

Apostolic Canonization (Part 2)

Duplication, Circulation, & Collection of the NT Canon

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This series of lessons is affirming that all 27 books of our New Testament were *written, collected, and certified* as authoritative by the apostles before they passed from the earthly scene at AD 70.

What we are affirming here is that the apostles were the only ones who had the inspiration and authority to not only write inspired scripture, but also to infallibly decide which books were authoritative. No later generation after the apostles has been given that inspiration, nor the Paraclete's direct guidance and empowerment, nor the direct commission and authorization of Christ to produce the canon. Later churchmen were not inerrant, nor were they eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ. This means that the only Christians who were ever qualified to set the boundaries of the NT canon were those very apostles who wrote the inspired books in the first place. We call this *Apostolic Canonization*.

There are three steps in the process of creating a canon of scripture (*write, collect, certify*), and all three steps are inseparably linked. The twelve apostles were commissioned by Christ to perform all three steps. We see that canonical work alluded to in John 12-16, where Jesus predicted the coming work of the Paraclete to help them accomplish it. That canonical work would not be left to a later generation. If we allow later generations the right to collect and certify the canon, we have not only stripped the inspired apostles of their Christ-commissioned work, but put it into the hands of uninspired churchmen who are unable and unauthorized to do it. The inspired and empowered apostles were the only ones authorized and enabled to do all three tasks of producing the canon. This is why the Catholic church got off track so far and so fast. They failed to realize that the apostolic authority was not successively passed down to each new head bishop of the Roman church, but instead ceased to be given to any later generations after the apostles, because it had only been given to the apostles for that first generation of the church. And their authority was equally vested in both their spoken and written words.

Evangelical Christians affirm that the first century apostles and prophets were inspired and their writings were canonical. But for some reason we do not all take the next logical step to conclude that **ONLY** those who had inspiration are also the **ONLY** ones who can infallibly decide which books are canonical. We have gullibly fallen for the Romanist idea that uninspired churchmen of later centuries are somehow able and authorized to make those decisions. We fall for this idea also because we do not realize that the apostles accomplished the collection and certification of the canon before they left the earthly scene. The possibility never seems to occur to us that later uninspired men cannot give us the canon. Only those inspired men who had the authority to write the books in the first place would have the authority and Paraclete's help to collect them and put their stamp of authenticity and authority on them.

In this series of lessons, we are looking at all three of the steps in the

process of delivering the canon to the saints: writing, collecting, and certifying. The burden of those like myself who affirm the apostolic canonization view is to demonstrate that all three steps occurred during the lifetime and under the oversight of the twelve apostles (and Peter especially) in the first century before AD 70. This lesson will focus on how all the New Testament books were copied and circulated among the churches and then gathered into complete collections before AD 70.

Second Step: Collection of All Books Before AD 70

Were the NT books widely circulated and collected before AD 70? The book of Acts and especially Paul's epistles tell us most of the story, without having to consider external historical traditions. Notice what Paul says to the church at Colossae:

When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. (Col 4:16, NAS95)

Not only did churches like Colossae and Laodicea share copies of their collected writings, but the apostles themselves carried copies of those apostolic books with them wherever they went. And the scribes of those churches copied those manuscripts while the apostle was with them, so that after he had gone to other places they would have those books to refer to for guidance.

Evidence for the wide circulation of these documents through the apostolic couriers can be found in the colophons and data birds (literary and artistic elements used by authors to inform readers who wrote the book, when and where it was written, and under whose authority it was produced or sent) found on some of the earliest manuscripts (like Codex W). These literary and artistic devices imply a wide circulation of the books wherever the apostles and their couriers traveled. The apostles—and Peter especially—would have maintained a complete certified collection of all these writings at the mother church in Jerusalem.

Paul had a collection of books and parchments that he carried with him on his missionary journeys. He mentions it in his second letter to Timothy:

*When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books [Gk. *biblia*, scrolls], especially the parchments [Gk. *membranas*]. (2 Tim 4:13, NAS95)*

Paul may have left his books and parchments at Troas, so that the church scribes there could make copies of some of his exemplars (master copies).

Lee Woodard, in his work on Codex W (a manuscript containing the four gospels) has suggested that the Washington Codex is a good example of what a First Century collection of canonical gospels might have looked like. The codex has a pile of parchment sheets bound together like a book between two wooden covers. We know from classical Greek and Latin studies that codex collections

like this were appearing on the literary scene no later than the mid-80's.

