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How We Got the Bible—Part 1



The Gutenberg Bible—Beinecke Library, Yale University

As is my custom, during the summer recess I will provide you with a weekly Bible study via email only. This is the first in a four-part series for the next four weeks on how we got the Bible. May the Holy Spirit bless your understanding of this critically important subject—how God gave us His book. He didn't just drop it out of the sky.

Ralph Drollinger

Ralph Drollinger

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WEEKLY BIBLE STUDIES

Governors: Fridays 9am (EST), Zoom

Former Cabinet Members / White House Senior Staff: Fridays 9am (EST), Zoom

Senate Members: Tuesdays 8am, rotating offices, hot breakfast served

House Members: Thursdays 8am, AG Hearing Rm., Longworth 1302, hot breakfast served



John Jay



“The Bible is the best of all books, for it is the word of God and teaches us the way to be happy in this world and in the next. Continue therefore to read it and to regulate your life by its precepts.”

— John Jay, President of Congress, diplomat, author of *The Federalist Papers*, original Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Governor of New York.

John Jay, John Jay: *The Winning of the Peace. Unpublished Papers 1780-1784*, Richard B. Morris, editor (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), Vol. II, 709, to Peter Augustus Jay on April 8, 1784.

How We Got the Bible—Part 1

I. INTRODUCTION

This study was written by, and is used with permission from the late Dr. Robert L. Thomas, one of my favorite seminary professors and an expert in this field. I have converted his format into ours.

Every believer needs to have a handle on this subject. Accordingly, I reissue it each year; it is good to review this every year, since we believe that God’s Word—His Word—is the ultimate source of truth and the final arbiter for all of faith and practice. That being the case, it makes sense that we have a good handle on this important subject.

II. THE TERM CANON

The term canon comes from the Greek word *kanōn* which originally meant “a reed.” This Greek word then came to mean “rod” or “bar.” Since a rod or bar was used for measuring, the word came to mean “standard.” In grammar, it meant a rule of procedure. In chronology, it meant a table of historical dates. In literature, it meant a list of works correctly attributed to a given author.¹

Kanōn is used four times in the New Testament, each having a metaphorical meaning. In 2 Corinthians 10:13, 15, and 16, the word depicts a geographical limit or boundary. In Galatians 6:16, it speaks of a moral standard. In other words, it is the rule by which a believer is to live.

Moreover, *kanōn* depicts a definitely bounded or fixed space within which one’s influence and activity is confined. The predominant thought is that of measure, limit, or boundary.

When used in conjunction with the Bible, the English word canon carries two possible connotations:

“Canon” may speak of principles, rules, standards, or norms by which a book is measured before being accepted as a part of Scripture.

“Canon” may speak of an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture, that is, the collection of books, which measures up to the body of principles referred to in the previous connotation.

Referring to an authoritative list of books, this use of the word is not found before the middle of the fourth century. In the Decrees of the Council of Nicea, published shortly after A.D. 350, Athanasius referred to the Shepherd of Hermas as “not being of the canon.” The 39th “Festal Letter” of Athanasius (also called his “Easter Letter”) in A.D. 367 described Scripture by a Greek term meaning “canonized.” This is contrasted with the “secret writings” of the heretics. Athanasius then listed the 27 books of the New Testament and applied the term *kanōn* to them. At about the same time, the Council of Laodicea



(c. A.D. 360) used the terminology “uncanonical” and “canonical” in setting forth its findings.²

Today, there are two main ways to view the canon of Scripture: an authoritative collection of writings or a collection of authoritative writings.

The view that the canon is an authoritative collection of writings is the traditional view of Roman Catholicism. Note that the authority of the canon is vested in the collection. *In other words, the collecting agency or the church has the authority rather than the writings themselves.*

There is also the view that the canon is a collection of authoritative writings. *Thus, the authority is vested in the writings themselves, and the church merely recognizes the authority that is latent in them.* In this case, the authority rests upon the fact of inspiration rather than resting upon an agency. This is the proper view of the canon as will become evident in the discussion, which follows.

III. THE RISE OF THE CANON

The New Testament consists of 27 books which are ascribed to eight or nine authors. Included are four Gospels, one history, 21 epistles, and one apocalypse. The period of composition covers over two generations (from approximately A.D. 45 to A.D. 95).

