

Canon to the left of them, Canon to the right

Probably every Christian group of the second and third centuries ascribed authority to written texts, and each group came to locate that Authority in the status of the author of the text. These authors were thought to be closely connected to the ultimate authority, Jesus himself, who was understood to represent God. Different groups tied their views to apostolic authorities in different ways. The Ebionites, for example, claimed to present the views advocated by Peter, Jesus' closest disciple, and James, his brother. The Marcionites claimed to present the views of Paul, which he received through special revelation from Jesus. The Valentinian Gnostics also claimed to represent Paul's teachings, as handed down to his disciple Theudas, the teacher of Valentinus. As is readily apparent, the members of the early church were surrounded by collections of canon. Each community with its own scripture that they produced to authenticate their orthodoxy was certain that they were right and the other group was wrong.

The proto-orthodox claimed all of these apostles as authorities- Peter, James, Paul and many others. But not all the books used by the proto-orthodox churches were written by apostles- or in some cases even claimed to be. The four Gospels that eventually made it into the New Testament, for example, are all anonymous, written in the third person about Jesus and his companions. None of them contain a first person narrative ("One day when Jesus and I were going to Capernaum..."), or claims to be written by an eyewitness or companion of an eyewitness.

Other books that came to be accepted as authoritative were not anonymous but homonymous, that is, written by someone who had the same name as a person well known in Christian circles. Yet other books are pseudonymous- forgeries by people who explicitly claim to be someone else. But why would someone claim to be a famous person from the past. It was probably in order to get a hearing of their views. It would be easier to have someone read your work if you told them it was a 'lost' letter from Paul than a letter from one of Paul's students. And it was a fairly common practice in the ancient world for students to write things under the name of their teacher, since everything they knew, they had learned from their teacher.

We return now to the question of how, when and why the twenty seven books of our New Testament became part of the canon. As we have seen, the process was already in motion by the end of the New Testament period, but it did not come to any kind of closure until the final part of the fourth century, nearly three hundred years later, at the earliest. Why did it take so long and what drove the process?

From what we have seen, there can be little doubt that events of the second half of the second century created a demand for a proto-orthodox canon of Scripture. A major driving force was prophetic groups such as Montanism from within the proto-orthodox circles and opposition to heretical forces outside these circles.

The effect of Montanism we have already seen. As long as proto-orthodox Christians like Montanus and his female companions could claim to have direct revelations from God, there would be no visible means to prevent other Christian groups from making similar claims. And so, even though the Montanists- and Tertullian among them- were orthodox in their theology, their activities had to be restricted. These limits would be written authorities, solid and fixed, rather than inspired prophesies in the Spirit, fluctuating and impermanent.

More than anything else, however, the interaction with heretical forms of Christianity forced the issue of canon. In this, no one was more important than Marcion, to our knowledge the first Christian of any kind to promote a fixed canon of Scripture, in his publication of modified versions of Luke and ten Pauline Epistles. It is possible to gauge the level of threat the writings of Marcion presented if we only look at two of his proto-orthodox opponents, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons. These two early church writers wrote prodigiously, attacking Marcion and his followers.

About the same time certain Christian writings were being quoted as authoritative texts for life and beliefs of the church. An excellent example of this is a letter written by Polycarp of Smyrna. He had been asked by the church in Philippi to advise them regarding the case of a leader who had engaged in some form of financial mismanagement within the church. Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, which still survives, is intriguing for several reasons, not the least is its use of quotes from early Christian writings. In fourteen brief chapters, Polycarp quotes more than a hundred passages known from these earlier writings, asserting their authority for the situation of the Philippian Church. This stands in contrast to a mere dozen citations of Jewish Scripture; and, in one place appears to call Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians scripture.

