

From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible

by
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Chapter 10

The Extent of the New Testament Canon

Precisely which books of the New Testament canon were in dispute in the early church? On what basis did they gain their final acceptance? What were some of the New Testament apocryphal books which hovered on the borders of the canon? These questions will provide the basis for our discussion in the present chapter.

THE BOOKS ACCEPTED BY ALL--HOMOLOGOUMENA

Like the Old Testament, the vast majority of New Testament books were accepted by the church from the very beginning and never disputed. These are called homologoumena, because all the Fathers spoke in favor of their canonicity. The homologoumena appear in virtually all of the major translations and canons of the early church. Generally speaking, twenty of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are homologoumena. This includes all but Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Three more books, Philemon, 1 Peter, and 1 John, are sometimes lacking in recognition, but it is better to refer to these books as omitted rather than disputed. Since the books of the homologoumena were accepted by all, we will direct our attention to the other groups of books.

THE BOOKS REJECTED BY ALL--PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

During the second and third centuries numerous spurious and heretical works appeared which have been called pseudepigrapha, or false writings. Eusebius called these books "totally absurd and impious."

The Nature of the Pseudepigrapha

Virtually no Father, canon, or council pronounced any of those books canonical. So far as Christians are concerned, these books are mainly of historical interest. Their contents are

heretical teachings of Gnostic, Docetic, and ascetic errors. The Gnostics were a philosophical sect claiming special knowledge into the divine mysteries. They held that matter is evil and denied the Incarnation of Christ. Docetists held to the deity of Christ but denied His humanity, saying He only appeared to be human. The ascetic Monophysites taught that Christ had only one nature, which was a fusion of the divine and human.

At best, these books were revered by some cult or were referred to by some orthodox Fathers. The mainstream of Christianity followed Eusebius and never considered them anything but spurious and impious. Like the Old Testament pseudepigrapha, these books manifested a wild religious fancy. They evidence an incurable curiosity to discover things not revealed in the canonical books (for example, about the childhood of Jesus) and display an unhealthy tendency to support doctrinal idiosyncrasies by means of pious frauds. There is perhaps a kernel of truth behind some of what is presented, but the pseudepigrapha must be carefully "demythologized" in order to discover that truth.

The Number of the Pseudepigrapha

The exact number of these books is difficult to determine. By the ninth century, Photius listed some 280 of them. Since then more have been brought to light. Some of the more important pseudepigrapha and the traditions traceable to them are listed below:

GOSPELS

1. *The Gospel of Thomas* (first century) is a Gnostic view of the alleged miracles of the childhood of Jesus.
2. *The Gospel of the Ebionites* (second century) is a Gnostic Christian perpetuation of Old Testament practices.
3. *The Gospel of Peter* (second century) is a Docetic and Gnostic forgery.
4. *Protevangelium of James* (second century) is a narration by Mary of King Herod's massacre of the babies.
5. *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (second century) is an ascetic teaching against marriage, meat, and wine.
6. *Arabic Gospel of Childhood* (?) records childhood miracles of Jesus in Egypt and the visit of Zoroastrian Magi.
7. *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (second or fifth century) contains the *Acts of Pilate* and the *Descent of Jesus*.
8. *The Gospel of Joseph the Carpenter* (fourth century) is the writing of a Monophysite cult which glorified Joseph.
9. *The History of Joseph the Carpenter* (fifth century) is a Monophysite version of Joseph's life.
10. *The Passing of Mary* (fourth century) relates the bodily assumption of Mary and shows advanced stages of Mary worship.
11. *The Gospel of Nativity of Mary* (sixth century) promotes Mary worship and forms the basis

of the *Golden Legend*, a popular thirteenth-century book of lives of the saints.

12. *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (fifth century) contains a narrative about the visit to Egypt by Jesus and some of His later boyhood miracles.

13-21. *The Gospel of the Twelve, of Barnabas, of Bartholomew, of the Hebrews* (see Apocrypha), *of Marcion, of Andrew, of Mathias, of Peter, of Philip*.

ACTS

1. *The Acts of Peter* (second century) contains the legend that Peter was crucified upside down.

2. *The Acts of John* (second century) shows influence from Gnostic and Docetic teachings.

3. *The Acts of Andrew* (?) is a Gnostic story of the imprisonment and death of Andrew.

