

Chapter Eight

Background to the Canonization of the New Testament

Key Factors Which Led to the Canonization of the New Testament

Just as Ezra and the Great Assembly were motivated by circumstances in their day to canonize the Old Testament, there were definite conditions in the first century AD that likewise compelled the apostles to canonize the New Testament. Four key factors were involved. First, as in Ezra's time, there was the massive spread of false teachings and a growing apostasy among the people. Second, the apostles gradually came to realize that Christ's return would not occur in their lifetimes. Third was the fact that Paul, Peter and John began to understand certain aspects of the "mystery of God" which inspired them to see the need for an *authorized* collection of their writings in particular. Finally, Peter and John were ultimately inspired by God to see that the establishment of the Kingdom of God was clearly centuries away.

Key One: False Apostles, False Doctrines, and the Great Apostasy

Before the apostles even began preaching the Gospel, Jesus warned them time and time again that there would be false prophets and ministers—and even false Christs (Matt. 24:4-5, 11, 24). They were confronted with this from the very beginning. They were to beware not only of the teachings of Judaism and Jewish Gnosticism, but also of the pagan Gnostic religions of Samaria and Egypt—as well as other heathen religions. Since Ezra's day, Samaria had been a stronghold of false worship. The apostate worship of the Samaritans—which undoubtedly was a primary reason for canonizing the Old Testament—continued down to New Testament times and beyond.

In fact, it was in Samaria in 31 AD that the apostles had their first confrontation with a false prophet—the influential Gnostic religious leader Simon Magus, who claimed to be the "great power of God" (Acts 8:9-23). Simon Magus went on to proclaim a false gospel—a strange mixture of Gnosticism, Judaism and Christian teachings—and ultimately start a counterfeit "Christian" organization. From that time, the apostles found themselves fighting not only against the various sects of Judaism, but also against Simon Magus' apostate "Christianized" Gnosticism.

The Apostle Paul Counters False Teachers

In nearly every Epistle written by the apostle Paul, there is evidence that he was combating various forms of false teachings and a growing number of "Christian" counterfeits. On every side there were false prophets and enemies of the Gospel. The teachings of the sects of Judaism—the religions of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, Hellenistic Judaism, Alexandrian Judaism, Gnostic Judaism—all had to be dealt with in addition to the Gnostic Samaritan/Jewish religion headed by Simon Magus.

There was hardly a place where Paul preached that he was not confronted by teachers of false religions—many of whom used the *name* of Jesus Christ, but preached false doctrines. Of the fourteen Epistles that Paul wrote, thirteen contain warnings against false teachers and false doctrines. This was one of the primary reasons why God inspired Paul to choose these Epistles for canonization. Key examples include:

II Thessalonians: The Second Epistle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in 51 AD dealt urgently with false teachers who were circulating a counterfeit epistle—claiming that it was from Paul and that the day of the Lord was already present. This was a first glimpse at the coming "apostasy" that would later sweep through the Church of God (II Thess. 2:1-7).

Background to the Canonization of the New Testament

Galatians: Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia in 53 AD because false teachers were perverting the Gospel by adding a strange blend of Jewish/pagan Gnosticism while preaching Christ. The Galatians were being enticed and drawn away, and were in danger of straying from the true Gospel (Gal. 1:6-7; 3:1). Paul made it abundantly clear that there was only *one* true Gospel—and that it was never to be mixed with the teachings and doctrines of any religion, Jewish or Gentile.

Corinthians: In 56 AD, Paul wrote his First Epistle to the Corinthians—devoted almost entirely to dealing with various sins, false teachings and false practices within the congregations. In his Second Epistle, however, which he wrote a year later, Paul warned the Corinthians of the false teachers who were coming into the Church. The churches of Corinth were even allowing false apostles to preach to their congregations—failing to discern the evil in their teachings. Paul wrote: “But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so **your minds might be corrupted** from *the* simplicity that *is* in Christ. **For indeed, if someone comes preaching another Jesus, whom we did not preach, or you receive a different spirit, which you did not receive, or a different gospel, which you did not accept, you put up with it as something good**” (II Cor. 11:1-4). Paul added that such teachers were actually ministers of Satan, deceitfully handling the Word of God (verses 13-15).

