

Introduction to the New Testament Canon

For the Preterist Bible Project

By Ed Stevens -- April 2011

It is usually surprising, even to evangelical theologians, when Preterists affirm that all twenty-seven books of our New Testament were *written, collected, and certified* as authoritative by the apostles before they passed from the earthly scene, and before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The reason for this surprise, is that most Christians have accepted without question the Roman Catholic theory of *canon* formation, which says that the writing of the New Testament books was not finished until the end of the first century, and the selection and collection of those writings into a list of approved books was not completed until near the end of the second century (i.e., the Muratorian fragment, AD 170).

When we use the word *canon*, we are referring to the twenty-seven books of our New Testament, which are considered by Christians as inspired, inerrant, and absolutely authoritative for all matters of doctrine and practice in the Church. Even though the New Testament does not use the word *canon* or *canonical* in reference to its contents, the concepts of *canonicity* and *canonization* (such as inspiration, binding and loosing authority, direct revelation, and Scripture) are frequently found throughout the New Testament.

Regardless of its vociferous claims, however, the Roman Church did not give us the canon of Scripture—the Holy Spirit did. And the Spirit provided it through inspired apostles and prophets who spoke and wrote under the infallible influence of the Holy Spirit. The Romanist claim is based on the idea of *apostolic succession*, and its corollary doctrine of the *infallibility* of the Church. In other words, if the inspiration and authority of the apostles was passed down to succeeding generations of churchmen, then the Church continued to be equipped with inspired, infallible, and absolutely authoritative leaders who would be qualified to give us an infallible canon and infallible creeds.

To be consistent, the Roman Church would also have to have the same *gift of inspiration* that the apostles and prophets had, since the authority and infallibility of the apostles came directly from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If the Roman Church has true apostolic succession, then they must also have the direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit, which would enable them to produce more inspired scripture and add it to the canon. Without that *inspiration*, there can be no absolute authority or infallibility.

Protestants are quick to point out that the office of apostle (as in the twelve “apostles” of Christ) required direct eyewitness experience of the resurrected Christ, full inspiration and empowerment by the *Paraclete* (the Holy Spirit or “comforter”), and direct revelation and commission from Christ. The only exceptions to this were those to whom Jesus directly appeared and commissioned (such as Paul and James), or those upon whom Peter and the apostles laid their hands (such as Mark, Luke, and Jude) using the canonical authority (“the binding and loosing authority” Matt 16:19) that Christ had given to Peter. That authority and inspiration passed away permanently when Peter and the other inspired apostles and prophets left the earthly scene. It was not passed down to future generations. That authority and inspiration is now vested in their written word (our New Testament writings).

If that (canonical) authority had been given to each successive generation of church leaders after the passing of the apostles, it would mean that the gift of inspiration was passed

down also, thus keeping the canon open forever. The Mormons with their *Book of Mormon* would love that idea, as would the Moonies and their writings of Sun Myung Moon. So we can see that the Romanist idea of *apostolic succession* opens the door for all kinds of confusion and corruption to creep into the church, and cheapens the idea of the inspiration, inerrancy, and absolute authority of the true canon of Scripture.

Nevertheless, the Romanists do not surrender their position. They point to the infallible canon and the infallible creeds as evidence of their infallibility. They state that if we deny the infallibility of the Church, we are thereby negating the legitimacy of the canon and the creeds, since the Church produced them. The Reformers had difficulty with this argument, but Preterists can easily see the fallacy. Since the creeds are wrong in their timing of the eschatological events, the Church who produced those creeds is also mistaken.

Furthermore, if the Church made mistakes in the creeds, how can we trust their work on the canon? If we have the correct canon of New Testament scriptures (and I believe we do), we are burdened to explain how that could happen without an infallible Church to select, collect, and approve those books. If the inspired apostles of the first century did not approve the canon for us, we are left to believe that fallible churchmen muddled their way through the process for two centuries and finally came up with a canon that can never be considered infallibly correct. The only acceptable solution, at least for a Protestant, is to believe that the first century inspired apostles did the canonization work, and that the later church *merely recognized* (not authorized) the already-established apostolic canon. That would be a canon we could trust, which would render all later creeds and councils subordinate to it (*sola scriptura*).

