

How the New Testament Canon was Formed

(Week 1 Notes)

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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...and believable.

[What we are going to cover tonight is foundational for understanding how the NT canon (the listing of documents) came into existence. It is going to be more academic and you need not feel like you HAVE to know and remember every small piece of data – you are building a scaffolding of knowledge that will help other things you hear moving forward to make better sense.]

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.

Some 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.

Dating of New Testament Documents [[Go to: Basic NT Timeline](#)]

(We are NOT covering this until the end of class to make sure we get through the materials-then we can have time for questions.)

How do we know that it took 30-40 years for the synoptic gospel material to take written form? We are going to go through the history and I am going to do my best to give you dates for when most of the NT documents were written.

Realize that these dates are fluid – many times scholars use the “accepted” dating of one document to help them date another document.

The first date of importance is when was Jesus born and in what year did He die?

It gets a little messy here, and we cannot go into detail, but we start with when was Jesus born. In 1603 German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler documented the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn. He witnessed the same phenomenon the following year and in addition he witnessed a supernova. Kepler calculated that this phenomenon occurred every 800 years. The indications from when Herod became King and an alignment of Jupiter and Saturn (which MAY have been the Christmas star) puts the birth sometime between 6-2 BC.

The calendars got mixed up in the 6th century when the Church was attempting to line up the Roman calendar with the Jewish calendar. Later on other mistakes in the dating were discovered, thus scholars give this 4 year sliding date because, quite frankly, we just cannot know for sure.

You can read a concise account of this dating issue based on the Star of Bethlehem, with references to two astronomy articles on the CH101 site:

<http://www.churchhistory101.com/feedback/date-jesus-birth.php>

Here are two separate links where dates are given for the New Testament documents. You will notice there are differences between the dates given and MY timeline differs a bit from both of these sources:

https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart_40_00_nt_timeline/

FF Bruce: "The NT Documents: Are They Reliable?"

<https://books.google.com/books?id=mtYPMWgtKLMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=new+testament+document+timeline+ff+bruce&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjwI97sqYLZAhVN7VMKHfOwAi0Q6AEIJzAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Luke 3:23 tells us that Jesus was around 30 years old when He began His public ministry. This agrees with the restrictions listed in the Old Testament book of *Numbers* where it states that a priest is allowed to serve in the Tent of Meeting from thirty years old to when he is fifty. *Luke 3:1* tells us that John the Baptist began his ministry in the “*fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.*” Tiberius Caesar became the emperor in 14 AD, thus using “the method of computation current in Syria, which Luke would have followed,” John would have started his ministry around 29 AD (Bruce, F.F., *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* p.10). Note the problem of assuming Luke to use the Syrian dating method – this is part of our problem with dating – many of the dates given in Roman documents use regional methods, making it less than 100% accurate.

In addition, a commonly used data point in the discussion of dating is the mention of three Passovers in John’s gospel. Thus, it is believed by NT scholars that the public ministry of Jesus lasted for three years.

One of the MOST important dating mechanisms for the NT comes from Paul's letter to the *Galatians*, chapters 1-2:

1:15 But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased

16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

17 I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.

19 I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother.

20 I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.

21 Then I went to Syria and Cilicia.

2:1 Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also.

2 I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles.

(6:20 pm)

Basic Timeline for New Testament Documents

If we use 2 BC as the birth of Jesus:

- 27 the beginning of Jesus' public ministry
- 30 the crucifixion (using the three years of ministry calculated by scholars from the gospel materials)
- 31 the salvation of Saul of Tarsus

This allows at least one year for the earliest church to operate prior to Saul's persecution and subsequent salvation which (according to this timeline) would have occurred sometime during the second year of the early church.

- 34 Saul goes to Arabia and Syria, his first visit to Jerusalem
(This allows for the three years in Arabia, *Gal 1:18*)
- 48 to return to Jerusalem (many think for the Jerusalem Council we read about in *Acts 15* – Paul says he only returned to Jerusalem after 14 years, *Gal 2:1*)
- 48 *Galatians* - (immediately following the Council)
- 50 1-2 *Thessalonians*
- 50-55 *Mark* in first draft (but not published)
- 54-56 1-2 *Corinthians* (Gordon Fee dates *Philippians* here)
- 57 *Romans*
- 60 *Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon*
- 62 Second draft of *Mark* with Peter in Rome (tradition from Papias)
- 64-65 1-2 *Timothy, Titus* (This date depends on a second Roman imprisonment and the witness given in *1 Clement* that Paul “reached the westernmost boundaries of the empire)
- 62-65 *Luke and Acts* (as Luke sees that Paul is not going to live much longer, wants an account of the status of things)
- 66-70 *Matthew, Hebrews, 1 Peter*
- 90-95 *John, 1 John, Revelation*

I am not including dates for *2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude* nor *James* because the dates for these are highly problematic.

The dates for *1 Peter* and *1 John* are mostly accepted, but are also problematic. *John* and the *Revelation* are dated in the mid-90's [tradition given by Papias].

[Go to: Sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas](#)

Bruce sums up his dating,

“a first century date for most of the New Testament writings cannot reasonably be denied....And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt. It is a curious fact that historians have often been much readier to trust the New Testament records than have many theologians.” (Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, pp. 12-13).