Romans: Paul wrote to the Romans in 57 AD from Corinth, warning of “**those who are causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned...**” (Rom. 16:17).

Acts 20: In the spring of 58 AD, Paul summoned the elders of the Church to meet him in Miletus—because he knew that he would not see them again. He gave them this final warning concerning the growing problem of false teachers: “Take heed therefore to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the Church of God, which He purchased with His own blood. **For I know this: that after my departure grievous wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and [even] from among your own selves men will rise up speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves...**” (Acts 20:25-31).

Ephesians: Written in early 63 AD during his first Roman imprisonment, Paul refers to those who were “systematizing the error” (Eph. 4:14).

Colossians: Also written from prison in 63 AD, Paul warned the brethren in Colossae against the false doctrines of philosophy and the worship of angels (Col. 2).

I, II Timothy and Titus: All three Epistles are filled with instructions on how to preach the truth and counter the influence of false doctrines and false ministers. Paul wrote Timothy: “Hold *as the standard for doctrine* the sound words that you heard from me, in *the* faith and love that *are* in Christ Jesus. Guard the good thing that was committed *to you* by *the* Holy Spirit that is dwelling in us” (II Tim. 1:13-14).

John, Peter and Jude Also Face False Teachers

I John: By the time the apostle John wrote his First General Epistle in 63 AD, the Church-wide apostasy was gaining strength as numerous “antichrists” were leaving the congregations and drawing away brethren. John had to deal with three false doctrines, in particular, that had begun to infiltrate the Church. First, there were those who denied the sinful nature of man. John countered: “**If we say that we do not have sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us**” (I John 1:8-10).

Second, some were teaching that it was not necessary to keep the commandments of God and to walk as Jesus walked: “And by this *standard* we know that we know Him: if we keep His commandments. **The one who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.** On the other hand, *if anyone is keeping His Word, truly in this one the love of God is being perfected.* By this *means* we know that we are in Him. Anyone who claims to dwell in Him is obligating himself also to walk even as He Himself walked” (I John 2:3-6; also John 14:15; 15:10-17).

Third, various “antichrists” were also teaching that **Jesus Christ had not come in the flesh.** As false teachers of mystic, Hellenistic Gnosticism, they were leading the apostasy while epitomizing “the spirit of deception.” John wrote: “Beloved, **do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.** By this *test* you *can* know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in *the* flesh is from God. **And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not from God. And this is the spirit of antichrist, which you heard was to come, and even now it is**

Chapter Eight

already in the world” (I John 4:1-6). John’s Second Epistle, probably written in late 64 AD, indicates that the apostasy had gained considerable momentum. John warned that “**many deceivers have entered into the world—those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. This is the spirit of the deceiver and the antichrist**” (II John 7). By the time John wrote his Third Epistle a year later, rebellion within the congregations had become so intense that John was forced to name one of the chief leaders in the apostasy, Diotrephes (III John 9-10).

II Peter: When Peter wrote his Second Epistle, in 66 AD, the Jews were preparing to rise up against Roman rule. Peter warned that the uprising would unleash a flood of “**false teachers among you, who will stealthily introduce destructive heresies, personally denying the Lord who bought them, and bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many people will follow as authoritative their destructive ways; and because of them, the way of the truth will be blasphemed...**” (II Peter 2:1-2).

Jude: In 67 AD, the Jewish rebellion was gaining momentum. False teachers and prophets were making massive inroads into the churches of God in Jerusalem and Judea. So acute was the situation that Jude urged the brethren to “**fervently fight for the faith, which once for all time has been delivered to the saints. For certain men have stealthily crept in.... They are ungodly men, who are perverting the grace of our God, turning it into licentiousness, and are personally denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ...**” (Jude 3-4, 11-13).

