

Now about Trusting the Text

How God's Word Came to Us

The Canon of the New Testament

For nearly twenty centuries Christianity has had the inspired and authoritative New Testament as its rule for faith and practice. How these twenty-seven books came to be recognized as God's Word and accepted by Christians is the topic of the New Testament (NT) canon. Apart from an established canon or accepted tradition to govern belief, the Christian Church would have little upon which to base its faith. Without a fixed standard against which error can be measured, subjective experience would eventually trump oral tradition and heterodox teachings would run wild. If the biblical documents are God's truth, how is it that Christianity came to accept the twenty-seven books called the New Testament? Who decided on twenty-seven? Why not just twenty-six? Or twenty-eight? What criteria were used to distinguish between divine voice and human voice amongst the writings of the first century?

Answers to these questions will be provided in this series using primarily the medium of historiography—the writing of history. Rather than imposing a narrative upon the historical events, it is the events themselves that are exposed by the narrative which believers call the New Testament. Admittedly accepting the NT record as an accurate account extends beyond historical processes and involves faith. Nevertheless, historical method is not therefore excluded as a viable (and perhaps only objective) means for codifying a canonic guide for life and faith.

We start with some background on the Old Testament. The canon of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament or just OT) was not officially identified until the councils of Jamnia (90, 118 CE). It is significant that several hundred years after the last OT book was written, the text was still awaiting an official stamp of approval, yet in Jesus' day he could refer to the OT writings as "scripture" (Jn 10:35); "law and prophets" (Mt 7:12; 22:40); and "Law of Moses...Prophets...Psalms" (Lk 24:44). This intimates public recognition of God's Word precedes an official canonized list. Similarly early believers seemingly knew of and approved the Old Testament content prior to it being officially recognized by any organized group or institution. In addition to the recognized OT scriptures, an "oral tradition" stood behind Jesus' teaching (e.g. I Cor 11:23; 15:3; also known as the kerygma), the Pauline epistles, and the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, Luke). These biblical sources were widely circulated throughout the entire Roman Empire and by the middle of the second century came to be the recognized, authoritative source for believers leading up to a completed canon.

That there were so many different but similar writings being collected and circulated amongst the early Church is one of the forces behind the formation of the NT canon. While these non-canonical writings were being read in Christian assemblies and/or being used for private reading, some shorter epistles (e.g. 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, and Revelation) were much later in being accepted. The Muratorian Canon (c. 200 CE), Origen's canon (c. 250 CE), Eusebius' canon (c. 300CE), the Codex Sinaiticus (4th century) all included the Shepherd of Hermas (c. 110 CE) and the Codex Alexandrinus (c. 5th century) had 1 and 2 Clement (c. 100 CE; 150 CE respectively). This

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material and others (viz., Letter of Barnabas, Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Gospel of Hebrews, Didache, Diatessaron) suggests the extent of non-canonical literature was immense. Consequently, the Church was eventually faced with a decision to render what writings will be regarded authoritative.

Some of the post-apostolic fathers recognized most of Paul's epistles. Clement (bishop of Rome; died c. 100CE), knew of Paul's letters to Corinth. Ignatius (bishop of Antioch; executed c. 110-115CE) attests to other Pauline epistles. Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna; contemporary of Ignatius; martyred c. 156-160CE) was familiar with all of Paul's epistles but three (1 Thessalonians, Philemon, Titus). This strongly indicates that by the beginning of the 2nd century all of Paul's epistles had been circulated amongst and accepted by a majority of churches.

Interestingly, Irenaeus (writing around 180 CE) quotes 1,085 different passages of the NT (626 from the Gospels, 54 from Acts, 280 from Paul, 15 from others NT books, 29 from Revelation) and Augustine (writing around 380 CE) quotes from 29,540 passages in the NT. Clearly the NT documents were penned before their time. In fact, virtually the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from quotations in the early Church Father's writings (ca. 150 CE – 400 CE).

