

Canon of the New Testament

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Most Christians take it for granted to have a copy of Bible, and the question of why New Testament has twenty-seven books hardly comes to their mind. While it is unlikely that they think those books were simply dropped from heaven, they may not realize the long process, which took place before all books were finally selected. As we will see later out of twenty-seven books, twenty (four Gospels, Acts, thirteen Paul epistle, 1 Peter and 1 John) were accepted as inspired without any problem while the other seven (Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John and Revelation) entered the canon after some dispute.

The Scripture known to Jesus and to the apostles was the Jewish scripture (cf. Luke 24:27, 2 Timothy 3:16). The first Christians did not have New Testament books - what Jesus and the apostles taught were first transmitted orally. Only in c. 50/51 AD Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, the first book of the New Testament to be written. The first Gospel to be written is the one according to Mark and the last is John's. By the end of the first century or very early of the second century, we had the twenty-six books of the New Testament. The only exception is 2 Peter that might be written in c. 130 AD¹. Other than those twenty-seven there are other books and epistles written by Christians in the first and early second century like *Clement* (c. 96 AD), bishop of Rome, *Ignatius* (died c. 107 AD), bishop of Antioch and of unknown authors like *Didache*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, epistle of *Barnabas* and *second epistle of Clement*. In addition we have a number of apocryphal Gospels, Acts and epistles written from second century onwards².

From New Testament we know that Jesus' unwritten word and apostolic teaching were already considered as authoritative as Scripture. For example in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quoted as scripture Deuteronomy 25:4 and Jesus' words, which were later recorded in Luke 10:7. 2 Peter 3:15-16 considers what Paul wrote as equal to scripture. However it does not mean that Christians accepted from the very beginning twenty-seven books of our present New Testament. In fact in the first two centuries AD they had a wider collection of

¹ Refer to Brown: *An Introduction to the New Testament* or Kümmel: *Introduction to the New Testament* for more information.

² For list and text of the New Testament apocryphal books refer to "New Testament Apocrypha", Vol. 1 and 2, edited by W. Schneemelcher and published by the Westminster Press, Philadelphia and "The Apocryphal New Testament", translated by J.R. Montague and published by The University Press, Oxford. The book does not include the recently came into light "Gospel of Judas".

scripture than our present New Testaments. They started defining the canon of the New Testament in the fourth century.

In *1 Clement* written c. 96 AD we find quotations and allusions from Matthew, Mark, Luke, Romans, Galatians, Philippians, Ephesians and Hebrews. It states that Paul was under the inspiration when he wrote his epistles³. The epistles of *Ignatius* (died c. 107 AD), bishop of Antioch indicate that he knew Matthew, Luke and several Pauline epistles: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians and Ephesians. Both Clement and Ignatius apparently relied more on oral tradition or from their memory than citing from written source⁴. *Papias* (c. 60-130), bishop of *Hierapolis* wrote five volumes of "*Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord*", a collection the words of Jesus that he gathered from the apostles. Unfortunately only few fragments (quoted in later books) survive today, from which we learn that he knew how the first two Gospels, Matthew and Mark were composed. *Polycarp*, bishop of Smyrna (died c. 156) in his epistle quoted Jesus' words, which are now in the Matthew and Luke Gospels and he knew Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 John and 1 Peter. He cited as scripture Ephesians 4:26 in par with Psalm 4:5⁵. *Epistle of Barnabas* written c. 130 AD is the earliest known work to cite one book of our present New Testament (Matthew 22:14) with the formula "it is written"⁶.

³ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.

Take up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write to you at the time when the Gospel first began to be preached? Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he wrote to you concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, because even then parties had been formed among you.

1 Clement 47 (emphasis added)

⁴ The following are a few examples. English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.

Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, how He said, "Woe to that man! It were better for him that he had never been born, than that he should cast a stumbling-block before one of my elect. Yea, it were better for him that a millstone should be hung about [his neck], and he should be sunk in the depths of the sea, than that he should cast a stumbling-block before one of my little ones.

1 Clement 46

A mixture of quotation from Matthew 18:6 (or Mark 9:42 or Luke 17:2) and 26:24.

When, for instance, He came to those who were with Peter, He said to them, "Lay hold, handle Me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit." "For a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see Me have." And He says to Thomas, "Reach hither thy finger into the print of the nails, and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side; " and immediately they believed that He was Christ. Wherefore Thomas also says to Him, "My Lord, and my God."

Ignatius, *Epistle to Smyrnaeans*, Chapter 3

Compare with Luke 24:39 and John 20:27-28.

⁵ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Scripture reference and emphasis are mine).

It is declared then in these Scriptures, "Be ye angry, and sin not," [Psalm 4:5] and, "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath." [Ephesians 4:26]

Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 12

⁶ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Scripture reference and emphasis are mine).

