Although it is popular to do so, we should not measure the existence of the New Testament (NT) canon (authoritative, or inspired, books) just by the existence of lists, which came into being somewhat later than the NT canon's coming into existence. When we examine the way the NT books were viewed and used in the very early days of Christianity, we can determine the de facto existence of a functioning canon by about 100 CE.

Did it take until the fifth century to finalize the NT canon?

The views expressed here are admittedly a little different than the traditional, or orthodox, view of how the New Testament canon, in particular, and the Bible as a whole, came into acceptance. The views presented here actually stand in stark contrast to modern-day populist scholars, like the agnostic Bart Ehrman.

"Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." (Matthew 16:17). The NT canon was not revealed by humans, but by God.

The books of the Bible did not become the Word of God because people decided it to be so. A book became canonical if it was inspired by God **(2 Timothy 3:16,17; 2 Peter 1:20,21).** Inspiration by God, and not humanly contrived lists, determines canonization.

"That by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Ephesians 3:3-5). Canonical books (inspired books of the Bible), prophecy, and revelation were revealed by the holy Spirt, not man-made councils.

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The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) claims responsibility for the decision as to which books should be included in the Bible canon. However, the NT canon was settled long before then – not by any council's decision, but by the same holy Spirit that inspired the Bible in the first place **(2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20,21).**

"And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe." (1 Thessalonians 2:13) The NT canon was accepted as the word of God by the early church, shortly after each book was written, which was long before the RCC came into existence in the 4th century.

There is no evidence that any book in our canon today gradually gained acceptance over time. There were no stages of acceptance for each individual canonical book.

"Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people " (Jude 3). This body of truth, or faith, contained in the New Testament, was delivered "once for all" time, being completed prior to 100 CE, according to the evidence.

"Just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which is ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15,16). This gives scriptural status to all 14 of Paul's letters, by placing them as having equal status with the Hebrew Scriptures. Why can we say this?

Since Peter wrote to the **"exiles scattered throughout [5] provinces" or regions (1 Peter 1:1)**, it is reasonable that Peter was referring to the entire collection of Paul's letters available at the time. Peter probably knew all but possibly one or two of Paul's letters that

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were available at the time. Not only would this mean that Peter was well aware of Paul's writings, but as a leading apostle, he affirmed them. It's obvious that Paul's letters had a widespread reputation. From this we can infer that they were circulating possibly as a corpus, or body, in the 60's. Ignatius of Antioch in the early 100's, and Polycarp in the mid 100's show familiarity with Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Hebrews – eleven of Paul's letters! The Chester Beatty papyrus 46, dated to around 200 CE, is a collection of most of Paul's letters, including Hebrews. The facts solidly prove that the Pauline corpus was circulating early, long before the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) councils of the latter part of the 4th century.

From this platform of Paul's 14 letters circulating as scripture from the 60's on, we can verify the rest of 13 NT books.

"For the Scripture says… 'The worker deserves his wages.'" (1 Timothy 5:18) Paul apparently quotes from Luke 10:7, which says **"…for the worker deserves his wages"**, and also quotes **Deuteronomy 25:4**, calling both **"Scripture".** This quote of **1 Timothy 5:18** gives scriptural status, or acknowledges the scriptural status, of Luke's writings, namely volume 1 – Luke, and volume 2 – Acts.

Since Luke and Acts comprise Volumes 1 and 2 of Luke's history ("my former book" – Acts 1:1), we can conclude that they both were circulating as scripture in the 60's. Polycarp cites some verses in Luke, in the mid-100's.

"Remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold." (Jude 17) The word of the apostles was authoritative. The New Testament was written by four apostles directly chosen by Jesus, namely, Matthew, John, Peter and Paul. Four other close associates of the apostles, namely, Mark, Luke, James, and Jude, wrote the rest of the New Testament.

In the 60's, when Jude wrote his letter, the apostles and their very close associates' writings were considered authoritative. Papias and Justin Martyr referred to Matthew and Mark's

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books, with Mark named as Peter's secretary.

"The church in Babylon, also chosen, sends you greetings, as does Mark, my son" (1 Peter 5:13). Mark was a very close associate of Peter, apparently his secretary, writing the book of Mark. So Mark's book had apostolic authority.

Polycarp and Justin Martyr in the mid-100's referred to 1 John and John, respectively. Ignatius of Antioch, who was martyred c. 110 CE, makes clear references to John's writings.

The Muratorian fragment of c. 170 CE named 23 of the 27 NT books as authentic. Only Hebrews, James and Peter's 2 letters were omitted. This proves widespread circulation and approval of, and for, the 23 books some time prior to this. Since the Muratorian document is fragmentary – omission from it does not imply non-acceptance.

John and Peter's status as prominent apostles gave them outstanding authority, and their writings would have been received as such.

- 1 Corinthians 15:7 – "Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles." Jesus appeared to James, his half-brother.
- Acts 15:13 – "James spoke…"
- Acts 15:19 – "It is my judgment…"
- Acts 15:22 – "Then the apostles and elders… decided…." James, Jesus' half-brother, was the spokesman.
- Acts 21:18 – "Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present." James was the leader of the important Jerusalem church.
- Galalatians 1:19 – "I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord's brother."
- Galatians 2:9 – "James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars."

James thus had status as a "virtual" apostle. Therefore, God used James to write a New Testament book.

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"Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James" (Jude 1). Although Jude at first did not believe **(John 7:5; Mark 3:21),** he is one of Jesus' brothers, and was there at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost day. Jude had status along with apostles, and the Lord's brother James, and Cephas (Peter) as a long-time, prominent Christian in the early church. Especially his close relationship with his brother James, who was the leader of the early Church for some time, gave him status to write his canonical letter – albeit brief.

Another powerful proof of the very early acceptance of the NT canon of the 27 books is that not just every book, but nearly every verse in the NT, was cited by one or more of the early Church "Fathers" within about 200 years after the fist century.

The John Rylands papyrus 52 was found in the sands of Egypt, and has been dated to about 125 CE. Since John was probably written in Ephesus in Asia Minor in the late 90's, this is also powerful evidence of how rapidly the NT canon spread.

"We ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us – whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter – asserting that the day of the Lord has come. Don't let anyone deceive you" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3). This is just one of many proofs that there were other known supposed "Christian" writings circulating even as early as the mid-first century. Some of these purported to be written by church leaders, such as the apostles. Christians were warned about these, as shown here, as early as the 50's.

Additional proof of the early canonical acceptance is that in 96 CE, Clement of Rome quoted the sermon on the Mount **(Matthew 5-7),** and treated it as scripture. By 110 CE, Ignatius of Antioch, an associate of the apostle John, said the Gospels were Scripture.

No other books other than the 27 in the NT canon were ever seriously considered to be canonical. Books, such as the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Gospel of Judas, were written long after the apostles, and their teachings did not match the OT or NT

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canonical teachings. Others, such as the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistle of 1 Clement, and the Didache, were rejected as canonical simply because of the distance in time from the apostles and the apostolic age.

So we have extremely strong, powerful, evidence proving the 27-book NT canon was in existence by around the year 100 CE. Is there an official list of the 27 New Testament books from the 1st century that is extant today? No, but we don't need such, because there is more than adequate proof scripturally and historically for the inspired 27 book New Testament canon by 100 CE.

All Bible verses quoted from New International Version (NIV)

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