Apart from the Old Testament, Christianity had no authoritative writings for the first 15 years of its existence. Proclamation during this period was solely by word-of-mouth based on the Old Testament and the tradition of eyewitness reports which were primarily oral. Doctrinal and practical issues among early Christians created the need for epistles first (beginning with James in the late forties). These were written by early apostles and prophets on the basis of direct revelations given them by God. Epistles continued to appear until the last three, the epistles of John, were dispatched in the early nineties.

About 10 years after the earliest epistle was written, eyewitnesses of Jesus’ earthly life and resurrection became more scarce and Christianity spread to the extent that there were not enough to tell the story of His life orally. Thus, the Gospels began to appear. Matthew came first, being written in the late fifties. Luke followed in about A.D. 60. Mark was written in the late sixties. The Gospel of John appeared some time during the late eighties.

The church needed to have an authoritative account of the first thirty years of its history and the activity of the Holy Spirit during this time. To meet this need, Acts was written in A.D. 62 or 63. To complete the package, a prophecy of God’s plan for the future had to be furnished. This came in the form of the Apocalypse in A.D. 95.

VERSE OF THE WEEK



Psalm 119:160

*The sum of Your word is truth,
and every one of
Your righteous ordinances
is everlasting.*



God’s Word is the
ultimate source
of truth and the final
arbiter for all of faith
and practice.





Timothy Pickering



“[W]e do not grieve as those who have no ... resurrection to a life immortal. Here the believers in Christianity manifest their superior advantages, for life and immortality were brought to light by the gospel of Jesus Christ [II Timothy 1:10]. Prior to that revelation even the wisest and best of mankind were involved in doubt and they hoped, rather than believed, that the soul was immortal.”

— Timothy Pickering, American Revolutionary War general, judge, ratifier of the U.S. Constitution, postmaster general under President George Washington, secretary of war under Presidents George Washington and John Adams, secretary of state under President John Adams.

Mary Orne Pickering, *Life of John Pickering* (Boston: 1887), 79, letter from Thomas Pickering to his son John Pickering, May 12, 1796.

How We Got the Bible—Part 1

Today, no original manuscript (singular “ms.”; plural, “mss.”) from any of the 27 books remains. Such documents are referred to as autographs or autographa. From the divine standpoint, the reason for their non-existence is probably to remove the human tendency to worship them. From the human side, these documents were probably destroyed through persecution and the wear caused by repeated use of the fragile materials.³

The New Testament scholar is not significantly hampered without the autographa due to the aid science and textual criticism.

The abundance of early manuscripts from the new testament places scholars in a better position to know what was originally written than for any other ancient writing.

Though we lack the autographs, we can surmise with a good bit of confidence what they must have looked like. A large number of Egyptian documents dating from the New Testament period have been discovered. These furnish a good idea of what form the New Testament autographs must have taken. Some of the Old Testament books by this time had been written on vellum or parchment, which is a writing material made by processing animal skins, but this undoubtedly was too expensive.

In 2 John 12, **paper** (*chartou*) refers to a writing sheet made of papyrus strips.⁴ In the same verse, ink (*melanos*) is a noun derived from *melas*, the Greek adjective meaning “black.” This became the name given to the **ink**, which was used by writers in that day. It was produced by mixing soot with gum and diluting it with water. This ink was long-lasting, and because it did not immediately sink into the fiber of the papyrus sheet, it could be washed off or scraped away while still fresh. This made the correction of copying or writing errors convenient.⁵ The erasure process is alluded to in Colossians 2:14 and Revelation 3:5 by the verb **cancelled** *exaleipho*.

