

THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

New Testament Survey – Lesson 3: Part 3

Mom recently returned from a visit to my aunt's home in central Texas. Aunt Penny and Mom had a chance to go through some personal materials of their mother, my grandmother, who passed away 18 months ago. Among the materials was a picture of my grandfather (Mom's dad) when he was a preschooler. Now Granddaddy Tommy, as we called him, was born in 1914, so this picture was datable to sometime around 1918. Granddaddy Tommy, as a very young boy, was playing at the feet of his mother, who would be my great-grandmother.

I knew Granddaddy Tommy very well; he did not pass away until I was in my 30's. I never knew his mother ("Mary"), but my Mom did. She was, of course, my Mom's grandmother and was called "Grandmother Mary." Mom had great stories to tell, and over the next two weeks, Mom and I spent some time researching the family tree as it ranged back through that branch. Grandmother Mary was born around 1876, and she gave birth to eight children, my granddaddy being the youngest. Mom had stories about almost all of his siblings, who were her aunts and uncles growing up.



Great grandmother Mary
with my granddaddy
Tommy on the ground in
the hat

Among the better records we have examined, all available on the internet, are the U. S. Census records. These records record not only those living at the houses, but also whether the house was owned or rented, whether the people were employed, could read or write, had served in the military, where they were born, where their parents were born, and more.

The time we have spent going through the records was delightful. It is a real tie to the past, allowing us to glimpse into seminal events in history. The records, however, were trumped by the stories they elicited from Mom. Stories of who ran off for fame, fortune or love, the common family interest in automobiles, the migration of many from deep East Texas to Abilene, Texas in the west, tragic deaths, whispered rumors, and more. I read of those people, but Mom knew them. She had heard the stories as a child and teenager, and those stories lasted.

Mom reminds me of St. Irenaeus of Lyon, and not just because Mom is a saint! Irenaeus was born sometime early in the second century. Scholars debate over

www.Biblical-literacy.com

whether he was born as early as 115 or as late as 142. Around 180 he became the bishop of Lyon (the town was called “Lugdunum” in Southern Gaul during his life), but in his early life, he lived in the biblical town of Smyrna (modern town of Izmir, Turkey). Born into a Christian home, Irenaeus made an impression among the churchmen, and as a young man had met and listened to the Bishop of Smyrna named Polycarp.¹



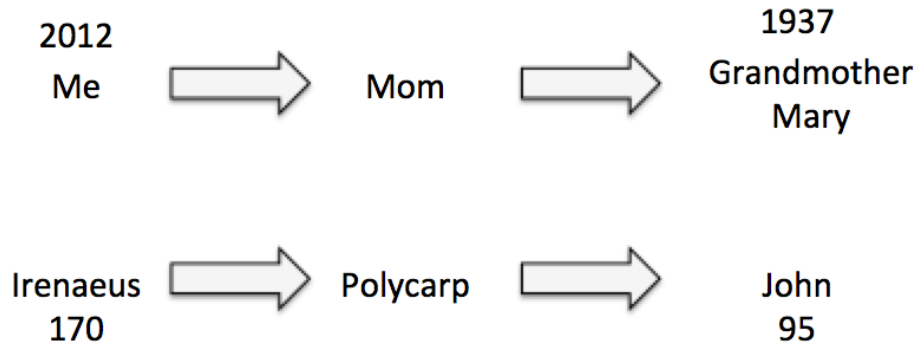
Polycarp was a famous man in the early church for a number of reasons. Born around 69, Polycarp carries the title among scholars today of an “Apostolic Father.” By that is meant he was a father of the early church, but not an apostle. He was in the second generation, among those appointed by or following the apostles. We have four ancient sources giving us contemporaneous insight into Polycarp. One was Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians. A second was a letter written to Polycarp by St. Ignatius, who was writing encouragement to various churches as he travelled to Rome for his martyrdom. A third is an accounting of Polycarp’s martyrdom on February 23, 157 when he was 86 years old.² The fourth ancient document comes from the writings of St. Irenaeus just over 20 years after Polycarp died. In his writings, Irenaeus detailed that Polycarp had been a student of the apostle John, the last living apostle who died around 100 AD.

¹ We know this both from the writings of Irenaeus and from the writings of the early church historian Eusebius. See Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Book 3, 3:4; and a letter of Irenaeus no longer extant but quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.20:5-6.

