

KEY POINTS IN CHURCH HISTORY

Chapter 10

Origins of the Canon – Part 1

“Introduction & The Old Testament”

INTRODUCTION

By Brent Johnson

When Mark asked me to teach on the canon of scripture, I began reading everything I could on cannons! I went to the Internet, to Civil War buffs, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, pirate ships, Navy archives, The Alamo and even to Gonzales, TX, who said I could borrow their cannon, but I would have to “*Come and take it!*”¹ I even went and got a cannon! I studied it, took it apart and put it back together again. I wanted to learn everything I possibly could about a cannon. I wanted to know how it was constructed, what were the standards used in construction, how it was used, why it was put together in the first place, how to operate it successfully, and how best to explain to the Biblical-Literacy Class the complete corpus of the church’s *CANNON*.

Then come to find out, Mark was not talking about a “*cannon*” at all, but the “*CANON*” (only one “*n*”) as it relates to the holy scripture of the Christian faith.

Now, the writer of Hebrews said, “...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”² But if he knew about cannons, he could have also said the Word of God is long and sturdy³, more powerful than a cannon ball speeding toward its target, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, obliterating the strongholds of Satan⁴, and impacting through the thoughts and intentions of the heart—the Word of God will blow your mind!

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¹ On January 1, 1831, the city of Gonzales, TX requested a cannon from Mexican authorities to help defend their settlement from Indian attacks. On March 10, the request was granted; but within the next

² Hebrews 4:12

³ Isaiah 40:8, 1 Peter 1:25, The Word of the Lord stands forever

⁴ Matthew 4:1-11, The temptations of Jesus

I certainly don't want to be accused of adding nor changing the Word of God, so let me be clear: this *cannon* metaphor is found nowhere in scripture, however it does communicate the awesome power found right in the pages that you hold in your hand...or iPad...or phone! The Bible is not neat décor for the Christian's home or bookshelf, but God's revelation of who He is, what He expects, how He redeems and the very plans He has for YOU! That is powerful!

VENERATION

When I was a teenager, I was carrying my Bible with a few other books stacked on top. My mother saw me and suggested I put the Bible on top. She explained how her mother taught her to never place things on top of a Bible. God's Word was to be placed above everything else and out of respect one should never cover the Bible with earthly possessions. Those comments made an indelible impression upon me that day. This new awareness never became a point of legalism nor sent me to a place of Bible worship, but my way of thinking about my Bible changed to where I stopped taking it for granted and recognized it in a new light of respect and gratitude.

The balance of this material is from Mark Lanier

If we were attending a Jewish worship service at a synagogue, the scriptures would be kept in an ark. Once removed, the scriptures would then be carried to the *bimah* for reading. In an orthodox high church service, the gospel would be carried down the aisle in reverence, and before reading, a call would issue forth, "Wisdom! All stand; let us hear the Holy Gospel." In a Catholic liturgy, special prayers would be offered both before and after the liturgy reading. During an Anglican communion service, typically all will stand while the gospel is read with a proclamation in unison, "Glory to Christ our Savior." At the conclusion, the reader would say, "This is the gospel of Christ," and the congregation would respond, "Praise to Christ our Lord." In Reformed churches (like the Church of Scotland and certain Presbyterian churches in America), the Bible is carried from the vestry to a reading desk. The Minister follows the Bible by a respectful distance. The Minister is listed with the initials V.D.M. after his name. Those initials stand for the Latin *Verbi Divini Minister*, meaning a "Minister [in the real sense of 'servant'] of the Word of God." All would stand as the Minister declared, "Let us hear the word of the Lord."

Why such a tradition of reverence in the church? Orthodox Christianity views the Bible as the divine and inspired word of God. It is in the Bible that God has spoken to man and revealed the matters pertinent to salvation. The Bible gives us great history of God's work among people, as well as the ultimate story of God's act of redemption in Jesus Christ, God's final word made flesh. Scripture demands the reverence of the church because of what it is.