Given the apostles’ urgent warnings concerning false teachers and the growing apostasy within the Church, it is apparent that such conditions were a major compelling factor in the canonization of the New Testament.

Key Two: Christ’s Return Was No Longer Seen as Imminent

The apostles expected Christ to return in their lifetimes—an assumption clearly reflected in their writings. Jesus’ statement, “**This generation shall in no wise pass away** until all these things have taken place” (Matt. 24:34), was assumed by the apostles to mean *their* generation. They did not realize until thirty-three years later that “this generation” was not their generation. Thus, the apostles’ writings after 63 AD indicate that they no longer saw Christ’s return as imminent—but as an event which would occur far into the future. Undoubtedly, this factor strongly influenced the apostles to canonize their writings for future generations.

Jesus Went to Heaven—and Promised to Return

On the night of His last Passover, Jesus revealed to the apostles that He was going back to heaven, and that He would return (John 14:2-3, 28-29). Forty-four days later just before Jesus ascended into heaven for the final time, they were eager to know whether Jesus would establish the Kingdom of God immediately. “So then, when they were assembled together, they asked Him, saying, ‘**Lord, will You restore the kingdom to Israel at this time?**’ And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know *the* times or *the* seasons, which the Father has placed in His own authority; but you yourselves shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and **you shall be My witnesses, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth.**’...” (Acts 1:6-8).

When the apostles heard Jesus speak these words, they did not realize the full magnitude of what He said. They could not possibly have known at that time that Jesus actually meant *all* nations in the world—including those nations that would arise well beyond their lifetimes—and that the work of preaching the Gospel through their writings would continue for nearly two thousand more years. Looking back on history, however, one can see in Jesus’ words the seeds for the future writing and canonization of what was to become the New Testament.

Indeed, Jesus declined to tell the apostles that He would not return for nearly two thousand years. That knowledge would have to wait for some thirty-three years—until 63 AD, when they were able to bear it (John 16:12).

Jesus’ Return in Paul’s Epistles Before 63 AD

I Thessalonians: When Paul wrote his First Epistle to the Thessalonians in 51 AD, he made a number of statements which indicate that he believed the Lord was returning soon. For example, he

Background to the Canonization of the New Testament

wrote that those “**who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall in no wise precede those who have fallen asleep**” and that “**we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds for the meeting with the Lord in the air**” (I Thess. 4:13-17). Clearly, Paul looked forward to witnessing the day of the Lord: “Now then, concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, there is no need that I write to you; for you yourselves understand perfectly that **the day of the Lord will come exactly as a thief comes by night.... But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day of the Lord should overtake you as a thief**” (5:1-9).

II Thessalonians: Also written in 51 AD, II Thessalonians includes a key reference to the time of Christ’s return—dealing with the coming “man of sin” and the “abomination of desolation.” Paul wrote: “Now we beseech you, brethren, concerning **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him**, that you not be quickly shaken in mind, nor be troubled—neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by epistle, as if from us, *saying* that the day of Christ is present. **Do not let anyone deceive you by any means because that day will not come unless the apostasy shall come first, and the man of sin shall be revealed—the son of perdition, the one who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is an object of worship; so that he comes into the temple of God and sits down as God, proclaiming that he himself is God.** Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I told you these things? And now you understand what is holding *him* back in order for him to be revealed in his own set time. **For the mystery of lawlessness is already working...** (II Thess. 2:1-12). These Scriptures—and the phrase “**our gathering together to Him**” in particular—show that Paul fully expected Jesus to return soon.

I Corinthians: Paul wrote I Corinthians in 56 AD, and the following references show an expectation for Jesus’ early return: “**Now this I say, brethren: the time is drawing close. For the time that remains...**” (I Cor. 7:29-31). Also: “Behold, I show you a mystery: **we shall not all fall asleep, but we shall all be changed, in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet**” (15:50-51).

