

Introduction to the New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 2: From Stories to Canon

Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-152/lecture-2>

Overview

The Christian faith is based upon a canon of texts considered to be holy scripture. How did this canon come to be? Different factors, such as competing schools of doctrine, growing consensus, and the invention of the codex, helped shape the canon of the New Testament. Reasons for inclusion in or exclusion from the canon included apostolic authority, general acceptance, and theological appropriateness for “proto-orthodox” Christianity.

1. Canon Versus Scripture

[1] *Professor Dale Martin:* What is scripture, and what is canon? These are not necessarily the same thing. When you call something “scripture,” what you simply mean is it’s some kind of writing that is taken by somebody as holy and authoritative, somehow sacred. Now, different religions—some religions don’t have what we would normally think of as scripture, in Islam, Judaism or Christianity. They might have lots and lots of holy writings, but they don’t have a particular, bounded body of writings that they call scripture. They have lots of scripture. What makes something scripture, though, is that it’s taken to be authoritative and holy by some particular community. Now, notice that does not necessarily mean it’s canonical because scripture in some religions refers to a bunch of stuff. But they don’t have a set list of things that make something the canon. Judaism, Islam and Christianity all have, basically, canons. That is it’s the Qur’an for Islam. It’s the Hebrew Bible for Judaism. And it’s the Hebrew Bible, plus the New Testament—and we’ll talk about some of the other writings, too—for Christians.

[2] What does it mean to call something “canon” that makes it different from scripture? By calling it canon, we’re saying there’s an actual list that a religion body adheres to, with books that are either in or books that are not in. So “scripture” can refer to any kind of writing that a bunch of people consider holy or inspired or authoritative. But when you call something

“canon,” you mean that there’s a group of writing that has boundaries to it. And, of course, it just comes from the Greek word canon, spelled with one “n,” not two. This Greek word means a list. It can mean a rod, a staff. It can mean a measuring rod. And so it comes to be a list that accounts as authoritative in early Christianity. So that’s what it means to call something “canonical.” When you talk about something like the Shakespeare canon, the canon of Shakespeare or the canon of great Western Literature that’s actually using the term in a bit of an expanded sense. Because we don’t really consider Western Literature to have an actual closed canon of authoritative texts.

[3] In Christianity, though, it means the list of texts that are scripture and recognized as different from other things. We have to first, also, recognize that the early Christians, it seems like, from the very early period, at least a lot of them, accepted Jewish scripture as their own. So for example, when the Apostle Paul says, “Scripture says,” he’s not talking about the New Testament. He’s talking about Jewish scripture. So almost all the early Christians, they didn’t know—the people writing the New Testament didn’t know they were writing the New Testament. They just thought they were writing a gospel or a sermon or a letter or something like that. So when you see the term “scripture” in the New Testament, every time except, maybe, one time—and we’ll talk about this when we get to it—it refers to Jewish scripture that Christians accepted, followers of

Jesus accepted, as their own. The oldest materials that we have for Christianity—and so what the lecture today is going to be about is how did the particular twenty-seven books that came to be the New Testament canon, how did those get chosen? By whom—who made the decision? When did they make the decision? And what were the criteria they used? Why did they allow some books in and other books not in?

[4] The oldest written materials of Christianity are actually the letters of Paul. This may come as a surprise, because you get to the gospels first in the New Testament. And most people assume, “Oh, the gospels, they’re about the life of Jesus. That must be the oldest stuff.” Well, the gospels are actually all written after the letters of Paul were written by 20 or 30 years. So the oldest material we have are the letters of Paul. And the oldest one of those letters is 1 Thessalonians, probably, dated to around the year 50 or thereabouts. Pretty quickly, though, different churches, probably Paul’s churches, initially, started sending around copies of Paul’s letters. Remember, there’s no printing press in the ancient world. Whenever your church would get a copy of one of these letters from Paul, you would have scribes, often slaves, because slaves were especially trained to be scribes. They would take that letter, and they would make a copy of it. And then, they might keep the original, and they’d send the copy off to somebody else. Or they might keep the copy and send the original off to somebody. And so letters would be copied, and books would be copied and sent around from different communities. This obviously happened.

[5] In Colossians 4:16, which is actually, I’ll argue, not written by Paul, although it claims to be written by Paul. The writer says, “When this letter has been read among you, have it read, also, in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read, also, the letter from Laodicea.” So notice this author—who I think is a pseudepigrapher. He’s writing in the name of Paul, but not really Paul. He’s saying that there’s another letter sent by Paul to the Laodicean church. So let them send you their copy, and you send a copy of this letter to them. So we quickly see that even in the letters under Paul’s name, this activity’s being spread around.

[6] Also, we see the letter of Ephesians—again, claims to be by Paul, but I’ll argue is not by Paul when we get to that lecture, way into the semester. The letter to the Ephesians looks like it was not actually written to only one church. It looks like it was a circular letter meant to be circulated to different churches. And one of the ways we think this—one of the reasons we think this is because in some of the old manuscripts of Ephesians, “To the Ephesians” is not there. It’s either blank or it’s to somebody else. So some scholars have suggested that maybe the letter to the Ephesians was originally intended as a circular letter. And, maybe, the original writer, sort of, even left some copies blank so that somebody could fill in. “Oh, well, we’re in Laodicea. Let’s say ‘To the Laodiceans,’ and we can act like Paul sent it just to us.” So the manuscript tradition suggests that it was a letter that was a circular letter in itself.

