

(Notes – Week 2)

The Canon of the New Testament, Bruce Metzger <https://books.google.com/books?id=gkit-fH4z4YC&printsec=frontcover&dq=new+testament+canon+metzger&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjXkZm2x6DZAhVCjK0KHV2oBj4Q6AEIJzAA#v=onepage&q=new%20testament%20canon%20metzger&f=false>

And Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon, David R. Nienhuis
<https://books.google.com/books?id=18laiJh3dm4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=james+and+the+new+testament+canon&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwir7oaHyaXZAhVPtIMKHS5LD6cQ6AEIbjAN#v=onepage&q=james&f=false>

Here is a nice table for a quick reference of early Christian writers and their NT citations – it also includes citations from various non-NT texts:

<http://www.ntcanon.org/table.shtml>

The New Testament – End of First/Beginning of the Second Century

A tremendous number of Christian documents begin to be written, copied and circulated in the second century. To some degree this is likely due to the growing production of papyrus. [To read many of these documents: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com>]

1 Clement

This is a document written by the bishop of Rome in the 90's. He is writing to the church in Corinth rebuking them for removing their bishop. He basically tells them it is not acceptable, indeed not possible for them to remove their bishop because God puts the bishop in place and only God can remove him.

Clement references the OT as scripture and while he alludes to the sayings of Jesus and to various letters of Paul, he is not as clear that these are “scripture.” One specific passage (*1 Clem* 13:2) illustrates his use of Jesus sayings:

remembering the words of the Lord Jesus which He spoke, teaching forbearance and long-suffering: for thus He said ‘*Have mercy, that you may receive mercy: forgive, that it may be forgiven to you. As you do, so shall it be done to you. As you give, so shall it be given unto you. As you judge, so shall you be judged. As you show kindness, so shall kindness be showed unto you. With what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you.*’

Clement indicates that the church in Rome and in Corinth have copies of Paul's letters, instructing them to read those letters. *1 Clement* is cited by a few early writers as "inspired."

Epistle of Barnabas – (cir. 80-130 AD)

Only a few scholars believe this document could have been written by the Barnabas in the book of *Acts*. This document has a big date range because scholars are divided on the date. It does appear to be a document written in Egypt, having typical "Alexandrian" style: a Hellenized view of and allegorical usage of the OT texts and a fairly negative view of Jewish Temple worship. This writer cites OT texts as "scripture" with only allusions to NT texts. The only significant early writers that cite *Barnabas* as "inspired" are Clement and Origen, both from Alexandria, Egypt.

Didache – (cir. 70-100 AD)

This is also a document with a wide dating range. It is like an early Minister's Manual with practical guidance about how to conduct the Eucharist and baptism for example. *Didache* reflects an early Jewish Christian orientation and contains "The Two Ways" teaching (the Way of Life and the Way of Death, an extension of when Moses delivers the Law). "The Two Ways" also appears in *Barnabas* and in the War Scrolls of the Essenes in the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Didache* gives an early representation of trinitarian formula and appears to quote an early version of *Matthew* with some scholars referring to this version as *M. Didache* is cited by a few early writers as "inspired."

Ignatius of Antioch – Letters (cir. 112-120 AD)

Ignatius is a bishop of Syria, taken prisoner by the Romans during a brief persecution and is being taken under armed guard to Rome to stand trial where it is believed his is executed. Along the way he writes letters to seven churches: Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia and Smyrna. He is writing on the go, thus he cannot have any documents with him and is apparently quoting gospel and Pauline material from memory. *Ignatius* is cited by a few early writers as "inspired" and gained a significant following due to the martyrdom of Ignatius.

Shepherd of Hermas – (cir. 120-128 AD)

This is a very interesting document written by somebody in Rome. The claim seems to be made that Clement of Rome is the author, but this is highly unlikely. *Shepherd* is an allegorical and apocalyptic document like the *Revelation*. The principle message of this document is urging Christians to live a holy life while offering them the hope of a

“Second Repentance” if they happen to have a moral failure or walk away from faith after baptism. This document was cited as “inspired” by a few early writers, but is denounced by Tertullian.