This idea of a closed canon by the time of the passing of the apostles is a sword that cuts both ways. Not only does it rule out the Roman Church's claim of having the right to decide the content of our canon, it rules out *all* other claims by Protestants and cults as well. The apostles were the only ones who had the inspiration and authority to not only *write* inspired Scripture, but also to infallibly *decide* which books were authoritative. Subsequent church leaders were neither inspired, inerrant, eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ, nor directly commissioned by Him. This means that the only Christians who were ever qualified to set the boundaries of the New Testament canon were those very apostles who produced the writings in the first place. This view is called *apostolic canonization*. It is not a new theory, nor is it exclusive to Preterism (cf. Ernest L. Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, 1994), but it is certainly consistent with the Preterist idea of a pre-70 date for all the NT books.

The Early Date of the New Testament Canon

It is easy to support a pre-70 date for the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, since Luke and Acts were clearly written before Paul was released from his imprisonment in AD 63, and Luke claims that he was aware of at least two other gospel accounts (Matthew and Mark) before he wrote his gospel (Luke 1:1). Furthermore, the gospel of Luke contains some of the unique material found in either Matthew *or* Mark, but not in both. Therefore, Matthew and Mark's gospels must have been among Luke's research material, thus predating his gospel. Luke's gospel, however, does not show any awareness of the unique material in John's gospel, suggesting that it was probably written after Luke.

We can also date all fourteen of Paul's epistles (including Hebrews, which is found in all extant ancient complete collections of Pauline epistles) prior to his martyrdom under Nero in AD 64. We also know that James, the Lord's brother, wrote his epistle before he was martyred in AD

62. The epistle of Jude appears to have been written about the same time as the second epistle of Peter, since there is considerable similarity of content. Since Peter was martyred under Nero in AD 64-65, his two epistles were obviously written before AD 70. This puts a pre-70 date on all New Testament books except the writings of the Apostle John.

What About John's Writings?

Evangelical scholars agree that all 27 books of our New Testament canon were written before the apostles died, but they do not terminate the apostolic generation until AD 95, the alleged date of John's death. This presumed longevity of John leaves the door wide open for a post-AD 70 date for the Johannine writings—i.e., his Gospel, three epistles, and the book of Revelation—thirty years after the deaths of Apostles Peter and Paul in AD 64-65. This creates a dilemma for Preterists, who date John's writings before AD 70.

If John or any of the other inspired apostles lived beyond AD 70, they would have retained the gift of inspiration, and could easily have written more inspired books after AD 70. And we would have expected them to write some more, in view of the confusion and doctrinal deviations that sprang up soon after the destruction of Jerusalem. If any of the inspired apostles were still around, they would have been able to clear up the confusion and put the church back on track, both by their public teaching and by their inspired writings. Of course, many Futurists use this very argument to support their idea that all of John's writings were written after AD 70, especially the book of Revelation.

However, there is a Biblical answer to this conundrum. We believe Apostle John died in the Neronian persecution, about the same time as Peter and Paul (ca. AD 64-65), thus forcing all of the New Testament books, including John's writings, to be written before AD 70. Where is the Biblical support for that?

In Matthew 20:20-23 (and its parallel in Mark 10:35-40) the mother of the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, asked Jesus to place her two sons on his right and left when He came into His Kingdom (i.e., at the Parousia):

But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you [plural] are asking. Are you [both] able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They [both] said to Him, "We [both] are able." He said to them [both], "My cup you [both] shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father." (Matt 20:22-23 NASB95)

Jesus asked *both* sons (not just James) if they were able to drink the cup of martyrdom which He was about to drink, and they *both* said to Him that they were able. Jesus then said to *both* of them (James and John) that they *both* would indeed drink the same cup of martyrdom, implying that neither of them would remain alive until His Parousia. James (the brother of John) was killed by Herod Agrippa I in about AD 44 (Acts 12:1-2).

