

Defending The NT as Containing the earliest most accurate information on Jesus! AD 70 → Carthage AD 397 & ← →to AD 30.

If we're curious about the historical reliability of the NT we need to address two questions; how did these 27 books pass the test (get canonized) and what is the earliest information we have about Jesus? Dear friends I'd like to journey with you to the year A.D 70; a year of great significance in the lives of 1st century Jews and the New Testament church – Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman general Titus & his army. (Engraved in Roman Stone – Arch of Titus) The historian Josephus describes this event in detail in his work on the Jewish Wars, (particularly book 6) 3 Synoptic Gospels (Matt, Mk, & Luke) record Jesus prophesying this event. We'll return to this in just a few minutes...

First I want to set course for another significant date: 397A.D. – Carthage, North Africa – (Modern day Tunisia) Council of Carthage→ Here the NT Canon will be officially ratified by church leaders from across the Christian world. This wasn't the first time this exact collection appeared, as it mirrored the Canon of the Council of Hippo in 393 & the private list of Athanasius in 367 as well as overlapping with many other earlier local and private canons as seen in this chart

by the late Norman Geisler in his book, *From God to Us*. Skeptics of Christianity often exploit this seemingly late date!

Notice the early consensus on the authority of the 4 Gospels. And don't let the blank spots on this chart mislead you; the question marks represent the disputed books by particular individuals, but it's not the Gospels, the book of Acts or Paul's letters. A blank spot simply indicates that the book wasn't mentioned. Most of the blank spots are early on and likely reflect the fact that the NT books were just beginning to circulate as well as the role of oral tradition in the early church – these 4 Gospels represent the Jesus we know, and follow, and worship; faithfully passed down from the 1st century.

Heretics (A different version of Jesus)

Irenaeus of Lyon (Mid-late 2nd century Southern Gaul)→ Said to the Gnostic heretic Valentinus – “You have no predecessor!” In other words, Valentinus, your Gnostic views of Jesus and the Bible appear as if out of nowhere. They do not trace back to the Apostles & the Prophets (Eph. 2:20). “*God’s household having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.*”

Or consider Marcion of Sinope during the first half of the 2nd century in Asia Minor and Rome. He was a dualist (ditheist); i.e. contrasted the Heavenly Father of the NT – god of love –as allegedly greater than the creator god of the OT. Docetism – Jesus wasn't fully human but merely appeared in the flesh. Marcion was perhaps the first to delineate a list of New Testament scripture; naturally choosing books that he thought he could twist and use to accommodate his heresy. He limited it to 10 of Paul's letters and a mutilated version of Luke's Gospel. Marcion was widely rejected; in Asia Minor by (Polycarp), in North Africa by (Tertullian), & in France by (Irenaeus); meaning that Marcion's teachings were rejected in both the Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking church; and all this despite the fact that Marcion was wealthy, letting us know something about the character of the 2nd century Church. They prioritized truth over worldly riches & their Jewish concept of God over pagan polytheism.

And it's as if these early gnostic versions of Jesus & Christianity forced orthodox believers to buckle down and explain which texts were and weren't canonical as well as correctly interpreting the intended meaning of the biblical authors. (Peter Williams' book **Can We Trust the Gospels?**)

Two additional facts from the 2nd century which strengthen our confidence in this list of 27 NT books;

- **Tatian constructs the Diatesseron (through 4 – a harmony of all 4 canonical Gospels) by mid-late 2nd century and**
- **Tertullian reports that the NT letters were still in their respective churches to his day ca. 150 years after Jesus.**

Some try to reduce this council of Carthage to merely a human vote:

- **Uphold the ecclesiastical authority of the medieval church. (later church on equal authoritative footing the Apostles.)**
- **Sell popular novels based on conspiracy theories (Dan Brown – The DaVinci Code) – Conspiracy theories of political corruption sell.**
- **(Our Muslim Apologist friends) – To uphold prophet-only view of Jesus. They often argue that it was the later Church councils which elevated Jesus to a divine status. Therefore, we're not only asking; how did these 27 books make the cut but also what is the earliest information about Jesus?**

