

The Canonization of the New Testament

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By the end of the first century AD, all of the twenty-seven documents that now constitute the New Testament were written and had begun to circulate among early Christians. However, it was not until centuries later that these texts were collectively named as part of the authoritative body of Christian scripture. The process by which this occurred is called “canonization.” The term *canon* comes from the Greek word *kanōn*, meaning “measuring rod” or “measuring stick,” and was frequently applied in the ancient church to the collection of texts that informed the beliefs and practices of the Christians who read them.¹ While the terms *scripture* and *canon* are often used interchangeably, there is a subtle yet important distinction between the two: *scripture*, as the term is commonly used by scholars, denotes the inspired and authoritative status of a written document, whereas *canon* typically refers to a defined list of such documents.² This distinction is significant because Christians did not begin to create, much less agree upon, such lists until long after the death of Jesus Christ (ca. AD 30). Thus, for several centuries, the earliest Christians considered many texts to be scriptural but had no commonly accepted canon.

To reconstruct the process by which twenty-seven early Christian documents became the official scripture of the church, modern scholars rely on different sources of evidence.³ These include first of all the actual use of these writings by early Christian authors. By noting the frequency and manner of their citations by ecclesiastical leaders, for example, scholars infer the value that the earliest Christians attached to them. Second, scholars also rely on explicit statements and decisions made by both individual Christian authors and ecclesi-

astical councils relating to the authority of various writings. And finally, the contents and arrangements of ancient manuscript collections also tend to reflect which texts were most important to early Christians.⁴

Broadly speaking, the process of canonization occurred in three overlapping stages:

1. In the first and second centuries, there was no formally closed group of authoritative Christian literature. The four Gospels, several Pauline letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John were widely used and highly regarded by many early Christians. On the other hand, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, James, Jude, and Revelation held less prominence and authority in Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire.
2. In the second through early fourth centuries, additional Christian writings were composed and read alongside the aforementioned documents. Debates regarding the authoritative status of newly composed texts, such as the Shepherd of Hermas, as well as the literature that would eventually constitute the New Testament, continued well into the fourth century. While there still did not exist any formally closed canon during this period, the scope of the church's authoritative writings was beginning to solidify as individual texts began to be consciously grouped into collections. One reason for this growing canon-consciousness was encounters with teachings and texts deemed heretical by early church leaders.
3. In the fourth and fifth centuries, early Christians struggled earnestly to define and distinguish between authoritative and nonauthoritative texts. During this period many lists of canonical books were drafted by church leaders. The first such list to advocate the exclusive use of the twenty-seven books that now compose the New Testament was written in the year AD 367. This list was later ratified by several church councils in subsequent years, effectively closing the New Testament canon for many Christians.

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the contours of this centuries-long canonization process in more detail by discussing four related topics: (1) the authoritative texts and teachings of the earliest Christians; (2) factors leading to the selection and closure of the canon; (3) the criteria by which canonicity was determined; and (4) important canon lists.

The Authoritative Texts and Teachings of the Earliest Christians

The scriptures of Israel and teachings of Jesus

At its inception, Christianity was a largely Jewish movement, meaning that Jesus and the majority of his earliest followers were Jews. The New Testament records that Jesus and the apostles quoted extensively from Old Testament⁵ books like Deuteronomy, the Psalms, Isaiah, and others, thus demonstrating that the early church considered the scriptures of Israel—albeit in their Greek translation—to be one authoritative source for moral instruction as well as determining matters of doctrine and practice.⁶ In contrast to their Jewish

neighbors, however, the followers of Jesus understood the Jewish scriptures to be fulfilled primarily in the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Although no known Christian writings were produced until the decades following Jesus's death, the earliest Christians preserved the teachings and acts of Jesus in memory and passed them on orally.⁷ These teachings were understood to have the highest authority in Christian communities and constituted the basis for Christian discipleship.

Beginning in the middle of the first century, about twenty years after Jesus's death, Christians began to produce their own writings, which gradually increased in variety and number to include Gospels, letters, narratives of apostolic "acts," and other genres of literature. Throughout the second and third centuries, Christians across the Roman Empire treasured such texts—not all of which would be included in the New Testament—even though no church council had formally legitimized or mandated their exclusive use. These documents informed the worship, preaching, and teaching of many Christian communities.