[7] We also have imitations of Paul’s letters developing. For example, I said, Colossians I don’t think is written by Paul, but by a disciple of Paul, maybe after his death. Ephesians was written by a different disciple of Paul, and he was using as his model for a Pauline letter the actual letters of Paul, or at least some of them that he possessed and knew of. But he was, also, using the letter to the Colossians. So notice this guy, another guy sort of forging another letter by Paul. And he’s using another forged letter by Paul as his model. In fact, he almost quotes it in places. So we can tell that the writer of the Ephesians seems to have been a different author. But he used the letter to the Colossians as one of his models.

[8] So Paul’s letters were being imitated, new ones were being written, and they were being circulated. Paul’s letters actually became so famous and respected, and at least in some aspects of early Christianity, that they were called themselves “scripture.” And this is the one exception I said to when in the New Testament you see the word scripture, it refers to Jewish scripture. The guy who wrote 2 Peter—again, not really Peter, but a writer writing in Peter’s name—talked about Paul’s letters as if—and he calls them scripture. He says, “There are many things in Paul’s letters very difficult to understand. And some people twist them to their own destruction as they do other kinds of scripture.” So already by the time 2 Peter was written, which was much later

than the letters of Paul, Paul's letters have come to be regarded by at least some early Christians as scripture themselves. So collections of Paul's letters were gradually being made and copied and circulated. That's the first development of what you have a collection of what would be considered holy writing among Christians that was more than just the Jewish scripture.

[9] We also know, though, about oral traditions in Paul's letters. And this gets us back to how did the gospels come about? So Paul's letters came about that way. How did the gospels come about? We know that there were oral traditions about Jesus. People would tell stories about Jesus in their churches. Sometimes, they would tell sayings. So in Romans 12:14, Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them." Now, he doesn't say this is a quotation of Jesus. But it sounds an awful lot like you find in some of the gospels, like in Matthew 5:44. So Paul's saying this, probably, passing this along as a quotation of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, here I'll read this to you. Start bringing your Bible to class if you haven't today. Because, you know, you can't trust me, and so you have to check me out and make sure I'm not lying to you.

[10] Oh, I should do this, now, perhaps, since it's the beginning of the semester. The official motto of the class—you have to memorize this: *de omnibus dubitandum*. Say it with me, please. *De omnibus du...*

[11] Students: *De omnibus dubitandum*.

[12] *Professor Dale Martin*: With feeling. *De omni...*

[13] Students: *De omnibus dubitandum*.

[14] *Professor Dale Martin*: About twice as loud.

[15] Students: *De omnibus dubitandum*.

[16] *Professor Dale Martin*: Write it down. Say it tonight, before you go to sleep. Say it in the morning, when you wake. Every day of the semester say it before you go to sleep. Say it when you wake. Can anybody tell me what it means? "Doubt everything." Doubt everything. Okay. And that includes me, because I'm going to lie to you a lot all

semester long. Or, at least, somebody will accuse me of that I guarantee.

[17] Okay. 1 Corinthians 11, if you've got your Bible follow along with me, verse 23. "For I received from the Lord," Paul says, "what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, he took the cup, also, after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Where did Paul get this? He says, "I gave it to you as I received it myself."

[18] This is traditional Greek language of passing on tradition. So Paul knows he's passing on a bit of tradition, very, very early Christian tradition. But Paul was not a disciple of Jesus during Jesus' lifetime. Paul never saw Jesus, except in his visions. Paul saw Jesus in apocalyptic visions, but he never saw Jesus' flesh and blood. And so Paul was not his disciple. He must have gotten this from other disciples of Jesus. So what does this tell us? This tells us that different disciples of Jesus were remembering some of his sayings and passing them around to other people after his life.

[19] Now, the first time—well, also, there's another interesting passage in 1 Corinthians 9:14, where Paul says this. "In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." Now, we actually don't have a saying in the Gospels that Jesus actually says that. It does sound a little bit like, maybe, Luke 10:7. But this is a saying that Paul attributes to Jesus that's not actually in our gospels. It also shows, though—it's interesting, too, that Paul says preachers should make their living from preaching the gospel. That is, churches should support the preachers and missionaries. Paul says that's a command from Jesus. He, actually, doesn't obey it, though. Because he makes the point that he, himself, is not going to take money from his churches at that point.

[20] So the earliest Gospel, though, that pulled together some of these things that we possess is the Gospel of Mark. It probably was written

around the year 70. And in the next couple of lectures I'll show you why we think we can pinpoint around the date that the gospel of Mark was written. It's a very interesting little process. Then, Matthew and Luke were both written after Mark, and they used Mark as sources. When you get to the discussion section on the synoptic problem, which is your first discussion section, you'll learn all this theory about the relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Who was written first, who copied whom, who used whom, and that sort of thing.

