

Formation of the New Testament Canon

The church lived for generations without a New Testament, but was never without a Bible. The Christian community began in Judaism and assumed the authority of the Jewish Scriptures from the beginning, as had Jesus. (Boring, 13)

From the beginning, the proclamation about the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the teaching of Jesus, circulated among the Christian churches in oral form. Some of this tradition was written down quite early (c. 35-65), but much of it remained in oral form for a considerable period of time. James Barr has made the interesting observation both from Plato and from the Pharisees that there was a “cultural presupposition” that suggested that the writing down of profound truth was an “unworthy mode of transmission.” His more important conclusion from this observation, based in part on the fact that Jesus neither wrote nor commanded his disciples to write anything down, is that the “idea of a Christian faith governed by Christian written holy scriptures was not an essential part of the foundation plan of Christianity.” (McDonald, 139)

The first Christians were strongly eschatological: For them the “last times” were at hand, and undoubtedly Jesus would return soon – “Maranatha” (= *Marana tha*; 1 Cor 16:22); Come Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20). Such anticipation of the end of the world did not encourage Christians to write for future generations (who would not be around to read books). It is no accident, then, that letters were the first Christian literature of which we know: Since they can be designed to answer immediate, pressing problems, they were consistent with an urgent eschatology. Thus in the 50s of the 1st Century Paul produced the earliest surviving Christian documents: 1 Thess, Gal, Phil, Phlm, I and II Cor, and Rom. (Brown, 5-6)

By the mid-60s death had come to the most famous of the earlier generation (i.e., those who had known Jesus or who had seen the risen Jesus: see 1 Cor 15:3-8), e.g., Peter, Paul, and James, “the brother of the Lord.” The passing of the first generation of Christians contributed to the production of works of a more permanent nature. Letters/epistles remained an important means of Christian communication even if they were written now not by Paul himself but in his name to preserve his spirit and authority. Many scholars assign II Thess, Col, Eph, and the Pastoral Letters (1 and II Tim and Titus) to this category of “deuteroPauline” writings, composed in the period 70-100 (or even later), after Paul’s death. Disciples or admirers of Paul were dealing with the problems of the post-70 era by giving advice they thought faithful to Paul’s mind. The idea of the second coming of Jesus was not lost but had become less emphatic, and so II Thess warns against those who overemphasize its immediacy. Col and Eph theologize about “the church” rather than about local churches (congregations) as in earlier Pauline writings. The structure advocated by the Pastorals, consisting of presbyter/bishops and deacons, is meant to help the church survive for future generations. (Brown, 6-7)

In the view of many scholars, to this post-70 period also belong the epistles attributed by name to Peter, James, and Jude, i.e., letters in the name of the great apostles or members of Jesus’ family addressing the problems of later Christian generations. Once again these letters often have a universal or permanent tone. (Brown, 7)

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According to the common scholarly view, somewhere in the 60s or just after 70 the Gospel of Mark was written, offering an account of Jesus' deeds and words remarkably absent from the letters discussed above. Experiences stemming from the decades that separated Jesus from the evangelist colored this presentation. For instance, the Marcan Jesus' emphasis on the necessity of suffering and the cross may reflect persecution undergone by Christians addressed by Mark. Expansion or explication of the Jesus tradition was demanded because the hearers and readers were no longer the Palestinian Jews of Jesus' lifetime but Gentiles to whom Jewish customs and ideas were strange (see Mark 7:3-4). The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, probably written ten to twenty years after Mark, offer much more of the Jesus tradition, especially by way of sayings (thought to be drawn from a lost collection of sayings known as Q). This wider tradition betrays experiences different from Mark's church background. Still another form of the Jesus tradition found expression in the Fourth Gospel (John), written around 90-100 – a form so different that scholars have labored extensively to reconstruct the peculiar community history behind this composition. (Brown, 7)

Although our canonical Gospels were among the earliest to be written, new gospels continued to be composed through much of the second century. Christian writers of the second century refer to many other gospels besides these four. Modern manuscript discoveries have furnished us with texts of gospels previously known by name only (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas and Gospel of Peter) and have brought to light other gospel-type documents previously unknown (e.g., the Dialogue of the Savior and the Apocryphon of John found among the Nag Hamadi codices in 1945, or the so-called Unknown Gospel [Papyrus Egerton] published in 1935). Still other gospels mentioned by second and third century writers are no longer extant (e.g., the Gospel of the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Egyptians), and it is plausible that a fair number of other gospels which have failed to survive even in name were known and used in the early church. This rich multiplication of gospel literature indicates that in the first half of the second century the Gospels which we know as canonical were not recognizably unique and had not acquired special authority. (Gamble, 25)

The Acts of the Apostles was intended by the author to constitute the second part of a work that commenced with the Gospel of Luke (which began and ended in Jerusalem), this book moved the story of Christianity beyond Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. The spread of Christianity is more important than looking to heaven in expectation of the second coming. Acts signals this spread by beginning in Jerusalem with the Twelve and ending in Rome with Paul, whose last words proclaim that the future of Christianity lies with the Gentile world (28:25-28). Such a work envisions an enduring Christianity that needs to know of its continuity with Jesus, Peter, and Paul, and to be certain that its development has not been haphazard but guided by the Spirit received from Jesus. (Brown, 8)

1 Peter and James have elements of a letter format, but the content is closer to a homily (1 Pet) or a type of oratorical debate known as a diatribe (James). The "Epistle" to the Hebrews has the conclusion of a letter but no address, so the destination "to the Hebrews" prefixed to the work by an early scholar derives from an analysis of its contents. The distance in style and development between this "epistle" and the early Pauline letters is striking. 1 John, which has

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no letter format and never mentions John, is extremely difficult to classify. It may be seen as the application of Fourth Gospel themes to a situation in which the Johannine community is no longer racked by expulsion from the synagogue but by internal disagreement and schism. (Brown, 9)

Chronological Ordering of New Testament books.

