

ORIGINS OF THE BIBLE – LESSON 2

– THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

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Introduction

Books of the Bible are listed differently in the canons of Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Slavonic Orthodox, (take a breath), Georgian, Armenian Apostolic, Syriac, Ethiopian (take another breath), and many other established churches. I make no claim to be able to bring order to the chaos – and won’t even try!

I intend for our project to include a review of the origins of the Christian/Protestant Bible – hopefully hitting the “high spots” as much as possible, and staying out of the complicated “pot holes”. We previously dealt exclusively with the Old Testament (or “OT”), which for me is an easier topic than the New Testament (or “NT”). Now we will work on the broad and complex history of the origins of our New Testament – trying to find the “high spots” for discussion and not getting bogged down in extreme detail.

Why Have an Old and New “Testament” for Christians?

A “testament” is a covenant – or a treaty, using a modern term. Old Testament is the name the first Christians gave the collection of Jewish holy books known as the Tanakh. We Christians consider it a covenant between God and the Jewish people. God promised the Hebrews land and safety in return for obedience and worship. The Old Testament tells the history of the Jewish people and of Israel. The covenant between God and the Israelites takes a central position having been first established after Noah survived the flood and extended several times – first with Abraham, and later with Moses in the Sinai.

Paul introduced the term “Old Testament” in his second letter to the Corinthians. The name “New Testament” is introduced in the gospel Matthew during the account of the Last Supper. The OT is the foundation on which the NT rests. If Christians could have separated themselves from Judaism, it would have been done long ago by rejecting the OT. But Christianity cannot do that and still have a foundation to the claim that Jesus is the Messiah. The prophecies of the coming of the Messiah are found in the Torah – and only there, as far as I know. The wonderful “marriage” of Christianity to Judaism is forever – and I am more than comfortable with that!

What is a “Canon”?

A canon describes writings which are officially accepted as scripture. They are considered authoritative in matters of faith and doctrine. These lists of writings, or canons, have been developed through debate and agreement by the religious authorities of those faiths. Believers consider these canonical books to be inspired by God, or to be an authoritative expression of the historical relationship between God and his people.

Although many canons are in agreement regarding most of the books of the Bible, there is variation regarding some books. Texts excluded from a particular canon are considered apocryphal; however, many disputed works considered “apocryphal” by some Churches are considered fully canonical by others. In the Hebrew canonic Bible there are significant separate manuscript traditions represented in the Septuagint, the Masoretic text, and the Dead Sea scrolls. And the “Samaritans” accept only their version of the Pentateuch as Scripture to this day – and the various differences don’t stop there.

There are differences between the Jewish and Christian OT canons, and between the canons of different Christian denominations. The differing criteria and processes of canonization dictate what the communities regard as the inspired books.

It seems that, quite logically, Christians have a method for determining canonicity that is more “developed” for the NT writings than for those of the OT. Many modern Protestants point to four criteria to justify the books that have been included in both the Old and New Testaments. These are:

- Apostolic Origin – from the first generation apostles or their close companions.
- Universal Acceptance – acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the ancient world up to the end of the fourth century.
- Liturgical Use – read publicly in gatherings of early Christians.
- Consistent Message – containing similar or complementary theological outlook when compared to other accepted Christian writings.

But I think this is too complex and overly analytical for our purpose. More simply, think of it this way: **Protestants hold to the Jewish canon for the Old Testament (the books are in a different order, and some books are combined into one for the Jewish canon). And Protestants adhere to the Catholic canon for the New Testament.**

A Brief Timeline (dates may be approximate)

51 – 125 AD (or 45 to 95 AD; or 50 to 90 AD; or whenever?) – The NT books are written, as well as many other early Christian writings.

140 AD – Perhaps the first compilation of the NT was completed by Marcion, an anti-Semitic Roman businessman. Being anti-Semitic, he eliminated the OT and kept only 10 letters of Paul and 2/3 of Luke's gospel – thus eliminating any references to Jesus' Jewishness. His theology, while partially acknowledging some Christian teachings of the time, was hardly Christian as he taught that there were actually two gods – that of the OT (the cruel Yahweh), and the NT (the kind Abba). As a positive, it forced the mainstream Church to decide on a core canon: the four gospels and letters of Paul. But the complete periphery of the canon was not yet determined, and wouldn't be for a long time.