There are more than 5,000 copies of Greek manuscripts dating from early 2nd century to the 16th century. The diversity of manuscripts illustrates not all the NT is from a single source. Available for scrutiny are approximately 8,000 manuscript copies of the Latin Vulgate (translation done by Jerome, 382-405CE) and more than 350 copies of the Syriac (Aramaic) New Testament dating ca. 400s. It is significant that no chronological gap exists in manuscripts from the early 2nd century until the 16th century. If we compare other ancient texts with the quantity of NT manuscripts and show how far removed in time they are from their original source, we learn the NT record is not only a) remarkably abundant but b) in close proximity to their original writing leading many scholars to claim that no other ancient texts are more scrutinized and better attested to their historical reliability.

Equally significant is the fact that Paul's letters show an amazing amount of consistency with the Gospel record regarding the events surrounding Jesus and his message. With the Gospels Paul affirms Jesus

- was born of a woman (Gal 4:4)
- descended from David (Rom 1:3), was the Messiah (1 Cor 15:3)
- ministered in Israel (Rom 15:8)
- Had a brother named James (Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 9:5)
- shared a common meal with other believers (1 Cor 11:23)
- was betrayed (1 Cor 11:23)
- was cruelly treated (Rom 15:3)
- gave testimony before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim 6:13)

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- was crucified (Gal 2:20) because the Jews of Judea hated him (1 Thess 2:14)
- died (1 Cor 15:3)
- was buried (1 Cor 15:4)
- was raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:5)
- was taken to heaven (Rom 10:6; Eph 4:9)

Clearly the NT records are internally consistent. Moreover, about 40 other “Gospels” were written in the first few centuries but none were accepted by the early Christians or the Christian leaders because the stories they told were “fantastic” and read like science fiction. For example, the Gospel of Peter tells that two angels led Jesus out of his tomb and his head extended into the clouds. Or the cross of Jesus, after following him out of his tomb, spoke to a voice in heaven! The Gospel of Thomas has Jesus asking Thomas “Who do you say that I am” and Thomas answers, in effect, “I don’t know!” Also Thomas’ Gospel contains nothing directly related to the details of Jesus’ death and resurrection and hardly anything about what life was like in first-century Palestine, where Jesus lived and ministered. In many cases these other Gospels read like a Harry Potter novel! They may be a lot of fun to read or make for nice conspiracy theories, but lack all the signs of reliable history!

The earliest list of books to be regarded as canonical came from Rome about 140 CE. The heretic Marcion believed the god of the OT to be inferior to the god of the NT and sought to provide a list of Christian writings that removed, as far as possible, any Jewish overtones. His list consisted of an edited version of Luke (a “gentile” account of Jesus’ life and ministry) and ten of Paul’s epistles (excluding the Pastorals). This attempt to remove all Semitic influence and Jewish thought from Christianity provoked, in part, the need for a recognized canon.

Justin Martyr (c. 150 CE) wrote in his *Apology and Dialogue with Trypho* that the Church reads the “memoirs of the apostles” (viz. the Gospels). Revelation is included in his canon as well as the Pauline epistles, Hebrews, and Acts. Later his pupil Tatian (c. 170 CE) formulated the *Diatessaron* (a harmony of the Gospels) using all four accounts Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This shows that Justin did know of the four Gospels.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (c. 177 CE), cites twenty-two of the twenty-seven books of the NT. Those not included are Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude. Although he put the *Shepherd of Hermas* on par with the canonical books, Irenaeus’ record indicates the early formation of the canon. His account alone shows the extent of recognition both geographically and authoritatively of most of the NT books before the close of the 2nd century.

