

“Our Christian Scriptures and How We Got Them”

2nd Timothy 3:16 & 17

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Wherever we’ve been in our lifetime, in all the places in which we’ve lived, worked and played, we’ve tried to stay connected to God in some way. We’ve done this by relating to a church community or even a smaller gathering of people – perhaps a class or support group – whose members, we felt, were trying to learn about God. Our culture has gotten a little more impersonal and more folks have felt totally left behind by the rapid changes in technology. Our health-care has become bottom-line oriented and the insurance companies are making decisions on the quality of our lives instead of our physicians.

Sooner or later, we need authoritative counsel on issues that modern science or popular psychology isn’t resolving. We want to know more about the nature and reality of God – in practical ways. We want to know about the survival of our souls after we die and the ultimate destiny of the rest of the human race – especially our loved ones. We want to know what will happen to the jerk who cut us off at the light who, we feel, should be forever consigned to the infernal region.¹

The most compelling reason we read the Bible is to discover more about Jesus Christ. Throughout the last two thousand years, the Church has proclaimed that Jesus was God and came to us to show us more about God. Jesus came to heal and to teach us in such a way that you and I can know God better and find love, meaning and faith in something beyond ourselves by having a nurturing relationship with God.

But this is the goal of every world religion – to find meaning and hope in that which goes beyond what we can see and touch and control. But sometimes we wonder if Christianity is just one more religion among many from which people may pick and choose on the smorgasbord in the world’s cafeteria of organized and disorganized religion.

¹ This talk is based on the work of Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (Mayfield Publishing Company; paperback; 1998; ISBN: 0767400143) pages 1-17.

Other religions and sects have documents that they consider to be “sacred and authoritative.” The Hindus cherish the Vedas.² The Buddhists center their lives around the recorded teachings of Buddha and the followers of Islam worship “the one God” named Allah, closely following their Bible the Koran.³ Christianity, as a world religion, occupies a relatively small percentage of world-wide belief and worship of God.

There’s also a funny thing about our ability to be objective in our study of our scriptures. We happen to live in a society that defines what is of value largely in terms of the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. So we tend to take what is in the Bible at face-value and not look into it as deeply as we would writings from another tradition.

For instance, unlike how we read about Jesus or Moses, if we were reading about Buddha or almost any other character in history or literature, we’d consult a lot of other sources than just the primary “scriptural” writings about the character. We’d normally read about their immediate culture, looking into their surrounding social and economic conditions as well as national and international technologies of that day. We would read not only everything the individual personally wrote or said but we would also look into how people responded to them, the changes they made in their life-style in that time and in that society.

Besides being biased by our upbringing in this Jewish and Christian culture, we’re impatient. We can’t even wait for the microwave oven to count down to zero and beep us before we have our hand hovering near it to open the door the nanosecond it is done. For most of us, the problem with immediate gratification is that it doesn’t come fast enough.

Like everything else that we pursue with excellence in our life, we can only achieve excellence if we slow down and become fully present with all available material – given the time we can commit to

² the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*

³ Spelled *Qur’an*

our schedules to grow in our understanding of our faith in God. That's what dating is about or learning a new software program that you'll be using in your career. It's about dedicating your time and energies to focus, in a concentrated way, trying to find out about as much as you can about the person or program upon which you're focusing.

If you're trying to get to know a person, you meet their friends and see them interact in formal and informal situations. You look at photo albums and listen to their family stories. You immerse yourself in their social, psychological, behavioral, financial, educational, religious and personality context.

In the case of learning a computer program, it's about reading every magazine article and trying as many tasks in the program that are relevant to what you're trying accomplish. You experiment and see what it can do. You go to seminars, you consult manuals.

This is why you and I are here and why we read and talk about matters of Christianity as extensively as we do. You don't want to be faith-illiterate (as people sometimes say in belittling themselves when they feel that they know little about computers).