The question of scripture's origins is a thoughtful and legitimate question that Christians should be able to answer. The answer is complicated and will take more than a few

classes to develop. At this point in the Church History Literacy series, we will pause for two Sundays and set out the basics of the Bible's historical development in at least the first two centuries of the church. As the class unfolds, we will follow other significant developments that happened later, such as the translating of the Bible into Latin, the changes in Hebrew scripting, the reformation movement, the translation of scripture into common languages, the scholarship that questions and reconstructs scripture to more closely model the supposed originals, discoveries that have assisted us in understanding the early manuscripts (including the Dead Sea scrolls), and finally, the various versions that are available for the modern churches. But, that is for later classes! Today, we start by discussing the origin of the canon of scripture itself.

CANON

Canon – it is an unusual word. Where does it come from? The roots of “canon” go back beyond Latin and Greek into early Semitic. In its earliest known form (K-n-h), the Semitic word meant a “reed” or a “rod.” The Greeks took this root and used the word as more a measuring rod (like a ruler or yard stick). The key to the Greek word was a reference to the measurements or marks on the ruler. The Latin version of the word was *canna* (from which we get the English word “cane”).

So, the Christian “canon” is ultimately the collection of writings that the church uses as its measuring stick – its ruler – the defining reference for Christian faith and life.⁵ More commonly, we might call the “canon” our “Bible” (from the Latin “*Biblia*” for “Books”) or “scripture.”

Christianity has two general canons, the Catholic canon and the Protestant canon. The Catholic canon includes the entire Protestant canon but adds additional writings commonly called the “Apocrypha.” Both the Catholic and Protestant churches recognize the role of scripture as canon, as the measuring rod for faith and practice. The famous Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote that “canonical scripture alone is the rule of faith.”¹ Similarly, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), a bedrock of Christian Protestantism affirms the 66 books of the protestant canon as “all which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule and faith of life.”⁶

Our approach in this class will involve focusing first on the Old Testament's inclusion in the church's canon of scripture, followed by examining the composition and collection of

⁵ *On the Gospel of St. John*, Lesson 6 on John 21.

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1 §2.

the New Testament.⁷ In the process, we will cover the collection process of the Old Testament books (scroll), its Jewish use as well as Christian use, its translation into Greek (the “Septuagint”), the inclusion/exclusion of the Apocrypha, and the ordering of the books.

OLD TESTAMENT BEFORE CHRIST

The Jewish scriptures before the time of Christ were not in a “book.” Books were a few centuries from coming into vogue. The Jewish scriptures were a collection of scrolls. Five scrolls (we call them Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy⁸) were called scrolls of Law. The Hebrew word for “law” is “*Torah*.” Hence, the first five books are called the “*Torah*.” The remaining Old Testament was considered inspired because it was the words of prophets. Often then, what we call the “Old Testament” was called “the law and the prophets.” Even Jesus used this reference. When asked about the greatest commandment in the Law (read that Torah, the first five books), Jesus replied from Deuteronomy 6:5 to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Jesus followed this with another Torah quote from Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet after answering the question about the greatest commandment in the Torah, Jesus added, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt. 2:37-40).⁹

Notice that the New International Version capitalizes “Law” and “Prophets.” The editors recognize that Jesus is using the technical reference to the two groups of scriptures that

⁷ Our words “Old Testament” and “New Testament” are not found, per se, within the Bible itself. The Bible does speak repeatedly of the covenant between God and his people. The Greek word (*diatheke*) is used for “covenant.” *Diatheke* can also be translated as a “will” but more commonly means an agreement between parties. This word is used in Hebrews 9:18-20 where a “new covenant” is contrasted with the “old covenant” referencing Jeremiah 31:31-34. The Latin word for the Greek διαθηκη *diatheke* (covenant) can be *instrumentum* (a legal document) or *testamentum* (a “will” or “testament”). The first Latin writer of note in the church was the trial lawyer turned theologian Tertullian that we spoke of in our last lesson on Montanism. Leaving behind an illustrious legal career in the courts of Rome, Tertullian was a profuse writer for the church from his home in Carthage, North Africa. In his book Against Marcion (arguing against Marcion’s brand of Gnosticism spoken of in earlier lessons), chapter 4, verse 1, Tertullian stated Marcion set up two Gods, one belonging to one *instrumentum* and one to the other. In chapter 15 of Against Praxeas, Tertullian wrote of “the whole *instrumentum* of both *testamenta*.” These writings were the first to begin referencing the Old Testament and the New Testament similarly.

