

AUGUST 26, 2024

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FROM OUR FOUNDING FATHERS

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FOCUSED ON THE WORD

How We Got the Bible—Part 4



The Bible used by Abraham Lincoln for his oath of office during his first inauguration in 1861.

As is my custom, during the summer recess I will provide you with a weekly Bible study via email only. This is the last in a four-part series 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.

We will be praying for you, that this will be a significant time in the district as you catch up on your rest and relationships. We look forward to seeing you back in D.C. in September! Enjoy the studies!

Ralph Drollinger

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The views expressed in each Bible Study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of any individual Bible Study sponsor.



John Adams



“I have examined all religions, and the result is that the Bible is the best book in the world.”

— John Adams, second president of the United States, signer of the Declaration of Independence, judge, diplomat, one of two signers of the Bill of Rights.

John Adams, *Works*, Vol. X, 85, to Thomas Jefferson on December 25, 1813



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.

In the previous study, recognition of the New Testament canon was divided into three periods: (1) A.D. 70–170; (2) A.D. 170–303; and (3) A.D. 303–397.¹ This study will cover the second and third periods.



Lodovico Antonio Muratori

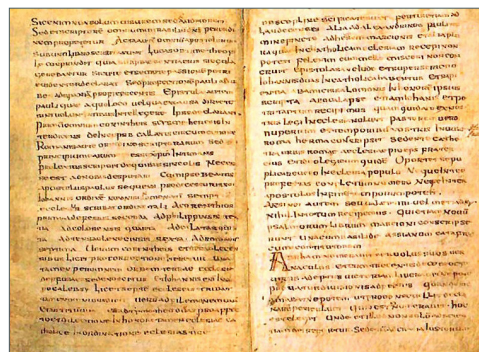
II. TESTIMONIES FROM A.D. 170–303 ON A CANONICAL COLLECTION

This is the period of the separation of the canonical books from the mass of ecclesiastical literature.² It was also a period of voluminous theological literature, which brings us into the clear light of Christian history. No longer was there a question about the existence of a New Testament canon; rather the focus was upon its contents though there was a general agreement.³

A. THE MURATORIAN FRAGMENT

The first major document in this period is the Muratorian Fragment, sometimes

called the Muratorian Canon. It was first published in 1740 by Muratori who derived it from a manuscript in the Ambrosian Library at Milan. It originally belonged to the Irish monastery of Bobbio and was found in a volume of Latin fragments dating from the eighth century. The writer of the document claims to have been a contemporary of Pius who lived in the middle of the second century. Thus, the date of the Muratorian Fragment may be set around A.D. 170.⁴ Perhaps partially in response to the truncated canon of Marcion, this document lists the New Testament books which are to be accepted as authoritative and notes certain ones that are to be excluded from such a select list. It includes 21 or 22 of the present 27. Those definitely missing are Hebrews, James, and 1 and 2 Peter. First John is possibly omitted since only two epistles of John are mentioned, but 2 and 3 John may be referred to as one epistle, in which case 1 John is included. The latter possibility seems most likely, because the writer refers to the opening words of 1 John. The reason for the omission of the four or five books may be the mutilated condition of the fragment. In its original state it is possible that it contained them.⁵



Muratorian Fragment



The Muratorian Fragment apparently originated in Rome. Thus, it represents the perspective of the Western church on the New Testament canon toward the close of the second century.⁶

B. IRENAEUS

The names of three leaders stand out during this period: Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria. Irenaeus represents three distinct areas of second-century Christianity. He spent his earlier years in Asia Minor where he was a pupil of Polycarp who had been a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus also moved to Rome and taught for a time. Later he became overseer of the church in Lyons, Gaul. Moreover, he was acquainted with the church in different areas and died in A.D. 202.⁷

In books 3–5 of his *Against All Heresies* Irenaeus proceeded “to adduce proofs from the Scriptures” to provide “means of combating and vanquishing those who, in whatever manner, are propagating falsehood.”⁸ The “proofs” which make up the bulk of books 3–5 are derived mostly from the writings of the apostles. Thus, the New Testament citations far outnumber those from the Old Testament.⁹ Irenaeus’ citations of “proofs from the Scriptures” include at least 21 of the 27 New Testament books. One source says he omits Philemon, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude, while others say that he definitely cited 2 John and possibly alluded to James.¹⁰

