

# HISTORY OF NEW TESTAMENT LITERATURE AND SCHOLARSHIP

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## **Abstract**

*The paper is a journey through the historical development of the New Testament. It first of all defines New Testament literature and scholarship as it differs from that of the Old Testament. The tradition of Jesus characterized by oral preaching of the Gospel is shown to be the basic method of evangelization in the early Church. The development of the New Testament from the Hebrew scripture is discussed. The paper further looks at the existence of certain traditions about Jesus that constituted the bedrock for the formation of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. Apostolicity, Palestinian coloration, orthodoxy and others are the things that guided the selection of the Gospels. The paper discusses the independent existence of the New Testament epistles before they were collected together to form Pauline, Johannine or Catholic epistles. It points out that the fixation of the New Testament canon was a process ignited by heretical teachings, Christian persecution, voluntary distribution of copies of scripture, Christian unity and so on. It discusses Historical documents indicating evidence of the canon of the New Testament. The paper highlights the completion of the New Testament canon as the exercise emerged from the Greek, Syrian and got completed in the Latin Church. Finally, the paper considers apostolic origin, catholicity and divine inspiration as the norms for the selection of the New Testament writings.*

## **Introduction**

The New Testament is the Christian Scripture. The interpretation of its content has been a subject of unquenchable noise in Christendom. Some Christians see its content as a testimony of the faith of the early Church and therefore serves a complementary role to the Church hierarchical teaching. Others see it as a dictionary of Christian faith and thus serve

## **New Testament Literature**

Literature is a word that is difficult to define. According to Meyer (2011:1), "pinning down a definition has proven to be quite difficult. In fact, at times one seems to be reduced to saying, 'I know it when I see it,' or perhaps 'Anything is literature if you want to read it that way'". A definition from

as the only authority that guides Christian life. From whatever perspective the New Testament is viewed, one thing is clear. That is, the books that constitute its content emerged from an oral tradition that is traceable to the time of Jesus Christ. This paper sets out to explore the process the New Testament went through to become what it is today.

antiquity and the renaissance period says that "literature or letters were understood to include all writing of quality with any pretense to permanence" (Wellek in Meyer, 2011:1). From another point of view, McFadden in Meyer (2011:1) describes literature as a "canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself and also those

whose aesthetic qualities are only secondary. The self defining activity of the community is conducted in the light of the works, as its members have come to read them” From the above definitions, the Bible qualifies to be called a literature because, it is an ancient document of quality slated for permanence, its content includes letters and other writings that direct the activities of the Israelites and the Christians. Thus the nomenclature, ‘biblical literature’ in reference to the books of the Old and New Testament of the Bible.

The Old Testament literature is centered on the activities of the people of Israel as God’s chosen nation. It starts from the call of Abraham to the rise of the prophetic ministry in Israel. While the New Testament literature focuses on the ministry of Jesus Christ and its continuation in the Christian community after his death.

### **New Testament Scholarship**

Scholarship is a word that has different meanings. The definition relevant here sees it as ‘Learning’. That is, all the activities that have to do with book learning, knowledge, erudition, education, letters, culture, academic study and so on (Hanks ed, 2004:38). In the reference to the Bible, Brown (2011:10) sees biblical scholarship as;

The art of making meaningful connections between a text and something else. “This text is better understood in connection with X” or “X is better understood in connection with this text” could summarize the vast bulk of what we call biblical scholarship. That might seem like nothing more than a restatement of the problem, since X could be almost anything: another text or set of

texts, another aspect or portion of the same text, a tradition or source or redaction layer, a scribal practice or transmission error, the history of transmission, the history of tradition, a genre or trope, a symbol or metaphor or any other particular form of language, a literary theory, a sociological theory, a way of life (whether ancient or modern), a ritual or custom, an archeological find, an image or icon, a people-group, an historical event, a theory of history, a theory of midrash, a theory of myth, a theory of mind, a method or methodology, a social, religious, political or economic movement, a philosophical system, a theological system, a theological tenet, a theological error, an ideology, modern science, ancient science, modern film, medieval children’s stories, teaching, preaching, blogging.

In simple terms, biblical scholarship concerns all the learning activities that are directed towards understanding the books of the Bible.

The learning activities directed towards the understanding of the Old Testament could be described as the Old Testament scholarship. Studies directed towards understanding and explaining the New Testament is what is meant by New Testament scholarship.

