

Chapter Ten

John's Final Canonization of the New Testament

While historians such as Josephus wrote detailed accounts of the period from 70 to 100 AD, there is unfortunately no scriptural record of the Church during that time. Clearly, Paul and Peter were dead by 68 AD, and there were no additional apostolic writings until John finalized his Gospel and Epistles and wrote the book of Revelation in 95-96 AD. **A brief overview of conditions in the eastern Roman Empire during that time frame will establish the background for John's final canonization of the New Testament.**

In 66 AD, Vespasian was appointed by Nero to conduct the war in Judea. After Nero's suicide, the armies in the east proclaimed Vespasian as emperor in July 69 AD, and Vespasian left the war in Judea to his son Titus, who oversaw the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the end of the Jewish rebellion. In 76 AD, Titus was made co-regent, assuming the duties of emperor. During this time, persecution against Christians was intermittent.

Domitian—the second son of Vespasian—succeeded his brother, Titus, in 81 AD. During Domitian's reign there was sporadic persecution against Christians and continued harsh treatment of Jews. Ruling as a “madman” his last three years (94-96 AD), persecution against Christians intensified, and Domitian exiled the apostle John to the island of Patmos, perhaps in 95 AD. Eusebius stated there was “ample evidence that at that time the apostle and evangelist John was still alive, and because of his testimony to the word of God was sentenced to confinement on the island of Patmos” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, bk. 3:18).

Nerva succeeded Domitian, reigning from 96-98 AD, and established an equitable administration with an awareness of the need for peace and compassion for the people he ruled. He recalled all exiles who were banished under Domitian's rule, including the apostle John. Eusebius wrote: “In Asia, moreover, there still remained alive the one whom Jesus loved, apostle and evangelist alike, John, who had directed the churches there since his return from exile on the island, following Domitian's death” (Ibid., bk. 3:23). While John was on the island of Patmos, he received many visions and wrote the Revelation from Jesus Christ that became the book of Revelation. Undoubtedly, John brought this book with him when he returned to the city of Ephesus.

John lived into the reign of Trajan (98-117 AD), but there is no record as to how long he lived after 98 AD. Trajan's reign was peaceful, and the Church had rest from Roman persecution. It was apparently during this time that John finalized the New Testament canon—and many copies were undoubtedly made and distributed to all the churches in Asia Minor and to other parts of the world.

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By the middle of 66 AD, the Jewish revolt against Rome had gained momentum. To escape the coming war, many Jews—Christian and non-Christian—had heeded God's warnings that Jerusalem was to be destroyed and promptly fled the city. Nearly all the faithful Jewish Christians had left Jerusalem and Judea, a good number of them going to the city of Pella, 60 miles northeast of Jerusalem, on the other side of the Jordan River. However, it appears that the majority of Christian Jews fled to Asia Minor, with many settling around the city of Ephesus. Eusebius recorded that “the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were scattered over the whole world. Thomas, tradition tells us, was chosen for Parthia, Andrew for Sythia, John for Asia, where he remained till his death at Ephesus” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, bk. 3:1). There is very little doubt that it was in Ephesus that John finalized his writings and completed the canonization of the New Testament after his release from exile.

Of John's role, Martin writes: “The apostle John was specifically commissioned to write what the Voice of God (like the Thunder) would relate to him. This is why he wrote his Gospel and the Book of Revelation to be included in the canon of the New Testament. Such a task shows that John was

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specially selected to produce a canon of scriptures which would proclaim the official Voice of God than even Peter and Paul” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 313).

Although Paul and Peter had canonized their writings before they died, the official canonization with the final arrangement of the books of the entire New Testament was accomplished by the apostle John in 96-99 AD. As one of the last living apostles and the last living eyewitness of Christ's transfiguration, John was uniquely qualified and chosen by Jesus to canonize the entire New Testament in its final form.

Qualifications of John to Finalize the New Testament Canon

In order to fully understand the apostle John's qualifications as the one whom Jesus had chosen to canonize the New Testament, one must go back to the time before John the Baptist, the son of a priest, was born. The scriptural record reveals that the apostle John was also of the priestly line of Aaron. In addition, there was an important family relationship between Jesus Christ and John.

The Family Connection and the Daughters of Aaron: The important family connection between Jesus and John has a profound bearing on the canonization of the New Testament. Martin noted the significance of this unique family connection: “It is usually not understood, but the mother of James and John was none other than Salome (Matthew 27:56 with Mark 15:40) who was the sister of Mary, the mother of Christ (Hastings, *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, vol. I. p. 846). This means that Christ and John were *first cousins* as far as legal matters were concerned among the Jewish people” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 313).

There are several clues about Jesus' relationship to the apostle John. John the Baptist's father, Zacharias, was a priest of the line of Aaron. Likewise, his mother, Elizabeth, was “**of the daughters of Aaron**” (Luke 1:5). Luke tells us that Elizabeth was also a “kinswoman” of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:36). (The *KJV* rendering “cousin” is not an accurate translation; the Greek means “kinswoman” or “relative.”)