325 AD – Constantine convened the Council of Nicea probably to bring some peace and order to competing Christian theologies and factions of the day – hopefully Christian unity. I believe he was politically motivated to create an easier time in his role as Roman Emperor. He never really showed any significant commitment to a personal Christian faith. The Council did result in one version of our current Christian creed, advanced the concept of the Trinity, and brought competing Christian leaders of the time together to talk about theology. I haven't found that this council did much to finalize a formal Christian canon, nor was it probably intended to, but it did advance the discussions which ultimately led to our current Bible.

367 AD – Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria and one of the “winners” at the Council of Nicea, in his Easter letter provided a list of the same 27 NT books that we currently use. But this was neither final, nor generally definitive.

397 AD – Council of Carthage – Church leaders acknowledged the 27 NT books as we now know them. Most had been generally accepted for many years, but a handful still warranted further discussion.

400 – AD – The entire Bible was translated into Latin, primarily by Saint Jerome. This version is called the “Vulgate”, or “in the language of the people”. There were earlier translations into Latin, but this was the first complete and generally recognized version.

400 AD – At this time in history, the canon of the NT was actually ratified only by widespread consensus rather than by official proclamation. By the beginning of the 5th century, most churches in the Christian world actually did agree on the basic content of the NT. This basically remained the status until the Council of Trent in the 1500s.

400s – 1300s AD – (early and high middle ages) – While intense study and scholarship took place during this period, little in the way of Bible translation occurred. The Bible of the Christian Church remained the Vulgate.

904 AD – Pope Damasus, in a letter to a French bishop, lists the NT books as we currently have them.

1380 AD – John Wycliffe began a translation of the entire Bible into English. It was finished by his friends after his death. Interestingly, Wycliffe could not translate from the original Hebrew or Greek because he did not understand those languages. He therefore had to use the Latin Vulgate.

1442 AD – Council of Florence – the entire Church recognizes the 27 books, though does not declare them unalterable.

1456 AD – The Gutenberg Bible was printed. It was an edition of the Vulgate and was significant as the first major work printed with movable type.

1514 AD – Erasmus edited the text of the Greek NT (without reference to the Trinity).

1525 – 1530 AD – William Tyndale, a scholar involved in the reform movement, translated the NT and the Pentateuch (the first five books of the OT) into English despite persecution. He was martyred before he could complete the OT.

1536 AD – Martin Luther translates the entire Bible from Hebrew and Greek to German.

1546 AD – Council of Trent – the Catholic Church reaffirms **once and for all** the full list of 27 books as traditionally accepted.

1611 AD – King James I of England commissioned a translation of the Bible that would become the primary Bible of English-speaking people for more than 300 years.

1782 AD – The first English Bible was printed in America – the Aitken Bible.

1880s – Today – Many other versions including The Revised Version, The New American Standard Version, The New International Version, and more.

Orthodoxy vs. Gnosticism

Orthodox Christians battled others, particularly Gnostic Christians, over their respective interpretations of the divinity, human nature, sin, salvation, and other crucial theological and philosophical points. Orthodoxy prevailed, but Gnostics lived on and had occasional revivals. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in the 4th century AD, was a leader of the winning Orthodox Christians following the defining Council of Nicea. Also among the losers was a group called the “Arians”.

Gnostics, who had very widespread appeal in the early years of Christianity, emphasized esoteric knowledge and self knowledge as the path to salvation. This compares with

orthodoxy which emphasizes the redemptive act of a living Savior (Jesus' crucifixion). Gnostics viewed the virgin birth and resurrection as symbolic rather than literal history. Gnosticism also embraces the truth of all traditions. It was the looseness and flexibility, when it comes to interpreting sacred texts, which drove the orthodoxy so "crazy".

A modern moderate viewpoint, which seems to defend the relevance of Gnostic writings, suggests that the Gnostic tradition would have made Christianity a more appealingly rational, tolerant, and expansive creed. But, according to this line of thinking, the orthodox unfortunately suppressed it and largely drove it out of existence. Gnosticism, according to a few, is more free of sexism and paternalism, and is unburdened by an emphasis on guilt and sin. It is described as highly esoteric and with an intellectual approach which even enlightened skeptics could embrace.

Some Didn't Make It

In spite of Athanasius' battle, some texts were preserved and later found. Three prominent Gnostic gospels are good examples: Thomas, Mary, and Judas. In 1945 texts were found in Egypt which included the gospels of Thomas and Mary. In the 1970s, the gospel of Judas was discovered, also in Egypt.

The Gospel of Thomas – 60-92 AD – This is a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, and even some conversations with other persons. Some sayings contradict those found in the canonical Gospels.

The Gospel of Mary – 3rd to 5th Century AD – In this gospel, Mary of Magdala is a leader among the male apostles. She is portrayed as one of Jesus' most beloved disciples and is singled out by Jesus for special teaching and revelation.

