

Sunday, December 2, 2018—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 68 Manuscripts & Christian Book Production: Forging a Link Between Canonicity & Transmission

Introduction

- Since Lesson 58 we been studying the topic of canonicity. In doing so, we have considered the following topics:
 - The Concept of Canonicity (Lesson 58)
 - Introduction to Canonical Models (Lesson 59)
 - Community-Determined Models (Lesson 60)
 - Historically-Determined Models (Lesson 61)
 - Self-Authenticating Model (Lessons 62-67)
- The next topic that I would like to consider in this class is the transmission of the text throughout history. Put another way, how did the New Testament text get from the first century when it was penned under inspiration to us today in the 21st century? One might consider a study of text's transmission to be an investigation into how the text was preserved throughout the dispensation of grace.
- As we observed in Lesson 65, there are many touch points or links between the various doctrines that we have studied throughout this course.
 - Revelation is God revealing or disclosing Himself to mankind in either a general sense via creation or specifically through the written word of God. (Lesson 6)
 - Inspiration is God causing man to record in writing those aspects of His revelation that He wanted written down. (Lesson 11-27)
 - Preservation secures the written revelation and passes it down from generation to generation through a multiplicity of accurate reliable copies. (Lessons 28-57)
 - Preservation facilitates the identification of the canon by corporately exposing (Corporate Exposure) the body of Christ to God's written word via the multiplicity of copies. (Lesson 63)
 - Corporate Exposure leads to the Corporate Reception via the ministry of the New Testament prophets during the 1st century. (Lesson 65)
- With these observations in mind, why would it be any different when one considers the topics of canonicity and transmission? Preservation and canonicity both require that the New Testament

documents be copied in order to facilitate Corporate Exposure and Corporate Reception. As the books of the New Testament were recognized and copied, they were grouped together into various groupings such as Paul's epistles. As these manuscripts were copied, they not only served to transmit the text, but they also provided a witness as to which books the body of Christ viewed as canonical. In this way we see a connection between canonicity and transmission where our understanding of one informs and facilitates the accomplishment of the other.

- In Chapter 7 of his book *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* Michael J. Kruger discusses how “Manuscript and Christian Book Production” impacted the Corporate Reception of the canon. Today, in Lesson 68, I want to consider this material in order to bridge our discussion of canonicity and transmission.

Manuscripts and Christian Book Production

- At the beginning of the Chapter 7, Kruger points out that until recently a consideration of the New Testament manuscripts (MSS hereafter) themselves has been completely left out of canonical discussions.
 - “While the *content* of early Christian texts has been carefully studied, the actual physical *vehicle* of these early Christians texts has generally been ignored as if it were a disposable husk that could be separated from its content and discarded.” (Kruger, 233-234)
- Kruger argues that these “husks” hold enormous potential in terms of understating the origins and development of the New Testament canon. In these MSS we have:
 - “. . . collections of New Testament books within a single manuscript that date to the second and third centuries, earlier than the time of many of our [earlier surviving] canonical “lists.” Moreover, the physical and visual features of these manuscripts—the codex form, scribal hand, and other inscriptional features—together provide a fresh window into the literary culture of early Christianity and how Christians would have viewed and used these texts.” (Kruger, 234)

The Quantity of Early Manuscripts

- The question of which books and writings early Christians preferred to use can be answered in part by considering the way the early church fathers cited and used books. But it can also be explored by considering the physical remains of the Christian writings themselves.
 - “The manuscripts left behind can tell us what texts Christians were busy reading, using, and, of course, copying. When we examine the physical remains of Christian texts from the earliest centuries (second and third), we quickly discover that the New Testament writings were, far and away, the most popular. Currently we have over sixty extant manuscripts (in whole or in part) of the New Testament from this period, with most of our copies coming from Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, Hebrews, and Revelation. The Gospel of John proves to be the most popular of all, with eighteen manuscripts, a number of which derive from the second century (e.g., P52, P90, P66, P75). Matthew is

not far behind, with twelve manuscripts; and some of these also have been dated to the second century (e.g., P64-67, P77, P103, P104). Compared with other documents of antiquity, the sheer quantity of these New Testament texts is impressive.” (Kruger, 234-235)

- The mere existence of these MSS speaks to how central these New Testament books were to the religious life of early Christians. These findings are compounded when compared against the textual remains of the so-called Christian Apocrypha. “These are writings that have a similar genre and subject matter as the writings of the New Testament, are often attributed to apostles, but never made it into the canon (though they were occasionally treated as Scripture by some early Christian groups).” (Kruger, 236)
 - “During the same time period, the second and third centuries, we possess approximately seventeen manuscripts of apocryphal writings such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Protevangelium of James*, and more. The *Gospel of Thomas* has the most manuscripts of all, with just three.” (Kruger, 236)
- According to Kruger, the existence of these texts, both canonical and apocryphal, proves the “bookish” nature of early Christianity.
 - “. . . the sheer volume of extant Christian texts from this period (canonical and noncanonical) reminds us again that early Christianity was a very “bookish” religion that found its identity within literary texts. Christianity was distinguished from the surrounding religions in the Greco-Roman world precisely by its prolific production of literature and its commitment to an authoritative body of Scripture as its foundation. So prominent were these scriptural books for Christians that even their pagan critics noted the Christian predilection for writing (and using) books and thus were forced to reckon with these books in their anti-Christian attacks. All of these factors indicate that the emerging Christian movement, like its Jewish counterpart, would be defined and shaped for generations to come by the same means: the production and use of books. Loveday Alexander notes:

It is clear that we are dealing with a group [early Christians] that used books intensively and professionally from very early on in its existence. The evidence of the papyri from the second century onwards suggests . . . the early development of a technically sophisticated and distinctive book technology.” (Kruger, 237-238)
- The discrepancy in number between MSS containing the canonical books and apocryphal ones offers historical proof of which books were viewed as scripture by the early church.
 - “. . . we should observe the disparity between the popularity of the New Testament books (particularly the Gospels) and that of the “apocryphal” books. Not only do canonical manuscripts outnumber apocryphal ones almost four to one, but there are more manuscripts of the Gospel of John than there are of all the “apocryphal” books combined. The fact that early Christians vastly preferred the canonical texts is consistent with what we discovered in the prior chapter, namely, that the core New Testament books

functioned as the foundational documents of Christianity from a very early time. Larry Hurtado argues that the low numbers of apocryphal manuscripts “do not justify any notion that these writings were particularly favored,” and he adds that whatever circles used these writings “were likely a clear minority among Christians of the second and third centuries. Similarly, C. H. Roberts observes, “Once the evidence of the papyri is available, indisputably Gnostic texts are conspicuous by their rarity.”” (Kruger, 238)

- “. . . the overall trend of early Christian papyri is still clear: early Christians were prolific users of books, especially those books that were to become part of the New Testament canon.” (Kruger, 239)
- These MSS were part of the text transmission but they also speak to the church’s view of the canon.

Early Manuscript Collections

- Not only did the early Christians copy individual canonical books but they also began grouping them together and copying those groupings. Therefore, it is not just a matter of the overall quantity of MSS but also how the New Testament books were combined together and then copied.
 - “. . . we must also note the practice of combining multiple New Testament books within a single manuscript. Such combinations can tell us much about the early development of the canon because they indicate how early Christians associated some texts with others and often joined them together into larger groups. Obviously such combinations were intentional and thus reflect early Christian literary preferences and perceived relationships between documents. . . some connections between manuscripts are still visible in this earliest period and anticipate what would eventually become the four New Testament collection units: the four Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, Acts/General Epistles, and Revelation.” (Kruger, 239)
- The first collection of canonical books found in the early MS evidence that Kruger deals with is the four gospels.
 - “As for the Gospels, we begin with P75, which dates to the end of the second or early third century and contains portions of both Luke and John in the same volume. T. C. Skeat has argued that it would have likely contained Matthew and Mark as well, making it a four-Gospel codex. . . In addition, Skeat has made a compelling case that P4 (Luke) and P64+67 (Matthew) come from the same codex, and he dates it to the late second century. . . Whether or not either of these manuscripts was a four-Gospel codex, they at least show early connections between the canonical Gospels. And each of them would have had predecessors. The relationship between the canonical Gospels is confirmed in the Chester Beatty codex P45, dated c. 250, which contains all four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), which are followed by the book of Acts. Noteworthy here is the position of Acts, which has been separated from Luke though they were clearly written as a two-volume work. This suggests a conscious and intentional linking

of Luke with the other three Gospels as a distinctive corpus, requiring a separation from Acts.” (Kruger, 240)

- There is no historical evidence of any apocryphal gospel ever being included in a collection with the four canonical gospels.
 - “The manner in which early Christians manuscripts regularly connect the four canonical Gospels is borne out by the telling fact that we possess no instance where an *apocryphal* gospel is joined with canonical Gospels within a single manuscript. J.K. Elliott comments, “There are no manuscripts that contain say Mathew, Luke, and Peter, or John, Mark, and Thomas. Only the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were considered as scriptural and then as canonical. . . Even though [some] early Christians read and used apocryphal gospels (as we shall see in the next chapter), their uniform exclusion from manuscripts containing canonical Gospels suggests that they were not seen as sufficiently compatible with, or on the same level as, the canonical Gospels.” (Kruger, 242)
- Early MS evidence also suggests that the Pauline Epistles were grouped together as a singular document.
 - “We also have early evidence that Paul’s letters were grouped together within a single manuscript. P46, dated c. 200, contains Romans, Hebrews [I am not saying that Paul wrote Hebrews], 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians. Because the outer leaves of the codex are missing, we cannot be sure of what final Pauline epistles were included. . . In addition to P46, there are a number of other early manuscripts that combine epistles of Paul. P30 is a third-century manuscript preserving portions of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, but the high page numbers suggest that it was originally a more extensive Pauline corpus. The third-century P49 (Ephesians) and the third-century P65 (1 Thessalonians) likely come from the same codex (considering their nearly identical scribal hands) and would, therefore, be another example of a Pauline letter collection (given the unlikelihood a codex would include *just* Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians). Similarly, P92 (c. 300) contains portions of Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians, which suggests yet another collection of Paul’s epistles.” (Kruger, 242-244)
- As one might expect, MS evidence for the smaller books comprising the General Epistles (Hebrews-Jude) is more difficult to come by but it does exist.
 - “Not surprisingly, we have much less evidence for the smaller books that make up the General Epistles. We do have a number of early manuscripts that preserve single books from this corpus—for example, James (P20, P23, P100), 1 Peter (P125), 1 John (P9), and Jude (P78). . . In addition, we possess a late third-century fragment of 2 John (P232) with high page numbers (164 and 165) at the top of the page. This suggests that the manuscript originally contained a number of other books, though we cannot be sure which ones.” (Kruger, 246-247)
- There is also early MS evidence that the book of Revelation was copied and distributed.

