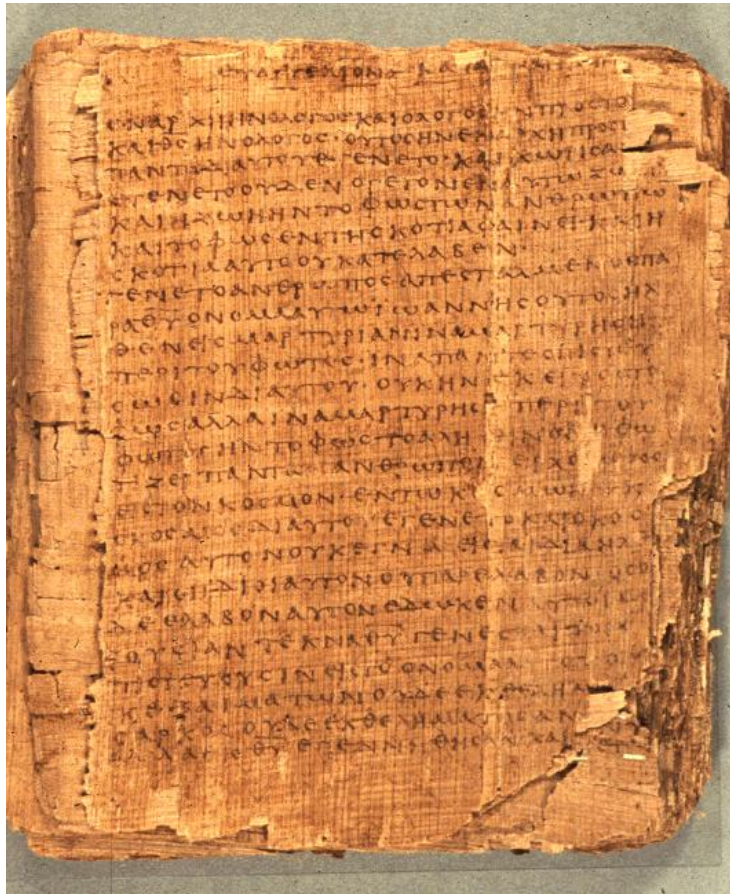


NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Part 2

THE PROCESS OF CANON

Just as the canon of the Old Testament was fixed through an historical process among the Jews, so the canon of the New Testament was similarly fixed by Christians. The earliest recognition of New Testament writings was spontaneous and instinctive, and a rationale for the canon would be developed later. In our earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament, writings which are referred to as the “Apostolic Fathers,” various documents of the New Testament were already being used as Scripture alongside the Old Testament. Of course, no official canon could have been established in the broad geographical spread of the church until all the documents had been produced, had become known, and had been disseminated throughout the congregations in the empire.



From ca. AD 200, this text of John's Gospel (p66) was written on papyrus pages bound in codex form rather than as a scroll.

This process of publication, collection, and dissemination occurred over time. The earliest writing material was papyrus, a sort of inexpensive paper made from reeds. Later, more substantial writing material in the form of vellum or parchment resulted in a more enduring product. Also, Christianity was for much of the first three centuries of its existence an illegal religion and subject to persecution. Christian writings were periodically confiscated by the authorities and destroyed.

Sharing texts between congregations entailed making copies, and all copies were necessarily hand-written. Each copy was unique. Because copies were being made in various parts of the Roman world, there arose what is sometimes called geographical textual families, the texts in each geographical area taking on their own distinctive character, since they were derived from the same exemplar.

At first, the texts circulated in smaller units, such as, the Pauline letters and