Romans: Paul wrote to the Romans in late 57 AD, from Corinth. He stated: “Now *consider* this, **knowing the time, that it is already the hour that we should be roused out of sleep; because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost over, and the day is drawing near; therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light**” (Rom. 13:11-14)—and, “**But the God of peace will bruise Satan under your feet shortly**” (16:20).

Hebrews: Paul wrote the book of Hebrews from Rome in the spring of 61 AD, no doubt looking for Christ’s return. Notice: “**For it is but a short time until He Who is coming will come, and will not delay**” (Heb. 10:37).

James: Written in 40-41 AD, James’ closing remarks indicate that the apostles were expecting Christ to return soon: “Therefore, brethren, be patient **until the coming of the Lord.... Strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord has drawn near.... Behold, the Judge stands at the door**” (James 5:7-9).

I Peter: It is evident that when the apostle Peter wrote his first epistle in 63 AD, he, like Paul, also was expecting Jesus’ return, perhaps within a short time. Peter wrote: “**Now the end of all things has drawn near**” (I Pet. 1:13; 4:7).

I John: The apostle John wrote his First Epistle in 63 AD, referring to the “last [end] time” (I John 2:18). Verse 28 expresses the hope that “**when He is manifested we may have boldness, and not be put to shame before Him at His coming.**”

It is abundantly clear from the writings of Paul, Peter and John that up to 63 AD they saw Jesus’ return as imminent. After 63 AD, however, their teachings dramatically changed. Why did this marked change occur?

Unfulfilled Prophecy Leads to a New Perspective on Christ’s Return

Certain prophetic writings from the Old Testament—coupled with many of the things Christ had personally taught—led the apostles to the conclusion that Jesus’ return was indeed imminent. When the anticipated prophetic scenario they had in mind failed to materialize, however, they began rethink the timing of Christ’s second coming.

In his book *Restoring the Original Bible*, Ernest L. Martin lays out several significant indicators that would have made it apparent to the apostles that Christ would not be returning in their generation—or anytime soon. Most likely, it was this new perspective that primarily led the apostles to canonize the books of the New Testament.

Chapter Eight

Martin mentions the martyrdom of James in the spring of 62 AD, the mass exodus of Jews, Christians, etc. from Jerusalem and Judea in 66-67 AD, and the Jewish-Roman War of 67 AD as having significant influence on the apostles' thinking (*Restoring the Original Bible*, pp. 185-186, 244-248, 265-268, 269-280). As well, there apparently were certain "supernatural signs" that impacted the apostles' conclusions—such as God indicating on Pentecost, 66 AD, that His presence had been removed from the temple (pp. 199-208, 258-259).

But the key appears to be the fact that the chronological prophecies of Daniel were not being fulfilled as anticipated (pp. 186-192, 230-231). The apostles were watching to see whether the prophecies of Zechariah and Daniel would be fulfilled—and were convinced, according to Martin, that 63 AD was the last possible year to begin the final sequence of events described by Daniel's "70 weeks" prophecy. In their minds, the final generation—referred to by Jesus in Matt. 24:34—ran from 30 to 70 AD; the last seven years of that period was Daniel's "70th week."

Martin continues: "Instead of a world war starting between the East and the West in A.D. 63, followed by a revolt of the various kingdoms within the Roman dominion, to fulfill what Christians thought to be Christ's [final] prophecies (Matthew 24:6, 7), just the opposite occurred. Rome had actually become stronger than ever in the spring of A.D. 63. [Thus] Paul came to the conclusion that the 'iron legs' of Rome were going to remain in power for a much longer time."

Martin concludes that the apostles ultimately came to understand that "Christ had been teaching that the actual end-time would arrive *upon a particular generation* which would 'see' the events of Matthew 24 and Zechariah 12 to 14. But with the year A.D. 63 over, it became obvious that the generation that succeeded Christ's resurrection was not the prophesied one of the end-time. **This was the signal to Paul (and shortly afterwards to Peter and John) that it had become necessary to formulate a standard body of Christian documents** which would last the Christian believers until those end-time events would actually occur" (Ibid., pp. 230-232; bold emphasis added).

