

Bible History

Lesson 1: How Did We Get Our Bible? Or “A Quick Guide to Canonicity”

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A Pressing Matter

- **“The Bible is a product of man my dear, not of God... The Bible as we know it today was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”**
Sir Leigh Teabing, *The Da Vinci Code* p. 231
- **“In the second century, Christianity was not an institution but a collection of warring factions, each with its own gospels, each claiming direct descent from Jesus, each accusing the others of heresy, homosexuality, and the life. In the fourth century, one group, or group of groups, won out: the people now known as the proto-orthodox, because, once they won, their doctrines became orthodoxy... Of the many gospels circulating, they chose four, called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.”**
- **“As with other Gnostic gospels, its [The Gospel of Judas] mere existence showed that there was no such thing as fixed doctrine, or that there wasn't at the beginning.”**
Joan Acocella, *The New Yorker*, Aug. 2009
- **“So this means that the Bible is a big fat lie, and I'm an idiot for believing it.”**
Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, Apr. 9, 2009, interviewing NT scholar Bart Ehrman

A Pressing Matter

- **Claims Made About the New Testament**
 - **“The church ‘created’ the New Testament.”**
 - **“Male power-brokers determined which books were in and which were out.”**
 - **“There was never any orthodox doctrine in the beginning.**
 - **“We cannot know who Jesus really was or what Jesus really said, since later leaders put words into his mouth.”**
 - **“The texts are so filled with errors that we have little idea what the original doctrines said.”**

Canonicity: How Do We Answer

- How Did We Get the 27 Books of the New Testament?
 1. Tracing the Dissemination of Apostolic Teaching
 2. The Situation at the End of the First Century
 3. Second & Third Century Developments (church fathers + NT manuscripts)
 4. Fourth Century consolidation and canonization.

Dissemination of Apostolic Teaching

Q: How did the church in Collosae receive *Colossians*?

A: “Tychicus will tell you all about my activities.... I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here” (Col. 4:7-9).

Q: How did other churches receive *Colossians*?

A: “When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea” (Col 4:16).

Q: How did *Colossians* spread?

A: The most plausible answer is that those who possessed it (Colossae, Laodicea, etc.) shared it with others.

Q: How did these Christians know that *Colossians* was authentically from the apostle Paul?

A: Because they received it from those who received it from Paul. They never decided it was “biblical” because they received it as such.

Dissemination of Apostolic Teaching

From Oral Tradition to Written Scriptures

1. The gospel and apostolic doctrine originally was spread by the apostles themselves, preaching and teaching in person.
2. As the apostles moved in their missionary labors, it became necessary for them to communicate with their former churches, which they did in their *epistles*.
3. Originally, the gospel story (life and ministry of Jesus) was spread as an oral tradition. (This was an oral culture, when vast amounts of material could be recalled orally, from memory – rabbis commonly memorized and could recite the entire OT.
4. As the apostolic generation grew older, it became clear that written Gospels were needed. Therefore, four Gospels were written, two by apostles (Matthew & John) and two under apostolic oversight (Mark & Luke).
5. These Gospels did not present different versions of the Jesus story, but rather “The Gospel according to Matthew,” etc. One Gospel recorded by four different apostolic authors.
6. All the evidence shows that these apostolic writings – Gospels and Epistles – were regarded as Scripture – i.e. God’s Word – from the earliest time
“... just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do *the other Scriptures*” (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

The End of the First Century, A.D.

- Status of NT Books: all written, but not universally known.
 - All canonical books written; not all universally known.
 - Other non-canonical books in circulation: *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Letter to Diognetus*, *Didache*, *Barnabas*, etc.
 - Heretical counter-gospels (Gospel of Thomas, Judas, etc.) *not* yet written.
- Status of the Church:
 - Churches throughout the Roman Empire, with several influential centers (Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome), none of which was dominant.
 - Roman persecutions becoming widespread and intense, so that large or regional gatherings of Christian leaders are not possible and communication is difficult.

The End of the First Century, A.D.

