

(Notes – Week 3)

Further Developments in The Third Century

Origen is important in the development of the canon because of his many written works with thousands of citations from the “accepted” biblical texts. While he does quote from works like *Barnabas* and *Shepherd of Hermas*, he does so rarely compared to his citations from the “accepted” texts.

Dionysius of Alexandria (cir. 248-264 AD, served as bishop)

Cyprian of Carthage (cir. 248-258 AD, served as bishop)

Dionysius was a student of Origen, thus held a place of distinction. Cyprian’s treatise in 251 AD, *On the Lapsed* was an important writing for the decision on how the early church would handle believers that fell away during persecution. While these of men left us with only a few writings, we do gain some witness on the development of the NT with respect to the questionable documents.

Dionysius quotes *James* once, refers to *Hebrews* as written by the apostle Paul, discusses *Revelation* and mentions *2 and 3 John*. *2 Peter* and *Jude* are missing in his writings. His comments on *Revelation* are important for our discussion. Dionysius states that “some then of those before us rejected and cast aside the book in every way,” and goes on to admit “I should not dare to reject the book, since many of the brethren hold it with zeal.” In this discussion he also admits that he does not understand the text. In addition, there is discussion regarding which “John” authored the writing, showing doubt as to apostleship. This lengthy passage of Dionysius only comes to us through Eusebius (*EH VII.25*) who seems to lack enthusiasm for *Revelation*. (Gregory, pp.228-232)

Though we do not have a large corpus of writing from Cyprian, he quotes biblical text quite often yet there are no citations from *James*, *2 Peter*, *Philemon*, *2 and 3 John*, *Jude*, or *Hebrews*. He does, however quote *Revelation* frequently. (Gregory, pp.232,233)

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Canon and Text of the New Testament

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The NT Canon in the Fourth Century

An explosion of Christian literature comes in the fourth century with Lactantius, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus), John Chrysostom, Jerome, Rufinus, and the great Augustine of Hippo (*Confessions* was written in the late fourth century, 396-97 AD). All of these writers illustrate how the New Testament had become far more settled with multiplied thousands of citations from the 27 “orthodox” writings and fewer citations outside that list.

The fourth century also begins with a new persecution of the Christians under Diocletian called “The Great Persecution.” In prior times of Roman persecution the strategy had been to attack the leadership – bishops were targeted. Diocletian went after the growing movement with great zeal, destroying church buildings and attempting to confiscate and burn the holy books of the Christian movement. If a Christian leader was arrested and could produce a copy of the scriptures to be destroyed he would be released. Those who handed over sacred writings were called “traitors” and were typically seen as “lapsed” in their faith, thus not allowed back into the fellowship of believers.

There are a few reports of bishops tricking Roman officials by handing over medical texts written in Greek which the Romans accepted, yet even these acts were deemed cowardly by many in the Church. Any compromise to the Romans led some of being accused as “traitors.” This is what led to the Donatist crisis in North Africa which split the Church and caused the newly victorious Emperor Constantine to get directly involved in affairs of the Christian faith.

Council of Nicea (325 AD)

The first major Christian council was called by Emperor Constantine in an attempt to resolve the Arian crisis. Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, applied some of Origen’s concepts regarding the transcendent nature of the Father beyond what was accepted as “orthodox.” His teaching on the nature and relationship of Jesus with the Father portrayed the Son as distinctly different from the Father, even stating that the Son had been created and thus was not eternal. This obviously caused great conflict and Constantine. In an effort to restore unity, Constantine called for a “Great Council.”

The discussion at the Council was almost completely theological. There were 20 canons (church rules) voted on at Nicea – none dealt with sacred writings. The canons drafted at the end of the Council dealt with many administrative issues. To illustrate, here is a sample of the canons:

Canon 4 - a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops of that province...at least three bishops should meet to make this decision.

Canon 6 - gives the bishops of Alexandria, Rome and Antioch authority over bishops in the greater region around their cities and in other local provinces.

Canon 10 - no lapsed believer should be ordained. [*This is obviously a “rule” to avoid conflict like what had led to the Donatist crisis in North Africa.*]

Canon 15 - ordained leaders shall not move from city to city on their own accord.

Eusebius of Caesarea (cir. 260-339 AD)

Eusebius is known as the first church historian and is a primary source for the history of the first 300 years of Christianity. His great work, *Ecclesiastical History* is ten books in length, and covers the beginning of the Church through the defeat of Emperor Licinius by Constantine in 324 AD. Eusebius had access to the tremendous library in Caesarea, compiled by Origen over the last twenty years of his life as he established a great Christian school in the Roman city. Eusebius quotes from numerous ancient texts that give us a close look into the beginning and growth of the early church. Many of these texts are no longer in existence. *Ecclesiastical History* was edited several times and his final version completed sometime in 324-25 AD. In this text Eusebius gives lengthy discussion to the received texts of “scripture,” thus we have an important witness of the New Testament canon in the early fourth century.

We must collect together various statements made by Eusebius, many quoting from earlier sources, to see the list of acceptable texts in his *History*:

- the four gospels
- *Acts of the Apostles*
- the epistles of Paul
- the first epistle of John and that of Peter
- the *Revelation* of John

“...these are among the acknowledged books.”

“...of the disputed books, but known then nevertheless to many...”

- the epistle of *James, Jude, 2 Peter*
- *2 and 3 John*

“...whether they happen to be of the Evangelist or of another of the same name...”

“Among the spurious [books]...”

- *Acts of Paul*
- the so-called *Shepherd*
- the *Revelation of Peter*
- *Barnabas*
- the so-called *Teaching of the Apostles (Didache)*

“...some have counted the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*...”

