



HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

Step #3: The Canon (cont'd)

The oral traditions of Judaism gradually accumulated and were handed down along with the canonical Scriptures, with these traditional matters eventually written down several centuries after the time of Jesus in the Talmud. The tractate *Baba Bathra* contains a summary of Judaism's traditional understanding of the authorship of their Scriptures.

Who wrote the Scriptures? Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and [the last] eight verses of the Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth. David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah. Jeremiah wrote the book which bears his name, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The Men of the Great Assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther. Ezra wrote the book that bears his name and the genealogies of the Book of Chronicles up to his own time. This confirms the opinion of Rab, since Rab Judah has said in the name of Rab: Ezra did not leave Babylon to go up to Eretz Yisrael until he had written his own genealogy. Who then finished it [the Book of Chronicles]?-Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.¹

The Development of the New Testament Canon

While the Gospels were obviously produced after the earthly life of Jesus occurred, there is good circumstantial, historical, and traditional evidence for assigning them a relative chronology. According to numerous records from early church leaders, Matthew was the first Gospel written, perhaps first in Aramaic (ca. 45 A.D.?). The second Gospel record to be written was probably Luke – since Luke's second volume, Acts, ends with Paul in Rome awaiting trial (ca. 60-62 A.D.), then his “first account” (the Gospel) must have been produced prior to that date. Luke asserted that he had “researched” his material from other first-hand sources (Luke 1:1-4). Mark wrote Peter's Gospel material for the Roman Church (ca. 64-70 A.D.), while John's Gospel was written last (after 70 A.D.?). At least some of Paul's letters were being exchanged (and probably copied) between churches during his lifetime (cf. Colossians 4:16). Second Peter (3:15,16) refers to a body of Paul's writings and compared them with the “rest of the Scriptures.”

The slow development of the New Testament canon is very understandable, when you consider a couple of facts. First, the New Testament writings themselves were originally addressed to diverse locations, which would contribute to their “scattered-ness” rather than their “collection.” Letters were sent to Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica, as well as to individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon). Peter wrote to Christians in

Asia Minor, while James was probably written to Jewish Christians in Palestine. Even under the best of conditions, it would reasonably take some time for all of these (especially the personal letters to individuals) to eventually circulate so that all churches around the Mediterranean would know of and possess copies of each. The first of the NT writings was probably made no earlier than 45-50 A.D.

A second factor retarding the development of a commonly accepted collection of NT "Scripture" would be the political and social setting in the Roman Empire between 65-325 A.D. The Churches around the Mediterranean could have probably arrived at a fixed canon much earlier if they had been allowed to openly meet to deal with such issues. However, from 65-313 A.D., Christianity was an "illegal" religion and from time to time it was actively persecuted by the Roman government. After Constantine declared Christianity a "tolerated" and legal religion (311, 313 A.D.), the major council meetings began to occur as leaders from around the empire could openly meet to deal with heresies and other situations. The first of these major councils was held at Nicea (325 A.D.) and it was during this century that the "fixed listing" of 27 writings was officially produced.

Evidence from the Church Fathers. From the late first century A.D. onward, it is obvious that the NT writings were spreading from their original recipients and more people were becoming aware of them. In addition, there were a number of non-apostolic, but orthodox letters (Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, Clement of Rome, etc.) circulating, as well as false gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses beginning to appear in the second century. While they may have possessed other writings they did not choose to quote from, we can know some of the books the early church's leaders were familiar with by the quotations and citations that appear in their letters, apologies, and commentaries produced during the first few centuries after the apostolic age.

Clement of Rome (ca. 95 A.D.), a personal friend of the Apostles, wrote a letter to the Corinthian church. He made reference to Matthew, Luke, Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Hebrews, First Timothy, and First Peter.

Polycarp (80-165 A.D.), a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote a letter to the Philippian church about 108 A.D. He quoted from ten of Paul's epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John, Acts, and possibly 2 Peter.

Ignatius of Antioch (?-115 A.D.) wrote seven letters on his way to martyrdom in Rome. He quoted Matthew, nine epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and perhaps Mark, Luke, and John,

Papias (80-164 A.D.), Bishop of Hierapolis and disciple of the Apostle John, testified that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew, and that Mark wrote a Gospel under the Apostle Peter's direction.

Justin (100-167 A.D.) wrote two *Apologies* and a *Dialogue* in which he quoted freely from all four Gospels, which he said "were drawn up by Jesus' Apostles and those who followed them." He also quoted from several of Paul's letters, 2 Peter, and Revelation.

(to be continued)

¹ Michael L. Rodkinson, New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud, vol. V (XIII), (Boston: New Talmud Publishing Society, 1916), Tractate Baba Bathra, 15a (p. 45).