

Orthodoxy and Heresy: Canon and New Testament Theology

Let us pray.

Father, as we come before You, we are thankful that You have not chosen to remain so aloof and holy from us that we are left without any context with You at all. You, by a very gracious act, have revealed Yourself throughout time through revelation to Your people such as Abraham and Moses and through revelation to us as mediated through the Word that has been written down by Your holy apostles and prophets. Father, as we see this Word, we desire to honor You through our study of it. Yet we also recognize there are those who would question even the parameters of this Word. They would add to, subtract from, or demean the books that we have. Father, we pray that You would give us some way of presenting a defense for our faith and also a confidence in the Scriptures that we have. We pray these things in Your wonderful and holy name. Amen.

Last time we spent a lot of the time talking about the presuppositions that we have in our study of the New Testament from a theological dimension. We talked about bringing out the emphases from the different New Testament books.

One analogy that I like to use to explain these different emphases is that of a diamond. If you look at a diamond, it is beautiful from every dimension. If you look at it from one way, the light is refracted in it in such a way that you see it, and it is just beautiful. If you turn it around you get a different vision of that same diamond with light refracted out in different ways. People looking at that diamond from different directions may describe it with slightly different emphases regarding what is going on. Everybody recognizes that they are looking at the same thing.

That is basically the model I work with in terms of New Testament theology. We have people looking at the truth of Jesus, the revelation of Jesus, and the Gospel therein. They are each turning it around and seeing emphases that are truly there. Their perspectives may have an added dimension that you would not have if you only had this one-directional look at the diamond.

That is essentially what I argue is going on in New Testament theology. What often happens is we take one person, for example the apostle Paul, and we make him our view of the whole. Usually we do not even take the whole of the apostle Paul; we basically take Romans and Galatians. That is our take. I want to broaden it and say there are dimensions to the Christian faith that we can understand in a new way if we look at the different emphases that different people make. Not only that, but we will see that various descriptions of the diamond are the same, and so are different descriptions of the Word. There are distinct emphases and yet there is a lot of area that is common ground.

That is a brief description of how I view New Testament theology. That is also meant to evoke some of the discussion we have had over the last couple of class periods.

At the end of the class period I said we were going to shift gears completely. We started into the discussion of canon. My goal was to create a bit of a crisis for you if you had not ever heard, for instance, that the canon was not finalized until the end of the fourth century. That comes as a bit of a shock, especially if it is stated like that. The question is, is that an all-encompassing statement? That is what I want to come to. We need to talk about that in some regard.

A lot of people come to seminary, and the idea of defending the fact that there are only 27 canonical books of the New Testament is not foremost in their minds. Some of you have come from contexts in where that was a question, and it may be a question you have. Often people wonder why they need an apologetic for defending the canon.

I am going to try to motivate this discussion in at least three different ways, going from the academic to the popular. I mentioned earlier the story about Phyllis Tribble and her take on the Elijah and Jezebel narratives. It was a great presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, which is an austere body of scholars. They have very divergent theological stripes, from very evangelical to very much not. Thousands of people were in the room. I also told you that my friend David and I showed up early. We did not want to be in the front row, but we wanted the third or fourth row. We were sitting right under her. We had gotten there early, so we were in these first few rows. Somebody had gone to the trouble of copying about 30 to 40 pages of literature and placing it on the first 300 to 400 seats. It is pretty expensive to make that many copies. The copies were of some Gnostic gospels. They are called gospels, but they are quite different from what you think of as a gospel. The Gospel of Truth and the Gospel of Philip were some of these. There were at least three different gospels represented there. There are a number of these Nag Hammadi gospels. They had put a preface to this, and the preface was basically, "It is time for us to recover the lost Christianities, to reaffirm that which was also held to be Christian in the first century. It is more true than contemporary expressions of Christianity." That was kind of an evangelistic act. These Gnostic gospels are mostly third- and fourth-century gospels, and are, from any Orthodox accounting, very heretical. They tried to convince some of the world's leading biblical scholars that they should take the Gnostic gospels and read them right alongside, or even in preference to, the four canonical Gospels that you and I read: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That is one illustration. It is quite removed and very academic. The audience was made up of mostly academic teachers. The goal was much more profound. They were trying to influence the teaching of these people and thus influence the culture more broadly.

Let me give my second illustration. I had mentioned before the idea of Orthodoxy and heresy. Orthodoxy is what we would consider non-heretical expression throughout time. Since Walter Bauer and around his time, people have said that what we have in the canon and Christianity in its Orthodox expression are just the people who won. My point was that this is not just something that was taught in the beginning of the twentieth century. It is something that is very much a part of our colleges and universities today in the twenty-first century.

