

This now is a continuation of my projected longer blog post that will serve as an Introduction to the New Testament (possibly around 5000 - 6000 words or so). In the first section I discussed the layout and structure of the New Testament; in the second I gave brief descriptions of each of the twenty-seven books. In this one (spread out over two posts) I deal with the question of how we actually got it: how was it collected together into a “book” and how was it transmitted to us over the centuries?

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## How Did We Get The New Testament?

The New Testament did not drop from the sky one day a few years after the death of Jesus. It was written over a number of years by a number of authors with a number of different purposes, interests, and perspectives. But how did we actually get it? That is, who decided on these particular twenty-seven early Christian writings, rather than others? When did they decide? And on what grounds?

Moreover, how did these books come down to us? How were they preserved and circulated during all those centuries before the invention of printing? Can we be certain that the books we read today are actually identical to the ones their authors produced?

## The Canon of the New Testament

The word “canon” comes from a Greek term for a straight edge, used either to measure or to draw a straight line (like a yard stick). The word eventually came to refer to any authoritative collection of books - and so today we can talk about the canon of Shakespeare. The canon of the New Testament would be the twenty-seven books that made it into the Christian scripture, as a second part of the Christian Bible (along with the 39-book canon of the Old Testament).

Religions in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds did not as a rule have “Bibles” - that is, books that provided authoritative guidance into what to believe and how to live. The only real exception was Judaism. But since Jesus and his followers were Jews, the earliest Christians already had a canon of Scripture, even if there was no universal agreement at the time (among either Jews or Christians) which books should be counted as the “Jewish Bible” (though virtually everyone agreed on the Pentateuch and prophets).

Christians themselves wrote books early on, within decades of Jesus’ death. And already in the first century some of these book were ascribed the same authority as the books of the Jewish Bible - just as Jesus’ own teachings were seen to be authoritative words from God. The problem was that ...

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