1 st Thessalonians	ca. 50-51	From Corinth by Paul
Galatians	ca. 54-55	From Ephesus by Paul
Philippians	ca. 56	From Ephesus by Paul
Philemon	ca. 55	From Ephesus by Paul
1 st Corinthians	ca. 56	From Ephesus by Paul
2 nd Corinthians	ca. 57	From Macedonia, by Paul, 2-5 letters combined
Romans	ca. 57/58	From Corinth
Gospel of Mark	ca. 68-73	Traditionally written in Rome
Gospel of Matthew	ca. 80-90	Probably from Antioch region
Gospel of Luke	ca. 85	Probably from Greece or Syria
Acts of the Apostles	same as Luke	
Gospel of John	ca. 90-110	Traditionally from Ephesus area
(Then 7 undisputed Pauline letters)		
(Then DeuteroPauline letters – written by different author in the name of Paul)		
2 nd Thessalonians	ca. late 1 st Cent.	when apocalyptic fervor was manifest
Colossians	ca. 80	from Ephesus, 60% of scholars believe pseudonymous
Ephesians	ca. 90s	80% of scholars believe pseudonymous
Titus	ca. late 1 st Cent,	80-90% of scholars believe pseudonymous
1 st Timothy	ca. late 1 st Cent,	80-90% of scholars believe pseudonymous
Hebrews	ca. 80s	Greetings from “those from Italy”
1 st Peter	ca. 80s	Likely by disciple of heritage of Peter in Rome
James	ca. 80s-90s	Likely from Jerusalem or Palestine
Jude	ca. 90-100	Likely from Palestine area
Revelation	ca. 92-96	Written at end of Emperor Domitian’s reign
2 nd Peter	ca. 130	Perhaps from Rome

(Brown, various)

[Around the time of the Irenaeus (mid-late second century)] there were no authoritative Christian texts at that time and the only texts reckoned to be binding on the Christian community were the OT scriptures (hence hermeneutical reflection at this time was largely on OT writings and not on the NT), but there was a growing awareness of the value of the Christian writings in the mid second century and following. (McDonald, 140)

It is clear that the sayings of Jesus had a scripture-like status from the very beginning of the church. Clement of Rome (c. 95) acknowledged the authority of the teaching of Jesus for the church. Metzger has noted that as highly respected as Jesus’ words were, there are still only two references to them in 1 Clement, as compared to over 100 references to the OT literature. (McDonald, 143-144)

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Clement, a leader in the Roman church at the end of the first century CE, still reflects the perspective of the New Testament itself. He knows Paul's writings and Hebrews, but reflects no knowledge of the Gospels or Acts, though Mark, and perhaps other Gospels, were in circulation by Clement's time. Yet it is clear that by "Scripture" Clement means the Jewish Scriptures; there is as yet no Christian New Testament. Clement cites Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Hebrews, but never as "Scripture." (Boring, 14)

Second Peter, among the latest New Testament documents to be written (ca. 130 CE), seems to place (some of) Paul's letters on a par with "the other scriptures" (3: 16). This statement makes clear that by this time Paul's writings were considered authoritative in some streams of early Christianity outside the Pauline tradition itself. The author of 2 Peter seems to have a "canonical" interest, since he purges his sources of statements that could rank 1 Enoch as "Scripture" (cf. Jude 11– 14; 2 Pet 2: 14– 17). First Timothy 5: 18 cites the saying of Jesus in Matthew 10: 10// Luke 10: 7 along with Deuteronomy 25: 4, and may include both under the rubric of "Scripture." (Boring, 15)

The unknown author of 2 Clement (ca. 120-140 CE) introduces a quote of Mark 2:17 with the words, "and another Scripture also says." The author writes: "And another Scripture also says, 'I came not to call righteous, but sinners.'" (McDonald, 147)

Polycarp in his Letter to the Philipppians (ca. 140-155 CE), cites portions of both Ps 4:5 and Eph 4:26 and calls them "scriptures." (McDonald, 148)

The author of 2 Peter (ca. 150 but possibly as late as ca. 180) referred to Paul's writings as being twisted by the "ignorant and unstable as they do the other scriptures. This author apparently placed Paul's epistles on an equal footing with the OT scriptures. (McDonald, 149)

There was a growing tendency on the part of the early church to transfer recognition given to the authoritative teaching of Jesus, as found in the Gospels, to the Gospel documents themselves. This is especially seen for the first time in the writings of Justin (ca. 150-160). After the time of Justin, Paul's epistles also seem to appear with a scripture like authority in the churches, most notably in the writings of Irenaeus, Athenagoras, and Theophilus of Antioch. By the year 200, it is almost certain that the collection of Christian writings that had achieved scriptural status in the church at large had as its core the four canonical Gospels and some of the writings of Paul. This was by no means a closed canon of NT writings, however, even though for Irenaeus only the four canonical gospels among the literature of the gospel genre had obtained a widely recognized scriptural status in the church. The growing body of authoritative writings for the church now included the OT scriptures, many of the apocryphal writings, the teachings of Jesus – located primarily in the canonical gospels – and the epistles of Paul. (McDonald, 153)

Justin Martyr, a Christian philosopher from Samaria who taught in Rome about the middle of the second century (martyred 165 CE), cites Scripture often. Each of his seventy-six explicit

