

How We Got the New Testament: The Formation of the Canon

Subject: NT Canon — Formation of the Epistles

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We hold the New Testament in our hands and read it as a settled, complete thing — twenty-seven books, bound and numbered. But it did not arrive that way overnight. The formation of the New Testament canon was a process that unfolded over three centuries, driven not by imperial decree or a single council's vote, but by something quieter and more organic: the accumulated judgment of churches across the Roman world, reading, testing, and recognising which writings carried the authority of God.

This document traces that process from the moment Paul first put pen to parchment to the day Athanasius wrote out a list that has never been revised since.

Primary Source: *A significant portion of the historical content in this document is drawn from Revd Professor John Barton FBA, "How the New Testament Was Created," The British Academy. Available at: thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/how-new-testament-was-created/*

The Timeline: How the Epistles Were Gathered

It is worth noting from the start that Paul's letters — not the Gospels — were the first Christian documents to be written. They predate the completion of the four Gospels by decades. The story of how scattered correspondence became a fixed canon moves through four recognisable stages.

Stage 1: Composition and Local Circulation (c. 50 – 100 CE)

Paul wrote his letters to specific churches or individuals — Corinth, Galatia, Rome, Ephesus — to address immediate theological crises and practical needs. Once a letter was read aloud in one congregation, it was copied and passed to neighbouring churches. The letters were not written to be scripture. They became recognised as scripture because of what they were.

The process of circulation is visible within the New Testament itself. In Colossians, Paul explicitly instructs the churches to swap letters:

Colossians 4:16 *"And when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans."*

By the close of the first century, 2 Peter 3:15–16 refers to a collection of "all [Paul's] letters" and places them on the same level as "the other Scriptures" — evidence that a recognised Pauline corpus was already forming before the apostolic generation had fully passed.

Stage 2: The Apostolic Fathers (c. 90 – 140 CE)

The generation of church leaders immediately following the Apostles demonstrate deep, widespread familiarity with a consolidated collection of Paul's letters. Clement of Rome, writing around 95 CE, instructs the Corinthian church to "examine the letter of the blessed Paul the Apostle" written to them decades earlier — presuming his readers know which letter he means. Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, writing around 110 CE, both quote repeatedly from Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, Romans, and Galatians. A multi-letter corpus was already circulating from Syria to Asia Minor.

Stage 3: Crisis and Reaction — Marcion's Challenge (c. 140 – 200 CE)

The catalyst that pushed the church toward a formalised list came from outside its boundaries. A teacher named Marcion of Sinope, around 144 CE, argued that the God of the Old Testament was a lesser, wrathful deity, entirely separate from the God revealed in Christ. He rejected the Jewish roots of Christianity entirely and constructed the first documented closed canon: a modified Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline Epistles, with the Pastoral letters removed. To combat Marcion's selective and distorted collection, the mainstream church was forced to do what it had never needed to do before — to explicitly state which books were genuinely authoritative, and why.

Stage 4: Formalization (c. 367 – 397 CE)

The final, exact 27-book New Testament we hold today was cemented in the late fourth century — not invented by it. The churches were ratifying what they had already received.

The Oldest Canon List: The Muratorian Fragment

By the late second century, the core of the New Testament — the four Gospels, Acts, and thirteen Pauline Epistles — was accepted without dispute across the Roman Empire. The earliest surviving evidence for what the mainstream church recognised as canonical is a document known as the Muratorian Fragment.

Discovered in an eighth-century manuscript, the Fragment itself dates to approximately 170–200 CE. It explicitly recognises thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, and 1 and 2 John, along with Revelation. It leaves out Hebrews, James, and 3 John, and explicitly rejects forged Pauline letters — including one addressed to the Laodiceans — which had been manufactured to lend scriptural weight to Marcion's positions.

The Muratorian Fragment is not a church council's decree. It is a witness to what Christians were already reading and already trusting across the Roman world by the end of the second century.

Source: Muratorian Fragment discussion, Wikipedia, "Development of the New Testament Canon."

The Three Criteria for Canonicity

When church leaders evaluated whether a given Epistle belonged in holy scripture, they did not decide arbitrarily. Three consistent criteria were applied across the centuries of discernment.

1. Apostolicity

Did the letter come directly from an Apostle, or from a direct and verified associate of one? Letters traceable to Paul, Peter, or John carried inherent weight. The authority of the text was inseparable from the authority of its source.

2. Orthodoxy — The Rule of Faith

Did the document align with the foundational teachings of Jesus and the established apostolic tradition? Letters that promoted alternative theologies — particularly Gnostic frameworks, which reinterpreted Christ and creation through a different metaphysical grid — were rejected regardless of how widely they circulated. Consistency with the core of what the church had always believed was non-negotiable.

3. Catholicity — Universal Usage

Was the letter being read continuously and widely across the global network of churches — in Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, and Ephesus — or was it confined to a single sect or region? A letter embraced by all was treated differently from one valued only by a few. This criterion explains why some very short letters, like 2 and 3 John, took longer to be accepted: they simply had not yet reached and been tested by every corner of the church.

The Disputed Epistles — The Antilegomena

While Paul's primary letters were never seriously in question, seven books — historically called the Antilegomena, meaning "spoken against" — faced sustained scrutiny over their authorship or the circumstances of their transmission. The debates were not fabrications of doubt. They were the church exercising exactly the kind of careful discernment that the stakes demanded.

Source: Antilegomena discussion adapted from Wikipedia, "Development of the New Testament Canon."

Formalization in the Fourth Century

The fourth century did not invent the New Testament. It recognised it. Two moments stand out as the formal conclusion of a process that had been underway for three hundred years.

Athanasius' Easter Letter — 367 CE

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria and one of the great defenders of Trinitarian orthodoxy, published his 39th Festal Letter in 367 CE. It is the earliest surviving document to list exactly the 27 books of the current New Testament. His words were unambiguous:

"In these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them." — Athanasius, 39th Festal Letter, 367 CE

The Councils of Hippo and Carthage — 393 & 397 CE

The North African regional councils of Hippo (393 CE) and Carthage (397 CE), heavily shaped by the influence of Augustine of Hippo, formally ratified the same 27-book list. These councils did not vote scripture into existence. They gave official ecclesiastical endorsement to the text selection that churches across the known world had already converged on through centuries of communal reading, worship, and testing.

The canon was not imposed from above. It rose from below — from the lived experience of churches reading, trusting, and being shaped by these documents across generations.

Why This Matters for How We Read

Understanding how the canon was formed changes how we hold it. The New Testament did not fall from heaven pre-bound. It came through history — through real churches, real crises, real discernment, and three centuries of the Spirit working through the people of God to recognise what was genuinely His Word.

That history does not undermine our confidence in the canon. It deepens it. The same criteria the early church used — apostolicity, orthodoxy, and catholicity — are the criteria that commend these books to us still. We receive what they received, because the God who inspired the Word also guided His people to recognise it.

Sources

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