How the New Testament canon formed: student handout

Module 19: Formation of the New Testament Canon and the Muratorian Fragment.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____ **Class:** _____

Central question: How and when did early Christians come to agree on the 27 books of the New Testament, and what can a damaged list like the Muratorian Fragment tell us?

Read each document's source note first, then what kind of source it is. Fill in the canon timeline and organizer with your partner. Words in quotation marks are the sources' own words in English translation.

Document A: Marcion and Irenaeus

Source: The timeline entries for Marcion's canon and Irenaeus and the site's answer to who decided the canon (for Justin Martyr), with a passage from Irenaeus's Against Heresies.

A summary by ExtantBible (2026) of Justin Martyr (about 150 CE) and Marcion's collection (140 to 144 CE), and a primary source: Irenaeus, Against Heresies, written about 180 to 185 CE, in a public-domain translation (1885).

“It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the "pillar and ground" of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.”

Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.11.8, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (1885).

- Use came first: about 150 CE, Justin Martyr described Sunday gatherings where "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read"; he calls these memoirs Gospels.
- Marcion, a teacher expelled by the church at Rome in 144, accepted only his own edited form of Luke's Gospel and ten letters of Paul (140 to 144 CE). It is the earliest known attempt to fix a set of Christian books.
- Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon in Gaul, wrote Against Heresies about 180 to 185 CE. In the passage above, the "four pillars" are the four Gospels. He quoted most other New Testament books as Scripture, but he wrote no list, and he never names Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, Jude or Philemon.

On ExtantBible: Timeline: Marcion's canon

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Document B: The Muratorian Fragment

Source: The timeline entry for the Muratorian fragment, with what Metzger (1987) and Gallagher and Meade (2017) report on its date, including the late dating by Sundberg (1973) and Hahneman (1992), and two passages from the Fragment in Gallagher and Meade's translation.

Primary source: an anonymous list of books, dated by most scholars to 170 to 200 CE and by a minority to the fourth century, in a Latin copy made in the seventh or eighth century; passages in the English translation of Gallagher and Meade (2017).

"There is current also [an epistle] to the Laodiceans, [and] another to the Alexandrians, [both] forged in Paul's name to [further] the heresy of Marcion, and several others which cannot be received into the catholic church [...]."

The Muratorian Fragment, lines 63-67, trans. Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity (Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 4.

"We receive only the apocalypses of John and Peter, though some of us are not willing that the latter be read in church. But Hermas wrote the Shepherd very recently, in our times, in the city of Rome, while bishop Pius, his brother, was occupying the [episcopal] chair of the church of the city of Rome. And therefore it ought indeed to be read; but it cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the apostles, for it is after [their] time."

The Muratorian Fragment, lines 71-80, trans. Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity (Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 4.

- What survives: a damaged Latin list of New Testament books, about 85 lines long, missing its beginning, in a manuscript in Milan copied in the seventh or eighth century (Gallagher and Meade; Metzger says the eighth). Lodovico Antonio Muratori published it in 1740.
- It names Luke and John as the third and fourth Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, two letters of John and Revelation (the "Apocalypse of John"). It also accepts the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. It says nothing about Hebrews, James or the letters of Peter. The Shepherd of Hermas it allows to be read, but not publicly in church.
- The date of the list: most scholars date it to 170 to 200 CE. Their main clue is inside the text: Hermas wrote "very recently, in our times" while Pius was bishop of Rome, and Pius led the church at Rome about 140 to 154. The warnings against Marcion fit the late 100s too.
- A minority, Albert Sundberg (1973) and Geoffrey Hahneman (1992), as Gallagher and Meade report them, date it to the fourth century. They read "our times" as the age after the apostles, not the writer's own lifetime. Without that clue, they argue, a list like this fits the 300s, when many lists were made, better than the 100s, when it would be the only one.

On ExtantBible: Timeline of the text: the Muratorian fragment

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Document C: Eusebius sorts the books

Source: The timeline entry for Eusebius's list, with two passages from his Church History 3.25, and the entry for Codex Sinaiticus on the page of famous early copies.

Primary source: Eusebius of Caesarea, a bishop and historian, Church History, written about 315 to 325 CE, in a public-domain translation (1890); and a note by ExtantBible (2026) on a Bible copied about the middle of the 4th century.

“After this must be reckoned the epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former epistle of John, and likewise the epistle of Peter, must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time.”