C. TERTULLIAN

The second important individual at the end of the second century was Tertullian of Carthage (c. A.D., 150–222). He was a lawyer of great influence who was also a noted leader of the North African church. Most of his voluminous writ-

ings were done in Latin, but he also worked in Greek. He had a good bit to say about the New Testament canon and his word can be taken as representative of the church of that area.¹¹

Tertullian validates the places of all 27 books except five. Four of these he fails to mention: James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. The other one, Hebrews, he does mention, but denies it canonical recognition because he says it was written by Barnabas and not one of the apostles.¹²

D. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 155–215) had been in Palestine, Greece, and Italy before settling down in Egypt. He was a well-read scholar who had studied under many masters. His wide acquaintance with church opinion is important in that he includes all 27 books except three in his New Testament (James, 2 Peter, and 3 John are excluded). The picture is not quite so clear with Clement as it is with his two contemporaries because he grants authority to a number of other books: Gospel of the Hebrews,



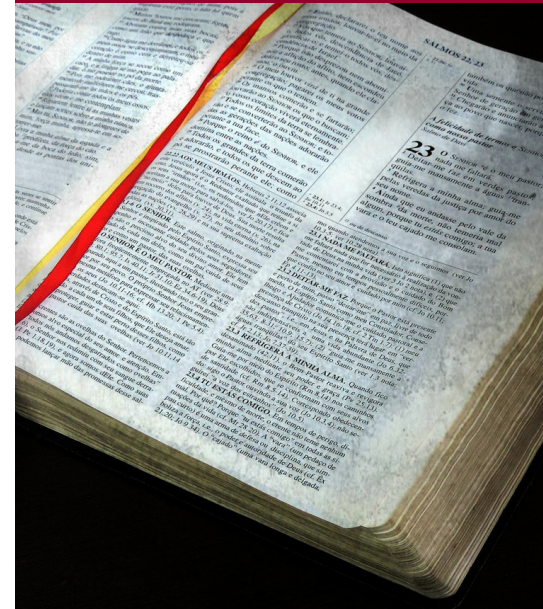
Clement of Alexandria

VERSE OF THE WEEK



Psalm 19:8

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.



God’s precepts are right;
His commandments are pure.
Amen!





John Jay



“By conveying the Bible to people ... we certainly do them a most interesting act of kindness. We thereby enable them to learn that man was originally created and placed in a state of happiness, but, becoming disobedient, was subjected to the degradation and evils which he and his posterity have since experienced. The Bible will also inform them that our gracious Creator has provided for us a Redeemer in whom all the nations of the earth should be blessed—that this Redeemer has made atonement “for the sins of the whole world,” and thereby reconciling the Divine justice with the Divine mercy, has opened a way for our redemption and salvation; and that these inestimable benefits are of the free gift

Continued on next page

Gospel of the Egyptians, Gospel of Matthias, 1 Clement, Epistle of Barnabas, Preaching of Peter, Revelation of Peter, Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, Protoevangelium of James, Acts of John, and Acts of Paul. From what we can tell, Clement did not make a sharp distinction between what was canonical and what was non-canonical.¹³

E. HIPPOLYTUS

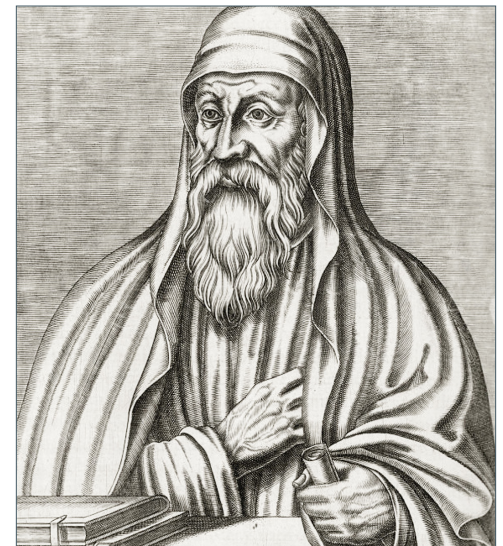
The Roman elder Hippolytus (c. A.D. 170–236) cites New Testament books in a way that indicates a near agreement with the list found in the Muratorian Fragment. He uses all the 27 books except Jude, Philemon, and 2 and 3 John. He considers Hebrews as authoritative, but not as Pauline.¹⁴