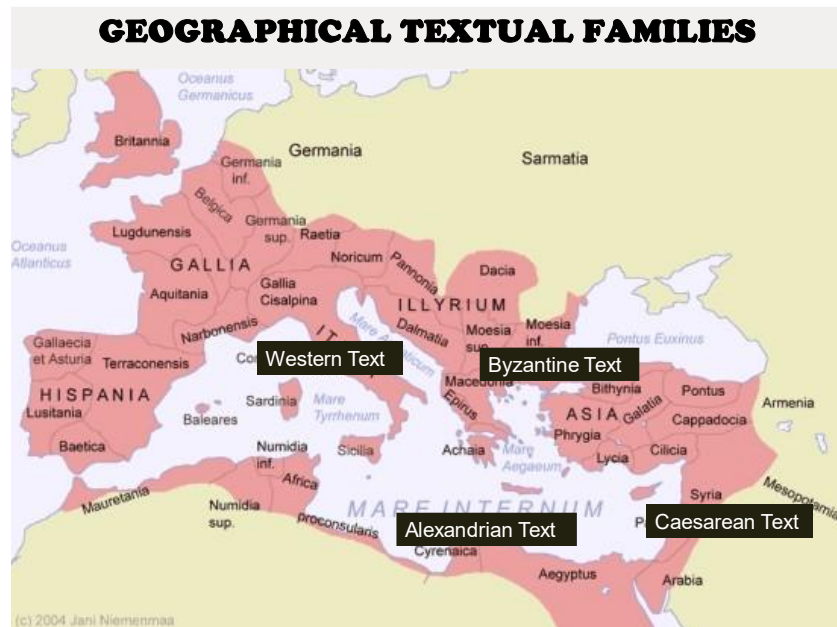
the four gospels. Paul's letters seem to have been collected and circulated in groups of seven, ten,

and thirteen. Texts were circulated between congregations more often than between individuals. and all this took time given the slow process of producing hand-written copies, the hazards of travel, and the threat of confiscation. Literacy in the Roman world was not much more than 10%, so the availability of scribes was limited.

During the severe persecution initiated by Emperor Diocletian in the early 300s, the Romans took it for granted that such texts were essential to Christianity's viability, so the authorities sought the most direct means for undermining this illegal religion by destroying their texts. Diocletian could assume that every Christian community had a collection, and his purge aimed at wiping it out. In the end, it is not surprising that

broad circulation of the Christian texts was painfully slow in comparison with modern standards, and the process took more than a couple of centuries.

In the midst of all this very slow process of publication and distribution, the church also had to evaluate texts. Which texts were authentic and apostolic? Matthew's Gospel was to be accepted; Gnostic gospels were not. Again, it is not too surprising that there was some debate, especially about some books. Was the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews apostolic? What about the small one-pagers, like Jude, 2 John, and 3 John, some of the texts with the slowest circulation. The implicit question was always near the surface, "Were these books inspired by God?" Were they used as Scripture in the public reading of the churches?



The Categories of Eusebius

By the 4th century, Eusebius divides the Christians' writings into three classes (*Ecclesiastical History* III.25)

Known to be Canonical

- Four Gospels
- Acts
- Pauline Letters
- Hebrews
- 1 John
- 1 Peter
- Revelation

Widely accepted though disputed by some

- James
- Jude
- 2 Peter
- 2 & 3 John

Not Canonical

- Acts of Paul
- Shepherd of Hermas
- Apocalypse of Peter
- Epistle of Barnabas
- Didache

By the very nature of the case, the documents of the New Testament could not bear the overt certification of Christ as did the documents of the Old Testament canon, which he accepted without question. By the 4th century, Eusebius, the historian who collected the various early traditions of Christianity,

identified three categories of writings, those known to be accepted, those widely accepted but disputed by some, and those definitely non-canonical.

X = Citation or Allusion
O = Named as Authentic
? = Named as Disputed

	Ignatius (executed 110?)	Polycarp (69? - 155?)	Didache (120?)	Ireneaus (130? - 202)	Justin Martyr (100? - 165?)	Clement of Alexandria (150? - 220?)	Tertullian (160? - 230?)	Origen (185? - 254?)	Eusebius (260? - 340?)	Jerome (340? - 420)	Augustine (354 - 430)	Mardon (in Rome 140?)	Muratorian Fragment (200?)	Athanasius (367)	Old Latin (200?)	Old Syriac (400?)	Nicea (325)	Hippo(393)
	Individuals											Canons		Translation		Councils		
Matthew	X	X	O	X	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Mark	X		O	X	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Luke	X	X		O	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
John	X		O	O	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Acts	X		O	X	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Romans	X	X	O	X	O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
1 Cor	X	X	O	X	O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
2 Cor	X		O	X	O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Galatians	X		O	X	O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Ephesians	X	X	O	X	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Phil	X	X	O		O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Col	X	X	O	X	O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
1 Thes.	X	X	X	O	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
2 Thes.	X	X		X	X	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
1 Timothy		X	X	X		O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
2 Timothy				X		O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Titus				X		O	X	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Phmn	X							O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Hebrews				X		O	X	?	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
James								?	O	O	O	O	O	O		O	?	O
1 Peter		X		O	X	O	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O		O	O	O
2 Peter							?	?	O	O	O	O	O	O		O	?	O
1 John		X		O		O	X	O	O	O	O		O	O	O	O	O	O
2 John		X		X				?	?	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	?	O
3 John								?	?	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	?	O
Jude				X		O	X	?	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	?	O
Rev		X	O	X	O	X	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O

