

KEY POINTS IN CHURCH HISTORY

Chapter 10 Part 3

The Accuracy and Collection of the “New Testament”

I was 24 when I bought my first house. It was in a subdivision of Houston, Texas, about 25 or 30 miles northwest of downtown. The home was brand new, and had a nice fresh coat of paint, grass in the front yard (with two trees) and to my eyes was marvelous. The backyard was nothing but dirt, but I saw that as a project. It meant I could landscape as I wished, and spend weekends doing yard work! I was stoked.

Money did not grow on the trees provided (nor any other I’ve ever been able to find), and the house note was a stretch, so I had to be careful with purchases, making each one count. I also had to do the work alone. I had not grown up in Houston and was relatively new to the soil and climate. The clay gumbo was brand new to me. In Lubbock, Texas, where I had spent most of my life, we actually had soil. And if the soil was not to your liking, every spring a new layer would blow in!

Not so in Houston. The clay gumbo was hard, unforgiving to most plant roots, and impermeable to water. I had my hands full. The builder had put a layer of sand about an inch deep over the whole back yard, so it looked good, but that look was deceiving. The sand was just deep enough to hide the Nutgrass that would soon surface, but was not deep enough to offer room for any plants I added to grow adequately.

I managed to put in my first bed, and was eager to finish it off with that nice “mulch” I saw in others’ yards. At the local nursery, I looked at the various bags and decided that one called “peat moss” was the cheapest and looked nice and dark like the mulch I had seen in some nice landscaping. I bought my bag, and brought it home, spreading it out over the bed.

The bed was an utter failure. The limited room for root growth killed most of the plants and stunted the growth of others. The peat moss – which it turns out is NOT the same as mulch – was pretty in appearance but light in weight. It floats. The first rain washed all my pretty “mulch” away. The only reason I can say the whole experience was not a massive waste of time and money is because I learned from it. It helped me learn to raise beds in Houston; it taught me what mulch is, and much more.

This experience has often returned to me in ways beyond home and garden. As a lawyer who constantly confronts “experts,” I never cease to be amazed at how

many that are lauded in their fields, often offer ideas and opinions that look nice on the surface, but have no deep roots, or they wash away under a good rain. It is no different among those scholars who write on the Bible. Some write missives challenging the Bible's authority and even demeaning those who believe in it. The Bible believer is often painted as either uninformed or blind to truth. Some of these people are real "scholars" as that term is used. Yet in their conclusions, it seems to me they often use pseudo-scholarship.

I am not saying that there are not thorny issues and questions that should perplex and stimulate the thoughts of any who study Scripture. But that would be expected if Scripture really is an inspired communication to humanity from an Almighty God.

So we continue in this lesson with our study on the early church's assembling of what we call the "New Testament canon." We begin this week by delving into the skeptic's challenge that the New Testament is not an assembly of the true Scriptures, but reflect the spoils of victory for one group of beliefs that triumphed over others. The cynic, typified by Bart Ehrman, will write popular books that make the New York Times best seller list, selling the idea that the earliest church was awash with many radically different views.¹ What we today call "orthodoxy" won out among the views, stamping the other views into the dust bin of history where we can get glimpses through writings that managed to survive and draw new life in our century. The New Testament, according to this cynical theory, is an amalgamation of those works that supported the victorious theology, rather than anything genuine from the earliest church.

This view may sound good (or scary, if you are a believer); after all, haven't we read that history is written by the victors? Nevertheless, a thoughtful and careful examination of the cynicism puts it into its proper perspective, and lends the greatest credibility to the New Testament as the church later assembled it. That is where we begin today.

ORTHODOXY AND CANON

As skeptical scholars frame the issue, the church of the second, third and even fourth centuries supposedly picked out as Scripture those writings that supported their theology. As orthodox scholars frame the issue, theology was determined from teachings that were inherently authoritative. To put it colloquially, someone

¹ Ehrman, Bart, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament*, (Oxford 2005).

is saying properly that the dog is wagging his tail. The other camp is saying the tail is wagging the dog. Our chore is to examine the evidence and figure out which is right!

