

# The Story of the Creation of the New Testament

By Jim Myers

Imagine there is no *New Testament*. Now, consider the questions below.

1. *What would we know about Jesus, the apostles, or Paul?*
2. *How many Christian religions would exist?*

The answer to the first question is “*nothing*.” The answer to the second question is “*none*.” Considering the importance of these answers, it is amazing that very few Christians know anything about the history of the *New Testament*. The story of the *New Testament* begins with the stories of the origins of individual books that are in it, and the stories of the actions that made them “*Scriptures*.” The development of the *New Testament* we have today took place in seven stages over many centuries.

## The First Stage

The first stage is from c. **55 to 100 CE**. From c. **24 to 50 CE**, prior to any book of the *New Testament* being written, the teachings of **Jesus**, the **apostles**, and **Saul/Paul** only **circulated orally** among members of the Jesus Movement. The **first written document of the Jesus Movement** was a decree issued by Jacob, the brother of Jesus, who is called “James” in English translations. It was written c. **50 CE** and is recorded in the *Book of Acts* 15:23-29, which was written c. **80 CE**.

“The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia:

Greetings.

Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “*You must be circumcised and keep the TORAH*” — to whom we gave no *such* commandment — it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus the Anointed One. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

Farewell.”

Approximately five years later, c. **55 CE**, the first book of the *New Testament* was written by Paul or some unidentified leaders of Paul’s movement. The book is called *The Epistle to Galatians*. It was followed by *1 Thessalonians*, *Philemon*, *Philippians*, *1 Corinthians*, *2 Corinthians*, and *Romans*. From c. **72 to 99 CE**, *Mark*, *Luke-Acts*, *Matthew* and *John* were

written. It is important to remember, the above books had not been gathered into a closed collection – *they were individual books.*

*People quoted from them, and they were read in the worship services.  
But they were not considered to be equal with the Jewish Scriptures,  
which were their only Scriptures at that time.*

The **Scriptures of Christianity** at that time was the **Septuagint**, the **Greek translation** of the **Hebrew Scriptures**. All of the books above were also written in Greek. By the **end of the first century CE**, the link between the Hebrew language of the teachings of the Jewish Jesus, had been lost. **The official language of Christianity was now Greek.**

### **The Second Stage**

The second stage is from **100 to 150 CE**. It is characterized by the writings of the *Apostolic Fathers* -- *Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Hermas, Barnabas, Papias, anonymous authors of the Didachē (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), Letter to Diognetus, Letter of Barnabas, Martyrdom of Polycarp* -- and *Justin*.

In addition to **the books of the first stage**, a new group appeared: *writings of the apostles of Jesus and other books attributed to Paul*. Christian leaders, now called “**bishops**,” increasingly turned writings linked to the apostles and Paul for their authority and sources of instructions. Gradually these books became more authoritative in local groups. As time passed, the level of their authority approached that of the *Septuagint*. However, the *Gospels* were first, followed by *Paul’s epistles*.

*Justin* is the first writer to quote from the *Gospels* in a way that we can clearly recognize as having special authority. It should be noted that Justin did not call them *Gospels*, he called them “*Reminiscences of the Apostles*.”<sup>1</sup>

The authority of the Jewish Scriptures is based on the authority of God and His Temple. At this this stage in the development of Christianity, *the primary institutions of authority were local groups headed by bishops.*

Printed books as we know them today have existed for a little over five hundred years, but the writing and publishing of literary works in the Western world began at least 2,500 years earlier. Prior to the invention of printing with movable type in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> CE, **each copy of every piece of literature was produced by hand**. This was a long and painstaking task, fraught with possibilities of introducing accidental changes into the text. Books were expensive. It would take many weeks or even months to finish a handwritten copy of a literary treatise of considerable length.

Two modes of producing manuscripts were in common use in antiquity. The first was **an individual** who would make a new manuscript by copying letter by letter from another manuscript. The accuracy of the new copy depended upon the degree of that individual’s familiarity with the language and content of the manuscript being copied, as well as upon the care he exercised in performing the task. It was inevitable that accidental changes happened.