These early documents are important evidence in the development of the NT canon because we see an early and heavy use of the OT followed by fewer OT citations replaced by some quotations of NT material and a growing number of allusions to what become NT documents. This seems to reflect both oral tradition and the slow circulation of documents. These documents are seen as “inspired” by many writers into the third century. These early writings also give us a fairly clear view of what the first, and early second century church believed.

The First Listing and the New Testament in the Second Century

In the 140’s Marcion (who was deemed a heretic) constructed his own canon which included most of Paul’s letters in edited form, along with Luke’s gospel. Marcion rejected the OT and the “god” of the OT as the evil demiurge. He rejects the other gospels as having been tainted by the Jews. Marcion becomes a fairly successful evangelist and grows his church all around the Empire, especially in N.Africa and Italy. The Marcionites continued into the 5th century.

This list presented by Marcion is the first known listing of what is called a New Testament canon and this “unorthodox” list pushed the early church to develop an authoritative list of inspired writings. Marcion is denounced by several early fathers with Tertullian writing a treatise bearing his name, *Against Marcion*.

The Second Century Apologists

All the evidence shows us that Gnosticism becomes a significant problem for early Christianity in the second century. Some of the clearest evidence comes from the writings of men we call Apologists: Justin Martyr (145-155 AD), Irenaeus of Lyons (170-180 AD) and Clement of Alexandria (195-202 AD) *these dates reflect the dating for their writings*. The Apologists defend the faith against Gnosticism, Judaism, and Marcionism.

Justin Martyr does not cite any New Testament writing by name, but he designates his several New Testament citations and allusions with “it is recorded,” or the “memoirs of the apostles.” He does, however, refer to the “Gospels,”

For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, “This do ye in remembrance of Me...” *First Apology* 66

Justin never cites any Pauline writing which is interesting, but he does argue against Marcion, thus he must have known about Paul’s writings.

Around 170-175 AD Tatian, a disciple of Justin, created a harmony of the four orthodox gospels known as the *Diatessaron*. This was an attempt to lay out a chronology of the life of Jesus with the texts laid out in four columns side by side. This text was accepted in some circles, even being used to replace the four gospels, but the acceptance of this document was only regional and short lived. The *Diatessaron* confirms, however, that the church recognized only four gospels.

Irenaeus confirms the view that the early church only accepted four gospels in *Against the Heresies*,

From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit.” *A.H.* III,11.8

Irenaeus also quotes from, or alludes to, almost all the documents that become the New Testament. These citations are mostly from Pauline works (25+ occurrences from each of these: *Romans*, *1 Corinthians*, *Galatians* and *Ephesians*). His Pauline citations/allusions include all three “Pastoral” epistles (*1 and 2 Timothy* and *Titus*). The other general New Testament letters get scant recognition and a few are totally absent (*Philemon*, *2 Peter*, *3 John*, and *Jude*). He also refers to a few non-New Testament documents as “inspired” (*1 Clement*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*).

This evidence from Irenaeus shows us a few important things: first, other “gospels” had begun to circulate and, following Justin Martyr, he wanted to make sure everyone knew that the Church only embraced the four gospels. We have already mentioned the *Gospel of Thomas* which may have been an early collection but contained both “orthodox” Jesus sayings mixed with dubious sayings. In addition, we know both from references made by Irenaeus and later by Clement of Alexandria that other questionable gospels were circulating: *Gospel of Truth*, *Gospel to the Hebrews*, *Gospel to the Egyptians*, *Gospel of Philip* and others. Luke had mentioned in the opening of his gospel

that others had attempted to record the events of Jesus. This had possibly alerted the earliest Christians to be on guard against false stories and writings.

Irenaeus openly warned his readers of the false teachings of “the Gnostics.” This movement was apparently strong in the Egyptian region and many of the strange documents being reported by Irenaeus were coming from this group. Gnostic writings played an important role in the development of the New Testament canon – Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria spend a good deal of time attacking this movement – this labels the Gnostic writings as non-orthodox and thus narrows the number of accepted documents for early Christianity.