[21] The beginning of Luke, though, starts off like this. "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about what you have been instructed." Now, what does that tell us? That tells us that whoever wrote the Gospel of Luke—and again, I'll tell you that it wasn't the historical person called Luke, who's a companion of Paul, probably. But whoever wrote this says that he did some research. He collected other sayings about Jesus. He even looked at other written accounts. And from those different things, he, himself, compiled his own gospel.

[22] So we can tell that the gospels start off with oral tradition that's being passed around, different sayings and stories about Jesus. And then, gradually, but only about 40 years after the death of Jesus, the Gospel of Mark is in the year 70. If Jesus was crucified around the year 30 that's a 40 year period of time between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the first gospel that we possess. Although there were other written materials being passed around during that time.

[23] Now, what does this say about this? Some of this—we tend to think, as modern people, that a written text is actually the best thing. It's better than just rumor or hearsay or oral tradition. It's interesting, though, that some ancient people didn't think that. In fact, there's a guy named Papias. He's on your handout [*the handout is appended to this transcript*]. He was a Christian leader who lived, probably wrote

about some of this stuff around the year 130 or 140. And he says this about his own little research: "I shall not hesitate to put down for you with my interpretations whatsoever things I well learned at one time from the Presbyters," just meaning the old guys, elders, "and well remembered, confidently asserting truthfulness for them. For I did not take pleasure as the multitude does in those who say many things, but in those who teach the things that are true. Nor did I take pleasure in those who recall strange commands, but in those who recall the commands given by the Lord to the Faith and coming from Truth itself. But if, per chance, there came, also, anyone who had followed the Presbyters," the elders, "I made inquiry concerning the words of the Presbyters, what Andrew or what Peter had said, or what Philip or what Thomas or James, or what John or Matthew, or any of the other disciples of the Lord said. And what things Aristeon and the Presbyter John, disciples of the Lord used to say. For I did not suppose that the things from the books would aid me, so much as things from the living and continuing voice."

[24] Notice what Papias says he's doing. He doesn't interview the actual apostles. He's too long after their death. But he tries to find people who are old men, who knew the apostles. And he says he questioned them about what they said Jesus had said. That's interesting, because it shows this continuing tradition. But it's also interesting that he says he trusted that traditional living voice more than he trusted written documents. So that's important to keep in mind.

[25] The next time we see some development in how this New Testament starts coming about is around the middle of the second century. We have a guy named Justin Martyr. He's called that because he was martyred for the faith around the year 150. He mentions "the memoirs of the apostles." We think he's, probably, talking about the gospels, but he doesn't actually use that term as much as he talks about "the memoirs of the apostles." So he knows that there's written documents. We also know that around this time there are several different things being passed around that look like gospels. There is Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which are in our bible. But there's also the Gospel of Thomas that we know about very early on. And then, you've

heard the news about the Gospel of Judas being discovered recently and published. So there's a Gospel of Mary. There are several other gospels that are floating around the second century. So that's how these written documents came about. How did they settle on these four, though?

2. *The Forming of Canons*

[26] First, then, we have to talk about Marcion. I think he's on your handout, is that correct? Yes, Marcion, who died around 160. Marcion was this guy from Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, and just get used to that term. Because whenever we say, "Asia Minor," we're talking about that section around the Mediterranean that now is called Turkey. But it was called Asia Minor, generally, in the Roman Imperial Period. Marcion came to Rome from Asia Minor. He seemed to be a successful businessman, a ship builder. He gave the Roman church a huge sum of money. And so he got a lot of honor.

[27] But then, he started teaching some doctrines that struck other Christians in Rome as being a little bit off. For one thing, Marcion said that the God, who's mentioned in the Jewish scripture, the God who created the earth, is not the father of Jesus Christ. He's a bungling or evil or bad god. He gave all these people these bad rules. And he punished them if they didn't obey the rules. That's not the God that Jesus talked about as being the God of grace and love and mercy. So he said, "That God is not the father of Jesus Christ. That's not the God that Jesus was talking about. So what we need to do is throw away Jewish scripture." So he said, "Christians don't need Jewish scripture. That's all about a wrong god anyway. It's about a false god. We don't need that. What we need," he said, "is the gospel." And in fact, he chose one of these gospels. He took the Gospel of Luke. Why did he take the Gospel of Luke? Because he believed Luke had been a companion of Paul. And Luke correctly passed on Paul's gospel. Because Paul was Marcion's fave, fave apostle.

[28] Marcion believed that Paul had been the only one of the different apostles who got it right. Because he taught people, "You don't have to obey the Jewish law." In fact, he taught people, "You shouldn't obey the Jewish law." So Marcion said, "Paul got it right." He threw out

the Old Testament. He threw out the Jewish God, and he introduced the correct gospel of Jesus. And Luke recorded that in his gospel. So Marcion said the only thing that should be scripture for us is not all that Jewish scripture. Get rid of that. We just need the ten letters of Paul that he knew about. Now, there are actually thirteen letters of Paul—that claim to be by Paul—in our bible. Marcion seemed to know only ten of them. That might be interesting later on in the semester, too. But he seemed to only include ten letters in his list. So the ten letters of Paul, and Luke.