The canonization of the New Testament texts may be profitably understood not so much as a process of collecting these documents individually, but as assembling smaller collections of texts. The four major components of the New Testament include three such "mini-collections": a collection of letters attributed to Paul, a collection of four Gospels, and a collection of what are commonly referred to as "universal" (or "catholic") epistles, so named on account of their general rather than specific intended audience. Only the books of Acts and Revelation stand apart from these three collections. It will be helpful at this point to provide a brief overview of when these four different components of the New Testament began to take shape.⁸

The letters of Paul

Paul's letters are almost certainly the earliest surviving Christian documents—although not all were written at the same time—and were tailored to the particular circumstances of the persons and communities to whom they were individually addressed.⁹ Paul, therefore, did not likely anticipate that his letter to the Thessalonians, for example, would be read by those in Corinth, or his letter to Philemon read by Timothy and Titus.¹⁰ Furthermore, the thirteen letters traditionally attributed to Paul and currently in the New Testament were certainly not the only ones he wrote to Christian communities. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, for example, Paul mentions a letter he had sent previously to the saints at Corinth. Ephesians 3:3 alludes to an earlier, but lost, letter to the Ephesians. Elsewhere Paul similarly mentions a letter he sent to saints at Laodicea (Colossians 4:12). None of these documents, however, survive today.

The earliest evidence that Paul's letters were being compiled and read together as a single collection comes from the beginning of the second century, making Paul's writings not only the first to be composed but the first to be gathered into a collection.¹¹ While the earliest such collection included only ten of Paul's letters (excluding 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), by the end of the second century, collections containing all thirteen letters of Paul were common in Christian communities.¹² The book of Hebrews, however, was viewed with suspicion even

into later centuries on the grounds that many Christians doubted that Paul wrote it, not least because the letter itself does not claim to have been written by the apostle.¹³

The four Gospels

The four Gospels were likely written in the second half of the first century to (1) preserve and testify of the teachings and acts of Jesus, which up to this point were primarily, if not exclusively, transmitted through word of mouth; and (2) adapt and apply these traditions to the particular circumstances in which Christian communities found themselves (hence the distinctive character of each Gospel).¹⁴ Two of the Gospels are attributed to apostles of Jesus (Matthew and John), while the other two (Mark and Luke) are attributed to men who were followers of Jesus and companions of apostles, but not apostles themselves (see Acts 12:25; 2 Timothy 4:11).¹⁵

The current scholarly consensus is that the Gospel of Mark was written first, being composed in the midsixties to early seventies AD, some three to four decades after the death of Jesus, and fifteen to twenty years after the earliest surviving letter of Paul was written. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke followed shortly after, being written in the seventies and eighties respectively, and reflect significant reliance on Mark's Gospel as a source. The Gospel of John was likely composed sometime between AD 80 and 100.

As with the letters of Paul, the four Gospels were originally addressed to individual Christian communities and thus were not at first read as a collection. It is not until the end of the second century that evidence emerges of Christians reading them together and arguing for their exclusive use. The earliest such evidence is a statement from a bishop and theologian named Irenaeus (ca. AD 180), who argues that the Gospels can be neither "more or less in number" than four.¹⁶ Before the second century, the Gospel of John seems to have been the least widely used in some regions, perhaps, as some scholars have argued, because of its differences in substance, style, and outline from other, more popular Gospels.¹⁷

The collection of four Gospels gained wide acceptance by the mid-third century, although the order in which the books were placed differed in some regions. Christian communities in the Western Roman Empire, for example, preferred the order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark, apparently privileging those Gospels written by apostles. Because of the vast distances that separated Christian inhabitants of the Roman Empire, as well as their general cultural diversity, it was not uncommon for Christian communities in different geographic regions—some of which might be thousands of miles apart—to favor some texts above others, or even to highly value texts rejected in, or unknown to, other congregations.¹⁸

The Universal Epistles

The third minicollection included in the New Testament comprises the letters 1 and 2 Peter, 1–3 John, James, and Jude. Because these letters are not addressed to particular communities or individuals, they are commonly referred to by scholars as the "Universal" or "Catholic" Epistles. The term *catholic* derives from the Greek word *katholikos*, which means "universal,"

referring to the general rather than specific intended audience of these epistles. All seven letters were likely written in the latter half of the first century. Early on, however, only 1 John and 1 Peter were widely read by Christians; the other five letters were still used but only regionally. One of the reasons for this was that some early Christians questioned the apostolic authorship of these letters. The Universal Epistles were not likely being read together as a collection until the third century.¹⁹

Acts of the Apostles and Revelation

The Acts of the Apostles and the book of Revelation are the only two documents to stand outside the three minicollections that compose the New Testament and have their own history of acceptance. The book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke are two volumes of the same work and were both written by Luke in the late first century. Whereas the Gospel records the ministry of Jesus, Acts records the first missionary efforts of Jesus's apostles. In contrast to Luke's Gospel, however, the book of Acts did not gain wide popularity until the end of the second century.