Some time before the letter of Polycarp, we know that Christians were hearing the Jewish scriptures read during their worship service. The author of I Timothy, for example, urges the letter's recipients to "pay close attention to (public) reading, to exhortation and to teaching" (4:13) and in Paul's letter to Colossians, it appears that letters by Christians were being read to the gathered community as well. It seems likely that the liturgical use of some Christian texts- for example, 'the memoirs of the apostles,' which are usually understood to be the Gospels- elevated their status for most Christians so that they, as much as Jewish scriptures were considered to be authoritative. But, still we had no official list of which books comprised canon.

Debates about the contours of the canon continued for several centuries. It appears that Christians by and large were concerned to know which books to accept as authoritative so they would: (1) know which books should be read in their services of worship and, relatedly, (2) know which books could be trusted as reliable guides for what to believe and how to behave. The decision about which books should finally be considered canonical was not automatic or problem-free. The debates were long and protracted, and sometimes harsh. Many Christians today may think that the canon of the New Testament simply appeared on the scene one day, soon after the death of Jesus. Nothing could be farther from the truth. But, as it turns out, we are

able to pinpoint the first time that any Christian of record listed the twenty seven books of our New Testament as *the* books of the New Testament- neither more nor fewer. Surprising as it may seem, this Christian was writing in the second half of the fourth century, nearly three hundred years after the books of the New Testament had been written. The author was the powerful Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius. In the year 367 C.E., Athanasius wrote his annual pastoral letter to the Egyptian churches under his jurisdiction. Athanasius used these annual “Festal” letters to provide pastoral advice and counsel to his churches. In his now famous thirty-ninth Festal letter he indicates, as part of his advice, the books that his churches were to accept as canonical Scripture. He first lists the books of the ‘Old Testament,’ including the OT Apocrypha (which was to be read only as devotional literature, not as canonical authorities). Then he names exactly the twenty seven books that we now have as the New Testament, indicating that “in these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them.”

Numerous scholars have claimed that this represents the ‘closing’ of the canon. Despite several calls for the addition of other writings; there has been agreement, however, throughout most of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant traditions. The twenty seven books named by Athanasius are the New Testament. There was no official, church wide pronouncement on the matter until the Council of Trent (1546) in the mid-sixteenth century (which, as a Roman Catholic council, was binding only on Roman Catholics). But by then, the twenty seven books were already ‘set’ as Scripture. And so, the canon of the New Testament was ratified by widespread consensus rather than by official proclamation. Still, by the beginning of the fifth century, most churches in the Christian world would agree on its contours.

To provide a sense of the length of time involved in settling the matter of Biblical Canon, if it can truly be settled, I have provided a timeline with approximate dates, in many cases, for the reader to appreciate the almost glacial pace of movement. Following that I have included a short set of biographies which are followed by a bibliography for the curious who would like to know more. If this has seemed like an endless journey, consider the bibliography and realize that for every page I have written, you are the recipient of a distillation of twenty to thirty pages of other source material. And who could have imagined that such a simple question as, “Where did the books of the Bible come from?” would have such a long and complex answer.

TIMELINE FOR CANON DEVELOPMENT

1000-50 BCE	The Old Testament books are written.
c. 530 BCE	Early Gnostic teachings appear in Babylon with arrival of Cyrus and syncretism first appears.
c. 200 BCE	Rabbis translate O.T. from Hebrew into Greek, called “Septuagint” (abbreviated LXX), include 46 books.
30-100 CE	Christians use LXX as scripture. This upsets the Jews.
c. 33 CE	Conversion of Saul of Tarsus- he becomes Paul.
51-125 CE	New Testament books are written, but during this period other early Christian writings are produced, such as Didache (CE 70 c.), I Clement (CE 96 c.), Epistle of Barnabas (100 c.), and 7 letters of Ignatius of Antioch (CE 110 c.).
c. 100 CE	Jewish rabbis meet at Council of Jamniah and decide to include in their canon only 39 books, since only these can be found in Hebrew.
c. 140 CE	Marcion, a businessman in Rome, teaches that there are two Gods: Yahweh, the cruel God of the OT, and Abba, the kind God of the NT. So Marcion eliminates the Old Testament as scripture and since he is anti-Semitic, keeps from the NT only 10 letters of Paul and 2/3 of Luke’s Gospel. Marcion’s “New Testament” – the first to be compiled- forces the mainstream Church to decide on a core canon: 4 Gospels and letters of Paul.
c. 200 CE	Muratorian Canon presented it contains: 4 Gospels, Acts, 13 of Paul’s letters (Hebrews not included), 3 of the 7 General Epistles (1&2 John and Jude) and the Apocalypse of Peter.
313 CE	Edict of Milan by Constantine, 2 years after his conversion, makes Christianity tolerated.

