

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TESTAMENT CANON

As a follow up to our previous studies of the Old and New Testament and our brief exploration of translations of the Bible, it might be interesting to examine how we arrived at the books which Christians call the New Testament. Several years ago I facilitated a study group where we explored the process of the New Testament Canon development. This study arose from a member of the group asking the question, “How did we get the books of the New Testament?” My response was, “To paraphrase H.L. Mencken, ‘Anyone who loves the law or sausage should never see either being made’ - the same goes for the development of Biblical Canon.”

There will be some material in this study which will revisit the previous study of the Old and New Testament we conducted last year. It is not that I am being lazy and want to pad the material; but, rather I want to examine some of the *why* for the material in the New Testament instead of the *what*. Dr. Bart Ehrman in his introduction to this study says: “The New Testament is one of those books that’s more widely recognized as important, than it is read or understood.” I agree with Dr. Ehrman, but don’t mean it as a rebuke for Christians. After all, it is part of the book of faith, and what better statement of faith than to ascribe importance and authority to the book without reading or understanding it! But then this may be a naïve faith.

As we saw last year, Christianity is perhaps unique among the religions in that its entire Canon was written by authors from a different faith tradition. And, while at the time of Jesus, the Jewish religion had a liturgical history that was almost 1500 years old they still had not settled on a canon of their scripture. This would not happen until almost the time of the completed writings that Christians accept as their canon. Although it would take another two centuries for the Christians to finally establish what their canon would consist of. This study will deal with some of the fundamental questions about the New Testament Scripture: How did we get the 27 books that comprise the New Testament? Briefly, when and where they were written and, for what purpose? And, finally when and how were they collected into what we call the canon of Scripture? For the curious who want to read more, I will include a bibliography. I will also include several charts to display information in a condensed form and a set of biographical notes so you can keep track of the players in the drama as it unfolds.

Let us begin with a rather shocking fact, depending upon when and where you worshipped, the scripture that was used may have been much shorter or longer than the 27 books we include in the New Testament today. But perhaps, even stranger is the fact that it was several decades after the Death and resurrection of Jesus before anyone even began to write the accounts of his birth, ministry, death and resurrection. So, why did this happen? What were early Christians thinking? Don’t, or more correctly, didn’t they know what was in the Bible? The short answer is NO! And for at least one generation, any time scripture was read it was what Christians call the Old Testament, or more correctly the Hebrew Bible. It was over **THREE CENTURIES** after the death and resurrection of Jesus before there was an *official and approved list* of what books

properly belonged in the Bible. And almost another 1200 years before that list was finally sanctioned by the Council of Trent (1546).

In his book “Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew”, Dr. Bart Ehrman writes: “As historians have come to realize, during the first three Christian centuries; the practices and beliefs found among people who called themselves Christian were so varied that the differences between Roman Catholics, Primitive Methodists, and Seventh-Day Adventists pale by comparison.” Most of these ancient forms of Christianity are unknown to people today. This is simply because they eventually became reformed or were stamped out. And now, let us begin our interesting journey.

First, let us begin by defining a word which I have been using for the past page and a quarter of this presentation. *Canon* is a Greek word meaning ‘reed,’ and came to refer to any straight stick used for measuring. This basic meaning was extended to refer to any rule or standard by which things could be compared. Furthermore, when used in reference to the Bible, canon has an even stronger significance: Not only is a given set of texts included, but all other texts- no matter how worthy otherwise- are excluded.

Raymond Brown in his book “An Introduction to the New Testament” gives three major criteria for inclusion of writings in the Biblical Canon:

1. Apostolic origin, real or putative.
2. The importance of the addressed Christian communities.
3. The conformity with the rule of faith (regula fidei).

It is this third criterion that became the flash point for many early Christian beliefs and the very survival of the group.

What I would like to do next is discuss the New Testament as a collection of books, for the New Testament is just that. Not an anthology, which is a sampling of writings, but a collection of specific texts, each with a very specific and discrete purpose. The New Testament contains 27 separate books, written by at least 14 or 15 early Christian authors for other Christian communities and individuals. These texts were written in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic- the language which Jesus and his followers spoke. And they are arranged in four groups, according to genre.

The New Testament begins with the Gospels, four accounts of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. It continues with the book of Acts, a historical account of the life of the Christian Church after the resurrection of Jesus. Next come 21 Epistles, actual letters written by Christian leaders, most prominently the apostle Paul, to Christian communities and individuals,

dealing with problems of faith and living. And the New Testament ends with an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world as we know it, the Revelation of John.

