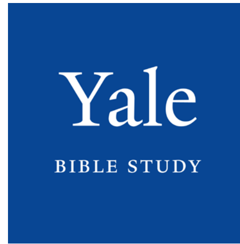

Formation of the Biblical Canon, New Testament

The canon of the New Testament took shape over a period of almost four centuries as Christians shaped the beliefs and practices of their movement. The process begins in the first century with the creation of accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus and correspondence from leaders of the Christian movement to congregations around the eastern Mediterranean.

Gospel Traditions and Gospels

The public ministry of Jesus began, according to the Gospel according to Luke in the fourteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, i.e., around 28 CE. His death on a cross in Jerusalem took place within a few years of that time, most likely in 30 CE. Stories about Jesus circulated orally, and perhaps also in some written form, in the decades immediately following his death and resurrection. His disciples, however, were not particularly interested in developing a collection of "scriptures." Most expected Jesus to return in triumph, to inaugurate the fullness of the Kingdom of God on earth, a belief attested in Mark 9:1, in 1 Corinthians 7:31, and 1 Thessalonian 4:17. The first account of the ministry of Jesus, the Gospel according to Mark, was probably composed in its current form in the years immediately prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The gospel knows of "wars and rumors of wars" (Mark 13:7) and anticipates the desecration of the Temple (Mark 13:14-23) but portrays that event not in terms of the destruction that actually took place, but, echoing Daniel 12:11, in terms of a desecrating sacrilege (Mark 13:14), possibly a pagan statue or altar.

Mark's succinct and fast moving gospel, probably designed to provoke disciples to renewed commitment to Jesus, told of this mysterious wonder worker who referred to himself as the Son of Man, who came to suffer and die (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33), and whom they understood to be their redeemer (Mark 10:45). This account served as the basis for other efforts to tell the story of Jesus written after the Jewish revolt and in light of the destruction of the Temple. Matthew provided a framework to Mark that highlighted the teachings of Jesus about himself, about his ethical demands, about the context of the church community in which those demands were to be followed, and about the expectation of future judgment that awaited all humankind both good and evil alike. Matthew supplemented Mark with stories of the birth of Jesus and of his post- resurrection appearances and supplied many sayings and parables of Jesus not found in Mark. Matthew crafted his gospel in a context in which Christianity was struggling to define itself over against the kind of rabbinic Judaism that was emerging from the Pharisaic movement in the wake of the disaster of '70.

Somewhat later Luke, which may have gone through more than one edition, did something very similar to Matthew, expanding the spare Markan account with stories and teachings, although Luke offered quite different accounts of the birth and post- resurrection appearances of Jesus. He drew on traditions of sayings of Jesus very similar to what was available to Matthew, most likely from a now lost collection of sayings of Jesus, labeled "Q." Both Matthew and Luke were probably completed in the last decades of the first century CE.

The Gospel according to John displays a complex pattern of similarity to and difference from the other known gospels. Although scholars have long debated exactly what the relationship of this gospel and other gospels might be, it is likely that the fourth evangelist knew and used the Matthew, Mark, and Luke alongside other early Christian traditions about the deeds and teachings of Jesus. The evangelist used that source material in his own creative way, fashioning a gospel that exercised a dramatic appeal to belief in Jesus.

The four gospels that became authoritative for the Church were not the only accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus that his followers composed in the first century of the Christian movement. Some other gospels became popular among Christians despite the fact that they never achieved the status of authoritative scriptures. These include the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, an account of the youth of Jesus between his birth and his visit to Jerusalem at age 12, a visit recorded in Luke. Other gospels are attested only as fragments or citations in writings of the first several centuries of the early church. These include the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, the *Gospel of Nazoreans*, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, all presumably works with a strong Jewish flavor. Yet other gospels composed in antiquity were only rediscovered in modern times. These include the *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus found in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. That text of the Gospel was written in Coptic, the native language of Egypt, but fragments of the text survive in Greek, which was probably the language in which this gospel was composed, probably in the second century.