The Gospel of Judas – 4th Century AD – This gospel portrays Judas as the most beloved and trusted of all the apostles, rather than the evil betrayer seen in the canonical gospels. He dutifully obeys his orders to hand Jesus over to soldiers for crucifixion, in accordance with God's will.

The "Missing Link"

An interesting concept has arisen from an analysis of what is in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew and Luke both draw extensively from Mark in their accounts, and, it is now believed, from some other source.....? Scholars have come to call this source the "Q" gospel, from the German word Quelle, meaning "source". No record of this text has ever been found.

The "lost" Gospel Q (GQ for short) would have been written about two decades after Jesus' death and would be older than the Christian Church itself. Its theoretical existence is the result of 150 years of detective work by historians and theologians. It is interesting

to speculate, but many of the sayings in Mathew and Luke, which are not traceable to Mark, can be found in the Gospel of Thomas. Thomas is at least similar in form and content to the GQ document which is strongly implied by the earlier research. Thomas is therefore also speculated to be a beneficiary of GQ.

In a sense, GQ is pre-Christian. Jesus is seen as a charismatic teacher, a healer, a simple man filled with the spirit of God. Jesus is also a sage, the personification of Wisdom, cast in the tradition of King Solomon. Jesus seems to appear here as neither Christ nor the Messiah, but the last in a long line of Jewish prophets. It was later writers who added the details about Jesus' life and death that became the bedrock of Christian belief.

But that's enough, for now, about a theoretical "something" which nobody has ever seen.

An Evangelical Twist

Many Evangelical Christian groups do not accept the theory that the Christian Bible was not known until various local and Ecumenical Councils, which they deem to be "Roman-dominated", made their official declarations. These groups believe that the NT supports that Paul (2 Timothy 4: 11-13), Peter (2 Peter 3:15-16), and ultimately John (Revelation 22:18-19) finalized the canon of the NT. Evangelicals tend not to accept the Septuagint as the inspired Hebrew Bible.

Reliability of the Texts

When studying the origin of the OT we found that many consider the manuscript evidence as dramatic in number and general agreement with each other. While differences exist, the focus was on the undeniably astounding similarity.

So too with the NT! While there are not as many known manuscripts or fragments as for the OT, there still are well over 5,000 known copies and fragments in the original Greek, nearly 800 of which were copied before 1000 AD. Some texts date to the early second and third centuries, with the time between the original writing and our earliest existing copies being a remarkably short 60 years. Interestingly, this manuscript evidence far surpasses the manuscript reliability of other ancient writings that we trust as authentic ever day: e.g. Julius Ceasar's "The Gallic Wars", 10 manuscripts and a 1000 year delay after the first writing; Pliny the Younger's "History", 8 manuscripts and a 750 year delay; and many more with similar numbers of manuscripts and delays such as manuscripts by Thucydides, Herodotus, Sophocles, Euripides and even Aristotle (49 manuscripts with a 1400 year delay from original writing).

Measuring reliability another way, Homer's "Iliad", the most renowned book of ancient Greece, has 643 copies of manuscript support. Yet in those copies, there are 764 disputed lines of text, as compared to 40 lines in all the NT manuscripts. And each of William

Shakespeare's 37 plays (written as recently as the 1600s) have gaps in the surviving manuscripts, forcing scholars to "fill in the blanks".

These comparisons pale in comparison to the over 5,300 copies and fragments of the NT that, together, assure us (or at least improve the likelihood) that nothing has been lost. In fact, all of the NT except eleven verses can be reconstructed from the writings of the early church fathers in the second and third centuries. One source puts it this way: "The complete New Testament could be reproduced from the quotes that were made from it by the early church fathers in their letters and sermons.

In addition to the "statistics" and comparisons given above for the very earliest church writings, the later versions of the NT also are impressive. There are 8,000 to 10,000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts for us to work with. And there are approximately 8,000 manuscripts in Ethiopic, Coptic, Slavic, Syriac, and Armenian.

These all are measurements and comparisons I can understand and which I find credible, at least as "prima facie" evidence of reliability. But it shouldn't stand unchallenged.

Skeptics and liberal Christian scholars both seek to date the NT as late first or early second century writings. They argue that none of the books were written by eyewitnesses but were merely second or third-hand accounts. Many stories are myths, they argue, and many words were "put in the mouth" of Jesus. Nevertheless, there is evidence that reference to incidental details in the Gospel of John gives credence to John having written the Gospel. Paul is known to have signed his epistles with his own hand, and other references in ancient writings seem to indicate Paul is the actual author. And Luke's eyewitness authorship of the Gospel of Luke and Acts has, through technical cross-referencing and other literary research of the accounts, gained support.

