

STUDY ON THE BIBLE

Session 4 - The New Testament (Part 2)

In the last session we began our examination into how the New Testament came into being. We looked at the various criteria that were used to determine if a particular book or letter was divinely inspired. When all was said and done, the early church used three tests to decide whether or not a writing was God-inspired. In order to be considered divinely inspired a book needed to be written by one of the Lord Jesus' apostles or under the supervision of one of the Lord's apostles with the apostle's blessing. (This was the test to see if it was ancient as opposed to just a contemporary work. Contemporary to those who came after the period of the apostles.) Then it also needed to be a work that was recognized by the early church as divinely inspired. (This was the test of universality. Was this book used regularly and freely by the ancient church and considered God-inspired.) Then lastly the book or letter needed to pass the test of whether or not the book contained apostolic content. (Was the message and teaching of the book orthodox? Was it in line with the teaching of the apostles or did it contradict the teachings of those who were the Lord's apostles?) We also saw how the church leaders developed the motto that was: test everything. While many books might have been seen as useful, their connection to one of the Lord's apostles could not be verified or it may have been known to have been written after their deaths. Also, some books were removed from use because their message was not in line with the teachings of the apostles. Then we saw how a few books that are mentioned in Scripture may have been intentionally "lost" or not copied and shared due to their content. So as we looked at the criteria last week, this week we are going to take a walk through history and see how these criteria were used to actually come to the New Testament we now have.

To understand this session, it's important to know certain periods of time.

- A. The first is the time of the apostles. This was the time after the Lord ascended in 33 AD until around 95 AD when it is believed that the apostle John, the last apostle is believed to have died. The significance of this time is that the apostles were alive and could still write and teach.
- B. Then there is the period of the early church fathers which overlaps with the time of the apostles and it seems to be between about 60 AD - 180 AD. The significance of this time period is that there were people in this time period who were disciples of the original apostles. Thus, they would have heard the teachings of the apostles and been familiar with any letters or books they wrote.
- C. It is important to note how centuries are counted. The first century is the time from 1 AD to 99 AD. The second century is from 100 AD to 199 AD. The third century is from 200 AD to 299 AD. and so on.

1. The early formation of the New Testament

From the earliest days of the church, there are two groups of books that were considered divinely inspired. One was called the 4-fold gospel and the other was called the Pauline corpus (or body of Paul's writings).

A. The 4 - fold gospel accounts

These were considered authoritative because they contained the words and teachings and life of the Lord. The first of the four to be widely accepted as inspired was

Matthew. It was written by a known apostle and as it was written to Hebrew people concerning Jesus fulfilling prophecies in the Scripture that prove He was the Messiah.

John was well known to have been written by the apostle John so it was quickly accepted by most. However, the book of John ran into some problems early on and twice was almost removed from the collection of 4 gospels - both times due to its teaching. Many felt that John was supporting gnostic positions. In fact, early gnostics loved quoting John to make their point. However, by 165 AD, Justin Martyr refuted this and showed how John actually provided the best ammunition against gnosticism.

Q: Do you remember one of the traits that the true gospels that were inspired had in common?
(*They were all anonymous. No author was given in the text.*)

How did Mark and Luke make it into the collection called the 4-fold gospel?

Mark was troubling in that it wasn't written in order of how the events of Jesus' ministry happened. However, for there to be an understood order implies that someone else had written an accepted gospel account that had a particular order to it.

There was a man named Papias, who was a disciple of the apostle John and became the bishop of Heiropolis. Some time in the early second century he wrote the following concerning Mark. *"Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately all that he remembered, whether the sayings or doings of the Lord, but not in order - for he had neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but followed Peter later on, as I said. Peter was accustomed to teach as occasion required, but not as though he were making a compilation of the dominical (pertaining to the Lord's) oracles. So Mark made no mistake in writing down certain things as he called them to mind; for he paid attention to one thing: to omit none of the things he had heard and to make no false statements in any of them."* So Mark is actually the gospel of Peter, thus, there was the valid link to an apostle.

Luke was known to be the traveling companion and personal physician of the apostle Paul. Thus when Luke and Acts were commissioned to be written by the wealthy Theophilus who had converted to Christianity, it was actually Luke's interviews of first hand accounts and Paul's accounts of the events that brought the gospel of Luke forward as an inspired work.

It was these four gospel accounts which began to be circulated widely as single unit. The early writings of the church discuss the 4-fold gospel. In 165 AD, Tatian, who was Justin Martyr's disciple, wrote a book called the Diatessaron. (The word "diatessaron" is Greek and means "harmony of the 4".) Tatian unstitched the four gospels and put the stories they contained in chronological order using John as the framework for the chronology. This work was used widely by churches for centuries and is used in our modern "harmony of the gospels". What this shows is that by 165 AD, the church recognized four books, gospel accounts of the Lord's life and ministry, as authoritative.

