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**Canon:**  
“measuring rod” or  
“device”

## Apocryphal Books

(not an exhaustive list)



## I. Introduction to Canon, Text, and Gospels

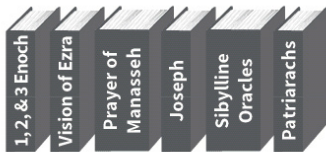
In this lesson we want to cover three different topics. Two form part of the broader historical background to understanding the New Testament that our previous lessons have already begun. The third deals with the writing of the Gospels themselves, as we prepare to move directly to the New Testament documents. The first two topics involve what the scholars call the canon and the textual criticism of the New Testament. The canon, which comes from a Greek word meaning a “measuring rod” or “device,” refers to the collection of books that ultimately were chosen for the label “the New Testament.” How were they chosen? What was left out, what was included, and why?

## II. The New Testament Canon

Now many people will have heard of the difference between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches with respect to the canon of Scripture. They may have even heard of the term “Apocrypha.” This is a term that refers to a dozen or more books from the intertestamental period, which we have already been studying, written in between the Old and New Testaments, which were never considered canonical or authoritative by Jews, as far as we can tell, but which some in the emerging church, particularly in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries—as Roman Catholicism began to develop in the form that it would later become well-known—valued and therefore at times considered canonical. Strictly speaking, this is a debate for a series of studies on the Old Testament; and therefore we need not go into more detail here.

## Pseudepigraphal Books

(not an exhaustive list)



### A. Pseudepigrapha

There are other books that were not considered canonical (by either Jews or Christians) from the intertestamental period, but enrich our understanding of its history, of its religion, and of its literary forms. These are known as the pseudepigrapha, and from time to time they will crop up in studies of the background of the New Testament as well. What we are concerned about in the study of the New Testament is whether or not there was ever any disagreement as to the twenty-seven books, and by what process those twenty-seven books emerged to form what Christians believed was an authoritative collection of inspired documents from God.

### B. Books of the New Testament

The process was a gradual one. The earliest testimony that we have comes from approximately the mid-second century, as lists of New Testament books that were to be considered authoritative began to emerge. By the time of Tertullian, around the end of the second century, roughly 200 A.D., the concept was expressed that since the old covenant, the covenant with Moses at Sinai, led to a written record of that covenant, emerging over centuries as the Hebrew Scriptures, so also it was natural to expect there to be a written form of the new covenant, the covenant which Jeremiah, in the old covenant, or testament (the words are the same in Hebrew and Greek), had already pointed forward to in Jeremiah 31:31 and following, when God prophesied through Jeremiah that the days would be coming when He would make a new covenant with His people in which His laws would be written on their hearts, internalized apparently in a way that did not always characterize the Old Testament age.

There are also hints in the documents that came to form the New Testament that the revelation of God to Jesus and to the apostles and the first Christians would take on written form. In John's gospel in particular, in John 14:26 and 15:26, Jesus promises to go away but to send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the one who will lead His disciples into all truth and bring to mind everything which he had said to them and had taught them. For these reasons, therefore, theologically the concept of a new covenant, issuing in

John 14:26

*But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*

## New Testament Canon:

Matthew • Mark • Luke • John • Acts  
 Romans • 1 & 2 Corinthians • Galatians  
 Ephesians • Philippians • Colossians  
 1 & 2 Thessalonians • 1 & 2 Timothy • Titus  
 Philemon • Hebrews • James • 1 & 2 Peter  
 1, 2 & 3 John • Jude • Revelation

a written collection of books, the New Testament, was a natural outgrowth for early Christian thought.

As one moves into the 300s and 400s and 500s, increasingly ecumenical councils, or gatherings of Christian leaders from around the Roman Empire, convened to discuss more formally a variety of matters of Christian doctrine, often opposing what were believed to be heretical or false teachings that were developing. And among these discussions were discussions about the canon of Scripture. So the process was not one in which overnight God revealed to the fledgling church which twenty-seven books would be canonical. But it is one in which, at least many evangelical scholars believe, from very early on, after the end of the formation of these books the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century, these books were widely recognized as categorically different from other forms of religious writings.