In 3 John 13, a further detail of the physical format of the autographs is reflected. *Kalamou* refers to the **pen**, which was used in writing. It was a thick reed, which had been sharpened to a suitable point at one end which was then softened in the scribe’s mouth.⁶

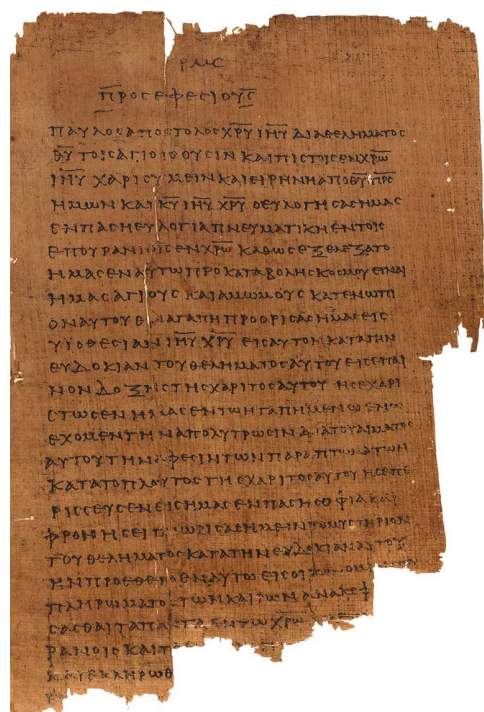
The unused sheet of papyrus material was called *chartēs*. After being used it was called *bublos* or *biblos*. A short writing was called *biblion*. A collection of short writings was called *ta biblia*, the neuter plural of the same noun. From this evolved the feminine singular noun, *hē biblia*. In Old Latin this became *biblia* from which we have received our English word “Bible.”⁷

The autographs were circulated in a scroll



form. The codex or book format did not come into use until the second century A.D.

To manufacture a scroll, sheets of papyrus were pasted together end to end and rolled up. The roll was held by being tied with a thread or string. Sealing with wax was utilized only for official documents. Normally the scroll had writing only on one side with the outside of the roll being used to note the address of the addressee.⁸



Ephesians 1:3 from Papyrus 46 (circa 175–225)

Some New Testament books were written by the authors themselves, but some were dictated to secretaries or amanuenses (singular “amanuensis”). For example, Tertius was the amanuensis whom Paul used for Romans (Romans 16:22). On the

other hand, Paul wrote Galatians himself (Galatians 6:11).

The only postal service available in that day was for official government use. Therefore the New Testament books had to be delivered by a messenger who was in full sympathy with the purpose of the letter. (Cf. 2 Corinthians 2:13, 7:6, 13; Ephesians 6:21; Philippians 2:27; Philemon 1:12)⁹ The words of the autographs were written without extra space between. Thus, it is difficult for the modern reader to tell where one word ends and another begins. Occasionally a writer might leave a slight space to indicate a break in thought, but the general rule was not to do this. Conservation of space was necessary due to the expense of writing materials. Simply stated, they were not nearly as available as they are today.

In addition, punctuation was hardly used. Sometimes a horizontal line above the words would indicate an abbreviation. A horizontal line below would indicate a new paragraph. Yet, such occurrences were rare.

IV. THE EARLY CIRCULATION OF THE CANON

The final state of the canon did not depend on the church’s reception of it. *In reality the canon was complete when the last book (i.e., the Apocalypse) was completed.* However, the church did not recognize this authority immediately. Recognition took

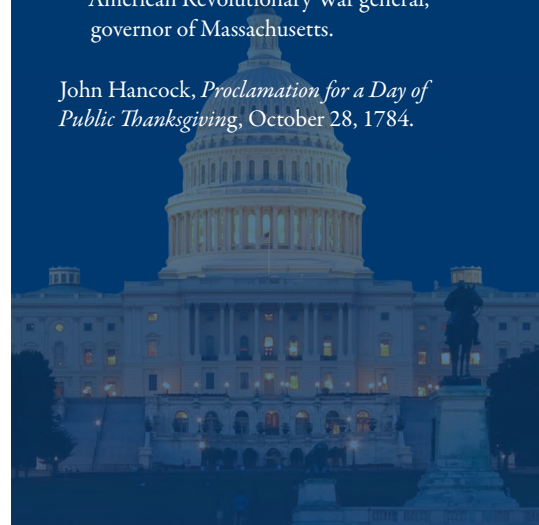
John Hancock



“... that universal happiness may be established in the world [and] that all may bow to the scepter of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the whole earth be filled with His glory.”

— John Hancock, signer of the Declaration of Independence, president of Congress, American Revolutionary War general, governor of Massachusetts.