B. The Pauline Corpus

We do not know who put together the first edition of Paul's letters or where it was

done but many have speculated that Luke did it as he had direct access to Paul's letters. All that we do know is that by the very early 2nd century, Paul's letters were being circulated as a collection and not individually. Here's the deal, almost all the collections we've discovered or have records of contain 10 books written by Paul but they aren't all the same 10 books. Many of the earliest collections did not contain the 3 pastoral letters (I & II Timothy, Titus) but did include Hebrews. There were some others that contained Philemon rather than Hebrews. There is actually a copy of the Pauline Corpus that survives and it is from 200 AD. It followed the tradition of containing Hebrews but not the pastoral letters.

It wasn't long before the two groups of writings became one group. The gospels preserved the words and teachings of the Lord and thus were automatically considered inspired. The letters of Paul were inspired as they preserved the words and teaching of one whose authority as an apostle was universally acknowledged. Thus, rather than having two sets of writings, the two became one new group of writings. When the two collections were put together they also put the book of Acts in with the others. When this became the norm, the church had what became a primitive approximation of what would later become the New Testament, though at the moment it contained only about 15 books of the 27 it now has and in some areas, it contained some books that would come to be removed in time.

2. The necessity of the New Testament

As we will examine, some of the largest strides in compiling what we now call the New Testament came from the necessity of the church defining what was and was not inspired, as opposed to allowing various heretical groups to make the decision.

The early church was not very concerned about forming a new set of authoritative books. These books merely existed and were considered on par with the books of the established Scripture, the Old Testament. The early church was busy proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and building up their members with solid teaching and training. And the Holy Spirit's work was evidenced by the fact that Christianity was spreading rapidly into every area of the known world - and beyond.

The problem came when men and teachings who had never known the apostles started teaching things which were in opposition to the teaching of the apostles. They would not only feel free to alter the written materials to suit their teaching, they would also not hesitate to add other works to their own list of "inspired" works that led to great confusion among people. What it boiled down to was that the New Testament came into being as a response against heretical teachers and movements. It set limits to what was inspired and what wasn't so that the church could know which books were worthy to be used in worship and training. Let's take a look at a few of these early heretics and their contribution to the New Testament.

A. Marcion

Marcion was born in 100 AD in Sinope (a city in present Turkey on the Black Sea). His father was an early church leader and he was brought up in the faith. The writings of the apostle Paul resonated with him and he later came to believe that Paul was the only apostle that preserved the purity of Jesus' teachings.

While in Asia Minor, he remained in communion with the church. However, he began to share his heretical thoughts with church leaders and he got angry because they were unresponsive

to his new ideas. He was a wealthy ship builder so he headed to Rome to try to find an audience for his ideas there. Marcion gave the church a large donation upon arriving in Rome. Yet, when they heard his teachings, they found them so disturbing that they returned the donation to him and withdrew fellowship from him.

Here's what Marcion did. He eliminated the Old Testament and all but Luke's gospel, (edited to his liking) as Luke was associated with Paul. He loved Paul's writings but also got rid of any references in Paul to the Law or the Old Testament. So while he used many of the same books as the church, he had edited them to his liking. The push for this was the Marcion had fallen into gnostic thought and this is what troubled the Roman church to much as to return a large donation. He believed that there were two gods - one of the Old Testament and one of the New covenant. The Old Testament god was a lesser god because he created the matter of the world (and to a gnostic, all matter is evil, thus the god of the Old covenant was a lesser, evil god). The god of the new covenant was the loving, spiritual god. In time, as he was booted from the universal church, he founded his own church. The church survived for a few generations which is amazing as it was made up solely of converts as celibacy was mandatory for members, thus no children were around to make up the ranks.

Why Marcion is important for us is that in 144 AD, he published the first ever fixed collection of what we'd call the New Testament books. He wrote an introduction to each of Paul's letters called the Marcionite prologues. These were two or three sentence paragraphs about each of Paul's letters and these prologues survived. Marcion formed his Bible in declared opposition to the holy scriptures of the church from which he had separated. It was his opposition that led the church to first become conscious of the heritage of the apostolic writings and their need to preserve them from false teachers.

B. Valentinus and his school

Valentinus was a contemporary of Marcion from Alexandria and lived in Rome from 135-160 AD. Like Marcion, he was in communion with the church at Rome when he arrived but soon broke with the church fathers and founded a gnostic school where he used a book he wrote called the "Gospel of Truth".

In 140-150 AD, Valentinus had completed a set of authoritative scriptures for his school. They were: Matthew, Luke/Acts, John, I John, Pauline corpus (not the pastorals), Hebrews, Revelation. In 1945 archeologists discovered a collection of ancient papyri called the Nag Hammadi collection. The Nag Hammadi collection validates the list of Valentinus' Bible. By 180 AD this list had grown. They also included the pastoral letters, the entire Old Testament, and several letters from other apostles (supposedly).

