

Notes on New Testament Canon and Transmission

Canon

- A. Canon: What books belong in the NT?
1. Was it written by an Apostle or associate of an Apostle? Is it called Scripture?
 2. When did it appear historically? Can anyone vouch for its genuineness? Did a church receive it?
 3. What is the tenor or the book? Does it keep with the themes and threads of other known works by that same author (e.g., Paul's writings), or other books known to Scripture?
 4. During the first part of the second century, the Gospel, collection of gospels, and Apostle, collection of Paul's writings, were known; Acts had been part of Luke before the Gospels were circulated as a collection.
 5. ca. 140 Marcion of Asia Minor taught only Paul understood the gospel, and rejected the whole of the Old Testament as portraying a god of jealousy and wrath. His canon consisted of most of Luke and the Apostle. This movement gained ground for several years, but eventually church leaders, e. g., Irenaeus 180 AD, who was taught by Polycarp, taught by John, solidified the known books and listing of canon.
 6. The listing of books of the New Testament as we have them now is first seen in 367 AD
 7. Introductions to the New Testament reflect the attestations of early church leaders for sources of the NT books.
- B. Early NT lists (FF Bruce, New Testament Documents, chapter 3)
1. 115 AD, Ignatius of Antioch, an early church leader, writes of The Gospel as a collection in its four renderings.
 2. There was some doubt about some of those which come at the end of our New Testament. " Origen (185-254) mentions the four Gospels, the Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as acknowledged by all;" (see, too, Homilies on Joshua where Origen totals 27 letters)
 3. "Eusebius (c. 265-340) mentions as generally acknowledged all the books of our New Testament except James, Jude, Peter, 2 and 3 John, which were disputed by some, but recognised by the majority.' "
 4. "Athanasius in 367 lays down the twenty seven books of our New Testament as alone canonical; shortly afterwards Jerome and Augustine followed his example in the West. "
 5. See, too, Muratorian Canon, which has an early listing of many letters to be received and read in churches.
- C. What about New Testament Apocrypha, books which arose later, during the 2d century? Examples:
1. Gospel of Thomas: Jesus creates clay pigeons and brings them to life; later he kills a boy when Jesus becomes angry with him.
 2. Gospel of Peter: "my power, my, power..." rather than "my God, my God ..."
 3. Arabic Gospel of The Infancy of The Saviour: Jesus speaks from the cradle of his identity (related reference in the Quran, Surah 19:30-31)
 4. These are later, not written during apostolic times, and have teachings not consistent with known Scripture.

Text and Transmission -- How do we know what the text of the New Testament is?

- A. Early papyri finds: (Pryor:63-64)
1. Rylands, dated ca. 125-150 CE, contains portions of John 18
 2. Bodmer, dated ca. 200 CE, contains John 1-14
 3. Beatty, dated ca. 3d century, p45 contains Gospels, p46 contains writings of Paul, p47 contains Revelation
- B. Uncials written in large capital letters, oldest ones listed:
1. Vaticanus, B, dated ca. 4th century, thought to be the "most exact copy," has most of the OT/NT, Mk. 16:9-20 missing but a space left on the page that would fit it. Little examination allowed during 19th cent, allowed facsimiles, etc., to examine in "recent times" (Lightfoot:18)
 2. Sinaiticus, Aleph, dated ca. mid 4th cent, part of OT, all of NT, Tischendorf obtained 1859. (Lightfoot:20)
 3. Alexandrinus, A, gift of Gk church to Chas. I of England, 1627, first of the oldest MSS to be seen in the west; date of this collection is about the mid 5th cent., 440 AD, (Lightfoot:20)
 4. Ephraemi, C, 5th cent, published 1845 (Lightfoot:23)
 5. Bezae, D, 5th or 6th, contains Gospels and Acts; presented to U of Cambridge, 1581, by Theodor Beza, (Bruce:183)
- C. Cursives: written in smaller letter, cursive style, many dating from 9th-16th cent.

