

Book of Book: The N.T. Canon Pt. 2 – Week 4

INTRO

The Bible has two purposes:

1) To glorify God; 2) For us to know Him and have salvation.

CANON: (Greek) – The list of books which orthodox Christianity recognizes as scripture; the very words of God.

- **1 Peter 1:21** - ... *no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*
- Unlike the O.T., ALL Christian faiths today agree on the 27 books of the N.T.

How did the books we have come to be recognized as scripture?

The process of canonization was slow, organic, and handled with great scrutiny. The Church didn't give/assign authority to certain books. **It recognized the authority which was already on them by God as His word.**

HOOK

It was the disciple's commission to – by the power of the Holy Spirit - remember His words, to teach what He taught, and give testimony as eyewitnesses to His life, death, and resurrection. They wrote letters to the churches they founded including several biographies. As those who were trained by Jesus, the apostle's teachings were considered to have the same authority, and copies of their works were circulated. Within a span of 20-30 years, most of the apostles were martyred. Each church sought to have collections of the apostle's writings for teaching and gathered all they could get their hands on. Because of the distant regions the churches were in, slow communication, and religious persecution, collections of books varied from church to church. They taught what they had but a consensus needed to be made.

BOOK

Matthew 7:24-25 - *Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.*

- It was this promise by Jesus which motivated the early church fathers in their pursuit to identify which writings were scripture, the teachings of Jesus.

LOOK

Last week we discussed how the biblical writers claimed their writings were scripture on the authority that they were giving Jesus' teachings. Further, we saw how they verified each other's writings as being the words of God.

Do we have any witnesses from outside the Bible who attested to the existence of these books & their authority as scripture? How do we know we have the right ones?

The teachings and events surrounding Jesus and his apostles which took place in the 1st century did not happen in isolation. If so, then critics could claim that several people sat down to start a religion by writing the bible together with questionable intentions. But Jesus was well known, as were His disciples. In fact, their job was to be as public as possible about what they saw and heard...

Matthew 28:19-20 - *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations [...] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*

- ...and they followed through.
- We are going to meet the apostle's disciples and see that they assign scriptural authority to the books we hold as the teachings of Jesus.

THE SUB-APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The sub-apostolic fathers were those church leaders whose lives overlapped the lives of the apostles. Most of them were pastors in the early church and wrote between AD90-140. Sadly, most of their writings are long gone because of the fragile nature of papyrus and the periods of violent persecution where they were executed, and Christian writings were sought and destroyed. Those which have survived give quotations from and reference the books of the N.T. often. They give indisputable testimony to the existence of these books (already in their day) and show us they are being regarded as authoritative scripture.

Clement of Rome (writings: AD95-100)

Clement was a disciple of Paul, knew Peter well, and was acquainted with John. He's probably the "Clement" mentioned in **Phil. 4:3**. He became the pastor of the church in Rome from AD91-100 and is known for the two letters he wrote to the

church in Corinth. 1 Clement, he wrote the same year John was exiled to the Island of Patmos (AD95). It's said of Clement that he was sentenced to work in the mines for his faith and eventually martyred around AD100/101.

"The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ: Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order." (1 Clement 42:1-2 written AD95)

While speaking of the word of God he makes a distinction between "the books and the apostles" (2 Clem. 14:2). This is probably his description of the O.T. books and the testimonies of the apostles with their letters. His two letters were so revered and influential they were read in churches as scripture until the 400's and were included in the Alexandrian codex of the Bible.

Clement quotes and makes references to Matt., Luke, John, Rom., Cor., Eph., Heb., 1 Tim., Titus, James, and 1&2 Peter.

Ignatius of Antioch (writings: AD110)

Ignatius was a disciple of John, knew Matthew and probably Luke. He became the pastor of the church in Antioch. He suffered martyrdom in Rome in AD110. However, on the long journey from Antioch to Rome to be executed, he wrote 7 letters. They were to the churches in Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Philadelphia, Rome, Smyrna, **and his friend, the pastor of Smyrna, Polycarp.** In these letters, he exhorts the churches, warns of heresy, and rejoices at the opportunity to die for Jesus.

In these letters he quotes and references Matthew, John, 1 John, 1 Peter, and cites nine of Paul's letters.

Polycarp of Smyrna (writings: AD110)

Polycarp was a disciple of John along with Ignatius. He became the pastor of the church in Smyrna. He wrote a number of letters, most of them lost, but we still have his letter to the Philippians written around AD110 where he **replied to their requests for advice.** He was important in the early church for authenticating orthodox teachings based on his learning from John and refuting heresies. His martyrdom came when he refused to burn incense to the emperor (a form of worship) and was burned at the stake and pierced with a spear.