Trobisch has suggested that the NT documents were collected in three codices, one for the four gospels, one for Paul's fourteen epistles, and a third one for the general epistles and the Apocalypse. As far back as we have codex collections, we find this very kind of arrangement. And Trobisch notes that in all extant complete collections of Paul's writings in codex form, the book of Hebrews was always included. Trobisch has suggested that this triple codex arrangement of the NT books may have followed the pattern set by the original apostolic collections of Peter and Paul and the Jerusalem church.

The codex (bound book) was much easier to handle on trips like the Apostle Paul had to take. Plus, it was easy to unbind the codex and allow multiple scribes to be copying separate leafs simultaneously. This expedited the copy process. Christians evidently did not invent the codex, nor were they the first ones to make good use of it, but they were certainly the most prolific users of that format. This makes Apostle Paul's casual reference to his collection of *books* and *parchments* in **2 Tim. 4:13** much more interesting. The word "books" usually referred to scrolls, but the word "parchments" was sometimes used in reference to codices.

Luke states at the beginning of his gospel that "many have undertaken to compile an account" (Lk. 1:1ff). He says he researched those other accounts "carefully" (Lk. 1:3) and wrote it down in consecutive order so that Theophilus could know the exact truth about all these things. So Luke was not only aware of those other accounts of the gospel, but had carefully researched them in preparation for writing his own gospel and the book of Acts. So he had access to them for a significant period of time. Where did he do that research? Who had copies of those other gospels for him to look at? The Jerusalem church did.

Luke was there in the area close to Jerusalem for two years while Paul was held in Caesarea, before he appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome. This would have given Luke plenty of time to consult with the apostles and other saints there in Jerusalem to do his research. So, it is quite likely that Luke had access to the gospels of Matthew and Mark there in Jerusalem. However, if he made any copies of them to take with him, they would have been lost at sea when he and Paul were shipwrecked on their way to Rome, unless he sent them by land. However, not long after they arrived in Rome, we discover that Mark showed up there, probably bringing copies of Matthew and Mark with him, which Luke could have used to write his own gospel there in Rome. Paul's defense attorney in Rome would have needed something like the books of Luke and Acts to use in preparation for his defense of Paul in Nero's court.

When Peter wrote his second epistle in AD 64, he showed that he was not only aware that Paul had written a number of epistles, but that he had copies of all of them, and had read them, and was here stating his approval of them:

*And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also **our beloved brother Paul**, according to the wisdom given him, **wrote to you**, as also in **all his letters**, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also **the rest of the Scriptures**, to their own destruction. (2 Pet 3:15-16, NAS95)*

There are four things we need to notice in these two verses. Peter refers to Paul in post-mortem eulogistic style (“**our beloved brother**”) as if Paul was already dead. He uses the past tense (“**wrote to you**”) in regard to Paul’s writing activities as if Paul was no longer writing to them. Peter then mentions Paul’s letters as a group (“**all his letters**”) as if he had access to a completed collection of them, which implies that Paul had already been martyred and was no longer writing letters to the churches. And finally, Peter places Paul’s collection of letters on a par with “**the rest of the scriptures**,” which certifies their inspiration and canonical authority. Peter here uses his “keys of the Kingdom” (binding and loosing) authority to pronounce the whole collection of Paul’s letters as canonical.

The point we want to stress about **2 Tim. 4:13** and **2 Pet. 3:15-16** is that both Paul and Peter clearly have access to a collection of NT documents. Tradition states that Peter had read Matthew’s gospel and found it lacking some of the details that he remembered about Christ, so Mark wrote an account which included those details and perspectives of Peter. And John supposedly remembered some other details that the other three gospels did not include (e.g., the ministry of Jesus before John the Baptist was arrested), and included that material in his gospel for the benefit of the church. Peter, Mark and John would have done this writing in Jerusalem, and the church there would have had a collection of all these writings for other Christians to copy from. Luke would have had access to the Jerusalem collection during the two years (AD 58-60) that Paul was imprisoned in nearby Caesarea, before they were taken to Rome. That would have been a perfect opportunity for Luke to compose his account while he had access to the Jerusalem collection of gospel accounts. And it would have been the perfect time for the Jerusalem church to make copies of all of Paul’s epistles as well. So those two years that Paul spent in Caesarea, waiting to be sent to Rome, may have been a very providential time for the writing and collection of all the NT books by the Jerusalem church under the leadership of Apostle Peter.

It is essential to the theory of Apostolic Canonization for the Jerusalem church (and Peter especially) to have in their possession a complete collection of apostolic writings before AD 70. By studying the book of Acts, Paul’s epistles, and Peter’s epistles, it is easy to support that thesis.

