

# **The Development of the New Testament Canon**

How God Uses Man For His Divine Purposes

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The New Testament Canon is regarded by evangelical Christians as a book not simply written by man, but inspired by God and as such an authoritative directive for all humanity. Furthermore, Christians claim the Scriptures in their original language to be infallible, meaning they are without fault or human error. Undoubtedly these claims are critical to the faith of those who trust the Bible as an inspired and flawless message from the Almighty. For if these claims do not hold true, the faith of these believers is also in question as it rests on faulty claims.

One of the key hindrances for unbelievers and even Christians who do not view the Bible as infallible and authoritative is the fact that the New Testament was written by fallible, sinful men. The question of the cynical skeptic and the sincere searcher alike is how flawed human beings can be used by God to write a book that is perfect. Indeed, this is a valid and legitimate question.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how God was working in the midst of history and lives of human beings to orchestrate the work of the Bible. The point of this paper will not be to prove the existence of God or that God is able to work in human history. While these questions or statements of faith are relevant, they are not the focus or intended purpose of this paper. We will begin with the assumption that God does exist and works within history through humankind. Using this assumption as a foundation and guiding principle, the purpose of this paper will be to trace the lives of individuals who were instrumental in the formation of the Bible to better understand how God used various people to develop the canon of the New Testament.

We will start this paper by defining the word canon and how it will be used in this study. Next we will look into the lives of several authors of the New Testament, their motives in writing and how God used these men to craft His message of redemption. Thirdly, we will look into the life of Marcion to see how his decisions spurred the church to action in defining the canon.

Lastly we will look to see the role of some of the early church fathers in the formation of the New Testament. Woven throughout this paper the author will theorize and analyze how God was working within human history to orchestrate and direct the development of the canon.

### Defining Canon

The word “canon” comes from the Greek word *kanon* (κανών) and literally means a straight reed, rod or rule. Figuratively, the word means a standard (of faith and practice) or by implication a boundary.<sup>1</sup> It was in the fourth century that the term came to refer to the list of books that constitute the Old and New Testaments.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we can think of the word canon to mean a spiritual plumb line or golden standard against which the veracity of other statements can be measured. In this paper, the primary use of the word canon will be in reference to the twenty-seven books contained in the Protestant New Testament of the Bible. At times the term canon will be used to represent a select group of books with some variation to the current New Testament that other individuals in history had defined as the inspired Scriptures from God.

### Authors of the New Testament

The Bible claims that it’s authors were holy men of God who were moved by God’s Spirit to speak God’s message. (2 Peter 1:21) As we investigate the lives of several authors of the New Testament scriptures, we will look for the fingerprints of God upon the lives of these men. We will limit our brief biographical sketches of the lives of Peter, Luke and Paul, three of the main contributors to the New Testament canon. We will make observations and hypotheses about each character’s life and writing to suggest the workings of God in their life and New Testament authorship.

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<sup>1</sup> James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words*, #2583.

<sup>2</sup> D.A Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*, 726.

## The Apostle Peter

Peter, the unpredictable, ambitious follower of Jesus is a colorful character in the writings of the New Testament. If you've ever been dumbfounded by your own ability to say something brilliant in one moment followed by a moment of sheer stupidity, you can relate to Peter. And yet this man of unpredictable speech has two books in the New Testament canon (First and Second Peter) attributed to his name. Could God use an uneducated fisherman from Galilee to write sections of the Bible that are considered inspired and divinely revelatory in nature?

Eusebius, the fourth-century church historian, considered First Peter (1 Peter) among the undisputed books of the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the external attestation for 1 Peter is considered by many scholars to be as strong as any other book in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> The book of 1 Peter is written as an appeal to Christians who are undergoing suffering to consider their plight in light of Christ's own sufferings for them. What makes this theme remarkable is that the author is one who himself denied his relationship with Jesus multiple times and yet became a key leader of the early church and eventually a martyr for the faith. For these reasons, we see a testimony of the workings of God in Peter's life, but also in the writings of this canonical book.

