

## Canon

TEXT: Deuteronomy 6:1-12

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on November 6, 2022*

Last week we took a balcony-level look at the two testaments that form the Christian Bible. And we talked in broad terms about the categories that shape them when bound together. This morning I want to zoom in a bit to see how we got those individual books to begin with, who decided that they qualified as sacred, and then talk a bit about the books that didn't make the cut.

How we got the books of the Old Testament is both easy and hard to identify. It's hard because those books contain written records of oral tradition that go back for millennia. So, how the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures came to be originally, who first told them, how much they were meshed with the cultures and peoples encountered along the way, and any other similar details are unknowable. That's the hard part.

The easy part is that scholars almost universally accept that most of the written books of the Hebrew Scriptures, as we know them today, were selected, recorded, and organized by Jews in exile during the period known as the Babylonian Captivity in the sixth century BCE, with a few being written by Ezra, once the exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild about four decades later. It's also almost certain that those who did that work in exile had earlier written versions of most of the texts by that time.

Jewish tradition holds that Moses wrote the first five books—Genesis through Deuteronomy—and some suggest that he had some older scrolls to go on. Writing was invented about 3,000 BCE, so that's technically possible, but we have not found any scrolls nearly that old. The stories of Moses reflect a time somewhere between 1600 and 1300 BCE.

The oldest piece of the Hebrew Bible that anybody has dug up to date is the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24-26, which was written on two small silver scrolls that date to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, about a century before the exiles in Babylon did their work, about four centuries earlier than the Dead Sea Scrolls, and at least six centuries after the time of Moses.

It's important to remember, in all of this, that we have found no "original" of even the smallest piece of either the Old or New Testaments. All we have are copies of copies of copies. The oldest New Testament fragment we have is a small piece of the Gospel of John. And by "small" I mean 3.5 x 2.5 inches. It was discovered in 1934 and dates to the first half of the second century.

So, if you were imagining that we have the actual scrolls, as they were first recorded, in an archive somewhere, give that thought a kind but firm goodbye. And support the work of archaeologists. But, on the positive side, the copies that have been found are remarkably consistent, even across centuries. Those charged with copying the texts, by hand, for millennia took on that work as a sacred calling.

There are variations in the texts, but not anything close to what you might imagine given the passing of the years and the number of times the text was copied. It's even more amazing when you remember that the earliest texts had no chapters and verses, no spaces in-between words, no punctuation, and, for the Hebrew texts, no vowels. So, if you were imagining that the texts we have today are wildly different from what was first recorded, give that thought a kind but firm goodbye, also.

So, for the Hebrew Scriptures, we don't know their names, but we know that the texts and stories were selected and written in the form we have them during the Babylonian Exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE; some by Jewish scholars in Babylon and some by Jewish scholars in Alexandria in Egypt. And the work was finished up by Ezra about forty years later when everyone was allowed to return to Jerusalem.

The order of books in the Hebrew Scriptures was first altered by the 70 scholars in Alexandria who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek during the 200 years before the birth of Jesus. That Greek translation is

called the Septuagint or, in Roman numerals, the LXX to reflect those 70 scholars. They were also the ones who added the books and additional chapters now known as the Apocrypha.

But it was likely Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin in the late fourth century, and who did that translation from the Greek Septuagint, who rearranged the books of the Hebrew Bible into the order and categories we have today in the Christian Old Testament.

The establishment of the canon for the New Testament, however, is a different kettle of fish. In part, that's because of how and why the effort started. The writings of the Hebrew Scriptures emerged over millennia. But they were finally recorded and brought together, not because there was pressure to define what was and was not Scripture, but because people wanted to be sure they would not be forgotten. At the time of the Exile, the death and devastation of the siege of Jerusalem created an urgency to preserve the traditions of their ancestors while there were still those living who could do so.

When it came to forming the New Testament, however, there was a sudden scramble to figure out which writings in the early church would be authoritative for Christians when Marcion of Sinope, an antisemitic bishop in the second century, drew up his own list and excluded the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as anything circulating in churches about Jesus that he felt was too connected to Judaism. While Marcion was excommunicated and labeled a heretic for his trouble, the pressure was suddenly on to produce an authoritative list that wouldn't make such an egregious error.

There were at least four serious attempts to put such a list together, but the one that stuck and became our New Testament was put together by Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth century. Athanasius was the 20<sup>th</sup> pope of Alexandria, and his leadership spanned 45 years. Athanasius is today venerated as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Anglican Communion, and in Lutheranism.

Although we ended up with the 27 books that Athanasius picked, it took a while for people to stop questioning whether that list was the best one. As late as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther, the priest who kicked off the Protestant Reformation, was arguing that the book of Revelation had no business being in the Bible and that the book of James was, as he called it, a "straw epistle." Luther did not win that argument, even with himself, since he included both books in his German translation of the Bible.

