**WIDENING**

**How Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Books Went Viral**

**Introduction – Viral Videos and the Awesomeness Principle**

**Today’s Goals:**

1. To have fun learning together.
2. To go home more comfortable with the Book than we came.

AND…

1. To begin to understand how the books that eventually got in the Bible made it beyond the communities that originally received them.
2. To find some common ground with those ancient authors and the communities they helped.

**Review**

*Week One Origins – Ancient Communities and the Authors Who Loved Them*

Last session, we observed the moment at which a Jewish or Christian author served a community by writing something that helped them and then having it read aloud to them. As we begin this session, it will help to remind ourselves that sometimes an author had more than one community in view.

“I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters.” (1 Thessalonians 5.27 ESV)

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.” (James 1.1 NRSV)

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, **2**who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance.” (1 Peter 1.1 NRSV)

“SimonPeter, a servantand apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” (2 Peter 1.1 NRSV)

“So when Paul and Barnabas were sent off [from Jerusalem], they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered [James’] letter. And when they had read it they rejoiced because of its encouragement.” (Acts 15.31 ESV)

**Part One: Expanding Audiences**

Early Christians found one another across distance. And when they did they shared what they knew. We picture a time between Jesus and the first Gospel when stories and sayings spread orally and in little written sections. Then, in the time between Paul’s first letter (50 C.E.) and the early second century (say 120 C.E.), they were increasingly able to share and exchanged full letters and books. This was sometimes by the authors’ design, other times by the communities’ needs.

***Traffic***

The early Christians visited one another a lot. In Romans 16, Paul can greet 28 Roman Christians by name, even though he has not yet been to Rome. They delivered letters to one another, brought oral reports, and otherwise kept one another informed. Check out these passages:

* Paul mentions a report from Chloe’s people (1 Corinthians 1.11)
* Paul quotes a letter from the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 7.1, 25; 8.1; 12.1)
* Paul discovers that Galatia is on fire (Galatians 1.6)
* The Author of 2 Peter learns that some Christians are twisting Paul’s meaning
* John the Seer, from exile on Patmos, finds someone to take his Revelation to seven churches (Rev 1.1-3.20)
* Etc.

***Transport and Copies***

“When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.” (Colossians 4.16 ESV)

“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish;and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. (2 Peter 3.14-16 NRSV)

**Part Two: Collectors’ Items**

Some ancient authors wrote for collections. The Roman orator, Cicero, wrote a century before Paul; and during Paul’s ministry, the Stoic philosopher, Seneca, was writing his “Moral Epistles” to a lad called “Lucilius.” Both Cicero and Seneca collected their own letters for publication – probably having their scribes copy them before they sent them. (Some scholars even think that Seneca created the fiction of “Lucilius” to be his mentee and the recipient of his profundities.)

Paul didn’t write for collection. Neither did the Gospel authors. Instead, the churches passed their letters and books around, as we’ve seen. After exchanging books for a while – sometimes because their leaders instructed them to do that, sometimes on their own initiative – the early Christians began to build collections. According to the English NT scholar, F.F. Bruce, the first two prominent ones were in place by the early second century:

* “The Gospel” – with four sub-headings, “according to Matthew,” etc.
* “The Apostle” – the letters of Paul, with sub-headings, “to the Romans,” etc.

The collections happened because Christian leaders and churches wanted them. They also began to carry a unique authority that, if not scriptural, was at least above others’ words. Their references include some

* Clement of Rome: Writing in about the year 96 Clement emphasizes the importance of apostolic authority: "The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order." 14 He quotes 1 Corinthians and Hebrews and is familiar with a wider range of the canonical materials.
* The Epistles of Ignatius (Antioch around 115) Ignatius stated that the teachings of the apostles are known through their writings.
* Polycarp (Smyrna – died in 155): Like Clement and Ignatius, Polycarp sees an integral unity between the Old Testament and the apostles; in his book, the Old Testament has lost ground in favor because of the increased value placed on the writings of the apostles, particularly Paul.
* The Epistle of Barnabas (Place Unknown – written around 130) cites Matthew 22:14 with the formula "it is written." This is a big moment: that’s how people quote scripture.

