



# St. George's Fall Theological Forum

## The Canon of Scripture: How did the Bible become the Bible?

### Part 4 – The Formation of the New Testament

#### The First “Official” NT Canon

- On the occasion of the Feast of Easter in the year 367 AD, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, wrote an encyclical letter (his 39<sup>th</sup>) to the wider Church in which he gives the earliest known complete list of the 27 books of the New Testament. Thus providing within 300 years of their composition, evidence that the Early Church had established its NT canon.
- In today's lecture we will look at the canonization of the NT, with particular emphasis on the documents that were not included and why. Our study today shall follow Athanasius' three-fold categorization of Church documents, first those considered inspired (canonical); secondly those considered edifying but not authoritative (ecclesiastical); and thirdly those to be rejected and not used in the church.

#### The list of NT Books

- Of the 27 received documents, all but a few carried early and widespread authority in the church.
  - 2 Peter, James, and Revelation: some uncertainty as to their apostolic provenance.
  - Hebrews was more widely received in the Eastern churches than in the Western
  - This uncertainty was relative to that of the rest of the books of the NT, and that their ratification demonstrates the fact that, while such uncertainty may have had warrant, it was not sufficient for canonical disqualification, and held up against other books.
- Criteria for Canon
  - Dating and authorship carry great relevance in NT canon studies. Jesus himself left no writings, and therefore his teachings and life events, especially his miracles, death, and resurrection, were preserved first orally by his disciples, and then subsequently written down for posterity and preservation. The ministry and record of Jesus was first and primarily entrusted by the Lord to his disciples, now called apostles. But which writings were to be kept, transmitted (and translated), and regarded as authoritative and inspired, and which were not?
- The writings canonized in the NT needed to meet the following criteria:
  1. Apostolic authority – either directly (e.g. Paul's letter to Rome), or by an immediate associate of an Apostle (e.g. Mark, writing Peter's teaching). Bearing in mind that the office of apostle was not limited just to the Twelve, but also included Paul, James, and Jude (or Judas), who, in the Gospels, are named brothers of Jesus (Mt 13:56; cf. James 1:1, Jude 1:1).
  2. Written early – writings of an apostle, or their associate, come from an early date and belong to the apostolic age. Later writings, whatever their merit, could not be included in the canon (see next section below). Writings that had been around longer, and whose apostolic authority were in little or no question, stood the test of time and were copied and circulated, and read and used.
  3. Widespread usage: the catholicity of the writing. Local versus Universal. Even though many books were originally local in nature, Paul's letters for example, we do know that within a few decades of his death that a large corpus of his letters were kept in churches which had accrued over time as they were received, copied, and passed on. Early on it was recognized that Paul had written to seven churches (Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica) which indicated that although local in occasion, they were intended for the universal church. This seven-fold nature of the Pauline corpus was seen to directly parallel the seven letters in the opening chapters of Revelation (2:1-3:22), a connection specifically, if anachronistically mentioned in the

- Muratorian fragment<sup>1</sup>. We should also note, as we'll see later in looking at Marcion's 'canon', that the final NT is a very diverse body of writings. As one scholar put it, heresy is very often a narrowing of orthodoxy, not a broadening of it. In other words, we have four Gospels, not one; each offering a unique perspective on the life of Christ. We have epistles from multiple apostles, not just one (Paul). This is of no small importance, especially when addressing modern critiques that claim the early church and its scriptures intentionally excluded other writings (which these critics claim were otherwise legitimate documents with every right to be included as the one's which were – more on this later).
4. Theological / doctrinal merit in keeping with the Rule of Faith (e.g. Irenaeus). This is the body of teaching and doctrine as received from the Lord and his apostles and passed down and preserved through the Church: "Apostolic Succession" As more and more Gospels and Letters began to circulate under the names of various apostles, the first test the leaders of the early church could apply was to ask, "what does it say about the person and work of Jesus Christ".

This list is not exhaustive, but encompasses the key, major factors in canonicity.