[Three pieces of evidence for WHY we think the gospel traditions were initially communicated through oral tradition:

Gospel of Thomas – Traditions of Papias – Little gospel material in Paul’s letters]
Sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas

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 and fascinating – an accurate account can be found in summary form online at www.answers.com (search “nag hammadi library discovery” and scroll down to the bottom of the page).

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:

[Skip reading this saying]

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 evidence for the view that *Mark* takes written form first comes from tradition recorded from what is known as *The Fragments of Papias*. Papias (cir. 60-130AD) was a bishop in modern day Turkey and is quoted by a few early Christian writers, but is quoted fairly extensively in the *Church History [EH]* of Eusebius of Caesarea (cir. 260-340AD). Eusebius tells us that Papias was an eyewitness to the apostle John and a friend of Polycarp. Eusebius references Irenaeus of Lyons (cir. 120-202AD) who had also mentioned a basic bio for Papias and had mentioned his writings. Papias wrote a five-volume work titled *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* which unfortunately has been lost. All that remains are various quotations from this work which have been compiled by scholars and is now called *Fragments* [www.earlychristianwritings.com/papias.html] gleaned from various early writers. Much of the fragments come from Eusebius *EH* III.3.39,1-16 [http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/eusbius_on_papias.htm].

Papias is important for several reasons; I will only mention a few in this quick discussion. One, he represents very early tradition. He claims to have heard the apostle John although it is not clear how many times. Secondly, Papias confirms the importance of oral tradition in the early church:

If, then, anyone who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings – what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples...For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice. *EH* III.39.4

Lastly for this discussion, Papias gives us an early tradition regarding the Mark and the recording of his gospel:

...Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions...with no intention of giving a

regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For one thing he took special care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements.

EH III.39.14-17

There are other statements from Eusebius presenting data from other early writers that make it difficult to know exactly when this meeting would have taken place, but all the early traditions point to Mark as the first gospel writer to complete his version. The majority opinion among scholars is that Matthew and Luke have a copy of *Mark* in front of them as they wrote their gospels.

The difficulty with attempting to set earlier dating for the gospel material (in the 40's, for example) comes from the fact that the apostle Paul does not seem to quote much of the gospel tradition. This is one of the primary reasons scholars have dated Paul's letters as the first New Testament writings to take final form AND to be circulated.

[Check the time – MIGHT want to skip this...]

This is a good place to address Paul's comments in 1 *Cor* 11 on the Lord's Supper event) found in Paul. Hundreds of pages of scholarly work has been done on this topic – this is a simple overview.

Initially it appears that Paul is quoting from gospel tradition, but his use of *paralambano* complicates this view. This is the language of oral tradition. Paul says "*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you...*" 1 *Cor* 11:23. This strongly suggests that Paul heard this not from any document or tradition, but directly from Jesus. In verse 24 Paul includes in the words of Jesus, "*do this in remembrance of me.*" This phrase is ONLY used in Luke's gospel (22:19). This suggests that either Paul gets this phrase from Luke's sources or Luke gets this phrase from Paul which supports the possibility that Paul heard this directly from Jesus.

Most scholars would conclude that the earliest Christians were already observing the Lord's Supper. The Jewish Christians would have observed the Lord's Supper as part of the Passover celebration. Paul's recorded view in 1 *Corinthians* reflects the more Gentile tradition taught by Paul which makes no reference to the Passover.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=uj9H4Jab9DMC&pg=PA571&dq=1+cor+lord%27s+supper+quotations+of+Jesus&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj2vu-IuYfZAhWLv1MKHUIpAvQQ6AEIJzAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Clear citations from the synoptic gospels do not begin to appear until the middle of the second century. This lack of quotation is attributed to a slow pace of copying and circulating these documents. Archeological digs have illustrated that papyrus does not become widely and commonly used outside the Egyptian region until the second century. After this point there is an explosion of papyrus scraps which suggests that this ancient paper began to be mass produced.

The earliest non-New Testament Christian documents (*Didache*, *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.

Why is the Dating of Documents so Important?

1. It attests to the early historical evidence for both the documents, but also to the beliefs of the early Christians. The early non-NT documents give evidence to how Christians understood the apostolic writings.

2. No NT writer actually dates their writing, thus scholars are left attempting to piece together for example, which of Paul’s letters were already written when he writes *Romans*.

3. We need to realize that the earliest Christians did not have a set of documents called “The New Testament.” We put so much importance in our NT, yet Christians in the first and second centuries held other documents like *Didache*, *Barnabas*, *1 Clement*, and *Shepherd of Hermas* as “inspired.” We know this because second and third century writers quote these documents as proof of their particular point with the standard phrase, “as it is written in...” Additionally, writings from what we call *The Apocrypha* were alluded to by some of the NT writers and were thus also held by some second-third century writers as “inspired.”

This second point speaks to the fluid nature of our NT documents and having an “official” listing. IF the NT had been dropped from heaven or instituted by the apostle John just before he died, for example, we would have had a fixed set of documents very early on.