Ironically, the authorship of Second Peter (2 Peter) which is also attributed to the Apostle Peter is among the most disputed of the New Testament canonical books. "Indeed, for no other letter in the New Testament is there a greater consensus that the person who is named as the author could not, in fact, be the author."<sup>5</sup> One of the primary reasons for this debate is the vocabulary and complexity of the Greek language used in this epistle is distinct from 1 Peter and

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<sup>3</sup> D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*, 641.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 641.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 659.

even from the entirety of the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> The counter argument states that the thirty plus years spent between abandoning his fishing nets, travelling in Asia Minor, Greece and Rome would have given the apostle adequate opportunity to write in such a prolific manner.<sup>7</sup> Certainly the strength of 2 Peter testifies to either a pseudonymous authorship or the work of God through an ordinary man with no formal education. (Acts 4:13) Additionally, the reference in 2 Peter 3:16 to Paul's writings as "Scripture" acknowledges that the author of this epistle viewed the New Testament writings of Paul in the same category as they did the Old Testament canon.

### Luke

On the other end of the educational spectrum stands Luke "the beloved physician", author of two canonical books, the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. (Colossians 4:14) In contrast to the writings of Peter, particularly 2 Peter, the polished use of the Greek language in these two canonical books attests and aligns well with Luke's education and his Greek descent.<sup>8</sup>

Both books that are attributed to Luke are historical in content. "Luke's interest in history is revealed in several references such as (Luke) 2:1-2 and 3:1-2."<sup>9</sup> The accuracy of Luke's historiography attests to the New Testament's historical veracity, but what does it say of the inspiration from God acclaimed by Christians?

In the beginning of Luke's gospel, the author states,

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, *it seemed good to me* also, having perfect

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<sup>6</sup> D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*, 659.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 659.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 283.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

understanding of all things from the very first, to write an orderly account. (Luke 1:1-3, italics added)

The English phrase “it seemed good to me”, comes from the Greek work *dokeo* (δοκεω) meaning, “to think; by implication, to seem good”.<sup>10</sup> It is the same Greek word that Luke uses in the book of Acts to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in giving guidelines to Gentile believers. (Acts 15:28)

While it may be that Luke simply had a good idea that he ran with under his own will and choice, it is also likely that the inspiration of this idea had divine origin and purposes. What may have seemed to Luke as a “good idea” to write an orderly account may have truly been a “God idea” prompted by the Holy Spirit.

To give further credence to this idea originating from God is the fact that if we acknowledge Luke as the author of both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, he is accredited with the largest quantitative contribution to the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> Such diligence in labor and persistence to complete a voluminous and accurate historical work may have been more than the thought of Luke, but the inspiration and plan of God to accurately record the life of Jesus and the Apostles.

### The Apostle Paul

Paul is accredited with writing thirteen epistles of the New Testament which make up almost one-fourth of this segment of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Paul’s contribution to the New Testament and to the history of the church at large is so significant that he has at times been referred to as the

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<sup>10</sup> James Stong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, #1380.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 146.

<sup>12</sup> D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*, 354.

second founder of Christianity.<sup>13</sup> It is unlikely that Paul would ever have accepted such a claim for his contribution to the faith wanting all the more to give glory to God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son. At the same time, it is not unreasonable to believe that Paul himself considered his writings to be God inspired and authoritative to the church.

In nine of his thirteen letters, Paul makes reference to his apostleship. “To which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth in Christ, not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.” (1 Timothy 2:7) His boldness and candor of speech to the churches testify to his own belief that his words were authoritative in nature and from the heart of God.

F.F. Bruce points out that Paul at times directly spoke of his words being originated from Christ himself (2 Corinthians 13:3), but in other instances when speaking on marriage and divorce, Paul clarifies that he is giving his own opinion on the matter.<sup>14</sup> “But to the rest I, not the Lord say...” (1 Corinthians 7:12) Paul’s writings indicate that in these instances he was expressing his own personal opinion and not writing as a commandment from God himself.

This is not to say that God did not share or agree with Paul’s opinion as much as it states that in this instance Paul was speaking out of his own personal convictions and not claiming his words to be directly from the Lord. Since Paul identified these passages as being his own opinion and not the Lord’s, conversely it implies that in all other instances Paul believed he was speaking on the Lord’s behalf!

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>14</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 120.

## Marcion

We will now shift our focus from the authors of the New Testament to delve into the discovery of how the New Testament was formed and the people God used in this process. We will start by looking into the life of Marcion, a man who was born around AD 100 at Sinope.<sup>15</sup> Marcion is the first person scholars recognize as having gathered together a fixed set of books to be considered as the inspired word of God.<sup>16</sup> We will use the word canon to describe this set of books, recognizing that the Marcion “canon” was different from the current New Testament.