- The Marcionite Conflict.
  - Marcion is the first person known to us who published a fixed collection of writings which we would call a "New Testament". Born about 100 AD in Sinope, a port city on the north coast of Asia Minor (Black Sea) to Christian parents, Marcion was raised in the apostolic faith. He revered Paul above all others, greatly admiring and appropriating Paul's explanations of justification by faith and salvation apart from works. Marcion concluded that Paul was the only Apostle who faithfully preserved the true teachings of Jesus, and took Paul's teaching to an extreme view which rejected the entire OT, citing its deity as a different one from the NT.
  - He was rejected for his radical views, moved to Rome, and gathered a following. He produced a published edition of Scripture, which consisted of two parts, *Gospel* and *Apostle*, which were prefaced by a series of *Antitheses*. The Gospel consisted of Luke's Gospel, edited to remove any OT bits; The Apostle was an edited version of ten Pauline letters, Marcion's version removed any passages which he deemed were inauthentic to Paul, and/or smacked of OT moralism.
  - It was in reaction to Marcion that many have concluded that the Church realized the need to deciding its own canon; that is, very idea of canon was Marcion's, and while the church rejected his list, happily followed his example. This is not entirely true, and a more helpful and accurate description is given by Theodor von Zahn, "Marcion formed his Bible in declared opposition to the holy scriptures of the church from which he had separated; it was in opposition to his criticism that the church in its turn first became rightly conscious of its heritage of apostolic writings."

### Edifying (but non-canonical) books

- These are books which were typically well known in the Early Church, and while many were respected and even commended to be read, there is little historical evidence that they presented serious consideration for the canon.
- Two principle documents which were often used and referenced by the Fathers, but not attributed as canonical, are *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache* (or, the *Teaching of the Apostles*), both of which date to the mid second century, the former being attributed to the brother of Pius, the Bishop of Rome (c. 135-150 AD), and the latter being anonymous.
- Other books, like the *Acts of Peter* (referenced in the Muratorian fragment), purports to recount the life, ministry, and martyrdom of Peter in Rome, and while considered important, its non-apostolic authority did not stand the test of time.

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<sup>1</sup> See F.F. Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, p. 160

- Other writings, like the *Acts of Paul*, written early in the second half of the second century, were written by orthodox Christians but intentionally as a work of fiction. Its author was known, but its fictitious nature was seen as unworthy of the Apostle.
- Other well known letters that had a fairly wide acceptance were Clement of Rome's *Letter to the Corinthians* (c. 96 AD), which addresses a crisis in the church's leadership.

### Rejected Writings

- This is perhaps the most 'interesting' part of our study, primarily because it is documents from this category which have been filling headlines and fictional best-sellers in our own day and age. These books can loosely be called 'gnostic gospels', and they've gotten a lot of attention in the last twenty years.
- We should note that, like some of the OT Apocryphal texts, often times the occasion for writing many of these books, both gnostic and, in the case of some ecclesial books like *Acts of Peter*, was to fill in the back story where canonical books were silent – why did Luke not continue Acts with what happened to Peter and Paul in Rome? What did Jesus do and say between the ages of 12 (when he appears as a boy in the Temple in Luke 2) and as a man beginning his ministry?

### The Gnostic Gospels

- Much hype and attention in the last ten years or so has been paid to the so-called Gnostic Gospels, made popular in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and formally advanced by writers and scholars like Elaine Pagels. First some facts
  - In 1945 an Arab peasant farmer discovered a cache of codices in a jar in Upper Egypt, near a village called Naj Hammadi. The collection of ancient texts, eventually dubbed the Nag Hammadi texts, are thirteen codices containing some 52 texts. The texts were written in Coptic in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century (papyrus dating confirms this), but it is likely that they were translated from earlier (non-extant) Greek versions, whose age is undetermined.
  - Some of the texts included are entitled: The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Philip, The Apocryphon of John, The Gospel of Truth, The Gospel of the Egyptians, The Secret Book of James, The Apocalypse of Paul, The Letter of Peter to Philip, and The Apocalypse of Peter.
  - Some of these texts were already known at the time of the Nag Hammadi discovery, like the Gospel of Thomas, a small fragment of which was discovered in 1890. What was significant in this case is that a relatively complete copy was now available.
- Gnostic objections to Christian doctrines
  - What makes the gnostic texts so intriguing is that they challenge many long held Christian doctrines, like the bodily resurrection, the virgin birth, and Jesus' celibate life.
  - Gnosticism, in general, posited the separation of spirit and flesh, the former being 'good' the latter 'bad', and espoused a view of salvation that was escapist. That is to say, one's spirit attains to 'salvation' or enlightenment by escaping its bodily prison, and the way to do this is through secret wisdom or knowledge (*gnosis*, in Greek)
  - There is a gnostic fascination with 'the secret teachings of Jesus' and their gospels are filled with what are specifically described as the things Jesus said in secret to such and such an apostle.
  - The Gospel of Philip has garnered much of the limelight for its very provocative, yet very fragmented depiction of Jesus' relationship to Mary Magdalene: "...the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more that [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended]... They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you as (I love) her?"
- Next week we will spend more time focusing on the facts, the nature, and the history of the Gnostic texts.