As we consider the evidence, we note that, as one might expect, the church has developed terms that are not found in the Bible. In fact, over the almost 2,000 years of the church, ideas are constantly taking shape as the church thinkers grow and live in different cultures with an increasing general base of knowledge about life and the world around them. So we do not find in Scripture words like “Trinity,” or scientific discussions about the mystery of the incarnation or the bodily resurrection. But new terms and further refined ideas are expected as new people stand on the theological and intellectual shoulders of others. There are books written today that continue to expand our understanding of God and his work. The real question is whether these words and ideas are based upon original apostolic teaching or not. For example, is the concept of the Trinity a concept found in Scripture but being explained in theology, or is the Trinity some made-up new thing that was then used to “select” Scripture?

To answer, we can first examine apostolic early church documents, like the writings of Paul. Now before anyone protests, “But wait! We are trying to figure out if Paul’s writings should be considered Scripture!,” let me explain. I am not saying we should accord Paul’s writings as Scripture yet. At this point, I am merely saying consider them for what everyone must admit they are on their face – letters written by Paul, an apostle of the earliest church. Admittedly some scholars question whether Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) and some even question his authorship of Ephesians and Colossians. So, let’s leave those out! Even Ehrman acknowledges that a number of Paul’s New Testament writings are authentic to Paul.

We can take the admittedly authentic letters of Paul that must date before Paul’s death around 67AD. We can look at these writings and ask, in the earliest reflections of what the church accepted as the word of God or Scripture; do we have core teachings about God, Christ, and salvation that the later church would term “orthodoxy”? In other words, did the “victor” rewrite history in selecting Scripture, or did the victor agree with the teachings that were historical, and the ones that didn’t “make it” actually hold heretical views?

Once we recognize that the church developed and used terminology that was expectantly different, and processed various ideas, do we find the core elements of later church orthodoxy in the apostolic writings? Can we fairly say that later church expressions of orthodoxy (for example, the “Trinity”) follow from express apostolic teachings, either directly or as a necessary inference? Probing these questions, we can fairly make the determination if the church was including in the

canon documents and texts that were apostolic in teaching, excluding others that did not follow apostolic thought. Here is the skeptic's important link: Did the church make an artificial selection among many "Christian Scriptures" or did the church continue to observe those writings that were regarded as canonical as set out earlier in our study (*i.e.*, Old Testament, authentic and early teachings of Christ, authentic teachings of the apostles and first generation church leadership)?

A fair reading of Scripture, and a comparison of other writings often labeled as "lost Scriptures," shows that the canon of the later church is actually a recognition of those writings that authentically conveyed the apostolic thought and doctrines from the earliest days of writing in the church.

To illustrate the alignment of the church's doctrines and decisions with Scripture, we can consider the Nicene Creed and compare it to indisputable apostolic teaching and the earliest church writings, including the New Testament church's first Scriptures we call the Old Testament. As a footnote, the First Council of Nicaea took place in Nicaea (modern Turkey) in 325AD, and this creed still expresses core orthodox beliefs for most every Christian denomination today. The core of the original Nicene Creed is below, followed by a brief examination of New Testament church authority.

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
maker of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God,
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
By whom all things were made;
who for us men, and for our salvation,
came down and was incarnate and was made man;
he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
And in the Holy Spirit.

"one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things..."

Much of the beginning of the creed is found in the Old Testament writings. These authoritative Jewish texts included the "one-ness" of God (Dt. 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.") who created all things (Gen. 1-2). For the Creed's affirmations of Christ, we turn to the apostolic writings of the first generation church.

"One Lord Jesus Christ"

Paul's indisputable writings that came during the first generation of believers contain clear teachings that declare the orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed's affirmations. Paul wrote to the Romans of the singularity of Jesus as Christ and Lord:

For if many died through one man's trespass [Adam's], much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many...much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ... So that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:15, 17, 21).

This Creedal affirmation was not a case of the victorious in the church picking Scripture. It is an affirmation of the teaching of the earliest doctrine in the church.

