



30. Who Decided What Was To Be In The New Testament?

It seems that at first there was no precise agreement over what constituted the New Testament; each Christian centre - Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem/Caesarea, Antioch, Ephesus - had its own list of the books it accepted as authoritative.

The earliest non-New Testament documents that have survived, from the first hundred years after the Crucifixion, are letters written by Clement, Bishop of Rome about 95 AD, by Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch about 115 AD, and Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (died 155 AD).

There is also a document called 'The Epistle of Barnabas', and two teaching texts, 'The Shepherd of Hermas' and the 'Didache'. In about 170 a Christian called Tatian produced a compilation of the four Gospels, which he called the 'Diatessaron' and this was used as 'The Gospel' by some of the churches.

From these writings, it can be demonstrated that very early in the history of the Church, all the texts at present forming part of our New Testament were used in teaching by at least one of the Early Fathers, except the Epistle to Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

We know of the documents excluded from the accepted New Testament Canon (i.e. the standard text) that was eventually agreed from references and quotations in works by mainstream authors written to confute them, and from documents discovered in caches left by communities like those of the Gnostic Christians discovered at Nag Hammadi in the Egyptian desert.

But there were other divergences from the mainstream. One early Christian teacher, called Marcion, wanted to cut Christianity off entirely from its Jewish roots. He would accept only the writings of Luke (cut to remove Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus, and all references to the Jewish Law) and the Epistles of Paul (similarly cut, and excluding altogether 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Marcion was of the school of thought we call 'Gnostic'; he found in the Bible two Gods, the god of the Jews, the creator, who was a bungler, and the supreme and righteous God of Christ.

There were many sects among the Gnostics; some of their writings have been recovered in whole or part: These include the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Barnabas, and others. There was also a 'Gospel of the Hebrews', now lost, used by Jewish Christians. These were eventually

discountenanced and ceased to be copied and circulated.

The Church at Rome, which claimed to have been founded by the Apostles Peter and Paul, had its own canon of the New Testament. A fragmentary list dated to about 190 AD was discovered in the library of Cardinal Muratori and published in 1740 (the so-called 'Muratorian Canon'). From this we find that at Rome the four Gospels and Acts were accepted, also the Paul's Epistles to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

The Epistle of Jude, and two of John, are also accepted, as is the Apocalypse of John (Revelation), and an Apocalypse of Peter (which dates from the second century); also, oddly enough, the Wisdom of Solomon, now in our Apocrypha.

It seems from the list that the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistles of James and Peter were not accepted in Rome. The anonymous writer says of the Apocalypse of Peter, 'some of our friends will not have [it] read in Church'.

The great scholar Origen of Alexandria (185 - 255) devoted most of his life to research and study of Scriptural books. His library and the traditions of his researches were passed on to the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (265 - 339). They both tell us that the generally accepted canonical books of the New Testament are the four Gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. The disputed works are James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Hebrews, though Origen regarded the last as authentic, and by Paul. Eusebius expresses personal doubts about Revelation. The Church at Antioch continued to dispute Revelation and the Pastoral Epistles. The Western Church evidently did not accept the Epistle of James.

Eventually a consensus was reached on the canon of the New Testament we have today: Athanasius, the great Bishop of Alexandria, sets it out in his Easter Letter of 367. The purpose of this was to exclude the Gnostic writings, widely read in Egypt. In 397 AD a Council of the Church was held at Carthage, at which Augustine of Hippo was present, and this confirmed the Canon of our present New Testament, though some theologians (such as Martin Luther, have argued that not all the books are equally authoritative.