

# How the New Testament Canon was Formed

R.A. Baker  
Ph.D., Ecclesiastical History

[www.churchhistory101.com](http://www.churchhistory101.com)  
© 2008

## **Introduction**

“How was the New Testament formed?” This is the most commonly asked question directed at me when I speak on university campuses. This is a critical question because the church has always believed that the documents found in the New Testament are “inspired” writings and the most important source documents for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (and Christian doctrine).

I have always been told that the early church fathers used a set of criteria in their decisions regarding the formation of the New Testament canon. Something like this:

- the author must have either been an apostle or the close associate of an apostle
- the document cannot contradict other “inspired” writings with respect to doctrinal teaching
- the document must share the overall “feel” and “character” of other inspired writings, AND
- it must have been cited by early Christian writers and be accepted by the majority of churches

Although these criteria sound reasonable, one cannot find such a clearly described methodology like this in the patristic writings, nor in any council canon prior to the late fourth century. Many early writings were accepted as “inspired” by some church fathers, yet failed to meet one or more of these conditions. Some of the documents that made it into the New Testament fail in one or more of these guidelines – the Revelation of John had very little support in the Eastern church even into the late fourth century.

I have also always heard that the New Testament canon was established at a church council. Although the exact list of New Testament documents was confirmed at the third Synod of Carthage (397 AD), this was a relatively small regional council and by this time the 27 New Testament documents had already been agreed upon by most of the church.

### **A Natural Delivery**

The New Testament was **NOT** dropped from heaven.

The New Testament was **NOT** delivered by an angel.

The New Testament was **NOT** found in a farmer’s field like the Book of Mormon.

The New Testament was **NOT** suddenly “discovered” in a clay jar with 27 “books” intact like the Dea Sea Scrolls or the Nag Hammadi texts.

The New Testament canon developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. If the New Testament had been delivered by an angel, or unearthed as a complete unit it would not be as believable. Part of the historical validity of the New Testament comes from the fact that we **can** trace its development. The fact that this development is not as precise nor as clean as we might like makes it far more historically reliable.

### **Oral Tradition**

Oral tradition was the normal mode for communicating the teachings of a master in the ancient world. For one thing, before the use of papyrus was widespread writing was both clumsy and expensive. Using a stylus on a clay tablet worked, but once the clay dried no “corrections” or “edits” could be made. Writing on a scroll made of an animal skin was certainly an improvement, but was still limited. The widespread use of papyrus for the ancient world was like the coming of the internet in the modern world - a virtual explosion of written communication began.

Even after respected teachings began to circulate in written form ancient writers continued to be skeptical of using a written format. There was a sense that it fell far short for the communication of treasured knowledge. Church historian Eusebius relates this thinking from the fragments of Papias,

But I will not hesitate also to set down for thy benefit, along with the interpretations, all that ever I carefully learnt and carefully recalled from the elders, guaranteeing its truth....For I supposed that things out of books did not profit me so much as the utterances of a voice which liveth and abideth.

H.E. III.39,3-4

Irenaeus (A.H. V.33,3-4) quotes another passage from Papias where the author tells us that he knew the apostle John. This represents one of the earliest references to an early oral tradition within Christianity - Papias is writing down what he remembered hearing from the mouth of John, Polycarp, and others - so he is writing down oral tradition.

### **Oral Tradition and the Words of Jesus**

The words of Jesus were recognized as inspired very soon after the resurrection, yet it was 2-3 decades before his words were circulated in written form. We have one clear example of oral tradition when Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders,

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' - Acts 20:35

This citation is especially interesting since Luke, the author of Acts, does not record this saying in his own gospel. In fact, this *agrapha* (the Greek word “unwritten”) does not appear in any of the four canonical gospels and is a witness to the sayings of Jesus being transmitted in an oral tradition.

Many Christian scholars disagree with the theory that the sayings of Jesus were initially transmitted in an oral tradition. The concern is that this would threaten the integrity of his message, and thus threaten the validity of the gospel tradition. But the task for the historian is to present the evidence as objectively as possible, always acknowledging that we are working with theories of events that happened 2,000 years ago for which we do not have ALL the evidence.

Probably as early as the late 40's the oral traditions that carried the words of Jesus began to be put into writing. This was probably done to protect the integrity of his message. The Nag Hammadi texts seem to shed light on this phase of the gospel development. The Nag Hammadi Library is a collection of thirteen ancient books, containing over fifty texts, discovered in the Egyptian desert in 1945. These books were sealed in a large clay jar and found by some peasant farmers. The story of this discovery is very interesting – an accurate account can be found in summary form online at [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com).