## **The Tradition of Jesus**

From internal Biblical evidence, Jesus is reported to have written just once. That is when the woman caught committing adultery was presented to him to pass judgment. The act of writing was even on the ground. Jesus transmitted his message by oral conversation. The oral teaching was also invoked by great teachers that predate his time. In the words of Schelkle,

With a few whom the memory of mankind honours as its first greatest, Jesus has in common that he left no written word behind. As in the case of Budha, Confucius and Socrates, so also with Jesus a written record of his discourse was first made by those born after him. Plato has said that only the living word produces education, the written word is merely a makeshift, in fact a game (Schelkle, 1969:32).

Jesus taught his apostles and disciples orally. The oral proclamation of the Gospel was the tradition of Jesus. There was a long development from the spoken word of Jesus to the writing of the N.T.

## **Jesus Tradition in the Early Church**

In the oldest Christian communities, the memory of Jesus was first preserved through oral narration. Eye witnesses passed on the words and teaching of Jesus as they had heard it from him and narrated his deeds as they had seen them (Acts 1:22, 4:33, 6:4, 10:37—43). At that time, there was no need for a book of the Gospels in the Church. For the mission outside the Church, there was no book. Eye-witnesses of Christ were the first missionaries (Acts 2:24, 3:13-15, 4:20, 5:32, 8:5). The living Church was like a book or a

letter to read and be informed (Schelkle, 1969). According to Moule,

The authority for the Christian statements about Jesus was the eye-witness of twelve men. According to the Gospels, Jesus himself had in his lifetime chosen and commissioned them to be with him and to be sent out as heralds of the kingdom of God (Mk 3:13ff). One of them, Judas Iscariot, had turned traitor; but the remaining eleven are claimed, in the Acts, to have received a further express commission from the risen Master to be his witnesses. The twelve evidently constituted the earliest Christian 'canon' or measuring-rod—the standard by which the authenticity of the Church's message was to be gauged, for the duration of their lifetime (Moule, 1966:178-179)

What the apostles had seen was claimed to be according to the scriptures and that the very form in which they framed their evidence was itself sometimes influenced by scripture. Thus, paving the way for the recognition of their witness as itself material for inspired writing (Moule, 1966). To challenge the Christian message was to doubt a body of living eye-witnesses authorized by the Lord himself. That is why Papias (About A.D 150) expressed his preference for the living voice rather than for writings. 'For I did not suppose', said he, 'that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice' (Moule, 1966:181). The Christian community in essence was not

book centered. "It had been called into existence by a series of events well remembered; it lived under the continued personal guidance, as it believed, of the central figure of those events; and the time would not be long, so it imagined, before he would return to sight" (Moule, 1966:181).

The last of the twelve died before the consummation of all things, and it began to become clear that the church must continue for an indefinite time in an imperfect world (Moule, 1966). The Christian community felt it was its responsibility to bring the Gospel to the whole people of Israel and the Gentiles. The community grew and became very large. The first eye-witnesses no longer sufficed as preachers of the word and ministers of divine worship. They needed disciples and helpers. Persons who were not eye-witnesses were recruited for that purpose (Acts 11:20, Ephes 4:11).

It became necessary to commit the tradition of Jesus to writing for the benefit of those teachers of the second generation. For them, it provided an aid to memory and guaranteed the authenticity of the message of Jesus Christ. It also met the need of the faithful who wished by means of the written word to preserve the memory of Christ in a more reliable and permanent form than was possible in the spoken word. In this second generation, the Gospel emerged from the confinement of Palestine into the outside world, passing from the sphere of the Jews into that of the Greek culture and language. The first written records were not complete Gospels as we have in the N.T., but partial sketches (Luke 1:1-3) (Schelkle, 1969).

### **The Historical Formation of the New Testament Canon**

The New Testament is a collection of twenty seven writings that differ in content and style. While some of the books

are in the form of historical narrative (Gospels and Acts of the Apostles), others are letters or epistles and the last is presented in an apocalyptic style (Revelation). The N.T. contains a number different types of writings spread over a period of about sixty years. As the church continued to grow in the second and third centuries, these writings took on a special importance. They became a Christian scripture which could be used along side the scripture the Christians inherited from the Jews, the Greek translation of the O.T (Perkins, 1988).