It was *Marcion*, who gave us the first collection of books⁷ in around 150 AD. His collection consisted of the Gospel of Luke and ten Paul's epistles (the three pastoral epistles not included), which he called "*Evangelion*" and "*Apostolikon*" (Gospel and Apostles). In his list Ephesians is named as *Laodiceans*. However, he mutilated many of them to suit his belief. He declared that the God of the Old Testament was different from the One of whom Jesus spoke. For this reason he rejected all Old Testament books and after being condemned by the Church for his heretical views he established his own church that survived for several generations.

Justin Martyr (died c. 165) mentioned the "*memoirs of Peter*" (possible Gospel of Mark) and "*memoirs of the apostles*", both of which he called Gospels⁸. He cites Matthew 11:27 with the formula "it is written"⁹. His disciple, *Tatian* introduced *Diatessaron* where he merged the four Gospels into one in a chronological order with the Gospel of John as framework. The *Diatessaron* remained the Gospel of the Syrian church until fifth century. *Irenæus*, bishop of Lyon (c. 115 to 202) quoted or alluded to the four Gospels, most of Paul's epistles (except Philemon), 1 Peter, 1 & 2 John and Revelation but also considered *Shepherd of Hermas* as scripture¹⁰ and had high regard of 1 Clement¹¹. He was the first to limit the

Let us beware lest we be found [fulfilling that saying], as it is written, "Many are called, but few are chosen."

Barnabas 4

⁷ Marcion wrote only one book "*Antitheses*", which for obvious reason no single copy survives today. What we know about him comes from the work of others like Tertullian. It has been argued that Marcion had a closed canon. Apparently he never handed down his collection as canon to his followers who later also accepted other books of the New Testament. Refer to Metzger: *The Canon of the New Testament*, page 160 and Hahneman: *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, pages 91-92

⁸ Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 66, 67 and *Dialogue with Trypho* 100, 101, 102, 103, 106

⁹ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Scripture reference and emphasis are mine). *For I have showed already that Christ is called both Jacob and Israel; and I have proved that it is not in the blessing of Joseph and Judah alone that what relates to Him was proclaimed mysteriously, but also in the Gospel it is written that He said: 'All things are delivered unto me by My Father; 'and, 'No man knoweth the Father but the Son; nor the Son but the Father, and they to whom the Son will reveal Him.'* [Matthew 11:27]

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100

¹⁰ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 ("scripture" reference is mine).

Truly, then, the Scripture [Shepherd of Hermas] declared, which says, "First of all believe that there is one God, who has established all things, and completed them, and having caused that from what had no being, all things should come into existence: "He who contains all things, and is Himself contained by no one.

Irenæus, Against Heresies 4.20.2

¹¹ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.

In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren at Corinth, the Church in Rome despatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians, exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith, and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from the apostles, proclaiming the one God, omnipotent, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Creator of man, who brought on the deluge, and called Abraham, who led the people from the land of Egypt, spake with

Gospels only to four¹². Both in Justin Martyr and Irenæus work we find what we call *Agrapha*, sayings of Jesus not found in the four Gospels¹³. Justin wrote about fire in the Jordan when John baptized Jesus, which is not recorded in the four Gospels¹⁴. *Clement of*

Moses, set forth the law, sent the prophets, and who has prepared fire for the devil and his angels. From this document, whosoever chooses to do so, may learn that He, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, was preached by the Churches, and may also understand the apostolical tradition of the Church, since this Epistle is of older date than these men who are now propagating falsehood, and who conjure into existence another god beyond the Creator and the Maker of all existing things.

Irenæus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.3

¹² English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1.

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the "pillar and ground" of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh. From which fact, it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit. As also David says, when entreating His manifestation, "Thou that sittest between the cherubim, shine forth." For the cherubim, too, were four-faced, and their faces were images of the dispensation of the Son of God. For, [as the Scripture] says, "The first living creature was like a lion," symbolizing His effectual working, His leadership, and royal power; the second [living creature] was like a calf, signifying [His] sacrificial and sacerdotal order; but "the third had, as it were, the face as of a man," -an evident description of His advent as a human being; "the fourth was like a flying eagle," pointing out the gift of the Spirit hovering with His wings over the Church.

Irenæus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8

¹³ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (emphasis is mine).

For what things He predicted would take place in His name, these we do see being actually accomplished in our sight. For he said, "Many shall come in My name, clothed outwardly in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves." And, "There shall be schisms and heresies."

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 35

Wherefore also our Lord Jesus Christ said, "In whatsoever things I shall take you, in these I shall judge you."

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 47

As He elsewhere declares: "The sacrifice to God is an afflicted heart: a sweet savour to God is a heart glorifying Him who formed it."

Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, 4.17.2

The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth: as the elders who saw John, the disciple of the Lord, related that they had heard from him how the Lord used to teach in regard to these times, and say: The days will come, in which vines shall grow, each having ten thousand branches, and in each branch ten thousand twigs, and in each true twig ten thousand shoots, and in each one of the shoots ten thousand dusters, and on every one of the clusters ten thousand grapes, and every grape when pressed will give five and twenty metres of wine. And when any one of the saints shall lay hold of a cluster, another shall cry out, "I am a better cluster, take me; bless the Lord through me." In like manner [the Lord declared] that a grain of wheat would produce ten thousand ears, and that every ear should have ten thousand grains, and every grain would yield ten pounds of clear, pure, fine flour; and that all other fruit-bearing trees, and seeds and grass, would produce in similar proportions; and that all animals feeding [only] on the productions of the earth, should [in those days] become peaceful and harmonious among each other, and be in perfect subjection to man.

Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, 5.33.3

¹⁴ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (emphasis is mine).

Alexandria (c. 150 to 215) cited books of the New Testament except Philemon, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John. But he also considered as scripture the apocryphal Gospel according to Hebrews, Gospel of the Egyptians, Revelation or Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas and he also had *agrapha* in his writings¹⁵. *Serapion*, bishop of Antioch

And then, when Jesus had gone to the river Jordan, where John was baptizing, and when He had stepped into the water, a fire was kindled in the Jordan; and when He came out of the water, the Holy Ghost lighted on Him like a dove, [as] the apostles of this very Christ of ours wrote.

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 88

¹⁵ English translation is from *Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2.

So also in the Gospel to the Hebrews it is written, "He that wonders shall reign, and he that has reigned shall rest.

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.9

Therefore Cassianus now says, When Salome asked when what she had inquired about would be known, the Lord said, 'When you have trampled on the garment of shame and when the two become one and the male with the female (is) neither male nor female'. Now in the first place we have not this word with in the four Gospels that have been handed down to us, but in the Gospel of the Egyptians. Further he seems to me to fail to recognize that by the male impulse is meant wrath and by the female lust.

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.9

And the Shepherd, the angel of repentance, says to Hermas, of the false prophet: "For he speaks some truths. For the devil fills him with his own spirit, if perchance he may be able to cast down any one from what is right."

Divinely, therefore, the power, which spoke to Hermas by revelation said, "The visions and revelations are for those who are of double mind, who doubt in their hearts if these things are or are not."

For the power that appeared in the vision to Hermas said, "Whatever may be revealed to you, shall be revealed."

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.17, 1.29, 2.1

Rightly, therefore, the Apostle Barnabas says, "From the portion I have received I have done my diligence to send by little and little to you; that along with your faith you may also have perfect knowledge.

And Barnabas the apostle having said, "Woe to those who are wise in their own conceits, clever in their own eyes,"

Accordingly, Barnabas says mystically, "May God who rules the universe vouchsafe also to you wisdom, and understanding, and science, and knowledge of His statutes, and patience. Be therefore God-taught, seeking what the Lord seeks from you, that He may find you in the day of judgment lying in wait for these things."

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.6, 2.7, 2.18

English translation is from Montague: *The Apocryphal New Testament*, page 506 (emphasis added).

*The **Scripture** saith that the children which have been exposed (by their parents) are delivered to a care taking angel, by whom they are educated, and made to grow up; and they shall be, it saith, as the faithful of a hundred years old are here (in this life). Wherefore also **Peter in the Apocalypse** saith: "And a flash (lightning) of fire leaping from these children and smiting the eyes of the women".*

Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae ex Prophetis Scripturis* 41.1-2

Agrapha's from Clement's work. English translation is from Anti Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2

*Of the kingly office one kind is divine,-that which is according to God and His holy Son, by whom both the good things which are of the earth, and external and perfect felicity too, are supplied. "For," it is said, "**seek what is great, and the little things shall be added.**"*

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.24

*Rightly, therefore, the Scripture, in its desire to make us such dialecticians, exhorts us: "**Be ye skilful money-changers**" rejecting some things, but retaining what is good.*

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.28

from 190 to 211 approved the use of apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* in one parish in Rhossus (near Antioch) but later withdrew it after he discovered its heretical teaching¹⁶.

The earliest known list of the New Testament books is the *Muratorian fragment*¹⁷.

.....those things at which he was present he placed thus, The third book of the Gospel, that according to Luke, the well-known physician Luke wrote in his own name in order after the ascension of Christ, and when Paul had associated him with himself as one studious of right. Nor did he himself see the Lord in the flesh; and he, according as he was able to accomplish it, began his narrative with the nativity of John. The fourth Gospel is that of John, one of the disciples. When his fellow-disciples and bishops entreated him, he said, "Fast ye now with me for the space of three days, and let us recount to each other whatever may be revealed to each of us." On the same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that John should narrate all things in his own name as they called them to mind. And hence, although different points are taught us in the several books of the Gospels, there is no difference as regards the faith of believers, inasmuch as in all of them all things are related under one imperial Spirit, which concern the Lord's nativity, His passion, His resurrection, His conversation with His disciples, and His twofold advent,-the first in the humiliation of rejection, which is now past, and the second in the glory of royal power, which is yet in the future. What marvel is it, then, that John brings forward these several things so constantly in his epistles also, saying in his own person, "What we have seen with our eyes, and heard with our ears, and our hands have handled, that have we written." For thus he professes himself to be not only the eye-witness, but also the hearer; and besides that, the historian of all the wondrous facts concerning the Lord in their order.