When the new copy was used to make another copy, those accidental changes were transmitted to future copies.

The second mode of producing manuscripts is a **scriptorium**. A reader read the manuscript aloud, slowly and distinctly. Scribes seated about him would write down what he said. Simultaneously, as many new copies as there were scribes were created. Although it increased productivity, dictation also multiplied the types of errors that could creep into a text. On the whole, however, many such errors in transcription would be caught by the "corrector" of the scriptorium, who inspected the new books for accuracy.

The early years of Christianity were marked by rapid expansion, which created an increased demand by individuals and by congregations for copies of the Scriptures. As a result, copyist pushed for the speedy multiplication of copies and more non-professionals became part of the process. <sup>1</sup>

There were many forms of Christianity from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century until the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. These groups were independent of each other and there was no central Christian authority. Many of those early forms are unknown today, and those that are known have been erroneously labeled "**heresies**" by later Christian institutions that used standards that did not exist in early Christianity. <sup>2</sup>

### **The Third Stage**

At the end of the **Second Stage**, around **142 CE**, an event took place that changed the course of Christianity. A man named Marcion, a very wealthy ship owner from the Black Sea, moved to Rome and made a very large donation to a Roman church. Before long he became a church leader. He actively pursued studies of the teachings of the apostles and rejected the Septuagint (Jewish Scriptures) because he claimed they had neither relevance nor authority for Christians.

Marcion taught that the apostles called by Jesus in Galilee corrupted his teaching by mixing Jewish legalism with the true teachings of Jesus. He taught the only true apostle was Paul, a self-appointed apostle who was also a Roman citizen. Marcion made a distinction between the god of the Jewish Scriptures and the God of Christianity -- they were completely different and independent of each other. The god who created the material universe, the god of Israel, was a totally different being from **the Father** of whom Jesus spoke. The Father was the good and merciful God. He had been hidden from mankind until Jesus came and revealed him. The Jewish god was an inferior deity in status and morality alike.

Marcion also created **new Christian Scriptures** which had these books in this order -- *The Gospel of Christ, Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, Thessalonians, Laodiceans (Ephesians), Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon*. There are some significant differences in the books in *the modern New Testament* and those of the same name in *Marcion's Scriptures*.

Leaders of the Roman congregation not only rejected Marcion's teachings and his *new Christian Scriptures* -- **THEY EVEN RETURNED HIS LARGE DONATION!** They also found him guilty of heresy and excommunicated him in **July of 144 CE**. Marcion formed his own

church and some of them survived until the fifth century in the Eastern Roman Empire. Many of his ideas and new Scriptures spread to other churches.

The most significant event in the **Third Stage** took place around **180 CE** when **Irenaeus** (Bishop of Lyons) created his version of *new Christian Scriptures*. *His decision to have four Gospels is why there are four Gospels in the New Testament today.* Marcion only had **one Gospel**, but by the time of Irenaeus there were over **100 Gospels** in circulation. This is why Irenaeus chose only four Gospels.

*"He noted a perfect correspondence between the **four points on the world's compass** and **four principal winds** and the **fourfold Gospel** intended for all the world. He said that in Revelation 4:7 John records **four living creatures** that surround the throne of God. His conclusion was that they directly relate to attributes of the **four Gospels**. The first is like a lion (Mark) with royal power; the second (Luke), a calf, sacrificial and sacerdotal order; the third (Matthew), with a human face, advent as a human being; and the fourth (John), an eagle, the gift of the Spirit."*

His version of *new Christian Scriptures* contained the following books in this order: *Mark, Luke, Matthew, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, James, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation of John, and Shepherd of Hermas.*

At the end of the **Third Stage** the **canon of the four Gospels was set** and the *Epistles of Paul had attained a status which was equivalent to the Gospels in principle, but not in practice.* There were also a number of other new Christian Scriptures in circulation.

The difference between the hundreds of books in circulation and books of the **new Christian Scriptures** was one thing – **canonization**.