4. *The Acts of Thomas* (?) presents the mission and martyrdom of Thomas in India.

5. *The Acts of Paul* describes Paul as small, large-nosed, bald-headed, and bowlegged.

6-8. *The Acts of Mattias, of Philip, of Thaddaeus*.

EPISTLES

1. *The Letter Attributed to Our Lord* is an alleged record of the response of Jesus to a request for healing by the king of Mesopotamia. It says He would send someone after His resurrection.

2. *The Lost Epistle to the Corinthians* (second, third century) is a forgery based on 1 Corinthians 5:9 found in a fifth-century Armenian Bible.

3. *The (6) Letters of Paul to Seneca* (fourth century) is a forgery recommending Christianity to Seneca's students.

4. *The Epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans* is a forgery based on Colossians 4:16. (We have also listed this letter under Apocrypha, p. 123.)

APOCALYPSES

1. *The Apocalypse of Peter* (also listed under Apocrypha)

2. *The Apocalypse of Paul*

3. *The Apocalypse of Thomas*

4. *The Apocalypse of Stephen*

5. *Second Apocalypse of James*

6. *The Apocalypse of Messos*

7. *The Apocalypse of Dositheos*

These last three are third century Coptic Gnostic works found in 1946 at Nag-Hammadi,

Egypt.¹

SOME OTHER WORKS

1. *Secret Book of John*
2. *Traditions of Matthias*
3. *Dialogue of the Saviour*

All three of these are also from Nag-Hammadi and were unknown before 1946.

Since the great teachers and councils of the church were virtually unanimous in rejecting these books because of their inauthenticity or heresies, they are properly called pseudepigrapha. Whatever fragments of truth they preserve are obscured both by their religious fancy and heretical tendencies. The books are not only uncanonical but are not of much value for religious or devotional purposes. Their main value is historical, revealing the beliefs of their composers.

THE BOOKS DISPUTED BY SOME--ANTILEGOMENA

According to the historian Eusebius, there were seven books whose genuineness was disputed by some church fathers and which had not yet gained universal recognition by the early fourth century. The books questioned were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

THE NATURE OF THE ANTILEGOMENA

The fact that these books had not gained universal recognition by the beginning of the fourth century does not mean that they did not have an initial recognition by the apostolic and subapostolic communities. On the contrary, these books are cited as inspired by a number of the earliest sources (see chaps. 3 and 9). Nor does the fact that they were once disputed by some in the church indicate that their present place in the canon is any less firm than other books. On the contrary, the basic problem of acceptance for most of these books was not the inspiration of the book but the lack of communication between East and West with regard to their divine authority. Once the facts were known by the Fathers, the final acceptance of all twenty-seven books of the New Testament was not long coming.

The Number of the Antilegomena

Each book was disputed for its own particular reasons. A brief survey of why each book

1 For an introduction to the apocalypses, see volume 1 of *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schmeemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963).

was disputed and how it was finally recognized is in order at this juncture.

Hebrews. Basically the anonymity of the author raised questions about Hebrews. Since the author does not identify himself and disclaims being one of the apostles (Heb 2:3), the book remained suspect among those in the West who were not aware of the authority and original acceptance of the book in the East. In addition, the fact that the heretical Montanists appealed to Hebrews to support some of their erroneous views slowed its acceptance in orthodox circles. By the fourth century, however, through the influence of Jerome and Augustine, the epistle to the Hebrews found a permanent place in the canon.

The anonymity of Hebrews kept open the question of the apostolic authority of the epistle. In time, the Western church came to accept Hebrews as Pauline and, therefore, that issue was resolved. Once the West was convinced of the apostolicity of the book, there remained no obstacle to its full and final acceptance into the canon. The contents of the book are clearly authentic as is its claim to divine authority (cf. 1:1; 2:3-4; 13:22).

James. The veracity of the book of James was challenged as well as its authorship. As with the book of Hebrews, the author does not claim to be an apostle. The original readers and those after them could verify whether this was the James of the apostolic circle, the brother of Jesus (cf. Ac 15, Gal 1). But the Western church did not have access to this original information. There was also the problem of the teaching on justification and works as presented in James. The supposed conflict with Paul's teaching of justification by faith plagued the book of James. Even Martin Luther called James a "right strawy epistle" and placed it at the end of his New Testament. But, as the result of the efforts of Origen, Eusebius (who personally favored James), Jerome and Augustine, the veracity and apostolicity of the book came to be recognized in the Western church. From that time to the present, James has occupied a canonical position in Christendom. Its acceptance, of course, hinged on the understanding of its essential compatibility with the Pauline teachings on justification.

