



“Understanding the Bible”

Section 2: How Did We Get the Bible?

Unit 2.3: Navigating the New Testament Terrain



I) A Focus on Fulfillment

- If there is one word that could capture the proper mood of the Old Testament it would be “anticipation.” As God adopts the holy nation of Israel to be His covenant representatives in a fallen world, the drama builds with each story while Israel awaits the deliverance of a promised messiah. However, when the prophet Malachi is finished speaking around 430 BC, Israel experiences a four-hundred-year period where God’s voice goes silent. It isn’t until four centuries later when God’s long awaited promise is finally **fulfilled** through the arrival of Jesus Christ. The first four books of the New Testament, known as the gospels, are testimonies of Christ as the divine Son of God sent to redeem His people from the eternal penalty of their sin. Right away in first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, Matthew presents an extensive genealogy that makes a direct connection from Abraham to Jesus. This boldly illustrates that what the people of Israel were longing for throughout the Old Testament, has finally been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth.

II) Trusting in Oral Transmission

- As we approach the books of the New Testament and begin uncovering the grand finale of God’s story of redemption, we must first cross a similar hurdle that we had to face with the Old Testament. Since oral tradition was the dominant form of communication in ancient biblical times, we had to prove in our last unit there was strong evidence of literacy pointing to original authorship of the inspired prophets. Now as we consider the New Testament canon we must address the issue of time, beginning with when the actual events took place, to the oral re-telling of these events, and finally when the events were written down for preservation. We know that literacy was commonplace by the time of Christ, but we also have a clearer picture than we do of the Old Testament concerning when the events first took place versus when the accounts were finally written. So, the question is, “*Can we really trust the accuracy of these stories if they were transmitted orally for many years before they were recorded in written form?*” Thankfully, we have strong historical evidence that **oral transmission** was a very reliable form of preserving ancient truth. Author Timothy Paul Jones says there are three reasons we can trust in the oral transmission of stories that were eventually recorded in the New Testament. His reasons include the following: 1) People in oral cultures were capable of recalling and repeating oral histories accurately; 2) Christian communities worked together to keep oral histories true to their sources; and 3) Eyewitnesses kept testimonies connected to the original events. These three reasons offer strong historical support for accurate transmission. We must never forget, however, that divine inspiration of the writing process was still the primary reason that we can trust what we read in the Holy Scriptures.

III) A Reminder of the Rules

- Before we look at the structure of the New Testament canon, we need to revisit the general guidelines that all books of the Bible must meet to be considered divine. We said in Unit 2.2 that the four main principles for canonical consideration are as follows: 1) The credentials of the author; 2) The truthfulness of the content; 3) The supernatural power of the content; and 4) The universal acceptance of the content. The one additional area of focus that plays a critical role in the New Testament canon is *time*. As we will see in a moment, all books of the New Testament were written by an apostle or a direct associate of an apostle. This means that the New Testament books were written within the lifetime of eye-witnesses of Jesus Christ, and therefore these books are all dated within the **first century AD**. This guideline quickly separates our current New Testament from hundreds of books that fall drastically short of such strict time requirements.

IV) The Nuts & Bolts of the New Testament

- Having laid out the guidelines, here is a bird's-eye view of our current New Testament canon:
 - Size:** There are 27 books of the New Testament including gospels, letters addressed to churches, communities, and individuals, as well as a dramatic view of the Apocalypse.
 - Language and Time Span:** These books were originally written in Koine Greek, and the complete collection of the books spans just fifty years. Scholars argue that James was possibly the earliest New Testament book, written about 45 AD, and Revelation was the final installment, written around 95 AD.
 - Chapters:** There are 260 total chapters of the New Testament, and these chapters were added by the same creator of the Old Testament chapters, Steven Langton, around the thirteenth century in Paris.
 - Verses:** The New Testament contains 7,959 verses, and these verses were created in 1551 in Paris by Robert Estienne. Legend has it that Estienne designed the verse structure of the New Testament while riding horseback on a trip from Paris to Lyons, and that accounts for several strange verse divisions.
 - Arrangement:** The current arrangement of the New Testament can be divided into four sections: Gospels and Acts (5: Matthew – Acts); Paul's Letters (13: Romans – Philemon); General Letters (8: Hebrews – Jude); and Apocalypse (1: Revelation). It's interesting to note that Paul's letters are organized by decreasing order of size, with the first books addressed to communities then more specifically to individuals.

V) Authentic Because It's Apostolic

- The first guideline of canonization we previously discussed was *authorship*. It was through prophets that God inspired the writing of the Old Testament, but it was through apostles that God recorded the New Testament writings. All New Testament books were either written by an apostle of Jesus Christ or a direct associate who traveled with an apostle (Mark, Luke). The word "apostle" comes from the Greek word "*apostolos*" which means "sent out" or "commissioned." And, an apostle by New Testament standards was someone who was a direct witness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22), a recipient of His teachings (Ephesians 3:5), and someone who was commissioned to safeguard the gospel and build a foundation for the church with the teachings of Christ.

VI) Four Views of the Good News

- The greatest area of debate concerning the New Testament books surrounds the four gospels. Skeptics question the need for four accounts of Christ, and they also challenge the actual dates of the writings. However, the beauty of having four accounts from four unique perspectives is they provide a very comprehensive and complete picture of the earthly ministry of Christ. These books have no contradictions, and they offer different aspects of Christ's life and ministry. This helps to eliminate any concern of collaboration between the authors and shows the true power of divine inspiration. The other issue of dating is quickly resolved by most scholars who claim the gospels were written within a thirty-year time span from 60-90 AD (which is still in the lifetime of eye-witnesses of the resurrected Christ).

VII) The Testimony of Time

- We mentioned in Unit 2.2 that there was not a single council or group of people who decided what the biblical canon was supposed to be, but they simply *discovered* it over time. This gift of time helped the church sift through many different books before the true words of God became evident. Although councils did not decide which books would make it into Scripture, there is evidence that several councils progressively recognized God's divine inspiration. These councils included the Council of Laodicea (AD 363 – recognized 26 New Testament books), the Council of Hippo (AD 393 – recognized all 27 books), and the Council of Carthage (AD 397 – recognized all 27 books).

VIII) Is the Canon Really Closed?

- So, now we must ask ourselves this concluding question concerning the books of the Bible: "*Is the canon of Scripture really closed?*" What if we discovered a letter from Paul today? Would we include that in our current New Testament? A simple answer to that question is "no" because of the reason stated above. The testimony of time throughout the early church confirmed divine authorship, and since that opportunity is no longer available to new books, the biblical canon is now considered closed.