Luther did win the battle over the Apocrypha, however, although not in his lifetime. Included in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, he left them out of his German Bible. But when reformer John Calvin put together the Geneva Bible, it was included there, and the King James Bible included it in printings through 1633. It was removed in later printings of the King James, and it has been only in very recent years that Protestant translations have begun again to include those books. They have never left the canon for the Catholics and Orthodox churches.

But, as many of you know, there are lots of other writings from the early years of Christianity. They include additional gospels about the life of Jesus, including stories of his childhood, as well as other letters and teachings, some of which were very widely circulated and read in early Christian communities. Some of those widely-circulated books appeared in the three other listings of a potential canon put together by other early church bishops and theologians.

Those books include: The Shepherd of Hermas, The Didache, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Acts of Paul, and The Letter of Barnabas. You can find copies of all of them today in bookstores or online. And that's before you get to several books that are mentioned in the Bible we currently have but are not included because no one has yet found a copy of the manuscripts.

And then there are still others. There are books that were read by certain Christian sects, like the Gnostic Christians, and you can find all sorts of writings in collections with names like: The Other Bible, The Lost Scriptures, The Nag Hammadi Library, the Gnostic Gospels, and others. Dan Brown made several of those famous when he published *The DaVinci Code*. So, in closing, I want to talk a bit about those other books.

When the DaVinci Code was first published, I was serving St. John's in Dover, NH and there was so much buzz about the Bible and these other books that I did a mid-week Lenten series about it. We only advertised it to our folks in our church bulletin but had over 40 people from four different churches show up. I learned a lot from leading those six classes.

One of the first things I learned was that there was an undercurrent of fear in many regular church goers about reading books about Jesus that were not part of the Bible, books like The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary. I had to pretty much promise that I would hold up the church roof and take any lightning strikes so that they could safely read those books and make up their own minds about them. You can find them free online. I printed them out and gave a copy to everyone in the group.

St. John's was not a uniquely fearful crowd, so I want everyone to understand that there is not a book in existence that can take away your faith. Lots of books can shake up our understanding of the Bible or change the way we view the teachings of the church. Sometimes a book convinces us that we need to go back to square one and figure out for ourselves what we really believe. But none of those questions or challenges make God love us less. None of them send us to hell. None of them put us out of God's reach.

I came to Crawford preaching about Jacob wrestling with God in the ford of the Jabbok River. That's what faith looks like; inviting challenges to our faith is what builds spiritual muscle. It's how faith grows. If you're just swallowing what someone else teaches you without wrestling with it yourself, what you have is that teacher's faith, not your own. And a faith that isn't our own doesn't hold up well in times of difficulty.

So be fearless in your reading. Wrestle with it in the company of others doing the same thing. Check in with yourself to see if a new understanding actually changes anything about the way you live your life. In the DaVinci Code classes, we talked about the book's suggestion—which was a common understanding among early Gnostic Christians—that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.

As I told them, you don't have to believe it to think about it. You're not committing to buying the shoes, you're just trying them on. If Jesus appeared before you in a way that was unquestionable and told you flat out that he and Mary Magdalene were a married couple, what exactly would change about your faith? Would you behave differently? Would it affect your relationship with God? I remember one man responding, "Actually, I would feel more connected to Jesus—more like he understood my life, since I'm married."

Don't be afraid of books, ancient or modern. Be afraid of people who won't let you read books and won't let you ask questions.

On the other hand, teaching those classes made me realize that there's another side to that coin. We are suckers for secrets. If I announced a sermon series called "The Secrets about Jesus the Church Won't Tell You," we'd likely have a full house, even if I just spewed hot garbage. Just like there are some who absolutely won't consider that there might be truth in some of the books *outside* the Bible, there's another group who are convinced that anything that didn't make the cut must be true just by virtue of being excluded and it's everything *inside* the Bible that's wrong.

I promise you, if you find and read a copy of the Gospel of Mary, you'll see why it wasn't included. It's really just a pile of fragments. It's like trying to read a legal document that's so highly redacted that you can't make any sense out of the words that are left. There's no way for anyone to really determine if there's truth of any kind in The Gospel of Mary, because there are so many words and sections missing that it's almost impossible even to know what it says.

The Gospel of Thomas is a numbered listing of 114 sayings of Jesus. There's no narrative framework, no connecting tissue, nothing. Some of those 114 sayings occur in the gospels we have in the New Testament. Some don't. If you were a bishop putting together a set of writings to help edify Christians, would you pick a numbered list of sayings or the Gospel of Luke? Or Matthew? Or Mark? Or John?

Here's saying #114 in the Gospel of Thomas: "Simon Peter says to them: 'Let Mary go out from our midst, for women are not worthy of life!' Jesus says: 'See, I will draw her so as to make her male so that she also may

become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who has become male will enter the Kingdom of heaven.” You want the Gospel of Thomas? Have at it. My life is hard enough with the books we’ve got!

What we really need to talk about is biblical authority. And we will. Next week. Amen.