If Peter had copies of all 27 books, then we can be sure that the Jerusalem church was aware of them and had access to them as well. It is known that Paul and Luke came to Jerusalem for some of the feasts, and brought Gentile contributions for the poor there, several times during the time when these books were being written (mentioned in the book of Acts and Paul’s epistles).

We do not know how extensive Paul’s collection of writings was, but we can assume that he knew of all the books that Peter had, and that he probably obtained copies of all of them as soon as he visited Jerusalem, and then took them with him on his next missionary journey.

When Luke wrote his gospel account, he states that he had access to at least two other gospel accounts (probably Matthew and Mark, since Luke shows the most similarity to them, and shows no familiarity with John’s gospel). Paul

would have copies of all his epistles with him (possibly in codex form as 2 Tim. 4:13 would allow). He also had Luke's gospel and the other two (Matthew and Mark). So the only books Paul might not have had were those last few catholic epistles that were written after Paul was arrested and sent to Rome the first time. Since Mark was the courier for Peter and traveled extensively throughout Syria, Turkey, Alexandria, Cyprus, Greece and Rome, it is possible that Mark may have brought copies of those catholic epistles with him to Rome. Between the travels of Paul and Mark and their other traveling companions, it would easily explain how copies of all the manuscripts could have been made at all the major churches.

Peter's base of operations was Jerusalem, from where his two epistles were written. The epistle of Jude was evidently written about the same time as Peter's second epistle. The remarkable similarities between Jude and Second Peter suggest that both epistles were written in Jerusalem at about the same time. Matthew's gospel was written in Jerusalem, and maybe Mark's also. John's gospel and three epistles were written in Jerusalem, as was the epistle of James. From 2 Peter 3:15-16 it seems clear that Peter (in Jerusalem) had access to the whole corpus of Paul's fourteen epistles (assuming Hebrews was written by Paul). And, as we noted above, Luke and Acts had been written four years earlier while Paul was imprisoned in nearby Caesarea. That leaves only one book (the book of Revelation, written on Patmos in AD 62-63) written outside of Palestine to which Peter may not have had access at the time he wrote his two epistles. However, noting the reference to "Babylon" in 1 Peter 5:13, some have suggested that Peter may have had access to the book of Revelation even before he wrote his first epistle in late AD 63 or early 64. If that was the case, Peter had access to all twenty-seven New Testament books before he was martyred in the Neronian persecution in late AD 64 or early 65. The book of Jude, written about the same time as Second Peter, even states that the system of faith chronicled in the New Testament had already been "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Thus, the work of the Paraclete as described in John 14:25-26 and 16:12-13 was finished. In order for Jude to make such an absolute statement, he would have needed to have access to a complete collection of New Testament books (in Jerusalem especially), and also to have known that the collection was complete (because all the inspired writers were either dead or were about to be killed in the Neronian persecution) and therefore no more books were to be written.

So it seems that all twenty-seven New Testament books were in circulation and available as a complete collection, in Jerusalem at least, before AD 70.

CONCLUSION:

What I AM, and AM NOT, saying: I am not saying that all the churches throughout the Roman empire had copies of all 27 NT books. Nor am I saying that there were very many churches which had copies of all 27 books (Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, and maybe a few others). That is not necessary to the thesis of Apostolic Canonization. All that is necessary to this theory is that Peter and the other apostles and the Jerusalem church had copies

of all 27 books, and that Peter and the other apostles gave their approval of them before they had passed from the earthly scene by AD 70. That much seems to be indicated by the statements of Peter and Paul that we have looked at here.

This idea has been labeled Apostolic Canonization -- a very conservative (and preterist) approach to the New Testament Canon, which needs and deserves broad consideration from the conservative Christian community.

For a much more detailed explanation of the rationale for a pre-70 dating of all the New Testament books and their circulation before AD 70, I would encourage all of our listeners to order my manuscript, *First Century Events in Chronological Order*. It is available at our website: **www.preterist.org**

For this lesson, I have drawn material from two of my publications.

1. My series of articles on Apostolic Canonization in the *Fulfilled Magazine*
2. My speech at the *Evangelical Theological Society* meeting in Rhode Island (2008)

I will send both of these documents to any of our listeners who want them. Simply email me and request the two PDF's dealing with Apostolic Canonization. This material will be put into book form eventually. So get it now while it is free! My email address is: **preterist1@preterist.org**

We will conclude this series in our next lesson by examining Peter's role in the certification of all these books as inspired and authoritative before he died in the Neronian persecution in AD 64.