A look at the life of Marcion makes a good segue from the discussion of the Apostle Paul for a few reasons. For one, Marcion’s canon contained no other epistles than the ten Pauline epistles (lacking the Pastoral Epistles).<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Marcion viewed Paul as the only faithful apostle of Christ and even went on to say that the original apostles had corrupted their Master’s teaching with an admixture of legalism.<sup>18</sup> “He embraced with intelligence and ardour Paul’s gospel of justification by divine grace, apart from legal works.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet even all of Paul’s writings didn’t make the grade with Marcion. In fact, wherever there appeared to be a contradiction between Marcion’s theological opinion and Paul’s writings, including in those epistles he accepted as part of his canon, Marcion chose to eliminate those writings from his canon. In the book of Romans alone, Marcion’s edition excluded Romans

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<sup>15</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 134.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 135.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.



1:19-2:1; 3:21-4:25; all of Romans 9-11 except 10:1-4 and 11:33-36, and everything after Romans 14:23.<sup>20</sup>

The only gospel included in Marcion's canon was an edited version of Luke. He also eliminated the entirety of the Old Testament because he saw the New Testament and gospel of grace as an overriding authority to the Old Testament and law. In fact, Marcion's theology held to a dualism in which the God of the Old Testament was different from the Father of the New.

Obviously, Marcion's "canon" was more based on his own theological beliefs than on an objective determination of which writings were indeed part of Holy Scripture. "Marcion, in Tertullian's famous phrase, was using the knife and not the pen, and the result of his activity was the elimination of the whole Old Testament, of all the Gospels apart from certain portions of Luke, and of all the rest of the New Testament apart from ten expurgated epistles of Paul."<sup>21</sup>

The significance of Marcion's canon is not in his choice of writings and passages that were to be included and considered inspired as much as it was the effect his choices had on the church body. Ferguson writes, "The church would have had its own canon in spite of Marcion, but he may have hastened the process of bringing the authoritative books together, for there was no need to pronounce judgment on what was not in dispute."<sup>22</sup>

Let us consider God's role in the creation of the Scriptures through the life of Marcion. While some may argue that Marcion was a heretic who only caused harm to the church and in fact created his own competing church that lasted several generations, it would be hard to deny

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<sup>20</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 140.

<sup>21</sup> D.A. Carson and John Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 112.

how the workings of this man were used to provoke the true church to action.<sup>23</sup> At times we see how God uses the lives of evil men or those with impure motives to complete his own work.

Joseph of the Old Testament understood the sovereignty of God to use the evil deeds of his brothers for good when he said to them, “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20) While it would be impossible to judge the motives of Marcion in creating his canon, it can be said that the church at large disagreed with his choices. In a similar way that Joseph saw the hand of God in the evil deeds of his brother, we can also see how God used Marcion as his own tool and impetus to prod the church in defining the New Testament canon of Scripture.

#### Tertullian

The main source of information on Marcion comes from Tertullian, whose treatise *Against Marcion* was written over a half a century later, when Marcion had been dead for some decades.<sup>24</sup> “Hostile and vituperative as Tertullian’s treatment is, his factual data appear to be reliable.”<sup>25</sup>

Tertullian played a vital role in the canonization process of the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> Tertullian’s highest criteria in deciphering which books were part of the inspired word of God was that of apostolic authorship.<sup>27</sup> “Since Jesus himself left nothing in writing, the most authoritative writings available to the church were those which came from his apostles.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 136.

<sup>24</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>28</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 256.

Tertullian never used the word “canon”, he did however have a fairly clear concept of a set of literature in mind.<sup>29</sup> In his writings against heretics at the beginning of the third century, one of his arguments concerned who has the right to “Christian Scriptures.”<sup>30</sup> Included in Tertullian’s collection were the four gospels and Acts, the thirteen epistles which bear Paul’s name, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation.<sup>31</sup>

Tertullian tenaciously fought off anti-Christian writings and heretical teachings in defense of true apostolic work. Litfin writes, “Certainly he was a deeply flawed character. He could be harsh and moralistic, especially later in his life.”<sup>32</sup> In this way, we can see how God used Tertullian, a man of who had his own character flaws and sinful nature to perform His work.

#### Irenaeus of Lyons

While Tertullian’s role of combating Marcion and other Gnostic writings and heresies was significant in the formation of the New Testament, this third century church father was by no means the originator of the concept of a canon of scripture different from the Old Testament.<sup>33</sup> Prior to Tertullian, we see how God used the work of Irenaeus of Lyons in forming the canon. “Irenaeus was one of the leading figures in establishing the canon of scripture.”<sup>34</sup>

Gnostics in the time of Irenaeus had claimed to possess secret knowledge that was of apostolic origins. Irenaeus argued against this belief by attesting to an apostolic faith that was handed down by the apostles and successfully passed on through an unbroken succession of

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<sup>29</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 182.