There is a series of textbooks that have been released by Bart Ehrman, who teaches at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is one of the major professors there. He is an extremely popular man. I heard him interviewed for an hour on National Public Radio about a year ago. He is a very articulate man and a good scholar, therefore he is respected in our field, especially in his subdiscipline, which is textual criticism. He has released a number of books with Oxford Press. Oxford has been promoting these books in a way that is extremely unusual for a British publisher. It is to the extent that every New Testament professor here has received at least two or three copies of different books by Bart Ehrman. If that is true here, you can imagine that it is true most places elsewhere. The reason is that they want us to use it as a course textbook. In fact, his books are being used in many colleges and universities around the United States as a course textbook. He has a longer introduction to the New Testament. This is his brief introduction to the New Testament, and it is extremely college friendly. You could use this with freshmen in college. It has pretty pictures and a lot of breakout sections called "something to think about." You could use it in high school. That is the intent, and that is how it is being used.

Page 6 says, "Development of the Christian canon. Christians did not invent the idea of collecting

authoritative writings together into a sacred canon of Scripture. In this they had a precedent. Even though most of the other religions in the Roman Empire did not use written documents as authorities for their religious beliefs, Judaism did.” That is just his introduction. A few paragraphs later he says,

It appears then that our New Testament emerged out of the conflicts among Christian groups and that the dominance of the position that eventually “won out” was what led to the development of the Christian canon as we have it. It is no accident that the gospels that were deemed “heretical” (that is, false, for instance the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Philip) did not make it into the canon. This is not to say, however, that the canon of Scripture was firmly set by the end of the second century. Indeed it is a striking fact of history that even though the four Gospels were widely considered authoritative by proto-Orthodox Christians—along with Acts, most of the Pauline epistles, and several of the other longer general epistles—the collection of our 27 books was not finalized until much later, for throughout the second, third, and fourth centuries, proto-Orthodox Christians continued to debate the acceptability of some of the other books.

He uses an interesting term: proto-Orthodox Christians. This is as if Orthodoxy did not really get finalized until the end of the fourth century. I would probably agree with a large percentage of what he has down there. I think I would just construct it differently. He is intentionally seeking to undermine people’s understanding of canon as canon. There are several books out by him, for instance *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. He does not call the other Christianities that are out there heresies; he calls them lost Christianities. Another of his books is *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make it into Our New Testament*. “Lost” has a connotation that people were sitting down to write the Bible, and after they got it off to the publisher they looked around and realized they forgot a couple of books. Oh well, it is already at the press! It is kind of like it was a mistake as opposed to something that was God-ordained.

That belief is a reality, and that is what is being taught at many college campuses. Therefore a lot of the people whom you will counsel with, people in your Bible studies, and people in your churches will have come into contact with this whether they tell you or not. That is my second illustration.

My third illustration moves to the increasingly popular: *The Da Vinci Code*. Some of you will know that this has been out for quite some time, and now they have a movie. It is extremely popular; in fact, it is a *New York Times* best seller; a lot of people have read this book. It is an exciting book. One of the reasons that make it so exciting is that in the course of 500 pages you have 106 or so chapters. In other words, you do not have to go very far to get to the end of the chapter. Nearly every chapter ends with a cliffhanger, so it is very exciting reading. It is never going to constitute great literature. It is exciting reading, and people have liked it. One of the things that is very striking about this book is how it assumes certain things as if they are facts. It treats you as if you are ignorant for not knowing all the facts about Leonardo Da Vinci’s life. By the time you get about halfway through the book, you feel like you are ignorant, but the book is bringing you up to speed. You do not have to admit to your friends and neighbors that you were ignorant about the life of Leonardo Da Vinci or the history of early Christianity. You feel like you are being educated in the whole process in the midst of this really gripping murder plot. The reason I say “by about halfway through the book” is because that is where the author starts to unleash his attack. It is a blatant attack on Christianity as we know it.

