

Week 3. The Origin of the New Testament Canon

- Are there more than four gospels?
- Historical development of NT canon
- Criteria for NT canonicity

How many gospels are there?

- Christians generally accept that there are 27 books in the New Testament with four gospels.
- But what about:
 - Gospel of Thomas?
 - Gospel of Judas?
 - “there are many other gospels”
- We need to know how to respond to these views!

Canon of the New Testament— Overview of Historical Developments

- **First century** – books written, began to be copied and disseminated
- **Second century** – books became more widely known and began to be recognized as authoritative
- **Third century** – recognized as “scripture”, along with OT. Beginning of distinguishing authoritative books from other Christian literature
- **Fourth century** – church fathers declare composition of NT canon.

New Testament– First Century

- The Lord's sayings are considered part of "scripture".
1 Ti. 5:18
- Paul's (oral) teaching is the "word of God". 1
Thessalonians 2:13
- Paul's writings are included in the "other scriptures" 2
Peter 3:15-16
- All Christians in Thessalonica exhorted to read Paul's
epistle. 1 Thessalonians 5:27
- Clement of Rome (AD 95) freely "quoted" Matt., Luke,
Hebrews, 5 of Paul's epistles (esp. Romans,
Corinthians), 1 Peter.

Conclude: Many NT books were circulating widely.

New Testament– Early Second Century

- Widespread copying of books in centers of learning
- Church fathers distinguished their own writings (e.g., Epistle of Barnabas) from inspired, authoritative apostolic books
- Polycarp and Ignatius: attested to all NT books except Mark, 2 Peter, 2&3 John, Jude
- Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) puts apostolic writings on same par as OT prophets: the same Voice was speaking. Justin was familiar with most books of NT, including all 4 gospels and Hebrews.
- Church in Rome (about 140) compiled a list of books similar to our NT.

Influence of Marcion, a heretic

- Acceptance of NT books happened spontaneously.
- Most Church fathers accepted and knew of the NT writings + related writings, but treated only former as authoritative books.
- *Marcion*, in about AD 140, rejected all NT except Luke and non-pastoral Pauline Epistles. If covenant was *new*, there had to be a clear break with any Jewish, he argued. Marcion was declared to be a heretic
- But he stimulated orthodox Christians to prepare a *standard* – a list of authoritative or canonical books.

NT– Late Second Century

- *Irenaeus* (studied under Polycarp). Asserts apostles were endowed from power on high. Quotes nearly every NT book. Wrote *Against Heresies* (see excerpt).
- *Tatian* (pupil of Justin Martyr) equated 4 gospels, but rejected other “gospels” circulating.
- Muratorian Canon (AD 170). Listed 22 of the 27 NT books included. Includes two non-canonical books and rejected other books that are “good for reading”.
- Some felt that the Epistle of Barnabas, the Epistles of Clement, and the Shepherd of Hermas should be included.
- The term “New Testament” used 1st in AD 190

Conclude: By around 200 AD, agreement on the canonical books was virtually complete.

NT– Third Century

- Origen. Commented nearly all NT books.
- Western Churches – supported inclusion of Revelation, but not Hebrews; Eastern churches – the reverse
- Dionysius (pupil of Origen in Alexandria). Supported inclusion of James and 2&3 John, but not 2 Peter and Jude

Conclude: Although canon still not formally decided by 300 AD, Christian leaders knew which books were to be used for establishing doctrine and defending the faith.

NT– Fourth Century

- **Eusebius** (AD 270-340, bishop of Caesarea). In “Church History” classified NT books as those : (1) universally agreed; (2) admitted by majority (but not all): James, 2 Peter, 2&3 John, Jude; (3) rejected certain useful books (e.g., the Didache, Shepherd of Hermas) and various “heretical” books.
- **Council of Nicea.** AD 325. Did not discuss canon.
- **Athanasius** (bishop of Alexandria), specified the 27 NT books without qualification in AD 367.
- **Council of Carthage** (AD 397) Affirmed 27 books as canonical: “nothing else to be read under name of divine scriptures”.
- **Vulgate** – Bible in Latin, completed AD 405, included all 27 books.

Conclude: Near unanimous agreement on the Canon of New Testament by AD 400 (a debate continued in eastern churches).

A Basic Principle for the Canon of Scripture

- At some point in time, the canon must be “closed” : nothing shall be added or subtracted.
- This principle, which applied to parts of the OT canon (e.g., the Law. Deut 4:2; 12:32), also applies to (at least) parts of the NT canon (e.g. the Apocalypse : Rev. 22:18)

Criteria for New Testament Canonicity

- 1) **Apostolic Authority (direct).** Jesus did not write. But Paul did—prolifically. So did John, Matthew, Peter. What about other apostles? Thomas? Judas?
- 2) **Apostolic Authority (indirect) -- close association with Apostles.** Mark—Peter (Bishop Papias); Luke—Paul; or with Jesus--James/Jude
- 3) **Antiquity.** Belong to apostolic age. E.g., Epistles of Barnabas and of Clement were “too late”.
- 4) **Orthodoxy.** The apostolic faith is defended: “what does it teach about Christ.” In particular, Gnostic teaching/writings/ were rejected.
- 5) **Universality.** Acceptance by all churches.
- 6) **Internal consistency.** Gnostic writings rejected.
- 7) **Speculative writings rejected.** E.g., Shepherd of Hermes rejected, since quite prophetic.

New Testament Apocrypha— “Gospels”

Other “Gospels” (selections)

- Gospels of the infancy (Arabic, Armenian)
- Bartholomew
- Birth of Mary
- Of the Hebrews
- Joseph the Carpenter
- Marcion
- Mary Magdalene
- Matthias
- Nazarenes
- Peter
- Philip
- Thomas (discovered, Nag Hammadi, Egypt, 1945)

Major themes

1. Embellishment on the “hidden years” of Christ

- Infancy of Christ
- Christ’s childhood (e.g., Christ at 5 years and the clay sparrow)
- “Passion” gospels: Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection

2. Last state of believers

New Testament Apocrypha– “Acts”

Other books of “Acts” (selections)

- Andrew
- Andrew and Mathias
- Barnabas
- Bartholomew
- James, ascent of
- John
- Matthew
- Paul, passion of
- Peter: Acts of, Passion of, Preaching of; Apocalyse of,
- Peter and Paul
- Philip
- Simon and Judas
- Thomas

Main theme: Lives of apostles

- Source of tradition that Peter was crucified upside down
- Source of tradition that Thomas went to India

Since many were heretical, “orthodox” church reacted against them, even their burning (Nicea Council 787).

New Testament Apocrypha– “Epistles”

Other “Epistles” (selections)

- Abgarus and the letters of Christ
- Epistle of Apostles
- Epistle Barnabas
- Third Corinthians
- Letter of Jeremiah
- Laodiceans
- Lentulus
- Paul and Seneca
- Epistle of Titus

**Other Gnostic writings were found
at Nag Hammadi**

Conclude:

- None of the Gnostic writings met the criteria of apostolicity, orthodoxy, antiquity, or widespread use

Questions

Do you agree with the following:

- *“Discoveries of new gospels are exploding the myth of a monolithic religion and demonstrating how diverse the early Christian movement really was”* (Elaine Pagels, professor of religion, Princeton).
- *“More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament.” Only four, which presented a more “godlike” Jesus, were chosen.* (da Vinci Code, p. 234)

If you do not agree, why not?

If not, how do you defend the New Testament canon to non-Christians, who believe the bold lies about the NT that are being propagated in novels, the media and theological colleges?