

OPENS WITH MARCION (144) · CLOSSES WITH ATHANASIUS (367) · 223 YEARS

How We Got the New Testament Canon Timeline

The canon was not handed down by a council in a smoke-filled room — and it was not a free-for-all either. The documents earned their place over three centuries; this is the paper trail.

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ERAS

16

EVENTS

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SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

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HOW TO READ THIS TIMELINE

 Hinge Moment

 Canon Event

 Document / List

 Challenge / Rival

The Writings

C. AD 48 – 100 · THE DOCUMENTS EXIST BEFORE ANY LIST DOES

C. 48–67 **CANON EVENT** *Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27*

Paul's Letters — Occasional Documents, Read Aloud, Passed Around

Thirteen letters written to real churches with real problems — and the circulation instructions are inside the letters themselves.

- COL 4:16** “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.” — exchange and public reading built in from the start.
- 1 THESS 5:27** “I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.” — possibly the earliest NT document, already claiming a public hearing.

C. 60S–90S **CANON EVENT** *Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31*

The Gospels Written — Four Accounts, One Story

Mark, Matthew, Luke, John — composed within living memory of the events, while eyewitnesses could still be consulted and could still object.

- LUKE 1:1-4** “Many have undertaken to draw up an account... handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses” — Luke names his method: sources, witnesses, investigation, order.
Within a generation, Papias is recording how Mark preserved Peter’s preaching “accurately... omitting none of the things he had heard and making no false statements.” The memory of how the books were made is itself early.

C. 64–96 **HINGE MOMENT** *2 Pet 3:15-16; 1 Tim 5:18*

Scripture Calling Scripture — The Earliest Internal Evidence

Before any external list, NT documents are already treating other NT documents as Scripture.

- 2 PET 3:15-16** “Our dear brother Paul also wrote you... His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures.” — Paul’s letters classed with “the other Scriptures” inside the NT itself.
- 1 TIM 5:18** “For Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle an ox...’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’” — the second quotation matches Luke 10:7 ; a Gospel saying cited under the formula “Scripture says.”

Collected & Used

C. AD 95 – 140 · AUTHORITY IN PRACTICE BEFORE AUTHORITY ON PAPER

C. 95–117 DOCUMENT / LIST 1 CLEM; IGN. EPP; POLYC. PHIL.

The Apostolic Fathers Quote the Apostles — 1 Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp

The generation after the apostles doesn't argue for the writings' authority — it simply uses them, which is stronger evidence than argument.

1 Clement (c. 95–96) weaves Paul and Gospel material into its appeal to Corinth. Polycarp's letter to the Philippians — the one Irenaeus calls "very powerful" — is dense with NT citation.

The exact citation counts and which books each father attests are worth pulling precisely before publication — this is the evidence layer that beats every "fourth-century invention" claim, so it must be airtight.

C. 95–130 DOCUMENT / LIST PAPIAS via EUSEBIUS, H.E. 3.39

Papias Collects the Memory — How the Gospels Were Made

The bishop of Hierapolis records what the elders said about the books' origins — the earliest external testimony to Gospel authorship.

Mark as Peter's interpreter, writing accurately though not in order; Matthew collecting "the oracles (ta logia) in the Hebrew language." What ta logia means is genuinely contested — a sayings source is a serious reading. UNRESOLVED stays UNRESOLVED.

Marcion's Knife

AD 144 – C. 170 · THE FIRST FIXED LIST IS A HOSTILE ONE

AD 144 HINGE MOMENT *EVANGELION + 10 PAULINES*

Marcion Publishes the First Canon — Eleven Books, One God Removed

Excommunicated 144, Marcion does what no one had done: fixes a closed list. A shortened Luke plus ten Pauline letters (no Pastorals) — the entire OT rejected, the creator-God demoted, the Twelve dismissed as Judaizers.

The canon question opens here. The church had functioning authority in its documents; Marcion forced it to say so out loud. Key irony: he likely accelerated the very canon he attacked. His movement survived to the 5th century; his list didn't survive the 2nd as a serious rival.

C. 140–180 CHALLENGE / RIVAL *NAG HAMMADI CORPUS (LATER FINDS)*

The Rival Scriptures — Gnostic Gospels and Secret Books

The Valentinian and related movements produce their own scriptures claiming secret apostolic pedigree. The dating question is the whole ballgame — and it's the Bauer-thesis battleground.

The Bauer thesis ("orthodoxy suppressed an earlier diverse Christianity") and its rebuttals, plus the dating of Gnosticism relative to orthodox Christianity, are in the staged Bauer block. Do not write this entry's verdict until that pull lands. The scaffolding claim (Gnosticism as later reinterpretation of Christian material, per Needham) is verified; the full argument needs the sources.

C. 150–170 CANON EVENT *JUSTIN, 1 APOL. 66-67; TATIAN, DIATHESSARON c. 175*

Justin's "Memoirs of the Apostles"; Tatian Weaves Four into One (c. 175)

Justin describes the Gospels read in Sunday worship alongside the prophets; his student Tatian harmonizes four Gospels into one continuous narrative — which presupposes there were exactly four worth harmonizing.

Justin: Sunday assemblies read "the memoirs of the apostles or the prophetic writings" for as long as time permits — and the memoirs "are called Gospels." The earliest reference to Gospel reading in Christian worship (mid-2nd c.), and the arrangement itself — Gospels read alongside the prophets — marks their functional equivalence with OT Scripture. Canonization beginning in practice before any list.

Tatian's Diatessaron, c. 175: a harmony of the four. Its existence proves all four Gospels were widely known and authoritative — and it simultaneously reveals discomfort with their multiplicity, the felt expectation that "the gospel" should be singular. The Syriac version became the dominant Gospel text of the eastern frontier for generations. Honest both directions: the four were settled; their fourness still itched.

