

The process of determining which texts would comprise the Biblical canon (the standard of authoritative and normative teaching for the church) took place over several centuries. Beginning in the first century A.D., Christian communities recognized the authority of texts that they gathered into collections for circulation and use in public worship. Second Peter already suggests a familiarity with multiple letters of Paul and goes so far as to place them on par with the Hebrew Scriptures (3:16). Evidence reveals that during public worship Christians in the earliest centuries read from the texts that would become the New Testament, just as they did from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Some scholars attribute the initial creation of a New Testament canon to the heretic Marcion, who accepted only the authority of Paul's letters and of Luke. In reality, the churches already accepted these texts as authoritative, and Marcion was attempting to exclude the acceptance of any others. The Muratorian Canon (date uncertain), an early attempt to establish a list of canonical books, did not include most of the general epistles. By the fourth century the churches were seeking to compile a definitive list of New Testament books. Eusebius, Athanasius and the Councils of Laodicea (363), Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) created such lists (both of the latter two accepted the 27 books of the New Testament the church now acknowledges). In some sense these lists merely ratified the church's practice by identifying the texts that were already functioning in an authoritative manner. Twenty-seven writings, including the Gospels, Acts and the New Testament letters, formed the New Testament canon and ultimately defined the church's identity.

The selection process considered three key criteria for the acceptance of a particular text as canonical:

- Writings in the canon had to reflect orthodox teaching. Texts that were determined to contain teaching incongruent with that of the earliest Christians were not to be included.
- The canon sought to include the earliest, most accurate accounts about Jesus and about the early church by selecting texts that had been written either by the apostles

themselves or by those who were closely associated with them. Texts claiming apostolic authorship were critically inspected, and if the authorship claim was suspect, they were rejected. The Gospels of Mark and Luke received canonical status because they were written by a companion of Peter and a coworker of Paul, respectively. The book of Acts, also written by Luke, was also accepted as canonical. The other two Gospels, the Epistles and the book of Revelation all have clear apostolic connections.

- Texts that were popular in only one region were viewed as doubtful, while those that had found widespread acceptance, both in the east and in Rome, were included in the canon. The writings chosen for the canon were understood to have universal application. For instance, although Paul addressed his letters to specific communities, others quickly acknowledged that his teaching was relevant to them as well.

Other Christian writings circulated alongside the canonical texts. Among these, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle to Barnabas were held in high esteem by some Christians but were eventually rejected from the canon because of their distance from the apostles and the apostolic age. Although these texts were not canonized for reading in the public assembly of the church, they were not condemned as heretical. Texts of this sort continued to be used by Christians for personal devotions and reflections, but without the same authority as the canonical writings.

One source: New International Version Archaeological Study Bible