

The New Testament Canon: An Overview by Genre

(in parentheses: total number of chapters / verses in each book)

Four “Gospels”: attributed to the four “Evangelists”; narrative “portraits” of Jesus’ life and ministry:

Matthew (28 / 1071)
Mark (16 / 678)
Luke (24 / 1151)
John (21 / 878)

} The Synoptic Gospels
→ The Fourth Gospel



One “Acts”: a partial narrative account of the growth of early Christianity; not a complete “history” of apostolic Christianity:

Acts of the Apostles (28 / 1008)

Twenty-One “Letters” or “Epistles”: written by (or attributed to) various early Christian “apostles”

Thirteen “Pauline Letters”: attributed to Paul; written to communities or individuals; listed by decreasing length, not age:

Romans (16 / 433)
1 Corinthians (16 / 437)
2 Corinthians (13 / 257)
Galatians (6 / 149)
Ephesians (6 / 155)
Philippians (4 / 104)
Colossians (4 / 95)
1 Thessalonians (5 / 89)
2 Thessalonians (3 / 47)
1 Timothy (6 / 113)
2 Timothy (4 / 83)
Titus (3 / 46)
Philemon (1 / 25)

} letters to Christian communities in these cities
} letters to individual Christian leaders, but only the first three are called the “Pastoral Letters”



One Biblical “Sermon”: interpreting Jesus’ significance in light of OT; not really a “letter” (no author/audience explicit):

Hebrews (13 / 303)

Seven “Catholic Epistles”: attributed to other apostles; written to broader audiences (“catholic” = “general, universal”):

James (5 / 108)
1 Peter (5 / 105)
2 Peter (3 / 61)
1 John (5 / 105)
2 John (1 / 13)
3 John (1 / 14)
Jude (1 / 25)



One “Apocalypse”: a highly symbolic narrative that interprets a historical crisis and provides hope for a better future:

The Book of Revelation (22 / 404)

More about the Gospels – the word “Gospel” is derived from the Old English “god-spel” (*god* = good; *spel* = news), which is equivalent to Greek *eu-angelion* (*eu* = good; *angelion* = message; *angelos* = messenger). Originally “gospel” referred to *oral* proclamations (see Mark 1:14-15), but it is later used for a particular genre of *written* literature (based on its use in Mark 1:1).

- Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “**Synoptics**” because they see Jesus “with the same eye”; the “**Fourth Gospel**” (John) is substantially different from the Synoptics in content, style, and theology, but no less valuable.
- About thirty other early Christian “Gospels” were not accepted into the New Testament (called “**non-canonical Gospels**”).
- All four canonical Gospels were originally written in Koine (“Common”) **Greek** between the late 60’s and early 90’s.
- The authors of the Gospels are usually called the four “**Evangelists**” (from Greek *euangelion*, lit. “good news”).
- The official titles are “The Gospel *according to...*” (although we often use the shorter, but less accurate titles “Gospel *of...*”).
- The **Q-Document** (“Quelle” = “source” in German) is a hypothetical collection of sayings & teachings of Jesus; many scholars think it was a written source (from the 50’s?) used later by Matthew and Luke, but it is now lost.
- The NT Gospels are similar to *ancient biographies* in literary form, but *very different* from *modern biographies*!

Pauline Letters or Epistles – the thirteen letters attributed to Paul are often subdivided into various groups:

- Seven “authentic” or “*undisputed Pauline Letters*” (Rom, 1 & 2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess, Phlm);
- Six “disputed” or “*deutero-Pauline Letters*” (Col, Eph, 2 Thess, 1 & 2 Tim, Titus), since some scholars think these are “authentic” [actually written by Paul], while others argue that they were written pseudepigraphically (by Paul’s followers after his death);
- The three letters written to early “pastors” (1 & 2 Tim, Titus) are usually also called the “*Pastoral Epistles*.”
- Eph, Phil, Col, Phlm are sometimes called “*Prison Letters*,” since Paul apparently wrote them while he was in prison.
- The anonymous sermon apparently written “*To the Hebrews*” was *not* written by Paul, nor even attributed to him!

