

How we got our New Testament

When and why was it written?

The early Christians only had what we call the Old Testament and oral accounts of what Jesus said and did, passed on by his followers. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were written about 30 to 50 years after Jesus' death, probably summarising Peter's preaching and perhaps fleshed out by drawing on another collection of Jesus' sayings. John's Gospel came later, towards the end of the 1st century or a few years into the 2nd century. None of the Gospels contains an author's signature, but for various reasons they have been attributed to the people whose names they bear. As John states in his account, they only include a small portion of all that Jesus said and did, selecting material to show who he was.

Paul's letters were the first parts of the New Testament to be written. They and the other letters were addressed to people who were already Christians; often to deal with issues and problems in the churches, which is why it is dangerous to build theology on one letter. The letters were sometimes circulated and were collected together late in the 1st century. The order in which they appear in our Bibles is not chronological but by author, and for Paul's letters, roughly in descending order of length. Some were disputed but they were largely accepted very early as authoritative; Peter in his second letter (2 Pet 3:15-16) refers to Paul's letters as 'Scriptures' as well as conceding that they can be 'hard to understand'.

By the late 2nd century a four-fold Gospel was recognised, and Acts, originally appended to Luke, was separated from it to link the Gospels with the letters.

How was it preserved and transmitted?

The documents were originally written by hand on parchment scrolls, in Greek, the common language of much of the Mediterranean area at the time. The earliest extant fragment is a scrap of John's Gospel from about AD 130, and there are many other early copies of part of the New Testament, with the oldest complete manuscript dating from the 4th century. There are variations in manuscripts, resulting either from mistakes made when copying or deliberate attempts to improve the text. However, much research has been done to establish the most reliable Greek versions, and readings still in doubt are not crucial to any major facts or doctrines.

By AD 300 translations had been made into Latin and other languages of the area, variable in their accuracy, as are quotes by early Christian writers, which is why it is important to rely on good translations from the original Greek. Remember that there was no complete English translation of the Bible until the late 14th century, no printed Bibles until the mid 15th century and no printed English version until the 16th century.

How were its contents decided?

Although the New Testament books had all been written by the early 2nd century, it took another 250 years for the canon to be finalised. The word *canon* comes from a Greek word meaning *reed* or *measuring rod*, which came to signify a list – in this context a list of books accepted for use in public worship and seen as authoritative for Christian doctrine and practice. There are other early Christian writings too, and it took some time to reach consensus on which were to be recognised as Scripture.

The first formal canon to be published was in about AD 140 by Marcion, considered a heretic. He rejected the Old Testament and anything else Jewish, which did not leave much – only part of Luke's Gospel and 10 of Paul's letters! This motivated the church to define which books were acceptable, and although some were debated due to their content, personal nature or doubtful authorship, by the early 3rd century the majority of believers recognised most of the current New Testament, although the list of books we have now was not formalised until AD 367. This was not the end of the debates. Even Martin Luther questioned the letter of James, calling it 'an

epistle of straw', and some Lutheran editions of the Bible relegated it to an appendix along with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation.

The statement in the Church of England's 39 Articles that the canonical books are 'those of whose authority was never any doubt in the church' is certainly not borne out by history. But despite changing practice, doctrinal disagreement and attacks on Scriptural authority over the centuries, the contents of the New Testament have remained intact for nearly 2000 years now and are still adhered to by all sections of the Christian church.