[29] Now, you may have noticed if you've actually read any of the letters of Paul, and the Gospel of Luke, that these people seem to believe that the creator God mentioned in Jewish scripture actually was the father of Jesus Christ. Marcion noticed some of those places, too, like when Paul seemed to be quoting Jewish scripture. So Marcion said, "Aha. The other Jewish apostles, the bad apostles, got hold of Paul's letters. And they got hold of the Gospel of Luke, and they adulterated it. They put all this other stuff in." So Marcion claimed that he could edit out all the added stuff out of Paul's letters and out of the Gospel of Luke. And this edited version of the Gospel of Luke and the ten letters of Paul, that's what Marcion published as his canon.

[30] This is the first time we have in Christianity someone attempting to say, "This is the authoritative list. And all these other things are not part of the list." Marcion, who came to be considered a heretic by orthodox Christians—remember that at this time, there's a lot of different kinds of Christianity. So how do you tell an orthodox Christian from a heretical Christian? Well, it's your judgment call or mine in the second century. You hadn't had, yet, the creeds that would try to settle these things for good, like you did in the third and fourth century—the fourth century. But a lot of Christians in Rome, the Bishop of Rome, a lot of other people, considered Marcion a heretic for this. They kicked him out of the church. They gave him back his money, that he had given to the church, and they kicked him out. And they declared this is heretical. The creator God really is God. The Jewish scripture really is our scripture, and the God of Israel is the God of Jesus Christ, also the father of Jesus Christ.

- [31] But Marcion seems to have really put the scare of bejesus into the Roman church. If you didn't accept Marcion's canon, his list, what was going to be your list? If you said that the other gospels were just as important as the Gospel of Luke, who said so and why? And who's going to pronounce this? Marcion, though, seemed to have spurred other Christian leaders to decide what they thought Christian scripture should do. So what do you do about the gospels? You have four different gospels accepted by some people, five or six by other people. Generally in Rome around this time, the four gospels that we have in our bible seem to have become the most popular accepted gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Now, some people still try to figure out that you've got four. Why do you have four?
- [32] So you have other people, like Tatian. He's on your handout list, too. He decided to take the four gospels and do an edition that would string all the stuff from the different four gospels into one book. So he made what we call the Diatessaron, which is a Greek word that means through four. He took four books and created one gospel out of it. You had other people who said, well, you accept the gospel of Mark because Mark was a disciple of Peter. This is the way Papias believed. Elsewhere, he said that Mark had traveled with Peter to Rome, and Mark wrote down Peter's version of the gospel. And so Papias said that's why Mark isn't reliable. Or people would say Luke wrote down the gospel that Paul had preached, so Luke was authoritative. They also said, well, Matthew was actually one of the disciples of Jesus. He's mentioned in the gospel. So the Gospel of Matthew is also by a good one. And John, also, was believed to be that.
- [33] Now, the problem with this is that Papias and these other people didn't really know what they were talking about. Papias, for example, thought that the Gospel of Matthew had originally been written in Hebrew, and only later translated into Greek. This is wrong. Any of us who know Greek and know Hebrew can tell that the Gospel of Matthew was written in Greek. It doesn't look like a translation from Hebrew. So we tend to doubt all of these different traditions. That Mark was the disciple of Peter who wrote Peter's gospel. That Matthew was written by the actual disciple Matthew. That Luke was written by the
- disciple of Paul. And that John was written by the disciple John.
- [34] Basically, what modern scholars believe is that all four of these gospels were anonymously published. They don't tell us who their author is. Notice, they're not pseudonymous. There's a difference between pseudonymous writings—easy for me to say—and anonymous. Anonymous means we don't know who wrote it. It's published without an author's name being listed. Pseudonymous means it's published with a false name, a false author attributed. The four gospels are not pseudonymous because the earliest manuscripts of these gospels, we believe, did not contain the titles, "Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Luke, Gospel of John." They just published the text as it was. If it ever did have an author's name attached to it, we don't have any evidence in the manuscript history. Nor do we have any evidence in any other historical place. What happened was, these names got attached to these documents. And that's, eventually, how they got included into the canon. People thought that these documents eventually were written by the people whose names that they possess. And therefore, they thought they had some kind of connection to the apostles.
- [35] Notice what the canon list eventually have. This is on your handout, also. Look at the Muratorian Canon. Remember, the word canon just means list. So this was a list of books that some author believed were scripture and should be read by Christians and churches. And he mentions others that he believes they should not. Sometimes he didn't believe they were bad books. Sometimes he believed they just weren't supposed to be included with the highest canonical books. There's a big debate about whether this canon list was composed around the year 200 or around the year 400. Scholars tend to line up on one side or the other. It used to be when I was in grad school that most people said, "Oh, it was written around the year 200." Now, I understand that probably the majority of scholars would say, "No. It comes from a later period." That's not really all that important for us because what's important for us is to see at this point, either 200 or 400, what was included and what was not.