² Scholars used to debate whether Polycarp died in 155, 156, or 157. The latest extensive discussion seems to have general agreement on 157. See Barnes, Timothy, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, (Mohr Siebeck 2010), 367-378. The story of Polycarp’s martyrdom is both inspirational and moving. It is worthy of anyone’s read. Recognizing many may not have ready access to it, we are attaching as an appendix to this lesson the lesson we have previously written in our church history series on Polycarp.

Irenaeus was to the apostle John, what I am to my great grandmother Mary. I did not know her, but I know Mom! Mom has stories to tell, for she knew Grandmother Mary personally. Irenaeus did not know the apostle John, but Irenaeus knew Polycarp, and Polycarp knew John!

The unfolding of history



Why does this matter on matters of the canon? That we shall see as we work through the historical development of the assimilation of the New Testament from 27 different documents into a collection we call The New Testament. Our history starts with the New Testament historical information and then moves into church history. From there, we will draw our conclusions.

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 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. 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 principle 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 were 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!

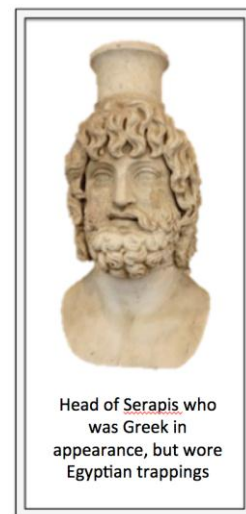
As time passed, and as the apostles began to see that their face-to-face witnessing might well draw to an end before the Lord’s return, it became very important for their testimony and teaching to be set in written form. In this way, they could fulfill their calling to go to “the ends of the earth” even after their death. We see then, as time passed on, 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, adhering only to YHWH.

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.”⁴ 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 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

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

⁴ Ehrman, Bart, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament*, (Oxford 2005).

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).⁵

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:

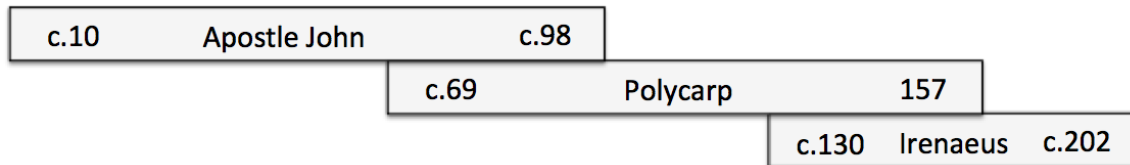
I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described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

⁵ Some skeptical scholars do not accord 2 Peter as authentically from Peter. That issue will be dealt with in the study on 2 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.

THE CANON: THE HISTORY OF PROCESS

How does the story unfold in history after the end of the apostolic age? Actually, it unfolds quite logically and is well documented by a number of different sources. While a full treatment is worthy of a much longer manuscript, we can get a very good and thorough idea by returning to the men mentioned in the introduction to this lesson. In our chart unfolding history, we showed the following relationship:



This chart sets out the apostle John, a firsthand witness to the events of the gospel, both the life and ministry of Christ as well as his death, burial, resurrection, ascension and the life of the church afterwards. Irenaeus, among other ancients, related that John was living and ministering in the ancient city of Ephesus in his later years “until the time of Trajan,” who started reigning in 98. During the time of the emperor preceding Trajan (Domitian who reigned from 81 to 96), early church history records that John spent a period of time exiled on the island of Patmos, about 60 miles offshore from Ephesus, where he received the revelation that is our New Testament book by the same name (Rev. 1:9).