The letters of Paul and the Gospels clearly gained wider readership and an increased level of respect in the late first and early second century.

**Part Three – Leaning Toward Canon**

What prompted the kind of collection that we call Canon? Why would that instinct emerge? These questions tilt us toward the middle of the second century, because that’s when Christians get organized around questions of orthodoxy. Always before, one leader would critique other teachers, or even call them cursed. But no one voice won out in the skirmish. In the Greek world, the word “hairesis” meant a school of learning. It was neutral, until the Christians got ahold of it. And it wasn’t until the mid-2nd century that Christians began to use that Greek word to mean what we now mean by the English word “heresy.” Once that began to happen, Christians began to name the books that were approved.

* Gnosticism – a Christian group that emphasized knowledge, mystery, and the non-physical elements of the teaching. Valentinus, who lived in Rome around 150, is the most famous of their leaders.
* Montanism – a Christian group that emphasized prophecy and the spontaneous messages of the Spirit. The leader, Montanus, led the group in central Turkey (Phrygia), but his movement spread and began to alarm other Christian leaders.
* Marcionism – a Christian group named for its founder, Marcion, who was the first we know of to define a list of Christian books that were authoritative over all others. He only included some parts of the Gospel of Luke and Paul’s letters, because he rejected the creator God of the Hebrew Scriptures as an inferior deity. Marcion also wrote in Rome.

By the year 180, a bishop in France called Irenaeus published a book that was a sign of the Christian times. Its Latin name was *Adversus Haireseias.* In English: Against Heresies.

**The Big Finish**

We now have the raw materials – a whole lot of Christian books – and an impulse on the part of the church to name an authority to which all Christians must answer. This instinct to identify an authoritative and orthodox (right-thinking) basis for all Christian belief brings us to the front porch of Canon.

**Q & A**

**Prep for Next Session**

In this session, we will finally ask, “Why did the books that got in, get in, and why did the books that stayed out, stay out?” To prepare, read the list of early Christian writings that existed by around 120 and the blog post by Bart Ehrman at the end of this handout.

See you next time!

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| 50-60 | [**1 Thessalonians**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/1thessalonians.html) |
| 50-60 | **Philippians** |
| 50-60 | [**Galatians**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/galatians.html) |
| 50-60 | [**1 Corinthians**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/1corinthians.html) |
| 50-60 | [**2 Corinthians**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/2corinthians.html) |
| 50-60 | [**Romans**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/romans.html) |
| 50-60 | [**Philemon**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/philemon.html) |
| 50-80 | [**Colossians**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/colossians.html) |
| 50-95 | [**Book of Hebrews**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/hebrews.html) |
| 50-120 | [Didache](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/didache.html) |
| 50-140 | [Gospel of Thomas](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas.html) |
| 50-140 | [Oxyrhynchus 1224 Gospel](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/oxyrhynchus1224.html) |
| 50-150 | [Apocalypse of Adam](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/apocalypseadam.html) |
| 50-150 | [Eugnostos the Blessed](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/eugnostos.html) |
| 50-200 | [Sophia of Jesus Christ](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/sophia.html) |
| 65-80 | [**Gospel of Mark**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/mark.html) |
| 70-100 | [**Epistle of James**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/james.html) |
| 70-120 | [Egerton Gospel](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/egerton.html) |
| 70-160 | [Gospel of Peter](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gospelpeter.html) |
| 70-160 | [Secret Mark](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/secretmark.html) |
| 70-200 | [Fayyum Fragment](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/fayyum.html) |
| 70-200 | [Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/patriarchs.html) |
| 73-200 | [Mara Bar Serapion](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/mara.html) |
| **80-100** | [**2 Thessalonians**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/2thessalonians.html) |
| **80-100** | [**Ephesians**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/ephesians.html) |
| **80-100** | [**Gospel of Matthew**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/matthew.html) |
| **80-110** | [**1 Peter**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/1peter.html) |
| 80-120 | [Epistle of Barnabas](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/barnabas.html) |
| **80-130** | [**Gospel of Luke**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/luke.html) |
| **80-130** | [**Acts of the Apostles**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/acts.html) |
| 80-140 | [1 Clement](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/1clement.html) |
| 80-150 | [Gospel of the Egyptians](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gospelegyptians.html) |
| 80-150 | [Gospel of the Hebrews](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/gospelhebrews.html) |
| 80-250 | [Christian Sibyllines](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/sibylline.html) |
| 90-95 | [**Revelation**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/revelation.html) |
| 90-120 | [**Gospel of John**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/john.html) |
| 90-120 | [**1 John**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/1john.html) |
| 90-120 | [**2 John**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/2john.html) |
| 90-120 | [**3 John**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/3john.html) |
| 90-120 | [**Epistle of Jude**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/jude.html) |
| 93 | [Flavius Josephus](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/josephus.html) |
| 100-150 | [**1 Timothy**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/1timothy.html) |
| 100-150 | [**2 Timothy**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/2timothy.html) |
| 100-150 | [**Titus**](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/titus.html) |

