

How We Got Our Bible – the Canon is Formed [ONE]

1. We've rather gotten ahead of our story at this point. We've looked at Tischendorf and we need to look at a bunch of other people and how they discovered old texts and restored scripture but we haven't yet answered the question of how they chose the books. I've mentioned the threat of death – and how that helped them sort their writings – but that is only part of the story.
2. By the time of Jesus, the text of the OT was established. [TWO] A question or two remained about a couple of books but almost all Jews accepted the books we have today and no others as scripture.
 - a. When writers speak of scripture in the NT, they are referring to the OT, not to their own writings.
 - b. Jesus referred to “The law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” in Luke 24:44.
 - c. Jesus also referred to the entire set of books when he said this [Luke 11:51, cf. Matt. 23:35]. Remember that the Jews had a different order for the OT books than we do. Abel was the first martyr in the OT and Zechariah was the last [2 Chron.24:20-21].
 - d. Much later, about 55 years after the death of Jesus, [THREE] Jewish leaders DID meet at Jamnia to determine what books were scripture but they were only arguing about a few books: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ruth. The canon had been well set and recognized by that time.
 - e. Josephus [FOUR] wrote a defense of the Jews and their religion, detailing how carefully they had assembled their story. [read HWGTB, pp. 154-155]
 - f. Early Christians absolutely agreed with this. Origen and Jerome both lock down the number of OT books at 22.
3. By the year 150 – if not earlier – the letters of the apostles and gospels were being read in Christian churches. [FIVE] The first mention is from Justin Martyr who wrote that “the memoirs of the apostles were read together with the writings of the prophets.” The church was not birthed with the idea that they now had to write a new testament; they had the OT

and were content with it. However, as the church grew and letters and gospels were written, they realized how important it was to keep that information from dying with the apostles and early authors. The first books gathered were those of Paul. Next came the Gospels.

4. As people gathered the books, they didn't always gather the same books. The reason isn't hard to figure out: they didn't have the same access to books and they weren't all aware of the same books. [SIX] By the end of the 2nd century, about 150 years after the death of Jesus, lists of NT books began to appear. One of the earliest is on a fragment known as the Muratorian Fragment. It was discovered by an Italian man named, oddly enough, Muratori, in the 18th century. Some of the list is missing. It starts with Luke but refers to Luke as the third gospel so we assume Matthew and Mark were the first two. The only books missing in the list are Hebrews, James, 1st and 2nd Peter, and 3rd John. It also accepts two books that are not considered scripture today: The Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. It rejects the Shepherd of Hermas as being written rather late in the city of Rome around 140 AD.
5. Many others gathered lists [SEVEN] but those lists have almost all vanished. However, we have later writers who refer to them. One example is Origen, the great scholar and bishop of North Africa. Eusebius, about a hundred years later, gathered Origen's surviving works and wrote about them. He also does not include Hebrews (though he liked it and quoted it several times in sermons), James, 2nd Peter, and 2nd and 3rd John. Later, he would write a sermon listing all of them – all 27 of our books – in broad, flourishing strokes. He seems to have changed his mind over time and accepted the other books.
6. A hundred years later, in the 4th century (note how long a time!), the matter was fairly well settled by Eusebius who divided existing writings into three: 1) those that are universally accepted, 2) those that are disputed and 3) those that are rejected. He puts James, Jude, 1st Peter and Revelation in the disputed category but states that they are accepted by the majority. The rejected books are all books that are still not considered scripture: The Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Teachings of the Apostles.

