

# The Canonical Gospels

## Overview of NT Gospel Canonization

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### Learning objectives

- Define: Canon
- Recognize: the OT canon
- Trace: History of the NT Canon
- Trace: History of the gospel canon
- Identify: A few non-canon gospels
- Defend: The four canonical Gospels

### Three usages of the term 'canon' (κανων, any straight rod or bar)

**Stage 1:** Authorized. "Recognition by the majority of the respected leaders" in a church or community.

**Stage 2:** Standardized. "Official recognition given to the situation already obtaining in the practice of the ... community." (Gerald Sheppard)

**Stage 3:** Theologized. Declared to be inspired, infallible, and authoritative.

### Was there a 1st century CE canon?

**Jews:** Accepted the Law and the Prophets, though the 'writings' were not yet fixed. Employed the LXX.

**Christians:** Cited the Jewish scriptures as inspired and authoritative.

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." 2 Tim. 3:16

**NT:** 'The NT writers never specifically call any extracanonical literature "scripture".'  
(LM McDonald, FCBC, 128).

**Jude:** Could quote from the Book of Enoch, because the Jewish canon had not yet been fixed in the 1st century CE. "Behold! He cometh with ten thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgement upon all, ... And to convict all flesh of all the works of their ungodliness which they have ungodly committed, and of all the hard things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."  
Enoch 1:9 quoted in Jude 14-15.

### Christians believed Jewish scriptures

**Challenge:** How to be 'free in Christ' whilst reading Torah.

#### Options:

- Ignore or deny portions of the Law.
- Allegorize laws to harmonize them with Jesus' teaching. Gal 4:24-25
- Emphasize pre-law, Abrahamic faith as normative. Rom 4:16
- Marcion rejected the entire OT.
- Redefine the meaning of Law.

### The earliest Christian 'canon'

- Jesus himself was the Christians' authority. They adapted his words and deeds to local cultures.
- NT writers quote Jewish scriptures as authoritative, often from the LXX.
- NT writings contain about 420 allusions or language parallels with non-canonical Jewish writings.

## 2nd century fathers

### On the origin of Matthew's Gospel

"Matthew wrote his gospel," Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.9.3

"[Matthew was] the most faithful chronicler of the Gospel because [he was a] companion of the Lord," Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, 22.

### On the origin of Mark's Gospel

"Mark the interpreter of Peter wrote down accurately," Papius, *Fragments*, 6

"Mark ... adduced testimonies to Christ ... what was spoken by Peter ... wrote entirely ... the Gospel of Mark," Clement of Alexandria, *Fragments* 1.

### On the origin of Luke's Gospel

"Luke, without respect of persons, delivers to us what he learned from ... eyewitnesses."

Irenaeus, *Church History* 3.15.3

"Luke was not an apostle ... followed Paul ... was subsequent to the others."

Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion*, 4.2

### On the origin of John's Gospel

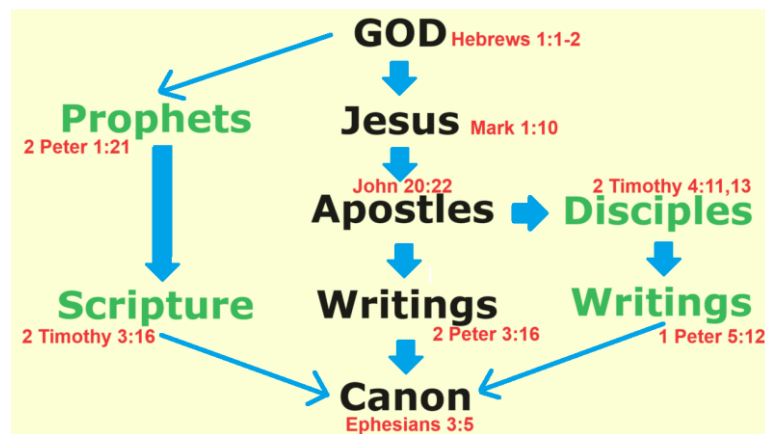
"Gospels which we possess ... John and Matthew" Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion*, 4.5

"Of the apostles ... John and Matthew instil faith in us." Tertullian, *ibid*, 4.2

## Inferences

Thus, in the 2nd century, some church leaders already:

- Knew by name the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
- Associated these gospels with the apostles Matthew, John and Paul.
- Ascribed these gospels to Matthew, to Peter & Mark, to Paul & Luke, and and to the Apostle John.



"Lineage of Inspiration of Holy Writ"

## Old Testament Canon, 1st cent. CE

- Jews accepted as authoritative their books in Hebrew, Aramaic & Greek.
- Torah (Law), Prophets, Psalms, and many 'second temple' books.
- These were not yet limited to the current Tanach or Old Testament.
- Would be limited to Hebrew books of the Tanach, sometime in second century CE, rejecting the LXX.

