

Timeline of Canon Recognition in Early Church History

(with Key People, Documents, and Councils)

| Date | Event / Person | Details |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| c. A.D. 45–95 | Apostolic Writings | Apostles write the New Testament books or close associates: Gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles, General Epistles, and Revelation. Churches receive and circulate them. |
| c. A.D. 95–110 | Clement of Rome | Quotes from multiple New Testament books (esp. 1 Corinthians), affirming their authority. |
| c. A.D. 110 | Ignatius of Antioch | Quotes from Matthew, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and other NT books as authoritative Scripture. |
| c. A.D. 130–150 | The Didache & Epistle of Barnabas | Early Christian writings that quote or refer to New Testament Scripture as authoritative. |
| c. A.D. 140–160 | Marcion's Heretical Canon | Marcion rejects OT and creates a distorted canon (10 Pauline letters, part of Luke). Church responds by clarifying the true canon. |
| c. A.D. 170 | Muratorian Fragment | Oldest known canonical list; includes 22 of 27 NT books (excludes Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 3 John; possibly due to regional awareness). |
| c. A.D. 180 | Irenaeus of Lyons | Strongly affirms the four Gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles, and others as Scripture. Rejects Gnostic writings. |
| c. A.D. 200–250 | Tertullian & Origen | Both quote extensively from all parts of the NT, affirming a virtually complete canon. Origen distinguishes between universally accepted and disputed books. |
| c. A.D. 250–300 | Cyprian of Carthage | Quotes nearly all the New Testament, recognizing the same 27 books in practice. |
| c. A.D. 303–311 | Diocletian Persecution | Roman emperors demand surrender of "Christian Scriptures"—only the canonical books are considered worth dying for. |
| A.D. 325 | Council of Nicaea | Convened for Christological purposes; no formal canon list, but the 27-book NT was functionally in place in many churches. |

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| A.D. 367 | Athanasius' 39th Festal Letter | First known document listing exactly the 27 NT books we have today—nothing more, nothing less. |
| A.D. 382 | Council of Rome (under Pope Damasus I) | Affirms the 27-book NT canon in response to heresies; follows Athanasius' list. |
| A.D. 393 | Council of Hippo | Reaffirms the 27-book NT canon; explicitly rejects apocryphal books for doctrine. |
| A.D. 397 | Council of Carthage | Officially ratifies the 27-book NT canon. Uses same list confirmed by Athanasius, Hippo, and Rome. |
| A.D. 419 | Second Council of Carthage | Reaffirms earlier decisions. The canon is widely and officially recognized by the entire Western church. |
| A.D. 500+ | Universal Usage | All major branches of the church (East and West) recognize the same 27-book New Testament canon. |

Summary Observations

- **The canon was recognized, not created.**
- Most of the NT was accepted as Scripture **within a generation** of the apostles.
- **By the mid-2nd century**, the majority of NT books were already universally recognized.
- The few disputed books (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, Revelation) were received gradually, primarily due to limited circulation or apostolic attribution questions—but all were later confirmed.
- The councils (Rome, Hippo, Carthage) did **not create the canon**, but **codified** what had already been used in the churches for over 300 years.