"...the Son of God"

Was Jesus Christ considered the Son of God in the earliest church, or was this a case of Scripture selection based upon beliefs centuries later? Of course, the ready answer available to even the greatest cynic is that the understanding of Jesus as God's unique Son comes from the very earliest teachings as well. In the same chapter of Romans as used above in reference to "One Lord Jesus Christ," we find Paul writing of the uniqueness of Jesus as "the Son of God:"

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:10-11).

"...begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father"

There are some specific words and phrases used in this portion of the Creed that were targeting specific heresy elements in the church. There was a portion of the council of Nicaea that supported the views of a church leader named Arius. Arius believed and taught that Jesus, as the "begotten Son" of the Father was created by the Father. He taught there was a time when Jesus was not. In rejecting this as heretical, the church adopted creedal language that Jesus was not only begotten, but was "Light of Light" and "very God of very God." Hence also the affirmation that Jesus was "begotten, not made." He was "of one substance with the Father."

Before we consider the Scriptural basis of this affirmation, it is worth noting that Arius and his supporters drew their conclusions not from Ehrman's "Lost Scriptures," but from canonical Biblical texts as well! The Arians quoted verses from John ("the Father is greater than I" – John 14:28) and Colossians ("He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" – Col. 1:15) in their efforts to justify their positions.

We find the core ideas expressed in this section of the Creed most readily in Paul's admittedly authentic writing to the Philippians. In the second chapter of that letter Paul wrote from prison, Paul exhorted the Philippians to live their lives looking out more for each other than for themselves. He invoked as their example the incarnation and life of Christ:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:5-7).

Here Paul taught that Jesus was born in the likeness of men, but was pre-existent. Moreover, his pre-existence was not from some other created time, it was a pre-existence "in the form of God" and an existence of "equality with God." Paul used different words, but certainly expressed the idea of Jesus as "one substance with the Father" who then "emptied himself" and took the form of man. Lest someone think this was a renegade idea of Paul's, we should emphasize that most scholars think that Paul is actually quoting a common early Christian hymn in these verses of Philippians. In other words, this was a common Christian understanding in the early church. This same idea is found in Paul's letter to the Romans where Paul declares that Jesus "is the Christ who is God over all" (Rom. 9:5).

"By whom all things were made"

Was the idea that all things were made through Christ something that the victorious in church battles believed, and then ramped back into history through careful selection of "Scripture"? Nothing could be further from the truth. While the most blatant passage affirming this creed is found in Colossians, which some scholars dispute as authentically Paul's, we can also find the truth expressed in undisputed Pauline texts. Consider, for example, 1 Corinthians 8:6-7:

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Paul echoes his comments about God in his comments about Jesus. Here again, the Nicene Creed merely echoes the earliest writings of the apostolic church. This was not an idea conjured over time and exported back into a set of Scriptures.

“Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man”

Here we find another very significant statement about the events integral to the salvation of man. The Creed speaks not only to the actions of Jesus and God, but also to the purpose—for our salvation.

We can see this same thought expressed by Paul in the fuller passage to the Philippians referenced earlier:

Christ Jesus...was in the form of God, [but] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

In many places, Paul explained that the actions of Christ were for the salvation of mankind. In Romans 3:24, Paul wrote of the “redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Later in Romans 5:1 Paul explained, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” There was nothing novel or post-apostolic about the fact that “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Paul explained the Nicene clause, several hundred years before it was written:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.

Again, it just doesn’t make sense to argue that this measure of orthodoxy was a late addition by the church elite who then superimposed it on the canon.

“He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven”

We grant that later non-canonical gospels take issue with this. We can find those who identify these as “lost scriptures” that say otherwise, but the question is not what people wrote hundreds of years after the apostolic church. The question is what did the apostolic church believe and was that the definer of what is orthodoxy and what is heresy! With that in mind, this Nicene claim is abundantly clear in the unquestionably authentic writings of the apostolic church. Consider what Paul taught the Corinthians:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received [*i.e.*, this was not simply something Paul dreamed up, it was the teaching of the church]: Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared... (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

After citing hundreds of people who were witnesses and still alive to attest to these facts, Paul proclaimed the confidence in Christ's return, bringing us near the end of the Nicene Creed.