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- D. Printed Gk NT, from the time of the first printing presses, 16th cent, text critical in nature.
1. Erasmus, a Dutchman, 4th ed. 1527; translated fr Latin. -> Gk when he could not find a Gk source for a text.
 2. Stephanus, 1546, 1550 included a text critical apparatus. 1551 had verse divisions. French
 3. Beza, 16th, published by Theodore Beza, Geneva... influenced KJV (Pryor:72)
 4. Received text, 1629, 1633. Elzevir bros. (Pryor:72)
- E. Westcott and Hort, 19th century text critical students lists these classes of mss, late 19th cent: (Pryor:73)
1. neutral, B and Aleph, texts which historically more nearly reflect the original texts
 2. Alexandrian, Alexandria area and text type, texts used from this area of the world, some differences
 3. Western, conflated, reconciles differences by adding them together.
 4. Byzantine, latest, least authoritative, later historically, Textus Receptus is in this family
- F. Families of manuscripts used today, copies of the NT and portions are placed in classes or families depending on the age and flow of the text. (Bruce:185ff)
1. Alexandrian: mss types Aleph, B, C; held to be as close to the original as possible;
 2. Ceasarian, type used in Jerusalem, mid 4th century
 3. Antiochian, assumed base for Old Syriac, original sources thought to be dated ca. 150 CE
 4. Western, widely used in early centuries,
 5. Byzantine, 4th century, adopted by church in the Eastern empire, marked by conflation to remedy conflicting readings, not represented in the translations or citations of the first three centuries; base text for Textus Receptus.
- G. Early versions of the New Testament:
1. Syrian, Old Syriac 2d - 4th cent. (Pryor:67)
 2. Peshitta, simple Syrian, known from 5th cent, 350 known copies.(Lightfoot:27)
 3. Old Latin, 150 AD - 4th cent.
 4. Vulgate, Jerome was commissioned by bishop of Rome, revise and create a common version in Latin. 384 NT. Influential on KJV. (Lightfoot:27-28)
- H. Critical Texts
1. Wescott and Hort, 1881 (Bruce:185)
 2. Text of Nestle and UBS used more widely today: estimated that any real problem is < .1% (Pryor:73-74). These do not consist of anything that changes or affects our Christian faith, life, and hope.
- I. There are about 5,357 manuscripts for evidence of the NT text, from small fragments to complete NT, (Pryor:70). Quotes by early church leaders, lectionaries (order of worship with Scriptures to be read) add to the body of evidence, as well as translations in early languages. Then how do we know which readings to use, if there are "families" of texts, which will differ from each other? Broad principles of textual criticism: (Pryor:69-70)
1. Use the oldest reading.
 2. Use the reading supported by the most ancient witnesses.
 3. In the case of several variations, use the root from which others were derived.
 4. Use quality not quantity: A Byzantine text, widely circulated may have a reading that is not as old as an Alexandrian.
 5. Take the shorter reading; if a verse has some variations among text families, likely the more verbose had some scribal emendation, explanation or commentary of the scribe who copied it.
 6. Prefer the more difficult reading; some copyist thought to be doing a service by making a reading easier to understand.
- J. So, if a verse from two different families of manuscripts are different, reconcile them in taking the older, more well attested, shorter, more difficult reading. Example: Acts 8:37 (United Bible Societies Greek New Testament, 3rd ed.)
1. Beatty papyrus, Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Vaticanus, many other ancient witnesses do not have this verse.
 2. some cursives, late versions, and some quotes of early church leaders reference the text of v. 37.
- K. Faith consideration: Does this change my faith and Christian duty? Do the variants challenge the teachings of the NT?
1. Confession is found throughout the NT: Mt. 10:32-33, Mt. 16:16, Phil. 2:9-11, Rom. 10:9-10.

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2. Quote: "' Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.'" (Bruce:190, quoting Frederick Kenyon, The Bible and Archaeology (1940), pp. 228 f.) This quote came even before the findings at Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

L. Differences in texts and their reconciling, the product of textual criticism, are faith building. We find that in light of the great volume of texts, the body of evidence, supports, does not detract from, the "faith once delivered to the saints," Jude 3.

M. Looking ahead at version questions: What is the underlying text of different versions? (Bruce:189)

1. KJV: Byzantine, and Latin Vulgate
2. ASV: Wescott and Hort which is mainly Alexandrian
3. RSV: eclectic approach to rely on 2d cent. readings.

Additional resources:

Pryor, Neale. You Can Trust Your Bible. Quality Publications: Abilene, Texas, 1980.

Lightfoot, Neil. How We Got the Bible. ACU Press: Abilene, Texas, 1986.

Bruce, F. F. The Books and the Parchments. Flemming H. Revel: Old Tappan, N. J, 1950. [sources shown as (Bruce:pp)]

Bruce, F. F. New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable? electronic format:

<http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/ffbruce/ntdocri/ntdocont.htm>

An interesting source on NT Aprocrypha: http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/gospels/inftoma.htm