In the chart, we show Polycarp overlapping with John. Polycarp was the bishop at the church in Smyrna, 40 miles north of Ephesus, by 110. Irenaeus wrote of Polycarp’s linkage both to John and to Irenaeus. In a letter no longer extant, save by the quotations of the letter contained in Eusebius’s church history, Irenaeus wrote to a man named Florinus saying,

While I was still a boy, I saw you in lower Asia with Polycarp... I recall the events of that time better than what has happened recently (for what we learn as children grows with the soul and becomes one with it), so that I can tell even the place where the blessed Polycarp sat and talked, his goings and comings, and manner of his life, and the appearance of his body, and the discourses which he gave to the multitude, and how he reported his living with John and with the rest of the apostles who had seen the Lord, and how he remembered their words, and what the things were which he heard from them about the Lord, and about His miracles and about His teaching, how

Polycarp received them from eyewitnesses of “the word of life,” and proclaimed them all in harmony with the Scriptures.⁶

Irenaeus also wrote of Polycarp in his book *Against the Heresies*, explaining,

Polycarp, likewise, not only was taught by the apostles and conversed with many of those who saw our Lord but also was appointed bishop of the church at Smyrna in Asia by the apostles. We, too, saw him in our early age, for he lived on a long time, and departed this life as a very old man, having most gloriously and most nobly suffered martyrdom. He always taught the things that he had learned from the apostles, which he also handed on to the Church and which alone are true. Of this all the Churches in Asia bear witness, as well as the successors of Polycarp until the present day.⁷

Fortunately, we have the benefit of reading firsthand the way that Polycarp “taught the things he had learned from the apostles,” because we still have a copy of Polycarp’s letter to the Philippian church. The letter is not dated, but scholars generally consider it likely written shortly after the martyrdom of Ignatius in 110, because Polycarp asks the Philippians if they have any more details about the martyrdom. In this letter, written a dozen years or so after the death of John, one is immediately impressed with his use of Scripture, both Old and New Testament. In this relatively short letter, Polycarp quotes or references Matthew, Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, 1 Peter, and 1 John, in addition to multiple Old Testament books.⁸ (Of course, that does not mean his failure to cite other books means he viewed them less favorably, no more than it does my failure in this lesson to cite other Biblical books).

Like the New Testament book of 2 Peter, Polycarp calls the writings of Paul “Scripture” when combining a statement of Paul’s with a Psalm. Polycarp wrote,

Only, as it is said in these scriptures, “be angry and sin not,” and “do not let the sun set on your anger.”⁹

⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Translated by Roy J. Deferrari, The Fathers of the Church series (Catholic Univ. 1953), Vol. 19, at 329.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 3:4, translated by Dominic Unger, Ancient Christian Writers series (Newman 2012), Vol. 64, at 33.

⁸ We use as our source for the referenced Scriptures the 1884 work under editor Cleveland Coxe, *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Eerdmans reprint 1989).

⁹ Our translation is that of Lightfoot and Hammer, *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Baker 1992).

The first part of Polycarp's quote is from Psalm 4:5, but the second part of the quote ("do not let the sun set on your anger") is from Ephesians 4:26.

Polycarp was writing to a church that had received its own letter from Paul just 50 short years earlier. It likely had other Pauline letters as well. Understandably we read Polycarp esteeming Paul and his letters when he said,

I am writing you these comments about righteousness, brothers, not on my own initiative but because you invited me to do so. For neither I nor anyone like me can keep pace with the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who, when he was among you taught the word concerning the truth. And when he was absent, he wrote you letters; if you study them carefully, you will be able to build yourselves up in the faith that has been given to you (3:1-2).

It seems clear that by 110, a number of Paul's letters were accumulated into a body and were being used by the churches of that area for study and teaching. These were seen as no ordinary letters, but those that rose to the level of Scripture. (In our Bibles today, Paul's letters are still grouped together in the New Testament, following a practice and order whose origins are lost in antiquity, but set up very early.

As noted before, Polycarp overlapped with Irenaeus, much like my mother overlapped with both my great grandmother and with me. While Irenaeus likely grew up in Smyrna, as an older man he was positioned with the church in ancient Lugdunum (modern Lyon). At the time, this was the largest Roman city north of the Alps, the "religious and economic hub of the whole of Gaul."¹⁰ Irenaeus had firsthand encounters with heresies of the church, especially after a visit to the church at Rome. Such exposures prompted Irenaeus to write a collection of books against heresies where he would outline the heresies, and then respond to them. In his responses, he repeatedly asserted the authorities for truth. His authorities were "Scripture" (including the Old Testament in Septuagint form as well as a number of New Testament books) as well as the basic summary of what Scripture teaches and the authentic chain of teaching that existed from the apostles to their successors. In this lesson, we hone in on the use of the New Testament Scriptures.