You and I are going to become more fully present this fall with the New Testament. We're going to devote some of our time together as we read about Paul and his writings – particularly his long letter to the Corinthian house church. In a way, we'll "hang out" and listen in on a lot of what was going on in that troubled little church. We'll try to become aware of as many things, as we can, about the people in that community, in that city and in that Roman culture. We'll be looking into their lifestyles and personal beliefs about God and Jesus. In these many weeks together, we'll look at their joys and sorrows – the things that absolutely broke their hearts and caused them great fear in their Christian faith.

In our time together, I suspect God will speak to each of us, in varying ways, if we intentionally try to stay open to taking in the faith, feelings and actions of these people whom Paul so emotionally addressed in his letter. If we can become fully present and stay open to the resources available to us, like millions of others, you and I will learn together. Our lives might even change for the better. But when we think a second longer about it, perhaps this could be our

approach to learning throughout our lives. How often, in life, are we fully present and focused and open to something unknown to us – without judging it – long enough to take it in. Should we not live our lives "signed up for class" at every moment, no matter where we find ourselves?

The documents in the Bible (Old and New Testaments) were written and collected over a span exceeding 1000 years.⁴ The biblical word "testament" means "covenant" or "agreement."

The Old Testament was about the covenant the Hebrew people had with their God – Whom they called El-Shaddai, Elohim, Adonai, Yahweh, Jehovah and I Am. In it were a variety of written documents that contained laws, poetry, songs, stories, social and religious regulations, prophecies and history. But even as early as 600 years before Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah predicted that Yahweh would replace the old Mosaic covenant with a new one.

The Gospel writers believed Jesus started a new covenant at His Last Supper with His disciples. The so-called "New Testament" was written between the years 50 and 140 in the common era (after Christ's birth). What we may not have been told, in the Sunday Schools of our youth, were three things.

First, the order in which the New Testament documents were written has little to do with the order in which the books were published. With our modern ways of writing in mind, we'd like to think that the first Christians writing the Bible would write as we do today.

For instance, suppose you and I witnessed a few miracles of Jesus and heard another profound and powerful teaching lesson. We'd jot down as careful and as detailed a set of notes as we could that evening when we got home. At Jesus' death, and for sure after the resurrection, we'd get all of our writings together, arrange them in chronological order and walk them down the street to the publisher. This is how we would do it, wouldn't we?

Instead of it happening in that way, the New Testament contained several different categories of literature, written by many different kinds of people

⁴ The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and some later books were written in Aramaic, then translated into the common Greek idiom, (Koine Greek) the result known as the *Septuagint*.

from at least two entirely different sociological and religious cultures. There were gospels about Jesus (Mark, Matthew, Luke & John in that order of writing), a history of the early church (Luke's Acts), 21 letters (or epistles) and an Apocalypse (Revelation) about the end of the world. The process by which the church came to view these writings as "authoritative" (worthy of putting in the "canon" of holy scriptures) took place over the span of the first four centuries.

As each of these documents was written, they slowly came to be circulated in one church, then another. There were no publishing houses, mass communication or even printing presses.

The letters to congregations that Paul personally wrote, along with the first couple of Gospels written, slowly came to be used and read in various local churches. Many local congregations rejected documents like Revelation, James and 2nd Peter while tentatively accepting other works that would not become familiar to modern readers, such as The Epistle of Barnabas, The Apocalypse of Peter and The Shepherd of Hermas. It wasn't until late in the 4th century that a list of New Testament books, by Athanasius,⁵ appeared exactly as the 27 books we know today. Each book first appeared as a separate document, independent of the others and circulated by itself in different regions.

Paul's genuine letters were sent individually to particular small congregations scattered throughout Asia Minor, Greece and Italy. Similarly, the four gospels were written for distinct Christian groups in a particular city or region. Matthew, for example, was for a congregation of Jews, at Antioch in Syria, who had converted from Judaism and became Christians. Luke (and its companion history book Acts) was written for people who had not been Jews (Gentiles) but had been raised in the Greek and Roman (Greco-Roman) cosmopolitan culture that was spread out all over the Mediterranean area since Alexander the Great.