The word 'Canon' in Greek means 'rule', 'norm' or 'standard'. It is use in reference to the books of the Bible considered by Christians as inspired by God, thus capable of directing human life (The New Testament of the New American Bible). Before the formation of the N.T canon, the Church was not entirely without a book to guide the believers. There was the O.T. The O.T was used because the community was still part of the Jewish faith. Like the Apostles (Acts 3:1, 5:12, 21:26), all the Christians still took part in the religious service of the temple. That is why in the New Testament, sacred scripture is frequently cited when making reference to the Old Testament (Mk 12:24, Mt 5:17, 11:13, Lk 20:42, 24:44, Acts 1:20) (The New Testament of the New American Bible).

The canon of the O.T was not yet defined in all its details at the beginning of Christianity. It was at the end of the first century that the Hebrew canon was fixed with 39 books. The Greek speaking Jews accepted into their canon other works composed in their language, which makes their canon to contain 46 books. This was the canon adopted by all Christians before the 16<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran reformation. Despite all this, the canon of the O.T was

not totally concluded. This is proved by the fact that some passages are quoted in the N.T as scripture that cannot be found in the O.T (James 4:5, Jude 14-15). Secondly, there was no any ecumenical council of Judaism for the recognition and rejection of the O.T books. In adopting the O.T scriptures, Christians considered them inspired as they relate to the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32. Jn 5:39, 10:35-36, 2 Cor 3:12-17, 2 Tim 3:15, Heb 8:13) (The New Testament of the New American Bible).

In the early Church, there was no thought of a new canon of scripture. The words of the Lord Jesus were cited as scripture with the O.T passages (1 Thess 4:15, 1 Cor 7:10;12, 9:9;14, Acts 20;35, Rev 2:2;8;12;18, 3;1-7;14) (The New Testament of the New American Bible). That is to say that right from the beginning, the Church had a book to guide the creation of her own. Thus, the Old Testament produced the New Testament (Schelkle, 1969).

### **The Formation of the Gospels/Acts of the Apostles**

The existence of widely current traditions, whether written or spoken, at a very early stage cannot be doubted. Pauline Epistles echoes such traditions about Jesus that later found their way into the Gospels. It is likely that a missionary like Paul most have had access to such traditions, either oral or written. Even later, among the sub-apostolic writers known as the Apostolic Fathers, there are traces of similar traditions running free and even running parallel to the Gospels. "Thus is built up a picture of a great reservoir of traditions, some spoken, some already written down, on which the early preachers are already drawing and from which ultimately the full-length Gospels are going to crystallize. Once again,

it is the assemblies for worship and religious instruction that are the most likely reservoirs" (Moule, 1966:185).

Schelkle (1969) presented a clearer picture of the development of the Gospels before their canonization. Individual communities used one Gospel as theirs. The Gospel of Matthew originated as indicated from external and internal evidence, in the Jewish-Palestinian area and is related to their situation. The Gospel of Mark is originally connected with Rome. Luke was probably written in Achaia because it is related to the Greek world as it was certainly in used there. Asia Minor is the home of the Gospel of John.

Towards the end of the first century, the present canonical Gospels were already collected. Papias in 130 acknowledged the Gospel of Matthew, Mark and John. Justin the Martyr in 150 described the memoirs of the Apostles which were read side by side the Prophets during divine worship as Gospels. "Between 100 and 150 the situation was reached where in a community, or at any rate to the teachers of the community, more than one Gospel was known and acknowledged by them" (Schelkle, 1969:213). This came about because, the growing consciousness of unity in the entire Church led to the development of a practice of exchanging the Gospels as well as other writings between communities (Schelkle, 1969).

Before the death of the apostles, there were in existence written documents containing sayings of Jesus and perhaps certain anecdotes in his life and at least one full-length Gospel (St. Mark). Though still doubted by some scholars, the priority of Mark as the first Gospel is still maintained. After him came a great spate of Gospels. However, the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John are still dated earlier than almost any others. Perhaps it

was not so much a matter of selecting, but recognizing that only four full-length Gospels emerged from the apostolic period (Moyle, 1966).