⁸ That is the title the church has added to these books. The Hebrews entitled each book by its first word. Hence, “Genesis” is called “*Bareshith*” which is the first word meaning, “In the beginning.”

⁹ See also Mt. 7:12; 11:13; Lk 16:16.

made up the Old Testament. In other words, Jesus is saying that the two greatest commandments of the Law are also the two keys to all scripture.

At some point around the time of Christ, some began referring to the Old Testament scrolls in three categories. The law/Torah was always the same. But, some divided “the prophets” into “the prophets” and “the other writings.”¹⁰ This division culled out from the prophets those writings that we call Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, the *Megilloth* (a scroll containing the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (one book in the Hebrew) and Chronicles.¹¹ If one were to buy a Jewish copy of scriptures today, it is called the “Tenakh.” This word stands for each of the three sections of scripture. The “T” is for the Torah (the law). The “N” is from the Hebrew word *Neviyim* (*N^ebī`îm*) which means “prophets”. The “K” is from the Hebrew word *K^etûbîm* which means “other writings.” Put them together (T-N-K), add some vowels to help with pronunciation, and voilà – you have the Tenakh, or Hebrew Old Testament.

SEPTUAGINT

Several hundred years before Christ, there was a very large community of Jews (hundreds of thousands) in Alexandria, Egypt where Greek was the predominant language since its conquering by its namesake Alexander the Great (331 B.C.). In an effort to ensure that Greek-speaking Jews were able to read and understand scripture, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. Scholars call this Greek translation of the Hebrew scripture the “Septuagint.” Septuagint comes from the Greek word for 70. This title is based on a likely fictional account of the number of scholars who translated the Hebrew into Greek.¹² The Septuagint is often abbreviated “LXX”, the Roman numerals for “70.”

¹⁰Some scholars see this tripartite division in Jesus’ comment in Luke 24:44, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

¹¹ Some believe Jesus referenced the Old Testament in these three divisions in Luke 24:44 where he said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” The reference to the Psalms is seen as the third category of Old Testament scriptures.

¹² There is a legendary account of how the Septuagint translation came about in a letter an Alexandrian Jew named Aristeas wrote to his brother Philocrates (written sometime between 200 B.C. and 50 B.C.). Aristeas describes the translation of the Torah (5 law books) as proceeding by order of King Ptolemy II (285-247 B.C.). The Alexandrian library was the greatest in the ancient world. The King’s librarian, Demetrius, was ordered by King Ptolemy II (285-247 B.C.) to add a Greek translation of the Hebrew law. Demetrius asked the Jewish High Priest of the time (Eleazer) for help. Eleazer sent 72 elders from Israel (6 from each of the 12 tribes) for the task. The king gave a party for seven days, apparently as a guise for checking out the abilities and scholasticism for the 72 elders to make sure they were up to the task. The 72 were then sent to a resort near the sea where they made the translation in 72 days. Most scholars readily admit that

Ultimately, this Greek version of the Old Testament became the Church's first Bible. It contains the Greek Old Testament (which is more than the Hebrew) that Paul and other New Testament writers most used in their writings.

The church used the original Septuagint, but the Jews ultimately made significant translation changes **because** of the church's use of the translation. For example, in Isaiah 7:14, the Hebrew reads that the Messiah would be born to a "young maiden." Now, the Hebrew word translated "young maiden" (*almah*) most often references a "virgin," but it does not necessitate a "virgin" (like the Hebrew word "*be'tulah*"). When the Alexandrian Jewish scholars translated this into Greek over one hundred years before Christ, they chose the Greek word *παρθενος* ("*parthenos*"), which is a "virgin."¹³ There was an optional Greek word for young maiden, but that word was not deemed to carry the Hebrew intent.

Once the church used the Septuagint to show the messiahship of Jesus, who was born to a virgin, a section of Judaism decided to retranslate this passage and use an alternate Greek work that was less specific on the virginity issue. Ultimately, the church's usage of the Septuagint led to most Jews shunning its use.