Something that confuses non-Christians is the Four Gospels, and a good question is why we have four and not more Gospels. Well, if we examine the various lists of Biblical Canon we see that some early communities, I will refer to them as proto-Christians, had various numbers of Gospels. But it was Irenaeus of Lyon who settled the argument saying, "As there are four winds, four corners of the world and four basic elements (earth, air, fire, and water) so there are four Gospels." How can you argue with that logic?

Chart 1: harmony of the Ministry of Jesus

GOSPEL	Period of Preparation	Period of Public Ministry	Period of Suffering	Period of Triumph	Closing
Matthew	1:1-4:16	4:17-16:20	16:21-26:2	26:3-27:66	28:1-20
Mark	1:1-13	1:14-8:30	8:31-13:37	14:1-15:47	16:1-20
Luke	1:1-4:13	4:14-9:21	9:22-21:38	22:1-23:56	24:1-53
John	1:1-34	1:35-6:71	7:1-12:50	13:1-19:42	20:1-21:25

Chart 2: Presentation of Jesus, audience and time

GOSPEL	Audience	Jesus as:	Character of Author	Time
Matthew	Jews	Promised King (Messiah)	Teacher	60's
Mark	Gentiles & Romans	Servant of God (Redeemer)	Storyteller	55-65
Luke	Greeks	Son of Man	Historian	60
John	Christians Worldwide	Son of God	Theologian	90's

This gives us some general background information in easily accessible form.

But, let us return to the question of why it took so long for Christians to have any interest in writing their scripture. The Christians of the first generations were strongly eschatological: For them the 'last times' were at hand, and undoubtedly Jesus would return soon. Such anticipation of the end of the world did not encourage Christians to write for future generations (who would be around to read the books). We see this problem of end times addressed by Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth.

Cross Reference Table: Writings and Authorities

Each symbol in the large table below corresponds to a specific authority and a specific writing. The symbols summarize the opinion of the authority about the writing. If the symbol is blue, select it with the mouse to jump to the evidence. The symbols have this meaning:

Symbol

Opinion of Authority

- ✓ accepted; true; scriptural; or quoted from very approvingly
- ✓ possible approving quotation or allusion
- ✗ acceptable, but only with changes
- ? dubious; disputed; or useful for inspiration
- ✗ spurious (in the classification of Eusebius)
- ✗ false; heretical; heterodox; quoted from very disapprovingly
- not mentioned or quoted from; opinion unknown

	<u>Ig</u>	<u>Po</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>Va</u>	<u>JM</u>	<u>Ir</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>MC</u>	<u>O</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>CS</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>P</u>	<u>V</u>
Gospel according to Matthew	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gospel according to Mark	·	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gospel according to Luke	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gospel according to John	·	·	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Acts	✓	✓	✗	·	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Romans	✓	✓	✗	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
I Corinthians	✓	✓	✗	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
II Corinthians	·	✓	✗	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Galatians	·	✓	✗	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ephesians	✓	✓	✗	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Philippians	·	✓	✗	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Colossians	✓	·	✗	✓	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
I Thessalonians	✓	✓	✗	·	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
II Thessalonians	·	✓	✗	·	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
I Timothy	·	✓	✗	·	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
II Timothy	·	✓	✗	·	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Titus	·	·	✗	·	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Philemon	·	·	✗	·	·	·	·	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	·	✓	✓
Hebrews	·	✓	·	·	·	✓	✓	✓	·	✓	✓?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
James	·	·	·	·	·	✓	·	·	·	?	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

I Peter	.	✓	.	✓	.	✓	✓	✓	.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
II Peter	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	?	?	✓	✓	✓	.	✓
I John	.	✓	.	✓	.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
II John	.	.	.	.	.	✓	.	.	✓	?	?	✓	✓	×	.	✓
III John	.	✓	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	?	?	✓	✓	×	.	✓
Jude	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	.	✓
Revelation of John	.	.	.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	.	✓
Gospel of Thomas	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	×	×	.	.	.	.	.
Gospel of Truth	.	.	.	✓	.	×	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Gospel of the Twelve	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	×	.	.	.	.	.	.
Gospel of Peter	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	?	×	.	.	.	.	.
Gospel of Basilides	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	×	×	.	.	.	.	.	.
Gospel of the Egyptians	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓	.	.	×	.	.	.	.	.	.
Gospel of the Hebrews	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓	.	.	?	×	.	.	.	.	.
Gospel of Matthias	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	×	×	.	.	.	.	.
Traditions of Matthias	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Preaching of Peter	.	.	.	✓	.	.	✓	.	.	×	.	.	.	.	.	.
Acts of Andrew	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	×	.	.	.	.	.
Acts of Paul	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	×	.	?	×	.	.	.	.	.
Acts of John	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	×	.	.	.	.	.
Epistle to the Laodiceans	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	?	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓
I Clement	.	.	.	.	.	✓	✓	.	.	?	.	.	.	✓	.	.
Epistle of Barnabas	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓	.	.	?	×	✓	.	✓	.	.
Didache	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓	.	.	?	×	.	?	✓	.	.
Shepherd of Hermas	.	.	.	.	.	✓	✓	?	?	?	×	?	✓	?	✓	.
Apocalypse of Peter	.	.	.	.	.	.	✓	.	✓	.	×	.	.	.	.	.
	Ig	Po	M	Va	JM	Ir	C	T	MC	O	E	CS	A	D	P	V