The Gospels were not initially collected and arranged together probably because of the authority of the local church in which a Gospel was used. Secondly, not all the Gospels were recognized at the same time. By the end of the second century, Luke was still hesitantly recognized and John met with opposition until about A.D 220. The formal declaration of the Four Gospels as canonical was only the recognition by the Church collectively, of a conviction that had been silently growing among all Christians (Moyle, 1966).

Certainly, between 100 and 150 A.D, the acts of the Apostles were already in existence. Interestingly, it belongs to a special literary category that differentiates it from the Gospels as well as the Epistles (Schelkle, 1969).

### **The Criteria for the Recognition of the Gospels**

The Gospels were not blindly recognized by the Church. Each Gospel has to meet certain conditions before its acceptance as an inspired book and thus normative for faith in Jesus Christ. The conditions are as follows:

- i. Apostolicity: "If not actually written by one of the twelve, a Gospel must at least have some kind of apostolic imprimatur: It must be shown to come from some close associate of an apostle and if possible, with the apostle's express commission" (Moyle, 1966:189).
- ii. Palestinian Coloration: The document must necessarily belong to an early period, and would be expected to show sign of at least derivation from the primitive

Aramaic-speaking Church (Moyle, 1966).

- iii. Orthodoxy: A genuine apostolic Gospel should contain an interpretation of the incarnation that does not contradict that held traditionally by the churches in the early decades. Because by the time the last twelve died, there was a sufficiently powerful uniformity, so far as the basic convictions of the church's leaders go, running throughout the Christian centers all over the Roman Empire (Moyle, 1966:189).
- iv. A Gospel should be a Gospel: "There were evidently a number of fragmentary documents in circulation then, as there continued to be later-sayings-collections, collections of miracle stories, perhaps, and of other anecdotes; but these could not stand on their own feet as Gospels proper, comprising the kerygma" (Moyle, 1966:189).
- v. Test of usage: Had the book proved it worth? Had it survived the critical sense of the Christian tradition? It is possible that certain writings asserted themselves as useful and sound before evidence for apostolic contact was discovered. The use of a writing in worship was an antecedent stage to its recognition as canonical (Moyle, 1966).

### **Pauline Epistles**

Like the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles existed independently before they were presented in a single collection. The Epistles circulated probably for a short period of time (Moyle, 1966). The Epistles of Paul possess by the Church are not all of his

Epistles. Those that have been preserved were probably written during the period that marked the peak and end of his missionary activity. Most of the letters were to communities with the exception of Paul's Epistle to Philemon. It is likely that Paul did not keep copies of his letters with the intention of publishing them as done by writers of antiquity. They were gradually collected by others (Schelkle, 1969).

The collection of the Pauline Epistles probably began at the end of the apostolic period. Evidence of this abounds in 2 Peter 3:15ff. The second Epistle of Peter was likely written at the end of the first century. By this time, the Epistles of Paul were already collected. The writings of Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch show that the collection of Pauline Epistles was a gradual process. First of all, the Epistles were recognized as addressed to all Christians and not individuals nor communities.

Secondly, they were put on par with the rest of scripture which is the O.T and referred to as 'scripture' (Schelkle, 1969).

The works of the earliest Fathers of the Church indicate the knowledge of the following Epistles before they assumed canonical status. In his Epistle to Corinth (about the year 95/96), Clement of Rome makes use of Rom., 1 Cor. and Hebrews. In his letters (about the year 110), Ignatius used Rom., 1 Cor., Ephes., Col. and 1 Thess. In his letter to Phillippi (about the year 135 A.D), Polycarp quotes from Rom., 1 and 2 Cor., Gal., Ephe., Col., Phil. and 2 Thess. 1 Thess. was surely known to him. It is uncertain whether he quoted 1 and 2 Tim. (Schelkle, 1969).

From the evidence of Tertullian, Marcion the champion of the heretical teaching known as Marcionism, used a collection of Pauline Epistles. Tertullian reported that Marcion knew the New

Testament Ephesians as 'Loadiceans', and his collection contained the following letters: Gal 1:2, Cor., Rom. 1:2, Thess., Laodiceans, Col., Philem., Phil. That is, Marcion used the nine great Pauline Epistles (Moule, 1966). With these Epistles used by the Church Fathers, it is certain that Paul's Epistles were collected, since it was a common practice in antiquity to preserve collection of the letters of prominent men (Schelkle, 1969).