**Institutional authority** was required for a book to become part of the "**canon of Scriptures of the institution**," which meant *that it could be read in worship services and used for instructions in Christianity.*

*No central Christian Institution existed at this time.* Local churches created their own canons of Scriptures. The **Septuagint** (Greek Old Testament) was part of most of those canons. **Irenaeus canonized** the "Four Gospels" in his church at **Lyons** in **180 CE** and other churches began to add "The Four Gospels" to their "canons of Scriptures." Here is a timeline to keep in mind.

- **72 to 95 CE** – Original books of **Mark, Luke, Matthew** and **John** were written in that order. Copies of copies of those manuscripts began to circulate among churches.
- **142 CE** – **Marcion**, at Rome, created the **first** "*New Christian Scriptures.*" It had **one Gospel** and the **Epistles of Paul**."
- **180 CE** – **Irenaeus**, at **Lyons**, created his "*New Christian Scriptures,*" with the "Four Gospels" and "Paul's Epistles." Marcion's "New Christian Scriptures" were widely

accepted and still in circulation among churches. In addition, there were over 100 other Gospels in circulation at that time.

### **The Beginning of the Major Conflict in Early Christianity**

- *Mark's Gospel* opens with "a man named John preaching and baptizing people in the Jordan River. Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, was baptized by John, and a voice from heaven said, 'You are My beloved Son.'"
- *Luke's Gospel* (the version we have today) opens with "a dedication to Theophilus, an angel telling Zacharias he will have a son (John the Baptist), an angel telling Mary she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and have a son (Jesus) who will be called the "Son of God and sit on the throne of David," the birth of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus, and an angel telling shepherds that 'a Savior, who is Christ the Lord has been born.'"
- *Matthew's Gospel* opens with "the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, an angel telling Joseph that Mary his wife is pregnant with a child of the Holy Spirit and she will have a son, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and wise men from the East coming to Jerusalem who said they had seen a sign in the heavens that; the King of the Jews' had been born."
- *John's Gospel* opens with "the **LOGOS** (Greek word translated "Word") who was with God at the creation, the **LOGOS** later became flesh, and that person was Jesus."
- *Marcion's Gospel* opens with "in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Jesus descended into Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath days; and they were astonished at his doctrine for his word was in authority."

*Marcion's Gospel* and the *Gospel of Luke* are almost identical, except for a few very important differences. The following verses in *Luke* were not in *Marcion's Gospel* -- Luke 1:1-2:52 & 3:2-4:30. In other words, the opening words of *Luke*, listed above in the second bullet, are not in *Marcion's Gospel*. Scholars for many years have said that Marcion removed them, but when we examine the copies of copies of manuscripts of *Luke*, we must consider another possibility – "someone copying a manuscript of *Luke* added them."

However, when the original manuscripts of *Mark*, *Luke*, *Matthew*, and *John* were made, Christians were also reading the *Epistles of Paul*. The Epistle to the Romans opens with these words (Romans 1:3-4) – ". . . concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."

- "Born of the seed of David according to the flesh" means he was human.
- "Declared to be the Son of God . . . by the resurrection from the dead" means that the declaration that he was the "Son of God" happened at the resurrection.

As you can see, around 200 CE Christians were hearing a lot of conflicting ideas. When we read *writings of the Early Church Fathers*, those conflicts can be clearly seen. Keep in mind that at that time there was no central body of Christian authority, no single standard to judge books by, and no “*Doctrine of the Inerrancy of Scriptures*.”

This set the stage for the beginning of one of the most important conflicts in history of all Christian Biblical Heritages – *What was Jesus? Human? A god? Human and god? A new god? The god of the Jewish Scriptures?*

That question became the central factor in the creation of “*New Christian Canons*” after 200 CE.

On Feb. 27, 280 CE Flavius Valerius Constantinus was born. Today, he is known as **Constantine the Great, Emperor of the Roman Empire**. His father was an officer in the Roman army, who later became governor of Dalmatia, and was elevated to the rank of **Caesar** in **293**. *Constantine became a member of the court of Diocletian at the age of thirteen*. He developed into a successful army officer and in **306** he joined his father on a military campaign to Britain. His father became ill, died, and the *troops hailed Constantine as the new Augustus*. In **308** a conference of *Caesars* and *Augusti* met and demanded that *Constantine give up his title of Augustus*. He refused!