Valentinus was the theological opposite of Marcion. Whereas Marcion cut things out he didn't like, Valentinus continued to add things that he liked. So both presented a challenge to the early church. The early church would appeal to Scriptures to settle issues raised by these two heretical groups but in the end they had to answer the question, "What is the Bible?" The church began to see if they didn't respond and answer this question, one of these heretical groups or another one would arise and answer it for them.

C. Muratorian Fragment

In 1740 a man named Muratori published a list of the books of the New Testament in Latin that he discovered in a monastery in Lombardi (and area of Northern Italy)

that dated back to the 7th century. This list was taken from a Latin list of books that the Roman church used as its scripture in the 2nd century. This list contained 24 books: The 4 gospels, Acts, 13 books of Paul, Jude, I & II John, Revelation, the Apocolypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon.

There was a book that was widely used by the early church and many churches used it in their worship and for teaching and it was called the Shepherd of Hermas (or simply, The Shepherd). It eventually got ruled out as being written too recently to the publication of the Muratorian list to be included. What is interesting is that by the late 2nd century, the writings of the earlier heretics and their influence was not seen in this list.

By around 160 AD and onwards, there began to appear books entitled “Acts of X” where X is the name of various apostles (Paul, Peter, John, Andrew, Thomas). None of these were included in the list as they were noted to be too recent in composition and their teachings were gnostic.

D. Montanists

In 156 AD, Montanus, a charismatic leader cropped up in Phrygia and claimed that the age of the Paraclete, foretold by Jesus, had arrived and that he was the mouthpiece of the Paraclete. (The Paraclete was the Greek term for the Holy Spirit used by Jesus in John 14, 16.) This was yet just one more attack on the church and the pure teaching of the apostles. Gaius, a church leader, tried to cut the ground under the Montanist’s main teaching by removing the book of John from the group of 4-fold gospels, yet this was seen as excessive and unnecessary by the rest of the church as the Montanist’s teachings could be easily defeated without dismissing the book of John from the list of inspired books.

What this attack did was firmly cement in the minds of the church that they needed to establish list of the new writings which were inspired to provide a check on “uncontrolled prophecy and undisciplined speculation”. While it was obvious now that a list of inspired books was needed, it would take another century and a half to develop that list.

3. The men who hashed out the New Testament

God used not only the heretics of the day to cause the early church to wrestle with and eventually establish a canon of the new writings but He also used various men to further the canon into existence.

A. Irenaeus

Irenaeus became the bishop of Lyons (an area in what is now Southeast France) in 177 AD. While he didn’t create a list of books, he wrote extensively and he quoted what he considered Scripture often. Thus from what he quoted, we know what he considered authoritative. Irenaeus was the first person to use the phrases “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant”. The books he quoted as authoritative was similar to the Muratorian fragment but with the addition of I Peter.

One of the most important contributions of Irenaeus was that from his writings forward through history, the whole church recognized the Bible as being both Old and New Covenants. What is interesting is that both Irenaeus and Hippolytus (who lived at the end of Irenaeus’ life) both quoted Hebrews but never considered it inspired. Though they were aware of the existence of James, II Peter and Jude, they didn’t consider them authoritative for reasons we

don't know. Hebrews is an anonymous letter written to a persecuted home church in Rome. The earliest Christians associated it with Paul. However, fairly early on it got dislodged from the Pauline corpus because it was anonymous - and Paul gave his name at the beginning of his other letters. Now while the original recipients knew the author, those later in history did not and they shunned it as they couldn't verify the author. It was a very late entry into the canon.

B. Tertullian of Carthage

He was a Christian lawyer who wrote in Latin (the language of North Africa) from 196 - 212 AD. He was the first to call the new scriptures the "New Testament". Tertullian liked the book of Jude and accepted it into his list of authoritative books because it supported his arguments for his book entitled "On Women's Dress". He believed that the idea of female finery was first introduced by fallen angels as a device to seduce mankind. In 206 AD he became a Montanist.

C. The Scillitan Martyrs

On July 17, 180 AD a group of Christians in the North African town of Scillitan were brought before the provisional governor on charges of being Christians. They refused to renounce their faith and were executed.

In the course of the enquiry a box, the property of the church, was brought into the court. The court asked what was in the box and they replied that it was the writings of Paul, just a man. What was gathered was the library of that church and it shows that the new writings had been translated into Latin by this time. (It's interesting that North Africa spoke Latin at this point in history while Rome spoke Greek until the very end of the 2nd century.)

What we note is that there is an influx of new ideas by Christians and the church body as to what constitutes the New Testament but also that Christianity is spreading in that these early letters are being translated into various languages.