The *Muratorian Fragment* was discovered by Cardinal L.A. Muratori, an Italian historian, and was published in 1740. It contains a list of books to be read publicly to the whole Church deemed “apostolic” in origin. This document is dated c. 200 CE. Twenty-two (possibly twenty-three if James

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is included; but, see Bruce *New Testament Documents*, p. 22 and *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [ISBE] Vol. I, p. 605) of the canonical NT books are included. Those not included are Hebrews, James, I and II Peter, and III John. It has been speculated that Hippolytus of Rome (c. 217 CE) is the author of the Muratorian Canon (ISBE Vol I, p. 605). In his known writings he lists twenty-one canonical books; although those books he includes or omits are different from the Fragment.

Tertullian of Carthage (c. 196-212 CE; North Africa) left in his writings a canon of twenty-two books. Those not included were Hebrews, James, II Peter, and II, III John. His strong position against Marcion's canon and doctrine led him to insist upon an authoritative body of writings.

Clement of Alexandria in Egypt and his successor Origen both attest to the process of a canon in the East. It is possible that Clement knew of all twenty-seven books of the NT, although he held that other non-canonical books were inspired as well. Origen, on the other hand, noted three classes of Scripture. In the first class were those books that were undisputed. In the second class were those still disputed, viz. Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. The third class consisted of "false" works.

Eusebius' canon (c. 260-340 CE) was the same as Origen's but included Hebrews and not Revelation. His canon is significant as the Arian heresy was hotly disputed during his time under Constantine. Although both Arius and Athanasius held to the authority of the Scriptures, both turned to them in order to reach a settlement as to the meaning of Christ's deity and humanity. This clearly indicates the importance of a canon or means whereby truth and error can be discerned.

The Alexandrian theologian Athanasius in his thirty-ninth Easter letter, 367 CE, recognized the most significant and complete canon. All twenty-seven books were acknowledged as Scripture and fully authoritative. He insisted that the twenty-seven alone are to be canonical — nothing to be added nor taken away from them. Also at about this time (c. 386 CE), Jerome was commissioned by Damasus, the bishop of Rome, to make a fresh translation of the Scriptures into Latin. In his translation he included all twenty-seven books of the NT.

The first official recognition of a complete NT canon consisting of all twenty-seven books by the Church in the West came at the Third Council of Carthage in 397 CE. Augustine was present and gave his stamp of approval of the canon. The Council of Hippo (419 CE) reiterated that decision with the same list of twenty-seven books. Later (c. 508 CE) the Church of the East recognized the remaining books in its canon (viz. 2 Peter, 2, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation). Thus, by the beginning of the sixth century the Church in the entire known world had a completed, recognized canon of the NT.

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The long historical/theological process to recognize the New Testament as the authoritative Word of God has been scrutinized and questioned time and again by the scholarly world. Martin Luther, for instance, placed certain books on a lower status (e.g. Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation), since they did not fit well with his theological presuppositions. Many others have followed suit. Those who question the authority of some NT books may ask, “Why accept the New Testament canon as authoritative?” Should modern Christianity accept these writings as canon?

To answer it's important to understand the criteria used by the early Church when deciding on what books to recognize as God's Word. Part of these criteria would no doubt include various social, theological, cultural, and even geographical considerations. After all, the Church did not exist in a vacuum. There were many forces that shaped the completed canon of the NT and these variables are difficult to weigh due to the time gap. There are limited available resources (such as antiquated writings, artifacts, excavations etc.) from which to draw. But a high degree of probability exists that what can be known regarding the NT documents will show it reasonable to accept their trustworthiness. Given this probability it's not a far distance to travel in trusting the NT Scriptures as a reliable account of the historical Jesus, his apostles, and the birth of the Church.

The first of many criterions for the NT canon would be the consistency of the message and its broad scope of application. Here it is plain that the four Gospels were regarded as accurate and authoritative. Had the Gospels been in question, those close enough to Jesus or his disciples could have made corrections before they were so widely circulated. The kerygma (apostolic oral traditions about Jesus) was one of the means used for sorting out the accuracy and therefore authority of the Gospel accounts.