"From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead"

Paul explained the coming of Christ would be accompanied by judgment as Christ delivered the kingdom to the Father:

At his coming those who belong to Christ [will rise]. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power (1 Cor. 15:23-24).

Paul detailed the second coming in writing to the church at Thessalonica, telling them,

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thes. 4:16).

Again, this is not something that was post-apostolic. It was the lifeblood of the church in its first generation.

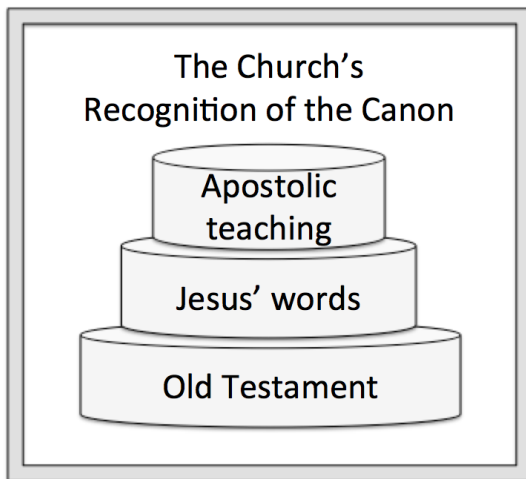
"And in the Holy Spirit"

This is something that is so obvious on every page of Paul's writings that it almost goes without saying. It was the Spirit that "revealed" the truth to Paul and the apostles (1 Cor. 2:10). The "Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor. 2:10). Paul taught believers to "walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16). The Spirit helps us in our weakness and in prayer (Rom. 8:26ff). Without question, the Holy Spirit was not a later invention of a certain aspect of the Christian faith. The earliest church embraced the Holy Spirit.

Having considered the authority recognized by the earliest church, and having then seen how the earliest church held to core orthodox beliefs, long before the church issued a "Table of Contents" for Holy Scripture, we are ready to consider church history and other writings some scholars label "lost Scripture."

DOES CHURCH HISTORY REFLECT THE CANON?

Popular press frequently publishes the challenge *du jour* to the Christian Scriptures. Over the last decade, the public has heard of the Gospel of Judas, the “Jesus’ Wife Papyrus,” and more. Some assert that these findings show that there were many “Christian” texts that were destroyed and suppressed by the early church power structure. It is a fact that in the last 100 years, we have found a number of ancient texts that were indeed condemned and destroyed by the early church, but that does not make the cynics’ point for at least two reasons. First, to us in the 21st century, the church of 150 – 400AD is truly the “early church,” but that church is not in the same time era as the church of 33 – 95AD. If we are to call the church of 150 – 400 the “early church,” then it is important we use a different designation for the *earliest* church. In this lesson, we have tried to carefully characterize the church of 33 – 95 as either the “apostolic church” or even the “first generation church.” It is well known that every generation has its own choices of direction, and it is a safe assumption that in a world of diverse cultures and churches separated by hard travel, succeeding generations would wander off into different ideas. That is why we have concentrated the earlier part of this chapter on the beliefs of the earliest church. The question is what the first generation church taught, and from that we build on the later historical developments.



This brings us to the second reason. As noted in the earlier section, some believe and teach that the “later” early church stomped out equally valid competing views, establishing the texts sharing the “victors’ views” as the canon. This distinction is not the fairest conclusion drawn from the evidence. If we take a cooking analogy, then we can consider recognition of the canon akin to the baking of a three-layer cake. A baker sets down the first layer, then the second, and finally the third. So it is

with the church and the recognition of the canon. As we have already seen in the last lesson, the church immediately recognized and used the Old Testament as Scripture, just as Jesus did. The earliest church also recognized the teachings and life of Christ as equally reflecting a revelation of God and his truth for the world. Jesus chose to dispense his truth, through the Holy Spirit, in the lives of his

apostles. Their teaching and message were also accepted into the church as God's revelation and instructions.