A number of other ancient texts bear the title "Gospel," but do not resemble the narratives of the life and teachings of Jesus that became authoritative. These include the *Gospel of Truth*, another text from the Nag Hammadi collection, which is a meditative homily on the significance of Jesus and his message, probably composed in the latter half of the second century. Here "gospel" is not a literary category, but a reference to content; to the "good news" that is the Christian message.

Epistles and Other Writings

What came to be authoritative scripture for Christians consists not only of accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, but also writings of his followers. Chief among these are the Epistles of Paul. The earliest of Paul's surviving letters, 1 Thessalonians, was probably written shortly after Paul evangelized the community, around 48 CE. The rest of undisputed epistles, Galatians, 1, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon, were probably written in the mid 50's while Paul was actively engaging in his mission to the gentiles in Greece and Asia Minor. As tradition suggests, Paul probably died in the persecution of Christians at Rome under the emperor Nero

in 64 CE. His letters were collected, probably shortly after his death, edited and supplemented by other compositions by his disciples. These texts include 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1, 2 Timothy, and Titus, although some scholars think that some of these letters might be genuine letters of the apostle. The Epistle to the Hebrews, although not claiming to be by Paul, was also associated with the Pauline collection at some point in the second century.

The collection of Pauline letters may have inspired other collectors or additions of letters attributed to other apostles, Peter, James, Jude, and John. The collection of seven letters may also have inspired the author of the Book of Revelation, which begins with a series of seven messages, rather like little epistles, sent from Jesus to Christian congregations in Asia Minor.

The Development of an Authoritative Collection of Scripture

Many factors drove the process by which these texts from the first and early second century became authoritative. Some accounts of the life of Jesus probably became popular in local churches and were used in their worship and teaching. The associations of Matthew with Antioch, Mark with Alexandria, and John with Ephesus may reflect such local popularity. [1]Justin Martyr in mid-second-century Rome reports on the use of traditional literature in liturgical settings. In places like Rome, with Christians from around the Mediterranean, gospels favored by more than one local group were probably part of the scene.

The early second century saw the introduction of a gospel that sharpened debate about what was to be considered authoritative. The new gospel came onto the Roman scene at the hands of [2]Marcion, a wealthy Christian merchant from Pontus, in Asia Minor, who arrived in Rome around 138 and made a major financial contribution to the local church. He brought with him a gospel favored in his homeland which seemed close to Luke. Many of his critics thought that he had edited Luke, although some scholars have argued that Marcion's gospel was simply a local account resembling Luke that may even have been a source used by the third evangelist. In any case, Marcion argued that authoritative Christian scripture, literature that could be read at worship and used to settle dogmatic debates, was limited to his gospel and a collection of Pauline epistles. Most controversially, Marcion claimed that Christians did not need the Old Testament, which depicted an inferior heavenly being who was not the God revealed by Jesus.

Christians who affirmed the connection between the Creator and the Redeemer, and who favored other gospels resisted Marcion's claims and argued that their texts also should receive special treatment. Most agreed that more than one gospel merited authoritative status but debated how many more should be recognized. In the decade or so after Marcion's activity in Rome, some Christian teachers thought that four gospels should be recognized, and, moreover, that four could be harmonized into one account of the gospel story. That conviction came to literary expression in the *Diatessaron*, a work of [3]Tatian, a pupil of Justin Martyr. This was the first gospel harmony, presenting a single account of the words and deeds of Jesus drawn from four gospels but told as a single story glossing over the tensions between the different accounts. The *Diatessaron* itself has not survived, although there are works that comment on it and gospel harmonies in various languages of the Christian world.

Other writers in the second century explored the process by which their revered texts had come into being. [4]Papias, who is cited by the fourth-century historian 5Eusebius, collected traditions about the authors of the gospels and provides the foundation of the now familiar legends about them. (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39).