The Anticipated "Abomination of Desolation"

Daniel's 70th week failed to begin in 63 AD as expected. This meant that the greatly-anticipated "abomination of desolation" (Dan. 12:11, Matt. 24:15) which was to be established in the "midst of the week" (Dan. 9:27)—or, ostensibly, midway through the year 66 AD—would also not occur as foreseen. Paul described this "abomination of desolation" as "the man of sin, the son of perdition" who enters into the temple of God to proclaim himself as God (II Thess. 2:3-4). Thus, the apostles came to fully realize that the "great tribulation" and return of Christ were not to occur until far into the future. Ultimately, God used this new understanding to compel the apostles to canonize for future generations the writings that would become the New Testament.

Key Three: God's Special Revelation to the Apostles

Jesus had promised the apostles that through the power of the Holy Spirit He would lead them into all truth (John 16:13)—but not all at once. Over time, God revealed deeper aspects of His plan to the apostles, starting with Paul. Special revelation was apparently given to Paul around 63 AD concerning what the New Testament calls the "mystery of Christ" and "the sonship of God"—through which God is creating an eternal spiritual family. This new understanding was so profound that it became a major factor in compelling the apostles to canonize their writings.

The Sonship of God: Paul first mentioned the teaching in a letter to the Galatians in 53 AD: "But when the time for the fulfillment came, God sent forth His own Son, born of a woman, born under law, in order that He might redeem those who are under law, so **that we might receive the gift of sonship from God**. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, 'Abba, Father' " (Gal. 4:4-6). (The *KJV* uses "adoption of sons" or "children;" see Rom. 8:15, 23 and Eph. 1:5.)

It is apparent that the knowledge of the "sonship of God" was given through progressive revelation. By 56 AD, when Paul wrote I Corinthians, he spoke of things that God had "**revealed ... by His Spirit**" (I Cor. 2:7, 9-10). Writing to the Romans a year later, Paul expresses an even deeper understanding of the subject: "Now you have not received a spirit of bondage again unto fear, but you have received **the Spirit of sonship**, whereby we call out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit itself bears witness conjointly with our own spirit, *testifying* that **we are the children of God**. Now if *we are* children, *we are* also

Background to the Canonization of the New Testament

heirs—truly, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if indeed we suffer together with Him, so that we may also be glorified together with Him” (Rom. 8:15-17).

Later, while still in prison in Rome, Paul explained to the Ephesians that God had made known to him the “**mystery of Christ** ... which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, **as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit**...” (Eph. 3:1-9). In 63 AD, Paul wrote to the Colossians of the “**mystery that has been hidden from ages and from generations, but has now been revealed to His saints**; to whom God did will to make known what *is* the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; **which is Christ in you, the hope of glory**...” (Col. 1:26-28).

Peter and John’s Understanding of the Mystery and Sonship of God

II Peter 1: When Peter wrote his Second Epistle, it is apparent that he had also received the same revelation from God. He taught that “sonship of God” meant believers would become “**partakers of the divine nature**” of God (II Pet. 1:3-4). What a profound new teaching! Just as God had inspired Paul, He inspired Peter as well to understand the fullness of the “mystery of Christ.”

I John 3: The apostle John wrote that the true believers were now—already—the children of God because they had the seed of begetting from God the Father. “Behold! What *glorious* love the Father has given to us, **that we should be called the children of God!**... Beloved, **now we are the children of God**...” (I John 3:1-2).

Later, when John was given the visions of the book of Revelation, Christ gave him more understanding of God’s plan for mankind. By that time, John fully understood that Christ’s return would not be for centuries into the distant future. Indeed, God’s plan for mankind was exceedingly greater than the apostles had first imagined.