Clement of Alexandria (writings from 195-202 AD) is an interesting, but atypical early Christian writer. He argues against the Gnostics, but then seems to hold a few Gnostic beliefs. He only cites from the four “orthodox” gospels and argues against “other” gospels, but then from time to time he will reference a non-orthodox gospel in a seemingly positive way. Clement clearly quotes the Apostle Paul over 1,200 times as “scripture” or “inspired.” His citations of Paul are almost word for word with the accepted text we read.

While we are not including **Tertullian** (writings cir. 212-220 AD) as a Second Century Apologist, like Clement of Alexandria he represents a clear change in the Christian writers with respect to the NT documents. Tertullian clearly cites NT texts hundreds of times (gospels, Pauline and general writings) as “scripture” or “inspired.”

Using only the quotations from Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian we could reconstruct 80-90% of the New Testament. These two writers illustrate that what becomes the “orthodox” NT documents has become more fixed (although not complete) by the year 220 AD. The New Testament writings that are mostly ignored by these two men only include the smaller epistles like *James, Philemon, 2 Peter, and 2-3 John*. Indeed, a very important factor in the development of the NT canon from this point forward would be, “Did Clement and Tertullian cite from this writing?” These are the first prolific Christian writers. From this point forward we find an increasing number of church fathers with greater numbers of documents filled with clear biblical citations.

The Muratorian Canon

The Muratorian canon is a manuscript fragment that represents the oldest known “orthodox” list of the New Testament. This is a Latin MS copied from a Greek original but is missing both the beginning and ending of the list. The document is dated by most scholars to have been written around 170-200 AD. This document was discovered in an Italian library in by Ludovico Antonio Muratori, a famous historian of the time. He published the document in 1740. This list includes the following:

- *Luke and John* (we assume the text names *Matthew* and *Mark* in the beginning of the fragment which is missing – the writer mentions “four gospels” and then names *Luke and John*)
- *Acts* (“*the acts of all apostles are written in one book*”)
- Pauline letters (including the Pastoral epistles)
“*There is current also (an epistle) to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, forged in Paul's name for the sect of Marcion, and several others, which cannot be received in the catholic Church...*”
- *1 and 2 John* is assumed since the writer only names two letters of John
- *Jude*
- the *Revelation* of John

This list omits *Hebrews*, *James*, *1 and 2 Peter*, and *3 John*. It also names a few documents that do NOT appear in the “orthodox” New Testament (*Wisdom of Solomon*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Shepherd of Hermas*).

By the end of the second century most of the 27 documents in the orthodox New Testament canon had already gained widespread acceptance, especially the four gospels and the Pauline writings. It is critical to understand why only four gospels were accepted. These early fathers were very familiar with the other gospels that were floating around – Marcion’s gospel of Luke, the various “Gnostic” gospels, and other “proto-orthodox” gospels that were not well accepted – they wanted to make it clear that these “other” gospels were NOT accepted as “orthodox.” There was, however, another very important reason – the Gnostics.

The Effect of Gnosticism

Gnosticism was at its zenith during the second century, especially in Egypt. The various Gnostic texts were rejected by the orthodox. Most of these Gnostic writings were rejected because they had too many bizarre passages and thus were not able to develop and keep a large audience. One important factor for any document to be affirmed as “orthodox” and “inspired” was how much acceptance it received among the bishops (and

thus the churches) in the various regions. This acceptance is typically reflected by if, and how often, the church fathers cited from the document in question.

The development of the New Testament necessitates some discussion of Gnostic texts. The proliferation of Gnostic texts forced church leaders to address these texts and to explain why the church rejected them. To illustrate, we will briefly focus on the bizarre nature of some texts found in these writings.

Before we get into bizarre Gnostic passages it is important to understand that many ancient texts have some strange passages, including the New Testament documents. One must be ready to admit this before launching an attack against strange Gnostic writings. For our purpose just two examples will be enough,

“I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.”...“Where, Lord?” they asked. He replied, “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.” *Luke 17:34-37*

AND

Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered. *Matthew 21:18-19*

I know there are many who have offered explanation for these (and other) passages. Many of the explanations I have read satisfy me. My point is that we must admit to some strange passages in our NT documents that cannot be *easily* explained. I could list many others. If you read the early fathers you will find *many* strange passages as well.