The book of Revelation is what is known as an "apocalypse," from the Greek word *apocalypse*, meaning "uncovering," and is a genre of literature that claims to disclose something hidden, often being revealed by heavenly beings in symbolic language and frequently pertaining to the end of the world (see chapter 26 herein). By the end of the first century, Revelation was widely read, although more so in Christian communities in the Western Roman Empire than in the East. Reasons for its slower acceptance as scripture in the East, which didn't occur until the late fourth century, include disputes over the apostolic origins of the book and disagreements regarding whether the events described therein should be understood literally or symbolically.²⁰

Other authoritative texts

While all of the above-mentioned texts would eventually become part of the New Testament canon, they were not the only writings valued by Christians in the early centuries of the church. Numerous other letters, gospels, acts, and apocalypses were read and considered authoritative in Christian communities across the Roman Empire. Many letters, for example, were sent from early church leaders to diverse Christian individuals and communities. These were intended to provide their addressees with instruction regarding Christian living and, like Paul's letters, were tailored to the individual circumstances of those to whom they were written. Some of these documents, however, were also disseminated widely and read beyond their original intended audience. First Clement and the Epistle of Barnabas are two examples of letters that were considered broadly authoritative but that ultimately were not included in the New Testament. First Clement was written in the late first century and is attributed to Clement, the third bishop of Rome. Addressed to the saints in Corinth, the letter attempts to resolve disputes among the clergy and congregation in that community.²¹ The Epistle of Barnabas was likely written sometime between AD 70 and 135 and is attributed to

Paul's missionary companion, Barnabas. It addresses Christianity's relationship with Judaism and argues that Christians are the true inheritors of God's covenant with Israel.²²

In addition to letters, there were numerous gospels composed. Gospels attributed to Peter, Thomas, Judas, Mary, and Philip, for example, were circulated and read in some, although not all, Christian communities (see chapter 19 herein). While these gospels purport to have been written by followers of Jesus, modern scholars and many early Christians generally agree that such was not the case. It was not uncommon in the ancient world for such "pseudonymous" (i.e., falsely named) texts to be written by one person and attributed to another on the grounds that the author understood his work to be inspired by, in honor of, or true to the mind and teachings of the person for whom he named it.²³ Whether and to what degree such authors were trying to intentionally deceive their readers is a matter of debate.²⁴ Additionally, another text popular in the Eastern Roman Empire until the fourth century was the Diatessaron, which harmonized the four Gospels into a single coherent narrative. The Diatessaron was written sometime in the second century and attributed to an author and theologian named Tatian.

Numerous accounts of the missionary endeavors, or "acts," of the apostles were also written in the second century, including the Acts of John, Acts of Peter, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Paul, and Acts of Thomas. These works were composed anonymously, circulated independently of one another, and claim to record the deeds of Jesus's apostles as they spread his message throughout the known world. Many of the stories contain accounts of miracles such as healings, exorcisms, and raising the dead. While these stories were certainly popular in some Christian communities, many ancient Christians also viewed them with suspicion, not least on account of some of their "unorthodox"²⁵ theological content, which is one of the primary reasons they were never included in the canon. Modern scholars generally do not view these texts as historically reliable accounts of what Jesus's apostles actually did.

Texts of the same genre as the book of Revelation were also widely read by Christians in the second century. The Apocalypse of Peter, for example, purports to have been written by the apostle Peter—a claim ultimately rejected by both many ancient Christians and modern scholars—and records a conversation between the resurrected Christ and Peter in which Jesus describes the destruction of the world, final judgment, and destinies of the righteous and wicked. The Shepherd of Hermas, another apocalyptic text, was written in the early second century by a man named Hermas and contains a series of visions and parables delivered by an angel. These texts teach principles relating to ethical life and the Final Judgment. Although viewed as scripture by many early Christians, the Shepherd of Hermas was ultimately excluded from the canon because its author was not an apostle.

Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the Canon

As a large number of Christian texts were being composed in the first and second centuries, Christians became increasingly aware of the need to delimit the number and scope of their authoritative literature. This was a complex process that not only spanned centuries

but varied in pace among the different regions of the Roman Empire. Scholars have argued that a number of social, technological, and theological factors contributed to the selection and closure of New Testament canon.²⁶ The most prominent of these include the following.

Creation of the codex

Before the end of the first century, Christians likely copied their sacred texts on scrolls made of papyrus (2 John 12; compare 2 Timothy 4:13), a paperlike material made from the papyrus plant, which was indigenous to Egypt. The maximum length of a single scroll was about thirty feet, which was roughly enough space to fit the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.²⁷ Parchment, a writing material made from animal skin (typically sheep, goats, and calves), was also sometimes used by Christians, although less frequently given that it was more expensive to produce.²⁸ One technological development that facilitated the eventual gathering of authoritative books together in a single volume was the invention of the codex, or leaf-book, which closely resembles a modern book. When Christians adopted the codex form of book for their scriptural writings, this allowed them to gather many more documents into a single volume. This format would also eventually help standardize the order of the New Testament books.

Marcion

Another likely influence on the formation of the canon was a man named Marcion (see chapter 19 herein). Marcion was a wealthy Christian shipowner living in Rome in the mid-second century. He believed that the God of the Old Testament could not possibly be the same loving and merciful God described by the Gospels. Consequently, he sought to establish a collection of authoritative writings that removed any mention of what he understood to be a cruel and vengeful deity. His efforts led to what some scholars have called the first verifiable—although eventually rejected—canon of the New Testament. Marcion's canon included only the Gospel of Luke and ten letters of Paul, which were all edited to exclude any mention of the Jewish scriptures and the God described therein. Marcion gained a substantial following in the second and third centuries, but he was ultimately excommunicated for his views. In responding to the teachings of Marcion, early church leaders were impelled to become more reflective about the scope of the church's scriptures and the degree to which they might be subject to alteration.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism, derived from the Greek word *gnosis* and meaning “knowledge,” is a broad term used by scholars to designate groups of Christians who claimed to possess special knowledge that would enable them to gain a higher degree of salvation than anyone else.²⁹ While gnostic Christians valued most of the same literature as other Christians, they also produced their own texts that they claimed contained secret teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Some of

these include the Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Mary, and Gospel of Thomas, the last of which claims to record secret sayings delivered by Jesus to the apostle Thomas. Many early Christian authorities criticized gnostic Christians not only for their use of these books but for the way they interpreted more widely accepted writings like the Gospel of John. One bishop's response to such interpretative practices was to establish what he referred to as a "rule of faith," which was founded on the teachings of the more traditional texts, like the four Gospels and writings of Paul, and intended to be a standard by which proper Christian teaching could be determined. Numerous other early authorities would follow suit, condemning the esoteric writings of the gnostics as heretical; in the process they advocated for the exclusive use of many of the texts that would eventually compose the New Testament.

Montanism

Another second-century influence on the closure of the canon was a movement led by a man named Montanus (ca. AD 170). This movement emerged in Asia Minor and spread throughout the Roman Empire. Montanus and his associates, two women named Prisca and Maximilla, believed themselves to be inspired instruments of the Holy Spirit and adhered to what they understood to be the true form of Christianity. They taught that other Christians lacked spiritual gifts and that the Heavenly Jerusalem would soon descend and be located in the small town of Pepuza, the same place where the three resided, spoke in tongues, and uttered prophecies that were recorded for their followers. The larger church strongly opposed the prophetic messages of the Montanists and was faced with the question of how new revelations should be treated in light of existing information revealed in scriptural texts. As a step toward the adoption of a more fixed canon, many Christian authorities at this time emphasized the absolute authority of apostolic writings for determining matters of faith and adjudicating the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit in the church.

Persecution

The persecution of Christians by the Roman government was another factor that likely contributed to the finalization of the canon. Christians in the Roman Empire experienced sporadic persecution from the mid-first century to early fourth century. In AD 303, during what is commonly known as "the Great Persecution," the emperor Diocletian (AD 284–305) issued an order that all Christian scriptures were to be confiscated and burned. Accordingly, when imperial authorities demanded the surrender of these documents, Christian believers (primarily the clergy) were forced to decide which books to hand over and which to try to save. Many faithful individuals hid copies of those most valued texts and handed over writings considered less authoritative in order to placate the Romans and avoid punishment. Persecution, therefore, offered early Christians another occasion to make deliberate judgments regarding which texts they held in highest regard.