By **311** four men were engaged in a power struggle for control of the Roman Empire. In the East it was between **Licinius** and **Maximinus Daia**, while in the West it was **Constantine** and **Maxentius**. In **312**, Constantine defeated **Maxentius** at the famous **Battle at the Milvian Bridge**. Later, Constantine would claim he had a vision before the battle, and in a dream, he saw the 'Chi-Ro' -- *the symbol of Christ shining above the sun (a Roman god)*. Constantine ordered his soldiers to paint that symbol on their shields. He declared he was an “**emperor of the Christian people**,” however, being “*the emperor of the Christian people*” did not mean that he had to be a Christian. Christians were required to participate in purification rituals of Roman gods until December 25, 323, when he exempted them.

Constantine’s relationship to Christianity changed when he became involved in a conflict between two Alexandrian church leaders. A teacher named **Arius** accused **Bishop Alexander** of teaching a false doctrine -- “**God and Christ were of the same essence**.” Arius claimed “**God was the Father** – *one, infinite, and indivisible. He was uncreated, existed forever, and ruled as sole sovereign and judge. No other God existed but He.*”

Bishop Alexander responded, “*Arius had drained the dregs of impiety by his unscriptural blasphemy against Christ.*” He called for a council of bishops to meet, and *they found Arius guilty of apostasy, schism, heresy, blasphemy and declared that Arius’ teachings were those of the Antichrist*. They also excommunicated Arius, but he kept on teaching.

Arius gained the support of two very powerful bishops – **Eusebius of Caesarea** (*the personal historian of Emperor Constantine*) and **Eusebius of Nicomedia** (*a relative of the imperial family*). They brought the situation to the attention of Constantine. At that time, the Roman Empire was being increasingly divided through power struggles in the East and West. Many scholars believe that situation was why Constantine decided to become involved in a “*church*

*conflict.*” It gave him an opportunity to participate in something that was linked to a network of churches that were spread across the entire Empire.

Constantine called for the **first imperial council to meet for the purpose of resolving a Christian matter**. The meeting took place in the summer of **325** at Nicea -- *298 bishops from the East and 2 from the West attended*. The lack of participation was probably not a sign of a lack of interest. The primary factor was most likely fear. After centuries of persecutions by Roman emperors, they were probably worried about this being a trap.

As the meeting progressed, no progress was made to create a creed that Bishop Alexander and Arius could agree upon. However, it became clear to Constantine, that its acceptance depended on how certain key words were interpreted. *After a great deal of debate by the bishops and their inability to reach an agreement on those words, Constantine surprised everyone by offering his own interpretation.*

*“The Father and the Son were **of the same essence** or **consubstantial**, not of a different essence.”*

Initially Constantine offered his interpretation as an option, but that soon changed as the bishops continued to argue. **It was then that Emperor of the Roman Empire demanded a unanimous vote of acceptance by the bishops**. Arius disagreed because it would mean that Jesus would be equal to the Father – *there would be two gods in Christianity!* That would be a direct violation of the monotheistic teachings of the early church. But the council excommunicated Arius, ordered his writings to be burned, and anyone caught with them would become a “**criminal of the Empire**.” They would be punished in Roman courts, not by councils of bishops. The **Council of Nicea** created **the first creed in Christianity**. A central authority of Christianity now existed – *the Roman Catholic Church*.

*It was backed by the authority and power of Constantine the Great, Emperor of the Roman Empire!*

**The Nicene Creed** clearly reflects Constantine’s involvement in this process and his demand for a unanimous vote. *Ironically, the words of a non-Christian emperor became the divine truth of the Church.*

*“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, **from the substance of the Father**, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, **of one substance with the Father** . . . But as for those who say, there was a time when He was not, and, before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or **who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance**, or created, or is subject to alteration or change - these the Catholic and apostolic Church **anathematizes**.”*

- The **Council of Sirmium** in **357** **reversed the Council of Nicea’s decision** above, adopted the views Arius, and created a new creed.