So the order of the list of New Testament books was the relative order of how well they were accepted by churches. In other words, they put Revelation last

⁵ in Alexandria as he was the bishop of that church

because it seemed too weird to too many for a long time. They put the Gospels first because Church leaders felt they had the most to say about Jesus. They put the letters they felt Paul had actually written next, (after the Gospels and Acts), because they were accepted as highly important and authoritative in matters of nourishing one's faith and maintaining a community of believers. Just before Revelation, they included some of the letters that were written and attributed to Paul in honor of his prominent influence in the expansion of the Church. We'll look at the dates and authors in a chart in a few minutes.

The second thing about how the books of the New Testament came to us has to do with the different way that first century culture treated the issue of attributing authorship of literary works. Today, if someone wrote a book and someone else published it or part of it, designating its author as someone other than its actual author, there would be instant suits over the plagiarism.

A thousand years ago, they didn't think and act like that. Writers would designate their writings as written by another author whom they deeply respected. Their thinking was that if what they were writing was inspired and influenced by the teachings of a well-known person, they would attribute their writing to that person out of respect.

Paul was such a monumental church growth expert, theologian and debater, among religious and philosophy teachers, that he was held in extremely high respect throughout the Christian Church. "Saint Paul" if you will. But even after his death, he was so well respected, Christians who felt they had been taught by him attributed their writings to Paul. "He has (or would have) taught or said this" they said to themselves as they put his name at the top of an epistle to a congregation. That's just the way they did things then – out of respect for someone they revered.

Perhaps we can get a sense of this very different way of doing things from today is by recalling a similar practice in the field of art. Rodin,⁶ the French sculptor, taught hundreds of artists his style and methodology of sculpting works of art. Most of them put his initials on their artwork out of respect for this

⁶ Rodin, (François) Auguste René (1840-1917), French sculptor

talented 19th century artist. So in addition to the order in which the New Testament books appear not being chronological, the people in the first few centuries handled authorship differently from our 20th Century way of designating authorship. If an ancient “epistle” was attributed to Paul in his honor, it shouldn’t bother us to note that Paul didn’t write it because it didn’t bother its first readers.

Keeping that in mind, we can more easily point out how a letter’s content differs from Paul’s other published writings. It helps us understand why there are occasional differing ways of thinking among the letters included in our New Testament.

Thirdly, aside from the differences of these ancient ways of writing and collecting written materials, the first churches in existence after Christ’s death and resurrection had no Bible. For years, the only “sacred writings” they had were the Jewish Old Testament scriptures that had been translated into the common Greek language they spoke. The very first parts of the New Testament that were written were surprisingly not the Gospels but Paul’s letters.

Paul wrote his letters between the years 50 and 62, initially trying to straighten out troubled house churches and then later, laying down more organized summaries of basic Christian theology. Take a moment to look at the printed chart of the books of the New Testament.

(See the last page of this transcript)→

Here’s an example of how we have to put ourselves back in the historical moments of the first century when a text was written.

The text from II Timothy 3:16 & 17 says “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”⁷

When the author of the two letters to Timothy was writing (attributing them to the late St. Paul), it was at the turn of the first century. Paul had been martyred in Rome about 30 or 40 years before this, (sometime in the late sixties). So when the author

wrote about “all scripture” being inspired by God and profitable for one’s Christian faith, what “scripture” was being referenced?

At that point, many of Paul’s letters to churches about their problems, and a few of his theological summaries (like Galatians and Romans) were getting passed around among some of the churches. Mark, then Matthew and then Luke were being written and slowly distributed in some of the churches. One congregation, perhaps in Ephesus we’ll say, maybe had a copy of Paul’s Thessalonian correspondence, perhaps a copy of Galatians and Mark’s long written sermon (that we call the Gospel of Mark) – and perhaps that’s all. Another church in Rome might have only had Romans, Mark and Luke-Acts in hand. So a reference to “the scriptures” in that late letter called 2nd Timothy could only have been referring to the Old Testament Jewish scriptures because Paul’s letters, the Gospels and the “pastorals” & Revelation were not considered as official “sacred scriptures” until late in the 4th century. And get this, Paul never thought that the letters he was writing would end up being considered “scriptures.”