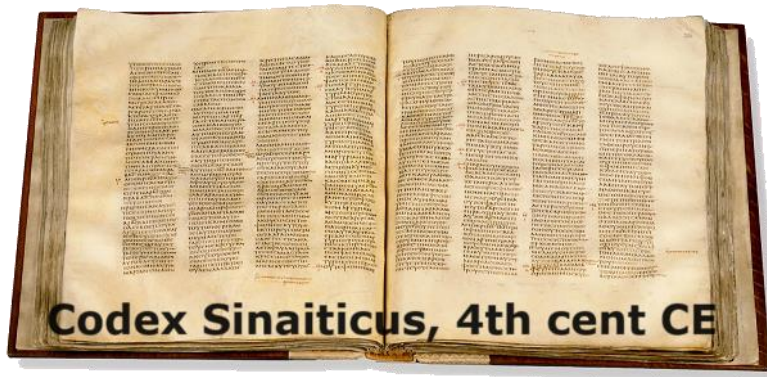
## Overview of NT Gospel Canonization

### Jesus' canon of Scripture

- Jesus quoted from 24 books of the Hebrew scriptures. Mark 7:6
- Jesus alluded to some 14 other (mostly Greek) writings. Mt 5:3-11
- Jesus approved of three collections:  
“Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44)

### 2nd to 4th centuries' canons

- By end of the 2nd century CE, Jews fixed their canon to include the Hebrew books of the Tanach, having rejected their LXX.
- From the 4th century CE, Christian codices (bound Bibles) include our 4 Gospels plus:
  - X: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, 1&2 Macc.
  - B: Tobit, Baruch, Ep of Jer., Sirach, no Macc.
  - A: Psalms of Solomon, 3 & 4 Maccabees.
  - C: Sirach, Prolog to Sirach, Wisdom, but lacks some Tanach books. Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus



### Tentative gospel canonization process

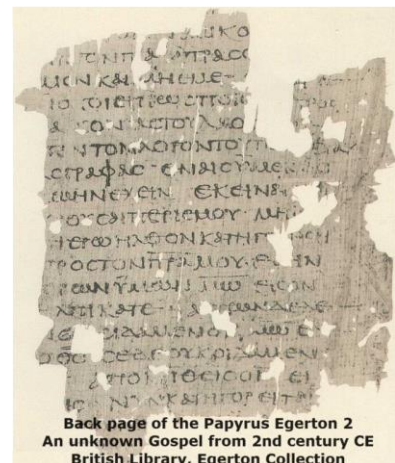
1. Oral tradition: Jesus is authoritative.
2. Apostolic epistles functioned as scripture before designated Scripture.  
“Anyone who claims to be a prophet or spiritual must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.” 1 Cor. 14:37 NRSVue
3. Clement of Rome (c 95 CE) calls Paul's writings 'inspired'.
4. Some church fathers quoted the OT more than they did Jesus' sayings.
5. Citations & allusions to the four Gospels were common in the 2nd century.
6. Some wrote, “It is written,” citing Jesus, making him equal in authority to the OT.
7. Others appeal to the Epistles as authority. E.g., 2 Pt 3.15-16 referring to Paul.
8. Tatian's diatessaron (c 160) blended Matt, Mark, Luke & John, for the Syrian church.
9. Bishop Maricon (d. ca. 160):
  - a. Taught that the God of NT ≠ the vengeful, creator demiurge of OT.
  - b. Separated the NT gospel from Judaism & Law.
  - c. Cites only Gospels of Matthew & Mark.
  - d. Drew up list of NT books that he considered to be authoritative.Other bishops would later condemn Marcion as a heretic.

