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PUBLIC SERVANT ENDORSEMENT

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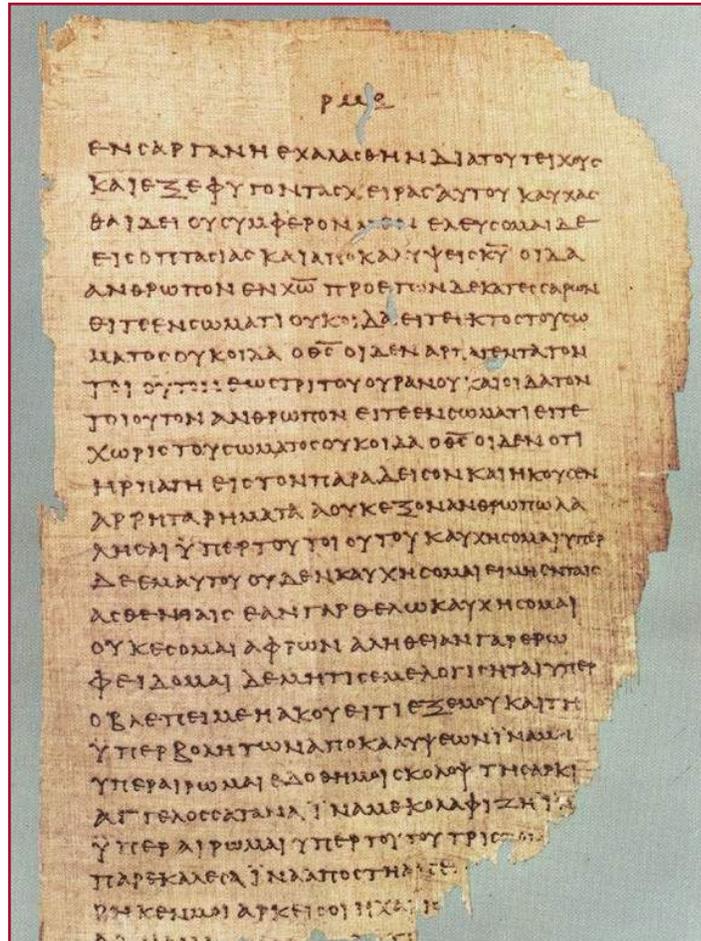
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# How We Got the Bible—Part 3



*A folio from an early 3rd-century collection of Pauline epistles*

**A**s is my custom, during the summer recess I will provide you with a weekly Bible study via email only. This is the third in a four-part series on how we got the Bible. May the Holy Spirit bless your understanding of this critically important subject—how God gave us His book. He didn't just drop it out of the sky.

Ralph Drollinger

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*The views expressed in each Bible study are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the position of any individual Bible study sponsor.*



★ PUBLIC SERVANT ENDORSEMENT

## Doug Lamborn

*U.S. Representative, Colorado*



“An in-depth Bible study is good for every person, but for lawmakers who are under pressure from a lot of different directions, the encouragement and guidance that come from Scripture is vital.

“It is wonderful that Capitol Ministries offers the opportunity for policy makers to be exposed to the Bible; the more people in Congress who have that opportunity, the better.”

— REP. DOUG LAMBORN

### I. INTRODUCTION

This study was written by, and is used with permission from the late Dr. Robert L. Thomas, one of my favorite seminary professors and an expert in this field. I have converted his format into ours.

For convenience, recognition of the New Testament canon by the church may be divided into three periods: (1) A.D. 70–170; (2) A.D. 170–303; and (3) A.D. 303–397.<sup>1</sup> This study will focus on the first period.

### II. TESTIMONIES FROM A.D. 70–170 ON A CANONICAL COLLECTION

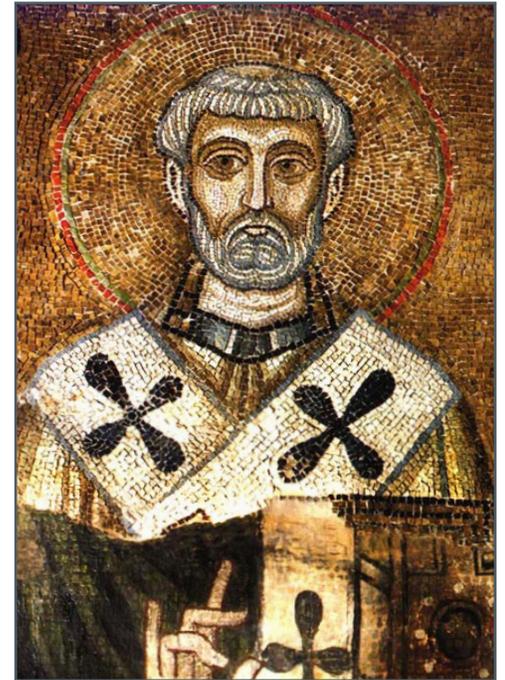
This first period was one of circulation and gradual collection.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, most writings were circulated individually. Yet, as the period wore on, they were gradually collected. There are two reasons why this process required so much time:

1. Communication was poor in comparison with modern standards.
2. Oral testimony from the apostles and other eyewitnesses was preferred over their writings. However, this preference changed as the period progressed.

