

How did we get the New Testament?

Agnostics Anonymous, St Helen's Church Centre, Tuesday 25 June 2024.

Many people probably never wonder how we got the New Testament. It's a given in Christianity. There's perhaps a feeling among Christians that it was given us by God, and there's no more to be said, and among non-Christians that it's some kind of forgery, even though probably a very old one. In the UK there's also a vague but persistent tendency to confuse the origin of the Bible with the origin of the King James or Authorized Version, and to think of the whole Bible as a piece of great seventeenth-century English, rather than seeing the King James as a *translation*—actually the culmination of a long tradition of translations—of a book written in Hebrew and Greek many centuries earlier. But my own ideas about the origin of, say, Hindu Scriptures are probably equally vague, so I'm not blaming anyone, just saying that the question of how we got the Bible, and specifically this evening of how we got the New Testament, isn't one that many people ask. But once you do ask it, then it can suddenly become quite a pressing question, because in its wake come questions such as: how far can we trust the New Testament; are the Gospels eye-witness testimony or later fiction; is the order of the books as we have them the order they were written in; do the books all speak with the same voice, or represent different points of view; has the church interpreted the New Testament correctly; how can such an old book still speak to us now?—to mention but a few! So here is a session on how we got the New Testament, considered just in human terms, leaving aside the question of whether we see it as inspired by God.

To begin with, this question is really two questions, which we should try to keep separate. One is how the individual books that make up the New Testament came to be written: who wrote them, when, where, why. It turns out that these sub-questions are very difficult to answer. That will be the first part of this talk. But a second big question is how these books, once written, got collected, turned into a single volume, and recognized by Christians everywhere as an authoritative, even divinely inspired book: to use the technical term, how the New Testament came to be *canonized* as a whole.

These two processes could in theory be the same: someone who felt inspired by God could sit down and write a book with all sorts of different sections and then immediately treat it as a single unified holy book. I suspect the Book of Mormon is a bit like that. But when you start to see how complicated the New Testament is, with many separate books of different kinds, it seems more likely that it went through two basic stages: each individual book being written, as stage 1, and then the books being collected and made into a 'canon' of approved and official writings, as stage 2. As an analogy, think of the works of Shakespeare. Even though those are all by one person (leaving aside theories that it wasn't actually Shakespeare), even so we'd want to distinguish between each play or sonnet being written, and all of them being collected into one volume as a sort of official 'canon' of Shakespeare. How much more so when we're dealing with the four Gospels, all presumably by different people; a collection of letters by St Paul but also apparently by James, Peter, and John; the Acts of the Apostles, a sort of

history of the early Church; and a long prophecy, the book of Revelation, sometimes called the Apocalypse. So let's think about these two different questions.

I

The first concerns the writing of the individual books. I think most Christians assume that the Gospels come first in the New Testament because they're the first books Christians wrote. After all, they're about Jesus, and he's obviously the founder and focus of the Christian movement which the New Testament is concerned with. But here again, there's a distinction to be made: the fact that certain books, in this case the Gospels, describe the earliest *events* we're interested in—the life of Jesus—doesn't necessarily mean those books are the earliest *books*. There are New Testament scholars who think the Gospels genuinely are by, or are at least based on the memories of, four eye-witnesses. In this country the most notable is Richard Bauckham, a great New Testament expert who used to teach in St Andrews. But this is a minority opinion. The general view is that although the Gospels have stories and memories in them that do go back to Jesus and the disciples, probably handed on by word of mouth, as written accounts they all presuppose the preparation for, or the aftermath of, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. Jesus' crucifixion must have been in the 30s. Mark, Matthew, and Luke, probably in that order, would thus have been written, or compiled, forty years or more later; John, the general consensus claims, is even later, conceivably even from the early second century. The earliest physical fragments of the Gospels we've got aren't any older than that. All that said, the dates of the Gospels are very uncertain, and speculative.