Likewise, the Pauline epistles were widely circulated and believed authoritative. Many times Paul claimed a “word of the Lord” ([1 Thess 4:15](#); [1 Cor 7:10](#); [9:14](#); [11:23](#); [Acts 20:35](#)). Philemon may have been late in being acknowledged but this could be due to the fact that it was a personal letter and not meant to be circulated. Paul insists that his letter to the Thessalonians be read to all ([1 Thess 5:27](#)). Likewise, Paul commanded the Colossians to send their letter to the church in Laodicea and in turn to read their letter from him in the Colossian church ([Col 4:16](#)). Also, the Apocalypse of John was to be sent to the seven churches in Asia Minor ([Rev 1:11](#)).

The fact that these NT books were circulated and accepted by so many indicates that there is a great deal of continuity inherent in the message they proclaimed. Had there been contradiction (apparent or explicit) in the early circulation of these accounts, then it is doubtful the Church would have accepted them.

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Apostolic origin was another criterion in determining authoritative writings for the Church. This was, in fact, the most important factor for the Church. Since Jesus granted authority to the apostles to proclaim the message of a risen Savior and endowed them with the Spirit of God to carry out this task, it was understood that the writings of the apostles were to be held in the highest regard.

The apostle Paul was acutely conscious of his authority. So much so that rejecting his teaching was tantamount to rejecting the teaching of God himself (1 [Thess 4:8](#)). It is equally significant that they had not challenged Paul, being a contemporary of the other apostles. In fact, he himself challenged Peter — one who walked with the Lord Jesus during his earthly ministry ([Gal 2:11](#)). Shortly afterwards (c. 15-20 years) Peter affirms Paul's writings as "Scripture" (2 [Pt 3:16](#)). This intimates a kind of internal consistency amongst the apostles and affirms their authority.

While apostolic authorship was the preferred means for determining NT authoritative writings, it does not explain the acceptance of Mark, Luke-Acts, James, Jude, and possibly Hebrews. The apostles themselves included the OT as canon for the Church and, therefore, did not insist that their writings alone be considered authoritative. In 1 [Tim 5:18](#) where Paul quotes [Lk 10:7](#) he puts Luke's Gospel on par with Scripture. This illustrates close association with an apostle as a possible criterion. In short, whatever books the apostles imposed as canon are those works that the Church included as canon (see *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Warfield pp. 415-416).

Another means of determining authoritative Scripture was the overall effect that these writings brought about in the lives of the people they reached. By way of contrast, the non-canonical books did not transform the moral and spiritual nature of the early Christians. This criterion may be highly subjective but its subjectivity does not remove the reality of virtuous and godly lives brought about as a result of the ethical injunctions found in NT writings.

The Council of Carthage in 397 CE did not so much determine the canon as recognized it. If apostolic authorship/association, internal consistency of the message, and the moral change brought about as a result of these writings makes up the primary foundation for canonicity, then all the Church could do was render a decision as to these books' authoritative nature. The rest was left to time. Had there been substantial question regarding the Church's decision on the canon, then one would think that history would reverse that decision. If anything, history has affirmed the early Church's conclusion.

What remains is the rise of Christianity that has stood the test of time based upon the writings of the New Testament. The canon of Scripture has never been the product of individual or institutional arbitration. Rather, it came about as a result of many processes that contributed to its formation. Its own internal consistency of message, the Church's use of it in defense of orthodoxy, the changed lives brought about by its dynamic, and the test of time have all contributed to the

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recognition of the NT documents' authority and inspiration from God. The final task is simply to understand and submit to the teachings and precepts of His Word under the guidance and influence of the Spirit.

The early Church had an immense responsibility in defining the parameters of the Christian faith. In an effort to defend orthodoxy, it was necessary to recognize an authoritative body of literature that carried with it the apostle's approval. While apostolic authorship (hence, authority) cannot be proven empirically, it is quite reasonable to believe, based upon the early Church witnesses, that the Christian message sprang from the risen Lord himself and was confirmed by his apostles ([Heb 2:3b](#)). This message corresponded to the activities of the historical Jesus and resulted in the twenty-seven books of the NT, which believers call the Word of God.