Apostles Oral Teaching ↔ Written NT Text (We struggle to imagine what that might have been like) → But I'll try: Imagine you're born sometime before 70 A.D. – you're a second-generation Disciple of Christ – and you have no written copy of the New Testament of your own. I mean, how could you, being that some of the books/letters hadn't been written yet and when they were composed they were addressed to specific audiences of specific locations? But your local church has access to the OT and you're familiar with the Apostles' teachings; like Paul when he wrote to the Thessalonians –

“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.” (2 Thes. 2:15: Traditions/Word of mouth/Letter) So you don’t possess your own personal complete NT, but that’s ok because in the worst-case scenario you’ve had the Gospel and the entire Apostles’ teachings – essentially capturing the life and teachings of Jesus Christ – presented to you and engrained into your mind; written on your heart. You’re in a local congregation that devotes itself regularly to the Apostles’ teachings, local elders have been established in your congregation who are particularly grounded in the Apostles’ teachings and you’ve likely also heard a letter or two, perhaps from Paul, Peter, or maybe even James, Jude or Hebrews read publically. You’re also aware that some of the disciples and their closest associates have begun writing down the most prominent teachings and experiences with Jesus in narrative – Gospel form. But this oral way of teaching and remembering the words and deeds of the Lord won’t die out immediately, so even Papius in the early 2nd century could safely and understandably claim....

“If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders,—what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by

James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice.” (Eusebius, chapter 39, par. 3, 150. - Quoting Papius)

So writing in the earliest years of the 2nd century Papius – who was likely connected to John and – at most – a generation removed from the other Apostles enjoyed the luxury of both reading the NT texts and hearing the juicy details between the lines and behind the scenes.

However, as time moved on and generations passed that living voice of the Apostles began to fade away, causing a noticeable shift towards dependence on the written text. The written text became more important and therefore the early church fathers began to quote; and quote they did – 36,000X

“Since Christianity was an international religion from the beginning, there was no tightly knit prophetic community which received all inspired books and collected them in one place. Local and somewhat complete collections were made from the very beginning, but there is no evidence of a central and official clearinghouse for inspired writings...within about two hundred years after the first century, nearly every verse of the New Testament was cited in one or more of the over thirty-six thousand citations by the Fathers.” Norman Geisler – *From God to Us*, pg. 101.

That is strong evidence for the authority of the NT prior to its official universal canonization.

Conditions for Canonicity:

- **Apostolicity**
- **Recognized as Orthodox by Churches**
- **Internal authority**

Early Complete NT Codices

- **Sinaiticus: Complete NT - St. Catherine's Monastery - 350 A.D.**
- **Vaticanus: Nearly Complete NT – Rome – 350 A.D. missing pastoral Epistles & Philemon.**
- **Alexandrinus: Complete NT – Alexandria – 400-450 A.D.**

Apologetic Advantages of a late ratification of the canon!!!

Freedom enabled through the legalization of Christianity by Constantine in 313 – Edict of Milan? Persecution of Christians had subsided somewhat→ Debated positive/negative

It actually undermines the corruption argument because from the inception of Christianity in the 1st century there were the 27 books of the NT from various apostolic authors that were successively copied and dispersed throughout the world. Our skeptic friends imagine councils – like Carthage corrupting the true Jesus and the true Bible and redistributing new copies with a new divine Jesus without leaving a trace of their conspiracy. Friends - HISTORICALLY IMPOSSIBLE!!!

Late universal ratification of NT Canon cannot undermine the internal evidence for authority of NT scriptures: Can we use scripture to determine what scripture is?

Allow me to make a presuppositional “if...then...” argument! If the NT is the inspired written word of God, no other standard could judge over it. Michael Kruger argues; “after all, if the canon bears the very authority of God, to what other standard could it appeal to justify it?” – Canon Revisited.