Moreover, the Acts of all the Apostles are comprised by Luke in one book, and addressed to the most excellent Theophilus, because these different events took place when he was present himself; and he shows this clearly i.e., that the principle on which he wrote was, to give only what fell under his own notice-by the omission of the passion of Peter, and also of the journey of Paul, when he went from the city-Rome-to Spain.

As to the epistles of Paul, again, to those who will understand the matter, they indicate of themselves what they are, and from what place or with what object they were directed. He

¹⁶ Eusebius (c. 260 to 339 AD): *Church History* 6.12

¹⁷ After *Lodovico Antonio Muratori* (1672 to 1750) who discovered the fragment in the Ambrosian library in Milan between 1738 and 1742

wrote first of all, and at considerable length, to the Corinthians, to check the schism of heresy; and then to the Galatians, to forbid circumcision; and then to the Romans on the rule of the Old Testament Scriptures, and also to show them that Christ is the first object in these; -which it is needful for us to discuss severally, as the blessed Apostle Paul, following the rule of his predecessor John, writes to no more than seven churches by name, in this order: the first to the Corinthians, the second to the Ephesians, the third to the Philippians, the fourth to the Colossians, the fifth to the Galatians, the sixth to the Thessalonians, the seventh to the Romans. Moreover, though he writes twice to the Corinthians and Thessalonians for their correction, it is yet shown i.e., by this sevenfold writing-that there is one Church spread abroad through the whole world. And John too, indeed, in the Apocalypse, although he writes only to seven churches, yet addresses all. He wrote, besides these, one to Philemon, and one to Titus, and two to Timothy, in simple personal affection and love indeed; but yet these are hallowed in the esteem of the Catholic Church, and in the regulation of ecclesiastical discipline. There are also in circulation one to the Laodiceans, and another to the Alexandrians, forged under the name of Paul, and addressed against the heresy of Marcion; and there are also several others which cannot be received into the Catholic Church, for it is not suitable for gall to be mingled with honey.

The Epistle of Jude, indeed, and two belonging to the above-named John or bearing the name of John are reckoned among the Catholic epistles. And the book of Wisdom, written by the friends of Solomon in his honour. We receive also the Apocalypse of John and that of Peter, though some amongst us will not have this latter read in the Church. The Pastor, moreover, did Hermas write very recently in our times in the city of Rome, while his brother bishop Pius sat in the chair of the Church of Rome. And therefore it also ought to be read; but it cannot be made public in the Church to the people, nor placed among the prophets, as their number is complete, nor among the apostles to the end of time. Of the writings of Arsinous, called also Valentinus, or of Miltiades, we receive nothing at all. Those are rejected too who wrote the new Book of Psalms for Marcion, together with Basilides and the founder of the Asian Cataphrygians.

Muratorian Fragment¹⁸

The list has four Gospels, Acts, thirteen Paul epistles, Jude, 1 & 2 John, Apocalypse (Revelation) of John and of Peter, and Wisdom of Solomon. *Apocalypse of Peter* (which was

¹⁸ Roberts and Donaldson (Editors): *The Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 603

not accepted by some) does not belong to the present New Testament, while *Wisdom of Solomon* is now part of the (Catholic and Orthodox) Old Testament. The list does not have James, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter and 3 John. The compiler mentioned two other Pauline epistles, to the *Laodiceans* (cf. Colossians 4:16) and to the *Alexandrians*, which he claimed to be forged. He also mentioned *Shepherd of Hermas*, which can be read but not to be given to people. Based on the statement "*The Pastor, moreover, did Hermas write very recently in our times in the city of Rome, while his brother bishop Plus sat in the chair of the Church of Rome*", the list was dated in third quarter of second century AD because the pontificate of Pius I was from c. 140 to 154 AD. The dating has been challenged because it is unlikely that Christians started defining the canon of New Testament in the second century when they started defining that of Old Testament in the fourth century¹⁹.

Tertullian (c. 160 to 230), bishop of Carthage in his writings mentioned the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation. He wrote that Hebrews was the work of Barnabas and in his judgment was worthy to be included in the canon. The writings of his successor, *Cyprian* (died c. 258) cited four Gospels, Acts, Paul's epistles to seven churches, his pastoral epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation. Biblical scholar *Origen's* (c. 185-255) collection of the New Testament books was preserved in *Eusebius Church History* written in c. 324.

"Among the four Gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language. The second is by Mark, who composed it according to the instructions of Peter, who in his Catholic epistle acknowledges him as a son, saying, 'The church that is at Babylon elected together with you, saluteth you, and so doth Marcus, my son.' And the third by Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, and composed for Gentile converts. Last of all that by John."

In the fifth book of his Expositions of John's Gospel, he speaks thus concerning the epistles of the apostles: "But he who was 'made sufficient to be a minister of the New Testament, not of the letter, but of the Spirit,' that is, Paul, who 'fully preached the Gospel from Jerusalem and round about even unto Illyricum,' did not write to all the churches which he had instructed and to those to which he wrote he sent but few lines. And Peter, on whom

¹⁹ Refer to Hahneman, G.M.: *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*.

the Church of Christ is built, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail, has left one acknowledged epistle; perhaps also a second, but this is doubtful. Why need we speak of him who reclined upon the bosom of Jesus, John, who has left us one Gospel, though he confessed that he might write so many that the world could not contain them? And he wrote also the Apocalypse, but was commanded to keep silence and not to write the words of the seven thunders. He has left also an epistle of very few lines; perhaps also a second and third; but not all consider them genuine, and together they do not contain hundred lines."