But there are some New Testament books we can be fairly confident really are earlier than the rather late dates when the Gospels were written. I mean the letters of St Paul. To work out where and when he wrote them we have to rely on the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and that has to come with a warning that Acts may also have been written long after the events it describes. And some of the letters ascribed to Paul may, so it's thought, really come from later disciples of his, writing in his name. This is particularly true of the 'Pastoral' Letters, 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, which most commentators think reflect the church of the late first or early second century. But even allowing for all that, there are some of Paul's letters, and indeed in many ways the most significant ones, that seem to have come from some time in the 50s AD. Paul didn't know Jesus, but so far as date goes he was a younger contemporary, and in principle he could have known him. But it's clear that the Christian movement had already been under way for at least a few years by the time Paul had the experience on the road to Damascus that turned him from a persecutor of those who followed what was called The Way into their greatest advocate.

Paul's first two letters—and this often surprises people—are the first Letter to the Thessalonians and the Letter to the Galatians, probably in that order. That means that 1 Thessalonians is the oldest surviving piece of Christian writing, and it's worth reading it while trying to blank out everything else in the New Testament—the sayings of Jesus, the miracles, the account of his sufferings and

crucifixion and resurrection, and so on—and just ask what was ‘the gospel’, the ‘good news’, that Paul had preached., mainly to non-Jews, in Thessalonica, and which he then in this letter wanted to remind them of.

Galatians comes next, an angry letter telling the Christians in what’s now Turkey that they have completely misunderstood Paul’s teaching about how Christ releases people from the demands of the Jewish law—not surprisingly, since Christian theologians have been arguing about what exactly he did mean ever since. But, again, read it, whether you know anything about that issue or not, or try to bracket out what you do know, and see what sense you can make of it.

Of Paul’s other letters, 1 Corinthians and Romans are the two most weighty, and come from a bit further on in his ministry. There are also of course letters attributed to St Peter, St John (but which one?), St James, and St Jude, all disciples of Jesus, though again maybe lending their names to letters by others. I say this because whereas Paul was a learned man—in our terms someone with a doctorate in Jewish and biblical studies—and could write in complex Greek (too complex for a lot of students today), Peter ran a fishing business but perhaps wouldn’t so readily, for example, have written what we find in the letter called 1 Peter. This includes an extended survey of passages from all over the Old Testament in its Greek translation that use the word for ‘stone’. Given that his name ‘Peter’ does mean stone or rock in Greek, translating the Aramaic name ‘Kepha’ which also means rock, it all fits together quite well. But is it the kind of book a Galilean fisherman would have written? Most scholars think not, though whether any Galilean fishermen have ever been asked about it I don’t know.

In ending this section about how the New Testament books got written, I want to stress that a lot of what I’ve been saying is very tentative. So far as dates are concerned, my old tutor in Oxford, Austin Farrer, wrote that the dates usually ascribed to all the books of the New Testament ‘are like a line of drunks, propping each other up, with no fixed wall to lean on’. The supposed date of one book becomes the tentative fixed point for working out the date of a book that seems to depend on it, and so on; but where is the genuinely fixed point that stops the whole thing from collapsing? If the account of Paul in Acts should prove unreliable, then dating his letters would become even more speculative than it already is. Even the dates when Jesus lived depend on the stories of his birth in Matthew and Luke, which are quite hard to pin down chronologically. What I’ve been saying represents best guesses, not really solid knowledge.

But one point I would like to make is this. Christians tend to think that the New Testament is the foundation of the Christian faith. It’s our basic document, like the American constitution for the political life of the States, or the Highway Code for guiding how we’re meant to drive, or the charter of a city that establishes how it’s to be run. If we wonder what our faith has to say about some difficult question, we consult the New Testament. This is simply obvious. But what about the very first Christians? St Paul couldn’t look up anything in the Gospels because there weren’t as yet any Gospels. He couldn’t look up 1 Corinthians, at least not until he’d written it. This is also obvious, in itself, but as with so-called self-evident truths in mathematics it may take a while, as I’ve just been doing, to

show that it's self-evident—we need to see the workings. That Paul couldn't consult his as-yet-unwritten letters is indeed obvious; it's like the point that King James couldn't have consulted the King James Bible, or that the Blessed Virgin Mary couldn't have recited the Hail Mary. But we don't think through the implications. I'd sum them up by saying this: Rather than the New Testament's being the foundation of the Christian faith, the Christian faith is the foundation of the New Testament. The faith was there before there were any Christian writings; it was handed down by word of mouth. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what he'd taught them orally, but he doesn't say 'Go and check it in the New Testament', because as yet there wasn't one.