One can give some explanation for the strange Gnostic passages, but even with the proper historical context many of these passages are just bizarre. Here is the critical difference between the New Testament gospels and the Gnostic gospels - the basic message contained in the New Testament is powerful because it is profound - taking the complicated and making it exceedingly simple to understand. Gnostic texts seem to be just the opposite, taking what should be easy to grasp and making it overly complicated. Paul can sometimes be accused of this (*2 Peter 3:16*).

The *Gospel of Thomas* is a good work to cite for this purpose – it does contain some Jesus sayings that are very close to the record in the synoptic gospels, and those who criticize early Christianity like to use *Thomas*. I will only give two examples of many:

Jesus said, “Blessed is the lion which the man shall eat, and the lion become man; and cursed is the man whom the lion shall eat, and the lion become man.” Saying 7

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go forth from among us, for women are not worthy of the life.” Jesus said: “Behold, I shall lead her, that I may make her male, in order that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who makes herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. Saying 114

These two sayings clearly illustrate why *Thomas* was not accepted in the early church. This gospel has many bizarre sayings. Many scholars who attack the integrity of the New Testament find it easy to criticize the male-orientation and domination of the early church. These scholars will use various passages from *Thomas* and other extra-biblical texts to poke at Christianity, yet typically they will avoid texts like Saying 114.

The *Gospel of the Egyptians* is another Gnostic document representing some of the most bizarre passages faced by the early church. This is such a strange document that it is difficult for a modern audience to even believe. The text contains long stretches of vowels that were meant to be sounded out while reading, probably like secret code.

These are the three ⁵ [powers], the three ogdoads that the Father ¹ [through] his providence brought ¹ [forth] from his bosom. He brought them ¹ [forth] at that place.

Domedon ¹ Doxomedon came forth, ¹⁰ the aeon of the aeons, and the ¹ [throne] which is in him, and the powers ¹ [which surround] him, the glories and the ¹ [incorruptions. The] Father of the great light ¹ [who came] forth from the silence, he is ¹⁵ [the great] Doxomedon-aeon in which ¹ [the thrice]-male child rests. ¹ And the throne ¹ of his [glory] was established [in it, ¹ this one] on which his unrevealable name ²⁰ [is inscribed], on the tablet ¹ [. . .] one is the word, the [Father ¹ of the light] of everything, he ¹ [who came] forth from the silence, while he rests ¹ in the silence, he whose **44** name [is] in an [invisible] symbol. [A] ¹ hidden, [invisible] mystery ¹ came forth iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii[iii] ¹ eeeeeeeeeee-
ēēēēēēēē [ēē o] ⁵ oooooooooooooooooooooo uu[uuu] ¹ uuuuuuuuuuu-
uuuuu eeeee ¹ eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee aaaaaa[aaaa] ¹ aaaaaaaaaa
ōōōōōōōō [ōō] ¹ ōōōōōōōōōō.

The Nag Hammadi Library in English, "The Gospel to the Egyptians," Robinson, James M., (New York 1977), p.210.

This is *Gos Egyptians* 43.4 - 44.9. [Brackets indicate holes and degradations in the manuscript where the translators have postulated the contents.]

The point here is that Gnostic writings contain many bizarre passages. The ratio of “normal” to “bizarre” is far different from the orthodox New Testament writings. In addition, the degree of bizarre is far more acute in these Gnostic writings. The Church of the second and third centuries was forced by the circulation of these strange Gnostic writings to label accepted writings as “orthodox” and some writings as “unorthodox.”

By 220 AD and the close of the writings of Tertullian we are beginning to see many citations from the documents that are in our New Testament. Some of the smaller works are noticeably absent at this point. To some degree this is due to the size and nature of these writings. It is FAR more likely that *Romans* would be cited than *2 John*. *Romans* has 433 verses and is full of critical theological and doctrinal explanation while *2 John* only has 8 verses (with an additional 5 verses of introduction and closing). The notable exception of smaller texts NOT referenced thus far is the letter of *James*.