In a broad form, Irenaeus considered Scripture made up of the Law, the Prophets, the Evangelists (gospels) and the writings of the apostles. In writing about the ways certain groups twisted the Scriptures, Irenaeus noted,

¹⁰ Parvis, Paul, "Who Was Irenaeus? An Introduction to the Man and His Work," *Irenaeus: Life, Scripture, Legacy*, (Fortress 2012), at 15.

They do violence to the good words [of Scripture] in adapting them to their wicked fabrications. Not only from the words of the evangelists and apostles do they try to make proofs by perverting the interpretations and by falsifying the explanations, but also from the law and the prophets.¹¹

Over and over, Irenaeus stressed the divine inspiration of the Scriptures:

The Scriptures are perfect, inasmuch as they were spoken by God's Word and Spirit.¹²

...one and the same Spirit who heralded through the prophets...He Himself announced through the apostles.¹³

Irenaeus understood the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) to be the only four authentic gospels that belonged to Scripture. He taught that, "the Word...gave us the fourfold gospel."¹⁴ Irenaeus equated the four gospels with the four faces of the angelic beings in Ezekiel 1. He concluded,

It is not possible that there be more Gospels in number than these, or fewer...the fourfold gospel, which is held together by the one Spirit.¹⁵

Irenaeus not only cited the four gospels, but he also referenced or quoted many other New Testament books in Scripture. In the forward to a recent translation of Irenaeus, Dominic Unger recorded,

Of the New Testament, Irenaeus quotes or uses every book except Philemon and 3 John.¹⁶

Bruce Metzger counted 1,075 quotations from the New Testament in the writings of Irenaeus.¹⁷

¹¹ *Against the Heresies*, Book 1, 3:6.

¹² *Ibid.*, at Book 2, 28:2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, at Book 2, 21:4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, at Book 3, 11:8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See, Unger from footnote 7 at 9. Some scholars dispute whether Irenaeus used James, Jude, and 2 Peter, but Unger does a convincing job showing the linkage from the text to the Scriptures.

¹⁷ Metzger, Bruce, *The Canon of the New Testament*, (Oxford 1987), at 154.

In Irenaeus, we have a very early, clearly linked recognition of the New Testament as Scriptures, with his usage of all but two books.¹⁸ He was not the only one with this view. In his writings he added,

The church, though dispersed throughout the whole world...has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith... The church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it.¹⁹

A review of other ancient writings shows the church in other areas of the world was approaching canonicity and the authority of Scripture the same way. The issue for the early church was not one of whether there were Christian Scriptures. The issue for the early church was what writings were appropriately included.

The approach of the church modeled that of the church in Acts 15 trying to determine the issue of Gentile conversion and Judaism. As mentioned in a prior lesson, the issue was not resolved by some Ouija Board or other magical approach. It was a careful and deliberate process of thinking, debating, researching both historical facts and Old Testament Scriptures, with the church leadership finally reaching accord on the issue. This was the process that happened over the New Testament canon. The church had certain criteria they used in their analysis. The criteria used were basically the same as Irenaeus's. One important criterion was apostolic authority behind the writing. That did not mean that the apostles had to actually write the document. For starters, most of the apostles were likely unable to write and were dictating or teaching the material that others wrote down. (Not true for Paul, who was literate and, while evidently using a secretary, would often sign his own name to the letters. See, 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philem. 19). What is more, the church readily recognized Mark, Luke, and Acts as authoritative even though Luke was not an apostle. Each of these writings was deemed to contain the apostolic imprimatur by virtue of their sources. Mark was the writing of Peter's gospel, and Luke used multiple apostles as references for his gospel and Acts, and he was known as Paul's companion who conveyed Paul's teachings as well. Similarly, those who were brothers of Jesus were recognized as eyewitnesses who carried apostolic authority, hence the church's acceptance of James and Jude (brothers of Jesus).

¹⁸ We cannot say that there are not issues that arise with the passages that Irenaeus uses, such as what translation or version he was using. But those issues are of a different ilk than whether or not the books were in play in his life as Scripture. Therefore we leave those interested to research the many good works that discuss this subject, beginning with those referenced in this lesson.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, at Book 1, 10:1, 2.

An extension of the need for apostolic authority was the need for antiquity. If a book was written after the time of the apostles, it was not worthy of inclusion. The church dismissed popular and inspiring books like the Shepherd of Hermes because they failed the criterion of antiquity.