Paul’s Writings after 63 AD

As the apostles began to fully understand that Christ’s return was in the distant future, they were also led to see that the Church would be responsible for revealing the purpose of God to the world. (See Eph. 3:10-11.)

How was God going to make the “mystery of God” known to the world through the Church? Apparently, by that time, Paul had begun to understand that God would do this, at least in part, through the canonized writings of the apostles—which God would preserve as authorized scripture throughout all generations to the return of Christ.

Thus, in his later Epistles, Paul began to emphasize the importance of long-term Church stability and individual Christian growth through the Spirit of God.

Ephesians: Here, Paul said nothing of the imminent return of Christ, which had been an important theme in his earlier epistles. Rather, the book of Ephesians instructs Christians on how to live their lives well into the future (Eph. 1:9-10, 18-23; 2:20-22; 3:16-21; 4:11-16, 21-32; 5:1-33; 6:1-20).

Colossians: Likewise, Paul’s letter to the Colossians clearly emphasized how Christians were to live their lives over a protracted period of time (Col. 3:1-4:6). Paul did not even mention the return of Christ—but he did write about the mystery of God (1:26-28).

I Timothy: Written in the late fall of 63 AD after Paul was released from his first imprisonment in Rome, I Timothy is one of the most important Epistles showing that Paul now understood Christ’s return would be far into the future. At this time, Paul wrote of the need to permanently establish the work of the elders—for teaching and pastoring the churches and fellowship groups. Paul gave detailed instructions to Timothy on how to lead the Church and serve the brethren on a long-term basis.

Clearly, Paul, Peter and John understood that Christ would not return for a long time—maybe centuries—and that the Church was to become a long-term establishment, awaiting the return of Jesus at an unknown time in the future. Thus, the need for a canonized body of New Testament Scriptures was vital not only for the proclaiming of the Gospel, but for the very survival of the Church of God.

Key Four: A New Understanding—The Last Days and the Return of Christ Were in the Distant Future

It appears that God directly inspired Paul, Peter and John to perceive that the last days and the return of Jesus Christ lay in the distant future. The lack of fulfillment of prophecy by 65-66 AD had

Chapter Eight

caused many to conclude that Christ's return was delayed. As a result, Peter in particular was inspired to warn that **"in the last days *there* will come mockers**, walking according to their own personal lusts, and asking, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the forefathers died, everything has remained the same as from *the* beginning of creation.'... But the present heavens and earth are being held in store by His Word, *and* are being reserved for fire in *the* day of judgment and destruction of *the* ungodly. Now, beloved, do not let this one fact be hidden from you; **that with *the* Lord, one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not delaying the promise of *His* coming, as some in their own minds reckon delay; rather, He is long-suffering toward us**, not desiring that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

"However, **the day of *the* Lord shall come as a thief in *the* night** in which the heaven itself shall disappear with a mighty roar, and *the* elements shall pass away, burning with intense heat, and *the* earth and the works in it shall be burned up. Since all these things are going to be destroyed, what kind of *persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, **looking forward to and striving for the coming of the day of God**, during which *the* heavens, being on fire, shall be destroyed, and *the* elements, burning with intense heat, shall melt? But according to His promise, **we look forward** to a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. For this reason, beloved, since you are anticipating these things, be diligent, so that you may be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless" (II Peter 3:1-14).

For Peter to write in 65-66 AD that "a thousand years is as one day and one day is as a thousand years," reveals that although he fully understood that the Day of the Lord and the return of Jesus Christ would be in the future—perhaps a thousand years or more—he did not have any specific understanding as to how far in the future it would be. From the tenor of what he wrote, it is clear that Peter fully understood that no man could know when Jesus would return. Jesus had, of course, previously forewarned the apostles: "But concerning that day, and the hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matt. 24:36).

These four key developments are significant for many reasons—not the least of which is that they were highly instrumental in motivating the apostles to canonize the writings that became the New Testament. The internal evidence of when, how and by whom the New Testament was canonized will be explored in the next chapter.