In case you ever look this up, go to page 231 in chapter 55. Here you have the two main protagonists of the narrative, Sophie and Langdon. You hope they will fall in love all the way through, so the book has a romantic dimension to it too. Langdon is portrayed as a great scholar of symbology, the study of symbols. He is trying to convince Sophie of something that she should have known all along. He brings

her to someone who is represented as the greatest scholar on the Holy Grail. If you know about this book, it is all about the search for the Holy Grail. One of the things it argues along the way is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. You find that out about halfway through the book, so pardon me if I gave away the plot if you did not know it already. Jesus was married to Magdalene, and they had a kid; that is the Holy Grail. That is what it comes down to. Along the way Langdon brings Sophie to see the great scholar, Teabing. It says, “Teabing cleared his throat and declared, ‘The Bible did not arrive by facts from heaven.’ ‘I beg your pardon?’ she says. ‘The Bible is a product of *man*, my dear, not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as an historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved throughout countless translations, editions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.’” You can see some truth in that. There have been a lot of translations, and most Americans read a translation. There has been some change in those translations because of some textual issues. So you can accept revisions and editions. When he says, “countless translations, editions, and revisions,” you get the sense that there never was a Bible that everybody agreed on. That is simply not true. That is a very American perspective on it. We assume that Scripture is what we have translated as opposed to what was written in Greek by authors in the first century. Everybody recognized them as apostles; therefore their writings were valued as Holy Scripture. Teabing says,

“History has never had a definitive version of the book.”

“Okay.”

“Jesus Christ was an historical figure of staggering influence, perhaps the most enigmatic and inspirational leader the world has ever seen [of course that is true]. As the prophesied messiah, Jesus toppled kings, inspired millions, and founded new philosophies. As a descendant of the lines of King Solomon and King David, Jesus possessed a rightful claim to the throne of the king of the Jews. Understandably, his life was recorded by thousands of followers across the land.” Teabing paused to sip his tea and then placed the cup back on the mantel. “More than 80 gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.”

“Who chose which gospels to include?” Sophie asked.

“Aha!” Teabing burst in with enthusiasm. “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”

“I thought Constantine was a Christian,” Sophie said.

“Hardly,” Teabing scoffed. “He was a lifelong pagan who was baptized on his deathbed, too weak to protest. In Constantine’s day, Rome’s official religion was sun worship – the cult of *Sol Invictus*, or the Invincible Sun—and Constantine was its head priest. Unfortunately for him, a growing religious turmoil was gripping Rome. Three centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Christ’s followers had multiplied exponentially. Christians and pagans began warring, and the conflict grew to such proportions that it threatened to rend Rome in two. Constantine decided something had to be done. In 325 AD, he decided to unify Rome under a single religion. Christianity.”

Did you know that was your history? He goes on; there is a lot more. The Council of Nicaea was in 325 AD. That is where he gets the date. That was the council where there was a lot of discussion in the early church about the nature of Christ and His relationship. Everybody agreed that He was divine. The question is what that meant. That is the truth of the matter. The Arians taught that He was divine because He was birthed by God Himself. That meant that He did not exist for all time. There was a time in which Jesus was not. When He was birthed, he was fully divine. That is what the Arians held, and of course the Orthodox said that that was not true. The Trinity existed from all time. The issue was not whether or not He is divine. The issue was what it meant that He is divine. Here is how it is represented in *The Da Vinci Code*,

“Indeed,” Teabing said. “Stay with me. During this fusion of religions, Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition, and held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea.”

Sophie had heard of it only insofar as its being the birthplace of the Nicene Creed.

“At this gathering,” Teabing said, “Many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon—the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of the sacraments, and, of course, the *divinity* of Jesus.”

“I do not follow. His divinity?”

“My dear, Teabing declared, “until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal.”

“Not the Son of God?”

“Right,” Teabing said. “Jesus’ establishment as the ‘Son of God’ was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.”

“Hold on. You are saying Jesus’ divinity was the result of a *vote*?”

“A relatively close vote at that,” Teabing said.

The Nicene Creed was not actually birthed at the Council of Nicaea. The Nicene Creed is a later document. *The Da Vinci Code* is a *New York Times* best seller. Most of us recognize it as fiction. Brown even has a little blurb at the beginning where he says that it is fiction, and he acknowledges that it is fiction. But he also then quickly claims that most of it is fact. He says what the two facts are, and they have to do with the Priory of Sion and something about the Vatican. The last paragraph on the “fact” page says, “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” People try to defend him by saying it is just a work of fiction. But Brown makes these “fact” statements at the very opening of his book. He intends it to be accurate. I do not want to spend the whole time critiquing *The Da Vinci Code*. I actually have over a page of little tiny notes of things that he got wrong. I have another page of little tiny notes of things that I suspect that he got wrong, but I have not had the time to look them up. There are many errors there. But the point, for the sake of this class, is this: were there 80 gospels that could possibly have made it into our canon? Is the canon just the accretion of Constantine’s mandate to try to create some unity among the Christians so he could have a peaceful Roman Empire? Those are the questions I want to deal with.