- Assessment:
 - Apostolic writings strongly accepted *where known*.
 - Non-apostolic writings widely appreciated but *not accepted as canonical*.
 - Heresies beginning, but counter-Gospels not written.
- “By the end of the first century, there are collections of Paul’s letters circulating among a large number of churches in the ancient world. Many churches would have possessed copies of at least one if not more of the Gospels. These documents are recognized as authoritative Scripture for believers” Dr. Matthew S. Harmon

Consolidation in the 2nd to 3rd Century

- The Witness of the Apostolic Fathers:
 - Clement of Rome (d. 99): *Epistle To the Corinthians* (c. 95 A.D).
 - Ignatius of Antioch (d. 117): *Seven Letters to Churches*
 - Polycarp of Smyrna (d. 155?): *Philippians* (110-140), *Martyrdom*
J. B. Lightfoot: “They prove that Christianity was Catholic* from the very first... The great facts of the Gospel narrative, and the substance of the Apostolic letters, formed the basis and moulded the expression of the common creed” *Apostolic Fathers*, 1:8.



Consolidation in the 2nd to 3rd Century

- Later Second Century Writers:

- Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165): *Apologies, Dialogue with Trypho*. Refers to Four Gospels as “memoires of the apostles” quotes them as Scripture with the OT. Basis of his defense of Christianity is the Four Gospels.
- Tatian (ca. 120-180): *Diatesseron*. Compilation of Four Gospels into one narrative.
- Irenaeus (ca. 130-200), Tertullian (ca. 155-222), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 130-200), and Origen (ca. 185-254) all based their work on the Four Gospels and Paul’s letters.
- Marcion (ca. 85-160). Heretic who separated OT God from NT God. Tried to establish a canon of ten of Paul’s letters plus a modified Luke. Was condemned for doing so.
- Muratorian Fragment (170-200). List at Rome of authoritative books. Four Gospels, Acts, Paul’s Letters, Jude, 1 John, Revelation. 21 of 27 NT books, none others. Shows widespread agreement on 80% of the NT.

2nd & 3rd Century Canonization

- Three criteria for recognizing authoritative Scripture:
 1. *Orthodoxy*: must conform to the message of Jesus that was passed down through the church.
 2. *Apostolicity*: Must have been written by an apostle or someone close to and under the authority of an apostle..
 3. *Catholicity*: Widespread recognition throughout the church, not just a local document.

2nd & 3rd Century Canonization

- Non-canonical & Gnostic Gospels
 - *Epistle of Barnabas*: Edifying Christian document from 2nd century. Excluded by Muratorian Canon because written “in our time” (late 2nd c). Commended but not authoritative.
 - *Gospel of Thomas*: first mentioned by *Hippolytus* ca. 222-235 as heresy; not found in any earlier church father.
 - *Gospel of Judas*: late 2nd c. Gnostic text. Denounced by *Iranaeus* as a “fictitious history”. Text discovered in 1978.
 - *Gnostic Gospels like Thomas & Judas excluded because: 1) not orthodox; 2) not apostolic; 3) not catholic.*

A Case Study on Oral Tradition

- U. S. Civil War
 - A soldier is 20 in 1865, lives 75 years. Dies 1920.
 - His grandchild is born in 1900, lives 80 years. Dies 1980.
 - Direct transmission of information from 1865-1980 – 115 years.
- Iraneaus of Lyons (125-202 AD).
 - John the Apostle, direct disciple of Jesus, dies approx. 95 AD.
 - Polycarp of Smyrna sits under his teaching.
 - Iraneaus is discipled and taught by Polycarp (d. 155).
 - Between AD 30 and 202 AD, there is a living memory of Jesus' ministry with only *one* intermediary who was not an eye-witness: 172 years.
 - So when Iraneaus writes *Against Heresies*, is he qualified to assess true and false Gospels? Yes.

Canonization in 4th Century, AD

- Domitian's Persecution, 303-311 AD
- Constantine's Conversion, 312; Edict of Milan, 313 AD (Christianity Permitted & Property Restored).
- Council of Nicaea, 325 AD
- Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 325.
 - Three categories of writings:
 - 1) *accepted* – Gospels, Acts, Paul's Letters, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation (22/27, none others)
 - 2) *disputed* – James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude
 - 3) *rejected* – numerous writings.
- Easter Letter of Athanasius, 367 AD
 - Official list of all 27 books, none others. Canon final.