The best known testimony of the circulation of the Pauline Epistles before the single collection is found in the Muratorian Canon. Its catalogue includes: Cor., Eph., Phil., Col., Thess., Rom., Philem., Titus and 1, 2 Tim. (Moule, 1966).

Another argument on the circulation and later collection of Pauline Epistles is the snowball theory. It suggests that the intercourse between one Pauline center and another gradually led to the exchange of copies of letters, until in a given center, there came to be not only the letter or letters originally sent to it, but also copies of certain others, collected from other Pauline Churches. Thus, in each center, there would be little nests of Pauline Epistles and that moved into wider circulation until the full number as we know it today was reached. Then all that remained to be done was the making of a careful 'edition' of the whole Pauline Corpus (Moule, 1966).

### **Johannine Corpus**

Many scholars see a close connection between the fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles. Both are associated by tradition with the name of John and with Ephesus. Apocalypse, itself claiming to be written by one John and also associated by tradition with Ephesus, is still held by some modern scholars to be by the same hand with some or all of the Johannines. However, despite certain contacts in

vocabulary and thought, its style and theological outlook are very different (Moule, 1966).

### **Catholic Epistles and the Apocalypse**

The collection and use of Pauline Epistles by some Churches most have inspired the practice of collecting other Epistles that bore the names of the Apostles as well as making them known to the whole Church. Though the Catholic Epistles most have existed between 100 and 150, nevertheless, they were not generally known and accepted. The earliest to be acknowledged were the first Epistle of Peter, the first Epistle of John and the Epistle of Jude. On the other hand, the Epistle of James and the second Epistle of Peter cannot be shown with certainty to have existed before 200 (Schelkle, 1969).

The final book in the N.T is the book of Revelation also known as the Apocalypse of John. The John is either the Apostle John or one John of Patmos, the Island the revelations took place (New Testament-Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). Revelation or Apocalypse was highly suspected. Even though attributed to a writer known as John, it was disputed between the Eastern and Western Church. But in the West, it was counted part of the canon at least since the middle of the second century (Schelkle, 1969).

### **The Fixation of the New Testament Canon (150-300)**

The fixation of the N.T canon was a process that took a lot time to be completed. Many factors necessitated the Process.

### **The Factors that Necessitated the Fixation of the New Testament canon**

- i. **Gnostic Writings:** In the second century, Gnosticism had become widespread. It was a heretical movement that promised insight into human and divine mysteries and a self-knowledge and knowledge of God that leads to salvation. "It taught man to look upon himself as a stranger in the world who the Redeemer wanted to call and bring home" (Schelkle, 1969:214). A basic tenet of the movement was that the world is evil and there is a lower, rival god. The Gnostics repudiated creation and despised the world. For this reason, they denied Christ coming into the world. To them, He merely assumed the appearance of a body. Lacking backings for their doctrines from recognized scriptural writings, the Gnostics started fabricating numerous false Gospels and Apostolic Epistles to put their teachings in the mouth of Christ or the Apostles. The church had to define her canon to prevent this foreign influx of teachings (Schelkle, 1969).
- ii. **Marcionism:** Marcion was a son of the Bishop of Sinope in Pontus. He went to Rome in 140 A.D and became part of the Christian community. At about 144 A.D, he quarreled with the Roman Church and founded his Church. He narrowed down the New Testament. He held that there



exist complete anti-thesis between the O.T and the N.T, between the law and the Gospel, justice and grace. "The Old Testament bore witness to a different God from that of the New Testament, the former to the strict and just, the angry and evil God, the latter to the kind and gracious God father of Jesus Christ. The creation was the work of the Old Testament God, the redemption that of the New Testament God. The original Apostles had followed the Old Testament and Judaism and because of this had falsified the Gospel by introducing into it the law of the Old Testament"

(Schelkle,1969:216). Marcion rejected the whole of the O.T and accepted only the Gospel of Luke with modifications. He accepted the Pauline Epistles (with the exception of the Pastoral Epistles), but purified them of alleged Jewish additions. "When Marcion appeared on the scene the Church already possessed a New Testament Sacred Scripture of almost its present size" (Schelkle,1969:217).