THE APOCRYPHA

There are a collection of writings that Roman Catholics include in their Old Testament scriptures that are not included in Protestant scriptures called the "Apocrypha."¹⁴ The four lessons in Biblical Literacy, which we devoted to each of these books, are available for those with greater interest in what these books contain.¹⁵

this story has both legend and truth in it. The legend was bolstered and modified by later writers over the next few centuries. The pre-Christian Hebrew scholar Philo claimed the 72 were divinely inspired and that each scholar translated in isolation, but all produced a word for word identical translation (*Vita Mosis*, 2.5-7). Eventually, the 72 (shortened for some reason to "70" for purposes of calling their work the "Septuagint") were eventually credited with translating the entire Old Testament. Most every scholar will agree, however, that the Torah was translated first, and the rest of the Old Testament later.

¹³ *Parthenos* meant "virgin," but was also used in the Septuagint in Genesis 34:3 for Dinah after she was raped.

¹⁴ From the Greek word meaning "hidden." Apocrypha is the term Protestants use, the Roman Catholic term is "deuterocanonical" meaning that these writings were not originally in the canon ("protocanonical") but were accepted later.

¹⁵ For brevity's sake, we can state that there are 12 to 15 different books of the apocrypha depending upon how one counts. Three of these are not considered canonical by the Catholic church (1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh). Some are independent books, and others are

The Protestant Reformation removed these books from the canon with the reformation leaders deciding that the original church did not have them in their canon. The arguments centered on the fact that the books were not included in the Hebrew canon. The reasoning was that the church took the Jewish scriptures, and

those scriptures never included these writings as inspired. A second argument was that Jesus never referred to these books in his recorded ministry. Similarly, the Apostolic writings do not reference passages from the Apocrypha as scripture. Nor do the New Testament writers quote from any apocryphal books, though they quote from most every other Old Testament book. Reformation leaders also pointed out that early scholars of the Roman Catholic Church, including Jerome, the 5th century scholar that provided the landmark translation of scripture into Latin, did not believe the Apocrypha was canonical.

There are more reasons set out for excluding the books. That being said, even Reformation writers recognized the spiritual lessons that are offered in places in the writings. Likewise, other parts of the Apocrypha offer historical insight into the time period between the Old and New Testaments.

ORDER OF THE BOOKS

The Protestant Bible has 39 books to the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible has 24,¹⁶ yet the books are substantively the same. Why the difference in number? Let's use the Hebrew divisions discussed earlier to see the numbering difference. The Law (Torah) is the same five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy. The Hebrew Prophets are four "former prophets" followed by four "latter prophets." The former prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. While these number four in the Hebrew scripture, the Christian Bible divides both Samuel and Kings into two books. The Hebrew latter prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and "the Twelve." The twelve are the minor prophets in the Christian bible, and hence, the number 12 rather than one! The "other writings" are typically ordered Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah are considered one book. Similarly, while the Christian Bible separates Chronicles into two, the Hebrew Bible considers Chronicles only one book.

This order is typical in Hebrew Bibles today, and has been for some time. While certain

additions to Old Testament books (additions to Ester and Daniel). Most scholars date these books between 300 B.C. and 100 A.D.

¹⁶ Josephus wrote in the 90's that there were twenty-two books of the Old Testament. Josephus followed another Jewish tradition that added Ruth to the end of Judges and Lamentations to the end of Jeremiah (*Against Apion*, 1.38).

books were probably in different orders at different times, we are fairly certain of several orderings. The Torah has its five books in the order of their chronology. Similarly, the former prophets are easily ordered by the time of the events recorded. No doubt as the other scrolls were kept, the order for the books might vary. There is, however, a good indication that even in the time of Christ, Chronicles was considered the last of the Hebrew canon.

In Luke 11:50-51, we read of Jesus charging that the generation would be responsible for “the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah.” Now we know from Jeremiah 26:20-23, that a prophet named Uriah was killed 200 hundred years after Zechariah. So, why does Jesus bookend the deaths with Abel and Zechariah? Abel, of course, is the first to die in Genesis, and Zechariah was the last death in Chronicles (2 Chr. 24:20-22). We see Jesus using canonical order common to Jewish scriptures as to the first and last book at least. It is much like a current expression “from Genesis to Revelation.”

