

THE CANON OF THE NT

I. NT Subcollections: Four Gospels, Acts, 14 Pauline Epistles, 7 Catholic [General] Epistles, Revelation

- **Four Gospels**

- Most churches widely accepted these books as a collection of Scripture by the end of the 2nd Century (101 AD – 200 AD)
- Most manuscripts confirm these four Gospels as canonical
 - a. P45
 - b. 05
 - c. Lect. 1043
 - d. 022
 - e. 024
- Ancient statements from early church leaders confirm the four Gospels:
 - a. Irenaeus (AD 180, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8) – “*It is not possible that the Gospels be more or fewer than these in number.*”
 - b. Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 3.13.93.1)
 - c. Tertullian (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8)
 - d. Origen (*Commentary on John* 1.21-2; *Sermons in Luke* 1.2)

- **Acts** – All the Christian canon lists include Acts, although some include it in a different place than after the four Gospels

- **14 Pauline Epistles**

- Early disagreement on the authorship of Hebrews
- Origen (*Sermons in Joshua* 7.1) accepted 14 letters as Pauline
- Clement of Alexandria quoted from all 14 letters as quotes from Paul

- **7 Catholic [General Epistles] – James – Jude**

- Slowest to be recognized as canonical
- (1st – 3rd Century AD):
 - a. All quoted much from 1 Peter and 1 John
 - Papias
 - Polycarp
 - Irenaeus
 - Clement of Alexandria
 - Tertullian
 - b. Origen (*Sermons on Joshua* 7.1) listed all seven
- 4th Century
 - a. Eusebius (AD 325) – First to mention the seven as a collection of Scripture on record
 - b. Cyril of Jerusalem (350 AD) was the first to include the seven as a collection in the New Testament canon (*Catechesis* 4.36)

- **Revelation**

- 2nd and 3rd Century church leaders accepted it as Scripture
 - a. Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 81)
 - b. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 5.26.1)
 - c. Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4.5)
 - d. Origen (*Commentary on John* 5)
- The Western church held this view early on and continue holding this view today
- The East (Greek Orthodox Church) didn't accept it until 17th century

II. NT Canon Lists

- See Appendix A
- Lists agree on all four Gospels, Acts, and mostly on the 14 Pauline Epistles
- Some dispute on General Epistles and Revelation

III. What about other books outside the NT Canon?

- Three types of early Christian books:
 - Canonical – 27 NT books
 - Intermediate
 - a. Able to be read for edification
 - b. Not canonical but not totally rejected by the churches
 - c. Apocalypse of Peter
 - d. The Shepherd of Hermas
 - e. The Epistle of Barnabas
 - f. The Acts of Paul
 - g. The Didache
 - h. The Gospel according to the Hebrews
 - i. 1-2 Clement
 - j. Two Ways
 - k. The Judgment of Peter
 - Apocryphal
 - a. By the time of Eusebius (4th Century), many of these books were no longer used by the churches
 - b. Only ones said to be read are listed as “Intermediate” and should be read privately
- Some Apocrypha books are totally rejected and for obvious reasons:
 - The Gospel of Thomas – Records Peter telling Mary to leave, for “females are not worthy of the life,” to which Jesus responds that he will make her male so that she can enter the kingdom of heaven.¹
 - The Gospel of Peter
 - The Gospel of Matthias
 - The Acts of Andrew
 - The Acts of John

¹ “Thomas 114, cited in Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 323.”

- All described by Eusebius as “forgeries of heretics,...altogether wicked and impious.”²
- Origen – “The Church has four Gospels. Heresy has many” (*Sermons in Luke* 1.2)
 - The Gospel according to the Egyptians
 - The Gospel according to the Twelve Apostles
 - The Gospel of Basilides
 - According to Thomas
 - According to Matthias
- Jerome – Letter to the Laodiceans – read by some but rejected by all
- **Criteria for “Divine Inspiration”**: A book had to be recognized with proof as being written by an apostle or close associate

IV. **Closing of the Canon** – Canon of Scripture was fully closed in 4th Century

- Athanasius – “Let no one add to these or subtract anything from them” (*Festal Letter* 39.19)
- Gregory of Nazianzus said that his canon list included all the authoritative Scriptures (39 OT books and 27 NT books) while rendering all other books ungenueine (*Hymn* 12)
- The Synod of Laodicea prohibited the reading of noncanonical books in church
- Cyril of Jerusalem counseled new converts to read privately only the books the church read publicly (*Catechesis* 4.36)

² “Eusebius, Church History 3.25.6–7, cited in Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 103. Slightly adapted.”

- The Councils of Carthage and Hippo permitted only the divine Scriptures in their canon lists to be read in the church

Conclusion: The churches of the 1st – 4th Centuries concluded that they had a sure Word from God in the 39 OT and 27 NT books of the biblical canon.

APPENDIX A

LIST	DATE	COMMENTS
Origen (Sermons on Joshua 7.1)	ca. AD 250	May lack Revelation
Eusebius (Church History 3.25)	ca. 325	Disputed: James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, Revelation: either accepted or spurious
Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechesis 4.36)	ca. 350	Lacks Revelation
Athanasius (Festal Letter 39.18)	367	Twenty-seven-book New Testament
Synod of Laodicea 59	343-380	Lacks Revelation
The Apostolic Canons 85	375-380	Lacks Revelation; adds 1-2 Clement
Gregory of Nazianzus (Hymn 12)	381-390	May lack Revelation
Amphilochius (Iambi In. 280–319)	ca. 380	Disputed: 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, Revelation
Epiphanius (Panarion 76.22.5)	ca. 376	Twenty-seven-book New Testament
The Muratorian Fragment	2 nd , 3 rd , or 4 th century	Accidentally lacks 1-2 Peter, James, Hebrews
Codex Claromontanus	300-350	Accidentally lacks Philippians, Thessalonians, Hebrews
The Mommsen Catalogue	Before 365	Lacks Hebrews, James, Jude; uncertain on the number of Petrine (1 or 2) and Johannine (1 or 3) epistles
Jerome (Letter 53)	395	Twenty-seven-book New Testament
Rufinus (Commentary on Apostles' Creed)	ca. 404	Twenty-seven-book New Testament
Breviarium Hipponense 36	ca. 393	Twenty-seven-book New Testament
Augustine (On Christian Teaching 2.8)	397	Twenty-seven-book New Testament
Pope Innocent I (Letter 6.7)	405	Twenty-seven-book New Testament
Syriac MS 10	350-400	Lacks Catholica Epistles and Revelation