

The Formation of the New Testament

The New Testament Canon

1. Formation of the NT Writings

Early Christians did not begin to write their own books immediately. Why?

Jesus did not write a document nor commission others to write about him.

Early Christians believed that they were living in 'the end times' before the second coming (*parousia*) of Jesus.

Written Record of Foundational Events

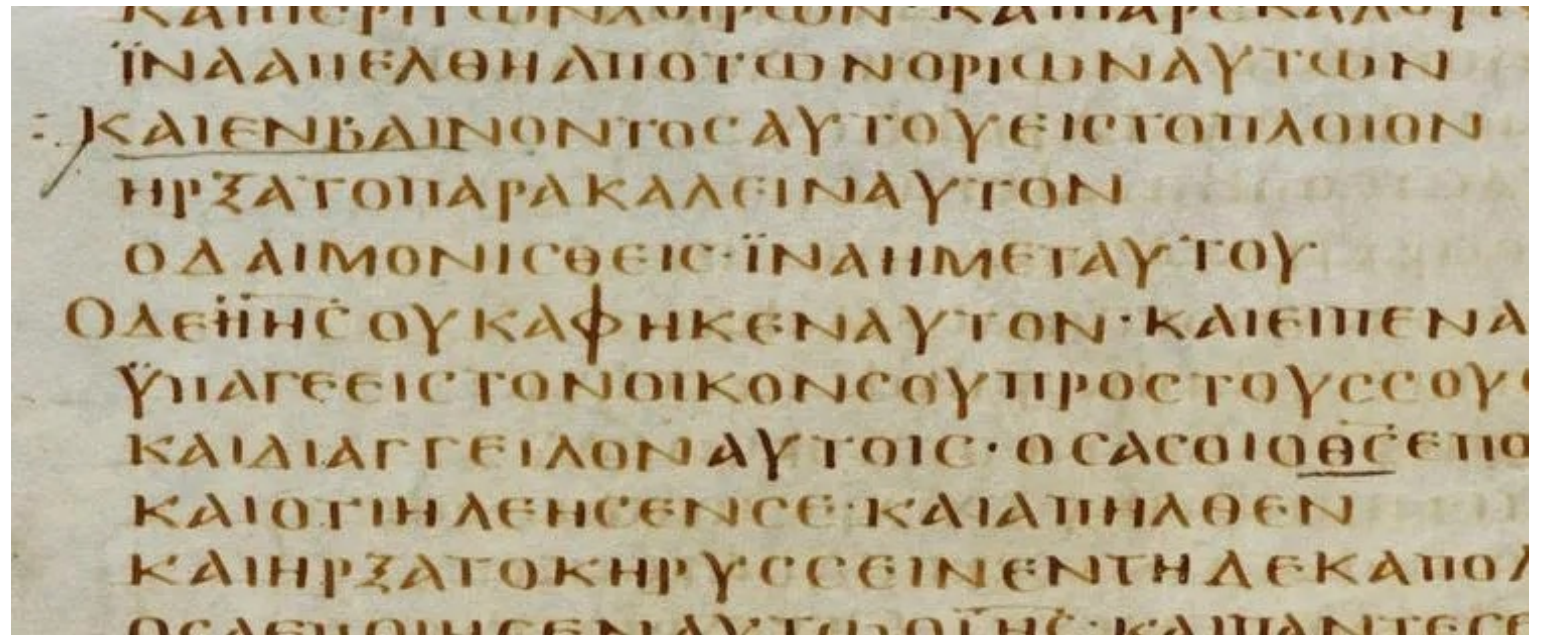
The early Christians gradually came to regard themselves (not only the twelve disciples) as commissioned by the risen Jesus to spread the gospel in the world.

A more urgent issue following the death of leading figures (especially in the 60s).

Reliable handbooks about Jesus to be used by preachers and missionaries.

Letters as an effective means of keeping in touch with Christian communities.

NT Writings: Documents in Greek



2. Formation of the NT Canon

- Unlikely that individual authors wrote their texts with a view to including them in a collection of Christian writings (cf. II Corinthians 1:1-2; Colossians 4:16).
- Canon: ruler or standard of measurement.
- Rule of faith by which beliefs and practices are evaluated.
- Body of writings conforming to this standard.

2.1. Jewish Authoritative Writings: A Precedent

- Importance of authoritative Scriptures for the life of a community.
- No canon (i.e., fixed collection) of Jewish Scriptures (= the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) before the end of the first century CE.

2.2. Responses to Other (Unorthodox) Attempts to Shape a NT Canon

- Marcion (excommunicated in 144 CE) rejected the OT (writings about a god inferior to the loving Christian God).
- Restriction of a 'canon' of scriptures to Paul (10 letters) and the Gospel of Luke.
- Even these texts were 'cleansed' of their scriptural heritage.
- The response of the Church was to (re)claim other Christian writings as authoritative.

2.3. Process of Canonical Selection

- Muratorian Canon (190-210 CE): lists all NT books apart from Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter.
- Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3:25:1-7): lists a) universally accepted books and ii) disputed books (including James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John).
- Athanasius (367 CE): all 27 NT books are described as 'the springs of salvation' to be found 'in the canon'.

3. Criteria in the Canonizing Process

- Apostolic origin (although many NT texts were originally copied with no names or headings attached).
- Conformity to the Rule of Faith: texts that conformed to the traditional teaching of the Church on matters of belief and practice (e.g., reaction against docetism).
- Communal Use of a Text: public readings of texts (liturgy and/or instruction) already well established (cf. Colossians 4:16).