- Bishop Alexander died, and **Athanasius** replaced him. He convinced church leaders to call new councils in **359** and **360** to revisit the issue. Both councils **reversed the Council of Sirmium's decision** and condemned Arian and his teachings.
- In **367 Athanasius created his version of "New Christian Scriptures."** It was a canon of twenty-seven books. It rapidly achieved a unified form of the **New Testament canon in both East and West which has lasted up to the present day.**

The first new *New Testament*, as we know it today, was created **330 years** after Jesus was executed by Roman soldiers, **297 years** after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Roman soldiers, and **225 years** after Marcion created the first new "*Christian Scriptures*" in Rome.

*Keep those numbers in mind next Monday when you celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. **America will be 246 years old!***

### **The Fourth Stage in Development**

Even though the **New Testament Canon of Athanasius** will ultimately survive, over the following centuries specific books would be rejected and added by various churches and Church Councils.

- The decisions of the Western church around **400 CE** were able to bring the *Book of Hebrews* into the canon, but it was really not accepted there for a long time. Even around **550** Cassiodorus could find no Western commentary on the *Book of Hebrews*, so he had to have Chrysostom's commentary translated into Latin.
- The Antioch churches recognized only *1 Peter* and *1 John* in 367. They continued to reject the *Book of Revelation*. The *Book of James* came in very slowly alongside *1 Peter* and *1 John*, but only after **431** did opposition to the canonicity of *2 Peter*, *2 and 3 John*, and *Jude* gradually lessen.
- It took the *Book of Revelation* even longer to be accepted in the East. That did not begin until about **500**.
- The list of canonical books ascribed to Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople in the **800s** still included the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*.
- The Syrian church's New Testament until **400** did not include the *four Gospels*, instead it had a harmony assembled from the four Gospels -- *Tatian's Diatessaron*. All the *catholic epistles of Paul* and the *Book of Revelation* were missing. The *Epistle to Philemon* is missing, and in its place, we find a writing of *Third Epistle to the Corinthians*. In addition there are other apocryphal writings of the most varied types. Only very slowly did the situation change in this church: gradually the *Diatessaron* had to give way; *James*, *1 Peter*, and *1 John* were accepted.



- The Eastern Syrian church preserved canon without *Jude* and the Revelation of John. For the present day, this Nestorian church is at best only a hazy concept, yet all through the Middle Ages it represented Christianity in all of Asia from Persia as far as China.

### Summary

**The five parts of this series, in broad strokes, have painted a picture of how the New Testament was created and evolved over a period of almost 1,000 years.** They have included information about the creation and evolution of the institutions, religious and political, that have played major roles in decisions about which books were accepted and rejected – and the creation of religious beliefs that became major factors. It is a grave error to judge early Christian beliefs and their “*New Christian canons*” by beliefs and standards of Christian institutions today.

It is also important to be aware of the six points below, even though I have not written about some of them in this series.

- *The Scriptures of the Jewish Jesus movement was the Torah, Prophets, and Writings written in Hebrew with a few Aramaic sections.*
- *The Scriptures of the Paul movement of was the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew text above).*
- *The Jewish Scriptures -- Torah, Prophets, and Writings written in Hebrew – were created and evolved over a 400-year period prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Persian kings played major roles in that process.*
- *The “Old Testament” of early Christianity was the Septuagint.*
- *Even though the names of books in many of the canons are the same, there are significant differences between the hand copied manuscripts of those books.*
- *Even though the names of the books of Bibles are the same English translation of those books have significant differences.*

### Conclusion

**Beliefs about the Bible will increasingly be at the center of political and economic discussions in the next few years.** Examining your beliefs about the Bible and aligning them with the facts in this series should be a high priority. *Sitting on the sidelines and saying nothing or spreading misinformation will have harmful consequences – **and that is a fact!***

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