In addition he makes the following statements in regard to the Epistle to the Hebrews in his Homilies upon it: "That the verbal style of the epistle entitled 'To the Hebrews,' is not rude like the language of the apostle, who acknowledged himself 'rude in speech' that is, in expression; but that its diction is purer Greek, any one who has the power to discern differences of phraseology will acknowledge. Moreover, that the thoughts of the epistle are admirable, and not inferior to the acknowledged apostolic writings, any one who carefully examines the apostolic text will admit."

Eusebius, *the Church History* 6:25²⁰

His collection has four Gospels, Paul's epistles (how many is not specified), includes Hebrews of which he questioned its authorship, one epistle of Peter, one of John and Revelation. The list considers 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John as disputed books. Origen distinguished between the undisputed and the disputed books of New Testament. The former consisted of the four Gospels, Acts, Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation. The latter consisted of 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude and Didache. He defended the use of only four Gospels and listed a number of heretical Gospels like Gospel according to Egyptian and according to twelve Apostles (Homily 1 on Luke) but he nevertheless still cited apocryphal gospels in his works²¹. In *de Principiis* 2.1.5 he cited Shepherd of Hermas as Holy Scripture

²⁰ Schaff and Wace (Editors): *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, Vol. 1, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 272

²¹ English translation is from *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 97 (Reference to apocryphal work is mine)

But if a person accepts these words: My mother the Holy Spirit, has recently taken me and carried me up to the great Mount Tabor. [from Gospel according to the Hebrews]

Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah* 15.4.2

I have read elsewhere as if the Savior was speaking - and I question whether it was someone who was a figure for the person of the Savior or it was appended in his memory or if this may be truly what he said - The Savior there says, "Whoever is near me is near fire; whoever is far from me, is far from the kingdom." [Gospel of Thomas 82]

Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah* 27.3.7

though he was aware that some despised the book (de Principiis 4.1.11). Origen was the first known Christian writer to cite 2 Peter²².

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine from 314 to 339 gave us his list of New Testament books in 324.

Since we are dealing with this subject it is proper to sum up the writings of the New Testament which have been already mentioned. First then must be put the holy quaternion of the Gospels; following them the Acts of the Apostles. After this must be reckoned the epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former epistle of John, and likewise the epistle of Peter, must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These then belong among the accepted writings.

Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name. Among the rejected writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books. And among these some have placed also the Gospel according to the Hebrews, with which those of the Hebrews that have accepted Christ are especially delighted. And all these may be reckoned among the disputed books.

Eusebius, *the Church History* 3:25²³

Eusebius divided New Testament books into three categories: accepted, disputed and spurious. The accepted books consist of the four gospels, Acts, Paul thirteen epistles, Hebrews, 1 John, 1 Peter and Revelation. The second category include James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John and Gospel according to Hebrews; while apocryphal books like *Acts of Paul*, *Apocalypse of Peter* and *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Didache*, and Revelation belong to the third category. Note that Revelation was listed both in the first and third category. It shows the two different opinions of the canonicity of Revelation, which was

²² Bruce: *The Canon of the Scripture*, page 193

²³ Schaff and Wace (Editors): *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, Vol. 1, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., pages 155-157

especially true among the eastern churches. Eusebius also mentioned (as heretical) books like *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Matthias* and groups of books of Acts bearing names of the apostles (Paul, Peter, Andrew, John and Thomas).

An early 4th century of New Testament catalogue, *Codex Claromontanus*²⁴ listed the New Testament books as Matthew, John, Mark, Luke, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Colossians, Philemon, 1 & 2 Peter, James, 1 to 3 John, Jude, *Barnabas*, Revelation, Acts, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Acts of Paul* and *Revelation of Peter*. It does not have Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Hebrews but the omission may come from copyist error. A horizontal dash appears in front of *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Acts of Paul* and *Revelation of Peter*, indicating that they may have different status.

Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem (died c. 386) gave us his list of New Testament books, which has twenty-six books.

Then of the New Testament there are the four Gospels only, for the rest have false titles and are mischievous. The Manichaeans also wrote a Gospel according to Thomas, which being tintured with the fragrance of the evangelic title corrupts the souls of the simple sort. Receive also the Acts of the Twelve Apostles; and in addition to these the seven Catholic Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude; and as a seal upon them all, and the last work of the disciples, the fourteen Epistles of Paul. But let all the rest be put aside in a secondary rank. And whatever books are not read in Churches, these read not even by thyself, as thou hast heard me say.

Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lecture 4 of Catechetical Lectures*²⁵

Compared to our present twenty-seven books of the New Testament only Revelation is missing from his list. His list was repeated at the council of Laodicea (c. 362).

