The New Testament Canon

How was the New Testament formed?
The meaning of “canon”
F. F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture

• A straight rod used as a rule might be marked in units of length (like a modern ruler marked in inches or centimetres); from this practice the Greek word *kanon* came to be used of the series of such marks, and hence to be used in the general sense of ‘series’ or ‘list.’ It is this last usage that underlies the term ‘the canon of scripture.’

• While the ‘canon’ of scripture means the *list* of books accepted as holy scripture, the other sense of canon—*rule* or *standard*—has rubbed off on this one, so that the canon of scripture is understood to be the *list* of books which are acknowledged to be, in a unique sense, the *rule* of belief and practice.
The meaning of ‘new testament’

• The earliest references to the latter portion of the Christian Scriptures as the “New Testament” are:
  – In Greek-Clement of Alexandria (150-215)
  – In Latin-Tertullian of Carthage (160-220)

• In Latin, the Greek term for “covenant” can be translated with either *instrumentum* (legal document) or *testamentum* (a will or testament). Tertullian used both to refer to the Christian Scriptures and probably preferred the first of the two terms although the latter was more commonly used in his day (Against Marcion 4.1.)

• The terms indicates that Matthew-Revelation reveals the “new covenant” promised by Moses and the Prophets
The New Testament as “Scripture”

- **Paul** referred to Gospel tradition as “Scripture” (1 Cor. 9:8-14)
- **Peter** referred to Paul’s letters as “Scripture” (2 Peter 3:15)
- The **apostolic church** treated the NT documents as Scripture (Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3) by reading them in corporate worship
- This high regard for the writings associated with the apostles continued among the “apostolic fathers,” leaders of the church in 2nd and 3rd generation Christianity
Early church’s regard for NT as “Scripture”

• Papias (early 2d Sent.) mentions Matthew and Mark by name and writes a 5-vol. commentary on the teachings of Jesus preserved in the Gospels
• Clement of Rome (AD 96) quotes the Sermon on the Mount and ascribes divine inspiration to it
• 2 Clement (AD 100-150) quotes Matthew repeatedly as “Scripture”
• Epistle of Barnabas (early 2d cent.) introduces quote from Matthew with “as it is written”
• Polycarp quotes Ephesians as “Scripture”
Early church’s regard for the NT as “Scripture”

• Basilides, an early gnostic leader contemporary with Polycarp, quotes Paul’s letters as “Scripture” and introduces quotes from Paul with “as it is written”

• Hegesippus of Palestine (AD 165-75) reports that the Gospels (and probably the other apostolic writings) were preached alongside the OT in churches everywhere

• Justin Martyr (c. AD 150) ascribes inspiration to the writings of the Apostles, says they were read publicly in church, and uses “it is written” with NT quotations
The canonization of the four gospels

THE FOUR-FOLD GOSPEL
Production of the four gospels

- As the apostles were martyred, they recognized the importance of preserving their testimony about the Lord in writing
- Mark-late 50s
- Matthew-early 60s
- Luke-early 60s
- John-late 80s
- The Gospels were accepted as authoritative and quoted as Scripture from the moment they were produced
Distribution of the gospels

Initially churches in specific locations had access to only one Gospel
Soon the Gospels circulated widely
Distribution and affirmation of the four gospels

- Papias (60-130) described background of Mark and Matthew and wrote a commentary on the Gospels.
- Justin Martyr (100-165) wrote that Mark preserved “memoirs of Peter”. He referred to multiple written Gospels as “memoirs of the apostles” and said they were read in church alongside the OT.
- Tatian (110-172) produced his Diatessaron, a harmony of the four Gospels.
Early manuscripts

P75 (Luke and John)

P45 (Gospels and Acts)
Close of the gospel canon

• Irenaeus (late 2d cent.) described in detail the authorship of the Four Gospels

• He argued that God “has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit.”

• He added, “They are guilty of vanity and ignorance, and of audacity also, who reject the form of the gospel and introduce either more or fewer faces of the gospels . . .”
Cover of gospels (1000-1050)

- This ivory plaque depicts in symbolic form the four writers of the Gospels surrounding the Lamb of God: Matthew by the winged man, Mark by the winged lion, Luke by the winged ox, and John by the eagle. The character of these symbols is based upon the vision of Saint John in the Book of Revelation (4:6-7). Originally this plaque would have covered a deluxe binding of a now-lost Gospel book. (Metropolitan Museum of Art).
Canonization of the Pauline Corpus

PAUL’S LETTERS
Paul’s letters

• Like the Gospels, Paul’s letters first circulated singly
• Even before Paul’s death, the churches were collecting and distributing Paul’s letters and reading them in corporate worship
• Before the end of the first century, all of Paul’s letters had been gathered into a single collection (2 Peter 3:15)
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• AD 200
• Contain all of Paul’s letters to churches plus Hebrews
• Possibly contained Pastorals and Philemon
Combination of Gospels and Apostle

• Around AD 140, Marcion published his edition of the NT which he called “Gospel and the Apostle.”

• Most scholars believe that his NT was a revision produced in response to the circulation of the 4 Gospels and Paul’s letters together among the orthodox churches.
The muratorian fragment

The earliest extensive list of accepted documents
Muratorian fragment

• Original text probably dates to late 2d century
• First part of text is missing
• Affirms [Matthew, Mark], Luke, John, Acts, Paul’s thirteen letters, Jude, 1 & 2 John, and Revelation
• Does not mention 1 & 2 Peter, James, 3 John, and Hebrews
• Includes Revelation of Peter and Wisdom of Solomon
Early church fathers

- Origen (185-254)
  - Undisputed: 4 Gospels, Acts, 14 letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation
  - Disputed: Hebrews, 2 Peter, James, 2 and 3 John, and Jude

- Eusebius (c. 325)
  - Universally acknowledged: 4 Gospels, Acts, letters of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation
  - Disputed by some, approved by most: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John
  - Spurious: Acts of Paul, Shepherd, Revelation of Peter, Barnabas, Didache
  - Publication of Eusebius’ canon
What do the surviving manuscripts tell us about the canon?

COLLECTIONS IN EARLY UNCIALS
Sinaiticus (4\textsuperscript{th} Cent)
Vaticanus (4\textsuperscript{th} cent)
Alexandrinus (5\textsuperscript{th} cent)
Early Church Fathers

• Athanasius (367) first to list the 27 books of our NT without making any distinction between them
• Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) listed all books except Revelation as universally accepted
• Amphilochius of Iconium (4th cent) listed the 27 books as “the most unerring canon of the divinely inspired Scriptures”
• Rufinus of Aquileia (345-410) same list as Athansius
• Jerome (383) Vulgate contained 27 NT books
• Augustine (354-430) accepted the 27 books
Church Councils dealing with Canon

- Council of Hippo (393)
- Third Council of Carthage (397)
- Sixth Council of Carthage (419)
- Pope Innocent I (405)
Criteria for Canonicity

• Apostolicity
• Antiquity
• Catholicity
• Orthodoxy