#### A. CLEMENT OF ROME

Among the early church fathers Clement of Rome furnishes a very important link in tracing the church’s recognition of the canon. Clement lived

from about A.D. 30 until about A.D. 100. He was overseer of the church in Rome from A.D. 88–97. His letter, 1 Clement offers advice on how to overcome certain problems.<sup>3</sup>



Clement quotes the Old Testament frequently and uses formulas similar to the New Testament: “it is written,” “Scripture says,” “he/it says.” While he does not use these formulas when drawing from New Testament books, he does attribute equal authority to New Testament sources. When quoting Jesus’ words along with the Old Testament, he accords them equal authority (1 Clement 13:1–4; 46:1–8). Moreover, he appears to have known at least one Synoptic Gospel and perhaps more than one.<sup>4</sup> Of these, some argue that he most certainly knew Matthew.<sup>5</sup>

**Clement also attributed the same authority to the apostles as he did to**



♥ VERSE OF THE WEEK

## Psalm 119:11

*Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You.*



Bank God's Word in the vault of your heart.



### Christ since they were appointed by Christ.

(1 Clement 42:1-2)

He clearly viewed the apostolic generation as belonging to the past (1 Clement 44:1-2). Since the apostles were not personally present, he appealed to their writings for guidance. He specifically identified 1 Corinthians.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to his knowledge of Matthew and 1 Corinthians, Clement shows familiarity with Hebrews and Romans. Furthermore, he has probable allusions to Acts, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, and James and possible references to Colossians and 2 Timothy.<sup>7</sup>

The kinds of allusions in Clement may be illustrated by the following. He shows dependence on Paul and James by choosing the same two examples of justification they used: "Through faith and hospitality a son was given to Abraham in old age, and by obedience he offered him a sacrifice to God" (1 Clement 10); "Through faith and hospitality Rahab was saved" (1 Clement 12); "We are not justified by ourselves ... nor by works which we have wrought in holiness of heart, but by our faith, by which Almighty God justified all from the beginning of the world" (1 Clement 32); "Let us then work from our whole heart the work of righteousness."<sup>8</sup> The language of Hebrews is repeated so often that one old tradition says Clement was the author. His familiarity with Hebrews is reflected in the following:

"Through Him our Lord wished us to taste of immortal knowledge, who being the brightness of His majesty is so much greater than angels, as He hath obtained by inheritance a more excellent name" (1 Clement 7).<sup>9</sup>

Clement reflected that the church in Rome before the end of the first century welcomed the teachings of several apostles.<sup>10</sup> Yet, there is still not a formal theory of a New Testament canon. There is an authoritative tradition from Jesus and the apostles, but it does not yet have a specific form. A distinction between oral and written tradition has not yet been made.<sup>11</sup>

### B. THE DIDACHE

Another early work which relates to the subject under discussion is the Didache, also known as The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. Though its dating is uncertain, it probably was written during the first half of the second century, possibly A.D. 120.<sup>12</sup> This writing uses Matthew and Luke and shows a familiarity with most New Testament books.<sup>13</sup> It introduces itself as "the Lord's teaching to the heathen by the twelve apostles."

**The warning of Deuteronomy 4:2 about not adding or subtracting from the Word of the Lord is applied to the "Apostolic teaching (DID 4:13).**

This document blends together apostles and prophets and emphasizes the need to distinguish between true and false prophets. The issue is to identify what is authentic and apos-



John Adams



“Suppose a nation in some distant region should take the Bible for their only law book and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited.... What a Eutopia—what a Paradise would this region be!”

— John Adams, second president of the United States, signer of the Declaration of Independence, judge, diplomat, one of two signers of the Bill of Rights.

John Adams, Works, Vol. II, 6–7, diary entry for February 22, 1756.



The Twelve Apostles  
Pushkin Museum in Moscow

toxic. To the author of the Didache, the standard of a New Testament canon involves something written. The principle of apostolicity led to the production of written works over oral tradition.<sup>14</sup>

### C. THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS

The Epistle of Barnabas, an early second century product, was probably written about A.D. 130.<sup>15</sup> Though falsely attributed to the associate of Paul named Barnabas, it still contains helpful information regarding the status of canonical recognition. Its relationship to the Didache is shown by its use of the same “Two Ways” tradition of ethical parenesis as is found in that work (Barnabas 18–21; Didache 1–6).