Emperor Constantine

Finally, several decades following the Great Persecution, when Christians were free to worship relatively unmolested in the Roman Empire, the emperor Constantine (AD 306–337) ordered fifty deluxe copies of the scriptures to be made in an effort to organize and promote Christian worship in his new capital, Constantinople. These copies were intended to furnish Christian churches in the region and encourage uniformity in belief and practice. The production of these codices suggests that the matter of which books were most valued was close to settled by the fourth century. Although it is a minority opinion, some scholars argue that at least two surviving New Testament manuscripts—Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus—may have been among Constantine’s original fifty copies, or were perhaps influenced by them.³⁰ The survival of Constantine’s codices notwithstanding, scholars posit that if these deluxe copies included the current twenty-seven books of the New Testament, then this likely would have had a profound impact on the eventual finalization and acceptance of the canon as it exists today.³¹

Criteria for Canonicity

During the second through the fourth centuries, as early Christians sought to define and distinguish between authoritative and nonauthoritative texts, there were primarily three criteria by which canonicity was determined: apostolicity, orthodoxy, and widespread use.

Apostolicity

Arguably the most important criterion for church leaders was a text’s apostolicity, meaning its authorship by or close connection with an apostle. The Shepherd of Hermas, for example, was a popular book but was ultimately denied entry to the canon in part because it was not written by an apostle. The Gospels of Mark and Luke, on the other hand, while not written by apostles, were nevertheless validated because of the authors’ close associations with Peter and Paul.³² In accordance with this criterion, texts accepted into the canon were typically composed at an earlier date than those that were excluded, reflecting a preference for books written by eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ’s ministry. The books of Hebrews, Revelation, 2–3 John, James, and Jude were slow to be formally accepted on a large scale owing to some doubts regarding their apostolic origins.

Orthodoxy

Another criterion was a text’s conformity with a tradition of fundamental Christian beliefs. This tradition of orthodoxy, although it developed over time, was understood to have been received from the apostles and passed down from generation to generation. It was also sometimes referred to by early Christian authors as the “rule of faith,” “canon of truth,” and “ecclesiastical canon.”³³ These phrases encompassed widely-held beliefs relating to things like the nature of the Godhead, the reality of the incarnation, suffering, and resurrection of

Jesus, the creation and redemption of humankind, proper scriptural interpretation, and the rituals of the church. The texts known as the Gospel of Peter and Gospel of Thomas, to name two examples, were rejected on the grounds that their portrayal of Christ was incongruent with this inveterate tradition of orthodoxy.

Widespread use

Another criterion for canonicity was a text's widespread and continuous usage, especially by respected Christian authorities and in the large metropolitan centers of the Roman Empire, such as Rome, Ephesus, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople. The broad use of a text implied its value for determining matters of faith and practice on a large scale and thus its relevance to the church beyond specific regional locales. For example, the Eastern Church's high valuation of the book of Hebrews influenced the West to adopt it, while the Western Church's usage of Revelation led to its acceptance in the East. Because the popularity and liturgical use of a book frequently led to its formal acceptance, canonization should be understood not only as a process by which authority is conferred but as a means of recognizing already-authoritative literary works.

Canon Lists

It wasn't until the fourth and fifth centuries that the majority of lists of authoritative books were drafted. During this time, early Christian leaders arguably did not impose anything new on the church, but rather formally ratified what was already widely accepted. Three of the most important lists that attest to the establishment of the New Testament canon as it exists today are the Muratorian Canon, the canon of Eusebius, and Athanasius's thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*.³⁴

Muratorian Canon

The Muratorian Canon is a fragmentary document named after Ludovico Muratori, the man who discovered it in the eighteenth century. Scholars disagree on when it was written, estimating its date of composition to be sometime between the second and fourth centuries. The document contains a list of twenty-four books accepted for reading in the church. These include the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, and 1–2 John. It likewise includes two books that would never become canonical (Wisdom of Solomon and Apocalypse of Peter) and excludes five that would (Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, James, and 3 John). Finally, the document also explicitly rejects several other books: Shepherd of Hermas, two letters falsely attributed to Paul (one to the Laodiceans and another to the Alexandrians), and other unnamed writings of heterodox groups.

