How the New Testament canon formed: study guide

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

Rereading and highlighting feel productive, and they build little memory. Testing yourself builds it. Cover each answer, try to recall it, then check, and come back on the days in the tracker.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. From the Mark lesson: does any original handwritten copy of a New Testament book survive?
2. From the Synoptic lesson: which Gospel do most scholars think was written first?
3. What is the difference between the date of a manuscript and the date of the text it preserves?

Key terms

The idea

- Canon: The set of books a community accepts as Scripture.

Why it matters: Why can different communities have different canons?

- Canon list: An ancient document that names the books its author accepted, disputed or rejected.

Why it matters: Why is a book missing from a list not proof that it was rejected?

- Internal evidence: Clues inside a text about when, where or by whom it was written, such as the Muratorian Fragment's remark that Hermas wrote the Shepherd "very recently, in our times" while Pius was bishop of Rome.

Why it matters: Why can one clue support two different dates?

The sources

- Marcion's collection: The edited Gospel of Luke and ten letters of Paul that Marcion, a teacher expelled by the church at Rome in 144, accepted as his only scriptures (140 to 144 CE).

Why it matters: Most churches rejected Marcion's collection. Why does it still belong in the story?

- Irenaeus's four Gospels: Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, writing about 180 to 185, argued that there must be exactly four Gospels, no more and no fewer. He quoted most other books as Scripture but wrote no list.

Why it matters: How far does his argument go?

- Muratorian Fragment: A damaged Latin list of New Testament books, missing its beginning, kept in a manuscript in Milan copied in the seventh or eighth century; Lodovico Antonio Muratori published it in 1740. It says nothing about Hebrews, James or the letters of Peter.

Why it matters: What changes if it was written in the fourth century instead of the second?

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- Disputed books: Books Eusebius said were known and used by many but not accepted everywhere: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John and 3 John. He put other books, such as the Shepherd of Hermas, in a separate group of rejected books.

Why it matters: What does a disputed category tell us about the state of the canon around 325?

- Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter: The Easter letter of 367 CE in which Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, told the churches in his care which books to read as Scripture: the earliest surviving list of exactly the 27 books.

Why it matters: Why did one bishop's letter not settle the question everywhere?

The decisions

- Regional council: A meeting of bishops of one region, such as Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 and 419, which approved the 27 books for their churches. The Council of Nicaea (325) did not decide the canon.

Why it matters: Whom did these councils speak for?

- Peshitta: The Bible of the Syriac-speaking churches (400 to 450 CE), whose New Testament has 22 books, without 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation.

Why it matters: What does it show about whether there was one canon for every church?

Timeline

- 140 to 144 CE: Marcion's canon (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 140 and 144 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 170 to 200 CE: Muratorian fragment (Scholars are split). Gallagher and Meade (2017) say the debate continues, with a significant following for each date; Metzger (1987) holds the late second century, McDonald (2007) and Robbins (1992) favor the fourth.
- 180 to 185 CE: Irenaeus (canon list) (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 180 and 185 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 240 to 254 CE: Origen's canon list (as reported by Eusebius) (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 240 and 254 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 315 to 325 CE: Eusebius, Church History 3.25 (canon list) (Most scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 315 and 325 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 325 CE: Council of Nicaea (Nearly all scholars agree). Decided in 325 CE, a date scholars broadly accept. The council did not decide the biblical canon.
- 350 CE: Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures (canon list) (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates to 350 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- about the middle of the 4th century: Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph (01)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown and Metzger both date it to about the middle of the 4th century.
- 363 to 364 CE: Council of Laodicea, canon 60 (Scholars are split). Whether the book list in canon 60 belongs to the council or was added later is disputed.
- 367 CE: Athanasius, 39th Festal Letter (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates to 367 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 381 to 390 CE: Gregory of Nazianzus (canon list) (Most scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 381 and 390 CE, the date most scholars give.

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- 393 to 419 CE: Synod of Hippo and Councils of Carthage (canon list) (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 393 and 419 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 400 to 450 CE: Syriac Peshitta (canon list) (Most scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 400 and 450 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 1522 CE: Luther's canon. This list of accepted books dates to 1522. Luther kept all 27 books but placed Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation at the end.
- 1546 CE: Council of Trent. Decided in 1546.

Explain it

In your own words: why do historians treat a list from 367 and a council decision from 393 as different kinds of evidence?

Worked example: dating the Muratorian Fragment

How a historian handles a source whose date is disputed, in four steps.

1. Describe what survives: A damaged Latin list of books, missing its beginning, in a manuscript in Milan copied in the seventh or eighth century.
2. Separate the copy from the text: The manuscript is a late copy. The list itself must be older, and the question is how much older. The parchment cannot answer that, so historians look inside the text.
3. Weigh the evidence inside the text: The list says Hermas wrote the Shepherd "very recently, in our times" while Pius was bishop of Rome (about 140 to 154). Most scholars take this as the writer's own lifetime and date the list to 170 to 200 CE; the site labels this "Most scholars agree". Albert Sundberg (1973) and Geoffrey Hahneman (1992), as Gallagher and Meade report them, read "our times" as the age after the apostles and date it to the fourth century, when lists like it were common: a minority view.
4. Say what each date would mean: If early, it is the oldest surviving list close to the later New Testament and shows a settled core in the late 100s. If late, it joins the other fourth-century lists. Either way, it says nothing about Hebrews, James or the letters of Peter.