My point is that it is now no longer just in the hands of so-called scholars and academes that the canon is an issue. It is a live issue for people whom you are going to interact with throughout life. I have already gone through why we should bother studying the history of the New Testament canon, and we have looked at five contemporary views of it. You can see that it is not simply going to work anymore to hold what I call the naïve conservative view. You cannot hold the view that we can just simply accept the Bible as Scripture because we believe it to be the case. There are people who are challenging the historical situation that we assume. Therefore I advocate that we all need to come to what I call an historically informed conservatism. First, we need to understand that what we have as canon is canon. Second, we need to be able to convey with historical terms how the canon developed, and we need to be able to have some discussion about it.

In terms of understanding the canon, we have to first get back into the mindset of the apostles and the early church. In that regard they had a set of Scriptures; they had a canon. The canon was the Old Testament as we understood it. At the beginning of the Christian era the canon of those Old Testament books, in terms of the books that everybody recognized as being canonical, was closed. There were some Jewish sectarians who would add other books to that, but in doing so they realized that these were books that few other people were reading in early Judaism. Thus they were not part of the common canon of Judaism. That is the reality of the first century. Therefore the New Testament Scriptures grow

up in light of that.

The first point is that the Old Testament canon was already recognized by the New Testament period. In order to illustrate this I am going to look at a couple of first-century Jewish documents. I want to prove that, by the time of the origin of the New Testament, the Old Testament canon was in place and was intact. In doing so, I actually disagree with a position that is held by some people that the Old Testament canon itself was not established until the so-called Council of Jamnia. It was not really a council, but it was a group of rabbinical scholars who got together in Jamnia. It was a rabbinical creation. Instead I point to first-century documents showing that at least by the first century, and undoubtedly before, the Old Testament canon was already in place.

Josephus was a Jewish author who wrote toward the end of the first century. He ultimately came in the pay of the Romans. He wrote a series of books for his Roman patron. One known as *Jewish Antiquities* was on the history of the Jewish people from the very beginning of creation. Another book was on the conduct of the Jewish Revolt, which was the Jewish war that resulted in the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. He also wrote a defense of his life when he was under attack. That book is called *Contra Apionem*, meaning “against Apion.” Apion was an opponent of first-century Judaism who sought to undermine it. Josephus basically did early Jewish apologetics against the pagans who were holding that Judaism was not a reasonable religion. In the process he simply relied on his assumption that anybody who knew something about Judaism would understand. That is represented in this quote, “We have not an innumerable multitude of books in front of us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another as the Greeks have, but only 22 books which contain the records of all past times.”

The number 22 may cause you some stir because our Old Testament has 39 books. In Jewish accounting systems, the enumeration of books is quite different. It still is this way in the contemporary Jewish canon. For instance, we have a 1 and 2 Samuel; they just have Samuel. We have a 1 and 2 Kings; they just have Kings. That is one distinction to be made. They will be separate in the Hebrew Bible, but Jewish people will speak of the “former prophets” as Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Samuel and Kings are treated as one book. They will also speak of the Book of the Twelve, the Minor Prophets, as a single book. Even though they recognize it was written by different authors, they still hold it be one book. The 12 will all become one book. There are some other issues along those lines. It is likely that on a Jewish first-century accounting, the 22 books overlap with our 39 books. Josephus went on,

[There are] only 22 books, which contain the records of all past times, which are justly believed to be divine. Of them, five belong to Moses [the Pentateuch] which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of 3000 years [the interval of time that is being recorded historically there]. But as to the time from the death of Moses to the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets who were after Moses wrote down what was done in their times in 13 books [the historical books] and few others. The remaining four books contained hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of the human life [the Psalter and Proverbs].

Scholars who studied this passage in Josephus were able to account for how these 22 books relate to our 39 books. That is the point of my reading this. Josephus first established that they had a canon. Then he talked about the stuff that came afterward: “It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time.” Artaxerxes is written about in what we call Ezra and Nehemiah. The Jewish canon also counts Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. Josephus is saying the history after that time is not on the same level as what we would deem the canonical books.

He goes on, “How firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do, for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them. But it has become natural to all Jews immediately and from their very birth to esteem these books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and if occasion being willing to die for them.” That is Josephus’ understanding of canon. That was a widespread understanding in the first century. You have a set of canonical books and then history afterward, but history is not given canonical status. If you are going to die for something, you die for the canon.