Canon of Eusebius

Another canon list comes from an ancient church historian named Eusebius (ca. AD 260–339) and was written in the early fourth century. Eusebius divides his list of books into four categories. The first category enumerates twenty-one books accepted without qualification in the church: the four Gospels, Acts, fourteen letters of Paul, 1 John, and 1 Peter. He adds, however, that the book of Revelation may also be used if desired. The second category lists books that were commonly used but whose authority was still under dispute at the time: James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2–3 John. Eusebius notes that some Christians would place the books of Revelation and Hebrews in this category as well. The third category contains books Eusebius considers illegitimate: Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache (also known as “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles”). The final category lists those books deemed heretical and thus to be completely rejected. These include gospels attributed to Peter, Thomas, and Matthias, to name a few, as well as books claiming to record the acts of Andrew, John, and other apostles.

Athanasius's thirty-ninth Festal Letter

The first canon list to name all twenty-seven books of the New Testament as exclusively authoritative was written by Athanasius, who was the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, and a prominent theologian. His thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* was sent out on Easter of the year AD 367 and recommended a list of canonical books to church members in North Africa. This list was later ratified by the Council of Carthage in AD 397 and subsequent councils as well.³⁵ Athanasius concludes his letter with a statement regarding the value of these books for Christians: “These [books] are fountains of salvation, so that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness.”³⁶

New Testament canons today

The acceptance of Athanasius’s *Festal Letter* by most Christians should not overshadow the fact that there still does not exist a single universally agreed-upon New Testament canon. In fact, given the diversity of Christianity in both ancient and modern times, no canon list ever produced has been binding on all those who claim to be Christian. The modern Syrian Orthodox and Chaldean Syrian churches for example, reject 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, and Revelation. The Greek Orthodox Church likewise rejects the book of Revelation. On the other hand, the Ethiopian Church, in addition to the commonly accepted twenty-seven books of the New Testament, also includes the Shepherd of Hermas, two letters of Clement, and a collection of church law called the *Apostolic Constitutions* in its canon.³⁷

Conclusion

The canonization of the New Testament was a long and complicated process, and numerous factors led to the formation of what is now arguably the most beloved volume of Christian

scripture. By understanding the history of the canon, Latter-day Saints should not only gain a greater appreciation for this remarkable book of scripture but find themselves deeply indebted to those ancient Christians who faithfully recorded, preserved, defended, and transmitted the teachings of Jesus and his earliest followers.



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Further Reading

- Gamble, Harry. "Canon, New Testament." In *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 1:852–61. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Jackson, Kent P., and Frank F. Judd Jr., eds. *How the New Testament Came to Be*. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006.
- McDonald, Lee M. *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.
- McDonald, Lee M., and James A. Sanders, eds. *The Canon Debate*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002.
- Metzger, Bruce M. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Notes

1. The word wasn't applied to Christian writings in the sense of an authoritative collection of texts until the fourth century. Before that point, it referred more to a set of governing Christian beliefs, something akin to the Articles of Faith in the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
2. Some scholars, however, understand the word *canon* in a much more capacious sense, as referring to normative texts, beliefs, and traditions, even before such things become formally ratified through conscious deliberation and ecclesiastical mandates.
3. For a brief introduction to prominent issues relating to the formation of the biblical canon more broadly, see Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, "Introduction," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee McDonald and James Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 3–17. For issues relating specifically to the New Testament, see Harry Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis," in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 267–94.
4. Those manuscripts and collections that survive to the present tend to be those whose contents were circulated most widely. The earliest of such collections date to about the fourth century. See Harry Gamble, "Canon, New Testament," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:853.
5. Some scholars believe, however, that Christianity did not inherit a fixed canon from Judaism, for Judaism had not yet fully set limits on its scripture in the first century. See Gamble, "Canon," 853.
6. See, for example, Jared Ludlow, "Paul's Use of Old Testament Scripture," in *How the New Testament Came to Be*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 227–42.
7. One early Christian author named Papias (ca. AD 60–130) alludes to this process of oral transmission, saying, "But if anyone ever came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders—what Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples had said, and what

Ariston and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, said. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as the word of a living and surviving voice." See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4. It is also possible that a collection of Jesus's sayings and other teachings was composed and circulated at a very early date. Scholars refer to this hypothetical written source for some of the Gospels as "Q," a shorthand for the German word *Quelle*, meaning "source."