Your turn: Revelation

Was Revelation accepted everywhere by 400 CE? The first two steps are done; write the last two before you open the answer.

1. Describe what survives: Eusebius (315 to 325) could not decide where Revelation belonged. Athanasius (367) includes it in his list of 27.
2. Separate the sources: Eusebius reports what churches did in his time; Athanasius writes as one bishop to the churches in his care.

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3. Weigh the other lists: What do the Laodicea list, Gregory of Nazianzus and the Peshitta show about Revelation?

4. Reach a qualified judgment: What would you conclude, and how sure can you be?

Common misconceptions

Historians put the same questions to any popular story about the past: who made the source, when, for whom, and what it leaves out.

- A common claim is that the Council of Nicaea in 325 chose the books of the Bible. The sources the site cites do not support this: Nicaea did not decide the canon. The council's published decrees contain no list of books. The earliest lists come from individual writers such as Irenaeus and Athanasius, and the first councils known to approve the 27 books were regional ones in North Africa, at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 and 419, decades after Nicaea.
- Some people assume there was one list of books that every church used from the start. The lists show several regions moving at different speeds. Eusebius still listed five books as disputed around 325, several Eastern lists left out Revelation after 367, and the Syriac Peshitta kept a New Testament of 22 books long after Athanasius listed 27. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church kept its own list too.
- Some think a council could have added or removed any book it liked. The councils the site records confirmed lists that were already in use. The councils at Hippo and Carthage approved the same 27 books Athanasius had already listed, for the churches of their region. Luther, centuries later, moved four books to the end of his New Testament but did not remove any.

Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. What is the earliest surviving list of exactly the 27 books?

A. The Muratorian Fragment, from the late 2nd century

B. Athanasius's Easter letter of 367

C. A list issued by the Council of Nicaea in 325

Reason: Why is the Muratorian Fragment not the answer, even if it is from the late 2nd century?

A. Every scholar dates it to the 4th century, after Athanasius.

B. Its only copy was made in the seventh or eighth century, so the list cannot be early.

C. It says nothing about Hebrews, James or the letters of Peter, so it does not list all 27.

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2. Which writer is the earliest known to insist on exactly four Gospels?

A. Marcion, about 140 to 144

B. Eusebius, about 315 to 325

C. Irenaeus, about 180 to 185

Reason: What does his argument show?

A. The four Gospels were a set by the late 2nd century, while other books stayed open.

B. The whole New Testament was closed by 185.

C. A council had already approved the four Gospels before he wrote.

3. The Muratorian Fragment survives in a copy made in the seventh or eighth century. When do many scholars date the list itself?

A. 170 to 200 CE

B. The seventh or eighth century, when the copy was made

C. 367 CE, the year of Athanasius's letter

Reason: What evidence do they rely on most?

A. It names exactly the 27 books, as the late 2nd-century churches did.

B. Its remark that Hermas wrote the Shepherd very recently, while Pius was bishop of Rome.

C. The age of the parchment the list is written on in Milan.

4. Which books did Eusebius list as disputed around 315 to 325?

A. Hebrews and the Shepherd of Hermas

B. James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John and 3 John

C. The four Gospels and Acts

Reason: What did "disputed" mean in his list?

A. The churches had rejected those books.

B. The books were known and used by many but not accepted everywhere.

C. The books were waiting for the Council of Nicaea to decide.

5. Which churches' New Testament had 22 books?

A. The Syriac-speaking churches, in the Peshitta

B. The church of Alexandria under Athanasius

C. The Latin churches of North Africa after Hippo and Carthage

Reason: What does this show?

A. The five missing books were written after 450, too late to be included.

B. There was one list, and the Syriac churches had a faulty copy of it.

C. Different regions kept different collections for centuries.

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6. What did the councils at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397 and 419) do?

A. Chose the books for every church in the world

B. Removed Revelation from the Bible

C. Approved the 27 books for the churches of their region

Reason: Why does "for their region" matter?

A. A regional council spoke for its own churches; the Greek-speaking East was not bound by it.

B. Regional councils approved a different list from Athanasius's.

C. They met before Nicaea, so their decision came first.

7. Which statement is a historical claim rather than a statement of belief?

A. These 27 books are inspired Scripture.

B. Athanasius listed 27 books in 367.

C. The church had the authority to close the canon.

Reason: What makes it historical?

A. It can be checked against a surviving source.

B. Most Christians today accept it.

C. It comes from a church leader, so it carries authority.

Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
What is a canon?	The set of books a community accepts as Scripture.
What did Marcion's collection contain, and when?	His edited form of Luke and ten letters of Paul, 140 to 144 CE.
Who insisted on exactly four Gospels, about 180 to 185 CE?	Irenaeus of Lyon.
Where does the Muratorian Fragment survive, and how old is the copy?	In a manuscript in Milan copied in the seventh or eighth century; Muratori published it in 1740.
How do many scholars date the Muratorian list, and from what clue?	170 to 200 CE, from its remark that Hermas wrote the Shepherd very recently, while Pius was bishop of Rome (about 140 to 154). A minority: the fourth century.
Which books did Eusebius list as disputed?	James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John and 3 John.
What is the earliest surviving list of exactly the 27 books?	Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter, 367 CE.

