

A History of the Bible

By John Barton

An opportunity to listen, reflect and discuss, led by Tom Kennar

Part Four: 'Who's in and Who's Out'

Recap of Main Points so far...

- The Bible is the product of a long and intriguing process.
- Few, *if any*, of the books are by one single author.
- Not one book – but a *collection*. *'Ta Biblia'* – *the Books / Library*.
- 'For the people of New Testament times, there was no 'New Testament'. (It was a long time before Paul's own letters, and the Gospels, came to be regarded as part of 'The Bible'.) **This will be the focus of today's study.**
- The Gospels, with all their differences and difficulties, offer us a compelling picture of a consistent person, whose character explains why people felt not only challenged, but accepted and affirmed by him.
- **Last week** – we pondered the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)

The Hebrew Bible:

- Started to be written down from around the 8th century BC.
- We don't know how much material was drawn from earlier, written or oral sources (none exists now), or how much was creatively written to speak into the particular political and religious questions of the 8th Century BC and beyond.
- In a nutshell – no document survives with Moses' signature on it. We accept 'by faith' that he was the primary author of the Torah.
- The Hebrew Bible contains HISTORY (including laws), POETRY and SAYINGS (wisdom)
- The Apocrypha contains books which never made it into the Jewish Canon, but which are considered authoritative by many branches of the Christian church (e.g. Bel and the Dragon)
- Barton emphasises the 'fluidity' of the process of arriving at the Bible we have today (noting that different churches today still have different arrangements of books in their Bibles).

Before we get started – clearing the decks

1) Who is John Barton?

John Barton FBA is a British Anglican priest and biblical scholar. From 1991 to 2014, he was the Oriel and Laing Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Oriel College. In addition to his academic career, he has been an ordained and serving priest in the Church of England since 1973.

2) There are *different* approaches to Biblical studies:

- a) **'Historical critical' approach** – scientific, archeological, bare-bones...a focus on what we can know for sure (this is Barton's approach)
- b) **'Confessional' approach** – in which Scripture is read in the light of traditional beliefs which have grown up around the Bible as a living part of the faith
- c) **'Final Form' approach** – essentially a belief that the Bible as we have it now is God's settled, final manifesto: an unerring guide for all human life and a sure prediction of its future (the 'Maker's Instructions').



Part Four:

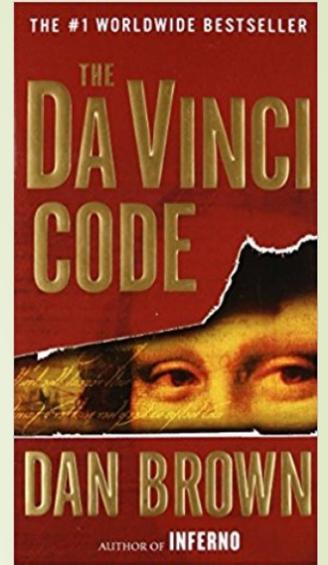
Who's in and Who's out... **The New Testament**



Dan Brown (Da Vinci Code) popularised an early 20th Century myth – that:

- a) there were lots of books floating around the Christian world, and
- b) the Councils of the 3rd and 4th Century threw many of them out – mainly the ones which either:
 - i) gave prominence to women
 - ii) refused to accept that sex was evil

According to this (**dis-credited**) theory – a malign patriarchy stopped us from having a completely different set of books, all about sexual freedom!





There is some truth in the Dan Brown myth (the best myths always contain enough truth to make them believable!).

- a) It was church councils in the 4th Century which gave rulings on the contents of the New Testament.
- b) Some books were excluded on the grounds that they were 'gnostic'.

Gnosticism (from Gk 'gnosis' meaning knowledge) – emphasised a special kind of 'knowledge of the divine' given to its followers (often imparted through secret rituals – like modern-day freemasonry.)

Some gnostic texts are actually much more 'anti-sex' than conventional Scriptures.

Barton says:

"To assert that the church of the 4th century selected which books to include 'tendentiously' (for a malign purpose) is a travesty"

Athanasius – Bishop of Alexandria – writes to his churches in 367 AD

He listed:

The four Gospels

The major letters of Paul

The letters of Peter and 1 John

The Acts of the Apostles

Christian writers had been quoting from these books since at least the middle of the second century (i.e. around 150 AD).

At the fringes of debate were some other contenders for canonisation:

2 and 3 John

The Book of Revelation

The Shepherd

Mary Magdalene

Judas

Proto-gospel of James

Athanasius endorses what was already pretty-much settled.



Barton reminded us of gnostic influences on early writings. The Gospel of Jude, for example, quotes Jesus as saying 'you only crucify the man who clothes me'. This is a typically gnostic idea (the acute separation between spiritual and physical realms).

For gnostics, the flesh is evil (or at least 'fallen'), and a mere shadow of the spiritual 'reality'. Whereas, orthodox Christian thought sees all Creation as 'good' (though aspects of it may be fallen).

Barton notes that Islamic teaching includes elements of gnostic thought.

Jude (and other such gnostic texts) were not widely known among the Christian community. It takes a particularly imaginative leap to suggest that the early church 'cancelled' it.

So:

Q: 'who chose the four gospels?'

A: No-one did. They established themselves by virtue of being the oldest accounts of Jesus' ministry, and by being the only documents routinely quoted by the earliest Christian writers and preachers.

(I am reminded of Jesus promising that the Holy Spirit will lead the church into all truth. John 16.13)

Closing of the Canon

The 4th Century rulings (by the church councils) were about bringing an end to the questions of which *marginal* books should be in or out of the Canon* (the official list of Bible books).

One excluded book of particular interest: The Gospel of Thomas

(which may have some claim to be considered alongside the Canon). A collection of sayings – some of which may pass muster as authentically in Jesus' voice and style. Some of its lines turn up in quotations by early Christian writers (including Origen).

e.g. *“When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will know that you are sons of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you are in poverty, and you yourselves are the poverty”*

The case for the books that are already in really rests on the grounds that ‘the church has always acknowledged them’. Not that they are either very early, nor very good. The Bible is a given. There may be doubts about some of the outer fringes. But its core is not in doubt.

* Reminder: ‘canon’ means ‘authorised’ – from Gk word for ‘rule’ or ‘measuring stick’

The Proto-gospel of James

Much loved in the early church. Source of many details of modern Nativity stories, such as

Joseph being an old man
Ox and ass in the stable
Mary riding on a donkey
The stable being located in a cave

None of these details are in the new testament – only in the Proto-gospel of James.

So: although we now think of the New Testament as a fixed, immoveable object, on closer inspection we find that there is some 'fuzziness' around it's illustrious edges.



If we have time....

Questions?

What do you think of the three approaches to Scripture:

- a) Historical critical?
- b) Confessional?
- c) Final Form?

What causes you to choose a preference?

How do you feel about learning (or re-learning) the rather 'messy' way in which the Canon came together. Does this inspire you? Or make you less certain of your faith?

Next Week: Christmas Returns! Nine Lessons and Carols