Second Peter. No other epistle in the New Testament had occasioned greater doubts as to its genuineness than 2 Peter. Jerome seemed to understand the problem and asserted that the hesitancy to accept it as a genuine work of the apostle Peter was due to a dissimilarity of style with 1 Peter. There are some notable differences in style between these two epistles, but the historic and linguistic problems notwithstanding, there are at present more than ample reasons to accept 2 Peter into the canon.

William F. Albright, noting the similarities to Qumran literature, dates the book before A.D. 80. This would mean that it is not a second-century fraud but a work emanating from the apostolic period. The recently discovered Bodmer manuscript (P72) contains a copy of 2 Peter from the third century in Egypt. This discovery also reveals that 2 Peter was in use and highly respected by the Coptic Christians at that early date. Second Peter is cited by both Clement of Rome and *Pseudo-Barnabas* in the first and second centuries respectively.

Then there are the testimonies of Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, and Augustine in the third through fifth centuries. In fact, there is more verification for 2 Peter than for such classics of the ancient world as the works of Herodotus and Thucydides. Finally, there is positive internal evidence for the authentication of 2 Peter. There are marked Petrine characteristics and doctrinal interests. The differences in style can be explained easily because of the use of a scribe in 1 Peter and the lack of one in 2 Peter (see 1 Pe 5:12).

Second and 3 John. The two shortest epistles of John were also questioned as to their genuineness. The writer identifies himself only as "the elder," and because of their anonymity and limited circulation, these epistles did not enjoy a wide acceptance, albeit they were more widely accepted than 2 Peter. Both Polycarp and Irenaeus acknowledged 2 John as authentic. The Muratorian canon and the Old Latin version contained them as well. Their similarity in style and message to 1 John, which was widely accepted, made it obvious that they were from John the apostle (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-4). Who else was so familiar to the early Asian believers that he could write authoritatively under the affectionate title of "the elder"? The term *elder* was used as a designation by other apostles (see 1 Pe 5:1), as it denoted their office (see Ac 1:20) and apostleship designated their gift (cf. Eph 4:11).

Jude. The authenticity of this book was questioned by some. Most of the dispute centered around the references to the pseudepigraphal Book of Enoch (Jude 14-15) and a possible reference to the Assumption of Moses (Jude 9). Origen hints at this problem in his day (*Commentary on Matthew* 18:30) and Jerome specifically declares this to be the problem (Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, chapter 4). Nevertheless, Jude was substantially recognized by the early fathers. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian all accepted the authenticity of the book, as did the Muratorian canon. The explanation of the pseudepigraphal quotes which commends itself most is that they are not essentially different from those citations made by Paul of the non-Christian poets (see Ac 17:28; 1 Co 15:33; Titus 1:12). In neither case are the books cited as authoritative, nor does the quote vouch for everything in the book--it merely cites a truth contained in the book. The recently discovered Bodmer papyrus (P72) confirms the use of Jude, along with 2 Peter, in the Coptic church of the third century.

Revelation. This book was labeled Antilegomena in the early fourth century because some had challenged its authenticity. The doctrine of chiliasm (millennialism) from Revelation 20 was a focal point of the controversy. The debate over Revelation lasted longer than that about any other New Testament book. It extended into the late fourth century. Strangely enough, Revelation was one of the first books to be recognized among the writings of the early Fathers. It was accepted by the writers of the *Didache* and the *Shepherd*, by Papias, and by Irenaeus, as well as by the Muratorian canon. But, when the Montanists attached their heretical teachings to the Revelation in the third century, the final acceptance of the book was considerably delayed. Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria, raised his influential voice against Revelation in the mid third century. His influence waned when Athanasius, Jerome, and Augustine came to its defense. Once it became evident that the book of

Revelation was being misused by the cults, although it originated with the apostle John (Rev 1:4; see 22:8-9) rather than with them, its final place in the canon was secure.

