

CODE 5: HOW WERE THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPELS ASSEMBLED?

- This and the discussion of the Gnostic Gospels that we just looked at are the most problematic in the book.
- In DVC, Sir Leigh Teabing says the following (DVC, p. 231-35). He states that Constantine “‘commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned” (p. 234). It’s here that he notes the *Nag Hammadi* texts mentioned earlier and blames the Vatican for their suppression. He then argues that the modern Bible “‘was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda – to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use the influence to solidify their own power base.’” Langdon tries to assuage him by affirming, essentially, that while the men in Rome were liars, they were at least sincere. Teabing then returns with “‘almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*’” (p. 235).
- So, Constantine and the Council of Nicea in AD 325 are held culpable for voting for Jesus’ divinity when “‘until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet” (p. 233). He continues, “‘Christ as Messiah was critical to the functioning of Church and state. Many scholars claim that the early Church literally *stole* Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power.’”
- So, there are 2 FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER HERE:
 - o What Christians believed and when they began to believe it, and
 - o What took place before Nicea was held. That is, before Nicea, what did Christians believe and where can we find the evidence?
- First, there are 3 points raised in the DVC that have some validity...
 - o Constantine was a key figure in Church history and his rule was a turning point from suffering and persecution to Imperial support.
 - o The Nicene Creed was an important affirmation in the history of faith and was partly an effort to define what Christians should believe. It was an attempt to codify a set of core beliefs that were regarded as essential.
 - o During this period, a collection of texts that would become the canon of Scripture gained momentum. As a result of this collection, certain other texts became less important and many were destroyed.
- But, and this is the point to remember, the council and the creed represented what a sizable number of Christians had believed for more than two hundred years. Nicea made specific what had always been believed in general terms. Further, the four Gospels highlighted at this council had been solidly established for more than a century before Nicea. So the vote at Nicea, rather than establishing the Church’s beliefs, affirmed and recognized what were already the predominant views in the Church.

Jesus’ Divinity: Vote or Conviction? (What did Christians believe and when did they believe it?)

- *Evidence from the First century: Paul and early traditional materials*
 - o Paul’s writings date from AD 50-68, almost 300 years before Nicea.
 - o Paul used many creeds, confessions, and hymns of the earliest Christians to argue many of his points.
 - **1 Corinthians 8:5-6** – “Lord” being a reference to God as One demanding and deserving of worship.
 - In several places, Jesus is mentioned as the agent of creation (**Colossians 1:16** just to name one).
 - The Gospel as confessional in **1 Corinthians 15:3-5**
 - o He also used many allusions or quotations of Old Testament texts that were originally attributed to God Himself. These could be called “substitution texts,” for they place Jesus in the position of God.

- **Philippians 2:9-11** from **Isaiah 45:23** – Jesus deserves and receives the worship due God.
- This also occurs on numerous occasions outside of Paul. Just one example is **Psalm 102:25-27** in **Hebrews 1:1-13**. Jesus is NOT a mere prophet in these texts. He shares equal glory and honor with God.
- *Evidence from the rest of the New Testament*
 - **Gospel of John**, most likely (although there is debate) written in the last decade of the first century, contains an unambiguous statement of Jesus’ deity (**John 1:1, 2-3, 14**).
 - **Mark, Matthew, and Luke** (probably written in that order before 70 AD (although some liberal scholars would spread them out between the 60s and the 80s)). Whether more conservative or liberal dates are chosen, there is virtually no dispute that these all represent first century documents. They are less overt in their portrayal of Jesus’ divinity, choosing instead to work as a narrative to a climactic final confession of who Jesus is in the resurrection. But, make no mistake, all three ultimately declare that Jesus is God.
 - When Jesus was taken to be crucified, He claimed that God would indicate that Jesus was the Son of Man, One who was seated at the right hand of God and rode the clouds. The title Son of Man was reserved for Messiah, who was seen as divine. And only deity rode on the clouds.
 - Son of man imagery from **Daniel 7:9-13**. He is the one who will be given authority to judge at the end and will be brought into God’s presence. This One will not just visit God in heaven, but will sit in His presence and reign as God.
 - This can be seen in the response of the Jews when Jesus claimed this. They tore their clothes and accused Him of blasphemy for claiming to be God. That’s because they understood the significance of the terms He had used and the claims He was making through them.
- All the evidence of Paul and other New Testament writers is that Jesus was fully human, but also as the One who uniquely bears the full marks and honor of deity. These views were WIDESPREAD almost 300 years before Nicea.
- *What about the age of the view that Jesus was divine? When did the Church begin to believe it?*
 - As we saw, the view of Jesus’ divinity, as in Paul, other New Testament writings, and traditional/confessional statements made by the earliest Church, has clear expression in books written within decades of the time of Jesus.