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citations or allusions refers to the Old Testament as his written authority. He understands them allegorically as teaching the doctrines of the Christian faith, for the Logos, the Word of God as the preexistent Christ, speaks in them (e.g., 1 Apol. 36– 38). He establishes points of Christian doctrine, and even events in the life of Jesus, on the basis of (his interpretation of) the Old Testament, not from Christian writings. Justin is acquainted with several Christian documents, which he regards as important and authoritative. He indicates that the Gospels (“Memoirs of the Apostles”) were read in Christian worship alongside “the Prophets,” that is, the Jewish Scriptures (1 Apol. 66– 67). Yet he has no list of authoritative Christian writings, and gives no indication that there is anything like a “New Testament” as part of the Christian Bible. (Boring, 15)

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) referred to or cited as scripture many of the writings of the NT, for example, the four canonical Gospels, Acts, fourteen epistles of Paul (he attributed Hebrews to Paul), 1, 2 John, 1 Peter, Jude, and Revelation. He made no mention however, of James, 2 Peter, or 3 John. He also quoted, in support of his ideas, from the Epistle of Barnabas, 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Preaching of Peter, the Sibylline Writings, and the Didache. (McDonald, 199)

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the last quarter of the second century, in his multivolume *Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So Called (Against Heresies)* is no longer content to defend orthodox faith on the basis of the Old Testament alone. He distinguishes the Old and New Testaments, regarding both as Christian Scripture. In defense of the catholic faith he quotes, interprets, and appeals to New Testament documents, explicitly naming them, defending their authenticity, and arguing that they are normative for Christian faith. For Irenaeus, the church already has a canonical core accepted by all catholic Christians— four Gospels and Acts, plus the letters of Paul— but its edges are not firm, and its authority is far from universally acknowledged. Irenaeus has a “New Testament,” but no fixed list. (Boring, 16)

Origen (ca. 185-254) drew from the four canonical gospels, fourteen epistles of Paul (he appears to have included Hebrews even though he did not believe that Paul wrote it), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. (McDonald, 201)

For Tertullian (ca. 160-225), the NT apparently consisted of the four gospels, thirteen epistles of Paul, Acts, 1 John, 1 Peter, Jude, and Revelation. (McDonald, 205)

The Pauline letters were the first to be collected and circulated, apparently as a corpus of seven letters, or letters to seven churches. With the later inclusion of secondary Pauline writings and Hebrews, the Pauline corpus became a fourteen-letter authoritative collection. The use of seven and its multiples is not accidental, but reflects the symbolic meaning of seven as “complete.” As a counterpart and complement to this exclusively Pauline collection of fourteen letters, a collection of seven Catholic Letters was made that included the letters of the three “pillar apostles” James, Peter, and John (see Gal 2: 6, 9), framed by the letters of James and Jude, the brothers of Jesus, all presumably representing the Jerusalem Christianity in tension with Paul. The collection was assumed to be composed by authors who, unlike Paul, had known

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the earthly Jesus. This collection was later prefaced by the book of Acts, in which Peter and Paul are two complementary leaders of early Christianity. Still later, this fourfold Gospel collection, which had a separate history, was combined with the two epistolary collections to form the New Testament canon. (Boring, 16)

H. M. Schenke has suggested that the collection of Paul's letters was the work of a "Pauline school," that is, a group of persons who knew and valued Paul's teaching and who assumed the responsibility for the continuation of Paul's work after the death of the apostle. Schenke attributes to this group not only the gathering and preservation of authentic letters of Paul but also the editorial reworking of some of Paul's correspondence, the composition of "new" Pauline letters (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus), and the publication of the whole corpus. These various efforts were aimed at sustaining, extending, and developing Paul's teaching in his historic mission field after his death. Under this impetus the Pauline literary heritage gradually took shape, but since it was a matter of a living tradition of teaching, it remained pertinent for a time only to Pauline communities. The silence of Acts about letters of Paul is due to the fact that when Acts was composed the collection was still in its early stages and not generally known. (Gamble, 39)

Of course, the existence of a "Pauline school" is an inference, but the continuing production of "Pauline letters," which show a deep indebtedness to Paul along with new developments and application to new circumstances, cannot be easily understood on any other basis. And since Paul had gathered around himself a group of associates who were instrumental in his missionary work, conversant with his thinking, and active in the supervision of his churches, it may be that such a group (or its successors) took up Paul's work after his death and sought all the more to preserve and extend his legacy. The mere presence within the collection of authentic and editorially revised letters shows that its formation was a creative endeavor, not merely a conservative one. (Gamble, 40)

One traditional component of the Pauline collection was not regularly present in its early editions: namely, the pseudonymous letters to Timothy and Titus. The first explicit witness to their presence in the collection is Irenaeus late in the second century. They were not included in the old seven-churches edition of the letters, and they were not present in the earliest extant manuscripts of the Pauline corpus, P⁴⁶, which dates from the early third century. (Gamble, 42)

The collected letters of Paul were available in several editions early in the second century, but their use is not well evidenced until late in the second century. Several writers belonging to the early decades of the second century were, however, acquainted with letters of Paul. Clement of Rome (ca. 96), Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (ca. 110), Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (d. 155), and the author of 2 Peter (ca. 140?) allude to them, but it is impossible to tell how many letters each knew or whether they were acquainted with an extensive collection. Only Polycarp among them offers clear quotations from Paul. Other Christian writers of the first three-quarters of the second century seem even more innocent of a knowledge of Paul or his letters. Among the Christian apologists whose writings constitute the bulk of second-century Christian literature, Paul is never mentioned by name, his letters are not cited, and there is no appropriation of his