John Hancock, *Proclamation for a Day of Public Thanksgiving*, October 28, 1784.





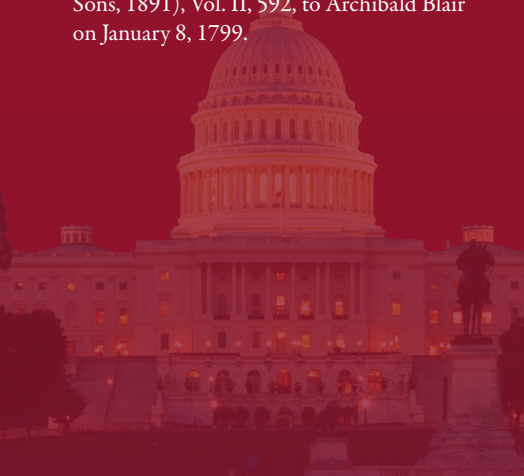
Patrick Henry



“The great pillars of all government and of social life [are] virtue, morality, and religion. This is the armor, my friend, and this alone, that renders us invincible.”

— Patrick Henry, American Revolutionary War general, legislator, “The Voice of Liberty,” ratifier of the U.S. Constitution, governor of Virginia.

Patrick Henry, Patrick Henry: *Life, Correspondence and Speeches*, William Wirt Henry, editor (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1891), Vol. II, 592, to Archibald Blair on January 8, 1799.



How We Got the Bible—Part 1

time as the books continued to circulate.

After an autograph’s arrival and reception by the initial recipient(s), it probably remained there for a while. It was read by the addressee(s) repeatedly, but went no farther. Exceptions to this general rule include those books which were circular letters. Built into such encyclical letters was a mechanism which necessitated immediate circulation to a number of churches. Revelation, Galatians, and 2 Corinthians were of this type. Ephesians also was probably a circular letter to all the churches in the Roman province of Asia (cf. Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 4:16).¹⁰

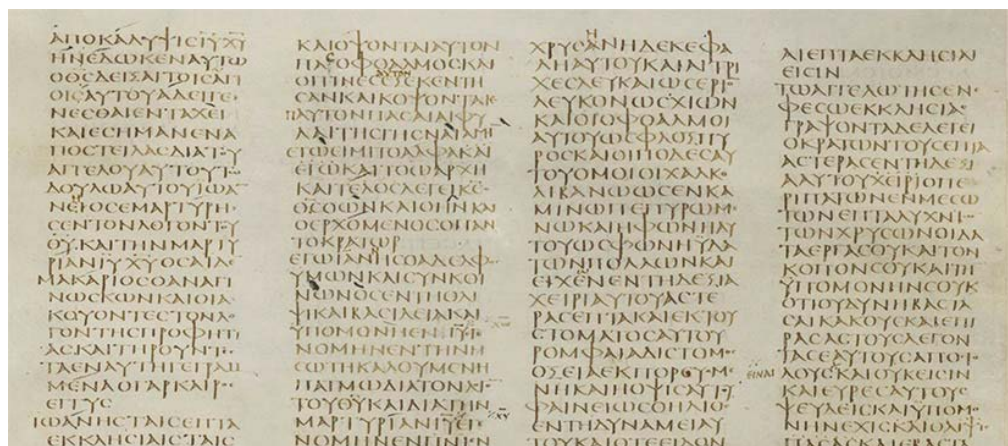
After possessing a New Testament letter or book, word would spread of its location, requests would come for copies, which could be utilized in other localities. Such requests were honored and over a period of time copies became plentiful and widespread.

Gradually these copies were made into sets of books. Evidence for such collections begins at a very early time, a time even before a number of the 27 books were composed.¹¹

As stated earlier, the autographs were written on papyrus sheets which were joined together into a roll. From an early date, however, the New

Testament writings began to be circulated in the form of papyrus codices (singular “codex”). In a codex, sheets were laid one on each other very much along the lines of a modern book. The sheets were then folded down the middle and fastened together either by sewing or gluing. Some of the codices became quite large. One of the largest is p45, one of the Chester Beatty series, which originally contained 59 sheets or 118 leaves. Advantages of the codex format included the possibility of writing on both sides of the sheet, thereby conserving space. Another advantage was that of quick reference when looking for a given passage.