History unfolds the church struggling to maintain authentic Old Testament Scripture, authentic details of the life of Christ, and authentic apostolic teaching. It is that struggle that is reflected in the historical record. Parts of the canon were recognized almost immediately by the general consensus of the church. Other parts were subject to much greater scrutiny, as we should hope and expect. The church did not cavalierly pick the books that measured up to revelation. They debated, discussed, researched, and worked to make the right decisions. We can consider this evidence by working through key documents and writings from church history as well as the Bible.

We showed earlier that Paul and others quoted Christ. The words of Jesus were written in the earliest gospels we have, which are dated in the first century. These gospels are four in number: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These were not written in the later church like those gospels often referred to as "Lost Scriptures." These are gospels Paul and others quoted from the beginning.

A number of good resources collect the writings of the early church authors and show the frequency of quotations and references those writers that drew from the Biblical books. Several of those first-rate scholastic books are referenced for any who wish more detail on this subject.²

THE EARLY CHURCH'S CANON

THE CANON: THE HISTORY OF NEED

Put yourself back into the shoes of the apostles at the time of Jesus' ascension, in the early 30's AD. For forty days after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to them, proving he was truly and physically resurrected, and speaking about the kingdom of God. Before his ascension, Jesus instructed his apostles to wait for the coming Holy Spirit. They all assembled one last time, and the apostles asked Jesus if he was about to restore the kingdom of Israel. Jesus replied that the time was not for them to know. They just needed to know that once the Holy Spirit came upon them, they would become his witnesses throughout the world. Having said that, he was lifted up from earth and taken away in a cloud. Two angels then appeared

² Oxford Society of Historical Theology, *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers*, (Oxford 1905); Metzger, Bruce, *The Canon of the New Testament – Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, (Oxford 1987); Metzger, Bruce, *The New Testament – Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Abingdon Press 2003)

and spoke to the apostles telling them, “Quit staring into the sky! He will return just as you saw him taken up (Acts 1:2-11).

One of the reasons it is hard for us to put ourselves into the apostles shoes at that point is because we have the benefit of nearly 2000 years of history. A week or so later, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell upon the apostles, as promised by Jesus. They began praying and prophesying, and Peter preached the first gospel sermon, opening the door to the church, with 3,000 coming to faith. The church and the apostles were not all knowing. They were fallible humans, but they did have the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was not there to give anyone omniscience. The Spirit bore witness to Jesus, convicting people of their sins, helping them fathom the reality of Jesus’ oneness with the Father, reminding the apostles of Jesus’ words and teachings, and giving them the words to testify to the same (John 14:15-26; 15:26-27; 16:4-13).

It is interesting to read the New Testament historically and watch the knowledge of the apostles grow over time. God progressively revealed truth to them, even as he has progressively revealed truth over time in his Scriptures. We can read about Peter’s vision that brought him enlightenment about God’s plan to save the Gentiles (Acts 10). Peter and Paul had to work through issues of Jewish/Gentile conflict, as did the church at large (Gal. 2:11-14; Acts 15). To the very end of the apostolic time, John was receiving revelation about things (Rev. 1-22)!

One thing the apostles did not know, was how long it would be until Jesus’ return. This was something not even Jesus had known during his ministry:

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only (Mt. 24:36).

As a result, Jesus had told his apostles to always be on the ready. His warning had a very deliberate sense of an “any day now” urgency:

as in those days [of Noah] ... they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect (Mt. 24:38-44).

This helps make sense of the temporary time after the establishment of the church where all were “selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:45). That is what most anyone would do if they were convinced the Lord’s return was imminent. (We should not infer, however, that such is the only or even main reason for benevolence!) What good does it do to have all your possessions if the Lord is coming back in the next 30 days? Would it not be better to sell everything, help those in need, and try to draw everyone to faith?