F. ORIGEN

Among the fathers of the third century Origen (A.D. 186–254) stands head and shoulders above the rest. He was unrivaled in universal learning and in brilliance. He devoted his long life to a study of the Scriptures, giving specific attention to issues of canonicity. He traveled extensively and spent considerable time in each of the major centers of Christianity. At the age of 17 he became an instructor in the famous school for catechumens at Alexandria. At age 18 he was appointed overseer (or bishop) of the Alexandrian church. Later he fell into disfavor and had to move to Caesarea. Though Origen is theologically suspect in a number of areas, what he has to say about the canon is extremely helpful.¹⁵

Regarding the New Testament canon, Origen writes, “There are four Gospels only uncontroverted in the Church of God spread under heaven. Peter has left one Epistle generally acknowledged;

and perhaps a second, for that is disputed. John wrote the Apocalypse and an Epistle of very few lines; and, it may be, a second and third, since all do not admit them to be genuine.”¹⁶ On the epistle to the Hebrews, he writes, that “the thoughts are the thoughts of the Apostle Paul; but who it was who wrote the Epistle, God only knows certainly.”¹⁷



Origen of Alexandria

Elsewhere he quotes the epistles of James and Jude, but doubts their right to be called Christian Scriptures.¹⁸

Origen alludes to various “apocryphal” books such as the Epistle of Barnabas and The Shepherd of Hermas, and either questions or rejects their authority.

The books that are acknowledged in the highest sense as being Scripture include the four gospels, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, the 13 epistles of Paul, and the Apocalypse. Hebrews is only slightly, if at all, behind these in authority.¹⁹ After deliberation, Origen seems to have endorsed James, 2 Peter, and Jude. However, his



position on 2 and 3 John has been subject to debate.²⁰

G. DIONYSIUS

A student of Origen, Dionysius, in A.D. 265 tried to raise questions about the authorship of the Apocalypse. Though his cause was later taken up to some extent by Eusebius, the Alexandrian church finally settled upon the canonical status of the book.²¹ Despite the heretical challenges to orthodox Christianity during the third century, there was a general acceptance of a common canon. For instance, each side in these controversies appealed to the same Scriptures as a common ground of conflict.²²

H. A SUMMARY OF THE PERIOD A.D. 170–303

1. Though precise limits were not yet defined, it was assumed by everyone that the contents of the New Testament were known. The writers of the third century are a little more definitive in this matter than those of the end of the second century. For example, Origen of Alexandria reflects a little more decisiveness than Clement of Alexandria.
2. Books that were not recognized, with a few exceptions, were unknown. An obvious exception here is Tertullian's treatment of Hebrews. Perhaps another would be Origen's handling of 2 and 3 John. Furthermore, there were significant differences between the East and the West on the recognition of some of the shorter books.
3. By the end of this period the apocryphal writings, including the Apocalypse of Peter, had disappeared as

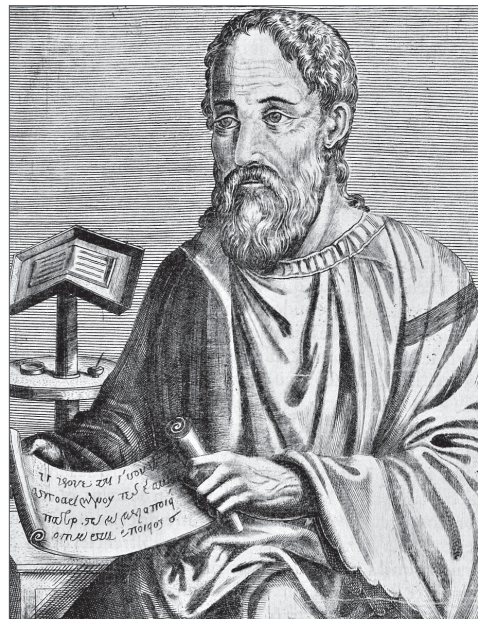
candidates for canonicity. In other words, the freedom taken by Clement of Alexandria in using some of these books had vanished by the time Origen and other third century writers made evaluations.

