

3.6

New Testament Canon: The Early Lists

By the end of the second century, lists began to appear specifying which Christian writings were to be considered Scripture by churches in line with the apostolic tradition (i.e., in line with what Jesus, his disciples, and the apostle Paul had taught). In most cases, these lists were more descriptive than prescriptive: they did not attempt to regulate which writings should be read as Scripture, but rather shared with other Christians which books were accepted as Scripture in some particular region or congregation.

The essential data from some of these early canon lists is given below, followed by a summary.

The Muratorian Fragment (ca. 170–200)

An unknown author wrote the Muratorian Fragment, which lists books that are to be regarded as Scripture.

- Books not included: Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 3 John
- A book not in our current New Testament that is included:
Apocalypse of Peter (with note: “some of us are not willing that it be read in church”)

- Books that are approved but not as Scripture: Shepherd of Hermas (written too recently; ought to be read, but not “publicly to the people in church”)
- Books to be rejected: two spurious forgeries attributed to Paul, Letter to the Laodiceans and Letter to the Alexandrians (unknown to us)

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 215–250)

Origen, an early theologian, does not provide a list but does discuss which books are disputed.

- 2 Peter: “Peter left behind one letter that is acknowledged, and possibly a second, but it is disputed”
- 2 John and 3 John: “not everyone agrees that they are genuine”
- Hebrews: probably not written by Paul, but acceptable anyway because “the thoughts of the epistle are marvelous and in no way inferior to the acknowledged writings of the apostle”

Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 311)

The early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea reports which books were considered Scripture in his day.

- James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John: “disputed books which are nonetheless known by many”

- Revelation: among both the “acknowledged books” and the noncanonical books, noting that it is a “book that some reject but others judge to belong”
- Listed as noncanonical: *Acts of Paul*, Shepherd of Hermas, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Didache*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, and Gospel to the Hebrews (which Eusebius says is considered noncanonical only by “some people” and is “particularly celebrated” by others)

Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 350)

Cyril of Jerusalem, a prominent Eastern theologian, wrote a catechism in which he discusses canon. He lists all books of our current New Testament except Revelation, and says that no other books should be read in the churches or even privately (as his readers might have heard was acceptable). He specifically lambastes the Gospel of Thomas as a work that “having been camouflaged by the sweetness of its title derived from an apostle corrupts the souls of the simpler ones.”

Mommsen Catalogue (aka Cheltenham List) (ca. 359)

An unknown author from North Africa wrote the Mommsen Catalogue. The list indicates that the New Testament contains twenty-four books, as symbolized by the twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation (see Rev. 4:4). It doesn't include Hebrews, James, or Jude, and seems to indicate that only one letter of John

and only one letter of Peter are canonical (but that would throw off the count, which is supposed to be twenty-four).

Athanasius of Alexandria (367)

Athanasius, a prominent bishop, wrote a letter listing what he regarded as “the canon” of Christian Scripture. He lists all twenty-seven books of the New Testament and books that are not to be included in the canon—the *Didache* and Shepherd of Hermas—but that “have nonetheless been designated by the fathers as books to be read.” He also says that “there should be no mention at all of apocryphal books created by heretics, who write them whenever they want but try to bestow favor on them by assigning them dates, that by setting them forth as ancient they can be, on false grounds, used to deceive the simple minded”

Amphilochius of Iconium (ca. 375–394)

Amphilochius of Iconium, a Christian poet, composed a poem to teach the books of the canon in iambic verse. He indicates that some say Hebrews is spurious, but that they are wrong to say this, for the grace that it imparts is genuine. He lists 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude as books that “some receive” but that should not be received, and says of Revelation that “some approve, but most say it is spurious.”

Third Synod of Carthage (393)

This regional meeting of churches was not a churchwide council but had significant representation. It ratified the list of Athanasius (above), declaring the twenty-seven books of our current New Testament to be the canon of Christian Scripture

Summary of Data from the Early Canon Lists

Looking at these lists, we can group the New Testament books and other early Christian writings into four basic categories.

Universally Accepted Canonical Writings

Twenty of the New Testament's twenty-seven books appear to have been accepted as canonical Scripture by virtually all churches that remained within the apostolic tradition. They are the four Gospels, the book of Acts, all thirteen of Paul's letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John. All of these books are included as accepted writings in every list known to us (with one exception: 1 Peter is not listed in the Muratorian Fragment).

Sometimes Disputed Canonical Writings

Seven of the New Testament's twenty-seven books had a more difficult time finding universal acceptance among Christian churches. They are Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. We have no indication that these books were ever rejected or denounced, but in many cases churches seem to have been reluctant to grant them the status of Scripture.

Commended Noncanonical Writings

A few books that are not found in our New Testament turn up on the canon lists as works that are “known to many” and “recommended for Christian reading” even though they are not to be read publicly in the church (i.e., treated as Scripture or used as texts for teaching and preaching). Examples include the *Didache*, the Shepherd of Hermas, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and the *Letter of Barnabas*. In a few cases, we find one or more of these books actually included in a list of Christian Scriptures (or, indeed, contained in an early manuscript of the New Testament). Most of the time, however, a distinction is made between “canonical writings” and “commendable-but-not-canonical writings.”

Rejected Noncanonical Writings

A number of books not found in our New Testament are listed as works to be avoided. These are books that were recognized as forgeries, having been written in the name of an apostle or associate of Jesus in order to claim support for gnostic teachings or other novel philosophies that had no connection with the apostolic tradition.

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Appendix IV.

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