Most of the epistle wrestles with the problem of continuity/discontinuity between the old and new covenants. Barnabas resolves the problem by concluding that Israel never actually received the old covenant, and so God gave it to the church. This allows the epistle to appropriate almost anything to the church from the old covenant through allegorical or typological exegesis. This “allegorical” gnosis eventually came into full bloom in the heresy of Gnosticism.<sup>16</sup>

As problems of Old Testament interpretation increased (along with the heresy of Marcion who disallowed the Old Testament), it was natural for the church to become more conscious of a complementary body of Scripture in the New Testament.

Neither should it come as a surprise to us when Barnabas cites Matthew 22:14 (“many are called but few chosen”) with the introductory formula “as it is written.” Apparently the writer held at least one of the synoptic gospels to be *graphē* and to have authority equivalent to that of the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup>

### D. CLEMENT’S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

A pseudonymous letter, Clement’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, was probably written before the middle of the second century. It is a sermon that distinguishes *ta biblia* from *hoi apostoloi*. In other words, it distinguishes the Old Testament from the apostolic writings. The quotation,



“I have come not to call the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32), are introduced in this work by the words, “and another Scripture also says.”<sup>18</sup>

### E. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Ignatius of Antioch is another significant figure in tracing the church’s recognition of the canon. He wrote seven letters on his way to Rome to be martyred. His death came some time during the last decade of the reign of Trajan, the Roman emperor (A.D. 87–117). Six of these letters were to churches in various cities and the seventh was to Polycarp, overseer of the church in Smyrna.<sup>19</sup>

Ignatius advocated that Christian prophets should be heard because they had “lived according to Jesus Christ” and were “inspired by his grace” (Magn 8:2). He wrote that Christians should love not only the gospel and the apostles but also the prophets because they had announced the advent of Christ and became his disciples (Philippians 5:2).<sup>20</sup>

For Ignatius, Jesus Christ was the full revelation of God and the Old Testament was on the same plane of authority, though less complete. He felt strongly about the authority of his own office of bishop, but made no claim of authority equal to that of the apostles. Looking upon them as apostles, he pictured himself as a convict (Romans 4:3).<sup>21</sup>

Ignatius shows a knowledge of many New Testament books. His writ-

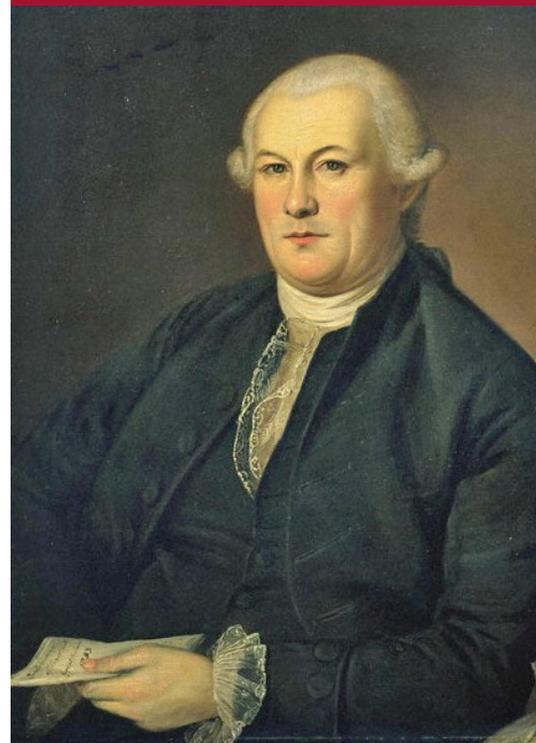


ings reflect a familiarity with most of Paul’s epistles, especially Romans and 1 Corinthians. His knowledge of Ephesians and Colossians is very probable, and he probably knew 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and the Pastoral Epistles. He may also allude to James or 1 Peter. He also knew Matthew and the Gospel of John.<sup>22</sup>

### F. THE EPISTLE OF POLYCARP TO THE PHILIPPIANS

The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philip-pians contains far more references

*Elias Boudinot*



“For nearly half a century have I anxiously and critically studied that invaluable treasure [the Bible]; and I still scarcely ever take it up that I do not find something new—that I do not receive some valuable addition to my stock of knowledge or perceive some instructive fact never observed before. In short, were you to ask me to recommend the most valuable book in the world, I should fix on the Bible as the most instructive both to the wise and ignorant. Were you to ask me for one affording the most rational and pleasing entertainment to the inquiring mind, I should repeat, it is the Bible; and

*Continued next page*



*Elias Boudinot (continued)*

should you renew the inquiry for the best philosophy or the most interesting history, I should still urge you to look into your Bible. I would make it, in short, the Alpha and Omega of knowledge.”