Eusebius, Church History 3.25.2, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890).

“Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name.”

Eusebius, Church History 3.25.3, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890).

- Eusebius sorted the writings into three groups: accepted (the four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, 1 John and 1 Peter), disputed (known and used by many, but not accepted everywhere) and rejected (among them the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter and the Letter of Barnabas).
- In the passages, "the former epistle of John" is 1 John, "the epistle of Peter" is 1 Peter and "the Apocalypse of John" is Revelation. He also lists Revelation among the rejected books, "if it seem proper", because some reject it and others accept it: he could not decide.
- He writes as a historian reporting what churches did in his time, not as a council making a decision.
- Codex Sinaiticus, a Greek copy of the whole Bible made about the middle of the 4th century (a codex is a book with pages), holds the New Testament with two more books, the Letter of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.

On ExtantBible: Timeline: Eusebius's list

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Document D: Athanasius, the councils and a different canon

Source: The timeline entries for Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter, the Council of Nicaea, the Synod of Hippo and Councils of Carthage, and the Syriac Peshitta, with a passage from Athanasius's letter.

Primary source: Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, 39th Festal Letter, written in 367 CE, in a public-domain translation (1892); and a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of councils from 325 to 419 CE and other lists of 350 to 450 CE.

List	Date (CE)	New Testament books	Revelation
Cyril of Jerusalem, lectures	350	26	Left out
Laodicea list (whether it is the council's own is disputed)	363 to 364	26	Left out
Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter	367	27	Included
Gregory of Nazianzus, a poem listing the books	381 to 390	26	Left out
Synod of Hippo and Councils of Carthage	393 to 419	27	Included
Syriac Peshitta	400 to 450	22	Left out

“These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude.”

Athanasius, Festal Letter 39.5, in St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, ed. Archibald Robertson, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 4 (1892), p. 552.

“These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these.”

Athanasius, Festal Letter 39.6, in St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters, ed. Archibald Robertson, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 4 (1892), p. 552.

- Athanasius's yearly Easter letter told the churches in his care which books to treat as Scripture. After the passage above he names fourteen letters of Paul, with Hebrews among them, and then Revelation. It is the earliest surviving list of exactly the 27 books. He adds that some other books, such as the Shepherd, are not in the canon but may be read by new believers.
- Bishops at Hippo (393), with Augustine pressing for it, and councils at Carthage (397 and 419) approved the same 27 books for the churches of North Africa. After them the Latin-speaking West kept to 27 books, but the Greek-speaking East was not bound by them.

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- The Council of Nicaea (325) did not decide the canon: its published decrees contain no list of books.
- The Peshitta, the Bible of the Syriac-speaking churches (400 to 450 CE), has 22 books and leaves out 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. Syriac churches still read from the 22 books in worship.

On ExtantBible: Timeline: Athanasius's letter

Evidence organizer

	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
1.	Put these in order with their dates: Athanasius's letter, Marcion's collection, Eusebius's list, Irenaeus.	
2.	Which books did Eusebius list as disputed, and what did "disputed" mean?	
3.	What does the Muratorian Fragment say about the Shepherd of Hermas, and how do scholars who date the list early use that sentence?	
4.	How is the date of the Muratorian Fragment's surviving copy different from the date of the list?	
5.	What is the earliest surviving list of exactly the 27 books?	

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	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
6.	Did the Council of Nicaea decide the canon? What does the site's record say?	
7.	Which lists in Document D leave out Revelation, and what does that show?	

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Your written answer

In one or two paragraphs, answer the central question. Cite at least three documents by letter, give the date range for each, and say how the Muratorian Fragment's date affects your answer.

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Check your work: the single-point rubric

The middle column is the target. Note where the work falls short on the left and where it goes beyond on the right.

Concerns	Target	Going beyond
	Sourcing: Says who made each list, when (with the date range the site gives) and what kind of source it is: a writer's list, a historian's report, a council's decision or a copied Bible.	
	Chronology: Puts the lists in order and identifies which books were settled early and which stayed in question.	
	Limits of the evidence: Explains what a damaged or disputed source can and cannot show, how the Fragment's remark about Hermas is read two ways, and what each dating would mean.	
	Descriptive, qualified language: Attributes datings and judgments ("most scholars date", "Eusebius lists") and keeps historical claims apart from claims about which books are Scripture.	

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