A Few Words on Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Infallibility

At the outset it's necessary to define some terms that are thrown around rather loosely in Christian circles, such as "inspiration," "inerrancy," and "infallibility," and zero in more precisely what they mean. As is well known, [2 Timothy 3:16](#) tells us that "all Scripture is inspired by God [literally, "God-breathed"]." The term "inspired" more precisely connotes expiration rather than inspiration, since the source of Scripture is God and he "breathed out," as it were, the content of Scripture. The mode by which he chose to communicate was, of course, human agency, but without displacing the writer's peculiar style, background, personality, et al. In so far as copies were faithfully reproduced from the original manuscripts, truthfulness and accuracy was preserved in the text. Of that small number of passages where words, phrases, and syntactical concerns are in question, none have to do with the essential message or meaning as originally intended. Most often when Christians disagree on meaning, it is due to a theological grid not shared or simply a blatant misunderstanding. Put differently, the disagreement is not in the text, but in us.

Infallibility of the Bible means that the text *cannot* err, whereas inerrancy simply means that the Bible *does not* err. One might argue the two doctrines are logically dependent upon one another. That is if the Bible cannot err, then it does not err. If A is true, and B is logically dependent upon A, then when A obtains, B follows as a necessary entailment.

The import of these doctrines (inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy) is that they apply only to the original manuscripts and not to translations that we have today. However, it must be asserted (and it is logically necessary) that when our translations faithfully communicate what the original text contained, then God's truth is accurately conveyed. Consequently, responsible translations in use today are authoritative for our lives.

On a practical/historical note: Due to the perishable materials available in their time of writing, all ancient manuscripts were subject to decay. Knowing this, the practice of document transmission via

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manual copying was a common and precise task amongst scribes in the Hebrew and Greco-Roman culture. However, it is wrong to assume that since copies are made and years divide the original piece of work from its copied source, that there are necessarily errors and that those copies cannot be trusted as reliable. If, for example, your mother wrote you a letter and you chose to hand-copy it and send the copied letter to your brother, and you subsequently lost the original, there is no reason for your brother to assume that the content of the copied letter is imprecise nor ridden with error (given your credibility, which the doctrine of inspiration as defined above takes care of, since it is presumed that God's credibility is impeccable).

Modern translations are the product of extremely reliable texts that date back to as early as 125 CE (a parchment of John 18 dating back to this time still exists on display at University of Manchester, England). We have more than 5,300 copies or pieces of New Testament documents and scholars pore over these copies for years before creating a translation. What is amazing is the fact that the differences are slight and miniscule. The oldest complete manuscript of the Old Testament (Codex Leningradensis) dates from 1006 CE. However, when this text is compared with like texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls (dating from about 150 BCE to 100 CE) there is essentially little difference. This demonstrates the reliability of multiple copies over more than 1000 years of transmission! Of those differences that do exist (spelling, grammar), there are no concerns over the meaning of the text. Hence, God's Word is kept intact. To the best of my knowledge, there is no finer work on historical reliability of Scripture than F. F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*

As for multiple translations: It is well known that no language can be exactly translated to another. And, due to semantics (the way in which language evolves through usage), it is necessary to freshly translate Scripture for each new generation so as to convey God's Word to the world. Personally, I recommend using multiple translations. For the new believer, The New Living Translation is excellent and faithful to the original intent. The 2011 New International Version is my preference. For study, The New American Standard (updated), The Revised Standard, and The English Standard Version are the most literal (word-for-word) translations available to date.

Finally, virtually every translation will have a preface that explains how the translation came about and everyone is encouraged to read that carefully to understand the philosophy of the translators. At the end of the day, every Christian can be sure that what Scripture says God says.