[36] This canon list includes these books that aren't in our bible: The Wisdom of Solomon, which is actually in the apocrypha—and I'll talk about that—and the Apocalypse of Peter. We do have an Apocalypse of Peter, along with the Apocalypse of John. It's just not in our bible. It's considered New Testament apocryphal writings. Also, this writer excluded these books that are in our bible. The Letter to the Hebrews, one letter of John, he rejects the Shepherd of Hermas, which is a book that we include in a groupings of writing we call the Apostolic Fathers. It was written in the second century sometime by a guy in Rome named Hermas, and it's called The Shepherd. And he excludes other books he calls gnostic books. We'll talk later in the semester about what does gnostic mean at this time. So notice that this could be a very early canon list. And it doesn't match our list. It does have the four gospels, though.

[37] Then, the first time you get a list by any Christian that we still possess, that is extant, that survives, that has the twenty-seven books of the New Testament that is in our bible, is in the year 367. It's the Easter letter by the Bishop Athanasius, who was Bishop of Alexandria. Bishops at this time, especially of major cities, would sometimes send around what we call a paschal letter, an Easter letter. In which they'd give instructions or different kinds of things to their churches. And in one year when he's doing this, he says, "These are the books that you should read and should not read." And this is the first time that the precise twenty-seven books that he lists are the twenty-seven books that we list. It's interesting, though, he does list the letters of Paul last, behind the other letters, rather than before them, as we have in our list. And then, we don't really start getting any kind of consistency with this until into the third and fourth and fifth and sixth centuries.

3. *The Invention of the Codex*

[38] So what I'm saying now is it took a long time for this to solidify. And one of the things we think made it solidify was the development of codices, a codex. What is a codex? Early books were all scrolls. So if you had a book as long as the Gospel of Matthew, it'd take up a pretty thick scroll. Now, what happens if you want to read not the whole book of Matthew, but you

just want to read Matthew 13:13? Well, you have to unroll your scroll, and unroll, roll, roll, roll, roll, roll, roll. You have to find the place, then, roll it all back up. And what happens if you want to move back and forth between a bunch of different letters? Well, you have to unroll different scrolls. Scrolls in synagogues, they didn't have books like this. They just had a basket or a box or a place called a geniza. And they just had scrolls all in it. So if you wanted to read Isaiah, it actually was more than one scroll. So you'd have to take that scroll out and undo it.

[39] Now, what some scholars may have speculated—we don't know this for sure. Some time around this period of time, in early Christianity, somebody got the big idea, "Hey, let's cut up the scroll into pages, and sew the pages together. And then, put it all in a book. And that way you can flip around in it a lot easier." Some scholars have even speculated that Christians may have been the first to do this, because they were arguing with their friends, the Jews. Or their enemies, the Jews, in some cases. And if you want to prove that Jesus really was born of a virgin, well, you need to go to that passage in Isaiah where, at least the Greek version—it's not in the Hebrew—but the Greek version of the Jewish scripture said that this man would be born of a virgin. That's the prophecy that we read around Christmas time. A virgin will bear a son. But you might have to, also, refer to a Psalm over here or to another passage over here. And it's too difficult if you're unraveling scrolls and everything.

[40] So some people believe that Christians, precisely because they wanted to proof text a lot, they wanted to run around through a lot of different texts, they actually invented the codex. I'm not talking about tampons. Codex, with a "d," okay? All that means is this is a codex. It just means pages sewn together and placed within the covers of a book. So when you see the word "book" in ancient Greek or Latin, they didn't think of this. They thought of scrolls. So when you see the word book, the mechanical thing they're actually talking about is a scroll. This was an interesting new invention of a new piece of technology. Maybe not quite as revolutionary as the computer, but close. Because all of a sudden, cumbersome scrolls—what would be contained in the codices we have—the plural of this is, is either

codexes sometimes, or if you want to act like you actually know Greek—I mean, Latin, you’d use the old Latinized plural, codices. And you’ll see both of those written in different sources. A Codex of the bible would be pretty big, maybe that thick and that wide. The ones we have, they are stored in the Vatican Museum. We have a few of them that survived from this period. They’re pretty impressive looking. But they would be big, but still that would be a lot easier to transport and handle than a whole box or closet full of scrolls. So this was a very innovative piece of technology.

[41] But one problem that this also caused is if you’re going to put all the books, the documents that you think are scripture, between two covers and not just have a bunch of scrolls lying in a box or a closet—with the scrolls, you can take one out and put another in. If you decide that you think Daniel is not scripture, or you think the Revelation of John is not scripture, just take it out of the box. Put it somewhere else in the synagogue or the church. But once you start publishing things in between covers, you actually have to decide what goes in and what goes out. And so around this time, the third, fourth, and fifth century, we get different codices, different codexes, that is books. And we can tell, then, what sorts of books they included in their scripture.