We need to supplement this perspective with another accounting that is in a much more sectarian document. It is represented as 4 Ezra, also known as 2 Ezra; it has various names. Let me give some brief background. This is a work that purports to be written by Ezra, the same Ezra who is in Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars in the earlier centuries recognized that it was written much later than Ezra’s time, typically dated to the first century AD. It represents a first-century belief in Judaism. There were a number of books that were written in the name of people who had been long since dead. Everybody would naturally recognize that these people had been dead for hundreds of years. So there were new books being written in the name of those who had been dead.

Ezra and Enoch are two Old Testament historical figures who were used by early Jewish people in some literature that they wrote. This is very interesting work because it indicates that the Old Testament has been lost at this stage in the book of 4 Ezra. Ezra is crying out to God to bring back the canon to his people. It is an amazing story, and it is hard to believe, but it did not happen. God tells Ezra to take five men and sit down. Ezra goes into a trance, and he speaks the words of all the rest of Scripture. The five men just write it down. This is a very strange apocalyptic book. That is the context. It says, “The Most High gave understanding to the five men, and by turns they wrote what was dictated in characters which they did not know.” That is pretty amazing; they did not even know what they were writing. “They sat 40 days and wrote during their day time and ate their bread at night.” We have heard of 40-day periods in Scripture before. You can see they are tying into Scripture there. “As for me [Ezra], I spoke in the daytime and was not silent at night. During the 40 days, 94 books were written. When the 40 days were ended the Most High [God] spoke to me, saying, ‘Make public the 24 books that you wrote first and let the worthy and unworthy read them. But keep the 70 that were written last in order to give them to the wise among your people for in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the river of knowledge.’ And I did so.”

A wide variety people from among all kinds of theological backgrounds will say that the 24 books represented in 4 Ezra overlap with the 22 books that Josephus speaks about. It is a different numbering system. There is the sense of a generally recognized canon that is for all people, “the worthy and the unworthy.” The worthy are the wise. The unworthy are the people who do not belong to their sect, to their band of people who possess the other hidden books. The wise have an additional 70 books, which is such a nice little round figure. This is very apocalyptic in its orientation. This coheres fairly well with some of what we found at Kumron. The Old Testament canon is established, but there also seemed to be additional authoritative books that the monastic sect in the Judean desert used and employed.

Let us talk about how we synthesize between Josephus and 4 Ezra. It is recognized that all of Judaism understood this group of canonical books, whether it is 22 or 24. The number probably refers to the same grouping of books. Josephus represents the conservative perspective that we only have this set of 22. He says that nothing else has the same authority. The apocalyptic, sectarian work by 4 Ezra represents the other viewpoint, which agrees to those books but adds some other books. That is the nature of the Old Testament in the first century. There was a canon everybody recognized, but there

were sects that wanted to add to that canon. To use different terms, there were agreed upon books and disputed books.

There is also New Testament evidence that New Testament Christians and Jesus Himself understood the idea of a closed canon of the Old Testament. Unlike those of 4 Ezra, they did not accept any of the disputed books. Jesus appeals only to the books that are canonical, the Old Testament as we recognize it. These are the common books and the books that everybody would have understood in the first century. There are a few passages in the New Testament that refer to the canon. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." The crucial part of that statement is when Jesus says, "the Law or the Prophets." This is a fairly inclusive designation of the Law, which is the five books of the Pentateuch, and the Prophets. The Prophets did not just include the prophetic books like Isaiah and Jeremiah but also the former prophets that we would deem to be historical books. This overlaps exactly with Josephus' description. We have the Mosaic Law and we also have the Prophets.

The Prophets account our history. In Luke 24:44 Jesus says, "These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms may be fulfilled." There again we have the Law and the Prophets, with the Prophets more broadly defined as the historical books and what we would deem the prophetic books. And He also mentions the Psalms, which are the third category in Josephus. This includes the books of hymns to God. These are all three categories that Josephus mentions. This is the canon of Jesus, the Old Testament.

I probably do not need to convince you too much, but I want to provide an argument to substantiate what you already hold. We can see Paul's viewpoint of the canon in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." The word "inspired" means "God-breathed." It is not inspired as though the author were motivated to do something. This is the Word of God breathed. It is what God issued forth. Therefore we should be very careful when we use the term inspired in our own common discourse. This is a much holier word than we often understand it to be. You can see that there is Scripture, an Old Testament canon, and it is that which is God-breathed. The first point was that the Old Testament canon is already recognized by the New Testament period.