In summary then, the Antilegomena books were spoken against by some Fathers. This was usually because of a lack of communication or because of misinterpretations which had attached themselves to those books. Once the truth was known by all, they were fully and finally accepted into the canon, just as they had been recognized by Christians at the very beginning.

THE BOOKS ACCEPTED BY SOME--APOCRYPHA

The distinction between the New Testament Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha is not definitive. For the most part, the later books were not received by any of the orthodox Fathers or churches as canonical, whereas the apocryphal books were held in high esteem by at least one church father.

The Nature of the New Testament Apocrypha

The New Testament Apocrypha had only at best what Alexander Souter called a "temporal and local canonicity."² They were accepted by a limited group of Christians for a limited time but never gained very wide or permanent recognition. The fact that these books possessed more value than the pseudepigrapha undoubtedly accounts for the higher esteem given them by Christians. There are several reasons why they are an important part of the homiletical and devotional libraries from the early church: (1) they revealed the teachings of the second-century church; (2) they provide documentation for the acceptance of the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament; and (3) they provide other valuable historical information about the early Christian church concerning its doctrine and liturgy.

The Number of the New Testament Apocrypha

The enumeration of the New Testament Apocrypha is difficult because it depends upon the distinction made between Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. If the criteria include acceptance by at least one of the orthodox fathers or lists of the first five centuries,³ then discussion.

² Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1913), pp. 178-81.

³ "Orthodox" indicates being in accordance with the teachings of the creeds and councils of the first five centuries, such as the Apostle's Creed, Nicean Creed, et.

The Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas (c. 70-79). This widely circulated first-century letter is found in the Codex Sinaiticus manuscript (Aleph) and is mentioned in the table of contents of Codex Bezae (D) as late as 550. It was quoted as Scripture by both Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Its style is similar to Hebrews, but its contents are more allegorical. Some have questioned whether it is really a first-century document. But as Westcott has said, "While the antiquity of the Epistle is firmly established, its Apostolicity is more than questionable."⁴ The writer of the epistle is a layman who does not claim divine authority (chap. 1), and who obviously is not the Barnabas named among the apostles of the New Testament (Ac 14:14).

The Epistle to the Corinthians (c. 96). According to Dionysius of Corinth, this letter by Clement of Rome was read publicly at Corinth and elsewhere. It is also found in Codex Alexandrian (A) around 450, and Eusebius informs us that this letter had been read in many churches (*Ecclesiastical History* 3. 16). The author was probably the Clement mentioned in Philippians 4:3, but the book does not claim divine inspiration. There is a rather fanciful use made of Old Testament statements, and the apocryphal Book of Wisdom is quoted as Scripture in chapter 27. The tone of the letter is evangelical but its spirit is decidedly subapostolic. There has never been a wide acceptance of this book, and the Christian church has never recognized it as canonical.

Ancient Homily. The so-called *Second Epistle of Clement* (c. 120-140) was once wrongly attributed to Clement of Rome. It was known and used in the second century. In Codex Alexandrinus (A) it is placed at the end of the New Testament along with *1 Clement* and *Psalms of Solomon*. There is no evidence that this book was ever considered fully canonical. If it ever was, it certainly was not received on a large scale. The New Testament canon has excluded it to date.

Shepherd of Hermas (c. 115-140). This was the most popular noncanonical book in the early church. It is found in Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph) in the table of contents of Bezae (D), in some Latin Bibles and was quoted as inspired by Irenaeus and Origen. Eusebius relates that it was read publicly in the churches and used for instruction classes in the faith. The *Shepherd* is a great Christian allegory and, like Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* later, it ranked second only to the canonical books in circulation in the early church. Like the *Wisdom of Sirach* (*Ecclesiastes*) of the Old Testament Apocrypha, the *Shepherd* has ethical and devotional value but was never recognized by the church as canonical. The note in the Muratorian Fragment summarizes the status of the *Shepherd* in the early church: "It ought to be read; but it cannot be publicly read in the church to the people, either among the Prophets, since their number is complete, or among the Apostles, to the end of time."⁵

The Didache Teaching of the Twelve (c. 100-120). This early work was also held in high regard in the early church. Clement of Alexandria quoted it as Scripture, and Athanasius said it

4 Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, p. 41.