Intertextual web – (Internal Apologetics)

1 Timothy 5:18 → Luke 10:7 “The worker is worth his wages”

2 Peter 3:16 → Peter refers to Paul’s letters with “the rest of the scriptures”

Acts 15: Church at Jerusalem write a letter to Antioch

Colossians 4:16 → Believers at Colossae & Laodicea were to swap letters and read them.

2 Timothy 4:11-13 → Paul refers to Luke’s presence, possibly prompting Paul to remind Timothy to bring his parchments; Was Luke possibly currently penning Luke & or Acts at the time?

Luke 24:27 & 44 → Jesus refers to 2-part & 3-part division of OT and interprets the OT’s entirety as finding its fulfillment in him!

TRANSITION: Shortly before 70 → (Our second question: Jesus???)

2 Thessalonians 2:15 – word/letter/traditions → Transition towards creeds argument/message!

- Skeptics date the Gospels after 70 because their philosophical naturalism doesn’t allow predictive prophecy

- And if the Gospels were written 70 or after it's still very early by ancient standards.
- Many scholars think that Mark wrote first, but the early church held a tradition lead by Papias that Matthew wrote first.
- What is certain is that Luke did not: Others who drew up accounts – Luke 1:1 → So Luke wrote after Matt. & Mark.
- However, Luke also wrote Acts & Acts 1:1 makes it clear that that Luke's Gospel was first.
- Here's the thing: Luke concludes Acts; with Paul, his main character (along with Peter) still alive under house-arrest in Rome.
- But Luke tends to report when significant people die and or get martyred; e.g. Stephan (Acts 7) and the Apostle James (Acts 12) → An entire litany of voices from the 1st-5th centuries seem convinced that Paul was beheaded in Rome under Nero whose reign ended in 68 --- 2 years prior to 70.
- How unlikely is it that Luke doesn't record the martyrdom of his main character? Internally it looks as if Acts can not only be dated prior to 70 but prior to 68. And what does that do Matthew, Mark, & Luke → Pushes them back into the mid to early 60s. (2 Timothy 4:11-ff. – Only Luke is with me...bring my parchments & scrolls.)

Is that the earliest material we have about Jesus? No – Epistles (Where Jesus is definitely the resurrected Messiah & Lord)

Are the Epistles the earliest material we have about Jesus? No – traditions (Creeds/confessions/hymns/kerygmatic material.)

Characteristics:

- Contextual dislocations or interruptions.
- Repetition. Lists / bullet points.
- Often rhythmical.
- Often lines of equal or similar length, or other structure.
- Use of language not employed elsewhere or differently by the author.

- Elementary theology chiefly regarding the Gospel message. (Death, burial, resurrection, exaltation, return and deity of Jesus Christ)

Even skeptics: Bultman/Luedemann/Ehrman recognize these as such.

Entire List and a few examples: (1 Cor. 15:3-7 – Jesus Seminar – 18 months after Jesus’ death!!!!) Theological Summary: DBRDR – Richard Bauckham – “The Earliest Christology is the highest Christology.”

Conclusion: Even if you and I have questions pertaining to the NT

Canon, Inerrancy of Scripture (Which I confessionally affirm) here is

the sum of the matter. Material this early IS UNPRECEDENTED AND

UNPARALLED IN THE ANCIENT WORLD! (NT – 27 books & letters

copied copious times never existing at one place at the same time to

be corrupted.)

What did the earliest followers of Jesus believe?

What does the earliest information we have about Jesus tell us?

DBRDR. From the first decade or two after Jesus and for our skeptic friends who reject Jesus; this is what they’re up against, because in order to undermine Christianity, in order to undermine the Gospel of Jesus Christ one must find evidence that is earlier and more multiply attested than this. And when our skeptic friends try to do this, quite honestly it’s game over!