

# BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

## (5) THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

### Introduction

As we have seen from the last study [THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON] the “Bible” which Jesus used was the Jewish Scripture. This collection of holy writings, which we now call the Old Testament, was also the “Bible” of the early church.

This reliance on God’s Word as it had been revealed to the Jewish people, continued as long as there remained witnesses of the Lord’s ministry on earth who were able to pass on His sayings in verbal form. But as the first apostles aged, and local churches spread throughout the vast Roman Empire, the need for trustworthy written records of Jesus’ teaching to supplement Hebrew Scripture became more obvious.

### The Importance of ‘Eye-Witness’ Accounts

From the very beginning the church acknowledged the importance of the testimony of those who had actually walked with Jesus, hearing Him teach and observing His actions.

In the uncertain days between Christ’s ascension into heaven and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, about 120 of Jesus’ disciples met to appoint a replacement apostle to the traitor Judas. At that time Peter said, “**...of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.**” (Acts 1:16, 21-22).

Peter maintained the importance of this principle right to the end of his ministry. In his Second Letter he wrote, “**...we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but [we] were eye-witnesses of His majesty ...And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.” (2 Pe 1:16, 18).**

The books and letters that make up the accepted Canon of the New Testament were therefore written by apostles or their close associates.

## TABLE #1 - THE WRITING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

DATES BY DECADE	HISTORICAL EVENTS	CHRISTIAN CHURCH	NEW TESTAMENT
<b>10 BC - 10 AD</b>	4BC Death of Herod the Great	5BC? Birth of Christ	
<b>11 - 20 AD</b>	14AD Tiberius becomes Roman Emperor 18AD Caiaphus is made High Priest		
<b>21 - 30 AD</b>	26AD Pilate becomes Prefect of Judaea	28AD? John the Baptist begins his ministry 29AD? Jesus Christ begins His ministry	
<b>31 - 40 AD</b>	36AD Pilate recalled to Rome 37AD Caligula becomes Roman Emperor 39AD Herod Antipas dies	<b>33AD? Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ</b> 34AD? Peter arrested. Deacons appointed 35AD? Steven is martyred. Philip preaches Paul is converted	
<b>41 - 50 AD</b>	41AD Claudius becomes Roman Emperor 44AD Herod Agrippa dies 49AD Claudius expels Jews from Rome	44AD? James brother of John killed 48AD? First Missionary Journey 49AD? Council Meeting in Jerusalem 50AD? Second Missionary Journey	48AD? James (James) 49AD? Galatians (Paul)
<b>51 - 60 AD</b>	52AD Felix made Procurator 54AD Nero becomes Roman Emperor 59AD Festus replaces Felix as Procurator	53AD? Third Missionary Journey 57AD? Paul arrested and imprisoned 59AD? Paul taken by ship to Rome	51AD? 1 & 2 Thess (Paul) 56AD? 1 & 2 Cor (Paul) 57AD? Romans (Paul) <b>58AD? Gospel (Mark)</b> 60AD? Ephesians (Paul)
<b>61 -70 AD</b>	64AD Fire destroys Rome 66AD Jewish revolt against Roman control 67AD Zealots occupy Jerusalem 68AD Nero dies 69AD Vespasian becomes Roman Emperor <b>70AD Titus destroys Jerusalem &amp; Temple</b>	62AD? James the Lords half-brother killed 64AD Nero persecutes Christians 67AD? Peter & Paul killed in Rome 70AD? Jerusalem Church flees to Pella	61AD? Colossians & Philemon (Paul) Gospel (Luke) 62AD? Philippians & 1 Timothy (Paul) 63AD? Acts (Luke) 65AD? Gospel (Matt) 1Peter (Peter) 66AD? Titus (Paul) 67AD? 2 Timothy (Paul) 2Peter (Peter) 68AD? Hebrews (...?) Jude (Jude)
<b>71 - 80 AD</b>	79AD Titus becomes Roman Emperor		
<b>81 - 90 AD</b>	81AD Domitian becomes Roman Emperor	90AD Domitian persecutes Christians	85AD? Gospel (John) 90AD? 1-3 John (John)
<b>91 - 100 AD</b>	96AD Domitian dies 98AD Trajan becomes Roman Emperor	94AD? John imprisoned on Island of Patmos <b>100AD? John dies</b>	<b>95AD? Revelation (John)</b>

### The Actual Writing of the Canon

Table #1 is based on estimates only and is gathered from various sources. However I hope it is sufficiently accurate to provide an idea of the background

surrounding the writing of those original books and letters that now make up our New Testament.

At first the teachings of Jesus were transferred by the apostles speaking directly to the growing numbers of Christians. But then, as persecution began to thin their ranks, (e.g. James executed in 44AD and Paul imprisoned in 57AD), and their flock became more far-flung, (e.g. Paul’s missionary journey into Europe in 50AD and the dispersion of the Jews after 70AD), written communications from them began to appear.

The apostles wrote letters of instruction and exhortation to the young churches. Matthew and John wrote their own testimonies concerning Jesus’ life and teaching. Mark was associated with Peter, and Luke with Paul, in the writing of their accounts. These four books, known as the Gospels, along with Paul’s Epistles, were recognised as canonical and therefore authoritative from very early on in church history.