In studying the Bible (by trying to understand as much about the writers and the people discussed), we come to appreciate how all these New Testament documents slowly came together. We can see that Paul was the first writer and obviously the most influential – judging by the number of works attributed to him in his honor. We can see that when people in the churches realized that Jesus wasn’t coming back to end history as quickly as they thought – four individuals came to write what we call the Gospels before they died and couldn’t pass on their stories by word of mouth. And as Christianity was coming to be an established world religion for all cultures, believers began to write more about establishing traditions in the congregations – traditions that would be taught to coming generations.

In our study of the New Testament (and it’s integrity stemming from the Old Testament), we come to find more about God and God’s people through the creation and editing of these scriptures during a thousand year period. As we already have, we will continue to discover that embodied in all of these scriptures is the way of life that has to do with the reality of God in Christ. We will continue to see how

⁷ New Revised Standard Version

particular peoples in different cities and countries and from different backgrounds came to have their lives transformed by God in Christ.

As we spend the coming weeks closely looking at Paul’s lengthy letter to the Corinthian house church, we will find that there were conflicting issues and philosophies putting stress on those church members. We’ll hear about the substantial heresy of the Gnostic Christians – of which we have to have a sense before we can understand why Paul said what he did in several verses.

We’ll be seeing the relatively low status of women in that culture and how the society around them was changing toward equality and how that change put stress on some of the practices of the church.

Throughout the coming weeks, we’ll see how that house church in Corinth faced issues about these kinds of things:

- Divisions and Schisms in the Church
- Sexual Immorality in the Church
- Lawsuits among Believers
- Marriage and Celibate Vows

- Eating Food offered to Idols – and your ethical choices around so-called “weaker” people in the faith
- The credentials about his being an Apostle
- Women and Head Coverings
- Abuses during Communion Observance
- Spiritual Gifts and Glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and how we should seek the spiritual gifts that are more useful to the community
- Disorderly Worship Services
- The Resurrection of the Dead

We place a lot of our energy into Biblical study, in our faith tradition because God’s revelation to us in Christ, and the Biblical witness to it, changes lives. Christ has caused changes in our lives and that is why we seek to know more about Christ (and the Bible) and all truth about God’s presence in our lives. It is into this community of God’s people that we have baptized Ethan Barnes – so he can find more about God as we study the Bible and stay open for all truth about God in Christ as we travel together, for a while, on this earth. ■



New Testament Books, Likely Dates and Authors

Approx. Date	Book Title	Author
50	1 Thessalonians	Paul
54-55	2 Thessalonians	Probably not by Paul
56	1 & 2 Corinthians	Paul
56-57	Galatians	Paul
61	Romans	Paul
61	Colossians	Probably not by Paul
61	Philippians	Paul
62	Philemon	Paul
66-70	Mark (the Gospel)	Mark by tradition (or anonymous)
63-73	Jewish War Against Rome: Destruction of Jerusalem & Temple	
80-85	Matthew (the Gospel)	Matthew by tradition (or anonymous)
85-90	Luke (the Gospel) & Acts	Luke by tradition (or anonymous)
85-95	1 Peter, James	Anonymous
85-95	Hebrews	Definitely not by Paul
70-170*	Ephesians	Definitely not by Paul
90-95	John (the Gospel)	John by tradition (or anonymous)
95	Revelation	John by tradition (or anonymous)
95-100	Letters of John	“The Elder”

110-130	1 & 2 Timothy, Titus	Definitely not by Paul
130-150	Jude, 2 Peter	Anonymous

(Derived from cumulative editing of Biblical Scholarship by Steven Harris *The New Testament, A Student's Introduction* [ISBN 0767400143] p11 & 265 and also Markus Barth, *Ephesians* [ISBN 0-385-04412-7] "The Problem of Authorship" page 37 and "Place and Date" on page 50.) and Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ISBN 0-8006-6002-1] "Introduction: 1. The Question of Authenticity" pages 1-10.