100-160 **2 Peter**

Source: [www.earlychristianwritings.com](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com)

**THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Bart Ehrman (<https://ehrmanblog.org/why-did-we-get-a-new-testament/)>

We are much better informed about the formation of the canon of the New Testament [than the Old], in no small part because we have the writings of later church fathers who explicitly discuss the matter. We do not have nearly as much information as we would like—as is true for almost every set of historical events from the ancient world—but we have enough to give us a good idea of what motivated Christians to come up with a list of canonical books, what criteria they followed in deciding which books should be included, and how the process or canonization proceeded over the course of time.

In considering the formation of the Christian canon, the first and most obvious point to make is that Christians already had a body of Scriptures at the very outset: Jesus and his followers were, of course, Jews, and as Jews of the first century they accepted the Torah and the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible as their Scripture, along with some of the other books. But after the death of Jesus his followers came to adopt other written authorities as “Scripture” on a par with the books accepted by Jews as canonical. We can see this movement already within the pages of the New Testament. You may recall from chapter 13 that the pseudonymous author of 1 Timothy quotes two sayings as “Scripture”; one is a passage from the Torah, the other is a saying of Jesus (1 Timothy 5:18). By the time this author is writing, at the end of the first century, Jesus’ words themselves are being taken as Scriptural authority. Eventually that will lead to the canonization of the teachings and life of Jesus as embodied in the Gospels. In addition, we saw in chapter 14 that the pseudonymous author of 2 Peter spoke of the letters of Paul and also included them among the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16). Already by the early second century, then, we have Christians seeing writings about Jesus and writings by his apostles as scriptural texts. This is the beginning of the movement toward a Christian canon, which will consist of these two components: works relating to Jesus and writings by his apostles.

What was driving this movement toward establishing a canon? For one thing, the followers of Jesus were increasingly attempting to differentiate themselves from Jews, as we saw in chapter 14. If the Christians embraced a separate religion, they needed a separate group of authorities distinctive to themselves (while accepting, of course, the Jewish scriptures as well).

But there was an even more important factor motivating Christians to have written authorities for their views. As we have seen, Christians from the outset maintained that it was very important for members of the faith to believe the right things. Our earliest author, Paul, was insistent that his converts accepted his message and not the message of other apostles that he rejected; eventually there were many different interpretations of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus, not just the views of Paul and his sundry opponents. Over time different Christian groups developed distinctive views, with Jewish Christians saying one thing, Marcionites saying another, various groups of Gnostics saying other things, and—well—lots of groups saying lots of things about who God was (and how many gods there were!), what God’s relation to the world was, who Jesus was, how salvation worked, and so on.