- iii. Christian Persecution: Among the crimes Christians were accused and condemned to death in the Roman Empire was the possession of the Holy Scriptures. In 188 A.D, twelve Christians from Scilium in Numidia were prosecuted in Carthage because they confessed that they had in their

satchel the books used by us (presumably the O.T and the Gospels) as well the letters of the holy man Paul. Thus, the canon of the New Testament was meant to establish with certainty books that Christians can actually die for if found in their possession (Schelkle,1969).

- iv. The desire of Emperor Constantine to distribute the Scriptures in his Empire: Emperor Constantine who won a war through the use of a Christian symbol of worship, decided to make Christianity the Religion of his Empire. He is said to have "donated elaborate manuscripts of the Bible for the great Churches. For the capital Constantinople Constantine had 50 precious manuscripts prepared through his court bishop Eusebius" (Schelkle,1969:224-225).
- v. Christian Unity: The growing consciousness of unity in the entire Church which led to the exchange of the Gospels as well as other writings inspired the desire for a uniform Christian scripture. Furthermore, through Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the one official religion and Church throughout the empire after 300 A.D. This development strengthened the sense of unity and encouraged the drive for it in the Church, which in turn led to the demand for one Sacred scripture of the N.T (Schelkle,1969).

- vi. Demand for Scripture at the time of Peace: The persecution of Christians was accompanied with the destruction of the scriptures. The Diocletian persecution demanded the surrender and destruction of copies of the Sacred books. At the time of peace, there was the need to replace the destroyed books (Schelkle, 1969).
- vii. The flourishing of learning: learning that flourished in the Church was essentially Biblical science. Its first aim was to establish with certainty which writings belonged to the Sacred book of the Church. The question on the canon then was placed at the forefront of academic discourses (Schelkle, 1969).

### **Documentary Evidence on the Canon of the Church**

From the year 150 to 300, there are evidences indicating the development of the New Testament Canon. In 1934, a Papyrus was found in Egypt with fragments of a Gospel that dates back to the second century (Schelkle, 1969). Ancient court records indicate that on 17<sup>th</sup> July, 188 twelve Christians from Scilium in Mumidia confessed at Carthage to be in possession of books used by us and the letters of the holy man Paul. The oldest list of the New Testament was found in the Muratorian Fragment. It was discovered in the Ambrosian library of Milan in 1740. The manuscript contains the canon from the monastery of Bobbio composed at the end of the second century (Schelkle, 1969).

Tatian, a biblical theologian of the second century composed a harmony of the

Gospels called the 'Diatessaron'. In it, he combined the four Gospels, complementing them occasionally with other writings. His work superseded the four Gospels in the East and remained in use right into the fifth century. Eusebius reported that Serapion, bishop of Antioch (190-211) allowed the reading of the Gospel of Peter at divine service. However, when he discovered that it contained Gnostic and Docetic heresies he proscribed its usage. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons quoted as the New Testament the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, 12 Pauline Epistles, the first Epistle of Peter, 1 and 2 Epistles of John and the Apocalypse of John. The first Epistle of Philemon was missing.

This shows that the canon of the four Gospels was not ratified at that time (Schelkle, 1969).

In Rome and Carthage, Tertullian (160-220) gives important information about the N.T. His list includes the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Pauline Epistles, the first Epistle of Peter, the Epistle of Jude, the first Epistle of John and the Apocalypse of John. He refused to acknowledge Hebrews (Schelkle, 1969).

In Egypt, Clement of Alexandria (Before 215) list of N.T canon includes the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, fourteen Pauline Epistles including Hebrews, the first Epistle of Peter, first and second Epistles of John, Epistle of Jude and the Apocalypse of John. He quoted other books such as the teaching of the twelve Apostles, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistles of Clement and Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Gospels of the Hebrews and of the Egyptians. Origen (.85-254) the successor of Clement distinguished several groups of books considered to be part of the N.T. They include the four Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Pauline Epistles, the Apocalypse of John,

the first Epistle of Peter and of John. Then Hebrews as the disputed writing was acknowledged by him. He accepted and used the Gospel of Hebrews, Didache, Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. However, he did not rank them as canonical (Schelkle,1969).

The testimony of the widely separate witnesses regarding the canon of the N.T shows that towards 300 A.D, most of the writings found in the N.T today have undisputed canonical status. The separation of unauthentic writings and the Church's position on Gnosticism and Marcionism had been clearly defined. A collection of the N.T in the individual provinces of the Church had been formed. Yet, nothing has been authoritatively decided by the Church assemblies for the whole Church or laid down by a Pope (Schelkle,1969).