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thought. There are some striking exceptions such as Marcion who's entire understanding of Christianity was ostensibly based on Paul, whom he esteemed as the only true apostle of Christ. For him the letters of Paul, together with a version of the Gospel of Luke, were the exclusively authoritative repository of Christian truth. Marcion's teaching won many adherents but also evoked sharp criticism and by the late second century was broadly repudiated as heretical. In addition to Marcion, various gnostic Christian teachers of the second century advanced their interpretation of Christianity with the aid of Paul's letters. This state of affairs has evoked the opinion that, because of the extensive appropriation of his letters by Marcion and the gnostics, Paul fell into disrepute among other Christians, and that before Paul's letters could become useful and authoritative for the church they first of all had to be rescued from the heretics. But the fact that Paul's letters were not much used in second century Christianity can be explained adequately on other grounds. The particularity of his letters was not easily overcome, for it was obvious that Paul had written to individual congregations and did not address Christians everywhere. Further, the general difficulty of understanding Paul, which is observed with some frustration in 2 Peter, coupled with the fact that many of Paul's concerns were not lively issues in second century Christianity, must have posed limitations to Paul's usefulness. Also, indifference to Paul's letters in the period may be more apparent than real. Most of the Christian literature of this era is apologetical, addressed to outsiders, and in this genre the use of specifically Christian authorities was not altogether suitable. Finally, if Paul's letters had been consistently disdained within the broader stream of Christian thought for most of the second century, then it would be very puzzling that they became suddenly well known and widely honored during the last two decades of that century. But the fact that Paul's letters are highly esteemed by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and the author of the Muratorian Fragment, geographically diverse as these witnesses are, implies that Paul's literary legacy had been more or less continuously and broadly valued during the preceding period as well, even if this is not readily apparent in the evidence that has been preserved. (Gamble, 45-46)

In the western regions of Christianity, Revelation was well known and much used by the late second century. Its currency in the east, however, was somewhat more limited. Later, however, Revelation came under dispute both in the west and in the east. The Epistle to the Hebrews appears to have been used (though never named) by Clement of Rome in the last years of the first century, but during the second century it commanded almost no interest in the western church. In the east, by contrast, Hebrews must have been more consistently popular. By the late second century, Clement of Alexandria maintained its scriptural authority and thought that it was written by Paul, and in P⁴⁶, the earliest extant codex of Paul's letters (early third century), Hebrews stand firmly within the Pauline collection. (Gamble, 47)

The Acts of the Apostles, although composed as a companion piece to the Gospel of Luke, did not come into any broad currency until later. Justin Martyr, near the mid-second century, is the first writer to show any knowledge of Acts (*Apol.* 2.50.12), but is later still that any real importance was attached to Acts. (Gamble, 47)

The so-called "catholic epistles" (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude) were little used in the second century. Only 1 Peter and 1 John had much currency. (Gamble, 47)

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In 1740 a fragment [now known as the Muratorian Canon] from an ancient Christian list of accepted books was discovered embedded in a codex from the seventh or eighth century CE. Until recently, most scholars were convinced that the fragment comes from Rome, about 170–200 CE. An alternative view argues the list derives from fourth-century Eastern Christianity. The list begins in mid-sentence, and its abrupt conclusion may mean that the ending is lost as well. Since Luke is the first Gospel mentioned (as “the third book of the Gospel”), the initial sentence fragment apparently referred to Matthew and Mark. The list continues with John, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul (excluding Hebrews), Jude, 1 and 2 John, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Apocalypses of John and Peter (with the comment that not everyone accepts them). There is no reference to James, 1 and 2 Peter, or 3 John. Gnostic, Marcionite, or Montanist writings are categorically rejected. (Boring, 16)

Eusebius (ca. 325 CE) distinguishes four classes of Christian writings for which normative claims had been made:

1. “Recognized” (homologoumena, “confessed” by the catholic church as representing Christian truth): Four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s Epistles (no number named), and one Epistle each bearing the name of Peter and John. Eusebius notes that some also place Revelation in this group.
2. “Disputed” (antilegomena, “spoken against” by some and accepted by some): James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John.
3. “Spurious” (notha, “not genuine”): Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache. Eusebius indicates that some place Revelation and the Gospel of the Hebrews here.
4. “Heretical”: As samples of a larger group he names the Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Matthias, the Acts of Andrew, and the Acts of John.

In Eusebius’s day, at the time of the legalization of Christianity and the Council of Nicaea, the church throughout the empire already had virtually the same collection of authoritative documents, but some books remained disputed. Hebrews was early “recognized” in the East, but continued to be “disputed” in the West; the opposite situation prevailed for Revelation: the Western churches accepted it early, but it continued to be disputed in the East for generations. (Boring, 17)

Codex Claromontanus – A bilingual Greek-Latin manuscript of the sixth century. The list it contains, however, is much earlier than the manuscript itself and was probably formulated in the east in the fourth century. This list specifies, in order, the four Gospels, ten letters of Paul, the seven catholic epistles, *Barnabas*, Revelation, Acts, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the Acts of Paul, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. The omission of Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians from the letters of Paul is certainly accidental, but the inclusion of the other documents is typical of the period. It should be noted, however, that *Barnabas*, *The Shepherd*, *the Acts of Paul*, and *the Apocalypse of Peter* each has a scribal mark before it, which must indicate some hesitation about these items, if not in the original list, then by a later copyist. (Gamble, 54)

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Codex Sinaiticus (ca. 350 CE) This codex, a well-written parchment manuscript of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, represents the Bible of some large church about the middle of the fourth century. It is one of our major witnesses to the text of the New Testament. The New Testament contains the standard twenty-seven books, plus the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, with no indication that the latter two belong to a separate category. Hebrews is located between 2 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy. (Boring, 17)