There was certainly no need for written Scriptures at this point. The apostles were God’s designated witnesses to their generation, and they performed exactly as instructed. Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, they went to the ends of the earth, bearing witness to Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and promised return. A principal witness to the world outside Judea was the “last” and “least” of the apostles, Paul. Among the mission sites visited by Paul was the Greek/Macedonian city of Thessalonica. The Thessalonians gave Paul a splendid reception as they turned to serve God, “and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10). This was Paul’s message: the resurrected Jesus was real and was returning. The Thessalonians believed Paul and were ready for the return! The idea of Jesus’ return had puzzled the believers, however. There were some believers who had already died without the Lord’s return, and the Thessalonians feared that those believers would not be a part of the eternal kingdom. Paul comforted the Thessalonians explaining, “through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess. 4:14).

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

Scholars are quick to point out that Paul wrote “we who are alive,” perhaps indicating that Paul expected Jesus’ return in his lifetime. Of course, Paul was no better off than the angels or anyone else. When Jesus said, “concerning that day and hour no one knows,” he was rightly describing Paul! Paul does use “we,” however, properly in light of Jesus’ instruction that all were to live as if the return was about to occur.

With the apostles available to teach, and with the church fully expecting the return of Christ, the only real need for a written message that we come to later call Scripture, would be the letter or missive that was necessitated by some particular occasion. So, for example, the Thessalonians needed the consolation and instruction Paul offered in his letters to them. Similarly, other letters of Paul were appropriate in light of events, and are even called by scholars, “occasional letters.”

Over time, things began to change. Christians were beginning to experience martyrdom for their faith. Death became very real to the apostles, and the first generation of witnesses and believers began to die. Combined with this, there were others who were teaching heresy (Gal. 1:8-9), who were teaching out of improper motives (Phil. 1:15-18), and who were writing letters as if from Paul or another (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Paul addressed some of those false letters and reports in 2 Thessalonians about the second coming. There, Paul gave further instructions to the Thessalonians that there would be a “man of lawlessness” revealed before the return of Jesus. This was an important lesson for the Thessalonians, because someone had tried to delude them into thinking Jesus had already returned and they had missed it!

As time passed, and as the apostles began to see that their face-to-face witnessing might well draw to an end before the Lord’s return, it became very important for their testimony and teaching to be set in written form. In this way, they could fulfill their calling to go to “the ends of the earth” even after their death. We see then, as time passed, the importance of a written record of God’s movement, recording the work of the Holy Spirit as set out by Jesus before his death.

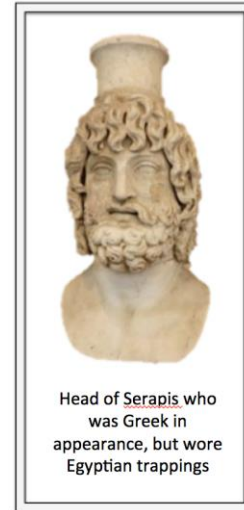
The teaching of Jesus and experiences of the apostles underscored the need; there were those who were spreading heretical ideas. Jesus warned of “false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Mt. 7:15). Paul urged Timothy to stay behind in Ephesus to,

charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith (1 Tim. 1:3-4).

These were people who “wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” (1 Tim. 1:6-7).

This problem was enhanced, as non-Jewish believers became a greater number in the church. Scholars have long recognized a tendency to fuse new beliefs onto old beliefs and ways of thinking. In religion, this is often labeled “syncretism,” and it was especially notable in the ancient world. For example, as the Roman state

grew and interacted with lands that were Greek in religion, the Roman religions began identifying Greek deities with Roman deities. The Roman goddess Vesta became the Greek goddess Hestia; Mars became Ares, *etc.* Similarly, in the third century BC, Ptolemy I established a cult of Serapis, who combined elements of Greek and Egyptian religion. This cult survived until late in the fourth century. Even in the Old Testament, we repeatedly saw the problems of the Israelites often integrating the religious gods and practices of the neighboring people, rather than adhering only to YHWH.



