

# Jot & Tittle

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## Canonization and the New Testament

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Canonization refers to the process that took place when the early church identified those writings that bore the mark of divine inspiration. Our New Testament contains twenty-seven distinct books. How did these twenty-seven books come to be viewed as holy Scripture, and how were other early church writings excluded from the canon of Scripture?

### *Canonization and Inspiration*

The word “canon” comes from the Greek word for a measuring rod. The word eventually came to mean a “standard,” and when applied to the books of the Bible, it means the authoritative standard of truth and faith. The books of the Bible possess divine authority because they were God-breathed, or inspired (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Canonization was the process by which the early church recognized certain writings as inspired, while discounting other writings as uninspired. It’s important to realize that early church writings didn’t become “inspired” because they were accepted into the canon of Scripture. Instead, they were included in the canon of Scripture because they were inspired. “Inspiration indicates how the Bible received its *authority*, whereas canonization tells how the Bible

received its *acceptance*. It is one thing for God to give the Scriptures authority, and quite another for men to recognize that authority.”<sup>1</sup>

Even as the books of the New Testament were being written, there were references to the recognition of divine inspiration. Peter described Paul’s letters as “Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15-16). Paul quoted Luke’s Gospel (Luke 10:7), referring to it as “Scripture” (1 Timothy 5:18). Canonization wasn’t an afterthought of the early church, but a process that began immediately as God inspired the writings of the New Testament.

### *Canonization and Early Church Heresies*

Although the process of canonization began immediately as the New Testament was being written, the process took several generations to complete. Many of the books of the New Testament were written for specific audiences scattered throughout the Roman Empire. This, along with persecution, made it difficult for the early church to identify, copy, and collect the entire body of New Testament writings. However, the identification of the inspired books of Scripture became more important as heresies began to spread in the early church. The church needed a recognized body of inspired truth.

One such heresy was Gnosticism, a belief that denied the deity of Jesus Christ. One Gnostic leader, Marcion (A.D.140), rejected a number of otherwise recognized New Testament books that contained teachings contrary to his brand of Gnosticism. “When a heretic, Macion, who rejected the Old Testament but made the first formal listing of Christian books (this included an edited gospel of Luke and ten Pauline letters), the church Fathers responded by defining their own position regarding the Hebrew Scriptures and early Christian writings.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Canonization and Early Church Writers*

A number of early church writers indicated their recognition of various New Testament books as bearing the mark of inspired Scripture. In their writings, men such as Polycarp (c. A.D. 150), Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 140), Iranaeus (c. A.D. 170), and Clement of

Alexandria (c. A.D. 200), and several others referred to certain books as canonical Scripture. “A sample survey will suffice to show that by the middle of the second century every book of the New Testament was referred to, as authoritative (canonical), by at least one of these Fathers.”<sup>3</sup>

One especially significant document relevant to New Testament canonicity is the Muratorian Fragment, dating to about A.D. 170. This list of canonical Scriptures reflects the attitude of the early church. “Unfortunately the manuscript is mutilated at the beginning and probably also at the end, but it is nevertheless of immense value as giving what is likely a fair consensus of the view of the canon held by the church in the West toward the end of the second century.”<sup>4</sup> This document points to the ready acceptance of twenty-three of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Second Peter is mentioned as disputed. Hebrews, James, and one of John’s epistles are absent from the list.<sup>5</sup> “Goodspeed, however, says that the early writers sometimes thought of 1, 2, and 3 John as one letter (as Irenaeus), and sometimes as two (Muratorian Canon). That being the case, all of John’s Epistles would be included.”<sup>6</sup>

These early sources recognized the majority of the New Testament as canonical. Debate continued, however, regarding several books. “Another early writer, Eusebius (c. 325) mentioned three categories of Christian writings: (1) those that were universally accepted as Scripture, (2) the books that were still questioned by some churches, and (3) the spurious or false books.”<sup>7</sup> The books listed by Eusebius as disputed in his day were James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.<sup>8</sup> The question of apostolic authorship or authority was often the cause of debate over these books. But the church was building consensus. “Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem (315-386), accepts all but the Revelation. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in his 39<sup>th</sup> Festal Epistle (367), is the first to cite all 27 books.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Canonization and Early Church Councils***

While more than one early church council, or official gathering of church leaders, discussed the canon of the New Testament,<sup>10</sup> it wasn’t until the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) that

the early church leaders expressed the final conclusion of the process of canonization.

The Third Council of Carthage (397) gives us the first Counciliar decision on the Canon. Augustine was an influential member of this Council. One of the Canons of this gathering demands that nothing be read in the Church under the title of divine Scripture except the “canonical” books. Then it gives a list of the books that are canonical, which embraces exactly our twenty-seven books.<sup>11</sup>

Because the process of canonization took many years to complete, we can see that decisions regarding New Testament books were not made emotionally or in careless haste. Instead, we can rest assured that God guided the process of canonization to the point where the church recognized the inspiration and authority of the twenty-seven books that comprise our New Testament today. No book was included that should have been left out, and no book was excluded that had the mark of divine inspiration. We have a complete and sufficient Scripture, able to move and challenge us in our faith and walk with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Geisler, Norman L. and Nix, William E. *A General Introduction to the Bible*. Revised and Expanded. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Clouse, Robert G., Pierard, Richard V., and Yamauchi, Edwin M. *Two Kingdoms: The Church and Culture through the Ages*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1993, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Geisler and Nix, p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison, Everett F. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Bettenson, Henry. *Documents of the Christian Church*. Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp. 28-29.

<sup>6</sup> Thiessen, Henry Clarence. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Clouse, Pierard, and Yamauchi, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History* (3.25). Translated by C. F. Cruse. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Harrison, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> Thiessen, p. 26.