And these are the books of the New Testament: Four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; The Acts of the Apostles; Seven Catholic Epistles, to wit, one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude; Fourteen Epistles of Paul, one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to

²⁴ Codex Claromontanus contains Pauline epistles and dated fifth or sixth century

²⁵ Schaff and Wace (Editors): *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, Vol. 7, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 27

the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Hebrews, two to Timothy, one to Titus, and one to Philemon.

Canon LX of Council of Laodicea²⁶

In 367, *Athanasius* (c. 300 to 373), bishop of Alexandria gave the list of twenty-seven New Testament books, identical to our present New Testament with all books having the same status.

Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.

But for greater exactness I add this also, writing of necessity; that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness.and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd. But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read; nor is there in any place a mention of apocryphal writings.

*Athanasius, 39th Festal Letter*²⁷

Athanasius distinguished three categories of books: accepted (27 books), edifying (*Didache* and *Shepherd of Hermas*) and apocrypha (not to be read at all).

Another 4th century list, now known as *Cheltenham* or *Mommsen* list²⁸ has only four Gospels, thirteen Pauline epistles, Acts, Revelation, 3 epistles of John and 2 epistles of Peter. It does not have James, Jude and Hebrews and after listing the epistles of John and

²⁶ *ibid*, Vol. 14, page 159. The authenticity of Canon 60 is questionable because it is not found in a number of its ancient manuscripts

²⁷ *ibid*, Vol. 4, page 552

²⁸ After Theodore Mommsen who discovered the catalogue in tenth century manuscript in the Phillips collection at Cheltenham

Peter, each has a Latin phrase "una sola" or "one only", indicating that while it listed 3 epistles of John and 2 of Peters, the author of the list favoured only one.

Epiphanius (315 to 402), bishop of Salami (Cyprus) gave a list²⁹ comprising 4 Gospels, 14 Paul's epistles, Acts, Catholic epistles (James, Peter, John, Jude), Revelation, as well as Wisdom and Sirach. The last two books are now are part of Catholic Old Testament.

Amphilochius (c. 340 to 394), bishop of Iconium listed twenty-seven books³⁰ with the order: 4 Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John); Acts; 14 Paul's epistles: Romans, Corinthians (2 epistles), Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians (2 epistles), Timothy (2 epistles), Titus, Philemon, Hebrews; 7 Catholic epistles: James, Peter, John, Jude; and Revelation. But he also stated that some considered Hebrews and Revelation as spurious and some accepted only three Catholic Epistles (1 Peter, 1 John and James) and rejected 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter and Jude.

The New Testament part of *Codex Sinaiticus* (4th century) has all twenty-seven books of our present New Testament but also includes *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas* and may have other books because some leaves (or pages) are missing. The order of the books are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Acts, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation, epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas. That of *Codex Vaticanus* (4th century) was torn at the end, thus it does not reveal the whole list. The existing part consists books of New Testament with the order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews.

Rufinus of Aquileia (c. 345 to 410), monk and translator, wrote his list written in c. 407 that agreed with Athanasius' three classes of books.

Of the New there are four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke; fourteen Epistles of the Apostle Paul, two of the Apostle Peter, one of James, brother of the Lord and Apostle, one of Jude, three of John, the Revelation of John.

²⁹ *Adversus Haereses* or *Panarion* (Medicine Chest) 76 Conf. Act 5 p. 941

³⁰ J.P. Migne: *Patrologia Græca*, 37, 1593-6

These are the books which the Fathers have comprised within the Canon, and from which they would have us deduce the proofs of our faith.

In the New Testament the little book which is called the Book of the Pastor of Hermas, [and that] which is called The Two Ways, or the Judgment of Peter; all of which they would have read in the Churches, but not appealed to for the confirmation of doctrine. The other writings they have named "Apocrypha." These they would not have read in the Churches.

Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* 37-38³¹

Rufinus considered Shepherd (Pastor) of Hermas, the Two Ways and the Judgment (Preaching) of Peter as ecclesiastical (they could be read but not for establishment of doctrine).

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329 to 390), bishop of Constantinople listed twenty six books of the New testament³² in the following order: 4 Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), 14 epistles of Paul (without naming them) and 7 Catholic epistles in the order James, Peter, John, Jude. He excluded Revelation from the list but quoted from it in his works³³.

The fourth century *Constitution of the Holy Apostles* list of the New Testament (Book VIII: 47:85) does not have Revelation but includes two epistles of Clement and the Constitution itself.

But our sacred books, that is, those of the New Covenant, are these: the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the fourteen Epistles of Paul; two Epistles of Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude; two Epistles of Clement; and the Constitutions dedicated to you the bishops by me Clement, in eight books; which it is not fit to publish before all, because of the mysteries contained in them; and the Acts of us the Apostles.

Ecclesiastical Canon of the Holy Apostles 47.85³⁴

³¹ Schaff and Wace (Editors): *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, Vol. 6, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., pages 489-490

³² J.P. Migne: *Patrologia Græca*, 37, 472-74

³³ English translation is from the *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series II, Vol. 7.