The awareness that the faith existed before the books was still a live idea in the second century AD, with teachings handed down from the apostles felt to have more authority than 'mere books'. It's an idea that doesn't come so easily to us, but it's worth reflecting on. For St Paul the faith preceded the Bible, though the Bible in due course came to *express* the faith.

II

The second question we need to address is the process technically called canonization. We're probably more used to this as referring to declaring someone to be a saint, but it also means recognizing a collection of writings as official or normative. People who study literature are often exercised by the question of whether we can still speak of a 'canon' of great world literature that all educated people should have read, or whether that may be an outmoded or 'colonialist' way of thinking. But that question depends on applying to literature a word, 'canon', that is borrowed from discussions of the Bible. 'Canon' primarily meant a list: when a saint is canonized, they're added to the official list or calendar, and when a book is canonized it's declared to belong in the list of sacred books. Amazingly, all Christians agree about the canon of the New Testament, and have done for nearly two millennia.

When did this unanimity arise? This question about the canonization of the New Testament had until recently been regarded even by biblical scholars, who aren't easily wearied by these technical matters, as rather boring. When I was writing a book about it, I suggested it as a topic for a Continuing Education Day somewhere, and after an awkward pause the organizer said, 'Maybe just for half an hour?' But a few years ago it suddenly became exciting to some people because of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Brown publicized what is undoubtedly a fact, that it wasn't until the fourth century, from around 350 AD, that church authorities and councils started to issue pronouncements on which books should be accepted as part of the canon. The definitive moment was the sending of a circular letter to eastern churches by St Athanasius, archbishop of Alexandria, in 367. This letter for the first time specifies exactly the books now in the New Testament, where earlier writers had left out the odd minor book (3 John, for example) or had included books now not included, such as the Letter of Barnabas, which you won't find in the Bible now but are in great biblical manuscripts such the famous Codex Sinaiticus, which you can see in the British Library. Here is the relevant section of Athanasius' letter:

... it is not tedious to speak of the books of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. After these, the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles called Catholic, of the seven apostles: of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul the Apostle, written in this order: the first, to the Romans; then, two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then, to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two of the Thessalonians; and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon; and besides, the Revelation of John.

These are fountains of salvation, that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them.

St Athanasius, *Festal Letter*, 367 AD

But Brown argued that until then a large number of other books had been regarded as canonical by many, and that the fourth-century concern to define the authoritative list represented a crackdown, eliminating many books such as other Gospels, many of which have come to light in recent times through archaeological finds. Some of these (though he gives the impression this is true of most of them) are more relaxed about sex than the 'official' church ever was, and that's why they were, as he puts it, suppressed.

In fact these other books, which you can get in a number of collections such as a Penguin version, are mostly *more* ascetic even than mainstream Christianity in that period, which was certainly ascetic enough, rather than more lax. Biblical specialists like me are sometimes irritated that when we talk about the books that are in the New Testament, people often seem more interested in those that aren't, though this comes from a natural fascination with the unknown. But many non-canonical Gospels and Letters are quite tedious if you actually read them, and very unlikely to contain any real historical information, though they do give us an impression of types of Christianity that the mainstream passed by. For the most part the books that are in the New Testament have what I've seen described as 'theological class'. The majority of the works that didn't make it really don't: they sound enticing when described by Dan Brown, but that's thanks to his ability to write page-turners.