When did John drink the cup?

Josephus (*Antiq.* 20:200 in Thackeray, or *Antiq.* 20.9.1 in Whiston) mentions that "James [the Lord's brother] and *some of his companions*" were arrested by Annas II in April of AD 62 during the three months between the end of Festus' and the beginning of Albinus'

procuratorships. Josephus says that James was killed by Annas II, but he does not say what happened to the others who were arrested. It is possible that John was one of those companions, but since John was a friend of the Annas family (as John himself tells us in John 18:15-16), he may have been exiled to Patmos rather than being killed. This would explain when and how John was exiled to Patmos.

Since Luke's gospel (written before Paul's trial in AD 61-63) does not reflect any awareness of the unique material in John's gospel, nor does his book of Acts (also finished before Paul's trial in AD 61-63) mention the exile of John to Patmos, it seems probable that the gospel of John was written after Luke had already composed his gospel account (ca. AD 60), and that the book of Revelation, written during John's exile to Patmos, was composed after the book of Acts and after Paul's trial in Rome began in AD 61. The date for Luke and Acts then becomes the peg on which we hang the dates for several of the New Testament books.

The book of Revelation would have been written after John was arrested and exiled in AD 62. That would place its writing at about AD 62-63, while Paul was still on trial in Rome (AD 61-63) and before his release in AD 63. That would mean that the book of Revelation was not the last book of our New Testament to be written.

Since the book of Revelation warns its readers to "not add to . . . nor take away from this book of prophecy" (Rev 22:18-19), tradition sees this as implying that Revelation was the last book to be written. But that supposition is easily overturned when we remember that both Paul and Peter reflect awareness of the book of Revelation in some of their epistles (cf. 1 Pet 5:13; Ephesians; Colossians; Philippians; and Heb 12:22-29; 13:14). Peter wrote his first epistle from the city cryptically named "Babylon". Paul wrote several things about the Jerusalem above, the new creation, and the New Heavens and Earth, which sound very similar to the descriptions in the book of Revelation. This suggests that both Paul and Peter had seen the book of Revelation before they wrote their epistles.

John's Gospel and his three shorter epistles appear to have been written before he was exiled, that is, before AD 62. If John was still being held under Roman guard on the island of Patmos when the Neronian persecution broke out two years later in the summer of AD 64, he most likely would have been killed by the Romans (right after Paul was killed, and shortly before Peter died ca. AD 64-65). However, it is also possible that John was released shortly after writing Revelation, and went to nearby Ephesus, where he would have been at the time of the Neronian persecution. That would account for the tradition which says he was buried in Ephesus. This would have fulfilled Jesus' prediction of John's drinking the same cup of martyrdom (Matt 20:23) that his brother James had already drunk twenty years earlier (Acts 12:1-2).

That would mean all of John's writings were finished before the Neronian persecution in AD 64, supporting the idea that the whole New Testament canon was written before AD 70.

Pre-70 Dates for All the Books

Norman Geisler, in his article "The Dating of the New Testament" on his website (<http://bethinking.org>), argues for a pre-AD 62 date for Luke and Acts, citing both William F. Albright and John A. T. Robinson as examples of scholars who have suggested pre-AD 70 dates for most (if not all) of the New Testament documents. John A. T. Robinson especially, in his *Redating the New Testament* (1976), defended the idea that every New Testament book must have been written before AD 70, because the destruction of Jerusalem "is never once mentioned as a past fact" in any of the New Testament documents (p. 13). Several conservative scholars

have advocated a pre-70 date for all New Testament books (e.g., Arthur Ogden, Milton Terry, David Chilton, J. Stuart Russell, and Cornelius Vanderwaal).

