



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

The Story of Canon Selection

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Rather than break up the story of the selection of the NT canonical books, I am summarizing it in one longer article. I encourage you to consult the Works Cited below and comparable resources for details (see a short bibliography [here](#)).

As we begin examination of the story of canon selection, we take note of F. F. Bruce’s caution about overstating the evidence:

The matter is oversimplified in Article VI of the Thirty Nine Articles, when it says: “In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.” For, leaving on one side the question of the Old Testament canon, it is not quite accurate to say that there has *never* been *any* doubt in the Church of *any* of our New Testament books. A few of the shorter Epistles (e.g. 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude) and the Revelation were much longer in being accepted in some parts than in others; while elsewhere books which we do not now include in the New Testament were received as canonical (Bruce 1981, 16-17).

Manuscript evidence validates Bruce’s caution. For example, the Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, a 3rd century collection of eleven papyrus codices,¹ includes three that contain most of the NT writings: #46 (ca. 200 AD)—nine Pauline letters and Hebrews; #45 (first half of 200s)—the four canonical gospels and Acts; and #47 (last half of 200s)—Revelation.

The Sinaiticus Codex, the earliest complete NT manuscript, dates from the early 4th century and includes all 27 NT writings, plus the *Shepherd of Hermas* and *Epistle of Barnabas*. Similarly, the 5th century Alexandrinus manuscript includes the 27 writings, plus 1 and 2 *Clement* (Bruce 1981, 11-12; Patzia 2011, 139-140, 251-253; Holladay 2005, 878, 880).²

Development in 2nd-4th Centuries

The manuscript evidence takes us back to the beginning of the 3rd century (200s), but the church made essential decisions about the books before that. Carl Holladay writes,

Worth noting is how quickly this happened. *After the first Pauline writings appeared in the mid-first century, it took only 70-100 years for Christians to make the basic choices about which writings would constitute the core of their canon* (Holladay 2005, 835).

Thus, by 125-150 AD, in the first half of the 2nd century, a consensus had formed about 17 of the books—the four gospels and letters of Paul. Metzger summarized the process:

¹ “Codices” is the plural of “codex,” an ancient manuscript text in book form. All the biblical papyri in the collection are missing leaves (pages), but enough has survived to show what was included in each. See Wegner 1999, 237.

² Other collections and translations were also available in the 2nd (Syriac), 3rd, and 4th (Coptic) centuries.

At first a local church would have only a few apostolic letters and perhaps one or two Gospels. During the course of the second century most churches came to possess and acknowledge a canon which included the present four Gospels, the Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, 1 Peter, and 1 John. Seven books still lacked general recognition: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. It is hard to say whether this was the cause or the effect of the divergent opinions concerning their canonicity. Certain other Christian writings, such as the first letter of Clement, the Letter of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Didache, otherwise known as the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, were accepted as scriptural by several ecclesiastical writers, though rejected by the majority (Metzger, *Testament* 2003, 311).

The earliest list of which we have knowledge is Marcion's canon (ca. 140), consisting of an altered version of Luke ("restored," to remove Jewish themes Marcion found objectionable) and 10 of Paul's letters. The Muratorian Canon (ca. 180) includes 23 of the 27 books. From it we learn that by the late 2nd century the position of the four gospels was firm and they were considered to stand together.

Further confirmation for the high view of the gospels is found in Tatian's *Diatessaron* (ca. 160-170), a harmony prepared for Syrian churches that wove the Synoptics into the framework of John.³ Similar esteem for Matthew-John is found in the writings of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (France; ca. 180) who was convinced the "rule of faith" began with Jesus and was transmitted to the apostles who

passed it on to the next generation of leaders; he argued for the "four and only four" (see *Against Heresies* 3.11.8).⁴

After the mid-2nd century, the only books about which there was significant doubt are some listed at the end of our NT. Origen (185-254) said 21 books were acknowledged by all, those disputed being Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, and Jude (also *Barnabas*, *Hermas*, *Didache*, and *Gospel according to the Hebrews*). Eusebius (265-340) said 22 were generally acknowledged; though some disputed them, the majority also recognized James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John.⁵

In the East, in his *Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter* in 367, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, "calls the twenty-seven NT writings 'canonical books' (*biblia kanonizomena*) that are to be distinguished from apocryphal works (*apokrypha*). This is the first time that the term *kanōn* is applied to this collection of twenty-seven writings" (Holladay 2005, 831).

Subsequent Developments

In the West, the African synods of Hippo Regius (393) and Carthage (397, 419) accepted the 27 books. Acceptance by Augustine (354-430) and Jerome's (c. 342-347 - 420) Vulgate translation influenced general western acceptance of the 27. In the East, some continued to doubt Revelation, but "eventually the canon of most of the Eastern churches came to be identical with that of the Western church" (Metzger, *Testament* 2003, 316-317).

But, although "twenty-seven books, no more, no less" became the guiding principle in the

³ C. E. Hill (2013, 103) notes that by the 240s Origen said the four were "'the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven' (*Commentary on Matthew* in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.4)." Later, referencing "the Gospel harmony composed by Theophilus of Antioch, and the better-known *Diatessaron* made by Tatian the Syrian," Hill comments, "That at least two Gospel harmonies combining the accounts of the same four Gospels should appear by the 170s seems to attest a previous recognition of these four as set apart, in at least some Christian circles in Rome and Antioch" (Hill 2013, 105).

⁴ Bruce 1981, 19, comments, "By the time of Irenaeus, who, though a native of Asia Minor, was bishop of Lyons in Gaul about AD 180, the idea of a fourfold Gospel had become so axiomatic in the Church at large that he can refer to it as an established and recognised fact as obvious as the four cardinal points of the compass or the four winds."

⁵ Eusebius also listed "spurious" writings: *Acts of Paul*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Barnabas*, *Didache*, and perhaps Revelation and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Holladay 2005, 838, notes Eusebius's fourth category, "the senseless and impious writings" of the heretics: *Gospel of Peter*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Matthias*, *Acts of Andrew*, *Acts of John*, and acts of the other apostles) (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.1-7).

Latin church after Hippo, “it would be a mistake to represent the question of the canon as finally settled in all Christian communities by the beginning of the fifth century” (Metzger, *Canon* 1987, 238). The early 5th century Syriac Bible, called the Peshitta, included 22 books, omitting 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.⁶ Western Syrians finally accepted them by the 6th and 7th centuries (the Philoxenian version), but eastern Syrian churches, having lost contact with the rest of Christendom, continued to have a shorter

canon for a much longer period (Metzger, *Testament* 2003, 317)

Conclusion

To repeat, although the 27 NT books did not appear together as a complete collection until the late 4th century, by the mid-2nd century, the church had settled on the majority of the books that constituted the canon’s core. We turn next to the criteria they used to decide which books to accept.

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⁶ Not until ca. 508 (6th century) were 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation included in a version of the Syriac Bible. We should also note that list of varying numbers of books were found into the 10th century and later.