



Introducing the New Testament

Week 6

1



Overview of this week

- ❖ The New Testament Canon
 - How did we get these 27 books?
 - When?
 - Why these books and no others?
- ❖ The book of Hebrews
- ❖ The book of James



What is a canon?

- ❖ Canon is from the Greek word for “measuring rod”
- ❖ The Jews had a tradition of a set of sacred, inspired writings that were from God, yet belonged to the people of God.
 - God’s word for his people
 - The spiritual journal of God’s people
- ❖ The Hebrew scriptures were “officially” closed in about 130AD by the Jewish high council.
- ❖ The early Christians continued this tradition!
 - Christians collected and circulated writings from the first decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

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Early Christian Writings

- ❖ Many writings were circulated among the Christian churches. Some were accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings. Others were instruction for the church. Here are a few prominent examples of writings that were useful but did not become part of the canon.
 - The Didache, The Epistles of Ignatius, The Epistle of Barnabas, The Shepherd of Hermes, the Gospel of Peter, the Revelation of Peter, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Gospel of Thomas
- ❖ Some early writings came to be seen as inspired, sacred, and authoritative in a way that others were not. There were three criteria for writings that would become part of the canon – our 27 books of the NT.
 - Widely used by the Christian churches
 - Written by or originated with the Apostles
 - Most important: Contained true Christian doctrine

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The Development of the NT Canon

- ❖ 200AD – The NT used in Rome, the Muratorian Canon
 - Most of our 27, lacking 1 & 2 Peter, and Hebrews
 - Included the Revelation of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon
- ❖ 250AD – The NT used by Origen
 - Disputed books were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Hebrews
- ❖ 300AD – The NT used by Eusebius
 - Did not dispute 1 Peter and 1 John, but specifically disputed Hebrews. John's Revelation was on his accepted list and disputed list!
- ❖ 367AD - the NT used by Athanasius
 - Our 27 books!

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The New Testament Texts

- ❖ The NT was written in Greek. We have thousands of Greek manuscripts that dedicated scholars have used to develop a standard Greek NT that underlies most of our English translations.
 - Problems in the KJV and NKJV
- ❖ What do we have to work with?
 - 100AD – 200AD – fragments/portions of papyri
 - 200AD – 800AD – 300 or so “all-cap” Greek manuscripts
 - After 800AD – nearly 3000 cursive manuscripts
- ❖ “No doctrine of the Christian Faith depends solely upon a passage that is textually uncertain.” (Metzger)

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Hebrews

- ❖ An unknown author. Some early Christians attributed it to Paul to try give it authority. We really don't know much about who wrote, when (though it had to be before 90AD and probably before the destruction of the temple), or to whom.
- ❖ In form, it is closer to a sermon than it is to a letter.
- ❖ It is written in elegant, stylized Greek and relies on the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint).
 - Part of the reason for Hebrews' density is its extensive, carefully woven use of OT passages.

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Hebrews – Why is it so foreign to us?

- ❖ It talks about lots of things we don't talk much about any more.
 - Angels, Melchizedek, the tabernacle, the tent, high priests, sacrifices
- ❖ Hebrews concentrates on animal sacrifices.
 - Sacrifice is part of what it means to be truly human, acknowledging that all creation belongs to God.
 - Sacrifice is hard-wired deeply into our awareness. Humans know that things are somehow wrong and they must be put right!
- ❖ We simply don't know much about the OT anymore!
 - Most Christians are not taught even the basics needed to make some sense of the OT and Hebrews.

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Making Sense of Hebrews (N.T. Wright)

- ❖ A compelling portrait of Christ – superior in all things and all ways.
 - Jesus as the Son of God, superior to angels, but fully human – not was human, but is human!
 - Jesus as the true Joshua, leading his people into the promised land.
 - Jesus as the true high priest.
 - Jesus is King, but can he also be High Priest? Yes! In Psalm 110 the King is a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek, for whom the priesthood is a calling.
- ❖ The completion of the OT story!
- ❖ Jesus as the final and perfect sacrifice.

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Hebrews -- Key Passages

- ❖ 1:1-4; God has spoken through a Son!
- ❖ 4:12-13; The word of God is living and active, to whom we are all laid bare.
- ❖ 4:15-16; Jesus is the high priest who can sympathize with all our weaknesses.
- ❖ 11:1-3; faith is . . .
 - Chapter 11 has numerous OT examples of people who lived by faith
- ❖ 12:1-2; Running our race with perseverance

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The Book of James

- ❖ Martin Luther's "epistle of straw"
 - Luther wrote that James has "nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."
 - This tendency to see James as no more than practical guidelines persist to this day!
- ❖ James resists our tendency to separate our heads from our hearts from our hands!
- ❖ James is the brother of Jesus, the leader of the early Christian church in Jerusalem. He was stoned to death by the Jewish authorities in 62AD.
- ❖ This book is only a "sort-of" letter, probably written to be circulated among the Christian churches.

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James – Doers of the Word

- ❖ The heart of the Law – loving God and neighborhood -- in justice, mercy, and faith.
 - A theology of the hands!
- ❖ Of all NT letters, James has the strongest link to Jesus' teachings!
- ❖ 1:22 – we are called to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers"
 - Particularly in relationship to the poor and humble. James is very harsh in his condemnation of the rich who oppress the poor. (See 1:10-11 & 5:4-5)
 - "Doers" live as God commands, as in the OT wisdom writings (like Proverbs).

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James – Faith and Works

- ❖ 2:14-26
 - What is the relationship between faith and works?
- ❖ 3:1-2 – warnings to teachers!
- ❖ 3:13-17 – contrasting earthly wisdom with the wisdom that comes from God
- ❖ 5:12 (compare to Matthew 5:34-37) – Are we prohibited from taking an oath?
 - No! In NT times, Jews often made an vow to tell the truth only to have a carefully worded escape hatch! We are to tell the truth and keep the promises we make!
- ❖ 5:14-15 – Should we rely on prayer and anointing by elders as the sole means of healing?
 - No! But James is saying that we should always remember that ALL healing is God's healing. Modern medicine is one of God's great gifts. Pray and go to the doctor!