D. Origen

Origen was an impressive scholar and linguist who lived from 185-254 AD. He mentions all 27 books of the New Testament. He lists 21 of these books as acknowledged as inspired by the church and 6 of them he lists as doubtful. However, he also included a book called "Letter of Barnabas" in Scripture though when he moved to Caesarea (231 AD) he removed it as the church of that area had already refused to accept it.

So think back to this time to see what a monumental and chaotic process this must have been as opposed to how we'd do it today. There was no internet and letters took months to deliver. There would be churches in the western part of the Roman empire who had access to certain documents of antiquity that led them to accept or reject certain books while in the east or central empire, the churches had other documents for the same purpose. God had to supervise thousands of men over several centuries to bring the New Testament into focus and make sure that just the books He desired gain entrance into His book.

E. Eusebius of Caesarea

He was the bishop of Palestine from 314-339 AD. He is called the 2nd Christian

historian, with the first being Luke. Eusebius built a good rapport with Constantine, who became the emperor of the western Roman empire in 324 AD. His writings give us the clearest insight we have into the development of the New Testament as he wrote on this topic - rather than just it being a footnote about another topic.

According to him there were three categories of writings available to the churches of his era. 1) universally accepted, 2) disputed, & 3) spurious.

Eusebius considered Hebrews to be Paul's 14th letter. He put James, Jude, II Peter, & II & III John in the disputed category. He noted that the Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Letter of Barnabas and Teachings of the Apostles were all spurious (heretical).

Eusebius had one other mammoth contribution to the New Testament. Not long after Constantine inaugurated his new capitol in Constantinople in 330 AD, he wrote Eusebius and asked him to prepare 50 copies of the Christian scriptures both Old and New Testaments. These would be used in the city's church and they were to be set in "magnificent and elaborately bound volumes" which the emperor would completely underwrite. From these copies, we see that the same 27 books we have in the New Testament were the same books Eusebius put in his copies to the emperor in 330 AD.

F. Athanasius

Athanasius was the bishop of Alexandria and he wrote a letter to his church for Easter in 367 AD. In that letter he not only listed the same 27 books we now use in our New Testament, he listed them in order. He considered them all authoritative - none disputed. In less than 40 years from Eusebius, the New Testament had taken its final shape.

G. The Council of Hippo

In 393 AD, the first council to limit the scope of the Scripture was called. While the rulings of this council did not survive, in the notes of the Council of Carthage in 397 AD there was the list that was approved in the Council of Hippo so that all 27 books of the New Testament were listed. By this point in history, the New Testament was, for all practical purposes, closed.

It is important to note that these men were not, for the most part, those who were deciding what books belonged in the canon and which did not. They were mostly just reporting what books were in general use by the churches in their area. While they did occasionally make recommendations or their opinions public, for the most part their lists and writings were reflections of what the churches were and had been doing already. In that regard they give us a picture into when various books were accepted or rejected from the canon.

What is important to note is that just because a book was not considered inspired didn't mean it fell out of use with the early church. They had to categories of writings. There were those who were inspired and could be used to determine the truth of a matter, establish doctrine and be used as the basis for teaching and practice of the faith. Then there were those books who were acceptable for edification of believers. While these were not to be read in worship services, they could be used for teaching and illustration. We'd call the latter group, Christian literature.

Another very important thought among these early church leaders in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries was a reaction to the over critical use of the orthodoxy principle used to determine if a book was inspired or not. They were seeing many groups hastily blacklist many of the works known to be or at least highly suspected of being authentic works of an apostle due to what appeared to be a misreading or misunderstanding of the text. These earlier Christian scholars were quick to disqualify a book if it appeared to teach something controversial by their current standards. However, in time, the church came to see that many times these teachings were not contrary to the teachings of the apostles (and indeed were the teachings of the apostles) and so they began a very forward thinking program of accepting all the books that met all three criteria, whether or not they liked every teaching of every book. This has had huge implications on us today as we now have a much wider scope of content to the New Testament than had it been limited. Imagine a New Testament without James or II Peter or Hebrews? So again, we see the Lord as the One Who has put His Word together in His manner for our benefit.

It is important to note that the writing of Scripture, the God-breathing of His Word into an author is only the half-way house in the process. Inspiration finds its conclusion in the heart of the reader or hearer who is equally moved by the Holy Spirit. The in-breathing of the Spirit into the reader is essential for the right understanding of Scripture as it was for the original authors for their right production of these works. Whereas we call the initial stage inspiration and the latter stage illumination, it needs to be kept in mind that it is the same Spirit who is at work in both.

In the canon of Scripture we have the foundation of Christianity, the charter of the church, the title-deed of faith. For no other literature can make such a claim. And when this claim is made, these books are more than just a collection of ancient writings, they are the voice of God speaking so that He can be heard even to today.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebuke, or rebuttals?