The church recognized that within those Scriptures that were without any question authentic, there was an orthodoxy taught, a core faith that was consistent across the breadth of known Scripture. The church used this orthodoxy as a test or measuring rod to determine whether other writings rose to the level of Scripture. Irenaeus used the term “rule of faith” referring to whether writings were consistent with the whole counsel of Scripture.

But as we follow for our teacher the one and only true God, and possess His words as the *rule of truth*, we do all speak alike with regard to the same things.²⁰

Irenaeus distinguished the heretical works where authoritative Scriptures were manipulated from those that he recognized as entirely authentic works. Marcion, for example, was a second century heretic who was notorious for his butchering of Luke and Paul’s writings to justify his theology that the God of the Old Testament differed from Jesus and the God of the New Testament. Irenaeus used the picture of a tile mosaic of an Emperor being disassembled tile by tile with the tiles being used in a contrary ordering to construct a picture of a dog:

They try to adapt their own sayings in a manner worthy of credence, either the Lord’s parables, or the prophets sayings, or the apostles’ words, so that their fabrication might not appear to be without witness. They disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures and, as much as in them lies, they disjoint the members of the Truth. They transfer passages and rearrange them; and, making one thing out of another, they deceive many... By way of illustration, suppose someone would take the beautiful image of a king, carefully made out of precious stones by a skillful artist, and would destroy the features of a man on it and change around and rearrange the jewels, and make the form of a dog.²¹



Becomes



²⁰ *Against the Heresies*, Book 4, 35:4, translation from Coxe, at 514.

²¹ *Against the Heresies*, Book 1, 8:1.

Of course, with New Testament writings being spread throughout the Mediterranean world, the process of finally agreeing on canon took a great deal of time. The Revelation of John, for example, found ready acceptance in the area of the world where John lived and experienced the visions. In other corners of the world, the revelation was not so readily received. Similarly, the books of Hebrews and James were accepted earlier in the eastern world than the western world. But we can borrow the example of a buffet from an earlier segment of this lesson set. It is as if the cooks decided on 90 percent of what would go on a buffet almost immediately. The remaining ten percent was an issue of identifying what else belonged on the buffet. It involved bringing the various churches of the world up to speed with the evidences and materials from other far reaches of the world.

We see this, for example, in a number of early efforts to set out a list of what was authoritative and what was not. The earliest table of contents is set out in a fragment named after its discoverer Ludovico Antonio Muratori, who published it in 1740. The “Muratorian Fragment” sets out a Latin list of Scriptures dated, by most scholars, around 170. The copy published by Muratori was not in great shape, and was poorly transcribed by later copyists. The list begins with the gospels, implying four gospels (the first lines are missing and Luke is the first gospel named, but it calls Luke the “third gospel” and it is apparent that the earlier lines were referencing gospels). The list then has Acts, attributing it to Luke as a collection of the acts of all the apostles. Paul’s writings follow with three books accidentally listed twice, totaling thirteen letters for Paul instead of 10. The list does mention that Paul’s letters were written to seven churches, like the letters of Revelation. This is indicated to symbolically represent the letters applied to all churches (seven being a symbol of completion). Of the remaining epistles, the fragment lists Jude and “two” epistles of John. 1 John was mentioned in the list earlier while referencing the gospel of John, leading some scholars to believe this final reference was to 2 and 3 John.

Beyond this listing of books that ultimately comprised the canon, the fragment included several other books that were expressly pointed out as not authoritative, at least in the eyes of the fragment’s author (the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermes – deemed written too recently). One inclusion that puzzles scholars is the Book of Wisdom, which was an intertestamental book, and not a New Testament writing at all.