The second point is that the limits of Old Testament canon are predicated in part on the cessation of widely attested prophecy. To put it very crassly, prophecy ceased, therefore the Old Testament canon ended with the time period of Artaxerxes. That is what Josephus held. I am a little more careful in the way that I state it, and I think you should be careful as well. It is not the cessation of prophecy entirely, but it is the cessation of widely attested prophecy in the form of God's designated prophets. Josephus himself actually claims at times to have made some prophetic pronouncements. He argues that prophecy has ceased, and yet he is still a prophet. That is because he states it even more precisely. As we read earlier, "It is true our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers because *there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time.*" He is not saying that prophecy as a whole has completely ceased, but he is saying that prophecy in the sense of God's designated prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah, or Isaiah has ceased. It stopped at the time of Artaxerxes. We do not have the big prophets, but we might have some people making some prophetic announcements. Those are treated as individual instances and not prophets. Josephus was not alone in holding that.

You can also find this in a variety of other places, including the Babylonian Talmud, which says, "Our

rabbis taught since the death of the last prophet [the last person who held that prophetic office—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the last prophetic books chronologically in the Old Testament]. The Holy Spirit of prophetic inspiration departed from Israel [prophecy was done in the sense of the succession of prophets], yet they were still able to avail themselves of the Bath Kol [the voice from heaven].”

Occasionally we might be speaking, and all of a sudden we might hear a voice that says, “Do your homework!” We would say it was a voice from God. The rabbis would acknowledge that that still happened. They gave a famous example of a bath kol. Once when the rabbis met in the upper chamber of Guryo’s house at Jericho, a bath kol was heard from heaven, saying, “There is one amongst you who is worthy that the Shekinah should rest on him as it did on Moses, but his generation does not merit it.” In other words, the voice said there was a rabbinic teacher who was worthy of the glory of God resting on him as it did on Moses; he was that great of a man. The rabbis often held their rabbinic teachers in high esteem. It is a statement of how much they thought of Hillel the elder. “The sages present set their eyes on Hillel the elder, and when he died they lamented and said, ‘Alas, the pious man, the humble man, the disciple of Ezra is no more.’” Despite the esteem in which they held their great rabbinic teacher, Hillel the elder, they had to say that even he was never given the prophetic utterance that ended with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. This is why the canon was closed for the wide majority of Jewish people. The striking thing about the sectarians is that they have a slightly different view of prophecy. They see that prophetic Scripture continues after the close. But it is not recognized by everybody, so those are the hidden books.

Finally, for the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament Scriptures, Jesus and the apostles reopened the church’s sense of recognized revelation. This is huge because Jesus thought and taught, and His disciples taught among the rest of the masses. Basically, the canon was closed because they did not have an exact succession of prophets. But Jesus is the Great Prophet. Now revelation could open again. It opened, not in the sense of disputed books, but in the sense of books attested by all as worthy of being equated to the Old Testament canon itself. For example, Matthew 13:57 says, “And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.’” Jesus is effectively claiming that He is on the same level as the prophets of the Old Testament. Other people recognized this, even those who disagreed with Him. Mark 6:15 says of Jesus, “Others said, ‘He is Elijah.’ And still others claimed, ‘He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.’” Why not just say He is a prophet? They say He is “like one of the prophets of old.” If you enter into the first-century mindset, you realize they are saying He is like Haggai, Malachi, or Zechariah. He is one of those kinds of prophets. He is not somebody who can just come along and make a few utterances that are important. He is a prophet who holds the office of prophet. That is how He is understood. In the context of Mark, they are not wrong; they just do not understand fully who Jesus is.

The author of Hebrews opens up the book in chapter 1 by saying, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.” This is an extremely striking way to open a book of the New Testament. The author is not only equating Jesus to the prophets of the Old Testament and the closed canon, but he is also saying that He exceeds those. “In the past, God spoke through prophets, but now we have His very Son.” That is why a closed revelation is now reopened, and it is why we can have a New Testament canon. It is because of this great moment in salvation history, which brings back not only a reopening of revelation, but also an exceeding of any previous revelation that we could ever have.