[42] And notice on your handout just some examples of this. The canon of Mommson, early fourth century canon, includes Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke, in that order. So it has our four and only our four, but in a different order. It excludes the Letter to the Hebrews, the Letter of James, the Letter of Jude. And this is one of the interesting things about it. It argues that the books must be exactly twenty-four, because Revelation 4:10 has twenty-four elders in God’s throne room. Convincing argument; right? Codex Sinaiticus, which is around the year 350, we think, is one of the earliest codices of the bible we have. It includes the Letter of Barnabus, which we don’t have in our bibles, but we do possess it, and the Shepherd of Hermas, which I already talked about. Which was written somewhere around the year 100 in Rome or right after that. It also excludes Jude. So it has two books that we don’t include and excludes one that we do include. Codex Claromontanus from the sixth century, so in the 500s, includes Matthew, John, Mark, and Luke. Again, it has all four,

but they’re in a different order. It has the Letter of Barnabus, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Acts of Paul, along with the Acts of the Apostles, and the Revelation of Peter. So it has that Revelation of Peter, again. It excludes Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which is in our bible, Hebrews and 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

4. *A Slowly Developing (and Incomplete) Consensus*

[43] Now, notice that means that some people would say that they use that 367 date, when Bishop Athanasius sent around his Easter letter. And they say that’s when the Christian canon of the New Testament was set. Because it’s the earliest that we have. But that’s not really right. He was just bishop of one area. His letter was not binding on anybody else, except the churches in his Alexandrian diocese. So it didn’t set the canon. 367 is simply the time when we get the earliest list that matches our list of twenty-seven books of the New Testament. But you can see when you look at all these different codices, different canon lists, from a century later in the 400s, two centuries later in the 500s, three centuries later in the 600s, you still get different lists. So it took a long time for the twenty books that we have to get settled on. And we’ll talk about how that actually happened, also, still.

[44] What really happened was consensus. Different bishops in different major cities and different councils would sometimes try to decide, and they’d put out decrees. But they never completely settled the question for all Christians everywhere around the world. This is surprising. But what counts as the bible is still not agreed upon by Christians around the world. So generally, the canon of the New Testament, our twenty-seven books, is accepted by all Christian churches, generally. Except that the Revelation of John is still not part of the lectionary or canon in some Eastern and Middle Eastern churches. So, for example, if you—I can’t remember which of these there are—but there are churches all through the Middle East and the East, also. And some of them don’t have the Revelation of John in their New Testament. The canon of all the scripture therefore has never been completely the same for all Christians everywhere.

[45] The Western Roman Catholic canon, and the Greek Slavonic bibles, have for example,

Tobit, part of the Old Testament, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and the letter of Jeremiah, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. They also have a longer version of Daniel and a longer version of Esther. So the Western Roman Catholic canon and Greek and Slavonic bibles will include our canon that you have, probably. But they'll also, maybe, include things that if you grew up in a Protestant church, was not in your Protestant bible. The Greek and Slavonic bibles also accept 1 Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151—they have another Psalm—and 3 Maccabees, another Maccabean book. You don't need to memorize all this. I'm just trying to give you an idea of the variety of different canons for different churches in different regions. The Slavonic and Latin Vulgate also accept Psalm 151 and 3 Maccabees. And the Greek canon also accepts 4 Maccabees.

[46] Why is the Protestant canon like it is? Well, at the time of the Reformation, Roman Catholics had not only the 27 books of the New Testament canon that we now have, and they had what Protestants came to accept as the Old Testament. But they had several other books that we now call the Apocrypha, such as Judith or Tobit or the 1 and 2 Maccabees. When you buy your bible, if you buy the one I ordered, it's called the New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha. And they take these certain books, and they put them in a special section of the bible. To show that they're not exactly part of the Hebrew Bible, but they're also not part of the New Testament.

[47] But early Christians accepted all these books. Early Christians didn't read the Hebrew bible in Hebrew. They all read it in Greek. So when they were first dealing with Jewish scripture, they didn't read it in Hebrew, they read it in Greek. There were several other Greek Jewish documents that weren't part of the traditional Hebrew bible. But they were still accepted by a lot of Jews, and therefore by a lot of Christians as scripture. Those books were accepted by Catholics, by Roman Catholics and by Christians up until the Reformation.

[48] At the Reformation, the reformers, Martin Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, they decided that—this was, remember, after the Renaissance and the beginnings of the rediscovery of the study of Greek and Latin text in the original documents. They wanted to go back to the

Hebrew. So they learned Hebrew. They started reading the Hebrew Bible in Hebrew, not in Greek or Latin translation. They, also, tried to come up with the correct Greek text of the New Testament documents, by doing textual criticism. They were practicing what was burgeoning scholarship of the period, in the sixteenth century, to go back to the original texts, as close as they could get. What these reformers then did, they said, "Wait a minute. Look at all these Greek Jewish books that aren't part of the Hebrew Bible. They don't exist in Hebrew. They only exist in Greek." So they said, "We're not going to accept those as part of the Old Testament." They decided to go back to what the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament, and not accept the Greek Jewish documents. The Roman Catholics decided, "No. We're going to keep these documents, also." Which is why the Roman Catholic Old Testament is larger than the Protestant Old Testament. The Roman Catholic Old Testament has the same books that the Protestant Old Testament has, but they kept these other Greek Jewish documents. We call those the Apocrypha, "the hidden writings," is what it means. Yes, sir?