- 325 CE Council of Nicea decides against Arians in favor of Athanasius in the debate about the nature of Christ. First formal Creed- Creed of Nicea adopted- formally accepted at Council of Constantinople in 381 CE.
- c. 360 CE Scrolls begin to be replaced by books.
- 367 CE The earliest extant list of the books of the NT, in exactly the number and order in which we presently have them, is written by Athanasius of Alexandria, in his Easter letter of 367.
- 393 CE Augustine at the Council of Hippo calls for acceptance of the list provided by Athanasius.
- 397 CE Synod of Carthage summarizes the earlier proceedings and gives approval to the canon we have today for OT and NT.
- c. 400 CE Jerome translates the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, called the “Vulgate”. He knows that the Jews only had 39 books and he wants to limit the OT to these; the 7 he would omit (Tobit, Judith, Maccabees 1&2, Wisdom of Solomon Sirach and Baruch he call ‘apocrypha’- hidden books. But Pope Damasus wants all 46 books included and so the Vulgate contains 46 books.
- 1442 CE The Council of Florence recognizes the 27 books of the New Testament, but does not declare them unalterable.
- 1536 CE Luther translates the OT from Hebrew and Greek into German. He assumes that, since the Jews wrote the OT, theirs is the correct canon; he places the extra 7 books in an appendix that he calls the “Apocrypha”. In his translation of the NT, Luther removes 4 books, Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation, from their normal order and places them at the end, stating only that they are less canonical.
- 1546 CE The Council of Trent reaffirms once and for all the full list of the 46 OT and 27 NT books as canonical.
- 1945 CE Nag Hammadi Library discovered in Egypt, source of many non-canonical texts, previously inaccessible.

- 1947 CE Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran containing a wealth of OT texts and cultural material from the Essences' dating from about 300 BCE.
- 2006 CE Publication of the 'lost' Gospel of Judas.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Athanasius: Athanasius was a highly influential and controversial bishop of Alexandria throughout the middle half of the fourth century. Born around 300 CE he was active in the powerful Alexandrian church. As a young man he was appointed as a deacon to the Bishop of Alexandria. He served as secretary to the Council of Nicea in 325, which attempted to resolve critical issues concerning the nature of Christ as fully divine, of the same substance as God the father, and coeternal with the father. Later, as Bishop of Alexandria (328-375) he was a staunch defender of the Nicene understanding of Christ, and a key player in the development of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. The author of many surviving works he perhaps best known for his Festal letter of 367 in which he set a list of books that were considered canonical.

Augustine: Augustine lived from 354-430 and for more than thirty years he served as Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Probably one of the most influential non-biblical Christian writers, he was greatly influenced by St. Paul and served as an inspiration for Christians. The Augustinian order was named for him and his role as a theologian and teacher.

Clement of Alexandria: Clement is a figure from the early days of the church, he was probably born around 150 CE, possibly in Athens. He came to Alexandria to pursue his education in theology and philosophy with leading Christian thinkers of the day. Tradition indicates that he became the head of the catechetical school there, but fled during a persecution of 202. He wrote on many subjects with a major portion of his works surviving, perhaps his most important book was an Apology of Christianity.

Clement of Rome: This Clement is another figure about whom we do not have much information. Tradition indicates that he was the second or third bishop of Rome (the disciple Simon Peter being the first). He is reputed to be the author of 1 and 2 Clement, although he is not mentioned in either book, nor named as author. Scholars also believe these two books to have been written by different authors.