### III. Criteria

More specifically, what were the criteria that led, eventually, to the inclusion of these twenty-seven books, even though discussions did take place as to whether some of them merited inclusion and one or two other documents that were ultimately excluded were at times put forward? The three major criteria are consistency, catholicity, and apostolicity.

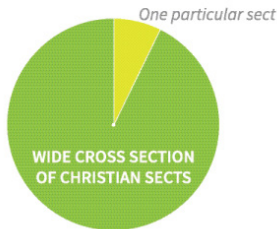
#### A. Consistency

What do these terms mean? Consistency in this context refers to documents that cohered with previous Scripture. Clearly the New Testament was about Jesus, about the movement that He initiated, about the beliefs that His followers in the first generation of Christian history and thought taught to various early Christian individuals and congregations. But what was to distinguish the portraits of Jesus and of the sound doctrine and ethics that the apostles taught from other options, options such as those of a Gnosticizing form of Christianity, to which we alluded in the previous lesson? One of the important criteria was that the new revelations were not to be seen as contradicting anything in previous Scripture, that is, the Old Testament,

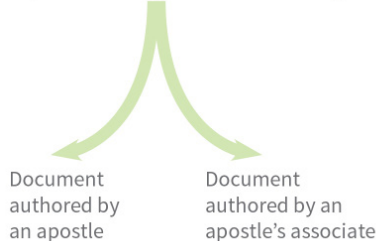
#### 1. Consistency



## 2. Catholicity



## 3. Apostolic Authority



or in earlier agreed upon New Testament documents.

### B. Catholicity

The criterion, secondly, of catholicity refers to universality or somewhat more accurately, the widespread nature of the acceptance of these documents. Documents that emerged just out of one particular sect would not qualify. Rather these books had to have circulated widely throughout the early Roman Empire and been found accurate and helpful and useful by a wide cross section of the first Christians.

### C. Apostolic Authority

Thirdly, the criterion of apostolicity. This means that a plausible claim could be made that each of these books was penned by an apostle or by one who was a close associate of an apostle. Matthew, John, and Peter were among the Twelve. Mark and Luke, tradition alleges, derived their teachings primarily from the apostles Peter and Paul respectively. And although the authorship of Hebrews is disputed—as we noted in our introductory lesson—the candidates that have been put forward have all been close companions of the apostle Paul.

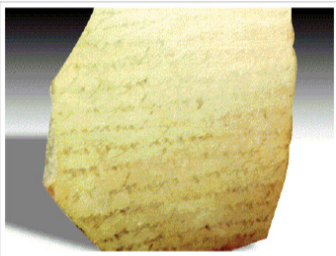
### D. Books Left Out

What types of books were left out? Second-century orthodox writings, collected today in convenient, translated, accessible collections known as the apostolic fathers, were left out, not because there was primarily any false teaching, but because the authors recognized that they were living in an era beyond the era of revelation to the apostles and to their followers. So-called New Testament apocrypha, written no earlier than the third century and spanning several centuries after that, are additional gospels, acts, epistles, or apocalypses trying to fill in the perceived gaps in the New Testament record. But their historical value in most cases is very negligible.

And then we have mentioned the Gnostic writings, other heterodox, or what was believed to be false teachings, emerged from certain sectarian circles. One of the most famous of these, that has engaged much scholarly attention in recent years, is the gospel of Thomas, a document

2 Tim. 3:16-17

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*



containing 114 sayings largely unconnected together by narrative—purportedly revelations from Jesus to the disciples, about a third of which resemble teachings in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, roughly another third without parallel but not unorthodox in doctrine, and roughly a final third clearly Gnostic in origin. Although a few scholars have speculated that perhaps a few sayings in the gospel of Thomas might reflect true teachings of Jesus preserved outside the canon, for the most part there is little that can supplement in an historically accurate way the teachings of the apostles within the canon.