What exactly was the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth? From Luke's account it is known that Elizabeth and her husband were “*well advanced in years*” (Luke 1:7, 18). Luke did not give their exact ages; however, from other Scriptures, it is possible to estimate with reasonable accuracy that Elizabeth and Zacharias were in their seventies when John the Baptist was born. On the other hand, Mary, the “kinswoman” of Elizabeth, was a young woman—a virgin. Scripture does not specify how old Mary was, but it is not unreasonable to estimate that she was about twenty years old when Jesus was born. Therefore, there must have been a difference of fifty years or more between the ages of Elizabeth and Mary, making it more likely that Elizabeth was Mary's aunt, rather than a cousin. This means that Mary's mother and Elizabeth were sisters. If Elizabeth was “of the daughters of Aaron,” then so was Mary's mother. Thus, Mary—and her sister Salome, John's mother—would have been considered of the line of Aaron.

Martin wrote of this family connection between the apostle John and Jesus: “Not only were his [John's] mother and Christ's mother both sisters (and this gave John some preeminence), but we find that Mary (and obviously her sister, Salome) [as daughters of Aaron] were in some way connected with the priestly ancestry.... One should recall that Mary was a kinswoman to Elizabeth (the wife of Zacharias who was an Aaronic priest and the father of John the Baptist), and Elizabeth herself was recognized as ‘a daughter of Aaron’ (Luke 1:6). This means that both Mary and Salome could be reckoned as being of priestly descent” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, pp. 314-315).

This of course shows us that John himself was of the Aaronic line. **The fact that John was of Aaronic priestly descent was a primary reason that Jesus chose him to make the final canonization of the New Testament.**

John Was an Eyewitness of the Vision of Transfiguration: Jesus informed all the apostles that some would “not taste of death until they have seen the Son of man coming in His Kingdom” (Matt. 16:28). Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him up on a high mountain, and they saw the vision of the transfiguration. John was the only apostle still alive who had seen the vision of the transfiguration and had heard the voice of God the Father, and this **gave him special authority from Jesus Christ to canonize the New Testament.**

As the last remaining apostle to see the vision of the transfiguration, John would also see the coming of Jesus Christ in the visions that he received and recorded in the book of Revelation. These special visions are prophecies of events leading up to the Day of the Lord and the return of Christ. In these

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visions, Jesus spoke directly to John, instructing him to write what he had seen (Rev. 1:11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). What John wrote became the book of Revelation—the capstone—the crowning glory of the Bible.

Parallels Between Canonization of the Old and New Testaments

Important parallels exist between Ezra’s canonization of the Old Testament and John’s canonization of the New Testament. These similarities demonstrate that the New Testament is indeed the work of God, and not man.

As stated previously, God used Ezra the priest to finish writing and canonizing the Old Testament. In the same way, He used the apostle John—a descendant of the Aaronic priestly line—to finish writing and canonizing the New Testament.

When Ezra canonized the Old Testament, he had the “Great Assembly” of 120 priests and Levites to assist him in finalizing and editing the books. In like manner, the apostle John also had helpers who assisted him in editing and finalizing his Gospel and Epistles for canonization and in setting the final order of the New Testament books. It is probable that the eyewitnesses who helped John were of the original 120 disciples (Acts 1:15). There is little doubt that from within this group were several other apostles who were still living and were thus among John’s helpers. Some traditions mention that the apostles Phillip and Andrew were included among the “elders” that were with John. Martin commented, “It can be almost certain that they *were all Jews*, and that they later lived near John [at Ephesus] when he was performing his job of canonizing the New Testament. These men were those that could be called *Elders that helped John in the canonization*” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 404).

Internal Evidence of John’s Helpers—the “We” Sections: The evidence of John’s helpers is found in the so-called “we” passages in John’s writings. Undoubtedly, these were some of the final edits that were added to complete these books. An obvious edit, for example, is found in John 21, where there is a sudden injection of a “we” passage: “This is the disciple [John] who testifies concerning these things and *who* wrote these things; and **WE know that his testimony is true**” (John 21:24). It is obvious that John was writing of himself—“this is the disciple”—when, suddenly, the next phrase shifts to the third person plural “we.” Apparently, the elders, the helpers of John, added their testimony to verify that what John had written was true. Because of their added stamp of approval, the final, expanded Gospel of John would be fully accepted by the churches of God.

Additional “we” passages appear in I John 1-5, supporting the tradition that some of the apostles—such as Phillip and Andrew—were alive and assisting John when he finished writing the Epistle.

Martin wrote of the “we” passages found in John’s writings, commenting on the short epistle of III John: “John began to speak to a man called Gaius in the first person singular: ‘**I pray** that in all things you may be prospering and having good health’ (verse 2). Then we find a long string of ‘**I rejoiced**’ (verse 3), ‘**I am thankful**’ (verse 4), ‘**I wrote**’ (verse 9), and ‘**I will call to remembrance**’ (verse 10). But then, and out of the blue, John introduces a plural intrusion into the text. In this book it says: ‘in fact, **WE are also bearing witness**, and *you know* that the witness **WE give is true**’ (verse 12). Then immediately the context of Third John returns to: ‘**I had** many things to write you, yet **I do not** wish to go on writing you with ink and pen. But **I am hoping** to see you directly (verses 13, 14)’ ” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 399, bold emphasis added). It is clear that the words in III John 12 show the same pattern of multiple testimony that is found at the end of the Gospel of John 21:24.