Cheltenham Canon (ca. 360). Probably originating in North Africa, it introduces the list of Christian scriptures with the statement: "As it is said in the Apocalypse of John, 'I saw twenty-four elders presenting their crowns before the throne' [Rev 4:10], so our fathers approved that these books are canonical and that the men of old have said this." Thus a collection of twenty-four writings is legitimized by an appeal both to an inspired statement of Revelation (allegorically interpreted) and to the authority of traditional usage. The list includes the four Gospels, thirteen letters of Paul, Acts, Revelation, three letters of John, and two of Peter. Hebrews, James, and Jude are omitted, and after the mention of three letters of John and again after the mention of two letters of Peter, there occurs the notation *una sola*, "only one." This suggests a decided preference for only 1 John and 1 Peter, and this is in line with the early tendency to grant full recognition to only these two documents among the catholic epistles. (Gamble, 54)

Athanasius (367 CE) The bishop of Alexandria followed the local tradition of writing, shortly after Epiphany, a Festal Letter to the Egyptian churches and monasteries informing them of the date of Easter for that year, which thus also fixed the dates of other Christian festivals. Such letters were the occasions for other edifying instructions. In Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter (367 CE), he gave his episcopal declaration on the list of canonical documents in the Christian Bible. His list of New Testament books is— for the first time in extant records— exactly the same as our present New Testament. (Boring, 17)

Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 350) gave a list of "Divine Scriptures" similar to that of Athanasius, only he excluded Revelation. (McDonald, 222)

Codex Alexandrinus (ca. 400 CE) This major manuscript of the whole Bible is a codex (bound book) that includes all the books of the present New Testament canon, as well as 1 and 2 Clement. (Boring, 17)

The final resolution of the many variations we have noted began to take place in the late fourth century, primarily through the actions of ecclesiastical councils. One of the earliest pronouncements is associated with the Council of Laodicea, held in 363. It apparently specified as suitable for reading in the church "only the canonical books," of which twenty-six were enumerated. This list agrees with our NT except that it omits Revelation. In the west, two North African synods of the late fourth century promulgated lists of authoritative books. The Council of Hippo (393) and the Council of Carthage (397) both named the twenty-seven books of our NT. (Gamble, 55-56)

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“Canon” comes from the Greek κανών (kanōn), itself a loanword from Hebrew (qaneh). Both words mean “reed,” and were used in the sense of “stick,” “walking stick” (cf. Eng. “cane,” from the same root), and especially “measuring stick,” “yardstick,” “ruler.” The canon is thus the norm by which other things are measured. To claim that the biblical documents are canonical does not mean that all divine revelation is contained within them, but that this collection of documents is the normative collection by which other claims are measured. (Boring, 18)

Criteria the “church fathers” considered in selecting which books would be included in the canon:

1. Inspiration. The church has always regarded the Spirit of God as at work in the process by which its Bible came to be. The later church regarded the canonical books as inspired by the Holy Spirit in a way that noncanonical books were not.
2. Liturgical reception by major churches. Documents were accepted as canonical partly on the basis that leading Christian communities had adopted them as authoritative documents to be read in worship. In the synagogues from which earliest Christianity originated, the reading from specific documents in the worship service affirmed them as Holy Scripture. The earliest churches not only continued this practice, but alongside “the Law and the Prophets” began to read the letters from Paul and other Christian leaders, which were written for this purpose. At first, such letters were not considered on a par with Scripture, but represented the homily or “word of exhortation” that would have been delivered by an apostolic preacher, had he or she been present. After the apostolic period this practice continued, and Christian documents read aloud in worship began to be accepted as on a par with Scripture.
3. Date, purported or real. In general, earlier books were considered to be more authoritative than later ones. A document known to have been written in the third century, for example, could never have been acknowledged as canonical. The Muratorian Canon respected the Shepherd of Hermas as valuable, but not canonical, because “it was written in our own time.”
4. Authorship, purported or real. Presumed apostolic authorship was validated by the theological content of the document, not vice versa. In the late second century Serapion, bishop of Antioch, heard that the Gospel of Peter was being read in the church at Rhossus, in his diocese. Serapion registered no objection, since he had never read the Gospel of Peter. Upon visiting the congregation and learning the contents of the document purportedly written by the apostle Peter, he rejected it on the basis of its theology, without raising the question of authorship per se. His judgment was that since its content did not represent the apostolic faith, it was not by Peter (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 6.12).
5. Theological adequacy. “Authorship” was thus a designation, conscious or not, for the church’s judgment as to whether the document in question represented the apostolic faith, that is, its theological adequacy as an interpretation of the meaning of the Christ event. Attribution or denial of apostolic authorship was not primarily a historical claim, but a theological one.

(Boring, 18-19)

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The data base for reconstructing the text of the New Testament may be summarized as follows:

127 papyri	mostly fragmentary	2nd to 8th century
320 uncials (majuscules = capital letters);	mostly fragmentary some are whole Bibles	4th to 15th century
2,903 cursive (minuscule = small letters);	many fragmentary often whole books or whole Bible	9th– 18th century
2,445 lectionaries (Boring, 23)	sections arranged for liturgical reading	4th– 13th century, mostly late

Some of the more important Greek manuscripts for reconstructing the New Testament text:

- \mathcal{P}^{45} The Chester Beatty papyri are in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, the Austrian National Library, Vienna, and the University of Michigan Library at Ann Arbor. 45 is from the early third century and 46 is even earlier, about 200 CE. 45 contains parts of all the Gospels and Acts, with a mixture of Alexandrian, Caesarean, and Western readings. This is our oldest manuscript representing a collection of Gospels. 46 contains the Pauline letters (including Hebrews, which it places immediately after Romans), but breaks off at 1 Thessalonians, and is thus missing 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, and the Pastorals. This is our oldest manuscript of a Pauline collection.
- \mathcal{P}^{52} The Rylands papyrus is our oldest extant fragment of a New Testament document (see above). It was rediscovered and published in 1935.
- \mathcal{P}^{66} , \mathcal{P}^{75} Bodmer Papyri II, XIV, XV are in the Bodmer Library in Geneva. 66 contains John 1: 1– 21: 9 with lacunae; 75 Luke 3: 18– 18: 18; 22: 4– 24: 53 with lacunae; John 1: 1– 15: 8 with lacunae. 66 is dated about 200, 75 from the early third century.
- \aleph or 01 Codex Sinaiticus This manuscript was rediscovered in 1844 and 1859. It was designated by the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (alef) to signify the importance attached to it (A was already taken). It contains both the LXX and New Testament. The manuscript is on parchment, beautifully printed, and in the judgment of most scholars represents one of the most accurate witnesses to the original text. Copied in the fourth century CE, it is the earliest extant manuscript that contains all the present books of the New Testament; it also includes the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.
- \mathcal{B} or 03 Codex Vaticanus This manuscript derives its name from the Vatican library where it has been housed at least since 1481. It includes the LXX and the New Testament to Hebrews 9: 14, the latter part of the codex having been lost and replaced in a much later hand. The manuscript was copied in Egypt in the fourth century CE and, like Sinaiticus, is judged to represent an earlier version of the text.

(Boring, 25)

Formation of the New Testament Canon

No two of the more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts of (parts of) the New Testament are exactly alike. The same is true of the additional thousands of early translations and patristic citations. No one knows how many textual variations are contained in our extant manuscripts. The standard critical edition of the Greek New Testament (Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th edition, 1998) averages listing about twenty-five variations per page. A very rough calculation would suggest that the footnoted critical apparatus of the 680 pages of Greek text documents about 17,000 variations. This is only a selection of what is considered the more significant variations. Some variations are simple: some manuscripts contain a particular word and others do not; some have the singular and others have the plural of the same word, and the textual scholar must only decide which of the two forms represents the earlier reading. Other variations are more complex, involving combinations of vocabulary, form, grammar, and word order. The phrase in Colossians 2: 2 translated in the NRSV as “God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself,” occurs in fifteen quite different forms in the manuscripts, several of which involve different meanings from that represented in the NRSV. (Boring, 28)

The significance of this vast number and complexity of variations should neither be exaggerated nor minimized. On the one hand, in regard to exegetical and theological significance, most of the variations are minor, indeed trifling. The vast majority consists of differences in spelling, word order, use of pronouns for nouns or vice versa, synonyms for the same word, and other such variations that make no difference in the meaning. On the other hand, many variations are dramatic and crucial for understanding the text.

At the ending of the Gospel of Mark, the manuscripts manifest six different endings, as indicated in the text and footnotes of the NRSV and other modern translations.

At the ending of Paul’s letter to the Romans, there are fifteen variations in the location and wording of the benedictions that conclude Romans. In the middle of the second century, Marcion circulated an expurgated version of Paul’s letters that ended at chapter 14. This had a ripple effect on the developing manuscript tradition, including the possibility that a Christian scribe composed the benediction now found as the conclusion of the present form of the letter in standard English translations.

Some variations are still important, though more subtle, sometimes consisting of a word or two important for understanding the meaning of the original text. In Ephesians 1: 1 the words “in Ephesus,” found in most manuscripts, are missing from several key witnesses. If the original text did not contain them, this would be additional evidence that the letter was originally an encyclical rather than representing itself as addressed to a particular church, a matter that also impinges on the issue of authorship. (Boring, 29-30)

Among the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), there is much shared material and yet many differences, and the best hypothesis seems to be that there is some degree of interdependence, combined with a shared use of documents or collections of Jesus’ sayings which are now lost. Most, though not all, New Testament scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel to be compiled – but out of diverse materials already collected by others – and that Matthew and Luke used both Mark (in some form or other), along with a collection of the sayings of Jesus conventionally known as Q. This implies a task of collection, selection, and

Formation of the New Testament Canon

compilation which would mean that none of the Gospels was complete until some 30 or 40 years at least after Jesus' death – though much of the material in them would, of course, be a great deal earlier, and much might go back to Jesus' first disciples. (Barton, 19)

A whole school of New Testament scholarship – form criticism – takes it for granted that the Gospel sayings and stories were handed on orally. The main occasion for this would have been the Church's worship. Each week, perhaps, a story about Jesus was recounted to Christians who assembled for worship, first by those who had known him and then by those who had known them. The intention would have been to pass on truly what the Lord had said. But little by little stories would have taken on the flavor of the Christian community in which they were told, and would have been accommodated to its needs and problems. For example, stories of Jesus' conflicts with opponents within Judaism gradually acquired a sharper edge as the Church found itself increasingly in dispute with other Jews, and eventually excluded from the Jewish fold altogether. The presentation of 'scribes' and 'Pharisees' in the Synoptic Gospels, and of 'the Jews' in general in John, would then reflect this later conflict rather than the much less stark opposition to the Jewish authorities by Jesus himself. To some extent, however, we may be able to reconstruct the process of this development, and so get back to a more authentic presentation of Jesus and his teaching. (Barton, 20-21)

The Lucan Jesus is in important ways different from the Matthaean one. For example, in Luke, Jesus sits loosely to the law of Moses, but is deeply concerned with the poor and other disadvantaged groups in society; whereas in Matthew, he intensifies the stringency of the law, and is interested much more in problems inside the Church. The best way to explain this might be to think of the two evangelists in question as having a different agenda in their own church setting, different problems to confront and different dangers against which to warn their readers. (Barton, 22)