He references Matt. and Luke, and reproduces phrases from 1 Peter, Phil., and nine other letters of Paul. It's clear that by his day, Christian writings were being widely circulated and churches collecting them. To the Philippians, he writes:

*“I have letters from you, and **from Ignatius**. I will send yours to Syria, as you request; and I am sending the letter of Ignatius to you, with others, and the present one of my own.”*

Papias of Hierapolis (lived: AD70-155)

Papias was a close friend of Polycarp’s and they sat under John’s teaching together. He became the pastor of the church in Hierapolis around the same time Ignatius was the pastor in Antioch. He wrote a five-book commentary on the teachings of Jesus (“Explanation of the Lord’s Discourses”). He went to great lengths to record accurate explanations of Jesus’ teachings from those who heard the apostles preach. Many scholars believe that the story of the woman caught in adultery, which is missing from the earliest manuscripts of John, was an addition by Papias recounting John’s teaching. One tradition says he was martyred alongside Polycarp, his lifelong friend.

His writings existed until the 1,200’s but have been since lost. The fragments of his we still have are quotations from his commentaries by Irenaeus, Eusebius, and others. In these, he quotes John, references Matthew, and cites Mark as being Peter’s recollections.

OTHER WRITINGS:

Epistle of Barnabas (written: AD90-120)

Barnabas is spoken of often in the book of Acts as the fellow missionary of Paul. Although met with controversy, he allegedly wrote the “Epistle of Barnabas.” It was read as scripture in the early church and is found at the end of Codex Sinaiticus. He quotes from Matt., John, Acts, 2 Peter, using the expression “*It is written,*” which was solely used to denote scripture. He also alludes to Mark, Luke, Eph., 2 Tim., Titus, Heb., and 1 Peter.

The Didache (written: AD80-120)

The Didache means “teaching” and is short for the full name “The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.” Its authors are unknown, but it was written very early in church history having been mentioned by Athanasius and Justin Martyr. Athanasius recommended new converts should read it. Meant to be a compilation of the apostles teaching, it gives instructions on baptism, the Lord’s supper, electing church leaders, and other church institutions. Until the N.T. canon was finalized, it was a part of many churches collection of scriptural texts.

It speaks of “the Gospel” as a written document and quotes Matthew 22 times. It also makes references to Luke, John, Acts, Rom., 1 Cor., 1 Thess., 1 Tim., 1 Peter, and Revelation.

Shepherd of Hermas (wrote: AD100-140)

Hermas was the brother of Pius, a pastor of the Roman church. He speaks of his background as having been a freed Christian slave who became a wealthy merchant. He allegedly wrote The Shepherd of Hermas which is an extended allegory like the “Pilgrim’s Progress” of the ancient church. It was written in Rome and indicates to the Roman church. It was referenced often by the early church fathers and was included with scripture until the N.T. was finally canonized. It’s even found in Codex Sinaiticus.

It makes use of James, is familiar with Revelation, and echoes many other N.T. books.

Do we have any witnesses from outside the Bible who attested to the existence of the apostles books and their authority as scripture? By the early 100’s, the sub-apostolic fathers like these and their writings identify 85% of the N.T. as having been verified as Jesus’ teachings through the apostles and are being taught in churches as scripture. However, because of the apostle’s broad travels, the gospels and many of the other books were still circulating independent of each other. Examples:

- **Palestine (Israel):** Matthew, James, Hebrews (?)
- **Asia Minor:** John, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Philemon, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude, Revelation
- **Greece:** Luke (?), 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians
- **Rome:** Mark, Acts, Romans

There was no comprehensive list (a canon) that encompassed the complete teachings of Jesus via his apostles. There were also other very good writings such as Clement’s letters, Barnabas’s letter, the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermes circulating around and being taught as scripture. Formulating a list wasn’t yet a big concern. Churches were collecting and teaching whatever they could get their hands on that was ascribed to Jesus’ apostles. But BIG complications were about to come.

2 Timothy 4:3-4 - *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*

- Heresy – any teachings/doctrines contrary to orthodox Christianity
 - Bad; But, watch how God uses it for His purposes.

GNOSTICISM (Gnosis = “knowledge.”)

Greco-Roman philosophy had a way of seeping into Christianity. One of the most pervasive forms it came in was the heresy of Gnosticism which got traction shortly after the birth of the church. Even John was combatting it in his gospel and letters. During the mid 100’s, it became one of the most influential distortions in Christianity.