Constantine: Constantine became Emperor of Rome in 312 following his victory at Milvian Bridge, before which he had a vision which led him to Christianity. Although not baptized until on his deathbed, he favored Christianity and signed the Edict of Milan (320) which tolerated Christianity. He convened the Council of Nicea in 325 which ruled on the nature of Christ.

Eusebius: Born around 260 CE, Eusebius of Caesarea is an important figure of the early church history. Trained by some of the leading scholars of his time he became the first author to produce a full history of Christianity up to his day. Active in the church he was ordained bishop of Caesarea in 315, and participated in the Council of Nicea and the theological disputes in its aftermath. Originally opposing, but later accepting the creedal statements about Christ that were to become orthodox. He died around 340 CE.

Irenaeus: Born about 130 CE, Irenaeus was an important theologian and heresiologist of the late second century. He was probably born in Smyrna and later educated in Rome, eventually making his way to a Christian church in Lyon, Gaul (modern France), where he was made bishop around 175. Irenaeus is our best patristic source for the Gnostic sects of the second century. His well know five volume attacks on heresy entitled, *Refutation and Overthrow of what is Falsely Called Gnosis*, frequently simply called *Against Heresies*. This book was used as a source for many later writers against heresy, including Tertullian and Epiphanius.

Justin Martyr: Justin was an important figure in the mid-second century church of Rome. Born of pagan parents about 100 CE, he undertook secular philosophical training before converting to Christianity, when he was about 30. He began to teach the philosophical superiority of Christianity to secular learning, first in Ephesus and later in Rome. Justin is the first prominent Christian apologist that is a defender of Christianity against the pagans. Justin's defense of Christianity led to political opposition: he was martyred on charges of being a Christian around 165 CE.

Montanus: Montanus who had been a pagan priest until his conversion to Christianity in 155 CE. During the persecution of 170 he began prophesying with two women Priscilla and Maximilla, declaring that he was possessed of the Holy Spirit. This was not new, as several other churches had women who prophesied. What was new, and gave rise to serious misgiving, was that Montanus claimed that their movement was the beginning of a new age. The rest of the church opposed Montanus, not because he prophesied, but because he claimed that with him the last age of history had dawned.

Marcion: Marcion was one of the most famous heretics of the second century. Tradition holds that he was born and raised in Sinope on the shores of the Black Sea, where as a young man he became wealthy as a shipping merchant. His father was the bishop of the Christian church there, who excommunicated his son for false teaching. In 139 he went to Rome where he spent five years developing his theology before presenting them to a special church council. The council rejected Marcion's interpretation of the Gospel and expelled him for false teaching. Marcion returned to Asia Minor where he was very successful at converting other to his understanding of the Christian message. 'Marcionite' churches continued for centuries after his death in 160 CE. Marcion was the first to present a canon of Scripture and provoke a response of the orthodox proto-Christians.

Polycarp of Smyrna: Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna, in Asia Minor, for most of the first half of the second century. Born about 70 CE, he was martyred as a Christian in 156. This was the first detailed account of a martyrdom to survive from ancient Christianity outside the New Testament. Among his surviving writings we have a letter written to the church in Philippi, addressing ethical and theological issues that had arisen in the church there. Although he was not an original thinker, Polycarp was one of the most well known and respected leaders of early and mid second century Christian church.

Tertullian: Tertullian, from Carthage (North Africa), was one of the most influential authors of early Christianity. It appears that he was born into a wealthy family of pagans around 160 CE. After receiving an extensive education in literature and rhetoric, he converted to Christianity in his mid 30's. He became an outspoken, even vitriolic defender of Christianity, writing numerous works defending the faith. At some point in his life he joined a group of schismatics known as the Montanists, an ethically rigorous ascetic group that anticipated the end of the world. He is probably best known for his five volume attack on Marcion.

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