



QUESTIONS ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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This article is by no means exhaustive on the subject but addresses some of the most common questions concerning the New Testament. For further study we recommend “The Canon of Scripture” by F. F. Bruce (InterVarsity Press)

When were the books of the New Testament written? Here’s an important fact to keep in mind: Jesus died in roughly A.D. 30 to 33, not the year 0, because A.D. does not mean “After Death” but *anno Domini* (“in the year of our Lord”).

With A.D. 30 as ground zero, most scholars date Paul’s letters between A.D. 50 and 66, the first three Gospels between A.D. 50 and 70, and John’s writings sometime between A.D. 80 and 90. That makes the majority of the epistles and three of the Gospels dated only twenty to forty years after the death of Jesus.

This, as Wikipedia would say, is the “scholarly consensus,” and it’s based on solid evidence. For example, writing in roughly A.D. 90, the bishop of Rome, Clement, quoted from many of the New Testament books, thus assuring that their dates are earlier than A.D. 90. Furthermore, by A.D. 110 to 120, a collection of Paul’s letters had been gathered, bound and circulated to various churches. We actually have

a manuscript of this collection, called the Beatty manuscript. This collection contains ten of Paul’s thirteen letters found in the New Testament.

Yet even against such evidence there are scholars who push for later dates on several of the letters, and the reason is a simple presupposition. I’ll try to illustrate.

When I go to McDonalds, I feel unhealthy even when I order the McSalad. The reason is that I have a presupposition that McDonalds food can’t be good for me. Even if the friendly cashier had hand-picked the lettuce and killed the cow herself, I would believe nothing to the contrary.

The skeptic’s presupposition is a little more logical. It is the belief that the miraculous stories about Jesus (being born of a virgin, giving sight to the blind, and so on) couldn’t possibly be true. Therefore, you can’t have documents within the immediate generation after Jesus containing these ideas, because time would need to elapse for such myths to develop. Make sense?

Following from that presupposition, that Jesus was just an ordinary man, you simply must stretch out the time line for people believably to be referring to him as the sinless Son of God. If, on the other hand, the New Testament claims about Jesus are true, such dating gymnastics aren’t necessary. But that said, there are certain books, such as Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians, for which virtually no one would dispute an A.D. 50–60 dating.

Do we have any of the original New Testament documents? No, but biblical scholars are constantly monitoring *Antiques Roadshow* in case one should



emerge from an old shoebox in someone's attic.

So, how do we know our New Testament is accurate? To evaluate the accuracy of our New Testament, we have to look at two factors. One factor is the number of ancient manuscripts (copies of the original) we possess, and the second is the time gap between when the original document was written and when the earliest surviving copies were written. The more manuscripts we have, and the closer the manuscripts are to the original, the better we are able to determine accuracy.

For example, we have seven manuscript copies of *Natural History*, written by Pliny Secundus, with a 750-year gap between the earliest copy and the original text. The number-two book in all of history in manuscript authority is *The Iliad*, written by Homer, for which we have 643 copies with a 400-year gap.¹

Now, this is a little startling. We currently have 24,970 manuscript copies of the New Testament, completely towering over all other works of antiquity in documentary evidence. In addition, we have one fragment of the New Testament (NT) with only a 50-year gap from when the original was written, whole books with only a 100-year gap, and the whole NT with only a 225- to 250-year gap.² Given the number of early copies, there is no question that we know what the original documents said, though see my note below.

(Occasionally a word can vary among ancient manuscripts, as they were hand copied and not xeroxed. When this happens the variant word with the greater amount of manuscript attestation (900 manuscripts said 'hare' vs. 3 that said 'hair') is chosen for the translation. On the rare occasion where a decision is difficult, you'll find the two variations noted in the margin of your Bible, neither of which will obscure the basic meaning of the passage.)

What role did Constantine and the Council of Nicea play in deciding what would go in the New Testament? Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* makes some creative statements concerning the New Testament, which can be disconcerting to those who are not familiar with church history (and perhaps even more disconcerting to those who are). Constantine had nothing to do with deciding on the books of the New Testament. Of the twenty rulings made at the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), none dealt with the contents of the New Testament.

Constantine convened the council to provide spiritual unity and a clear church position on an ongoing debate causing division within the newly Christianized Roman Empire. That debate was not about the New Testament but about the nature of Christ.

