

Tom Coop
July 29, 2018
2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

The Newest Testament

It has been nearly 2,000 years since the bits and pieces of what would become the most influential book in history were written, over a period of perhaps fifty to one hundred years, by obscure and, in some instances, perhaps unknown authors.

At first glance, the New Testament tells a fantastic tale. A child is born to a virgin mother. He grows up to be the only sinless, perfect soul ever to grace this earth. He preaches his message of love, mercy, and forgiveness for three short years.

He garners a few supporters, though he is rejected by most of his hearers. Then, condemned to death as a common criminal, dies on a cross suspended between two thieves.

And then, wonder of wonders and miracle of miracles, He rises from the dead and brings universal resurrection to all humankind with the promise of eternal life to all.

His message of love and redemption then is carried by faithful disciples to much of the Roman Empire and ultimately to the whole world.

The New Testament is a collection of writings in which different people set forth their convictions concerning the meaning and significance of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth.

No one of these writings appear until some years after Jesus' physical death. He left no written records concerning himself, and any information about him must be gleaned from what other people have written.

By the end of the first century of the Christian era or thereabouts, several biographies (or Gospels) of Jesus had been written, four of which are now part of the New Testament.

Before any of these biographies were written though, Christian communities or churches were established, and letters instructing the members about the Christian way of life and telling them how to deal with local problems were sent to them.

Some of these letters were written by a man we know as Paul, who, although raised in the strict traditions of the Jewish religion, had miraculously converted to Christianity.

And then spent the remainder of his life as a missionary, founding new churches and nurturing members in their newly acquired faith.

After Paul's death, other leaders of the movement continued to write letters to churches.

In this way, they hoped to strengthen the organization and prepare its followers for any emergencies.

The earliest Christians had, at first, no sacred books other than those of the Old Testament, which they, like their Jewish neighbors, regarded as the Word of God.

As I mentioned, the books of our New Testament were written over a period of not much less than a hundred years, the earliest being perhaps the Epistle of James (c. A.D. 45 ?) and the latest probably II Peter (between A.D. 100 and possibly as late as 150).

And, although the New Testament books we have today were written in the first century, it took time for them to be accepted as universally authoritative.

Initially, only the life and sayings of Christ were considered of equal authority with the Old Testament scriptures.

Moreover, the "Gospel" spoken of was often the Oral Gospel and not exclusively the four Gospels we have in our current Bible.

Written accounts of what Jesus did during the course of his life were not considered necessary by the earliest Christians, who believed that Jesus would return to earth in the very near future and establish the messianic kingdom.

Until that time, the memories of his disciples and friends would be sufficient to preserve his deeds and his teachings.

Not until after many of those who associated with him had died was the need for written records recognized.

Most scholars agree that the first of the three so-called synoptic Gospels to be written is Mark, composed within a few decades of Jesus' death (c. AD 65–70) at a time when some who knew Jesus personally were probably still alive.

The author is likely John Mark, the sometime missionary companion of Paul and Barnabas and a reputed follower of Peter.

Mark's Gospel, apparently written primarily for a Gentile audience, emphasizes Jesus' activities more than his sayings.

It also appears to have been cited less often by early Christians than were the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Matthew, who was perhaps not the Apostle of the same name who had been a tax collector before his call, is believed to have utilized much source material from Mark in writing his Gospel, the longest and most eloquent of the three synoptic Gospels.

Some scholars suggest that the book was written ten to fifteen years later than Mark's Gospel, about AD 80–85.

Luke was, so tradition avers, a Gentile physician who wrote his Gospel in idiomatic Greek, perhaps about the same time as the Gospel of Matthew may have been written (AD 80–85).

Luke also drew from Mark and emphasized Jesus' loving kindness and human understanding, while underlining his role as the Savior of all humankind.

He gives Gentiles a significant place in Christ's ministry, leading some scholars to believe that Luke's Gospel was written for an audience of predominately Greek-speaking Gentile Christians.

John differs significantly from the other Gospels and was probably the last gospel to be written down.

It was written for a different audience, addressed to middle-class, literate, members of a new Christian community.

John emphasizes Jesus' divinity and his resurrection, affirming that he is the Only Begotten Son of the Father.

It generally is agreed that the Acts of the Apostles also was written by Luke.

It describes the adventures and tumultuous lives of the earliest Christian missionaries, most notably Peter and Paul, and provides insights into the struggling branches of the Church established by Paul and others throughout Greece and Asia Minor.

Much of the rest of the New Testament tells the story of the Apostle Paul's struggles to maintain the doctrinal purity of the infant churches he established or was otherwise involved with throughout the various provinces of the Roman Empire, in Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, Rome, and Thessalonica.

Thus, Paul's epistles are not primarily evangelistic but regulatory and doctrinal in nature.

It must be emphasized that Paul's letters were not intended for private use but, in a world where most people were illiterate, were to be read aloud to the congregation.

Interestingly, the letters written by the apostle Paul which constitute nearly one third of the New Testament, were written long before any of the Gospels were in existence.

For example, as you read his letters, you will notice that he does not quote from any of the four gospels.