#### IV. Accuracy of the Text

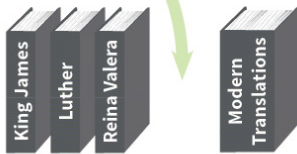
But a second question that proceeds from our discussion of the canon—How do we know that we have what are most likely to be the documents that God genuinely inspired and gave as a new covenant revelation?—is the question of the text of the New Testament. Is it realistic to believe that after two thousand years and thousands upon thousands of copies being made for centuries entirely by hand, that we have an accurate knowledge of what those twenty-seven books originally contained? We must freely confess at the outset that we have no known autograph, that is to say, no copy that we have reason to believe was the actual parchment or papyrus on which any New Testament author put ink to pen.

##### A. Textual Evidence

On the other hand, the textual evidence that we do have for the New Testament is literally outstanding in comparison to the textual evidence of any other ancient document, historical or otherwise, from antiquity from that part of the world. The oldest known copy of any part of the New Testament is a fragment of just a few verses out of John towards the end of his gospel, that dates to approximately 125 to 140 A.D. John, as one of the last New Testament documents written, perhaps only in the 90s, would have written his autograph barely thirty, forty, or fifty years before that. By the end of the New Testament times, we have existing entire gospels or entire epistles, at times perhaps without a handful of verses that had been torn off or there had been holes in the scroll.



Discovery of Complete  
New Testament Documents



## B. Older Translations

By the time we reach the fourth and fifth centuries, we begin to find existing copies of complete or virtually complete New Testaments. Now interestingly, in the history of the translation of the New Testament the six oldest and most reliable copies of an almost complete or complete for the most part were not discovered until recent centuries. During the time of the Protestant Reformation, when the King James version was first created in English, when Luther's Bible was being created slightly earlier than that in Germany, the Reina Valera in Spain, and a variety of other European languages what for those days was a modern European language translation rather than the Latin that the Roman Catholics had preserved for so many years, when all of these translations were coming and many of them were made very meticulously, none of these oldest half dozen or so almost complete New Testaments were known. These discoveries came later, and there are significant textual differences between the older texts and some of the later texts. Today those who follow a modern language translation with footnotes or with marginal notes will regularly have textual variance presented for them, so that the reader today can see where the most interesting and significant of those textual differences occur.

## C. Modern Translations

MODERN  
TRANSLATIONS



In the English-speaking world, undoubtedly the three most widely approved and commonly used Protestant translations of the Scriptures have been the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, and the Revised Standard Version, which has been revised again in recent years and is known as the New Revised Standard Version. The vast majority of all of these textual variants that modern language translations incorporate involved very minor errors of spelling, of accidental omission of words or letters or repetition; and these are very easily corrected and are not even noted in the margins of our translations. Occasionally there are theologically significant differences that may have been made intentionally by early Christian scribes to try to smooth out an apparent difficulty in the text or may have been made accidentally.