### **Conflict Over the Rest of the Canon**

Two things occurred in those early centuries which tended to obscure the clear identity of the rest of the New Testament Canon. One was the fragility and scarcity of the early written copies of apostolic writings, which led to some documents being well known in some areas but lost in others.

The second and possibly more important difficulty arose as a result of a multitude of ‘non-apostolic writings’ being circulated throughout the church. These documents had similar titles to the genuine canon and seemed to address similar issues. There are 59 apocryphal books which are known to have competed with the 27 canonical books of the New Testament at one time or another.

The subsequent confusion and disagreement on this issue was not resolved until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when a large meeting of church leaders from throughout the old empire met to accept the canon.

Table #2 is an attempt to provide an overview of those difficult years of conflicting opinions until settlement was finally reached. The various columns show historical periods, and in them the books that were recognised as canonical.

**TABLE #2 - THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON**

<b>IRENAEUS of LYONS</b> 130-200AD	<b>MURATORI-AN CANON</b> 170-210AD	<b>ORIGEN of ALEXANDRIA</b> 220-250AD	<b>EUSEBIUS’ ECCLES HIST</b> 260-340AD	<b>ATHANASIUS 39<sup>th</sup> LETTER</b> 367 AD	<b>CARTHAGE SYNOD</b> 397 AD	<b>PRESENT CANON</b> 400 AD ....
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Matthew	Matthew	Matthew	Matthew	Matthew	Matthew	Matthew
Mark	Mark	Mark	Mark	Mark	Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke
John	John	John	John	John	John	John
Acts	Acts	Acts	Acts	Acts	Acts	Acts
Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans
1 Corinthian	1 Corinthian	1 Corinthian	1 Corinthian	1 Corinthian	1 Corinthian	1 Corinthian
2 Corinthian	2 Corinthian	2 Corinthian	2 Corinthian	2 Corinthian	2 Corinthian	2 Corinthian
Galations	Galations	Galations	Galations	Galations	Galations	Galations
Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians
Philippines	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines	Philippines
Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians
1 Thessaloni	1 Thessaloni	1 Thessaloni	1 Thessaloni	1 Thessaloni	1 Thessaloni	1 Thessaloni
2 Thessaloni	2 Thessaloni	2 Thessaloni	2 Thessaloni	2 Thessaloni	2 Thessaloni	2 Thessaloni
1 Timothy	1 Timothy	1 Timothy	1 Timothy	1 Timothy	1 Timothy	1 Timothy
2 Timothy	2 Timothy	2 Timothy	2 Timothy	2 Timothy	2 Timothy	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus	Titus	Titus	Titus	Titus	Titus
Philemon	Philemon	Philemon	Philemon	Philemon	Philemon	Philemon
		(Hebrews)	Hebrews	Hebrews	Hebrews	Hebrews
James		(James)	(James)	James	James	James
1 Peter		1 Peter	1 Peter	1 Peter	1 Peter	1 Peter
		(2 Peter)	(2 Peter)	2 Peter	2 Peter	2 Peter
1 John	1 John	1 John	1 John	1 John	1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John	(2 John)	2 John	2 John	2 John	2 John
		(3 John)	(3 John)	3 John	3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude	(Jude)	(Jude)	Jude	Jude	Jude
Revelation	Revelation	Revelation	(Revelation)	Revelation	Revelation	Revelation

	Wisdom of Solomon			Wisdom of Solomon		
	Apocalypse of Peter		(Apocalypse of Peter)			
	(Shepherd of Hermas)	(Shepherd of Hermas)	(Shepherd of Hermas)	(Shepherd of Hermas)		
			(Acts of Paul)			
			(Epistle of Barnabus)			
		(The Didache)	(The Didache)	(The Didache)		

## **The Need for a Final Test**

We have seen from the earlier internal evidence of Scripture, that ‘Eye-Witness’ status was critical in establishing those writings which were authoritative to the early church. However as the centuries passed by, and more and more of the original

parchments turned to dust, it became increasingly difficult to prove canonicity by this means alone.

The position of some authors and their writings continued to be unassailable, because evidence of acceptance by early church leaders confirmed their position in the canon. But others like the Letter to the Hebrews seemed to founder on this question of authorship, with some thinking it Pauline, but others not so sure.

Then there was the range of writings attributed to Peter. Whereas most seemed comfortable with his First Letter, many were concerned about the authenticity of the Second Letter, and many more were sceptical of the Revelation of Peter, the Gospel of Peter, and the Acts of Peter.

The question therefore was how church leaders could authenticate the genuine canon, and so provide a reliable guide for those Christians who came after them? The answer lies in the operation of spiritual discernment over time.

### **The Practical Use of Spiritual Discernment**

The apostle Paul urged his young assistant Timothy to, **“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”** (2 Ti 2:15). The writer of Hebrews condemned those who were **“..unskilled in the word of righteousness,”** but recommended **“..those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”** (He 5, 13, 14).

What happened in practice was that those writings which failed to continue to exhibit the accompanying witness of the Holy Spirit simply ceased to be used in the churches. In other words, Christians continued to apply the test of ‘spiritual life’ to what they were reading, and those books which no longer ‘quicken’ were discarded.

**“For the [real] word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”** (He 4:12).