.... And to the presiding Angels, for I believe, as John teaches me in his Revelation, that each Church has its guardian,

Gregory of Naziansus, *Oration* 42.9

³⁴ Roberts and Donaldson (Editors): *The Anti Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., page 505

Jerome (347-420) accepted twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

The New Testament I will briefly deal with. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the Lord's team of four, the true cherubim or store of knowledge. With them the whole body is full of eyes, they glitter as sparks, they run and return like lightning, their feet are straight feet, and lifted up, their backs also are winged, ready to fly in all directions. They hold together each by each and are interwoven one with another like wheels within wheels they roll along and go whithersoever the breath of the Holy Spirit wafts them. The apostle Paul writes to seven churches (for the eighth epistle-that to the Hebrews-is not generally counted in with the others). He instructs Timothy and Titus; he intercedes with Philemon for his runaway slave. Of him I think it better to say nothing than to write inadequately. The Acts of the Apostles seem to relate a mere unvarnished narrative descriptive of the infancy of the newly born church; but when once we realize that their author is Luke the physician whose praise is in the gospel, we shall see that all his words are medicine for the sick soul. The apostles James, Peter, John, and Jude, have published seven epistles at once spiritual and to the point, short and long, short that is in words but lengthy in substance so that there are few indeed who do not find themselves in the dark when they read them. The apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words.

Jerome, *Epistle 53.9 to Paulinus*³⁵

Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo, listed the same twenty-seven books in his work, "*On Christian Doctrine*" written in 397.

That of the New Testament, again, is contained within the following: -Four books of the Gospel, according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, according to John; fourteen epistles of the Apostle Paul-one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, two to the Thessalonians, one to the Colossians, two to Timothy, one to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews: two of Peter; three of John; one of Jude; and one of James; one book of the Acts of the Apostles; and one of the Revelation of John.

Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine 2.8*³⁶

³⁵ Schaff (Editor): *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 6*, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., pages 101-102

³⁶ *ibid*, Series I, Vol. 2, pages 538-539

Those twenty-seven books were later declared together with the forty-six books of Old Testament at the Council of Hippo in AD 393 and at Third Council of Carthage in AD 397. The sixth Council of Carthage in AD 419 promulgated the same canon of Bible. In summary among the twenty-seven books, seven (James, Jude, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John and Revelation) books entered the canon after some disputes. They are more or less the same as *deuterocanonical* books of the Catholic Old Testament. The councils of Hippo and Carthage were not ecumenical councils, but African synods, hence they did not speak for the whole church, and the canon of the Bible remained open ended until the 16th century.

In his list of canonical books addressed to bishop of Toulouse in 405 Pope Innocent I listed 26 books and may not include Hebrews³⁷. The fifth century compilation, commonly known as *Gelasian decree*³⁸ listed twenty-seven books with Revelation placed between Paul's and Catholic Epistles. On the other hand New Testament part of *Codex Alexandrinus* (5th century) has twenty-nine books with the order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Revelation, 1 Clement and 2 Clement. *John of Damascus*, monk and theologian who lived in the eight century AD gave us his list that has twenty-seven books plus *Canon of the Holy Apostles*.

The New Testament contains four gospels, that according to Matthew, that according to Mark, that according to Luke, that according to John: the Acts of the Holy Apostles by Luke the Evangelist: seven catholic epistles, viz. one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude: fourteen letters of the Apostle Paul: the Revelation of John the Evangelist: the Canons of the holy apostles, by Clement.

John of Damascus. *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book 4, Chapter 17³⁹

The different status of some New Testament books resurfaced during Reformation in sixteenth century. Martin Luther placed four books: James, Jude, Hebrews and Revelation

³⁷ The manuscripts of the letter have 13 or 14 as the number of epistles written by Paul. It may come from confusion of the two numbers, which in Latin numerals are written as XIII and XIIIII (not XIV). However the western Church was slow in accepting Hebrews and Pope Innocent never cited it in his extant writings. Refer to Hahneman, G.M.: *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, page 155.

³⁸ Some manuscripts of the decree attribute it to Pope Damasus I who reigned from 366 to 384. Others and more manuscripts the same decree was attributed to Pope Gelasius (reigned from 492 to 496) or to Pope Hormisdas (reigned from 514 to 523) or anonymous.

³⁹ Schaff and Wace (Editors): *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, Vol. 9, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., pages 89-90

at the end of his list of New Testament books, but did not assign any number to them and considered them to have inferior status⁴⁰. Even to the remaining twenty-three books he placed them in different levels⁴¹. He particularly disliked James, which he labelled "Epistle of Straw"⁴². To Luther whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Pilate, and Herod wrote it⁴³. *William Tyndale* gave the same treatment to the four books when he printed his English translation of the New Testament in 1526. Other Reformer, Zwingli, is known to reject Revelation⁴⁴. As a response to the Reformation, the Catholic Church reaffirmed the canonicity of twenty-seven books of New Testament (and forty-six books of Old Testament) at the ecumenical Council of Trent.