I think he also misunderstands the purpose of lists such as the one Athanasius circulated. When various church councils, or Athanasius and similar bishops and patriarchs, constructed lists of books, they generally weren't innovating. They weren't making a selection from a huge heap of possible books, which is the impression we get from Brown. Instead they were listing the books that were *already accepted* by all, or virtually all, the churches in their area. Most add notes on books whose status is disputed, and sometimes leave the question hanging over them unresolved. They're checklists of what's widely agreed, rather than

rulings on disputed questions. Most of the books Dan Brown thinks they deliberately excluded were by then just not on the table for discussion anyway.

Athanasius' letter includes all the books now in the New Testament and no others. But if we want to know which books were reckoned to be in the New Testament by the fourth century, the main evidence isn't really so much decisions of bishops or councils. It goes back a good deal earlier than the fourth century, and we can sum it up in three words beginning with 'c': citations, commentaries, and codices.

Citations: that is, which books were 'cited', in other words quoted as scripture, by Christian writers. If I preach a sermon with dozen of quotations from St Paul's letters and none from any other writers, that doesn't prove that I regard them as canonical, but it surely suggests it; and if that pattern's repeated in many other preachers' sermons, and especially if the quotations are introduced by a formula such as 'as it is written' or 'as Scripture says', that's arguably even stronger evidence than the letters being mentioned in a list. A list could reflect theory rather than practice, but citation shows canonicity in action.

Commentaries: Just as Jews did with the Old Testament, so Christians from the late second century AD onwards started to write commentaries on the books now in the New Testament but not on other books. That also shows that the books being commented on were high-status books—more or less what we mean by 'canonical'.

Codices: In the ancient world serious books, as opposed to notebooks or pads for scribbling, were written on scrolls. One of the unsolved mysteries of the origins of the New Testament is that Christians consistently wrote their holiest books, the Gospels and the letters of Paul and the other apostles, in what we would recognize as books, bound down one side, and opening as we open books, rather than having to be unrolled as scrolls are. They did have scrolls, but their own precious writings were in almost all cases known to us in the low-prestige form that's what we call a book. It's known technically as a codex. And that, too, is a really concrete sign of which books were and which weren't canonical, though why Christians consistently used a low-status type of book for their most revered works is deeply puzzling. As yet there doesn't seem to have been any really convincing explanation of this paradox.

There are other criteria too, such as which books were read in services. But these three 'c's are already enough, if you do the detailed research, to give us an idea of which books formed the effective canon of the New Testament. They turn out to be pretty much the books Athanasius lists. The list you get by empirical work is slightly fuzzy at the edges: people weren't completely sure about 2 or 3 John even after Athanasius, and there were still disputes. But the Gospels or Paul's major letters weren't chosen from a pool when they might not have been; they'd always been in the New Testament as long as there'd been one, and in the fourth century this was simply acknowledged as having been settled long ago, not treated as an open question. There's a good book called *Who Chose the Gospels?* (), which gives the only answer the evidence really allows: no one. They

‘emerged’, and by the time anyone asked whether they were canonical, the answer had long been a foregone conclusion.

I’ve tried to convey in this talk that much about the New Testament is unknown, mysterious, much less certain than some textbooks would make you think. This is particularly true of the Gospels, whose authority seems to have established itself without anyone deciding on it. There, and to a good extent with the rest of the books, the answer to the question ‘How did we get the New Testament?’ is that in spite of a lot of bits of evidence and an enormous industry of scholarship, we don’t really know.

John Barton

Books by John Barton with information about the canon of the New Testament:

The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon, London: SPCK 1997; otherwise identical American edition *Holy Writings, Sacred Text*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press 1998.

What is the Bible?, London: SPCK 1991. Second edition with additional chapter 1997. Third edition 2009.

The Bible: The Basics, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009; second edition, 2019.

A History of the Bible: The Book and Its Faiths, London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2019, paperback 2020; otherwise identical American edition: *A History of the Bible: The Story of the World’s Most Influential Book*, Viking, 2019).

See also: Craig E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.