8. For the format and content of following summary, I am indebted to Gamble's helpful article in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*: "Canon," 852–61.
9. For a brief introduction to Paul's letters and the reasons they were written, see Eric Huntsman, "The Occasional Nature, Composition, and Structure of Paul's Letters," in Jackson and Judd, *How the New Testament Came to Be*, 190–207.
10. One exception to this is the letter to the Colossians, in which the author explicitly states that it should be read by the saints in Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).
11. Second Peter, which may have been written toward the end of the first century, refers to a collection of Pauline Letters; see 2 Peter 3:15–16.
12. Gamble, "Canon," 853–54.
13. For a brief introduction to issues relating to authorship of Hebrews, see Terrence Szink, "Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews," in Jackson and Judd, *How the New Testament Came to Be*, 243–59.
14. Gamble, "Canon," 854; Thomas A. Wayment, "First-Century Sources on the Life of Jesus," in *How the New Testament Came to Be*, 109–22.
15. Authorship is a complex phenomenon and involves not only the telling a story but conscious choices regarding what to include in one's account as well as how to present that information to the reader. Accordingly, some scholars have highlighted the role of the Gospel authors as editors. For one example, see Gaye Strathearn, "Matthew as an Editor of the Life and Teachings of Jesus," in Jackson and Judd, *How the New Testament Came to Be*, 141–56.
16. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8.
17. Gamble, "Canon," 855.
18. Unlike today, in which the ease of travel and communication across large distances, as well as a centralized ecclesiastical authority, promote uniformity in worship, doctrine, and practice, in the ancient church there existed more regional variety with respect to such things.
19. Evidence for this comes from a fourth-century Christian author and historian, Eusebius, who says that these seven letters were being read publicly in many churches. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.25.
20. Gamble, "Canon," 855.
21. Michael Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 33–43.
22. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 370–75.
23. K. Aland, "The Problem of Anonymity and Pseudonymity in Christian Literature of the First Two Centuries," *Journal of Theological Studies* 12 (1961): 39–49. For the implications of pseudonymity for understanding the formation of the New Testament, see Kent D. Clarke, "The Problem of Pseudonymity in Biblical Literature and Its Implications for Canon Formation," in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 440–68. For one Latter-day Saint perspective on this issue, see also Stephen E. Robinson, "Lying for God: The Uses of the Apocrypha," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 133–54.
24. Thomas A. Wayment, "False Gospels: An Approach to Studying the New Testament Apocrypha," in Jackson and Judd, *How the New Testament Came to Be*, 292–303.
25. At this point the boundaries of orthodoxy were still being established and were thus somewhat more fluid than in later centuries.

26. For a more detailed discussion of these factors, see Everett Ferguson, “Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon: A Survey of Some Recent Studies,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 295–320.
27. Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 108–9. However, this is a debated point. David Brack argues, “Considering the size of Luke and Acts, it would be too unwieldy to glue both papyri into one papyrus roll, and Luke’s preface makes clear that there were two rolls. See *Luke’s Legato Historiography: Remembering the Continuity of Salvation through Rhetorical Transitions* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 26.
28. For more on the early Christian production of texts, see Lincoln H. Blumell, “Scripture as Artifact,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Christian Interpretation of Scripture* (forthcoming).
29. For a more detailed treatment of the relationship of Gnosticism and the canon, see Pheme Perkins, “Gnosticism and the Christian Bible,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 355–71.
30. Kirsopp Lake, “The Sinaitic and Vatican Manuscripts and the Copies sent by Eusebius to Constantinople,” *Harvard Theological Review* 11 (1918): 32–35; and T. C. Skeat, “The Use of Dictation in Ancient Book-Production,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 42 (1956): 195–97.
31. Lee McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 188; and Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 205.
32. According to Eusebius, Papias identifies Mark as Peter’s interpreter. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15–16. See also Acts 12:25 and 2 Timothy 4:11.
33. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 252.
34. For additional lists see “Appendix D: Lists and Catalogues of New Testament Collections,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate*, 591–97.
35. Though there had been general agreement for centuries, the Roman Catholic Church did not formally establish its canon of scripture until the sixteenth century at the Council of Trent.
36. Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.6.
37. Alexander B. Morrison, “Plain and Precious Things: The Writing of the New Testament,” in Jackson and Judd, *How the New Testament Came to Be*, 25.