III. TESTIMONIES FROM A.D. 303–397 ON A CANONICAL COLLECTION

This is the period of the formal ratification of current beliefs about the canon by early councils of the church.²³ Some outstanding leaders were also involved in this period, but it is the consensus of fourth century Christianity as recognized by the councils that is of greatest significance.

A. EUSEBIUS

A look at two individual leaders will demonstrate the grass-roots origin of this consensus. Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 270–340) was overseer of the church in Caesarea before 315. He experienced the persecution under the Roman emperor Diocletian and wit-



Eusebius

John Jay (continued)

and grace of God, not of our deserving, nor in our power to deserve. The Bible will also [encourage] them with many explicit and consoling assurances of the Divine mercy to our fallen race, and with repeated invitations to accept the offers of pardon and reconciliation.... They, therefore, who enlist in His service, have the highest encouragement to fulfill the duties assigned to their respective stations; for most certain it is, that those of His followers who [participate in] His conquests will also participate in the transcendent glories and blessings of His Triumph.”

— 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, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay, 1794–1826*, Henry P. Johnston, editor (New York: Burt Franklin, 1890), Vol. IV, 494, 498, from his “Address at the Annual Meeting of the American Bible Society,” May 13, 1824.



Roger Sherman



The Globe, a Washington, D.C. newspaper printed this about Roger Sherman:

“The volume which he consulted more than any other was the Bible. It was his custom, at the commencement of every session of Congress, to purchase a copy of the Scriptures, to peruse it daily, and to present it to one of his children on his return.”

— Roger Sherman, signer of the Declaration of Independence, signer of the Constitution, “Master Builder of the Constitution,” judge, framer of the Bill of Rights, U.S. senator.

The Globe (Washington, D.C. newspaper), August 15, 1837, 1.

nessed the burning of many sacred books including copies of the Scriptures as a result of the edict of A.D. 303. Eusebius was the outstanding church historian of the early centuries of Christianity.

After Constantine legalized Christianity in A.D. 313, one of his actions was to commission Eusebius to make 50 copies of the New Testament.

Thus it was not an idle question to Eusebius as to which books belonged in this canon and which did not, and it is not surprising that he devotes much space to it in his famous *Church History*.²⁴

Eusebius divided early Christian writings which claimed to be apostolic into three categories:

- 1. The acknowledged books.** This category contained all the present 27 books minus James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and possibly Revelation. Only books with undisputed authenticity that were written by one with apostolic authority were included here. If a book failed these tests, Eusebius placed it in the disputed group.
- 2. The controverted or disputed books.** This group was subdivided into two parts. The first part was composed of books which were popularly admitted, though authenticity (2 Peter) or apostolicity (James, 2 and 3 John, Jude) were in question. Thus, if 2 Peter was written by the apostle Peter, then it belonged with the acknowl-

edged books. Eusebius held that the other four books were authentic, but questioned their author’s apostleship. Books in this group were disputed but were used. The second part of disputed books were those definitely lacking in either authenticity or apostolicity. Books such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* were included here. In addition, the *Apocalypse of John* was questioned on internal grounds (style of writing). Yet, it was not lacking in external support (earlier testimony held that it was written by the apostle John). Those who questioned the apostolic authorship of John’s *Apocalypse* sometimes placed it among the acknowledged books, though others placed it among the spurious works of the second group of disputed books. Of course, those who fully accepted its apostolic authorship placed it among the acknowledged books.²⁵

- 3. The heretical books.** All of these writings opposed orthodox doctrine.

Eusebius reflects the prevailing tradition among the churches that existed before the first council ever met.