By the third quarter of the second century, leading Christian teachers defended the position that four and only four gospels, the ones we know as canonical, were to be recognized as authoritative for liturgical and theological purposes. Bishop [6]Irenaeus of Lyon, in his five-volume work *Against the Heresies*, written around 180, staunchly defended that position, and offered various arguments in its favor, including the

association of the four evangelists with the four beasts of Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 1:5). Irenaeus argued that authoritative works ought to have been *written by apostles* or their immediate disciples, be in *conformity with the accepted beliefs* of the Church expressed in its creeds, and be *recognized by bishops*. These considerations came to be the foundation on which the canon, and orthodox Christianity itself, was built.

Some Christian leaders in the second century may have compiled lists of works that they recognized as authoritative. One such list is the *Muratorian Canon*, a Latin enumeration of scriptural texts, which some scholars date to the second century, although others think that it is a fourth century composition. The list, in any case, overlaps with, but is not identical to the list of books that finally were recognized as authoritative scripture.

By the third century Christian thinkers were making a distinction between authoritative texts, works that were acceptable but not authoritative, and works that were to be rejected as purveyors of false doctrine yet the precise limits of what was authoritative remained fluid. Some works eventually canonized were respected in only part of the larger Christian world but rejected elsewhere. Thus the Epistle to the Hebrews, while generally accepted in the Greek east as at least worthy of Paul, was rejected in the Latin west as a work of someone else, Barnabas perhaps, as the third- century North African theologian Tertullian argued. The Book of Revelation was widely revered in the Latin west, while leaders of the Church in the Greek east were uncomfortable with its disruptive apocalyptic expectations.

By the fourth century, the episcopal historian Eusebius could provide a detailed account of the debates of earlier generations of Christians about the scriptural works that they recognized, and this account is one of the major themes of his *Church History*.

While Eusebius was concerned with what counts as authoritative scripture, he did not yet have a strictly limited canon or list of specific books. Such a list, containing the 27 books in the New Testament recognized by Latin and Greek Christian churches alike, appears in a letter by Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, who led the fourth century struggle against the [7]Arian heresy and in support of the doctrines defined at the Council of Nicaea in 325. This letter of 367 CE, one of the annual messages sent by Athanasius to the Churches of Egypt at Eastertime, names the books of the New Testament as we know it. Similar lists appeared soon appeared in the Latin West. The Damasine list is attributed to Pope Damasus (366-84) who presided over the Council of Rome in 382, shortly after the letter of Athansius. That document appears in some manuscripts as the first three chapters of the *Decretum Gelasianum* or Gelasian Decree,

attributed to Pope Gelasius I (492-496), although probably written in the early sixth century. The relationship between the two documents has been debated, but they provide evidence that at least by the late fourth and certainly by the late fifth century the New Testament as we know it was known in Rome.

Glossary

1 Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist active in Rome in mid second century, best known for two *Apologies*, and the *Dialogue with Trypho*, an account of a debate with a Jewish teacher.

2 Marcion of Sinope (c. 85-c. 160), a Christian from Asia Minor, whose version of the New Testament, based on a gospel like that of Luke and the Pauline letter collection, spurred debate about what was authoritative scripture.

3 Tatian, a student of Justin Martyr, originally from Syria. He composed the Diatessaron, a harmony of the four gospels.

4 Papias, active in the early to mid-second century, born in Hierapolis is modern Turkey, he wrote the *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, cited in Eusebius.

5 Eusebius, (c. 265-c. 340), bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, where he oversaw a library founded in the third century. He attended the Council of Nicaea (325) and supported the efforts of the emperor Constantine, to reconcile the Christian church and Roman political power. He is best known for his *Church History*, the first attempt to tell the story of Christianity from its inception.

6 Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130- c. 200), born in Smyrna on the west coast of modern Turkey, he became the bishop of Lugdunum (modern Lyon) in France and wrote *Against the Heresies* in five volumes, around 180.

7 Arius of Alexandria, a Christian priest of the early fourth century, taught that Christ is not fully divine. His teaching led to controversies in the church of Alexandria. Constantine, who became emperor of the whole Roman world in 324 and who was sympathetic to the church, intervened and called the first ecumenical council, held in Nicaea in Northern Turkey in 325 CE. The council produced the Nicene Creed which affirms the full divinity of the Son.