### **The Completion of the New Testament Canon**

The N.T was finally accepted by the whole Church with 27 writings. The development needs to be considered in reference to the great languages and cultures of the ancient Church; Greek, Syrian and Latin.

**The Greek Church:** The canon for the Greek Church was ratified by Athanasius on the 39th Easter of the year 367. His list of the N.T consists of 27 writings. "Athanasius was the first to establish the New Testament as a collection of 27 books such as we have it today, thereby proving to be a law-giver of the Church" (Schelkle,1969:227).

**The Syrian Church:** The Syrian Church in the fifth century made an official translation of the Bible known as the Peshitta. The writings included were the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, fourteen Pauline Epistles, the Epistle of James, the first Epistle of Peter and the first Epistle of John. This

canon remained in use in the Eastern part of the Syrian Church even after the council of Ephesus due to the influence of the heresy of Nestorius. In it, the list of the N.T writings was 22 (Schelkle,1969).

**The Latin Church:** Jerome a young priest in Rome translated the Bible known as the vulgate between the years 384-395 under the instruction of Pope Damasus. He repeated the exercise after 386 in Jerusalem. His translation favoured the 27 writings of the N.T also found in the collection of Athanasius. In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century, the list of N.T books of Jerome received the confirmation of the Synods of the West. The Synod of 382 under Pope Damasus accepted the four Gospels, fourteen Pauline Epistles, the Apocalypse of John, the Acts of the Apostles and seven Catholic Epistles.

Several synods of the Church were presided by St. Augustine in Carthage between 397 to 419 A.D. The decision that recognized the 27 books of the N.T was taken at the council of Carthage (397 A.D) and sent to Rome for confirmation by the Pope (Graham, 1977). Hebrews was subsequently added to the collection of Paul's Epistles. However, such a result already had been arrived at in the East and at this time achieved in the West (Schelkle,1969). These synods were the ecumenical councils of the Church that gave the books of the N.T their final recognition as inspired word of God (Moule,1966).

The final unity of the N.T canon was achieved through a voluntary effort of the churches of the East and West. "This shows how sure the Church was in her judgment of what is genuine and what was foreign to her spirit. The Church was securely united to the origin, and from this union she was able to make her decisions" (Schelkle, 1969:229). Today, the N.T remains the basic source of Christian unity.

## The Standard for the Selection of the N.T Writings

The selection of the N.T writings was not a random exercise. Certain guidelines, rules or norms were considered.

- i. The Writings should be of Apostolic Origin: The books have to come from the Apostles. This was to guarantee their origin and the purity of their doctrine. "The Apostles were the witnesses of the truth by reason of their personal connection with the history of Jesus (Act, 1:21f), as well as by reason of their having received the gift of the divine spirit (Acts, 15:28; 20:28)" (Schelkle,1969:230). Therefore in every effort to distinguish the true from the false, the question was examined whether writing was Apostolic or not.
- ii. The Catholicity of a Writing: If awriting was acknowledged by all Churches as apostolic tradition, it was necessarily considered to be genuine. "For the mind of the whole Church could not err" (Schelkle,1969:231). Such a judgment is found in 2 Peter 3:15f.
- iii. Divine Inspiration of writing: The doctrine of divine inspiration of the Prophets inherited from the Old

Testament was also used in the assessment and canonization of the N.T writings. In 2 Pet. 1:16, the Epistles of Paul are said to be filled of wisdom. The Muratorian canon says that in the New Testament writings, the one and guiding spirit in all explains everything. Irenaeus further says that the four Gospels are kept together by one and the same spirit (Schelkle, 1969)

## Conclusion

The formation of the New Testament is a journey that needs to be appreciated. It started from Jesus oral proclamation of the good news. The age of the apostles also witness the invocation of the oral teaching for the spread of the Gospel. The act of writing that crept into the Church was a later development that was occasioned by many factors. Since Christianity was the subject matter of many ancient writers, it became necessary to distinguish false Christian teachings from the true ones. It is that very exercise that gave birth to the New Testament. The knowledge of this development is necessary because it will correct the impression that makes the New Testament looks as if it is a document that pre-dates the Christian community and supersedes any other teaching authority in Christendom.

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