It is important to recognize that this prophetic authority did not only rest on Jesus. In the context of His

teachings He conveyed that same authority to His apostles. Note that I said “to His apostles.” I did not include His church, His followers, or His disciples. This authority was conveyed to His apostles because they are the ones who testified and witnessed to the revelation that is in Jesus. They did so in a special way that no one else could do. A couple of passages show this theologically in the New Testament. John 14:26 says, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” Very often when people are interpreting this passage in John 14, we want to see ourselves everywhere in Scripture that we can. We often interpret “He will teach you” to include all of God’s disciples, and therefore it includes us. But if you look at the context in John 14, He is speaking to His apostles. Therefore it is an argument that the Holy Spirit will teach the apostles all things, and they will remember the things that Jesus said to them. It is not that they will remember because it has been passed down through time. They will remember because they were there, and the Holy Spirit is inspiring them to remember what they account to be of Jesus. Jesus Himself says that the Holy Spirit is the One Who will bring them into the special apostolic authority of remembrance and teaching. John 16:13 says, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” In context, this has more to do with apostolic mandate than the authority that we have in the church today.

In 1 Corinthians 14:37 Paul says, “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment.” The fascinating thing about that is that he has just finished dealing with issues of prophecy and tongues. He is saying if anyone thinks that he or she is a prophet, in the sense of the New Testament prophecy that is open in 1 Corinthians 14, let him recognize that what Paul writes is the Lord’s commandment. That is not actually something that Jesus said in His earthly ministry, so far as we know. Paul is taking on himself the apostolic mantle of saying, “This is from the Lord.”

I should interact with an earlier passage in 1 Corinthians 7, which is striking for people. There is an issue that has arisen in the church. They have probably written to Paul about how to treat virgins in the church. Typically in the ancient world unmarried women were to get married. There was a teaching that had arisen that maybe they should not be married. Paul is trying to negotiate his way through all of this. He is dealing with the issue. In 1 Corinthians 7:25 he says, “Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.” It is easy to read that as if he is suddenly stepping out of his apostolic status and admitting that he is not sure what to do. We could imagine that he steps out of his apostolic role for a brief time and gives his opinion instead. Later he steps back into his apostolic role. I do not think that is the best way to read what is going on in 1 Corinthians 7, though. Most of the stuff that has come up until now in 1 Corinthians 7 has to do with divorce and remarriage. Jesus spoke about divorce and remarriage. We have a number of teachings in the canonical Gospels about divorce and remarriage. Jesus did not speak overtly about celibacy in the Gospels. When Paul goes into this point in 1 Corinthians 7:25 concerning the virgins, he is saying that the Lord did not talk about this. That is why he says he has no command of the Lord. But listen to the authority Paul claims, “I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.” It is not like it is just his opinion. It is his opinion, and he is an apostle. That is what is going on there.

The last passage we will look at is in Ephesians 2:19-20. It notes that the foundation of the church is in the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone. The important thing about this passage is to recognize the understanding that Jesus is the bedrock of the church. But there is a foundation that is being built in His name by those who were specially designated by Him as apostles and prophets. The rest of the church will build up on that.

There are some people today who will claim apostolic status. The problem is that in the first century people really recognized what constituted an apostle and what did not. There is a wonderful work written at the end of the first century by a Christian in Rome named Clement. First Clement is the name of the book. It was written around 96 AD, which is within a few decades of the time of the New Testament. Clement is very careful even though he effectively holds the bishopric of Rome, which later became the papacy, to distinguish his authority as being under that of the apostles. The apostles were at a different level. The apostolic status ended in the first century because the apostles ended. The apostles were those who witnessed Jesus directly. The only reason Paul could be included as an apostle is because he saw Jesus on the Damascus road. Jesus especially selected him to be His servant in the same way He did with the twelve disciples. We recognize the apostles as being different from the rest of the church, and the apostles have authority.

Second Peter 3:15 especially shows how Peter looked on Paul. Peter said, "...so also our beloved brother Paul who wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do the other Scriptures." In other words, Paul is a difficult read at times. If you have ever tried to really unpack what is going on in Romans, you have no doubt of that. The apostle Peter writes about the apostle Paul and calls his writings Scripture. That shows how high the apostolic status is.

The word for "the other Scriptures" is *grafe*, which is the technical term for the Old Testament Scriptures. We see that the viewpoint of the early church and the apostolic viewpoint itself is that they are creating Scripture on the same level of the Old Testament. Even the book of Revelation ends with it calling itself a work of prophecy. Revelation 22:18-19 says, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." That is a big-time claim. Do not mess with this book because if you do you will face eternal perdition. That is what it says. That is a huge apostolic claim to the authority of that book.

The apostles were cognizant of reopening revelation and of speaking to revelation. I would argue that once the apostles were gone that authority dissipated. That is how the early church understood it too. When we talk about canon we need to see what is referred to in the New Testament as an extremely exalted collection of Old Testament books. It has to do with the prophetic unveiling of God, and it was closed. It could not be reopened again until Jesus showed up, and He is the true prophet. Beyond that He is the Son of God. Revelation reopens, and He designates an apostolic band of followers who will then be the mediators of that revelation and will write it down in a canonical form. Then that revelation will cease. Everything after that will not be deemed as like authority.