## Overview of NT Gospel Canonization

10. Justin Martyr wrote in c 160 CE: “The apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them.”  
First Apology 6
11. Irenaeus (170-180) spoke of a ‘canon’ and coined the phrases ‘Old Testament’ and ‘New Testament’ without drawing up a list of books.
12. Muratorian Canon 180 CE. Lists:
  - (Matt & Mark probably but ms damaged.)
  - Luke, John, Acts
  - Epistles of Paul, including the pastorals
  - NOT Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter
  - (1 John probably, 2 & 3 John maybe.)
  - Jude
  - Apocalypses of John and of Peter
  - Wisdom of Solomon
  - Shepherd of Hermas recommend
13. Montanists declared themselves to be Paraclete-inspired prophets, rejecting John’s Gospel and Revelation, whilst advancing their own writings.
14. Gnostics claimed to have received secret gospels from the apostles themselves.
15. Thus, with Marcion the churches saw a need to expand their written corpus of authoritative writings, and with the Montanists a need to limit its scope.
16. In 303 CE emperor Diocletian ordered Christian buildings and ‘scriptures’ be burned. Those who gave up scriptures were called *traditores* or *lapsi*. Those who refused and were killed martyrs. Thus, individual churches must have recognized certain writings as scripture.
17. In 313, emperor Constantine I issued his Edict of Milan, making Christianity a licit religion, declaring himself a church bishop. At the first Council of Nicea in 325 CE, he enjoined on the bishops to resolve their divisive issues. He asked Eusebius to supervise production of 50 copies of the scriptures (completed by 336 CE), pressing the bishops to agree on an official ‘canon’ of NT scriptures.
18. Eusebius categories: ‘recognized scriptures’ and disputed books, which, by end of the century, became ‘rejected’.
19. Between 300 and 400, 15 extant lists of authoritative NT scriptures were drawn up in different cities.
20. All extant ancient lists either mention “four gospels” or include the Gospels named Mathew, Mark, Luke and John.

### Sample 1st & 2nd century gospels

- Egerton papyrus: Miracles and sayings of Jesus, of Jesus.
- Shepherd of Hermas: Visions & commands given by Jesus.  
Promotes celibacy.
- Gospel of Judas: Written in Coptic translated from Greek, teaching Gnostic doctrines.



Back page of the Papyrus Egerton 2  
An unknown Gospel from 2nd century CE  
British Library, Egerton Collection

### Traditional criteria for NT canonicity

#### 1. Apostolicity: 'historical succession'.

Logic: Jesus remains our sole authority, and his apostles' writings remain our best access to Jesus.

"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you." John 12:26

Critique: There are books in the NT canons of all denominations that were certainly not written by an apostle. For examples: Gospel of Luke and Epistle to the Hebrews.

Reply: Associates to apostles wrote with apostolic oversight and approval. "Apollos and myself ... learn through us what 'Not beyond what is written' means." 1 Cor. 4:6

#### 2. Orthodoxy: 'normative doctrine/teaching'.

Logic: The apostles' teaching is true doctrine. All later doctrines diverge from the truth.

"Concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us."

1 John 1:2-3

Critique: There was no doctrinal standard common to all apostles and to NT writings. Even the Gospels have distinctive features and apply the OT differently.

Reply: Apostles themselves recognized unique teachings in each other's writings. "Our brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him." 2 Peter 3:15-16

#### 3. Antiquity: 'The period of the incarnation'.

Logic: The apostles' "rule of faith" was a criterion for the early churches.

"I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once and for all handed on to the saints." Jude 1:3

Critique: There were non-canonical gospels or 'sayings of Jesus' circulating before the appearance of the canonical Gospels. Luke 1:1

Reply: Canonicity allows for both the period of the incarnation and the lifetimes of Jesus' apostles.

#### 4. Inspiration: 'Moved by the Holy Spirit'.

Logic: The apostles' "rule of faith" was a criterion for the early churches' acceptance of a book.

"Understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will." 2 Pet. 1:16

Critique: Early church leaders believed that their unique canon of books was divinely inspired, including disputed books that were later rejected. E.g., the Book of Enoch.

Reply: A book's inspiration is inferred from its authoritative, apostolic source, since we do not know directly what is inspired.

#### 5. Usage: 'Widespread recognition'.

Logic: Books that all or most of the churches accepted as authoritative are the canon of scripture.

"When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea." Col. 4:16

Critique: Some books did not arrive at all the churches, and not all those that arrived in a church survived or proved edifying.

Reply: Over time, most churches came to approve the most useful books. These form the common canon to which some churches add other books.



**Linages of the Canonical Gospels** (Robert L Thomas, *Charts of the Gospels*, Zondervan (2000), 81)

- Matthew → Gospel of Matthew
- Peter & Mark → Gospel of Mark
- Paul & witnesses → Gospel of Luke
- John → Gospel of John

“The apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them.” Justin Martyr (b. 100 in Judea).

### Supposed Gospel Emphases

- Matthew → Messiah as King, 1:1  
“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”
- Mark → Messiah as Servant, 10:45  
“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”
- Luke → Messiah as Human, 3:23  
“He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph ... son of Adam, son of God.”
- John → Messiah as Divine, 1:1, 14  
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son.”

### From Ezekiel 1:10

- Matthew → Lion
- Mark → Bull
- Luke → Man
- John → Eagle

### Conclusion

- Most Christian churches have in their NT canon the same 27 books.
- Some Christian churches include other books in their OT and NT canons.
- All Christian churches have the same four Gospels in their canon.
- All Christian churches recognize the authority and inspiration of the Gospel According to Saint Luke.