5 Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford U., 1947), p. 41.

was used in catechetical instruction. Eusebius, however, listed it among the "rejected writings," as did the major Fathers after him and the church in general. Nonetheless, the book has great historical importance as a link between the apostles and the early Fathers, with its many references to the gospels, Paul's epistles and even the Revelation. However, it was not recognized as canonical in any of the official translations and lists of the early church.

The Apocalypse of Peter (c. 150). This is one of the oldest of the noncanonical New Testament apocalypses and was widely circulated in the early church. It is mentioned in the Muratorian Fragment, in the table of contents of Bezae (D), and is quoted by Clement of Alexandria. Its vivid imagery of the spiritual worlds had a wide influence on medieval thought from which Dante's *Inferno* was derived. The Muratorian Fragment had questions about its authenticity, claiming that some would not permit it to be read in the churches. The church universal has never recognized it as canonical.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla (170). This was quoted by Origen and is in the table of contents of Codex Bezae (D). Stripped of its mythical elements, it is the story of Thecla, an Iconian lady who supposedly was converted under Paul in Acts 14:1-7. Many scholars feel that the book embodies a genuine tradition, but most are inclined to agree with Adolf von Harnack that the book contains "a great deal of fiction and very little truth." The book has never really gained anything like canonical recognition.

Epistle to the Laodiceans (fourth century?). This forgery was known to Jerome, but it appears in many Bibles from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries. As J. B. Lightfoot noted, "The Epistle is a centro of Pauline phrases strung together without any definite connection or any clear object."⁶ It has no doctrinal peculiarities and is as innocent as any forgery can be. Combined with the fact that a book by this name appears in Colossians 4:16, these factors no doubt account for its very late appearance in Christian circles. Although the Council of Nicea II (787) warned against it, calling it a "forged epistle," it reappeared in the Reformation era in German and English Bibles. Nevertheless, it has never gained canonical recognition.

A book by this name is mentioned in the Muratorian Fragment, but some have thought this to be a reference to Ephesians or Philemon which Paul called the "epistle from Laodicea." This confusion has lent to the persistent reappearance of this noncanonical book, but the epistle is definitely not canonical.

The Gospel According to the Hebrews (65-100). This is probably the earliest extant noncanonical gospel and has survived only in fragments found in quotations from various Fathers. According to Jerome, some called it the true gospel, but this is questionable since it bears little resemblance to the canonical Matthew, for it is in many respects more

⁶ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), p. 285.

pseudepigraphal than apocryphal in nature. Its usage by the Fathers was probably largely homiletical, and it never gained anything like canonical status.

Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (c. 108). Polycarp, the disciple of John the apostle and the teacher of Irenaeus, is an important link with the first-century apostles. Polycarp laid no claim to inspiration, but said that he only taught the things he had learned from the apostles. There is very little originality in this epistle, as both the content and style is borrowed from the New Testament, and particularly from Paul's epistle to the Philippians. Even though Polycarp's work is not canonical, it is a most valuable source of information about many other New Testament books which he cites as canonical.

The Seven Epistles of Ignatius (c. 110). These letters reveal a definite familiarity with the teachings of the New Testament, especially the Pauline epistles. The style of the letters, however, is more Johannine. Irenaeus quotes from the epistle to the Ephesians, and Origen quotes from both the epistle to the Romans and the epistle to the Ephesians. Ignatius, whom tradition claims was a disciple of John, does not claim to speak with divine authority. To the Ephesians, for instance, he writes, "I do not issue orders to you, as if I were some great person. . . . I speak to you as fellow-disciples with me" (chap. 3). The letters are no doubt genuine but not apostolic and therefore not canonical. Such has been the consent of the Christian church through the years. The genuine writings from the subapostolic period are most helpful from a historical point of view, for they reveal the state of the church and the recognition of canonical books of the New Testament.

We may summarize by saying that the vast majority of the New Testament books were never disputed from the beginning. Of the books originally recognized as inspired but later questioned, all of them came to full and final acceptance by the universal church. Some other books which enjoyed wide usage and were included in local lists for a time were valuable for devotional and homiletical use but never gained canonical recognition by the church. Only the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are known to be genuinely apostolic. Only these twenty-seven have found a permanent place in the New Testament canon.

Geisler, Normal L., Nix, William E. *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
Note: No change of any kind has been made to the text.