We have to acknowledge that some of the books of the New Testament evidence the fact that those who were in the apostolic band but were not themselves apostles were given the authority and had recognized authority to write down Scripture as well. This is because they were accounting the words of the apostles. I am referring especially to Mark and Luke, who were Gospel authors. Whether they would have been deemed prophets in the same way as Old Testament prophets, I do not know of any place in early Christianity where that term was applied to them. The people who wrote the historical books of Joshua and Judges were deemed to be prophets in the first century. I personally would be comfortable calling Mark and Luke prophets in the same way, but to my knowledge the early church did not say that. I am not going to go there. I will hold that they have revelatory status to the same degree as Matthew and John. That revelatory status is mediated because they were followers of Peter and Paul. Therefore as

followers of Peter and Paul, they were designated to write down what they were taught. They did not writing anything new down; they wrote down what they were taught. That is what Luke himself claims in his prologue.

Here is where we get to further historical issues. It is the case that the 27 books of the New Testament were not found in an official church listing until the two synods: the Synod of Hippo Regius in 393 AD and the Synod of Carthage in 397 AD. That is where there was a final, complete, authorized list that was established by a church council. There is some truth to the claim that the canon as we know it was not finished until the fourth century. But it is not the whole story. Athanasius, who is a very famous church father, had the same canon and wrote the same canon down in his thirty-ninth Festal Letter in 367 AD. His letter came first, but the canon was not official until this church council.

We also have to acknowledge that church councils, as in gatherings of the church, did not start until 325 AD. This is when Constantine called the first one at Nicaea. That part was true in Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*. Constantine called it, and it was to deal with Christological teaching and heresy within the early church. Some people call the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 a council, but it is not a council in the same sense. An official council is one in which messages were sent throughout the Roman Empire, and delegates throughout the Roman Empire come together. You have a big month or several-month-long council. Acts 15 was a meeting of the people who happened to be in Jerusalem. It was authoritative, but you did not really have councils until 325.

The reason you did not have any councils before that was because pagans were putting Christians to death left and right. The empire itself opposed Christianity; it was illegal to be Christian by the fourth century. By the end of the third century, under different emperors, the persecution was extremely harsh. It would be foolish to call everybody together and get together. By the time they finally were able to do that it was because Constantine had become Christian. Unlike *The Da Vinci Code*, he did not remain pagan. He became Christian, and it was not a very opportune political movement. It would have been much more opportune had he simply kept paganism in tact. The vast majority of people in the ancient world were pagans. It was also not the case, as Dan Brown says, that the pagans and the Christians were fighting. It was a very lopsided fight; the Christians were being slaughtered. As far as we can tell, there is no evidence that they put up a fight. They just simply went passively to the Coliseum and were slaughtered. The Christians were very much in the minority, and they did not have a chance to get together.

By the fourth century, when they could finally get together, they had to first deal with the stuff that really mattered. They dealt with the stuff they were really debating. They were not debating about the four canonical Gospels. They were not debating about whether Paul was authoritative Scripture. That was simply accepted from early in the second century and probably from the end of the first century. They did not need to fight about that and make any great council decision. They had to fight about Arianism. Was Jesus begotten, and in what sense was He begotten? Was He born, and was there a time when He did not exist? They fought about that stuff. Finally at the end of the fourth century, they could sit back and establish a canon that they could all agree on. They all agreed on 27 books.

In representing all of that, it would be false and untrue to say that the canonical thinking did not happen until the fourth century. There was a lot of discussion represented in second-century authors that what we accept to be Gospels matters, and there are only four recognized Gospels. What we accept to be Paul matters, and we only accept so many books by Paul. That is accepted as apostolic with apostolic authority. That is what constitutes canon. Canonical discussion antedated all of these councils. The ironic thing about Dan Brown's book is he claims that Constantine established the canon. It was much

after Constantine, though. It was not until 393. Constantine was rotting in his grave by then!

We are going to interact with more historical facts next time. We will look at the Muratorian Canon and Eusebius' *Church History* as illustrative of some of the historical facts of canon. I have tried to describe why, from the church's perspective, there even is a canon. It is because the revelation that is canonical in the Old Testament and had ceased is reopened with Jesus and His apostolic followers. If you get that then you have gotten the crucial bit that I wanted you to get today. We will talk about canon next time, and we will also start talking about what it was like to live in the first century.