



# St. George's Fall Theological Forum

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

### Part 5 – The Gnostic Texts & the NT

#### The formation of the Canon: Fact and Fiction

- In the 2003 best selling thriller, the Da Vinci Code, one of the main characters, Sir Leigh Teabing, recounts the 'history' of Nicene Christianity, in which he argues that the many 'sects' of Christianity debated many things, including the over 80 gospels that were available. Teabing's retelling of history follows the theory of nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar Walter Bauer.
- Walter Bauer: Orthodoxy vs. Heresy. Walter Bauer (1877 – 1960) published a book in 1934 in German called *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. It was an attempt to historically reconstruct an early church history in which there was no 'orthodox' doctrine until the end of the second century, when an increasingly dominant church hierarchy, centered in Rome, asserted itself over other (supposedly) legitimate and diverse forms of (gnostic) Christianity.
  - Through study of key metropolitan centers of the Roman Empire and differing features of the Christian communities in these centers, he posits what I call ecclesio-theological evolution in which a plurality of early "Christianities" gives rise to one dominant form which becomes the Christianity we know today. In other words 'orthodox' Christianity is only such because it 'beat out' all the other competing views and trampled them as heresy; but if things had gone differently what we call today historic orthodoxy could just as easily have been heresy.
  - Initially Bower's work had little influence and readership, but the latter half of the twentieth century has seen a revival and even significant influence of his thesis. Especially in light of the Nag Hammadi texts, and under the fuel of Bauer thesis advocates like Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels, along with a growing tide of anti-Catholicism, his work has resurged. Couple this with a post-modern culture which intrinsically values diversity and tolerance above all virtues, you have an environment primed to not only be curious about these things, but highly likely to believe them despite the holes in its scholarship, even within the church.
- The Bower thesis is in fact practically a given among popular scholars and in the media, and is currently the dominant, if unspoken, paradigm for understanding the early church. It is however an incorrect thesis, and a robust critique of his work and its resulting implications can be read in a book called, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, by Andreas Kostenburger & Michael Kruger.
- Even though we recognize that the list of the canon wasn't developed formally (or finally) until the fourth century, to be true historians and pay legitimate attention to the process of canon, we must ask and explore how those books were functioning before the canon was established.
  - By the end of the first century 21 of the 27 NT books were widely used and accepted as authoritative in the Church. 2 Peter, Hebrews, James, 2 & 3 John, and Jude did not have as widespread use, and so later generations had some doubt.
  - But these doubts were examined and by the third century recognized. It is simply not true that the church decided what was in the canon in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Its terrible scholarship and overlooking historical facts to posit this.

#### The Canon and the Gnostics

- The canonical gospels situate Jesus very precisely in history and depict him as connected with real history. The gnostic gospels don't tell the story of Jesus as history at all, but rather treat Jesus as a mythic figure within the larger gnostic cosmos.

- When gnostic groups started writing and circulating more and more of their own writings, it became necessary to more explicitly list the authoritative books. Irenaeus said, “To read these gnostic works is to expose them.”
- The Gospel of Thomas is 114 verses of pretty much one “saying” of Jesus after another. There is no narrative, no characters, no story. It reads more like Proverbs and clearly shows the author was familiar with the Synoptic Gospels, and a large number of verses in GoT quote them.
  - Verse 9 is clearly taken from Mark 4:3-8. Verse 31 is quoting Mark 6:4. Verse 35 quotes Mark 3:27. Verse 46 is quoting Matthew 11:11. Verse 54 is quoting Luke 6:20 (Sermon on the Mount).
  - In v12 Jesus tells the disciples that after he departs they are to follow James the Righteous “for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.” An interesting anachronism, since James the Righteous (or James the Just) was a title ascribed to James in a period well after the apostolic age. Also an interesting ascription: was heaven and earth really made for James’ sake?
- Because the GoT makes significant usage of the Synoptics (although little if any from John) some scholars have tried to argue that, even though the GoT was written late, probably late in the second century, its sources come from a tradition as old as that of the canonical Gospels. Some argue it even pre-dates the sources of the Four - making the GoT representative of the first and oldest Christian Tradition.
  - Without trying to be crude, this is pure fantasy. There is absolutely no shred of evidence for any of this. I could write a story about Jesus the Pink Dragon and pepper it with quotes from the Synoptics and claim this tradition predates the NT with about as much validity. And yet, these are the scholars and this is the ‘version’ of Christianity that most people in the public media are hearing about.
- One final ironic note, given that most proponents of the GoT claim that orthodox (i.e. Roman Catholic) Christianity was prejudiced against women, and (evil) Peter suppressed the stream of Christianity supposedly espoused by Mary Magdalene, which was preserved by the gnostics. In the final verse, v114, the GoT writes,
  - “Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

### **Canonical vs. Gnostic**

In order to rightly distinguish the nature and corresponding canonical fate of the gnostic texts compared with the canonical books of the NT, particularly wrt the gospels of both, below is a list of six key distinguishing features where the gnostic texts and the NT differ.

- Early versus late
  - The NT is the most reliable and well attested document from antiquity, and whose documents date to within thirty to forty years of the people and events they contain.
  - The gnostic texts, at best, date to late in the second century, and most to the third. Some gnostic scholars have suggested that although written in the second century, some gnostic texts record oral or other earlier written traditions that date to the first century, and may predate NT oral/written tradition. There is, however, no evidence for this.
- Open versus secret
  - The NT repeatedly identifies Christianity as a public affair. Jesus teaches in public, the apostles preach in public and remind the people that they know the same events (cf. Acts 2:22). Church worship and individual life was private, and there is use in the NT of mysteries, but this is almost always referring to the mystery of Christ in the OT, now revealed which most gnostics rejected anyway, and the saving work of God for Gentiles now revealed (see Eph 2:11f)

- The gnostic gospels are entirely built upon the teachings of Jesus that were secret, only given to one particular person, who now passes it on in secret to the reader.
- Corporate versus personal
  - Christianity from the beginning (and from its Jewish roots) was ontologically communal.
  - Gnostic Christianity is inherently individual – you learn the secrets, you go home; no need for a Body of Christ and fellowship of saints.
- Historical versus “Spiritual”
  - Christianity is contingent upon historical verifiability. Its doctrines and truth claims are anchored in history. It claims to be the fulfillment of God’s promises in history, thus indicating sovereignty, trustworthiness, and ethical sympathy. Either Jesus bodily rose or he didn’t. If he didn’t, we’re to be pitied. If Christ was a figment of imagination, then the Apostles are diabolical maniacs.
  - Gnostic Christianity isn’t concerned with history in the objective sense, but rather in eternal spiritual truths which one discovers, usually through self-enlightenment to discover the divine already in you. Although called ‘Savior’, Jesus is more of a spirit guide than Prophet, Priest and King.
- Witness versus Anachronistic projection
  - The NT is based on eyewitness testimony, and is well attested historically
  - Their popularity and value as ancient documents notwithstanding, gnostic Christianity and the Gnostic Gospels as they are portrayed seem to be the product of a skeptical and sensationalistic (and increasingly anti-Christian) post-modern projection onto the ancient world, rather than arising from careful, legitimate scholarship.
- Plain difference of religion
  - One only needs to simply sit down and read the Gospel of Thomas and then read the (canonical) Gospel of Matthew to see that they are both radically different documents and represent radically different religions.
  - The early church was ancient, not stupid. We must be careful not to presume their ignorance nor our superiority.