“...those brought forward by the heretics...gospels, as of Peter and Thomas and Mathias...Acts, as of Andrew and John and the other apostles...”

In 331 AD Emperor Constantine commissioned Eusebius to have fifty copies of the Bible “...*most needful for the instruction of the Church, to be written on prepared parchment in a legible manner, and in a convenient, portable form, by professional transcribers thoroughly practised in their art.*” *Life of Constantine IV.36*

This is the only record we have of these bibles being made. These fifty bibles would have been highly prized. Most scholars agree that whatever these copies contained would be considered THE official texts of the Bible moving forward, yet we have no listing of their contents.

Many scholars believe the copy of the famous Codex Sinaiticus is one of these fifty Bibles. This codex contains just over 400 large leaves of parchment, each page has four columns written in Greek uncials (all capital letters) with no spaces between words. It appears that the entire Old Testament was contained in this codex, but large sections are missing with evidence that these pages have been lost. The contents of Sinaiticus includes:

- sections of the Old Testament
- portions of the Apocrypha (*2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, Wisdom and Sirach*)
- the entire New Testament (the 27 “accepted” books in the West) with missing and corrected sections (the order of the books are different from the modern order)
- *Barnabas* and *Shepherd of Hermas*

The “Accepted” New Testament Documents

There was a very small council held in Laodicea in 363 AD in which the 59th canon listed the sacred books that could be read in church. All of the 27 books in the modern Western canon were listed except *Revelation*. Most scholars believe this document was edited and the last canon added by a later scribe.

The first historical reference listing the exact 27 writings now found in the “orthodox” New Testament is in the *Easter Letter* of Athanasius in 367 AD. His reference to the “accepted” book begins,

But since we have referred to the heretics as dead, and to us as having the divine scriptures...lest some few of the simple may be led astray...and finally may begin to read the so-called apocrypha...

Athanasius states that these are the only recognized writings to be read in a church service, but then he adds the following texts “not canonized,” but useful to be read for those “who wish to be informed as to the word of godliness:” *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Wisdom of Sirach*, *Esther*, *Judith*, *Tobit*, *Teaching of the Apostles (Didache)* and the *Shepherd*.

The first time a church council ruled on the list of “inspired” writings allowed to be read in church was at the Synod of Hippo in 393 AD. No document survived from this council – we only know of this decision because it was referenced at the third Synod of Carthage in 397 AD. Even this historical reference from Carthage, Canon 24, does not “list” every single document. For example, it reads, “the gospels, four books...” The only reason for this list is to confirm which writings are “sacred” and should be read in a church service. There is no comment as to why and how this list was agreed upon.

The Apocrypha

In a study of the New Testament canon some comment must be made regarding the set of documents known as *The Apocrypha*. This is a set of documents written mostly during the period “between” the Old Testament writings and the birth of Jesus. The following documents are found in the Anglican *Apocrypha*: *Tobit*, *Judith*, *Esther*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Sirach*, *Baruch*, *The Letter of Jeremiah*, *Azariah and Three Jews*, *Susanna*, *Bel and the Dragon*, *1,2,3 & 4 Maccabees*, *1 Esdras*, *2 Esdras*, *The Prayer of Manasseh*, and *Psalms 151*. The works in this set of documents differs from one branch of the Church to another.

Jerome included these writings in his Latin Vulgate edition of the Bible in between the OT and NT and he called it “apocrypha,” or “hidden” writings. Apocrypha was used in the ancient world to indicate something either originating from oral tradition, or containing “secret” material, not suitable for a general audience. It appears from some of

his comments in the prefaces of a few books that Jerome did not think *The Apocrypha* belonged in the OT canon, but he did quote some of the apocryphal writings as “inspired.”

As the centuries passed *The Apocrypha* writings slowly grew to be read and accepted as “inspired” by many priests. During the Reformation period the Wycliffe Bible included these documents. The Church of England included these documents. The original King James Bible contained these documents. It was the Puritan movement at the end of the 16th century that first started to exclude *The Apocrypha* from the writings in the Bible.

Canons of the Major Movements

Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church accept the writings of *The Apocrypha* as part of their “inspired” texts. The most ancient branches of the Christian faith also accept the documents of *The Apocrypha*: The Armenian Church, the Syriac Church, the Coptic Church, and the Assyrian Church.

Conclusion

The New Testament canon developed, or evolved, over the course of the first 250-300 years of Christian history. No one particular person made the decision. The decision was not made at a church council. The particular writings that became those of the New Testament gradually came into focus and became the most trusted and beneficial of all the early Christian writings. The New Testament was formed by a continued affirmation of the most accepted writings while the less accepted writings slowly faded into the category of good Christian writing.

The New Testament came to us through *Church tradition*, starting with surviving extracts of documents that no longer exist – early traditions about how the gospels and various letters had been written. As copies of these early documents circulated early Christian writers first made loose allusions to, then gradually began to make clear citations from these “accepted” writings as “inspired.”

By the end of the second century there are Christian writers with fairly large bodies of work clearly quoting from these “inspired” writings hundreds, then thousands of times. From time to time listings of “accepted” documents are found. Early lists contain many (but not all) of the documents that end up in the New Testament in addition to some

documents that are not eventually included. Finally, lists appearing in the fourth century contain all of the documents that are currently found in the New Testament.

The Latin Vulgate translation introduced *The Apocrypha* which included documents alluded to by various NT writers. Over time *The Apocrypha* became accepted as part of the Christian Bible and was included in several early versions during the Reformation. The later Reformers excluded these documents and eventually most Protestant sects would reject *The Apocrypha*. To this day the biblical canon of the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Protestant Church and a few of the more ancient branches differs slightly with each branch holding to different *traditions*.