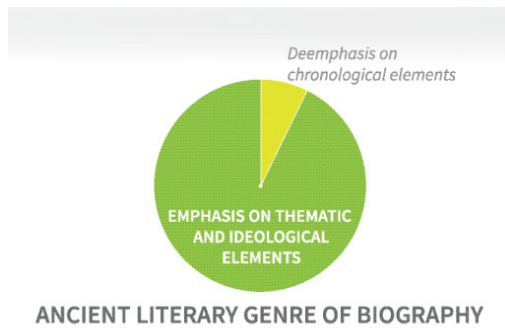


Only in a handful of cases in the New Testament is an entire verse or verse to a verse and a half in question, and in only two instances is a major chunk of text textually disputed. These two instances are found in the so-called longer ending of Mark's gospel, Mark 16:9-20 in the standard English versification, and the story of the woman caught in adultery in John's gospel—John 7:53-8:11. Textual critics are fairly much agreed that it is doubtful that either of these chunks of text were what Mark or John initially wrote in their autographs. In the longer ending of Mark there are even some signs of some potentially theologically troubling passages: disciples promised that they could pick up snakes or drink their venom without being harmed. In the story in John of the woman caught in adultery, many scholars believe that this is an historically authentic incident—it rings true to everything we know about Jesus' career—but it may well first of all been preserved outside of John's gospel and only added at a later date by an early Christian scribe. What is important to say is, notwithstanding these two dramatic disputed passages and the occasional verse or part of a verse (for example, the longer ending of the Lord's Prayer) no doctrine of Christianity hangs on any disputed text and anywhere from ninety-seven percent to upwards of ninety-nine percent of the New Testament is textually secure beyond any reasonable belief.

Historically, Christian doctrines of inspiration or of inerrancy have almost always referred only to the original autographs, not to any supposed perfect system of preservation of those texts. God providentially, however, seems to have seen fit to preserve the text well enough that no one will ever be led astray particularly if they rely on the most modern and most reliable up-to-date modern language translations. We have the very books that God intended to form the New Testament, and we have very accurate abilities to reconstruct the original Greek in which they were written, and therefore know their contents and know the handful of places where there still are uncertainties about those contents.

## V. Formation of the Gospels

We want to turn now to the first part of the New Testament itself, the Gospels, and raise one final introductory question about



*"Possessed of such a character, Ananus thought that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus was dead and Albinus was still on the way. And so he convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned."*

The Josephus reference to James in Antiquities 20:200

the formation of the Gospels: What was involved in writing a biography of Jesus? We have said already that the Gospels resemble the ancient literary genre of biography, but compared to modern biographies they are dramatically different—very little about Jesus' childhood or upbringing, next to nothing prior to his beginning of ministry at age 30, and Mark and John then in turn spending almost half of their gospels on the events that led up to and culminated in the last week of Jesus' life. This is highly disproportionate by modern biographical standards, but perfectly in keeping with the standards of ancient biographical writing where thematic rather than strictly chronological interests often accounted for the arrangement of a work and where the ideologically most significant elements of a famous individual were given the most attention.

### A. External Evidence for the Life of Jesus

There is, however, paradoxically an interesting pair of problems when one assesses the evidence for the life of Jesus. On the one hand, apart from the four canonical Gospels we have extremely little historical information that has been preserved. Josephus, the Jewish historian, preserves the most information and only in a handful of passages, later Jewish literature, the occasional reference in a Greco-Roman historian, enable us to say with confidence that Jesus was a Jew who lived in the first century, who gathered disciples, who was baptized by John, who preached about the kingdom of God, who had a reputation for being a miracle worker, particularly exorcising people, who broke barriers of fellowship particularly over meals, who got Himself in enough trouble with the authorities to be arrested by the Jews to be convicted by the Romans of sedition. Notwithstanding all of that, there were among His followers people who believed He was the Messiah and who believed they saw Him come to life again.

Beyond that there is very little we can prove outside of the New Testament itself. And yet from one point of view that is a remarkable lot to be corroborated elsewhere, simply because ancient history tended to be about the military and political exploits of emperors and their courts, rather than the obscure stories of an apparently defeated religious movement and a crucified founder who held no official institutional religious office. On the other hand, the second part of the paradoxical problem with the evidence





## SYNOPTIC GOSPELS



## GOSPEL of JOHN



The Four-Source Solution to the Synoptic Problem

surrounding Jesus is that we seem to have too much.