What about the Canon and making of the New Testament?

- The naming of the books of the New Testament is part of a long process that extended from the time of their writing in the latter half of the first century until they were fully recognized in the middle of the fourth century.
- Athanasius was the first to list the 27 books of the New Testament and the first to use the term “canon” in reference to this collection (“canon” means “standard”). The history of this collection process shows that by the end of the second century, the four Gospels had, because of their roots, content, and usage, surfaced as the primary sources of Jesus’ life and ministry.
- Four forces drove the effort to define which gospel documents bore unique authority for Christians. They were 1) Apostolic roots as the ground for truth, 2) widespread use (AKA “catholicity”), 3) the rise of competing views of faith, and 4) persecution. They are unpacked here...
 - 1, 2, 3 (Apostolic roots, widespread use, and threat of false teaching)...
 - The writings of the 2nd and 3rd century Church Fathers already display the preeminent position of the four Gospels. They do so by appealing to the nature of Apostolic connection and truth in order to combat and deal with the issue of false teaching. Pressure exerted by false groups like the Ebionites (2nd cent), one led by Marcion (140), Montanus (170), and Valentinus (ca. 100-175) (as referred to in the writings of men like Irenaeus

and Tertullian) led to the need to identify core theological beliefs and key documents espousing those beliefs.

- We also have lists of books that the Church received. As new letters appeared that were either written by or attested to by an Apostle, they were spread, copied, and read in the Churches. As time went on, many of these letters began to surface as being more authoritative than others. One of these lists was discovered in 1740 by an Italian historian named Muratori. It is referred to as the *Muratorian Canon*. The copy that was discovered was an eighth century copy. The original is dated as mid-2nd century through references within the document to key figures and the recent writing of *The Shepherd of Hermes*. This is debated, with some arguing for a date in the 4th century. It states that “**the third book of the gospel is that according to Luke.**” It names only four gospels and says this about John: “**The fourth gospel is that of John, one of the disciples.**” It also names two apocalypses, one of John and one from Peter. This would not be expected if the list was from the mid fourth century *after* the Church had solidified its New Testament. So, in my view, here we have a 2nd century document that affirms 4 Gospels only.
- Irenaeus *Against Heresies* Book 3.11.7 (2nd cent) (p. 112-3):
“So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these [documents], each one of them endeavors to establish his own peculiar doctrine. For the Ebionites, who use Matthew’s Gospel only, are confuted out of this very same, making false suppositions with regard to the Lord. But Marcion, mutilating that according to Luke, is proved to be a blasphemer of the only existing God, from those[passages] which he still retains. Those, again, separate Jesus from Christ, alleging that Christ remained impassible, but that it was Jesus who suffered, preferring the Gospel by Mark, if they read it with a love of truth, may have their errors rectified. Those, moreover, who follow Valentinus, making copious use of that according to John, to illustrate their conjunctions, shall be proved to be totally in error by means of this very Gospel, as I have shown in the first book. Since, then, our opponents do bear testimony to us, and make use of these [documents], our proof derived from them is firm and true.”

