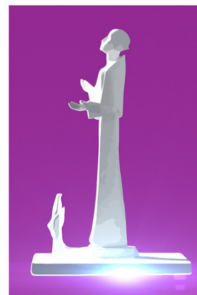


EXPLORING THE BIBLE

a St Francis College short course



Theme 4: Reading the New Testament

4b: What are the origins of the New Testament?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How else do you experience the idea of 'canon'? For instance, are there 'official' family stories that regularly get shared at gatherings? Or stories that get shared amongst your friends? How do stories make it onto those 'lists'?
2. In what ways does it help to know some of the contents around the creation/collation of the New Testament texts?
3. The Chester Beatty collection referred to by Greg can be viewed online at <https://chesterbeatty.ie/> - select 'collections' and find 'the Biblical Papyri collection'.
4. The Chester Beatty collection is a museum housed in Dublin Castle. It contains magnificent collections of rare books, manuscripts and treasures and is worth a visit...set aside a bit of time, it's a wonderful place to get lost!

TRANSCRIPT

The Very Rev'd Dr Greg Jenks
Dean, Grafton Cathedral

I guess the first thing to remember is that Paul and others didn't know they were creating a New Testament. Their bible was what we call the Old Testament, more or less. Paul and others were writing letters, and so the stories about Jesus were being remembered. Some of them were coalescing probably well after the time of Paul into either the gospels or some of the literary sources of the gospels.

So how do we then get from that first generation or so after Jesus when there is no sense of a Christian New Testament to having a New Testament? The answer takes us through an interesting character called Marcion, who was from the northern end of what we now call Turkey on the Black Sea, a wealthy ship owner who went to Rome as part of his business. He was a Christian leader, then he fell out with the church authorities in Rome. The way the orthodox people tell the story he became the first heretic and set up a rival church. That church, for a hundred years or so almost outran the official church. That's kind of the way history has told the story.

So what did Marcion do? Marcion was representative of a version of Christianity that was strongly pro-Paul and also very suspicious of Jewishness in the experience of being Christian early in the first half of the second century. He comes from a place where Christians were fairly thick on the ground. We've got to be aware of the politics that were going on: you've not only had the Jewish revolt in the 60s of the first century, you've had the second Jewish revolt (115-117), you got the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135), and that takes us up to Marcion's time. Where did the Romans get the soldiers to fight the Jewish wars? They Recruit the men from what we call Turkey. There were lots of Christian around Ephesus and the Galatia area and so on: the seven churches of revelation are all in Turkey. So this is kind of Christian homeland at the end of the first century, beginning of the second century.

Christians were fairly well represented. They didn't want to be mistaken for rebellious Jews so this is where the impetus to separate Judaism and Christianity really takes root. Paul and his ideas had fallen out of favour after his death. There'd been a pro-Jewish push back against Paul. But by round about 100 and the early part of the second century Paul is coming back in to favour because Paul is being read as anti-Jewish (which is a bit unfair given as Paul said I'm more Jewish than the Jews, I'm a Hebrew of the Hebrews and could give all his Jewish credentials).

So Marcion is not simply somebody grabbing hold of Christianity and pulling it to one side. He's representing a fear amongst early second century Christians that they needed to distinguish themselves from Judaism. Soldiers were being conscripted, taxes were going up to pay for the war, exactly in the bit of real estate

where Christians were most common and also where there were large Jewish communities. It was a tense time. The most recent research is suggesting that Marcion was given bad press by orthodox authors who were opposed to heretics. But Marcion in effect published the first edition of the New Testament. It only had two bits in it, two volumes, the gospels, Euangelion in Greek and the Apostle which was Paul. He got rid of the Old Testament because that was the flavour of things in that part of the church so his answer was radical but simple, jettison everything that was Jewish and we'll have one single gospel and we'll have the apostle Paul and nothing else.

Now that sent a shockwave through the other parts of the early church who said "No, you can't throw out the whole of the Bible". But it was actually the response to Marcion that made the orthodox people say, "We are going to have a New Testament and this is what its going to look like; it's going to go alongside the Old Testament and it is going to contain four Gospels, and it's not just going to be Paul , but also Peter, James and John , the three pillars of the church from Galatians. We get the epistles of Peter, James and John alongside Paul.

So, by Marcion, say 130-140 and round about the year 200 we have the four Gospels and the Jewish community have the Mishnah, so you can see that both Jews and Christians are codifying the documents which are going to shape their lives together. The Chester Beatty manuscripts not only include the four Gospels but also the letters of Paul and some of the other New Testament manuscripts. It's another couple of hundred years before we can get a definitive New Testament but by the time you get to 200 it appears that what we would recognise as the New Testament is beginning to coalesce.