The striking thing is that all of the various Christian groups could back up their claims to represent the “true” interpretation of Christianity because all of them had books that were allegedly written by the apostles of Jesus themselves. And so there were Gospels of Matthew, and John, and Peter, and Thomas, and James, and Philip, and Mary and—and on and on, for a very long way. There were various accounts of the apostles’ lives; there were letters allegedly written by Peter, Paul, James, and others; there were apocalypses allegedly written by John, Peter, Paul, Isaiah, and yet others.

Christians appealed to all of these books because they were living long after the days of Jesus and they needed to know which views were “true” and acceptable. It was the apostles who would know. And so, unknown authors wrote books claiming to be apostles in order to support their points of view.

The movement to define a canon was thus, in large part, a product of the conflicts between what we have been calling orthodoxy and heresy. These conflicts were waged in an effort to win converts to one point of view or another. The side that won these conflicts was the side that decided what Christian belief would be for all time to come. The winning side, for example, said there were not two or twelve or thirty-six gods, but only one God; that Jesus was not just a human or not just a divinity, but that he was both fully man and fully God at one and the same time; that the world was not a cosmic disaster but the good creation of the one true God. These became the standard views—so much so that they are the accepted views of virtually all Christians today.

The side that won these conflicts claimed they had always been the majority view within the religion. And they appealed to their own books to prove it, and rejected the books of the other groups. And so Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were “in,” and the Gospels of Peter, Thomas, James, and Mary were “out.” It was all a matter of having written authorities to support your views.

## [**How We Got the New Testament (and not some other books!)**](https://ehrmanblog.org/how-we-got-the-new-testament-and-not-some-other-books/)

Many people (most people?) don’t realize that the collection of the books into the New Testament did not take a year or two.  It was \*centuries\* before there was any widespread agreement about which books to include and which to exclude (why include the Gospel of John but not the Gospel of Thomas?  Why include the Apocalypse of John but not the Apocalypse of Peter?).

Yesterday I started to explain how it all happened.  In this post I finish the task, by explaining the grounds on which the decisions were made and something of the historical process involved.  I’ve always thought this topic was unusually interesting – it was my first passion in my graduate school days (and the first topic I ever wrote a scholarly article on).

Again, this discussion is taken from my Introduction to the Bible, published a couple of years ago.

The Criteria Used

The “orthodox” church fathers who decided on the shape and content of the canon applied several criteria to determine whether a book should be included or not. Four criteria were especially important.

1. Antiquity. A book had to go back to the very beginning of the Christian movement or it could not be accepted. If a really good and important book that was fully informed and “true” were written, say, last year, that would not be good enough for it be part of Scripture. The canon of Scripture contained books from the beginning of the Christian movement.
2. Apostolicity. Only books that were written by apostles could be accepted as part of the canon; this included the disciples of Jesus and their followers of the first generation. And so, for example, the writings of Paul were obviously acceptable; so too were the writings of the disciples Matthew, John, and Peter; and so too were the books of Mark, Peter’s companion, and Luke, Paul’s companion. If books were anonymous (such as the Gospels) they had to be attributed to apostles or they could not be considered canonical.
3. Catholicity. Only books that were universally used throughout the church could be accepted as part of the canon. (Recall: the term “catholic” means “universal.”) Local favorites were not to be accepted by the church at large; a book had to be utilized by a broad range of churches throughout all of Christendom.
4. Orthodoxy. Most important of all, a book had to be “orthodox” in its perspectives and teachings if it were to be accepted as part of the canon of sacred Scripture. Any book that taught a “heretical” view could obviously not be from God or written by a true apostle. And so books had to be judged as presenting the “right teachings,” or they had no chance at all of being included as canonical.