[49] *Student:* [Inaudible]

[50] *Professor Dale Martin:* When and how did Jewish scripture become settled? The Jewish bible started developing in the Rabbinic period. So what the rabbis—now, this is all after Jesus and Paul. So we're talking about the third, fourth and fifth, sixth centuries. They started teaching people that only the Hebrew scriptures in Hebrew should be used. In other words, the rabbis, eventually, started rejecting the use of the Greek bible, also. This took time, though. Because at the time of Paul and Jesus, more Jews actually had Greek as their first language than had Hebrew as their first language. Most Jews in the first century would've used Greek as their first language, not Hebrew or even Aramaic. So they read their scripture in Greek. And some people would believe—this is a debated question—I would even say that one reason the rabbis started using Hebrew more and taking the Hebrew Bible is because they were reacting against the predominance of Christianity, as it grew more and more strong. So as Rabbinic ideas and as Rabbinic practices developed in late antiquity, they taught that they should reject the Greek bible, not use the Greek bible.

Except, I mean, you could use it, but not use it as authoritative. And they started teaching that the Hebrew Bible should be the one that Jews use. So the Jews today, what they call it is Tanakh, which is an acronym from Torah and then, prophet—the Torah, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. So they will call their bible Tanakh often, or just the bible. And it includes only those Hebrew documents that the rabbis eventually said were part of the Hebrew Bible. Good question.

[51] So notice how Jews have one bible that's basically centered on the ancient Hebrew. Protestants have followed the rabbis, in a sense, and accepted the Hebrew Bible as being the Old Testament. Roman Catholics actually followed more what was ancient Christian tradition of accepting not only the Hebrew Bible, although it was translated into Latin and Greek most of the time, But also Jewish documents that came from that period and were surviving in Greek, itself. So that's why Christian, Protestants have one set of texts, Roman Catholics have another, and Jews have another. Now, what about those Episcopalians? As one of my friends says, "Those whiskey-palians." They decided to be in the middle. So they wanted to be somewhat Protestant and somewhat Catholic. So if you go to an Anglican church, they will also, most of the time, accept the Roman Catholic canon, along with Roman Catholics. Even though a lot of Episcopalians and Anglicans—a lot of them, not all of them—will consider themselves Protestant. So Anglicans follow the Roman Catholic canon a bit more. Protestants and Jews have different ones. That's kind of where we are right now. But notice how long it took us to get there, how many centuries it took.

[52] Now, the big question is who did it and why did they do it? Basically, some councils in the early church, councils that would be called by the Emperor, for example, by Constantine or his successors. Sometimes they would get so tired of churches—you know how Christians squabble all the time. You know, when I was a kid growing up in Texas, one of our sayings was, "Let's make like a Baptist church and split." So, you know, Christians are always squabbling. So the emperors would try to call together councils to get them to agree on things. To get them to agree on doctrine, to get them to agree on the canon. So some councils did try to set the canon. And so you had some

councils doing this. But generally, the canon developed over time through a process of general consensus. And then, as I said, through these different institutions of Christianity ending up coming to somewhat different decisions.

5. *The Reasons for Canonical Inclusion and Exclusion*

[53] But why do they include things? Why were some texts included in the New Testament and other text not included in the New Testament? The reason is not the one that most modern people think is the reason. Most modern people say, "Why is this text scripture? Why is it canon?" And most Christians will say, "Because it is inspired." That's not what the ancients believed. They believed that inspiration—there were lots of texts that were inspired, and there were different levels of inspiration. So just because a text is inspired, or even if you believe it's inspired by God and that God told somebody to write it, that wasn't enough for ancient Christians to include it in their bible, in their canon.

[54] So inspiration, contrary to modern assumptions was not the criteria you hear ancient people talk about. Apostolic authorship was one thing they talk about. So for example, Papias and other ancient writers, they said, "Well, we accept the Gospel of Mark because, well, if it wasn't written by an apostle, it was written by someone very close to an apostle. And it was Peter's gospel that Mark just published. Or Luke published Paul's gospel." So, often, some people in the ancient world, if there was a gospel they didn't like, they didn't want it to be included, they would argue against it being authored by an apostle. So that at least, they claimed for some that through these texts that they wanted apostolic authorship or close to apostolic authorship. The problem was we can tell historically that these texts were not written by apostles. Nor do we believe they were written even by the close disciples of apostles. They're anonymous texts. So if that was the reason they were included in the ancient world, it's not the reason they're still in now, because modern scholars don't believe the apostles actually wrote all of these texts in the New Testament.