Eight Tips about the Canonical Arrangement of the NT (to help you learn the correct order of the 27 NT books):

1. The 27 books of the New Testament are **NOT** listed in *chronological* order (not the order in which they were written historically); several *other* principles were operative instead.
2. The **overall order** begins with the life of *Jesus* (the four Gospels), then deals with the growth of the Christian *Church* (Acts, Letters, Epistles), and finally focuses on the *Eschaton* (the end of time, as described symbolically in the Book of Revelation).
3. The four **Gospels** are listed in what *was* traditionally regarded as their chronological order (i.e., Matthew was thought to be the oldest Gospel); most scholars today, however, believe that *Mark* was the first written Gospel (or at least the oldest of the four canonical Gospels in their full versions, as we know them today).
4. The **Acts** of the Apostles was originally the second volume of Luke's two-volume work; but when the four Gospels were grouped together, Acts was placed after John.
5. The letters written by **Paul** (or at least attributed to him) are divided into *two sub-groups*: those written to communities and those addressed to individuals; within each sub-group, the letters are arranged *not* in chronological order, but rather in *decreasing order of length* (more or less, although Galatians is slightly shorter than Ephesians).
6. The anonymous "Letter to the **Hebrews**" comes immediately after the Pauline letters because people *used* to think it was also written by Paul; it may have been written by one of his followers, but was almost certainly *not* written by Paul himself.
7. The Catholic or General **Epistles** are also listed in decreasing order of length, although letters attributed to the same apostle are grouped together.
8. The Book of **Revelation** (singular! not plural "Revelations!") closes out the NT canon, since it concludes with a description of the end of time (New Heavens, New Earth, New Jerusalem, etc.).

Ten Stages of NT Formation and Transmission (with chronological overlap, continuing down to today):

- **Life & Ministry of Jesus** – words are spoken and deeds are performed by Jesus himself during his lifetime on earth.
- **Oral Tradition** – traditions and beliefs about Jesus are developed and passed on by early Christian communities.
- **Written Sources** – some of the miracles and/or sayings of Jesus are compiled and recorded in early written documents.
- **Written Texts** – individual letters, full Gospels, etc., are written with particular messages for particular situations.
- **Distribution** – some writings are copied and shared with other Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean.
- **Collection** – certain Christians begin collecting the letters of Paul and gathering together several different Gospels.
- **Canonization** – four Gospels, several collections of letters, and a few other texts are accepted as authoritative scriptures.
- **Translation** – biblical texts are translated into other ancient and modern languages: Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, etc.
- **Interpretation** – the meaning of the scriptures is investigated on various levels: literal, spiritual, historical, social, etc.
- **Application** – communities and individuals put the NT to practical use: liturgical, moral, sacramental, theological, etc.

Four Criteria for Canonicity (why certain books were eventually accepted into the NT Canon, while others were rejected):

1. **Apostolic Origin** – attributed to and/or based on the preaching/teaching of the first-generation apostles (or their closest companions).
2. **Universal Acceptance** – acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the Mediterranean world (by the end of the 4th century).
3. **Liturgical Use** – read publicly along with the OT when early Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper (their weekly worship services).
4. **Consistent Message** – contain theological ideas compatible with other accepted Christian writings (esp. Jesus' divinity *and* humanity).

Four-Fold Role of the Evangelists as Authors (what they contributed, even if "God is the Author" of all scripture):

1. **Selectors** – from among the many things Jesus said and did, they chose which stories they wanted to include and which to omit.
2. **Arrangers** – they organized the materials in a particular sequence, not necessarily chronologically but often in thematic blocks.
3. **Shapers** – they adapted and edited the individual stories from their sources so as to emphasize the themes they wanted to stress.
4. **Proclaimers** – they were not objective historians, but preached the "good news" about Jesus in ways appropriate to their audiences.