Gnosticism taught that it derived from the secret knowledge, teachings Jesus gave to His apostles. Gnostics believed that all matter was evil and only the spirit was holy. It set up a hierarchy of deities and demi-gods where the creator god (the demiurge) was evil but inferior the unknown, supreme God who sent Jesus to redeem us from the evil material world. According to Gnostics, the Son of God could not have become human since flesh is evil. He would have had to come as a ghostly apparition or be a spirit possessing the man, Jesus.

Along with the good writings of the sub-apostolic fathers (examples above), this heresy birthed many (“spurious” or “apocryphal”) letters and writings promoting its own bad theology. These cleverly paralleled and imitated the letters and gospels of the apostles often claiming to be from an apostle to attract attention to them. In some churches, these ended up being treated as scripture. There were many of these “gnostic gospels” and gnostic writings. Examples:

- Gospel of Mary (Magdalene) – found in Egypt, 1896, the Berlin Gnostic Codex
- Gospel of Thomas – Discussing Jesus childhood and hidden sayings of Jesus
- Gospel of Philip – implies marriage b/t Jesus and Mary Magdalene
- Gospel of Judas – found in Egypt, 1970’s – secret conversations b/t Jesus & Judas
- Gospel of Peter – found in Egypt, 1886 – bizarre details about Jesus’ resurrection
- Apocalypse of Peter – John had an apocalypse. Shouldn’t Peter get one too?
- 50 more found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945
 - How the each of the spurious writings were accepted varied from church to church. Several became very popular and treated as scripture, but most of them were treated with suspicion.

MARCION of Synope (wrote: AD140)

1 Timothy 6:3 - *If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he [...] understands nothing.*

Complicating matters was a businessman and church leader from Pontus who came to prominence named Marcion. Trained under Cerdo, a gnostic Christian, he redefined Gnosticism and propelled it into popularity. His teachings were attractive because they were simple and clear, and they pandered to the fashionable Greek philosophy of the day (secret mysteries, disdain for the material world, Platonism's forbidding of marriage, etc.).

He taught there were two cosmic gods. The evil god created the evil material world and was the god of the O.T. He was harshly focused on justice and judgment. The other who was superior was entirely good and kind who sent Jesus to save us from bondage to the evil material world. Jesus was crucified through the malice of the just god. Before dying, Jesus passed on his secret teachings to the apostles, but they failed and allowed it to be corrupted. So, Paul took up the torch to spread the true secret teachings of which he, Marcion, was the interpreter.

To support his doctrines, Marcion compiled scriptural writings useful to his teachings and then did something interesting. He took his metaphorical scissors and began cutting out anything that didn't fit his views and aimed to boil it down to a definite, comprehensive "gospel" which supported his teachings. If anything seemed too worldly or showed the creator as loving, it had to go.

He began by removing the O.T. entirely because it taught the goodness of the creator God in Genesis. Then he cut out Matthew and Mark because of their many quotations of the O.T. John was removed because it identified Jesus as the one through whom everything was created. When he was finished, what was left were edited versions of 10 of Paul's letters and the gospel of Luke, but not before he removed the first two chapters and the temptation of Jesus.

Orthodox Christians recognized Marcion's teaching as the greatest threat to the established church. **Tertullian** spoke of Marcion saying, "*What Pontic mouse ever had such gnawing powers as he who has gnawed the Gospels to pieces?*" **Polycarp** met Marcion in Rome and described him as "*the firstborn of Satan.*" Marcion was expelled from the church in AD144 but he and his teachings continued to flourish.

However, what Marcion had done was massively significant for the Christian church. **He had abused the apostolic writings to formulate his own “canon” in support of his heretical teachings. This compelled the church to finally assess the multitude of unorganized writings and begin working toward an orthodox canon; one which would accurately and comprehensively give the teachings of Jesus. God used the cancer of heresy to catalyze a pursuit of accurate theology.**

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The early church fathers were the third generation of Christians. The primary focus of the apostles and sub-apostolic fathers was extending the gospel far and wide and founding churches. This generation had to respond to the infection of heresy. They worked tirelessly to formulate and defend orthodox doctrine.

Titus 1:7-9 - *For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must [...] hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

It's during this era of church history that the number of Christian writings exploded in the forms of commentaries, apologetics, and letters seeking to defend truth and put heresies to rest. To this end, the early church fathers got serious about distinguishing which books were authoritative scripture, which ones were good and edifying but not authoritative, and which were forgeries.

