Textual Authority and Historical Formation in Early Christianity

Canon, Tradition, and Manuscript Evidence

A Historical-Critical Study

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Abstract
This study examines the formation of textual authority in early Christianity through the analysis of canonical writings, non-canonical traditions, manuscript evidence, and the broader context of Second Temple Judaism. It argues that early Christianity emerged not as a unified doctrinal system but as a plural interpretive movement shaped by competing traditions of revelation, communal memory, textual transmission, and institutional consolidation. Through examination of Pauline epistles, canonical Gospel traditions, apocryphal literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and extant manuscript witnesses, this study reconstructs the historical processes by which Christian textual authority and canonical boundaries developed between the first and fourth centuries CE. The evidence suggests that doctrinal and textual stabilization occurred gradually and often in response to competing theological traditions.

Keywords: Early Christianity; Canon Formation; Pauline Studies; Second Temple Judaism; Textual Criticism; Apocryphal Literature; Manuscript Traditions

Methodology
This study employs a historical-critical methodology integrating textual criticism, manuscript analysis, comparative historiography, and theological source criticism. Primary textual

analysis is conducted through canonical and non-canonical Christian writings, while manuscript evidence is examined through surviving papyri and major codices. The approach is descriptive rather than confessional, seeking to reconstruct historical processes of textual formation and authority rather than defend doctrinal claims.

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Introduction

Early Christianity did not emerge as a fully formed institutional religion but developed gradually through a complex interaction of oral tradition, textual production, theological debate, and institutional consolidation. The earliest Christian communities operated without a fixed canon or centralized institutional authority. Instead, they preserved traditions about Jesus through proclamation, liturgical practice, correspondence, and narrative construction.

The historical record consists of canonical texts, apocryphal writings, Jewish background literature, and fragmentary manuscript witnesses. Together these materials reveal that early Christianity developed through overlapping and often competing traditions of authority.

This study examines those textual and historical layers.

1. Jesus within Second Temple Judaism

The earliest narrative traditions place Jesus of Nazareth firmly within the social and religious framework of Second Temple Judaism. He is described as circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21), in accordance with covenantal law established in Genesis 17:12 and Leviticus 12:3.

He participates in synagogue worship (Luke 4:16), teaches from

Jewish scripture, and debates questions of law and covenant identity with other Jewish interpreters.
These include:
Sabbath law (Mark 2:23–28)
purity law (Mark 7:1–23)
resurrection theology (Mark 12:18–27)
These debates reflect internal Jewish legal discourse rather than external religious conflict.
Modern scholarship situates Jesus within Jewish restorationist and apocalyptic traditions.^1

2. Pauline Christianity and Earliest Authority
The earliest surviving Christian texts are the authentic letters of Paul, composed approximately between 49–62 CE.
These letters predate the canonical Gospels and provide the earliest literary evidence of Christ-believing communities.
Paul's undisputed letters include:
Romans
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Philippians
1 Thessalonians
Philemon
Paul grounds his authority in revelation:
οὐ γὰρ ἐγὼ παρὰ ἀνθρώπου παρέλαβον αὐτό
("For I did not receive it from any human") — Galatians 1:12
This establishes a revelatory model of authority distinct from eyewitness memory.

3. The Development of the Gospel Traditions
The four canonical Gospels were composed in Greek between approximately 70 and 110 CE:
Mark (~70 CE)
Matthew (~80–90 CE)
Luke (~80–90 CE)
John (~90–110 CE)
All are anonymous in earliest manuscript tradition.
The Synoptic Gospels demonstrate literary interdependence.
Most scholars affirm Markan priority and a hypothetical Q source.^2

John introduces λόγος (logos, “word”):
Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος
(“In the beginning was the Word”) — John 1:1
This reflects significant theological development.

4. Non-Canonical Texts and Theological Diversity
Early Christianity included a wide range of non-canonical writings.
Gospel of Peter
A fragmentary second-century passion narrative preserved in the Akhmim Codex.
Gospel of Thomas
A sayings collection discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945.
It emphasizes γνῶσις (gnōsis, “knowledge”) as salvific.
Gospel of Mary
Preserved in Coptic and Greek fragments, reflecting alternative authority traditions.
Gospel of Philip
A theological text emphasizing sacramental symbolism.
These writings demonstrate that early Christian theology was far from uniform.

5. The Dead Sea Scrolls and Jewish Context
The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered between 1947 and 1956, consist of Jewish texts dating from the third century BCE to the first century CE.
They include:
biblical manuscripts
sectarian rules
apocalyptic literature
interpretive commentaries
They reveal a Judaism characterized by theological plurality, dualism, and eschatological expectation.
This context is critical for understanding early Christianity.

6. Manuscript Transmission and Textual Evidence
No original autographs of New Testament texts survive.
Key manuscript witnesses include:
𝔓52 (~125–150 CE)
𝔓46 (~200 CE)
𝔓75 (~175–225 CE)
𝔓72 (3rd–4th century CE)

Major codices include:
Codex Sinaiticus
Codex Vaticanus
Codex Alexandrinus
These manuscripts contain textual variants, demonstrating that textual stabilization occurred gradually.
Important examples:
Mark 16:9–20
John 7:53–8:11
John 1:18

7. Canon Formation and Institutional Consolidation
By the late second century CE, church leaders such as Irenaeus advocated for a fourfold Gospel canon.
Constantine's legalization of Christianity in 313 CE facilitated institutional consolidation.
The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) addressed Christological disputes, not canon formation.
The earliest surviving complete list of the modern New Testament appears in Athanasius' Festal Letter (367 CE).^3
Canon formation was therefore gradual.

Conclusion
The evidence surveyed demonstrates that early Christianity developed through multiple competing textual traditions, theological interpretations, and authority structures. The canonical and non-canonical writings reflect overlapping yet distinct communities.
Faith, viewed historically, emerges not as assent to a closed doctrinal system but as participation in a living interpretive tradition shaped by memory, revelation, and institutional negotiation.
The history of early Christianity reveals a tension that remains fundamental:
between plurality and unity
between interpretation and authority
between history and doctrine
This tension is not a weakness of the tradition but part of its historical formation.

Footnotes
1. E. P. Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (London: SCM Press, 1985),

75–102.
2. John S. Kloppenborg, Q: The Earliest Gospel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008).
3. Bruce Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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