B. ATHANASIUS

Athanasius completed the task begun by Eusebius in defining the extent of the New Testament canon. The fall of Constantine’s house and Athanasius’ position as overseer of Alexandria afforded him this opportunity. Thus, in his *Festal Letter* of A.D. 365 (a communication which customarily set the date for Easter each year), he presented his judgment on this matter. He listed the 27 books of the present canon and had strong words forbidding the use of any



others such as the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas.²⁶

C. THE COUNCIL OF LAODICEA

The earliest council to act upon the canon was the Council of Laodicea (A.D. 363). Its last pronouncement said, “Psalms composed by private men must not be read in the church, nor books not admitted into the canon, but only the canonical [books] of the New and Old Testaments.”²⁷ Yet, two deficiencies of this council were:

1. It was only a small gathering of clergy from parts of Lydia and Phrygia. It was not representative of the whole church of the time.
2. Its findings did not furnish a list of the canonical books. Some sources contain what is probably an early gloss of such a list. It corresponds exactly with the list of Cyril of Jerusalem and contains 26 books. The Apocalypse is missing.²⁸

Despite these deficiencies, the council of Laodicea is the first move in the direction of formal ecclesiastical recognition of the New Testament canon.

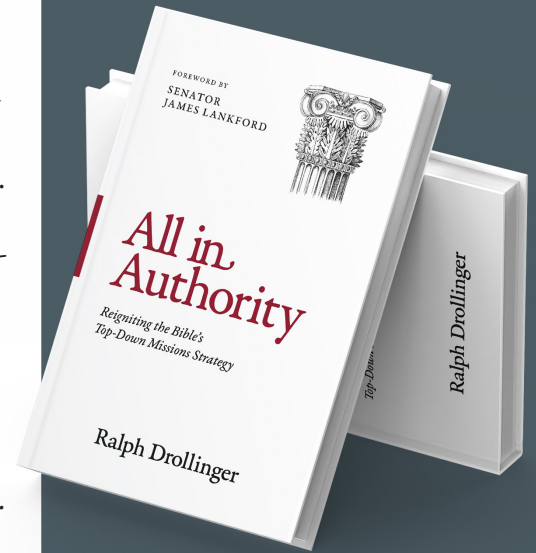
D. THE COUNCIL OF HIPPO

The next several decades were marked by extensive discussion on the canon in various sections of the Christian world. The first discussion by a representative provincial council was one in which Augustine (A.D. 354–430) took part: the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393.

IV. SUMMARY

Ralph Drollinger: Explained here in some detail is *How We Got the Bible*. This was the historical process wherein the Church recognized the Canon of the New Testament. Importantly, it did not create it; through this historical process of debate, sifting, and reaffirmation is the settled recognition of The Book God has given to the world He created. He not only involves human instrumentalities in the saving of souls, but in the penning and canonization of His Book.

Subsequently, may the Bible hold a special, authoritative place in your heart: It being God’s Word, it follows that it should be the final arbitrator of truth, faith, and practice for all areas of your life. Hold it in high regard—raise your personal beliefs, standards and policy positions to match its standards—align yourself in all ways to the immutable truths it contains. It follows that you should seriously study His Book to know Him. Do not diminish its authority in an attempt to, in some way, justify in your mind incorrect beliefs, behavior and policies.



NOW AVAILABLE

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).

All in Authority: Reigniting the Bible’s Top-Down Missions Strategy provides the biblical exegesis for this missional strategy that is found in both the Old and New Testaments. The book provides a clarion call for the Church to make political public servants a priority mission field in our nation today. Request your complimentary copy at capmin.org.



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1. Brooke Foss Westcott, A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament, 6th ed. (1889; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 14–15.
2. Ibid., 405–408; J. S. Riggs, “Canon of the New Testament,” in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1929), 1:564–565.
3. Brooke Foss Westcott, The Bible in the Church (1864; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 116.
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13. Thiessen, Introduction, 17; William R. Farmer and Denis M. Farkasfalvy, The Formation of the New Testament Canon: An Ecumenical Approach (New York: Paulist, 1983), 17–18; Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 340–341.
14. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 340.
15. Thiessen, Introduction, 18; Westcott, The Bible, 134–137; Metzger, Canon of the New Testament, 135.
16. Cited by Westcott, The Bible, 136.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 136–37.
20. Thiessen, Introduction, 18.
21. Ibid., 19; Westcott, The Bible, 137–138.
22. Ibid., 116.
23. Westcott, General Survey, 15.
24. Metzger, Canon of the New Testament, 201–202; Westcott, The Bible, 146–147.
25. Westcott, The Bible, 150–153.
26. Ibid., 160–161.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 170; Thiessen, Introduction, 25.

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