Head of Serapis who was Greek in appearance, but wore Egyptian trappings

Christianity was not immune to syncretism. The attitude of taking elements of one faith and combining them with others is evidenced by people appropriating certain doctrines, beliefs, and practices and integrating them into their other practices and beliefs. The fourth century work, *Historia Augusta*, while subject to great scrutiny over when and how it was written (it claims to have been written earlier, but most modern scholars deem that unlikely, placing it in the fourth century), contains an interesting comment on the syncretism of the Alexandrians, focusing in on Serapis mentioned in the previous paragraph:

The land of Egypt, the praises of which you have been recounting to me, my dear Servianus, I have found to be wholly light-minded, unstable, and blown about by every breath of rumour. There those who worship Serapis are, in fact, Christians, and those who call themselves bishops of Christ are, in fact, devotees of Serapis. There is no chief of the Jewish Synagogue, no Samaritan, no Christian presbyter, who is not an astrologer, a soothsayer, or an anointer... Their only god is money, and this the Christians, the Jews, and, in fact, all nations adore.³

This is the same time period where we see the rise of many of the works referred to in earlier lessons, called by Ehrman and others “Lost Scriptures.” In fact, these are classic examples of syncretism where the gospel and Christian labels were woven into gnostic beliefs to produce all sorts of religious material wearing Christian labels and language, yet far from the teaching of the apostles.

The concern over corrupting the apostolic message is evident as early as the apostolic writings themselves. As already noted, Paul was concerned that no one lead astray the Galatians by teaching “another gospel.” Paul also warned the

³ *Historia Augusta*, Transl'd by David Magie, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1932), at 399-401.

Thessalonians against any fake writings wrongly claiming to be from him. The apostles recognized that their teaching was unique in the sense that it was not simply the rambling ideas of some country folk from Judea. They recognized that God was at work in their words and their ministry. They understood their witness was one in conjunction with the Holy Spirit. They held to the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit “will bear witness about me,” but not alone. The Holy Spirit would bear witness about Jesus with the apostles! Jesus’ words continued, “and you will also bear witness” (John 15:26-27).

In this sense we read Paul writing on an authority beyond his own. When Paul was writing distinct from that authority, he clarified so:

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)... To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)... (1 Cor. 7:10-12).

We see in 2 Peter, recognition of Paul’s writings as Scripture:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the *other* Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:15-16).⁴

A final reference on this issue is found in the book of Revelation. Accorded by most as the last book written among those in the New Testament, it clearly considered each word of its text as important and divinely instructed:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

As we draw this section to a close, we note the initial lack of any written Scriptures in the New Testament church. However, as occasions warranted, an apostolic word from the Lord was important and we see the rise of letters like those of Paul’s. Further, the apostles began to realize that because Jesus never committed to a time schedule for his return, they had just assumed it imminent because of his instructions to live every day as if that were the day. They saw the

⁴ Some skeptical scholars do not accord 2 Peter as authentically from Peter. For purposes here, however, it is irrelevant, for it still shows the belief of Paul’s writings as Scripture at a very early stage, whoever might have written 2 Peter.

need to put into writing their recollections and teachings, as those infused with the Holy Spirit for that very purpose. All of these writings and teachings became more and more important as the church both moved from the time of the apostles and as the church faced infiltration of paganism and heretical teachings. That moves us to our next section of study next week: the historical unfolding of the early church shepherding the recognition of the canon.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "*For if many died through one man's trespass [Adam's], much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many*" (Rom. 5:15).

This is no late church invention. It is the core of our faith, and it was the core of the faith Paul wrote of within two decades of the death of Jesus. This is the core by which we live. Jesus Christ was a gift to all believers when he gave his life in our stead to satisfy the requirements of real justice upon the sinfulness of all people. I will hold to this belief.

2. "*much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 5:17).

Jesus is not simply an investment in the future, in case death is not a cessation of existence. Jesus was real. His death was real. His resurrection was real. His indwelling the believer is real. And in his death, and the freedom over sin and death, we find a life with meaning and purpose that is grounded firmly in history and reality. It gives a deep meaning to each day and each breath. I will live in this belief.

3. "*So that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (Rom. 5:21).

The truths of Jesus not only form my faith and infuse my life with meaning; they also anchor the hope I have in an eternal future that intertwines my being with the Lord. I will be with him and the fellow saints in life beyond the pages of this mortality. I will confidently await that day, hoping in that belief!

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 1:1-2:20. This week we add 1 John 2:21-22. 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. 17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

18 Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. 20 But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. 22 Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.