7. About the same time, in 367 AD, Athanasius of Alexandria published a list of the same 27 books we have today and said they and they alone were to be considered scripture.
8. But back to why they gathered the list at all: Other than knowing which books were worth dying for, they also had to get their story straight. Jesus had not returned and the apostles and they who knew them were dead. And...there were teachers who were taking parts of the scripture and creating division among the newly born church. One such man would start the war over the canon of scripture: Marcion. [EIGHT]
9. Marcion was the son of the Bishop of Pontus, a Roman province in northwest Turkey on the Black Sea. He was born around 85 AD, very close to the beginnings of the church. He was a ship master – probably a ship owner or fleet owner and merchant. One of the first mentions of him was a gift he made of 200,000 sesterces to the Church in Rome. Later, the church would return the donation...
10. Marcion was taught by a man named Cerdo that there were two gods. The God of the law and prophets was an angry, harsh god. He was not the father of our Jesus. Jesus was too loving, kind and welcoming to have come from such a god so he must have come from another God, the true God.
11. Marcion was plainly on a search for truth but he went sideways. He started by trying to live the ascetic life but he blew that by sleeping with a young girl (“seducing a virgin”). He was excommunicated by his bishop dad and forced to leave his home town. Some doubt this story as it only exists in books that are anti-Marcion so take it with a grain of salt.
12. He appeared later with a following, however, teaching what he’d learned from Cerdo. He had studied the Hebrew scriptures and other writings floating about at the time and come to the conclusion that the teachings of Jesus were incompatible with the actions of Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew Bible. He created a ditheistic system of belief around the year 144 when he was 59 years old. One god was a higher god, the father of Jesus. He was transcendent and holy and kind. The other god was the lower world

creator and ruler. This, to Marcion's mind, solved the contradictions he believed existed between the two pictures of God.

13. He went further. He didn't accept that the Jewish faith gave birth to the Christian faith. He said they were entirely unrelated and that Christianity was opposed to the Jewish scriptures. He didn't say those scriptures were false; he said they were speaking of a different god than Christians followed.
14. He took metaphor and ancient story and used it to prove his point. For example, the OT God, Yahweh, walked in the Garden and asked where Adam and Eve were. That proved, he said, that the OT God had a human body and limited knowledge. He said that God was a minor god, a tribal god of the Jews (belief in tribal gods was common in the early church) whose law was based on reciprocal, legalistic justice, punishing humans through suffering and death.
15. Contrasting that, Jesus plainly sprang from a God of love and compassion who looks upon humanity with benevolence and mercy. He wrote a book about this that gained a lot of readers and converts. In his book, he goes further by claiming that Jesus' human body was just an imitation of a material body, thereby denying Jesus' actual, physical death.
16. And in his book and in his letters he produced the first written list of acceptable books, the first canon. It consisted of 11 books – Luke (with parts removed that he didn't agree with), and ten epistles of Paul (also edited). Marcion considered Paul the correct interpreter of Jesus' teachings. The gospel in Marcion's writings is stripped of Jesus' death but also of his birth and childhood.
17. In all of this, Marcion was the first of a line of thinking in the church that would later be called Gnostic. He was not a Gnostic because he didn't teach that each of us possess a spark of God in our souls at birth or that we must reject the world and treat it as an illusion. Marcion's teaching was that the God of Heaven, the Father of Jesus, was a completely alien God who had nothing to do with the creation of the world.

18. To fight against this heresy (which still exists in how many ways?) Christians began the first discussions about which books belonged in the canon of scripture. This discussion and fight went on for hundreds of years because the church Marcion started grew rapidly and lasted for hundreds of years. It would only wither away after Nicea and Constantine (stories for another day). For many years, his church in Asia Minor (Turkey) rivaled that of Rome.
19. People who were influenced by Marcion continued to pop up through the years. Manichaeism [NINE] (begun in the 3rd century in Iran by Mani who considered himself a disciple of Jesus) , the Mandaeans [TEN] (a monotheistic religion with dualistic teachings, considered Christian Gnostics and nearly wiped out recently having gone from 70,000 in Iraq to 7,000 who fled Iraq...into Syria and Jordan under threat from Islamists) and the Cathars [ELEVEN] of the 13th century (Christian Gnostics, 11th-13th centuries until the Albigensian Crusades and the Inquisition wiped them out) all taught some or all of Marcion's teachings.
20. [TWELVE] Even though he was considered an enemy by the church, Marcion's life did a lot to motivate Christians to gather their sacred books and decide on their story.