KEY TO CANONICAL AUTHORITY

Ig	Ignatius of Antioch	Po	Polycarp of Smyrna
M	Marcion	Va	Valentinus
JM	Justin Martyr	Ir	Irenaeus of Lyons
C	Clement of Alexandria	T	Tertullian of Carthage
MC	Muratorian Canon	O	Origen
E	Eusebius of Caesarea	CS	Codex Sinaiticus
A	Athenasius of Alexandria	D	Didymus the Blind
P	Peshitta (Bible of the Syrian Church)	V	Latin Vulgate

Source material: <http://www.ntcanon.org>

As this chart demonstrates, the early church, and its various teachers had a diverse list of canon.

So, what was it that drove so many of these proto-Christians to have so many books and such a variety of Biblical Canon? Quite simply it is what made Christianity different from other forms of religion and other faith liturgical traditions. Christians actually incorporated their Theology into their beliefs and practices. And to revisit two terms we used previously, Christianity developed the importance of orthodoxy *and orthopraxy*, right belief and right practice. For the many pagan cults that existed with Christianity it really did not matter what you believed as long as you participated in the appropriate rites and sacrifices to the god of the *Polis*. Worship and sacrifice were both acts of propitiation, and appeasing of the Gods; not in the Christian idea of praise and thanks. But, I will say more on the subject of liturgy and worship in a future discussion.

What caused so many Christians to get into trouble with their friends and neighbors was that they would steadfastly refuse to offer sacrifice to other gods. There was only one true God and he would brook no insubordination or worship of other gods. You may recall that Paul addressed the subject of eating food that had been offered as a sacrifice in the pagan Temples. So, by rejecting worship and even contact with other gods, Christians were excluding themselves from the larger community. And, since the Christians would not make offerings to the *God of the Polis*, anytime that misfortune befell the community the Christians were to blame.

But, I am getting ahead of myself yet again. As we saw with the four very distinct Gospels, the purpose was not to record the history of Jesus as much as it is to proclaim the “Good News”. We discussed this subject at great length in our introduction to the New Testament last year. The book of Acts, as well, is driven not by purely historical interests but by a powerful theological agenda: to show that God was at work in the spread of the Christian mission. Acts traces the spread of Christianity from its inauspicious beginnings just after the death of Jesus to its auspicious arrival, after the missionary work of Paul, in the capital of the empire, Rome itself.

The Epistles are usually divided into two groups, those written by Paul and the *catholic* or universal Epistles, written by a number of other authors. Of the 13 letters attributed to Paul, 7 are generally acknowledged to have been written by him. For the most part they deal with problems that arose in the churches Paul had established as a Christian missionary in what are now Greece and Turkey. Again, this was discussed in greater depth with charts, timelines and photographs in our study last year concerning Paul his missions and writings. There are 8 other letters in the New Testament, written by various authors to deal with a variety of problems. And, as with 6 of the Pauline Epistles, some of these letters may have been written by someone other than their reputed author, an act known as pseudepigraphy, common in the era.

The Revelation of John is the one apocalypse of the New Testament. We will look at how apocalyptic literature worked in early Christianity in order to view this book is best situated in its own historical context. That is, as a message of hope for Christians who were experiencing turmoil in their day, rather than as a blueprint for the future.

Two questions posed by Dr. Ehrman which I would like us to consider are:

1. In your opinion, why does the New Testament continue to be such a culturally and religiously important book for people today?
2. What do you imagine would be different about our culture if all references to the New Testament were somehow removed from it?

I would like for us to both consider and discuss the implications of these questions.

Next: Early Christian writers and some ‘other’ Christian beliefs.

Speaking of Paul, he is the author of the majority of the books included in the accepted Canon of New Testament and he appears to be the ‘Father of the Epistles’.