We "shan't" or daren't, for the purpose of this study, get into the very heavy conversation and analysis of technical minutia (although important) like "textual variants", that support some of the claims of NT reliability.

How About Archeology?

This isn't a study of Bible archeology. It's only a study of the origins of our bible and the process for "getting there". Nevertheless, it seems natural to at least introduce the subject of archeology because it is relevant for evaluating information we have on the early Bible and its context. And it may be a good topic to consider for future discussions.

In my opinion, the Bible is an inspired book written for a specific purpose – not merely a history book, though it is that to a limited extent. Its purpose is to reveal God's plan for all mankind and to provide an instructional manual of examples, lessons, and laws about how to live. But it's not just that! It is God's introduction to us of his intent for our relationship with him as our creator, and it describes how he has revealed himself and his intentions to us through Jesus Christ and the crucifixion.

Archeology is not about faith. Its purpose is not to make us believe or not believe in the Bible. It does not prove or disprove the Bible. Its purpose is not to replace, invalidate or support the Bible, but to help elucidate the context of what the Bible is describing and when the Bible is being created. The Bible stands by itself and does not need the support of modern scientific study (even though that debate is interesting).

Very simply, archeology seeks to understand how people lived and why they lived that way. It studies merely (but importantly) what society has left behind. It provides general background and gives us insight into the religious setting of the biblical world. Biblical archeology covers the time of Abraham in about 1850 BC to the first half of the second century AD. And through all of this time, the New Testament covers only about 140 years, as opposed to a bit over 1800 years for the Old Testament. And while it is not necessary that it does so, archeology has strengthened the historical credibility of the Bible.

Archeology, conveniently, has helped confirm the historical accuracy of the Bible, particularly through its verification of many ancient sites, civilizations, cultural practices, and biblical characters. And, optimistically speaking, only a fraction of available archeological sites have been surveyed, and an even smaller fraction have been excavated. And many experts believe it can be clearly stated categorically that no archeological discovery has ever controverted a single biblical reference (a strong statement but quite defensible).

How About Ancient Historians?

Outside the Biblical world, there are several witnesses to the events of the time. The much heralded and generally respected Jewish historian Josephus (37AD – 100 AD) recorded the history of the Jewish people in Palestine from about 70 AD to 100 AD. In his famous work “Antiquities”, he states: “Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works.....He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the gentiles. He was the Christ and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him. For he appeared alive again the third day...”

Pliny the Younger, Emperor of Bythynia in northwestern Turkey, writing to Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. writes: “They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to commit any wicked deed...”

One of the most important Roman historians is Tacitus. In 115 AD, he recorded Nero’s persecution of the Christians as follows: “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our

procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, ... but even in Rome”.

Research and Discussion Topics (*For any of the following, the presenter is free to adjust the question or topic to make it more informative or interesting.*)

1. Give us some more background on Constantine, his background, his motivation for convening the Council of Nicea, and his apparent “Christianity” or lack thereof.
2. Give us some background on Athanasius, his background, his importance and role in developing our current canon.
3. We see references to the “Arians”, one of the losers at the council of Nicea. Give us some more background on this early Christian “tradition”. Were they part of the “Gnostic” tradition? Do they remain in existence today in any form?
4. Give us more information on Gnosticism. Do they remain in existence in any form?
5. Give us some background on the Latin Vulgate, its importance and use as a Christian canon.
6. Give us some more background on Martin Luther’s process for translating the Bible into German. Why and how did he chose the NT books to be his choice for the protestant canon.
7. Investigate the Evangelical claims as to scriptural support for Paul, Peter, and John personally finalizing the NT canon and discuss it.
8. Here are some “gospels” that didn’t make the final cut: Thomas, Mary, Judas. Why were they excluded? Report anything else you find of interest.
9. Tell us more about the “lost” Gospel Q.

Are there potential new subjects for study which have been suggested by the “Origins” discussions we have had regarding the Trinity, the Old Testament, and the New Testament? For example, as regarding the Origins of the Bible, we could consider: looking in more detail the concept of “virgin birth”, the resurrection, etc.; traditions behind other NT narratives; early Christian persecution, more information on early Christian authorities, e.g. Athanasius; more study on selected apocryphal writings; the claims of inaccuracies in, or inappropriate changes to, the manuscripts over time; etc.