Paul's epistles are obviously the apostle's comments and instructions, arising from the particular situation of the churches to which he was writing. In the case of Philemon, the situation is extremely particular and special. It would be odd to say that Philemon began life as a piece of Scripture, even though (as it succeeded perfectly well in becoming one. On the other hand, John's Gospel (unlike the Synoptics) seems to make scriptural claims for itself. This can be seen especially in the opening words – 'In the beginning was the Word' – which immediately invite comparison with Genesis 1:1, and suggest that John is a kind of Christian equivalent of Genesis. (Barton, 54)

Even for us, after several centuries of detailed textual study, it is not possible to say with certainty whether 1 and 2 Timothy, which claim to be by Paul, are genuine or not, though there is a broad consensus that they probably aren't. Occasionally, writers in antiquity were able to notice suspicious features: Origen (c. 185–c. 254), for example, argued that Hebrews was not by Paul because the literary style was different from his. But Origen was an exceptional scholar. For the most part, writers in this period were quite unable to know whether or not the authorship claimed for ancient books was true or false. (Barton, 60)

Formation of the New Testament Canon

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ΚΑΤΑ ΜΑΡΚΟΝ

Act 12.12,25;
13.5.13; 15.37
Kol 4.10 2T 4,
11 Phm 24 1P
5.13
2-6: Mt 3.1-6
L 3.1-6 J 1.19-
23 · Ex 23.20 Mt
3.1 Mt 11.10P
L 1.76 J 3.28

1 Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Ἰησοῦ θεοῦ):

□ 2 Καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν ῥ τῷ Ἰσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ ἰ-
δοῦ τ' ἀποπέλασεν τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου,
ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου ῥ.

3 φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ·

εἰσιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου,

εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους ἑαυτοῦ: ἰ, τ 1 \

4 ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κη-
ρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεςιν ἁμαρτιῶν. 5 καὶ
ἐξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ
ἱεροσολυμίται πάντες, καὶ ἐβαπτίζοντο ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ
Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ ἢ ἐξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν.
6 Ἔκει ἦν ὁ Ἰωάννης ἠνδεδυμένος ἑνδύμασι καμήλου □ καὶ
ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφύν αὐτοῦ ἢ καὶ ἑσθίων ἄ-
κριδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον.

7 Καὶ ἐκήρυσσεν λέγων· * ἔρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερός
μου ὀπίσω Ὁμοῦ, οὗ οὐκ εἰμι ἰκανὸς ὀκῦψας λύσαι τὸν
ἱμᾶνα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ. 8 ἐγὼ ἐβάπτισα ὑμᾶς τ
ῦδατι, αὐτὸς δὲ βαπτίσει ὑμᾶς Ὁ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

7s: Mt 3.11
L 3.16 J 1.26s
Act 13.25

J 16.71

Inscriptio: εὐαγγελιον κ. Μ. Α. Δ. Λ. W Θ f¹³ l. 33. 2427 BR lat | το κ. Μ. αγ. ευαγγ. 209.
579 al (vgcl) | lat (N B) pc

¶ 1,1-3 ῥ t - N* Θ 28. / 2211 pc sam^s; Or | - (et om. I. Xp.). Ir Eriph | υιοῦ του κυριου
1241 | lat N¹ B D L W 2427 pc (sed του θ. A f¹³ 33 BR) lat sy co; Ir^{al} | [Lachmann c] |
2-4 D Θ f¹ 700. / 844. / 2211 pc; Ir Or^m Eriph | τοις προφηταις A W f¹³ BR vgm^s sy^h
(bo^{mss}); Ir^{al} | lat N B L Δ 33. 565. 892. 1241. 2427 al sy^{hmg} co; Or^m | Τεγων Ν Α Λ W f¹³
33 BR vgl^l sy^h sam^s bo^m; Or Eus | lat B D Θ 28*. 565. 2427. / 2211 pc lat co; Ir^{al} | T (Mt
11,10) εμπροσθεν σου A f¹³ 33 BR f¹ f² | vgl^l sy^h sam^s bo^m; Eus | lat N B D K L P W Θ
700*. 2427. / 2211 al lat sy^h sam^s bo^m; Ir^{al} | ῥ του θεου ημων (D) it | T (L 3,5s) add Is
40,4-8 W (c) • 4 ῥ t / -5 B 33. (892). 2427 pc bo^{mss} | 2-6 A W f¹³ BR sy^h sa? | 3-5 2 6 D Θ
28. 700. / 2211 lat sy^h | lat N L Δ pc bo • 5 ῥ 3 5 / 2 D² W Θ 28. 565. 700. / (2211) a | 3-6
/ 2 A f¹³ BR sy^h | lat N B L 33. 892. 1241. 2427. / 844 pc f l vg co? • 6 ῥ ην δε ο (- A D W
Δ pm) Ιωαννης A D W Θ f¹³ (ῥ 28) BR it sy^h sa bo^m | lat N B L (33. / 2211). 565*. 892. 2427
pc lat bo^{mss} | ῥ δεppiv D a et^o D it • 7 ὁ B (Δ 1424. 2542); Or^m | οἱ p) D Θ f¹³ 28*. 565.
/ 844. / 2211 pc it • 8 ῥ ev A (D) L W (Θ) f¹³ BR it | lat N B Δ 33. 892*. 2427. / 2211 pc vg;
Or | ὁ t B L 2427 b l vg | lat N A D W Θ f¹³ 33 BR it vgm^s; Or

Critical Signs

The following signs in the critical apparatus refer to corresponding signs in the text of a given verse, or more rarely, sequence of verses (cf. Lk 22.17-20). They show the exact location and nature of the variant recorded in the apparatus, and are not repeated within a single verse or within a verse sequence constituting an apparatus unit. Apparent exceptions are easily explained by their contexts.