Specifically, the debate was about whether Jesus was coeternal with the Father, that is, if there was a time in eternity past when Jesus "was not." No one at the council thought Jesus was just a man or a prophet. The debate was concluded with a 300-to-2 vote deciding that Jesus was coeternal with the Father. Thus the Nicene Creed affirms that Jesus was "one in being with the Father, begotten not made."³

When was the New Testament decided upon?

Most of the letters and Gospels of the New Testament were recognized as Scripture before the end of the first century. Yet, as letters, these documents circulated in various geographic regions, and so it is closer to about A.D. 150 (175 years prior to Nicea) before we have a comprehensive list that closely reflects our New Testament.

Without going into elaborate documentation, we (my laptop and I) will simply note that the church leader Irenaeus, writing in approximately A.D. 180, attested to the universally held scriptural status of the four Gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. That's most of our New Testament.⁴

In fact, the general contents of the New Testament were so well established that the church felt no need to formalize the list until heresy, forgeries, missions, and other factors of the third and fourth centuries necessitated a New Testament list that would forever be unaltered.

And so, at the synod of Hippo (A.D. 393), not at Nicea, the church listed the twenty-seven confirmed books of the New Testament. This was not a creative brainstorm but a ratification of what the church had held to be true for more than two and half centuries.

How did the church come to recognize the books of the New Testament as Scripture?

There were four major criteria. The first is fairly obvious: was it written by one of the disciples? While most of the authors, such as Peter and John,



were clearly disciples, what about Mark and Luke, whom we didn't see sitting at the Last Supper? Early Christian writings explain why these books were included.

- “Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter.” (Papias, A.D. 60–140)⁵
- “Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him.” (Irenaeus, A.D. 120–200)⁶

The second criterion was, did the writing conform to the doctrine that had been handed down from the original disciples to their disciples and so on? Third, did the document have wide use and attestation from the earliest and most recognized churches (usually those founded by the disciples) and church leaders? Last, the testimony of the disciples of the original disciples were taken into account, considering what was said by those who had lived on into the second century and testified to their firsthand knowledge of what were authentic apostolic documents. Papias, for example, mentioned his acquaintance with many who had been personally taught by the disciples,⁷

Were there other gospels not included in the New Testament, and if so, why were they excluded? We know of roughly sixty other documents, most of them not Gospels, that can be traced to several of the predominant cults of the second and third century, mainly the Gnostics. These documents were almost all written well into the second century, bearing the pseudonyms of the apostles. Our copies of many of these works came from the discovery of an ancient Gnostic library (Nag Hammadi) in 1945.

The earliest of these “alternative gospels” actually exaggerate Christ's deity, attempting to deny his humanity, as the Gnostics held that matter (flesh) was evil and that it was therefore inconceivable that Jesus could have been an actual man. The documents were far from secret. The early Christians were aware of both the cults and their writings and went to great length to condemn and combat them. You might want to read the early work *Against Heresies*, written by the noted church leader Irenaeus (A.D. 120–200). The book records the names of several of these works and pseudo-gospels, citing from which cult they emanated and defending what Christians from the very beginning believed about these doctrines.

Jesus and Mary Magdalene

While the Gospels do lack romance and a love interest, not a single ancient source indicates that Jesus was married, let alone to Mary Magdalene. By ancient sources, I mean the writings of the New Testament, the writings of early Christians and church leaders, and even the writings of second-century cults such as the Gnostics. The Gospel of the Nazarenes, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Peter—not a mention in any of these Gnostic documents. Simply put, there is no historical basis for the claim, and no reputable New Testament scholar would say otherwise.

While it is clear that the apostle Paul, John the Baptist and Jesus were all single, the apostle Paul indicated that many of the disciples had wives (“Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?” [1 Corinthians 9:5]). And, as marriage is clearly not a sin, it is inexplicable why all of the ancient sources would indicate that these three were unmarried, unless they were.

As for the idea that Jesus had a child and that there was a royal bloodline, how should I explain this? Besides there being no mention in human history of a royal bloodline coming from Jesus, the very idea of it misunderstands the nature of the kingdom of God, making it an earthly one with actual royalty. Hopefully this book, and a more informed understanding of the Gospels, will have disabused anyone of such a misunderstanding of the kingdom that Jesus preached.

¹Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif.:

Here's Life, 1999), p. 42.

²Ibid., p. 40.

³Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

⁴New Testament books referenced throughout Irenaeus, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Book 1:*

Against the Heresies, trans. Dominic Unger (Paramus, N.J.: Newman, 1991).

⁵Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.39.15.

⁶Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 3.1.1.

⁷Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 3.39.4.

Excerpt taken from *Jesus Without Religion*