Paul evidently knew something about the life of Jesus, although he never saw him in the flesh.

Paul's information, so far as we can determine, must have been obtained from the oral traditions that were passed on to him by those who associated with Jesus (and maybe the Holy Spirit!).

The remaining portions of the New Testament, although concerned primarily with specific problems and situations, nevertheless reflect the generally accepted beliefs concerning Jesus that were current among Christians at that time.

So how did the church fathers decide which book was sacred and which was not? There were actually a number of principles used in formalizing the canon.

Apostolic authority (which required that the book have been written by an apostle, by someone associated with an apostle - for instance Mark and Luke, or by a member of the Lord's family) was a crucial principle in determining canonicity.

A corollary was that the book had to be from the apostolic age (written when the apostles were still alive).

And it had to conform to Orthodoxy.

Regular use of a book liturgically was also an important principle-and the book must have been widely accepted for a long time and in many places.

The current Christian canon, in a sense, came into existence as a response to Marcion, a mid-second-century bishop's son and a clever heretic.

Marcion believed that of all the early Christian leaders, only Paul got it right. Marcion claimed there were two different Gods: the harsh, demanding God of the Jews, whom he rejected, and the loving God of Jesus.

Marcion denied any Jewish connections with Jesus and so, in his list of what he considered to be the authentic writings of the Christian faith, included some, but not all, of Paul's letters and a revision of Luke's Gospel, with careful deletion of all mention of the Jews.

The church had to respond to this. In A.D. 144, the church of Rome excommunicated Marcion and then continued the sifting process on what was Scripture and what wasn't.

By the close of the second century this process had advanced sufficiently for there to be general agreement within the Church on the acceptance as authoritative of our four gospels and thirteen epistles of Paul.

By the early third century only a handful of books that we now include in our New Testament were in question.

In western regions of the empire, the book of Hebrews faced opposition, and in the east Revelation was unpopular.

Eusebius, a church historian of the fourth century, records that James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John and Jude were the only books "spoken against" (though recognized by others).

In A.D. 363 the Council of Laodicea requested that only canonical (approved) books of the Old and New Testament be read in the churches. They proceeded to enumerate these books, and listed all the books of our New Testament, except Revelation.

In A.D. 367, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, wrote an Easter letter that contained all twenty-seven books of our present New Testament.

Then the Council at Hippo in A.D. 393 and the Council at Carthage in A.D. 397 “officially acknowledged the canons of both Testaments, including the twenty-seven books, and forbade any others to be read in the churches.”

It is well to remember that, even in the days when the full authority of scripture was generally accepted, not all Christians gave equal authority to all the books.

Thus, during the Reformation in the 16th century, Martin Luther said of the Epistle of James that “it has no character of the gospel in it”, and also refused to count the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of Jude among the books necessary to lay the foundation of faith.

John Calvin, also omitted the Book of Revelation from the number of New Testament books which he furnished with a commentary.

Both their followers, however, recognized all twenty-seven books as authoritative, as we do today.

One more point to make. In antiquity books were copied by hand, one letter at a time.

This allowed a number of opportunities for scribal errors - intentional or unintentional - to enter into the text.

Unfortunately, we do not have any of the originals of any books of the New Testament. Our copies were made much later.

We do know that changes were made as books were transmitted because of the copies that we do have.

Scholars have collected over 5,700 Greek copies of the New Testament and no two are exactly alike.

Most of the changes, as one might expect, are the result of human error, carelessness, or fatigue on the part of the scribe or copyist.

Misspellings and the inadvertent omission or duplication of a word or a line clearly fall into that category.

Most scribes in the early centuries of the Christian era were not trained to do the work, but were simply the literate members of a congregation.

Origen, a third-century Christian Father, complained about the copies of the Gospels to which he had access and said:

“The differences among the manuscripts have become great, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others.

“They either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they make additions or deletions as they please.”

Does that take away from their importance to us today? Of course not. It is still sacred scripture that we need to read and take seriously if we are to truly understand God and God's plan for each of us.

Let me close with some interesting facts about the Bible and particularly the New Testament.

Did you know that:

The shortest book of the Bible is 3 John (only 15 verses). You can read this book in about one minute. The book right before it, 2 John, is the second-shortest book of the Bible.

China is the largest producer of Bibles in the world.

The Bible is the most commonly stolen book in the world, most likely because it is so available in hotel rooms and places of worship

The Bible is the best-selling book in history, with total sales exceeding 5 billion copies.

The last word in the Bible is *Amen*.

The Holy Bible has been translated into 2,018 languages, with countless more partial translations, and audio translations (for unwritten languages).

In comparison, Shakespeare, considered by many to be the master writer of the English language, has only been translated into 50 languages.

The New Testament contains 27 books, 260 chapters, 7959 verses, and 180,552 words.

Dogs are mentioned 14 times in the Bible, and lions 55 times, but domestic cats are not mentioned at all.

The words, "Don't Be Afraid" appear 365 times in the Bible, the same amount of days in the year.

And now you know all that I can possibly cram into 11 pages!

Amen...