

The New Testament Canon

1. The Formation of the New Testament Writings

Early Christians were initially slow in writing their own documents (Jesus had not written a single document, and they were convinced that they were living 'in the last times' before Jesus' second coming (Greek: *parousia*)).

Documents began to be written due to a desire to preserve the memory of key events, since a) missionary figures were commissioned to preach 'the gospel' (reliable accounts had to be provided); b) letters were written as a means of communication and as a response to specific issues. All documents were collected and read in public services of worship.

2. The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Each NT document was originally intended to stand on its own, even if Paul hoped that some of his letters would be circulated in other communities (see II Cor. 1:1-2; Col. 4:16).

How, and when, were certain early Christian writings gathered together and collected in what became known as the New Testament canon? (Greek word = ruler or standard of measurement > rule of faith by which beliefs and practices were evaluated > body of writings which conformed to this standard).

2.1 Importance of a Jewish Collection of Written Documents

The use of the Jewish Scriptures demonstrated the value of written documents for the life of a religious community; this became an impetus for the production of specifically Christian texts. Some signs of a Jewish canon by the end of the first century CE but this was not closed.

2.2 Responses to Attempts at Shaping a Canon

Many external pressures shaped the formation of a NT canon. Marcion (excommunicated in Rome in 144 CE) sought to establish a specifically Christian collection of authoritative writings; he rejected the OT and included only the letters

of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. Response of the traditional Church was to reclaim and reaffirm other writings (Gospels and the other letters).

2.3 The Process of Canonical Selection

Lists began to be issued of writings that could be read in the Church.

a) The Muratorian Canon (late second-early third century CE): list includes all NT books apart from Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter (but it also accepted the Apocalypse of Peter).

b) Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.25:1-7) lists universally accepted books (the four Gospels, Acts, letters of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter) and disputed books which i) are generally acknowledged as authoritative (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John) and ii) more doubtful books (Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Teachings of the Apostles, Gospel of the Hebrews), while Revelation could belong to either category.

c) Athanasius (367 CE) lists the twenty-seven books now contained in NT: the 'springs of salvation' included 'in the canon'.

3. Criteria in the Canonizing Process

Three factors were particularly important in determining whether a book was accepted or rejected.

3.1 Apostolic Origin

Many writings were pseudonymously attributed to the apostles (John the apostle as the author of the Book of Revelation?) Many books were originally copied with no names attached.

3.2 Conformity to the Rule of Faith

Writings were in accordance with the traditional teaching of the traditional Church on matters of belief and practice. Avoidance of writings with a docetic view of Jesus (that is, he only appeared to be human and did not truly die on the cross). This is the 'rule of faith', although fixed formulations were only adopted at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE.

3.3 Use of a Text by a Community

Public reading of early Christian texts was a major factor in the formation of the canon. For example, Col. 4:16: the recipients are urged to read the letter publicly and to exchange it for a letter written to the community at Laodicea.

Bibliography

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