IV

ERA FOUR · THE ANSWER TAKES SHAPE

The Fourfold Gospel & the First Orthodox List

C. AD 170 – 200

C. 180 CANON EVENT *ADV. HAER. 3.11.8*

Irenaeus and the Four — An Established Fact, Rationalized After

Four winds, four corners, four pillars — Irenaeus’s cosmic symbolism for why there are exactly four Gospels, aimed against Marcion’s single mutilated Luke. Write it honestly: post hoc rationalization for a number the churches already used.

By c. 180 he likely works from codices already binding all four together. He reflects the fact; he doesn’t create the limit. The strip-the-lens method applied to a church father — the method cuts both ways, and saying so is what makes the rest of the argument credible.

C. 170–200 DOCUMENT / LIST *MURATORIAN FRAGMENT*

The Muratorian Fragment — The Earliest Orthodox List (Dated Honestly)

A damaged Latin canon list: four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s letters, more — with notes on what’s read publicly and what isn’t. The dating rule from the capture is binding: c. 170–200, with the scholarly minority (Sundberg, Hahneman) arguing 4th century. Never a flat “c. 180.”

On the majority dating, the church is listing its books within a generation of Marcion. On the minority dating, the earliest orthodox list moves two centuries later and the argument reshapes. The honest move is to show the reader the stakes of the dispute, not to pick silently.

Sifting — Accepted, Disputed, Rejected

C. AD 200 – 325

C. 200–254 **CANON EVENT** *ORIGEN via EUSEBIUS*

Origen's Working Canon — The Scholar's Inventory

The era's greatest scholar uses and discusses the books across his enormous output — and his usage, reported by Eusebius, becomes a snapshot of what's settled and what's still argued (Hebrews, some Catholic epistles).

Origen's category language and his famous line on Hebrews ("who wrote the epistle, God knows") need pulling from sources — outside the capture's verified set. Staged in the Tertullian/Origen block alongside his method.

C. 325 **DOCUMENT / LIST** *EUSEBIUS, H.E. 3.25*

Eusebius Sorts the Library — Acknowledged, Disputed, Rejected

The church's first historian files every candidate document into categories — homologoumena (acknowledged), antilegomena (disputed), and the rejected. The honesty of the system is the point: the early church kept public books on its own uncertainties.

Recognized (universally accepted): the four Gospels, Acts, fourteen letters of Paul (Hebrews included), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation — twenty-two books without question. Disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John. Rejected as spurious: Acts of Paul and Thecla, Shepherd of Hermas, Acts of Peter, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Gospel according to the Hebrews.

Revelation's famous double-listing (Eusebius also allowing it among the spurious "if it seem proper") was not confirmed in this pull — verify against H.E. 3.25 directly before citing it. The takeaway stands regardless: no conspiracy keeps public books on its own uncertainties.

303 **CHALLENGE / RIVAL** *DIOCLETIAN, FIRST EDICT 303*

The Persecution Proves the Canon — What the Traditores Handed Over

Diocletian's edict demanded the scriptures be surrendered — which means by 303 everyone, including the empire, knew which books the Christians would die rather than hand over. A canon definite enough to persecute is a canon in fact, list or no list.

The traditores crisis (and the Donatist schism it spawned) presupposes a recognized body of sacred books. The persecutors confirmed the canon's existence more effectively than any council could.

From Nicaea's Deacon to the 27 Books

AD 325 – 397

AD 332 **CANON EVENT** *EUSEBIUS, VITA CONST. 4.36*

Constantine Orders Fifty Bibles — The Canon Goes to Production

In AD 332 Constantine orders fifty expertly inscribed copies of the Scriptures from Eusebius at imperial expense — carried out and presented to the emperor. What was IN them is another matter.

The commission is solid (AD 332). But none of the fifty has ever been identified, so we do not know what canon they contained — Eusebius as overseer likely chose the contents, and it is not even clear a particular table of contents was expected. The earlier draft's line that "mass production presupposes a settled canon" over-claimed; the honest version is that the empire was now funding Scripture production while the edges of the list were still settling. The Sinaiticus/Vaticanus link stays speculative at best.

AD 367 **HINGE MOMENT** *FESTAL LETTER 39, AD 367*

Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter — The First 27-Book List

The Easter letter of Alexandria's bishop — Nicaea's former deacon, five times exiled — lists exactly the twenty-seven books of our New Testament. The first time the precise list appears anywhere.

The throughline complete: the canon question opens with Marcion (144) and closes with Athanasius (367) — 223 years. Not a council vote, not a Constantinian decree: a bishop's pastoral letter naming what the churches had long been using.

393 / 397 **CANON EVENT** *COUNCILS OF HIPPO & CARTHAGE*

Hippo and Carthage — The Councils Ratify What Exists

Regional North African councils affirm the 27-book list — the order of operations matters: the councils ratify; they do not create. By the time anyone votes, the question is already answered in the churches' lecterns.

Hippo (393) was probably the first church council to set the limits of the canon; its statement repeated as Canon 47 of the Third Council of Carthage (397). The resolution: nothing read in church as divine Scripture except the canonical writings — four Gospels, Acts, thirteen epistles of Paul, Hebrews (counted separately), 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, James, Jude, and John's Apocalypse. Regional councils, ratifying practice. No smoke-filled room; a 350-year paper trail.

About This Timeline

This sheet is the printable form of <https://jayms.com/bible-study-tools-2/how-we-got-the-new-testament-canon-timeline/>, where the same material is searchable, filterable by era, and every reference links straight through to the text.

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