The Christian Bible does not follow the Hebrew order of Old Testament books. The Christian Bible gets its order from the Septuagint copies. Although the order in Septuagint texts differ, that is the family tree we can trace our roots to in finding the current Biblical ordering of our Old Testament texts.

Because the Old Testament was originally a collection of scrolls, there is way to find a set “order” for the Jews who first collected the scriptures. The advent of the “book” brought an “ordering” question to the forefront. Previously, the only time where order was an issue was when people were listing the books. In other words, while the scrolls themselves were not ordered into a book, some would write and list out the scrolls. Of necessity, then, someone would order the scrolls in such a list.

With books, however, clear decisions on ordering must be made. Originally, the term used for a “book” was a “codex.” The inventor of the book/codex, like the inventor of the wheel, never got a patent to secure her/his name in history. But, the invention was nonetheless great. Scrolls required two hands to read. They were no doubt quite bulky when one hand had to unroll while the other rolled. And if you were looking for a passage in the middle of a 35-foot roll, then good luck on finding it!

With the early books, several sheets of papyrus (or later, parchment) were folded in half and stitched together in the middle fold. While the origins of books are lost in history, more and more scholars are agreeing that the Church is predominantly responsible for the popularity of the codex/book, if not the outright invention!¹⁷

¹⁷ C.H. Roberts, “The Codex,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954): 169-204; *The Birth of the Codex*, (Oxford 1983); *Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 2, 68-92.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A WITNESS TO CHRIST

Jesus himself taught that his coming was not to “abolish the Law or the Prophets [read that Old Testament].” The Law (Torah) and Prophets were neither irrelevant nor inferior. Instead, Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Mt. 5:17-18). If the law (Torah) was a reflection of God’s ethics in practical function among men and nations in space and time, then Jesus (being God incarnate) fulfilled the law in the sense that Jesus lived God’s ethics day in and day out among men and nations at a specific point in space and time.

The prophets (the rest of Jewish scripture beyond the law/Torah) also bore witness to Jesus as Christ. Repeatedly, as the Spirit of God foretold through the prophets about God’s coming ransom of men, the prophets were telling of Jesus in measurable ways that validated his mission and ministry.

Hence, we see the New Testament writers constantly referring to the Hebrew Scriptures for their explanations and teachings about Jesus.

In addition to the New Testament writers, early church writers saw the Old Testament as God’s holy word about Jesus as well. We saw in the writings of Clement and others clear references to the Old Testament as our holy words for the church.

OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATIONS

As the New Testament and early church writers consistently used the Hebrew Scriptures to teach about Jesus as Christ, certain issues began to surface. As discussed in the first two lessons, the church transformed from a branch of Judaism into a Gentile-centered faith. A division between the church and Judaism grew more and more pronounced as time went on.

This placed the church in a bit of a dilemma. The church was at odds with Judaism, and yet, the church leaned heavily on the Jewish scriptures. What was more, those scriptures taught much and spoke often of God’s external and special relationship with the Jews.

What was the church to make of this? As we discovered last week in our studies of early church writers from Alexandria, a school of allegorical interpretation was strong in parts of the early church. This school taught an interpretation of the Old Testament that viewed references to Israel as references to the church. Passages and stories alike in the Old Testament were viewed to have an allegorical meaning that spiritualized whatever was written.

Some of what these early writers thought proper in understanding the Old Testament would also seem inline with 21st century evangelical thought. Most, however, would seem a bit outlandish. We will study this more in depth as we look at other early writers.

POINTS FOR HOME

By Brent Johnson

1. Be diligent to study God's Word.
We are not faithful followers if we fail to take time to study this treasure we have. "Do your best (study) to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV)
2. You view it; you do it!
God has worked through many in history to secure us his inspired word; therefore we should be diligent to heed what it teaches. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. John 14:15 (ESV).
3. Covenant!
God has reached out to establish this new covenant with His people (Hebrews 8-9). Agree with God by driving down a stake in the ground symbolizing that there is no turning back as you whole-heartedly follow Him by practicing points A & B!

HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-2:14. This week we add 1 John 2:15-16. We provide all verses below for your help!

1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. **2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. **3** And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. **4** Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, **5** but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: **6** whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. **7** Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. **8** At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. **9** Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. **10** Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. **11** But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the

darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

12 I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

13 I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

14 I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **16** For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.