- The word following in the text is omitted by the witnesses cited.
- ◻ The words, clauses or sentences following in the text are omitted by the witnesses cited. The sign \ marks the end of the omitted text.
- ∟ The word following in the text is replaced with one or more words by the witnesses cited.
- ∟ The words following in the text are replaced with other words by the witnesses cited. The sign ∟ marks the end of the replaced text. Frequently this involves the transposition of words. To the extent the words are identical with those in the text, they are indicated by italic numerals corresponding to their position in the printed text (cf. Mt 27.51).

∟ This sign marks the location where one or more words, sometimes a whole verse, is inserted by the witnesses cited.

∟ The words following in the text are transposed by the witnesses cited. The sign ∟ in the text marks the end of the portion of text transposed. The sequence of the transposed words is indicated when necessary by italic numerals corresponding to the position of the words in the printed text (cf. Mt 16,13).

∟ A raised colon indicates a variant form of punctuation.

∟ The word or verse of text is transposed as indicated in the apparatus (cf. Lk 6,5; Jn 13,8).

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
Formation of the New Testament Canon
MARK

CHAPTER 1

ΚΑΤΑ ΜΑΡΚΟΝ
ACCORDING TO MARK

1.1 Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ [υἱοῦ θεοῦ].
[THE] BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST THE N
OF GOD

1.2 Καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ἰσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ,
JUST AS IT HAS BEEN WRITTEN IN ISAIAH THE PROPHET,
Ἴδου ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου
BEHOLD I SEND THE MESSENGER OF ME BEFORE [THE] FACE
σου,
OF YOU,

ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου.
WHO WILL PREPARE THE WAY OF YOU;

1.3 φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ,
A VOICE CRYING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS

Ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου,
PREPARE THE WAY OF [THE] LORD,
εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ,
MAKE-STRAIGHT THE PATHS OF HIM,

1.4 ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ
JOHN CAME - BAPTIZING IN THE WILDERNESS AN

κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετάνοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν
PREACHING A BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR [THE] FORGIVENESS

ἁμαρτιῶν. **1.5** καὶ ἔξεπορεύετο πρὸς αὐτὸν πᾶσα ἡ
OF SINS. AND ⁵WERE GOING OUT ⁵TO ¹⁰HIM ¹[THE] ENTIRE -

Ἰουδαία χώρα καὶ οἱ Ἱεροσολυμίται πάντες, καὶ
J DEAN ³COUNTRY ⁴AND ⁶THE JERUSA EMITES ⁵ALL, AND

ἐβαπτίζοντο ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ Ἰορδάνῃ ποταμῷ
THEY WERE BE NG BAPTIZED BY HIM IN THE JORDAN RIVER,

ἔξομολογούμενοι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν. **1.6** καὶ ἦν ὁ
CONFESSING THE SNS OF THEM. AND HA EN

Ἰωάννης ἐνδεδυμένος τρίχας καμήλου καὶ
JOHN CLOTHED [IN] CAMEL HARS AND

ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐσθίων
A LEATHER BELT AROUND THE WAIST OF HIM AND EATING

ἀκρίδας καὶ μέλι ἄγριον. **1.7** καὶ ἐκήρυσσεν λέγων,
LOCUSTS AND WILD-HONEY. AND HE WAS PREACHING SAYING,

Ἐρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου ὀπίσω μου, οὗ
IS COMING ⁴THE ONE ⁵STRONGER HAN ME, ¹AFTER ME, OF WHOM

The beginning of the good news^a of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^b

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^c

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^d who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared^e in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;

^a Or *gospel*

^b Other ancient authorities lack the *Son of God*

^c Other ancient authorities read *in the prophets*

^d Gk. *before your face*

^e Other ancient authorities read *John was baptizing*

1:1 text all. ο: 1: ASVmg RSVmg NASBmg NIV g NEBmg TEVmg N Bmg NRSVmg 1:2a text all. var εν τοις προφηταις (n the prophets) ASVmg RSVmg NR Vmg 1:2b Mat 3 1 1:3 Isa. 40:3 LXX

Formation of the New Testament Canon

Mark 1:1-15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

1 The beginning of the good news^[a] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[b]

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^[c]

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]

who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,’”

4 John the baptizer appeared^[e] in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. **6** Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. **8** I have baptized you with^[f] water; but he will baptize you with^[g] the Holy Spirit.”

The Baptism of Jesus

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. **11** And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved;^[h] with you I am well pleased.”

The Temptation of Jesus

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. **13** He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news^[i] of God,^[j] **15** and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;^[k] repent, and believe in the good news.”^[l]

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 1:1](#) Or *gospel*
- b. [Mark 1:1](#) Other ancient authorities lack *the Son of God*
- c. [Mark 1:2](#) Other ancient authorities read *in the prophets*
- d. [Mark 1:2](#) Gk *before your face*
- e. [Mark 1:4](#) Other ancient authorities read *John was baptizing*
- f. [Mark 1:8](#) Or *in*
- g. [Mark 1:8](#) Or *in*
- h. [Mark 1:11](#) Or *my beloved Son*
- i. [Mark 1:14](#) Or *gospel*
- j. [Mark 1:14](#) Other ancient authorities read *of the kingdom*
- k. [Mark 1:15](#) Or *is at hand*
- l. [Mark 1:15](#) Or *gospel*