Within the Nag Hammadi texts is a *Gospel of Thomas* - this gospel is basically a collection of “sayings” and stories, not written with any recognizable chronological or thematic order. Some of the sayings closely parallel sayings found in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) - Saying 9, for example is the parable of the sower. Yet others are not only different, but bizarre. Just one example will serve to make the point:

Jesus said, “This heaven will pass away, and the one above it will pass away. The dead are not alive, and the living will not die. In the days when you consumed what is dead, you made it what is alive. When you come to dwell in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?” *Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 11

It is likely that early Christian leaders began to hear odd sayings like this one attributed to Jesus and determined that an authoritative set of sayings needed to be recorded. Most scholars believe that Mark's gospel was the first of the four New Testament gospels written, followed by Matthew and Luke. The dates given vary widely from the early 60's (for Mark) into the 80's (for Luke). The difficulty with dating comes from the fact that early writers, like Paul for example, do not quote any of the four gospels. Clear citations do not begin to appear until the early second century. Even more liberal scholars would not suggest a second century date for the synoptic gospels, thus the lack of quotations are attributed to a slow pace for copying and circulating these documents. Papyrus does not become widely and commonly used outside the Egyptian region until the second century.

The earliest non-New Testament Christian documents (*Barnabas, 1 Clement, and The Shepherd of Hermas*) cite the Old Testament as "scripture" and only make allusions to New Testament texts. Ignatius of Antioch (107-120 AD) is full of allusions to, and paraphrases of, New Testament texts, but it is only when we come to the second century apologists that verified quotations from what we now call New Testament texts begin to be common.

### **Marcion and the Four Gospel Tradition**

In the 140's Marcion (who was deemed a heretic) constructed his own canon which included most of Paul's letters in edited form, along with Luke's gospel. Marcion rejected the other gospels as having been tainted by the Jews. This list by Marcion is the first known listing of what is called a New Testament canon and helped to push the early church to develop an authoritative list of inspired writings.

Second century church father Justin Martyr does not cite any New Testament writing by name, but he designates his several New Testament citations with "it is recorded," or the "memoirs of the apostles." He does, however, refer to the "Gospels,"

For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me..."      *First Apology* 66

Around 170-175 AD Tatian, a disciple of Justin, created a harmony of the four orthodox gospels known as the Diatessaron. This text was accepted in some circles, even being used to replace the four gospels, but this success was short lived. What this

harmony reveals, however, is that the church was beginning to recognize only four gospels.

The four gospels are confirmed by Irenaeus of Lyons in *Against the Heresies*,

From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit.

A.H. III,11.8

Irenaeus also quotes from, or alludes to, almost all the documents that become the orthodox New Testament. These citations are mostly from Pauline works (25+ occurrences from each of these: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Ephesians). His Pauline citations/allusions include all three “Pastoral” epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). The other general New Testament letters get scant recognition and a few are totally absent (Philemon, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude). He also refers to a few non-New Testament documents as “inspired” (*1 Clement, The Shepherd of Hermas*).

### **The New Testament in the Second and Third Centuries**

By the time we come to the end of the second century and look at the citations of Clement of Alexandria (195-202 AD) and Tertullian (205-225 AD) we find numerous references from almost every New Testament document. The New Testament writings that are excluded by these two men are very similar to that of Irenaeus, but Clement then includes many writings as “scripture” that did not get final acceptance. One can take the citations from Clement and Tertullian and reconstruct the entire New Testament excluding the 4 or 5 small epistles which they neglect (like 3 John and Jude). Indeed, this is a very important factor from this point forward as church leaders would ask, “Did Clement and Tertullian cite from this writing?” These are the first prolific Christian writers. From this point forward we find an increasing number of fathers with greater numbers of documents filled with biblical citations.

### **The Muratorian Canon**

The Muratorian canon is a manuscript fragment that represents the oldest known orthodox list of the New Testament. The beginning and ending of the manuscript is missing. The document is dated by most scholars to have been written around 170-200 AD. This document was discovered in an Italian library by Ludovico Antonio Muratori, a famous historian of the time. This list includes the following:

- Matthew and Mark (we assume these were named in the beginning of the fragment which is missing – the writer mentions “four gospels”)
- Luke and John
- Acts
- all 13 Pauline letters (including the Pastoral epistles)
- 1 and 2 John is assumed since the writer only names two letters of John
- Jude
- the Revelation of John

This list omits Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. It also names a few documents that do NOT appear in the orthodox New Testament.