Additional Internal Evidence of John’s Final Edits: As previously noted, the initial writing of the Gospel of John was probably completed by 42 AD. However, from the internal evidence, it is obvious that John added many details later. It is apparent that John originally intended to end his Gospel with chapter 20, verses 30-31: “Now then, Jesus did many other miracles in *the* presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. But these have been written, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing, you may have life through His name.” Later, when John was finalizing his writings and canonizing the New Testament, he must have added chapter 21 with the assistance of his helpers—who added their testimony: “**And we know that his testimony is true**” (John 21:24). This affirmation of truth must have included all the other edits in John’s writings as well.

Evidence of later editing can again be seen in the prologue of the Gospel of John. One can detect in the verses that pertain to John the Baptist what must have been the apostle John’s original opening to his Gospel. The added prologue reflects the later revelation of the “mystery of godliness” (I Tim 3:16)

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that Christ had given to the apostles in 63 AD. It was not until this time that they fully understood that Jesus was indeed “God manifested in the flesh”—the LORD God of the Old Testament. Thus, the prologue of the Gospel of John—“In *the* beginning was the Word”—expands on what John had earlier written of in his First Epistle, that Christ had indeed come in the flesh (I John 4:1-3).

Additional Important Edits by John and His Helpers: The edits John and his helpers made to his books demonstrate that John and the elders finalized and sealed the New Testament in a detailed and systematic manner. It is apparent that they must have scrutinized every book of the New Testament word for word.

Two additional edits—generally overlooked but which again show the hand of John and his helpers—were added to the texts probably in 96-98 AD. The insertion of the parenthetical statement—“**the one who reads, let him understand**”—to the words of Jesus’ prophecy in Matthew (and similarity in Mark) is intended to warn the reader that Jesus’ prophecy concerning “the abomination of desolation” had not yet occurred (Matt. 24:14-16; Mark 13:13-14). It is apparent that the parenthetical statements were not spoken by Jesus at the time He was speaking to His disciples. Clearly, these are later editorial comments added by John and his helpers when they were finalizing the New Testament—inserted because John and the Elders understood that “the abomination of desolation” did not occur as a part of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, and would not take place until the temple would be rebuilt in the distant future.

The Book of Revelation Proves That John Canonized the New Testament

The book of Revelation is, perhaps, the most unique book in the entire Bible. It is the capstone and crowning glory of the Word of God. The opening verses of the book reveal that the apostle John was the one to whom Christ had given the visions of Revelation. John was commanded by Jesus to write everything that he saw, for a witness both to the Church and to the world (Rev. 1:1-3).

The book of Revelation bears witness 1) “to the Word of God,” meaning that the Revelation of Christ substantiates the entire Word of God—Old Testament and New Testament; 2) “to the testimony of Jesus Christ,” which is contained in the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; and 3) of “all the things he [John] saw,” which means all the recorded visions of Revelation.

This final witness that Jesus gave through John is actually a fulfillment of the command that He gave to the apostles when they began their ministry. “According as it is written, it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and to rise from *the* dead the third day. And in His name, repentance and remission of sins should be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. **For you are witnesses of these things**” (Luke 24:44-48). Jesus repeated this command, as Luke recorded: “**You shall be My witnesses, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto *the* ends of the earth**” (Acts 1:8).

The Apostle John Recorded Jesus’ Final Warning: At the end of the book of Revelation, Christ inspired John to summarize the requirements for salvation and to reveal the fate of sinners: “And behold, I am coming quickly; and My reward is with Me, to render to each one according as his work shall be. **I am Alpha and Omega, *the* Beginning and *the* End, the First and the Last.**

“**Blessed are those who keep His commandments, that they may have the right to eat of the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.** But excluded *are* dogs, and sorcerers, and fornicators, and murderers, and idolaters, and everyone who loves and devises a lie. I, Jesus, sent My angel to testify these things to you in the churches” (Rev. 22:12-16).

Christ ended the book of Revelation with a profound warning against adding to or taking away from the words of the Bible: “For I jointly testify [Jesus Christ and John] to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book, *that if anyone adds to these things, God shall add to him the plagues that are written in this book. And if anyone takes away from the words of *the* book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from *the* book of life, and from the holy city, and from the things that are written in this book*” (Rev. 22:18-19).

With this final warning, the apostle John—of the lineage of Aaron, uniquely chosen and qualified by God the Father and Jesus Christ—finished the canonization of the New Testament, the most magnificent book in the world. Once this task was finished, the New Testament was added to the Old Testament. Thus, the full revelation of God to mankind was completed by the disciple whom Jesus especially loved—the apostle John.