Based on the above considerations, here is how we would sequence and date the twenty-seven New Testament books. A fuller explanation of the reasoning behind this can be found in the books, *First-Century Events* by Edward E. Stevens, and *The Development of the New Testament* by Arthur Ogden:

1 Thessalonians (AD 52)
2 Thessalonians (AD 52)
Galatians (AD 52-53)
1 Corinthians (AD 57)
2 Corinthians (AD 57)
Romans (AD 58)
Matthew (pre-AD 58)
Mark (pre-AD 58)
Luke (AD 58-61)
Acts (AD 58-61)
John (AD 60-62)
1, 2, 3 John (AD 61-62)
James (AD 62)
Revelation (AD 62-63)
Ephesians (AD 63)
Colossians (AD 63)
Philemon (AD 63)
Philippians (AD 63)
Hebrews (AD 63)
1 Timothy (AD 63)
Titus (AD 63)
1 Peter (AD 63-64)
2 Timothy (AD 64)
Jude (AD 64-65)
2 Peter (AD 64-65)

Collection and Certification of the Canon

Anyone who has studied textual criticism, knows that these books must have had early and wide circulation around the Mediterranean rim. The same variant readings appear in early manuscripts that come from Alexandria, Palestine, Turkey, Greece, and Rome. That was a wide circulation at an early date. How did that happen?

We know that Paul carried his own collection of "books and parchments" with him on all his missionary trips.

When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments. (2 Tim 4:13, NAS95)

He evidently kept copies of his epistles with him so that the churches he visited could

copy from his originals. And there is a good chance that he not only had copies of his own epistles, but perhaps one or more of the gospel accounts as well (in addition to Luke). These were the “exemplars” or master copies from which the churches made their own copies.

Furthermore, when Peter wrote his second epistle in AD 64, he showed that he was not only aware that Paul had written a number of epistles, but that he had evidently read them, and was here stating his approval of them:

*And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also **our beloved brother Paul**, according to the wisdom given him, **wrote to you**, as also in **all his letters**, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also **the rest of the Scriptures**, to their own destruction. (2 Pet 3:15-16, NAS95)*

There are four things we need to notice in these two verses (see the boldfaced words in the text above). Peter refers to Paul in post-mortem eulogistic style (“our beloved brother”) as if Paul was already dead. He uses the past tense (“wrote to you”) in regard to Paul’s writing activities, as if Paul was no longer writing to them. Peter then mentions Paul’s letters as a group (“all his letters”), as if he had access to a completed collection of them, implying that Paul had already been martyred and was no longer writing letters to the churches. When he says “rest of the Scriptures,” it implies that Peter had access to a collection of canonical Scriptures there in Jerusalem. Peter places Paul’s collection of letters on a par with “the rest of the scriptures,” which certifies their inspiration and canonical authority. Peter here uses his “keys of the Kingdom” (binding and loosing authority) to pronounce the whole collection of Paul’s letters as canonical. Notice what Jesus had earlier said to Peter:

“I will give you [singular] the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you [singular] bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you [singular] loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:19 NASB95)

Peter literally played the key role in the canonical process, not because he was the most prolific writer, or because he had the best collection of books, or the best rabbinical education, but because he had the inspired authority to recognize and certify which writings were true.

The authority that Christ gave to Peter was *not* passed on to successive generations. Otherwise, writing by inspiration and certifying new books as canonical would have also continued, thus leaving the canon open forever. This means that the collection of writings approved by Peter and the apostles would have been the first and only *authoritative* canonical list. Furthermore, it means that *inspired* men, rather than later generations of uninspired men, did the writing, collecting, and certifying of that canonical list. The result is a canon we can trust, and which renders any determinations by later uninspired churchmen as being secondary and subordinate.

In conclusion, I am not saying that all, or even many, of the churches throughout the Roman Empire had copies of all the New Testament books. Jerusalem may have been the only church that had copies of all twenty-seven, although it is possible that the churches of Antioch, Rome, and Alexandria did as well. The universal pre-70 distribution of the canon is not essential to *apostolic canonization*. All that is necessary is that Peter, the other apostles, and the Jerusalem church had copies of all of them, and that Peter gave his approval of them before he was

martyred in the Neronic persecution of AD 64-65. That much seems to be indicated by the statements of Peter and Paul which we looked at above.