— Elias Boudinot, president of Congress, signer of the peace treaty to end the American Revolutionary War, first attorney admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court Bar, framer of the Bill of Rights, director of the U.S. Mint.

Elias Boudinot, *The Age of Revelation* (Philadelphia: Asbury Dickins, 1801), xii-xiv, from the prefatory remarks to his daughter, Susan, on October 30, 1782; see also Letters of the Delegates to Congress: 1774–1789, Paul H. Smith, editor (Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress, 1992), Vol. XIX, 325, from a letter of Elias Boudinot to his daughter, Susan Boudinot, on October 30, 1782; see also, Elias Boudinot, *The Life Public Services, Addresses, and Letters of Elias Boudinot* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1896), Vol. I, 260–262.



to New Testament books than any other literature of this period. Part of it is thought to have been written about A.D. 110 and the rest in about A.D. 135. Polycarp, who died around A.D. 155, was acquainted with most of the New Testament, including the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, most of the Pauline letters, Hebrews, and most of the Catholic Epistles. In one statement (Philippians 12:1) he combines Psalm 4:4 and Ephesians 4:26 and calls them “Scripture,” thus going even further than Clement and Ignatius in comparing the authority of two testaments. Though he was a personal disciple of the apostle John, he appears not to have alluded to John’s writings with the exception of one possible reference to 1 John.<sup>23</sup>

### G. OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

The rest of those who contribute to our knowledge of the church’s recognition of the canon during this peri-

od are generally referred to as “Greek Apologists.” Strictly speaking, this is not entirely accurate for all involved. Yet, limited space prohibits a discussion of testimonies from Papias, the Shepherd of Hermas, Justin Martyr, Marcion, Tatian, the Clementine Homilies, and others.

### H. A SUMMARY OF THE PERIOD A.D. 70–170



*The Shepherd of Hermas, or the Good Shepherd, 3rd century, Catacombs of Rome*

1. The Old Testament canon as interpreted through its fulfillment in Jesus Christ was solidly in place as the basis of Christian preaching and teaching. The authority of the apostles was accepted as equal to that of the Old Testament. Apostolic writings were read in church services along with Old Testament.

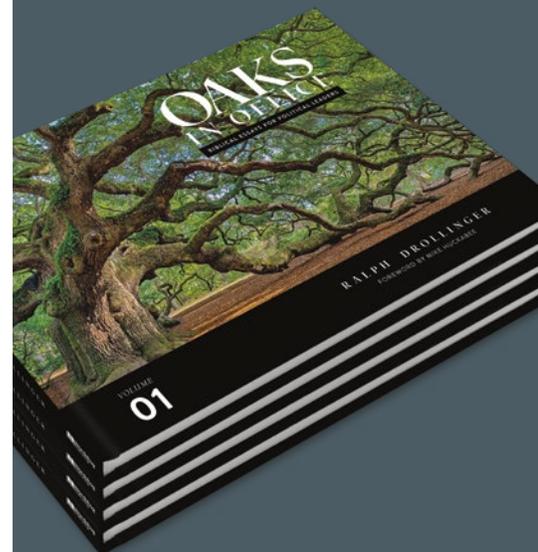


**By the end of this period the principle of a fixed and written New Testament canon was established.**

2. By the end of this period the extent of the New Testament canon was known to include the four gospels and only the epistles of Paul. The remainder was still vague.
3. Only 2 Peter of our present 27 books remained unnoticed dur-

ing this period. The Apocalypse of Peter is the only candidate outside the 27 that retains some favor regarding canonical recognition. However, it was by no means accepted by all sectors of the church.

**Next week: the second two periods of recognition of the New Testament canon by the church.**



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1. Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 6th ed. (1889; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 14–15.
2. Ibid., 15. The first half of the period (A.D. 70–120) is usually characterized as the period of the Apostolic Fathers, and the last half (A.D. 120–170) as the age of the Greek Apologists (Ibid., 19, 64).
3. Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1943), 21; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 40–41.
4. David G. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 323–24.
5. Thiessen, Introduction, 21.
6. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 324.
7. Ibid.
8. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Bible in the Church* (1864; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 75.
9. Ibid., 76.
10. Ibid.
11. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 324.
12. Ibid., 327; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 49–50; Thiessen, Introduction, 13.
13. Thiessen, Introduction, 13.
14. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 327.
15. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 327; Lee Martin McDonald and Stanley E. Porter, *Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 75.
16. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 327–328.
17. Ibid., 328.
18. Westcott, *The Bible*, 76; Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 324.
19. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 43–44; Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 325.
20. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 325.
21. Ibid.
22. Westcott, *The Bible*, 79–80; Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” 326.
23. Westcott, *General Survey*, 37–38.