The main point here is two-fold. First is Irenaeus’ understanding of authoritative Gospels known to the Church – four of them which could not be separated – ie, all four were important. Second, is the fact that the heretics knew of them and used them in their own defense. The central debate for Irenaeus is one concerning authority and revelation. He argues that the Apostles have authority and that their writings (or ones they were connected with) are to be given credence far above any “secret” writings.

- Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 103.19 (even earlier in 2nd cent): referred to the gospels as “memoirs which I say were drawn up by His apostles and those who followed them.” He used the phrase “memoirs of the apostles” 15 times. These references cite Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In *Dialogue* 106.3, Justin referred to the gospel of Mark as the “memoir of Peter.” In *1 Apology* 66.3 he referred to the “memoirs of the apostles” and then noted they were also called “gospels.”
- It was the belief that other writings like the *Gospel of Thomas* lacked such genuine apostolic connection that caused many Christians to not accept them as reflective of the faith in its earliest form.
- A 2nd century student of Justin Martyr named Tatian (who was later expelled when he began to follow the heretic Valentinus) decided he should combine the 4 Gospel accounts into one. He called it *Diatessaron* (“Through the Four”). The Church never accepted it as valid, presumably because the four gospels were too important.
- Origen (185-254): In his **first homily on Luke 1:1**, he stated that he is aware and has read some of the Gnostic texts (in particular *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Matthias*) and that the Church needs to heed and accept only the four Gospels

“I know a certain gospel which is called “The Gospel According to Thomas” and a “Gospel according to Matthias,” and many others have we read – lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved solely what the church has recognized, which is that only the four gospels should be accepted” p. 119-20).

Origen later stated in his *Commentary of the Gospel of Matthew*, “Among the four gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that first was written that according to Matthew” (p. 120). He then went on to name Mark, Luke, and John as the other 3. Again, lived a hundred years before Nicea.

- Some on the other side of the debate in the second and third centuries also began naming books. This meant that in order for the Church to combat men like the Montanists, they had to also begin to name authoritative books for the Church.
- Irenaeus’ full list had 21 books, including the four gospels. In fact, these gospels and the bulk of Paul’s writings were already well-established and circulated by AD 200. After that time, discussion of the canon was really only limited to about a dozen books that were on the fringe of consideration. Note well, though, that the 4 gospels are not on this fringe.
- On 4, persecution...
 - There were many widespread persecutions of Christians which predated Constantine. In some from the second to early fourth centuries the sacred books of the Christians were ordered to be burned or destroyed by Emperor Diocletian (AD 303). In order to follow that order, the authorities needed to know which books to destroy and be able to name them. Further, those who would defy such an order (at the risk of their own lives) needed to know which were worth the ultimate sacrifice

Concluding Thoughts

- Of the four forces that led to the naming of the books and the acceptance of some and not others that followed, the claim of Apostolic connection dominated.
- The books of the New Testament were not so much selected as recognized for their importance to the early Church.
- the recognition of the four gospels *significantly* predates Nicea and Constantine.
- We haven’t even explored the question of whether the “Secret” gospels make claims that are historically true. We really haven’t even needed to because even if we take them at face value, they do not support what those in the “new” school claim for them. Rather, they force a choice: either the Gnostic texts reflect what Jesus was and is, or the four gospels are the best witnesses. You can’t have it both ways.
- Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown reviewed the book, *The Gnostic Gospels* for the *New York Times* in 1979. He stated that what the Christians in the 2nd and 3rd centuries did in rejecting these books and supporting the 4 was to reject “only the rubbish of the second century,” and he added, “it’s still rubbish” (Bock, p. 123).
- To attribute the selection of the gospels to Constantine and Nicea is to ignore more than 3 centuries of evidence and at least a century of widespread understanding of which books were important for the Church. There was never a time when Church leaders were picking and choosing from dozens of gospels. Rather, the four Gospels were well established before Constantine was ever born.