

II & III John & Jude as “disputed.”

It should not be surprising that it took some time for all the epistles to be circulated and fully accepted. Nor is it surprising that there had to be a process of testing which works were genuine and which were not. During this time Christians had to contend with 1.) Gnostic texts deliberately written to alter traditional teachings (e.g. the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Thomas*); 2.) Christian fiction which placed Biblical figures in fictional situations (e.g. *Paul & Thecla* and the *Infancy Gospels*); and 3.) Early Christian religious writing (e.g. *First Clement* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*). This does not suggest that the preservation and truth of God’s word was uncertain, but simply that men acting with freewill were expected to “**test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world**” (I John 4:1).

In the years that followed there came to be more widespread acceptance of the 27 books of

our New Testament. In 367 AD, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, sent a letter urging churches in his area to accept the books of our current New Testament as complete and canonical. Leaders in the North African cities of Hippo (in 393 AD) and Carthage (in 397 AD) expressed agreement with Athanasius. In 405 AD the church in Rome acknowledged the same list, and there has been little serious challenge to this since then.

We should not imagine that the compilation of these books was simply a matter of human effort. Jesus promised in Mark 13:31 - “**Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.**” The hand of God’s providence has always been at work in both the preservation and the compilation of His word. We can have full confidence that the books contained in the Old and New Testaments are the full and complete revelation of God to man.

By Kyle Pope

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Services

Sunday: 9:30 a.m.
 10:20 a.m.
 6:00 p.m.
 Wednesday: 7:00 p.m.

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 Charles Kelley
 Pat Ledbetter

Deacons:

Dean Bowers
 Eddie Cook
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The Canon of Scripture



The Old Testament

By the time of Jesus the 39 books which are found in our English translations were already grouped together. The Jews arranged them in three sections: *The Law* (Genesis-Deuteronomy), *The Prophets* (Joshua-II Kings, Isaiah-Ezekiel, & Hosea-Malachi) and *The Writings* (Psalms-Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah & I Chronicles - II Chronicles). Jesus demonstrates His own acceptance of these three groups of books in Luke 24:44. He declares: “...**These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me**” (NKJV). The New Testament contains 312 quotes from almost every one of these books.

The word canon is a Greek word meaning “measuring line, or rule.” When used in reference to the Scriptures it refers to the collection of books recognized as authoritative and inspired. In our day it is often asserted that man alone decided (long after various works were written) what would make up this “canon” of Scripture. For a few moments let’s consider how the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments came together.

The Apocrypha

During the 3rd-1st centuries B.C. fourteen books were written which are referred to as the Apocrypha meaning - "hidden writings." These fourteen books are:

- **I Esdras** - It describes Cyrus and Darius' treatment of the Jews.
- **II Esdras** (or IV Ezra) - Claims to be a vision of God's coming government of the world.
- **Tobit** - A Romance between an Israelite captive and a widow.
- **Judith** - Legend of a Jewish woman who beheads a Babylonian general.
- **The Rest of Esther** - Additions to the book of Esther which attempt to show God's work in the story.
- **Wisdom of Solomon** - A book of philosophy written by an Alexandrian Jew impersonating Solomon.
- **Ecclesiasticus** (or Wisdom of Jesus, the son of Sirach) - Proverbs written by a Jewish philosopher.
- **Baruch** - Claims to be a document addressed to the Babylonian exiles written by Jeremiah's scribe.
- **Song of the Three Holy Children** - Additions to the book of Daniel.
- **History of Susanna** - An addition to the book of Daniel describing a Jewish woman falsely accused of adultery.
- **Bel and the Dragon** - An addition to the book of Daniel describing a contest Daniel stages to prove the falsehood of the Babylonian gods.
- **Prayer of Manasseh** - Claims to be a prayer of the king of Judah.
- **I & II Maccabees** - Historical accounts of the Jews under the Seleucid rulers.

These books were never considered canonical by the Jews. The 1st Century Jewish historian Josephus gives a clear explanation of what books were accepted by the Jews. He claims — "...there are only twenty-two books which contain the records of all the past times and are justly believed to be divine" (*Against Apion*, Bk. 1:8).^{*} Josephus does not include the Apocrypha within this description. While the Apocrypha was included within the Greek translation of the Old Testament made before the time of Christ known as the *Septuagint*, it was probably included as a historical supplement.

The Roman Catholic Church and some other denominations view the Apocrypha as canonical. Jerome, the 4th century Latin scholar, included it in his Latin translation of Scriptures known as the *Vulgate*. However, Jerome himself was the first to apply the name "Apocrypha" to these works, acknowledging them as "books of the church" but not "books of the canon." It was not until 1546 that the Roman Catholic council of Trent declared the Apocrypha to be "canonical." This was largely in response to the rejection of these texts as canonical by many within the Protestant Reformation.

It is important to note that neither Jesus nor the Apostles ever quoted from or made reference to these books. Thus, while we may

^{*} The Jews combined the two books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles into one each; Ezra and Nehemiah into one; the Twelve prophets into one; and sometimes Ruth & Judges and Lamentations & Jeremiah into one each - totaling 22 books.

appreciate the historical value of some books of the Apocrypha, they must be rejected as non-authoritative and uninspired.

The New Testament

The 27 books which comprise the New Testament were written as separate epistles or narratives between 44 AD. and 96 AD. Copies of these works were made and circulated among the churches from the very beginning. This is evident from the earliest history we have after the New Testament. For example, an early Christian writer named Clement, writing to the church in Corinth in the early second century cites Paul's letter to them, to teach against division (*To the Corinthians*, 47). Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, claimed that the "memoirs of the Apostles," which he says are called "gospels," were read in Christian worship (*First Apology*, 66,67). The late second century apologist Irenaeus uses New Testament books as the source of his authority and refers to all of them (except Philemon, III John and possibly Jude).

False doctrines which arose in the mid-second century made the need for consistency regarding what was accepted as New Testament Scripture of vital importance. A gnostic by the name of Marcion decided to establish his own "canon" based on his own gnostic views. He rejected the Old Testament and all of the gospels except Luke (which he edited in accordance with his views). He accepted only ten of Paul's writings and rejected Acts, Revelation and the other

epistles. Sometime after Marcion, another gnostic named Montanus claimed to receive a direct revelation from God. Montanus argued that the New Testament canon was not closed, but that ongoing revelation should continue. In response to this Christian leaders formally began to contend that the New Testament canon was in fact closed.

Among those who argued that revelation was complete, was a Carthaginian named Tertullian. Although originally a Montanist, Tertullian late in the second century, like Irenaeus, came to believe that the books of the New Testament were complete. In the years after this Christian writers and religious groups began to compose "canon lists" and to issue decrees in religious "councils" expressing their convictions regarding what books comprise the New Testament canon.

One of the earliest of these lists, written by an unknown author sometime in the Second Century is known as the *Muratorian Canon*, after its 18th century discoverer, Muratori. It lists most of the New Testament books (although it leaves out Hebrews, Peter's epistles, James and III John). It also includes two apocryphal works, the *Revelation of Peter* and the *Wisdom of Solomon* (see above). The Muratorian fragment is written in very poor Latin, and reflects either the ignorance of the scribe who copied it or its original author.

More scholarly lists, composed by the Greek scholar Origen (ca. 250) and the historian Eusebius (ca. 300), have been preserved. These list all of the New Testament books, yet classify Hebrews, James, II Peter,