Justin Martyr (lived: AD100-167)

Justin, born the year John died, was a philosopher who pursued Stoic, Peripatetic, Pythagorean, and Platonic philosophies but found them unfulfilling. He found satisfaction in Christianity when an old man led him to Jesus and became a Christian philosopher.

“I fell in love with the prophets and these men who had loved Christ; I reflected on all their words and found that this philosophy alone was true and profitable.”

He traveled around debating as a Christian apologist then founded a Christian school in Rome. He courageously used his talents as an apologist to write Antoninus Pius, the Roman Emperor, to explain Christianity and show Christians were his, *“best helpers and allies in securing good order”*. When Marcus Aurelius became emperor, Justin again wrote to him on behalf of Christianity. Four years later, Justin was arrested for his faith and told to denounce it by making a sacrifice to the gods. He

responded, “No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false” and was beheaded. Since he gave his life for what he called “*true philosophy*,” he has been nicknamed Justin Martyr.

He wrote his book, “Apologies,” in AD140 and mentions Revelation, Acts, and eight of Paul’s letters. He also refers to the gospels, which he calls, the “Memoirs of the Apostles.”

Irenaeus of Lyons (lived: AD 125-202)

Irenaeus, born in Smyrna, was a disciple of Polycarp (disciple of John). He attended the school of Justin Martyr in Rome before becoming the pastor of the church in Lyons where the previous pastor had just been martyred. He was one of the earliest heroes of fighting for Church orthodoxy. In one of his works, “Against the Heresies,” he boldly fought against Gnosticism & other abuses of Christian doctrine.

Significantly, he quoted the N.T. approximately 1,000 times and recognized the four gospels (comparing them to “*the four winds of heaven*” or “*four corners of the earth*”), Acts, Paul’s letters, and Revelation. He omitted the book of Hebrews, not believing it was written by Paul.

Irenaeus’ writings (and **Tatian**’s work, the Diatessaron (AD170) - where he attempted to harmonize the four gospels into one) give clear evidence that the four gospels were finally being compiled together and recognized as scripture, and the other “spurious” gospels were beginning to lose hold in most Christian circles.

Tertullian of Carthage (lived: AD155-220)

Tertullian was born to pagan parents in Carthage which was a cultural epicenter at the time. He received an exceptional education there in law, philosophy, literature, and rhetoric. He was so moved by the dedication of the martyrs, Christian morality, and their uncompromising belief in one God, he converted and became one of the leading apologists using his talents as a teacher.

Tertullian wrote passionately against many heretics of his day including **Marcion**. He was known for being fiery and intense which influenced his extensive writings “with arresting and memorable phrases, ingenious aphorisms, bold and ironic puns, wit, sarcasm, countless words of his own coinage, and a constant stream of invective against his opponents (Encyclopedia Britannica).”

He attests that the original manuscripts of the apostles were still in existence, speaks of the “New Testament,” and quotes the N.T. books around 1,800 times. In his work “Against Heretics,” he tries to convince unbelievers to convert writing:

“If you are willing to exercise your curiosity profitably in the business of your salvation, visit the Apostolic churches in which the very chairs of the Apostles still preside in their places; in which their very authentic Epistles are read, sounding forth the voice and representing the countenance of each of them. Is Achaia near you? You have Corinth. If you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi and Thessalonica. If you can go to Asia, you have Ephesus. If you are near Italy, you have Rome.”

MURATORIAN FRAGMENT (AD170) **How do we know we have the right books?**

The Muratorian Fragment was found in the 1740's by an archeologist named Ludovico Antonio Muratori. Although difficult to prove, many scholars attribute it to a contemporary of Irenaeus named Hippolytus.

This fragment, which scholars believe reflects the widely held views of the early Church, is massively significant for two reasons.

First, it contains the earliest discovered list of compiled N.T. books known as the Muratorian Canon: The Muratorian Canon lists 23 of the 27 N.T. books. Hebrews, 1&2 Peter, and James are omitted. Luke and John are listed but the portion above them is missing leading scholars to believe Matthew and Mark were included before it was damaged. It refers to 2 Epistles of John. 1 John is assumed, and many believe 2&3 John were combined.

In addition are the apocryphal books of The Apocalypse of Peter, and The Wisdom of Solomon which were no longer included by the mid 300's.

Secondly, it explains the process the early church was using to identify which books were authoritative scripture. As they sought the Lord as to which should be included as the voice of God, they set up three criteria to filter the many works available.

Note: They were intentional not to choose the books they most preferred, nor did they assign authority to certain books. The church fathers only saw themselves as receiving and recognizing what God had given to them from the apostles. (e.g. Irenaeus, Against Heresies)

The Three Criteria

1. **Authorship** – Must be written in the 1st century by an apostle.
 - a. Eye-witness evidence matters. Multiple eyewitnesses matter more.