By the end of the second century most of the 27 documents in the orthodox New Testament canon had already gained widespread acceptance, especially the four gospels and the Pauline writings. It is critical to understand why only four gospels were accepted. These early fathers were very familiar with the other gospels that were floating around – Marcion’s gospel of Luke, the various gnostic gospels, and other “proto-orthodox” gospels that were not well accepted – they wanted to make it clear that these “other” gospels were NOT acceptable. There was, however, another very important reason – the Gnostics.

### **The Effect of Gnosticism**

Gnosticism was at its zenith during the second century, especially in Egypt. The various Gnostic texts were rejected by the orthodox. Most of these Gnostic writings were rejected because they had too many bizarre passages and thus were not able to develop and keep a large audience. One important factor for any document to be affirmed as “orthodox” and “inspired” was how much acceptance it received among the churches in the various regions. This acceptance is typically reflected by if, and how often, the church fathers cited the document.

The development of the New Testament in the second century necessitates some discussion of Gnostic texts. The proliferation of Gnostic texts forced church leaders to address these texts and to explain why the church rejected them. To illustrate, we will briefly focus on the bizarre nature of these Gnostic texts.

It is important to understand that many ancient texts have some strange passages, including the New Testament documents. One must be ready to admit this before

launching an attack against strange gnostic texts. For our purpose one example will be enough,

“I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.”...“Where, Lord?” they asked. He replied, “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.” Luke 17:34-37

AND

Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered. Matthew 21:18-19

I know there are many who have given explanation for these passages - I have recently read 2-3 explanations for both of these, and none satisfy me 100% - my point is simply that we must admit to some strange passages in our NT documents that cannot be easily explained. I could list many more. And if you read the early fathers you will find many strange passages as well.

One can give some explanation for the strange gnostic passages, but even with the proper historical context bizarre is...well, bizarre. This is the critical difference between the New Testament gospels and the Gnostic gospels - the gospel contained in the New Testament is powerful because it is profound - taking the complicated and making it exceedingly simple to understand. These gnostic texts are just not easy to grasp.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is a good work to cite for this purpose – it does contain New Testament-like passages and those who criticize early Christianity like to use *Thomas*.

Jesus said, “Blessed is the lion which the man shall eat, and the lion become man; and cursed is the man whom the lion shall eat, and the lion become man.” Saying 7

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go forth from among us, for women are not worthy of the life.” Jesus said: “Behold, I shall lead her, that I may make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. Saying 114

These two sayings clearly illustrate why *Thomas* is not accepted in the early church. This gospel has many bizarre Gnostic-like sayings like these two. Many scholars who attack the integrity of the New Testament find it easy to criticize the male-orientation and domination of the early church. These scholars use various passages from *Thomas*, yet typically they will avoid Saying 114!

The point here is that Gnostic writings contain many bizarre passages. The ratio of “normal” to “bizarre” is far different from the orthodox New Testament writings. In addition, the degree of bizarre is far more acute in these Gnostic writings.

### **The NT Canon in the Third and Fourth Centuries**

By the third century there is a noticeable increase in citations from the “inspired” writings that eventually become the New Testament, and far less citations from works that do not make it into the New Testament. The most prolific third century writers are Tertullian (already mentioned), Hippolytus of Rome, Origen of Alexandria and Cyprian of Carthage.

An explosion of Christian literature comes in the fourth century with Lactantius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus), John Chrysostom, Jerome, Rufinus, and the great Augustine of Hippo (his *Confessions* was written in 396-97 AD). All of these writers illustrate how the New Testament had become settled with thousands of citations from the 27 “inspired” writings and fewer citations outside that list.

### **The Official Canon**

Many people think the New Testament writings were agreed upon at the Council of Nicea. There were 20 canons (church rules) voted on at Nicea – none dealt with sacred writings. The first historical reference listing the exact 27 writings in the orthodox New Testament is in the *Easter Letter* of Athanasius in 367 AD. His reference states that these are the only recognized writings to be read in a church service. The first time a church council ruled on the list of “inspired” writings allowed to be read in church was at the Synod of Hippo in 393 AD. No document survived from this council – we only know of this decision because it was referenced at the third Synod of Carthage in 397 AD. Even this historical reference from Carthage, Canon 24, does not “list” every single document. For example, it reads, “the gospels, four books...” The only reason for this list is to confirm which writings are “sacred” and should be read in a church service. There is no comment as to why and how this list was agreed upon.

## **Conclusion**

The New Testament developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. No one particular person made the decision. The decision was not made at a church council. The particular writings that became those of the New Testament gradually came into focus and became the most trusted and beneficial of all the early Christian writings.