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Question	Answer
Which councils approved the 27 books, and for whom?	Hippo (393) and Carthage (397 and 419), for the churches of their region.
Did the Council of Nicaea decide the canon?	No. Its published decrees contain no list of books.
How many books does the Peshitta New Testament have, and which does it leave out?	22; it leaves out 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation.

Answers

Warm-up

1. No. The books survive in later copies.
2. Mark.
3. A text can be much older than the surviving copy of it.

Why it matters

- Canon: Each community came to accept its books through its own use and its own leaders' lists. The Syriac churches kept 22 New Testament books while Alexandria and North Africa listed 27.
- Canon list: A list may be damaged, as the Muratorian Fragment is, or its writer may simply not mention a book. Irenaeus never names Hebrews or James, but he wrote no list at all, so his silence is not a rejection.
- Internal evidence: Because the clue has to be interpreted. Most scholars read "our times" as the writer's own lifetime, soon after Pius (about 140 to 154), and date the list to 170 to 200; Sundberg and Hahneman, as Gallagher and Meade report, read it as the age after the apostles, which allows a fourth-century date.
- Marcion's collection: It is the earliest known fixed set of Christian books, and it pushed other churches to say which writings they already accepted.
- Irenaeus's four Gospels: It shows that the four Gospels were a fixed set for him in the late 100s. It does not show a closed New Testament: other books stayed in question for two centuries after him.
- Muratorian Fragment: If it is early, it is the oldest surviving list close to the later New Testament and shows a church with a settled core of books in the late 100s. If it is late, it is one of many lists of the 300s and loses that place.
- Disputed books: The core was settled but the edges were not. Five of the later 27 books were still in question, and he could not decide about Revelation.
- Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter: He wrote to the churches in his own care. Other lists still differed after 367: Gregory of Nazianzus (381 to 390) left out Revelation, and the Syriac Peshitta kept 22 books.
- Regional council: A regional council spoke for the churches of its own area. After Hippo and Carthage the Latin-speaking West kept to 27 books, but the Greek-speaking East was not bound by them.
- Peshitta: There was not one canon for every church. The Syriac churches kept a shorter New Testament for centuries and still read from the 22 books in worship.

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Explain it

Athanasius's letter of 367 is one bishop telling the churches in his care what to read, so it shows what Alexandria was taught. The decision at Hippo in 393 records the bishops of a whole region agreeing for their churches. Both show where the canon stood, from different kinds of authority, and neither spoke for every church.

Your turn: Revelation

3. Weigh the other lists: The Greek list after the Synod of Laodicea names every book except Revelation, though whether the list is the council's own is disputed. Gregory of Nazianzus (381 to 390) names 26 books, all but Revelation. The Peshitta (400 to 450) leaves Revelation out.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: Revelation was accepted in some regions, such as Alexandria and North Africa, but not in all: writers in the Greek-speaking East left it out, and the Syriac churches did without it. Name the regions and the sources in your answer; one date will not fit every church.

Self-test

1. Answer B, reason C. The Fragment leaves out Hebrews, James and the letters of Peter. Most scholars date it to 170 to 200, so it is not later than Athanasius by every dating, and a late copy does not make the list itself late. Nicaea issued no list of books.
2. Answer C, reason A. Irenaeus treats the four Gospels as a group in the 180s. Marcion used only his own edited Luke, Eusebius wrote more than a century later, and other books stayed in question long after Irenaeus. The first councils known to approve the books met from 393 on.
3. Answer A, reason B. The clue is inside the text: Pius led the church at Rome about 140 to 154, so "very recently, in our times" points to a writer of the late 100s. The parchment only dates the copy, and the Fragment does not list all 27 books. Sundberg and Hahneman, as Gallagher and Meade report, read "our times" differently and date the list to the fourth century, a minority view.
4. Answer B, reason B. Eusebius calls them disputed writings "which are nevertheless recognized by many". He put the Shepherd of Hermas in a separate group of rejected books and placed the Gospels and Acts first among the accepted. Nicaea did not decide the canon.
5. Answer A, reason C. The Peshitta leaves out 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation, while Alexandria and North Africa listed 27. The five books were not late: Eusebius was already sorting all of them around 325. The lists show regions moving at different speeds, not one list badly copied.
6. Answer C, reason A. They approved the same 27 books Athanasius had listed, Revelation included, for the North African churches. The Latin West then kept to 27, but the East was not bound, and the Syriac churches kept 22. They met decades after Nicaea.
7. Answer B, reason A. A historical claim can be checked against the sources: Athanasius's letter survives. Being widely accepted or coming from a church leader does not make a statement historical. The other two options are beliefs that communities hold and explain in their own ways.

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