A final listing of the 27 books of the New Testament were issued by Athanasius of Alexandria in AD 367 in his 39th Easter Letter as representing the accepted view of the universal church. Every subsequent branch of Christianity has agreed on this canon list, whether Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant. In retrospect, it is fair to say that over the lengthy and slow process of canonization, the various churches had come to embrace increasingly similar points of view. It was out of this growing unanimity

EASTER LETTERS

Easter Letters were a series of annual letters by Christian bishops of Alexandria which, among other things, announced the date of Easter (a movable date). Alexandria was chosen to produce the letter because of its well-known school of astronomy, and the date of Easter depends upon the spring equinox and the phases of the moon.

In Athanasius' 39th Letter, he also lists the 27 books of the New Testament (just as we have them today), a list of books "appointed...to be read for instruction in godliness" (Apocrypha), and books to be rejected (Gnostic writings, etc.).

that Athanasius published his canon list. Afterwards, various other Christian leaders, such as, Augustine and Jerome, reaffirmed this canon in their respective canon lists in other parts of the empire.

To complete this discussion of canon, it should be pointed out that most of the New Testament documents were exempt from dispute and were accepted and cited as Scripture by most Christians throughout the empire from very early on. The disputed books of the New Testament were largely confined to seven, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. On the other hand, there were some Christian writings which were accepted as Scripture by some churches, but which did not gain eventual acceptance by the entire church. The most important of these books were the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Apocalypse of Peter, 1 and 2 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Acts of Paul and Thecla.

PRESERVATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The preservation of the New Testament text may be discussed in six broad categories, the first three of which are considered to be the most valuable because of their age. The available manuscript base for the Greek New Testament is very large, numbering nearly 6000 documents containing either all or part of the New Testament. **It is easily the best documented text in the history of the world.**

The Papyri (Approximately 2nd--4th Centuries AD): The oldest New Testament manuscripts were written on papyrus sheets. Our very earliest extant portion of a New Testament manuscript is a fragment of John's Gospel (18:31-33), which was copied in the early 2nd century. Biblical papyri are labeled by the lower-case letter "p" with a number following, e.g., p46 (= Chester Beatty Papyri, Ann Arbor, MI, about 200 AD).

The Uncials (Approximately 4th--9th Centuries AD): Two Greek penmanship styles existed in antiquity, one more formal in all upper-case letters, called "uncial." Uncials are labeled by capital letters in Greek, Hebrew, or English and/or Arabic numbers prefaced by a zero, e.g., B or 03 (= Codex Vaticanus, Rome, 4th century AD).

The Minuscules (Approximately 9th--15th Centuries AD): The second Greek penmanship style was a cursive or running hand which could be written more rapidly. Everyday documents, such as, letters, accounts, receipts, petitions, and deeds were often written in this style. Biblical manuscripts written as minuscules are labeled by a simple Arabic number, e.g., 33 (= 9th century AD manuscript).

Lectionaries (Approximately 9th--15th Centuries AD): A regular schedule of scriptural readings from the gospels and epistles was developed. Manuscripts with biblical passages written in the order of the lesson schedule were produced, called lectionaries, and these are also witnesses to the text. Biblical texts found in lectionaries are labeled by a lower case italicized "l" followed by an Arabic number, e.g., l 181 (= a lectionary from 980 AD).

Versions (Beginning in the 4th Century AD): The documents of the New Testament were also translated into several ancient languages, such as, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Ethiopic, and so forth.

Church Fathers (Beginning in the 2nd Century AD): Christian leaders in the early centuries of the church, often called the "Church Fathers," frequently quoted passages of scripture in their writings. These also form a body of witness to the text of the New Testament.