- b. The apostles had the authority of the office given to them from Jesus and recognized by the church.
 - i. The fragment recognizes the book The Shepherd of Hermas
 1. It's a helpful book. Christians should read it. But it shouldn't be read aloud in the church (= read as scripture) because we know the author and "*he's of our own day.*"
 - ii. Exceptions: Mark (Peter's teachings), Luke (close traveling companion with Paul), and Hebrews (a good enough argument was made by Augustine it was written by Paul, but fits all other criteria).

2. **Theological Orthodoxy** – It must be consistent with the apostolic teachings which were already recognized as authoritative scripture.

- a. Is it sound doctrine aligning with the books which aren't debated?
- b. In short, does it fit the rest of scripture?
 - i. On these grounds, the Gospel of Peter was rejected for its Docetic tendencies, but the questioned Gospel of John was fully accepted.
 - ii. The Muratorian Fragment lists other writings of that day and says they, "*should not be mixed with scriptures as honey should not be mixed with gaul.*" (bitter and unpleasant)

3. **Wide Acceptance in the Church** – It must be recognized as scripture and being taught by a majority of churches.

- a. Do churches around the world mutually recognize the soundness of authorship and theological content of this book?
 - i. By this third filter, most of the spurious gospels and apocryphal books were eliminated.

What are we seeing happening through this ancient fragment?

John 14:26 - *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

- The H.S. was making the voices of certain books stand out against competitors.

Over the next 200+ years before the sealing of the Canon, the early church fathers will use these three standards, laid out in the Muratorian Fragment, to grapple and discern what is God's Word. Remember, during this process, they aren't giving these books credibility, they are recognizing the authority that's already on

them by God. By taking these three criteria as sufficient, every orthodox branch of Christianity (Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox), without dispute, accepts the 27 books of the N.T. as the complete and authoritative record of God's divine self-revelation.

Where do we see God at work in all of this?

1. The Holy Spirit reminded and illuminated Jesus' Words so they could be taught across multiple generations with clarity and accuracy.
2. He preserved His Word through multiple national persecutions and across 2 millennia, even when the originals were destroyed, so we could read it with confidence in its accuracy.
3. He defended His Word against the subtle, cancerous attacks of heresy.
4. He empowered His Word to stand out against competing books.
5. He gave unity (universal agreement) to the Christian churches as to which were authoritative.

TOOK

Justin Martyr was a former Greco-Roman philosopher who was seeking truth and left unfulfilled. His search was satisfied in Christianity, and he became an apologist and the founder of a school defending that truth. Justin was arrested for his faith and told to denounce it by making a sacrifice to the gods. He responded, *"No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false,"* and was later beheaded. He has been nicknamed Justin Martyr because he gave his life for what he called *"true philosophy."*

- Consider: *"No one who is rightly minded turns from true belief to false."*

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, these men trailblazed the way for us to know God. This Truth – accurate understanding of God's self-revelation through Jesus and His word - is what they lived, fought, and died for.

- **Do you know truth?** Do you recognize warped, misused, or half-truths about the Bible when you hear them?
- **Do you follow truth?** Do you apply the scriptures you read and are taught?
- **Do you stand for truth?** Are you lovingly bold about the truth you hold?
 - If so, then **you stand on an unwavering rock in the midst of every storm.**
 - Justin Martyr knew truth, followed truth, and stood for it.

Matthew 7:24-25 - ...*whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the Rock.*

FURTHER INQUIRY

Can Gnosticism still be seen subtly in churches today? What does it look like?

RECAP

- The sub-apostolic fathers were those discipled by the apostles and give testimony as to which writings were authentic.
- Heresies, and books supporting them, crept into Christian theology.
- The most dangerous was Gnosticism propelled into popularity by Marcion.
- It was combatting heresies like this which compelled the 3rd generation Christians to consolidate, clarify, and defend their beliefs.
- They needed to establish a criterion to recognize which books were scripture, so Christians everywhere could study and teach the undiluted Word of God.
- The three criteria were 1) authorship, 2) orthodoxy, and 3) Church acceptance.
- The Holy Spirit has been at work in every step of bringing us His Word.
- It is still critical that Christians are vigilant to watch for falsities being taught.

Challenge 1: Get to know Jesus by studying a gospel.

Challenge 2: Listen to a sermon, worship songs, or podcasts this week and evaluate every claim against scripture. Is it true?

Soli DEO Gloria