- [55] Flexibly, here are the criteria. If it's not necessarily apostleship, and it's not inspiration, what are the real reasons? First, it seems that the text that at least these people believed were the most ancient and had the closest proximity to Jesus. Like I said, they wanted them to be traced back to the apostles. So even if they weren't, it's because that's what people believed about these texts. A second big reason was simply general acceptance. Apparently, the texts that were the most popular over a bigger geographical space tended to be the ones that got in. Now, it's true, there were different gospels that were popular in different parts of the Mediterranean. So for example, the Gospel of Thomas seems to have been especially popular in certain parts of the East. And in Rome there would be other document—or different parts of the Roman Empire. But, generally, as time went on, it seems like Christian leaders tried to include those gospels, those documents that were more generally accepted. In fact, if you wanted to argue against, say, the Letter of Hebrews being included, you could say, "But all the people in the East don't accept the Letter of Hebrews as part of their canon, so we shouldn't, either." So general acceptance was big.
- [56] But the most important criterion—this probably won't shock you, especially if you're as cynical as I am—theological acceptability. People tended to want to include the documents that matched their own theology. In other words, you believed something was apostolic if it taught stuff you believed. So, of course, documents that did teach that the creator God was an evil demonic god and not the father of Jesus Christ—and there are early Christian documents that teach this—they were excluded. Why were they excluded? Well, some of them claimed to be by apostles. Nobody exactly knew how old they were. They were excluded because they taught a doctrine that other Christians thought was heretical and not accurate. So when you say, though, theological appropriateness is what ended up being the most important criterion for including stuff in the canon, you actually have to say then, "Appropriate to whom?" And of course that means you have a judgment call.
- [57] But generally, the documents that came to be accepted were the ones that people we call the "proto-orthodox." This is a term that Bart Ehrman uses in his textbook. You'll see it.
- And he explains what he means by this. In the second century you can't really use the term "orthodox Christianity" versus "heretical Christianity," because there wasn't—orthodoxy hadn't been established, yet. It was all in a state of flux. People believed all kinds of different things. And what this class will do is talk about how did orthodox—what became orthodox Christianity—how did it become orthodox Christianity, rather than one of the other kinds of Christianity? And we'll talk about that repeatedly. In the second century, though, it's anachronistic to talk about orthodox Christianity versus heretical Christianity. So what some scholars have done is create this word "proto-orthodox." And all they mean is those Christians who believe the kinds of stuff that would later be proclaimed as orthodox in creeds and councils.
- [58] So what happened was the people who were the Christians in the second century, and the third century, who resembled what later became Nicean, Orthodox Christianity, they were the ones who had the most say, eventually, in what became part of the bible. So in the end, the canon is a list of the winners in the historical debate to define orthodox Christianity. Questions? Comments? Outbursts? Rantings and ravings? No? Yes, sir?
- [59] *Student:* [Inaudible]
- [60] *Professor Dale Martin:* Okay. If the books were written anonymously how did the names that are associated with them...
- [61] *Student:* [Inaudible]
- [62] *Professor Dale Martin:* [Who gave these documents their names and why?] Yeah, most of the stuff that we'll say has a wrong name attached in the New Testament is not anonymous, although there are some. It's pseudonymous. But there are some that are anonymous, too. The gospels we say are anonymous, because they didn't come attached with a name, as far as we know. How did those names get attached? By different people—partly it was because they wanted this text to be authoritative in some way, and so they tended to attach the name of a particular apostle to them or a particular disciple. Or in some ways, for example, the Gospel of Luke may have gotten its name Luke, because in the

Acts of the Apostles, which is also written by the same author, Luke is an actual character who follows Paul around. So it may have been that the name Luke and the Acts of the Apostles got connected with the acts of the apostles, and the Gospel of Luke as its author. So sometimes, it's something in the text itself that may have prompted someone to think that. Often, we just don't know how it got it, and it just happened because somebody just said,

“It's authoritative. It must've been written by an apostle.” We have time for one more question. I think I saw a hand up. Then, we need to dismiss. No more questions? Okay. See you next time. Remember, we are meeting on Friday.

[end of transcript]

From Stories to Canon

RLST 152 Introduction to New Testament History and Literature
Dale B. Martin

Papias, (ca. 60-130), Bishop of Hieropolis in Asia Minor (modern western Turkey)

Justin Martyr (ca. 100- ca. 165), lived in Rome, considered himself a “philosopher” of Christianity; wrote “apologies” (i.e. defenses) of Christianity, and other works.

Marcion (died ca. 160), native of Sinope in Pontus (northern part of what is now Turkey, on the Black Sea), was in Rome by about 140; excommunicated by the Roman church in 144; developed his own “canon” of New Testament texts; established a movement of churches that long survived in different parts of the Mediterranean.

Tatian (ca. 160), student of Justin Martyr, but later active in the East. Also wrote “apologies” for Christianity. Author of the Diatessaron. Later considered a heretic.

The Muratorian Canon (ca. 170-190? Or fourth century?)

Includes: The Wisdom of Solomon; Apocalypse of Peter (as well as of John).

Excludes: Hebrews, one letter of John. Rejects the Shepherd of Hermas and other “gnostic” books.

The Easter Letter of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (367): first instance of precisely our list. He does list Paul’s letters *after* the general or “catholic” epistles.

Canon of Mommsen (ca. early 4th century):

Includes: Matthew Mark, John, Luke.

Excludes: Hebrews, James, Jude.

It argues that the number of books must be exactly 24 because Revelation 4:10 has 24 “elders” in God’s throneroom.

Codex Sinaiticus (ca. 350)

Includes: the Letter of Barnabas, The Shepherd of Hermas

Excludes: Jude

Codex Claromontanus (6th century)

Includes: Matthew, John, Mark, Luke; Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Revelation of Peter.

Excludes: Philipians, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Thessalonians.