The Canonical Process

We have seen that there was a movement toward having distinctively Christian authorities already during the New Testament period itself and that early on, different Christian groups accepted and promoted different written texts as embodying those authorities. In almost every instance these texts were attributed to apostles. The first person who was actually known to have come up with a canon of Scripture, and to insist that these books and only these books were to be seen as canonical, was not a member of the orthodox church but, in fact, was a person who was later branded as one of the arch-heretics, Marcion.

In an earlier chapter I pointed out that Marcion accepted Paul as the apostle par excellence, and rejected all things Jewish as being not Christian. Marcion’s views were very popular, and the Marcionite church spread far and wide in the late second century c.e. In about the middle of the century Marcion had relocated from his home in Sinope (northern Asia Minor) to Rome, the capital city of the empire and already home to one of the largest and most influential churches in the Christian world. Marcion spent some five years in Rome developing his theology and writing his books. No book was more important than a collection of sacred writings that he put together and then claimed was “the” Christian Bible.

Since, for Marcion, the Jewish God was not the true God, Marcion’s Bible did not include any of the writings of the Old Testament. And since Paul was his hero, he included all of the writings of Paul that he knew—ten of them (all except the Pastoral epistles, which may not have been available to him). Throughout Paul’s writings, of course, he refers to his “gospel,” and so Marcion included a Gospel along with Paul’s ten letters; this was a form of the Gospel of Luke. (Possibly because Luke was thought of as Paul’s companion? Possibly because it was the Gospel Marcion grew up with?) That was the entirety of Marcion’s canon of Scripture: eleven books altogether. He claimed that his view of the Christian faith was rooted in this canon and that it was authentic because these were the authoritative writings of the church.

Marcion’s orthodox opponents had a different view of things, and it may have been Marcion himself who compelled other church leaders to argue for a different canon of Scripture. It was not long after Marcion that his opponents claimed that he had a skewed view of the Christian faith because he had eliminated from consideration books of Scripture that showed his views to be wrong. In the orthodox opinion, there was not just one Gospel (Luke); there were four, and Christians needed to heed what was said in all four to come away with a true understanding of the faith. Moreover, Paul was not the only “apostle” to be included in the canon: there were the writings of Peter, James, John, and Jude, as well.

Marcion may have provided the impetus for orthodox communities to decide on which books to be included, but there was not an immediate response that led to the finalization of the twenty-seven-book canon as we have it today. Quite the contrary, that did not happen for centuries. Still, by the end of the second century most of the orthodox churches agreed on the fourfold Gospel canon, the letters of Paul (including the Pastorals, which were seen as opposing Marcion), and the letters of 1 Peter and 1 John.

There continued to be debates for a long time over other books. Some church fathers wanted to include the Apocalypse of John, others wanted instead to include an apocalypse allegedly written by Peter, others wanted to include them both, and yet others wanted to include neither. Some church fathers thought Hebrews was written by Paul and so should be included; others thought it was not by Paul and should not be included. Some church fathers wanted to include a book called the Shepherd of Hermas; others wanted the letter allegedly written by Paul’s companion Barnabas; others wanted a book known as 1 Clement. Some wanted the letters of 2 Peter, Jude, and James; others did not.

These debates went on for a very long time. The first time any church father of record indicated that there are twenty-seven books of the New Testament—and who named the twenty-seven books that we today have as the New Testament—was in the year **367 c.e., in the writings of an influential bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, Athanasius**. In a letter sent to his churches, Athanasius specified that while other books (like the Shepherd) were worth reading, only the twenty-seven could be accepted as canonical.

It cannot be stressed enough that this letter was written nearly three hundred years after the individual books of the New Testament were first put into circulation. The New Testament did not drop from the sky a few weeks after Jesus died or after Paul finished writing his books. It was a matter of ongoing debate for decades and decades and, well, centuries. Even Athanasius’s letter did not end the debates. It was not until the fifth century or so that most Christians agreed on the twenty-seven books that now are almost universally considered to be the canon of the New Testament.