⁴⁰ *Thus it is plain that this [Hebrews] is the work of an able and learned man; as a disciple of the apostles he had learned much from them and was greatly experienced in faith and practised in the Scriptures. And although, as he himself testifies in chapter 6, he does not lay the foundation of faith – that is the work of the apostles – nevertheless he does build well on it with gold, silver, precious stones, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3. Therefore we should not be deterred if wood, straw or hay are perhaps mixed with them, but accept this fine teaching with all honour, though, to be sure, we cannot put it on the same level with the apostolic epistles.*

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, pages 394-395 (emphasis is mine)

This enables one to observe that the Epistle of James is no truly apostolic epistle, for it does not contain a single word about these things.

Luther's Works, Vol. 30, page 12 (emphasis is mine)

I praise it and consider it [James] as a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men but vigorously promulgates the love of God. However, to state my opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle,

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, pages 395-396 (emphasis is mine)

Therefore, although I value the book [Jude], it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books, which are supposed to lay the foundation of faith.

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, page 398 (emphasis is mine)

My spirit cannot accommodate itself to the book [Revelation]. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it; Christ is neither taught nor known in it.

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, page 399 (emphasis is mine)

⁴¹ *Therefore John's Gospel is the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three gospels, Matthew, mark, and Luke.*

In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine.

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, page 362.

⁴² *Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.*

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, page 362.

⁴³ *Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.*

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, page 396

⁴⁴ Wescott: A general Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament, page 495

Looking back at the long process (around three hundred years after our Lord's ascension), which took place to define what belongs to our New Testament, one may ask: what are the criteria of canonicity? Several criteria have been proposed:

1. **Apostolic authority:** was it written by one of the apostles?

But unless the original manuscript of the book can be found (and be verified) no one can absolutely prove that Paul or another apostle wrote it. Some books like Acts, 1 to 3 John and the three synoptic Gospels are anonymous. Through the testimonies of the Church Fathers we believe that Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote the first three Gospels. Even those bearing the name of an apostle, like 2 Peter, James, Jude and Revelation, may not be written by the actual person. As mentioned earlier Luther questioned the apostolicity of James, Jude and Hebrews.

2. **Antiquity:** was it written in the first century?

But 2 Peter might be written in the second century and not by Peter.

3. **Orthodoxy:** does it teach apostolic faith?

But how do we define orthodoxy (true teaching) in the first place? If we define it based on New Testament, then to use it to determine its canon is a circular argument. Either we choose the books first and then define orthodox teaching from those pre-chosen books or we define our orthodox doctrine first and then choose books that support it. In Galatians 4:4 Paul wrote that Jesus was born of woman, which some may use to deny Christ' Virgin Birth. Are we to be baptized with Trinitarian formula (Matthew 27:19) or in Jesus name (Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48)? Did Christ die as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45) or for all (1 Timothy 2:6)? Orthodoxy is also a matter of personal interpretation. Luther despised James because it teaches justification by works, contrary to what Paul wrote⁴⁵.

4. **Inspiration:** did the writer claim inspiration?

But most books of the New Testament do not claim inspiration. In 1 Corinthians 14:37 Paul wrote that his written words were a commandment of the Lord but in 1 Corinthians 7:10, 12, 25 he stated that what he wrote was from himself, not from the Lord.

⁴⁵ *In the first place it [James] flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works.*

Luther's Works, Vol. 35, page 396

Thus in 1532 Luther had said at table concerning the difference between St. Paul and the Epistle of James: "To him who can make these two agree I will give my doctor's cap, and I am willing to be called a fool."

Luther's Works, Vol. 2, page 277 (footnote)

We should throw the epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn't amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ. Not once does it mention Christ, except at the beginning.

Luther's Works, Vol. 54, page 424

Revelation claims to be a witness of the word of God and has a number of prophecies (Revelation 1:2-3). However, it is one of the disputed books that entered the canon at later stage.

What happens if they discover another authentic epistle written by Paul or one of the other apostles? This is not a hypothetical case. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, 2 Corinthians 7:8 and Colossians 4:16 Paul wrote about his other epistles. Will they be added to the Canon of the New Testament? To the Catholics, the answer is "no" because the canon of New Testament was already fixed at the council of Trent. Thus by itself, none of the New Testament books can prove its canonicity. If we rely on the testimony of the Christians in the first four centuries, they too may have different opinions on some books. We need the authority of the Church, the foundation and pillar of truth (1 Timothy 3:15), to decide which book belongs to both Old and New Testaments. Most Protestants do not like the fact that it was the (Catholic) Church who gave us the Bible. They may say that the Church is the discoverer of the Bible, no difference with Columbus who discovered America or Isaac Newton who discovered Law of Gravity. But American continent and Law of Gravity had been there long before Columbus and Isaac Newton were born. In contrast the Church came to exist before the first book of the New Testament was written. Christ and the apostles did not give us the list of inspired books to be "discovered" by the Church. God can and may use the Church as His infallible instrument to determine the canon of His written Words.

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