The list does not set out the epistles of Peter, James, or Hebrews. Otherwise, it shows an intact canon by 170. We should note that 1 John was included in referencing the gospel of John. Since the textual lines that contained the references to the gospel of Mark are missing, we do not know whether Peter’s epistles might have been included there. We can fairly assume that Mark was listed as Mark’s writing of Peter because the mutilated line that preceded the

information on Luke seems to be referencing Mark as relying on others for his gospel as he was not an eyewitness. This would have been a logical place to insert Peter's role.²²

If we move into the next century, we arrive at the century of Eusebius's birth (c. 260). Eventually becoming the bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius is the church father that wrote a thorough church history, as well as a biography on the Emperor Constantine. In the early 300's Eusebius published his history in sections. Eusebius included in his writings information about the church's acceptance of the canon. His writing conveys the logical history set out earlier. Namely, he mirrors the decision of key church leaders in various places, noting the issues that he took with different findings and the dissents of others. Eusebius categorized the writings into three groups:

1. Those that were universally recognized (22 books were listed here including the four gospels, Acts, the Pauline Epistles – including by his reckoning Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation – although with some extra verbiage about the concerns of Eusebius and others on it).
2. Eusebius included another grouping of books that were familiar, but not accepted by everyone. This listing included James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2, 3 John.
3. Eusebius then set out those that were universally rejected. These were books still rejected by the church today as non-canonical. Here Eusebius did include Revelation as one that was viewed by some as belonging in this group even though he inserted it into the group of universally recognized, leaving scholars puzzled over his exact meaning.

These canon lists reveal that most everyone agreed on the core of the canon, with a few matters open to debate as the church continued to work on the historical issues and investigate thoroughly whether the writings were authentic or not. The first time we have the list of New Testament books that has the same listing as finally approved by the church at an international council in 393 comes from the pen of the Alexandrian bishop Athanasius, the most celebrated theologian on the 300's. In a festal letter to the Egyptian churches under his jurisdiction in 367, he listed the authoritative books of the Old and New Testament, giving the list we have today. He added to his list the admonition:

These are the fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone the teaching of godliness

²² For more on this important fragment, see the analysis and references of Metzger at 191ff.

is proclaimed. Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them.²³

CONCLUSION

The process of canon recognition took place over several hundred years, but to consider it a late development is to skew the truth. The apostles did not list a canon; they taught and wrote the truth as inspired by the Holy Spirit. The second generation had this truth, at least the books that were available in the respective regions of the church, holding firm to apostolic doctrine through successors designated by the apostles. History unfolds such and so do the Scriptures. Paul “entrusted” his teachings to Timothy, charging him to preach appropriately (2 Tim. 1:8-14; 4:1-5). John entrusted Polycarp, *etc.* This gave the direct link we are able to study today, John => Polycarp => Irenaeus => Church.

The criteria for authenticity led the church to ready recognition of most all of the New Testament, even though the church took its time and worked through issues before finally making its most reasoned decision (a good thing!). This approach mirrored the approach of the New Testament church in Acts 15. It provided the church for the last 1600 plus years a clear line of New Testament Scriptures adhered to by most believers since the 4th century.

POINTS FOR HOME²⁴

1. *“Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen”* (Rom.11:34-36).

God’s Word has the very greatest authority of all authority, whether it is spoken or written. It had it in the days of Christ and his apostles. It still has the same authority today! Give it that place in your life, your home and your work.

2. *“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. 3:16).

²³ See analysis by Metzger at 211ff.

²⁴ Points for home 1 and 3 courtesy of Charles Mickey (with modification).

Just because the written Scriptures are available to the church, does not mean that Christians will always adhere or apply those Scriptures properly. How do you and I apply the Scriptures. Do we accept them as authoritative or have we in practice, if not theology, decided some will be authoritative and others ignored? Let us commit to understanding Scripture and then following it!

3. *“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.”* (Eph. 3:20-21).

No doubt God was at work, behind the scenes, in all the developments of the canon. Are you aware that He is still at work in your life today? Are you praying and believing that He will provide you with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3)? It may be years before you see His hand and know what He did or is doing. It may not be obvious in your lifetime in some matters, but there is no doubt He is at work.

APPENDIX²⁵

THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

Polycarp was Bishop of Smyrna for a long time. We know from Ignatius that Polycarp was Bishop by 110. We also are able to see when he died. The church at Smyrna wrote of Polycarp’s martyrdom shortly after it happened. In a letter we call The Martyrdom of Polycarp, the Smyrnaeans wrote to the church at Philomelium²⁶ (another town in what is now Turkey) an eyewitness account of the martyrdom.