<sup>30</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 115

<sup>31</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 182.

<sup>32</sup> Brian M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*, 113.

<sup>33</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 115

<sup>34</sup> Brian M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*, 78.

bishops.<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus himself had a direct chain link back to the apostles. As a youth, he had listened to Polycarp who was a disciple of the Apostle John.<sup>36</sup>

Irenaeus held to a four book gospel as we know in today's New Testament and rejected the removal or addition of any other gospel accounts.<sup>37</sup> This is significant in light of the fact that there were possibly a dozen or more gospel accounts written.<sup>38</sup> Irenaeus cited practically every book of our current New Testament in order to disprove the heretics.<sup>39</sup> While not using the term "New Covenant", Irenaeus is possibly the first person to recognize a separate set of inspired holy books that were distinct from the Old Testament. God used Irenaeus to draw clearer lines between pseudonymous and canonical writings and to pave the way for a closed canon.

#### Athanasius

During the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, it was decided that the bishop of Alexandria should have the privilege each year to determine the date of Easter and then communicate this decision with the rest of the bishops.<sup>40</sup> Athanasius issued forty-five such "festal letters" during his position as bishop.<sup>41</sup> In each of these letters, Athanasius used the occasion to address other matters of importance to the church. In his thirty-ninth letter, Athanasius dealt with the canon of both the Old and New Testament.<sup>42</sup>

Athanasius had a habit of making history and took a significant step in his Easter Letter of 367. In this letter, he recognized the entirety of the Old Testament as we know it today (with

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<sup>35</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 172.

<sup>36</sup> D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Second Edition*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Donald W. Riddle, *Factors in the Formation of the New Testament Canon*, 330.

<sup>39</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation*, 116.

<sup>40</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 77.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

exception of Esther) and was also the first to recognize the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as known in the current canon of Scripture.<sup>43</sup> Church fathers in the following centuries confirmed this selection of books as authoritative.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Athanasius is credited as being the first person to use the word canon in the sense of the word as used today and as defined earlier in this paper.<sup>45</sup>

While Athanasius defined a “closed canon” in the sense that he identified these books to be “inspired”, he did commend other books to be edifying for reading, but not part of the Holy Scriptures. These books included the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith and Tobit.<sup>46</sup> It was this church father’s concern with heretical and spurious works (which he called “apocryphal”) that led him to this definitive act of defining the canon.<sup>47</sup>

Similar to the way we see how God used the false teaching and theology of Marcion to drive the church to action in formulating the canon, so we can see how the false teachings and writings of the fourth century, propelled Athanasius to make his bold decree in 367. God was using the iron of controversy to sharpen the church.

## Conclusion

As we have looked into the lives of the early disciples of Jesus, the life of Marcion and the lives of several church fathers we can see how God used ordinary people of various times, backgrounds, education and spiritual motives to formulate the canon of the New Testament.

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<sup>43</sup> D.A. Carson and John Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, 202.

<sup>44</sup> D.A. Carson and John Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, 202.

<sup>45</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

We also see how challenges to the church namely the teachings of Gnosticism and other pseudonymous writings and movements were actually used by God to instigate action in the church body to define the canon. While we did not cover the entirety of the formation of the New Testament, nor by any means reviewed an exhaustive list of persons who were instrumental in the formation of the canon, we do see that the New Testament we hold in our hands today was a bi-product of the church body and no single individual.

As we survey the lives of the seven characters discussed in this paper, we see how God used imperfect men in the formation of the canon. Peter had denied the Lord three times. Luke was a non-Jew and also not an Apostle.<sup>48</sup> Paul had once persecuted the church. When Marcion couldn't convince the church of his devious doctrines, he started his own church. Tertullian did not receive the title of "saint" because of his rough and at times abrasive character.<sup>49</sup> Athanasius had a "fiery and stubborn personality."<sup>50</sup> The study of the formation of the New Testament shows that an omnipotent and all wise God is able to use the events of human history and the workings of fallible creatures to perform a good and perfect work.

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<sup>48</sup> It is recognized that while Luke as well as Mark were not Apostles, their close relationship with the Apostles, allowed their writings to pass the "apostolicity" litmus test in being included in the canon.

<sup>49</sup> Brian M. Lifestin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*, 113.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

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