### B. Synoptic Gospels and Gospel of John

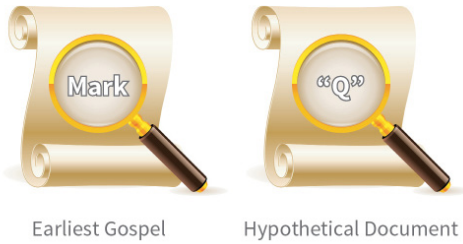
We seem to have an abundance of evidence in the New Testament, or to put it even more pointedly the evidence at times seems to contradict itself. Matthew, Mark and Luke are more like each other than unlike each other, and hence have come to be known as the Synoptic Gospels from the Greek words for a “together look.” One can look at the three together, one can put their material in parallel columns in a synopsis or harmony of the Gospels (this has often been done) and compare and contrast their similarities and differences. On the other hand, the gospel of John is more unlike his three predecessors than like them and this also creates interesting problems for the historian and for the believer as to why the Gospels differ as they do.

Now throughout the greatest part of Christian history and the study of the church, many of these problems were not directly addressed head on. The most common practice from the second century on was precisely to create a harmony of the Gospels—a harmonization in which all of the material of all four Gospels was fitted together into one possible coherent chronology of the life of Christ. The only problem was that God could well have chosen to inspire precisely such a harmony, precisely such a document, and for whatever purposes He did not choose to do so. By creating such a life of Christ, we lose the flavor of the distinctive form of each of the four Gospels in which Christians believe God did inspire them. So it has been largely the product of the last two hundred years when a variety of critical or analytical methods have developed in which the Synoptic Problem—the problem of the relationship of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the Johannine question, the relationship of John to the synoptics—has been explored in more detail.

## VI. Biblical Criticism

We may think of the four very broad periods of historical investigation in the rise of modern biblical criticism that has addressed these issues.

## 1. Source Criticism



Earliest Gospel

Hypothetical Document

## 2. Form Criticism

Analysis of Form	Interpretation
Sitz im Leben	<b>HISTORY</b>
Transmission of Tradition	

## 3. Redaction Criticism

(2 Kinds)

MT	MK	LK	JN
Reading Vertically		Reading Horizontally	

### A. Source Criticism

The oldest of these is the issue of source criticism: how are these documents related literarily? And the view that has become most popular for a variety of reasons is that Mark was the earliest. Matthew and Luke both knew and used Mark in places, but supplemented him with their own information, some of which may have been from a now lost sayings source. Scholars call it “Q” from the German word *quelle* meaning “source”—some of which may have been from their own distinctive sources, including, in Matthew’s case, if indeed he was the apostle by that name, his own memory.

### B. Form Criticism

A second phase is the phase that we know as form criticism, in which the oral period between the life of Jesus and the writing down of the Gospels, no earlier than twenty to thirty years later and maybe somewhat later than that, took place. The stories of Jesus circulated in different forms, parables, miracle stories, proverbs, and so on, and many scholars believe that different histories of these forms can be traced throughout the period in which the teachings and deeds of Jesus circulated by word of mouth. Sometimes form critics are quite skeptical about the historical trustworthiness of the tradition during this period, but other more evangelical scholars have pointed out that first-century Judaism was a culture that had cultivated high arts of memorization and it would have been quite possible for the disciples to preserve this information very accurately.

### C. Redaction Criticism

The third period dominating the last half-century or so in biblical scholarship is that of redaction criticism, from the German word *redaktion*, which simply means “editing.” This focuses on the purposefulness of the four gospel writers, their theological emphases, and their reasons for putting together the traditions in the way they did. It seeks to identify the distinctive themes that each sought to communicate to distinctive audiences.

## 4. Literary Criticism



### D. Literary Criticism

Then finally we come to a period of literary criticism in which the Gospels are read as one would read any other great works, novels, or histories to understand the plot, the dynamic among the characters, periods of climax, tragedy, comedy, and the like. All of these elements will come together as we turn now to a brief introduction to each of the four Gospels separately, but at least they give a little bit of an overview of the types of issues with which scholars are concerned.