While we do not know the precise year of Polycarp’s death (scholars generally date it within a year or two of 157), we get pretty close to the actual day of the

²⁵ This is an excerpt from the lesson on Polycarp in the Church History Literacy series taught in this class and available for download on the website: www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

²⁶ The letter is addressed to the church in Philomelium “and to all the communities of the holy and catholic church sojourning in every place.” This uses the Greek word καθολικη (“*katholika*”), first used by Ignatius among the church fathers as a description of the church. The word actually means “universal” or “general.” It is used in this sense to describe our salvation or resurrection. By the year 200, it became a technical term for the churches of orthodoxy as opposed to the heretical sects. Interestingly, of the seven letters of Ignatius, the one where he first uses the term for the church is the letter to the church at Smyrna (8:2).

year! The account tells us “Polycarp was martyred on the second day of the first part of the month Xanthicus, seven days before the calends of March...about two o’clock P.M.” (21:1) (in other words, February 22, or maybe 23).²⁷

The detail of the martyrdom account is quite touching and, in places, quite graphic. The letter certainly does not “blame God” for the tragedy of the martyrs and their deaths, but it does recognize that the martyrdoms “have taken place in accordance with the will of God (for we must reverently assign to God the power over all things)” (2:1).

Before divulging the particulars of Polycarp’s death, the letter speaks of other martyrs and their quiet endurance of such horrible deaths that the bystanders “had pity and wept” even as the martyrs in “bravery” would not “utter a cry or groan” and they were “so torn by whips that the internal structure of their flesh was visible as far as the inner veins and arteries” (2:2). Many of these martyr accounts held that the martyrs were able to see and converse with Jesus at the time of their misery and deaths, much like Stephen in Acts 7. The letter does make note of a man named Quintus who recanted his faith and swore an oath to Caesar, offering a pagan sacrifice in the face of death. Interestingly, Quintus had evidently turned himself in as a Christian as opposed to being discovered and brought in by the law. Quintus is isolated as the exemplary reason that Christians should not turn themselves in for punishment (Chapter 4).

The community had been crying out for Polycarp’s martyrdom. While the cries neither scared nor disturbed Polycarp, the church imposed upon him to withdraw from town to a nearby farm. At the farm, Polycarp spent his time “doing nothing else night and day except praying for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, for this was his constant habit” (5:1). While so praying, Polycarp had a vision that he would be burned alive. The vision did not seem to particularly scare or concern him.

Those searching for Polycarp found two slave boys that, after being tortured, told the authorities where Polycarp was hidden (6:1). So “on Friday about suppertime” the mounted police and horsemen, taking all their weapons with them, set out to find and arrest this old Christian man. In the late evening, they found Polycarp lying in a bed upstairs in the farmhouse. The letter notes that Polycarp had enough warning to escape, but opted to stay saying, “May God’s will be done” (7:1).

²⁷ There are two different dating systems used in this passage. The “second day of the first part of the month of Xanticus” is a Greek/Macedonian calendar date. The phrase, “seven days before the calends of March” is a Roman system of dating. The “calends” of each month was the first of each month. Seven days before the calends would therefore be February 22 unless it was a leap year, in which event it would be February 23.

Upon hearing that the police had arrived, Polycarp went down and started visiting with them. Those present were amazed not only at his advanced age, but also at his calm composure in the face of what was to come. Polycarp immediately ordered that a table be set and his captors be given the supper they must have missed by chasing him at that hour. Polycarp also asked his captors for permission to pray for an hour before they left. The captors agreed, and to everyone's wonder, he stood for two hours praying out loud for everyone "who had ever come into contact with him" (7:2-8:1).

His captors and those with them regretted coming after "such a godly old man" (7:2), but they still took him! They set Polycarp on a donkey and brought him into the city. The police captain (ironically noted to be named "Herod") and the Captain's father came out to meet Polycarp. Transferring Polycarp to their carriage, they started to counsel and attempt to persuade him to state, "Caesar is Lord" followed by an offering of incense. The Captain and his father explained that Polycarp could return to business as normal and live if he would do those two minor things. Polycarp sat silent and wouldn't answer the Captain. As the Captain and his father persisted, Polycarp finally responded, "I am not going to do what you are suggesting to me." At this point, things got a bit nastier. The Captain and his father started threatening Polycarp and forced him out of the carriage so rapidly that the old man hurt his shin fairly badly. Rather than giving in to the obvious leg injury, Polycarp tried to move on quickly as if nothing had happened. Polycarp went straightway into the stadium where the crowd noise rose so high that "no one could even be heard" (8:1-3).