A third type of format used in circulation of the New Testament writings was the parchment codex. The use of parchment dates back to the reign of Eumenes II at Pergamum (197–158 B.C.). Eumenes’ ambition for his city was to build a library collection that would rival the one in Alexandria. To accomplish this, he needed to import a large amount of papyrus from Egypt. When Ptolemy Epiphanes of Egypt discovered his plans, he immediately shut off the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Eumenes therefore had to resort to the use of animal skins, which had been specially processed to make them suitable for writing. The new material became known as pergamena, which means “parchment.” Another name for such material, which is practically synonymous, is “vellum.”¹²



The beginning of Apocalypse from the Codex Sinaiticus



The main disadvantage of parchment compared to papyrus was the expense to produce it.

Its advantages, however, began to assert themselves and to outweigh the disadvantages in the circulation of the New Testament writings during the fourth century A.D. These included the possible manufacture of it in any part of the world, its flexibility permitting a more presentable codex format, its durability, and its resistance to moisture content in the air. Papyrus could not be preserved outside the dry climate of Egypt. Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus are examples of the parchment-codex form.¹³

The science of paleography which includes an analysis of handwriting is an important means, perhaps the most important means, of dating ancient documents. There are three major styles of handwriting found in New Testament manuscripts.¹⁴

A. THE UNCIAL STYLE

Uncial letters resembled “capital” letters in ancient times. Capital letters were chiseled in stone and have been found in inscriptions. Uncial letters were square and upright, but not quite as square and upright as the capitals. This type of handwriting is found in the earliest parchment codices of the New Testament. It also is the dominant style in the earliest papyrus manuscripts. The early centuries of the Christian era, perhaps the first four or five, give us manuscripts which were written in this manner, particularly in the literary or formal type of writings. An example of uncial handwriting resembles the upper case printed Greek letters of modern times.

B. THE CURSIVE STYLE

Gradually the cursive handwriting developed from the Uncial style. Now, however, the letters were connected together in a sort of running

The book of Acts records how a small band of men—the apostles—in very short order *turned the world upside down* (Acts 17:6, KJV) during the first century in which they lived. This small team of uneducated, common men were not elite leaders, so how were they able to saturate the world with the gospel—changing lives, changing culture, and eventually changing the Roman Empire?

Scripture provides the answer: not only did they fulfill the Great Commission one soul at a time through a ministry of geometric evangelism and discipleship, but they succeeded *by concentrating on and impacting a particular element of society, specifically kings and all who are in authority* (1 Timothy 2:1–4).

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handwriting. This permitted greater speed in copying. There also began to be some letters which projected above and/or below the rest of the letters. This style became characteristic particularly in non-literary or more informal types of writings. Generally speaking, the Cursive style belongs to the middle centuries of the first millennium A.D., until around the ninth century.

C. THE MINUSCULE STYLE

The Minuscule handwriting borrowed characteristics from both the Uncial and the Cursive. It had the beauty of the uncial and the flowing quality of the Cursive. The letters are smaller, and some letters consistently extended above or below the line of the rest of the letters. This type permitted speed in copying and also provided for a conservation of space. It came into use in private documents during the ninth century, and from the tenth century on, it was popular for literary purposes also. Our modern printed Greek New Testaments resemble this style more than any other.

**Next week we will examine the influences
that led to the canonical collection.**

1. Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), 401–2; Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (1985; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 15; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 289–93.
2. Gamble, *New Testament Canon*, 17–18.
3. George Milligan, *The New Testament Documents: Their Origin and Early History* (London: MacMillan and Co. 1913), 6–7.
4. Ibid., 9.
5. Ibid., 16; Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2005), 10–11.
6. Milligan, *New Testament Documents*, 17; Lee Martin McDonald and Stanley E. Porter, *Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 588.
7. Milligan, *New Testament Documents*, 10.
8. Ibid., 17–18.
9. Ibid., 30–31.
10. Ibid., 173–74.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 188–192; Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 8–9.
13. Milligan, *New Testament Documents*, 192–93; Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 8; McDonald, *Early Christianity*, 588–89.
14. Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, 16–31.

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