Polycarp and the Christians with him heard a voice from heaven as he entered the stadium. The voice said, "Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man." And then, Polycarp was brought before the proconsul in the middle of the stadium. The proconsul asked Polycarp whether he was indeed the legendary and wanted man, and Polycarp confirmed he was. The proconsul then tried to persuade Polycarp to recant. Using phrases like, "Have respect for your age," the proconsul urged Polycarp to "Swear by the genius of Caesar." Thinking of the Christians as atheists (for not believing in the deity of Caesar and other gods of the Roman pantheon), the proconsul asked Polycarp to say, "Away with the atheists!" Now that was something Polycarp could do, although not meaning the Christians. So, Polycarp "solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then (groaning as he looked up to heaven) said, "Away with the atheists!" Not quite what the magistrate intended!

The magistrate then persisted even more offering, "Swear the oath and I will release you; revile Christ." To this Polycarp responded, "For eighty-six years I

have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” (9:1-3)

The proconsul kept at Polycarp with wave after wave of persuasion and offers to save his life by recanting his faith. But Polycarp never faltered. Instead, Polycarp explained, “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you request, and pretend not to know who I am, listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the doctrine of Christianity, name a day and give me a hearing.” The proconsul stated that Polycarp had an assembly there shouting for his death, he ought to persuade them of his faith. Polycarp refused, noting the people would not be persuaded (10:1-2).

As time was wearing on, the proconsul moved into the final stage of confrontation. Polycarp was told that the wild beasts were coming unless he repented from his Christian faith. Polycarp again refused noting that no one would repent from what is right, to do something that is wrong. Polycarp urged the magistrate to end it, saying, “call for the wild beasts.” The proconsul then said instead of wild beasts, he would have Polycarp burned. To this threat, Polycarp mentioned that he would rather burn in the stadium than in Hell’s fires for eternity. Polycarp added, “Why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.” (11:1-2).

The eyewitnesses saw Polycarp filled with courage and joy and Polycarp’s face was “filled with grace.” Even the proconsul was astonished. Meanwhile, the crowd itself was emphatically shouting and chanting for Polycarp’s death. The cries eventually turned into demands that Polycarp be burned (12:1-3).

Then things “happened with such swiftness, quicker than words could tell” as the wood and kindling was gathered. As the pyre was built, Polycarp took off his own clothes for the death. As they started to nail Polycarp to the pyre, Polycarp stopped them. He explained he did not need to be nailed. “Leave me as I am; for he who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain on the pyre without moving, even without the sense of security you get from the nails” (13:1-3).

So instead of nailing Polycarp, they tied him up. Polycarp looked to heaven and offered a prayer of praise to God testifying to God’s love through Jesus. And as Polycarp declared “Amen!,” the fire was lit. (15:1).

The fire itself did not consume Polycarp at first. It seemed to burn in an arc around him, but his flesh was not singed. So the authorities then sent an executioner in to stab and kill Polycarp. After this incredible event, there arose among the authorities fear over whether more might become Christians after this impressive set of events demonstrating great faith in the face of death and persecution. The Captain’s father urged the proconsul to keep the body of

Polycarp lest Polycarp become a new Jesus worshipped even more than Christ himself (To this, the Christian letter writers added, “they did not know that we will never be able either to abandon the Christ who suffered for the salvation of the whole world of those who are saved, the blameless on behalf of sinners, or to worship anyone else.”) (17:1-3).

Ultimately, the church was allowed the bones of Polycarp after the cremation by the authorities and “deposited them in a suitable place” (18:2).

And “such is the story of the martyrdom of Polycarp” (19:1). Many everywhere spoke of his death, “even by pagans” (19:1). Early in the 200’s, the Christian writer Tertullian would say that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. More and more people were inspired and further convinced by a faith that people would gladly die for, than by the paganism that would kill those believers.

In reflection, it is worth noting that this wonderful man put to death by the hands of the state had, in his letter to the Philippians, urged the church to pray for the “kings, powers and rulers.” Yet even as he did so, he added, somewhat prophetically, “and for those who persecute you and hate you, and for the enemies of the cross, in order that your fruit may be evident among all people” (12:3).

And so it was with Polycarp.