- “The manuscript evidence for Revelation is well established by this time as we have five extant manuscripts of Revelation from this period: P18, P47, P98, P115, and P308.” (Kruger, 246)
- “In summary, the manuscript evidence shows that even in the earliest stages of the canon’s development (second and third centuries), New Testament books were already being grouped together and linked with one another.” (Kruger, 247)
- This textual evidence provided by the transmission process informs our views of canonicity. Not only do extant MSS of the canonical books greatly outnumber apocryphal ones, but there is little evidence of canonical books ever being grouped together in collections with apocryphal books. P72 from the third-century stands out as possibly the only exception. This MS contains I & II Peter, Jude, as well as the Nativity of Mary and III Corinthians, and others. In this we see a point of connection between canonicity and transmission. The overwhelming rule of thumb is that only books that were viewed as canonical were copied and transmitted to future generations.

Early Christian Use of the Codex

- It would not be an overstatement to say that Christians popularized and possibly invented the codex.
 - “The primary form of a book in the broader Greco-Roman world was the scroll (or roll), which was made from sheets of papyrus or parchment pasted together (end to end) in a long strip and rolled up. Writing was done only on the inside of the scroll so that when it was rolled up the words were protected. The codex, in contrast, was created by taking a stack of papyrus or parchment leaves, folding them in half, and binding them at the spine. This format allowed for the traditional leaf book with writing on both sides of each page. It is now well established among modern scholars that early Christians not only preferred the codex over the roll, but they did so at a remarkably early point. Various manuscript discoveries indicate that the codex was the widely established Christian practice by the early second century, if not late in the first. . . What is remarkable about the early Christian preference for the codex is that it stood in sharp contrast to the surrounding culture. While Christians overwhelmingly used the codex, both Judaism and the broader Greco-Roman world continued to prefer the roll for centuries to come. Indeed, it was not until the fourth century and beyond that the rest of the ancient world began to prefer the codex to the roll, something Christians had done centuries earlier.” (Kruger, 247-249)
- Scholars have debated the reasons that gave rise to the use of codices within the Christian community. Possible reasons that have been given included the following: 1) convenience, 2) size, 3) cost, and 4) lack of education. Kruger argues the most plausible explanation links the Christian use of the codex with the development of the New Testament canon.
 - “It is evident that the Christians began to prefer the codex about the same time that the New Testament canon was beginning to take shape. Skeat has suggested that the codex was chosen because it was able to do something a roll could never do: hold all four Gospels in one volume. In a similar vein, Gamble has suggested that the codex was

chosen because it could hold all of Paul’s epistles in one volume and allow easy access to individual letters. Regardless of which of these theories proves to be more plausible . . . they agree that the significance of the codex lies in its role in the development of the corpus of New Testament books. In this regard, the codex performed two critical functions: 1) positively, it allowed certain books to be physically grouped together by placing them in the same volume; and 2) negatively, it provided a natural way to limit the number of books to those contained within the codex; that is, it functioned as a safeguard. As Elliot has noted, “Canon and codex go hand in hand in the sense that the adoption of a fixed canon could be more easily controlled and promulgated when the codex was the means of gathering together originally separate compositions.” . . . the widespread Christian use of the codex proves to be a substantial piece of historical evidence that the establishment of the New Testament canon was well underway by the turn of the century—long before Marcion, and long before most critical scholars have allowed.” (Kruger, 249-250)

- No canonical book from the first three centuries of church history has been found to be preserved on a roll. Yet, there is evidence that apocryphal books were copied to rolls as stand-alone documents.
 - “When it comes to just scriptural books, the Christian preference for the codex is so overwhelming that one is hard-pressed to find copies that are not codices. Indeed, in the entire second and third centuries, we do not have a single example of a New Testament document copied onto an unused roll. At the same time, Christians still employed the roll format on occasion for other kinds of books. . . In fact, about one third of all nonscriptural Christian books were written on rolls. Of course this pattern does not suggest that any book copied onto a codex was considered scriptural by early Christians—we have numerous extrabiblical books on codices. However, it does suggest that Christians (in certain instances) may have reserved the roll format for books that they did *not* consider scriptural. Put differently, Christians not only had a general preference for the codex, but, as Hurtado has stated, “Christians favored the codex *particularly* for the writings they treated as Scripture. . . The fact that no New Testament books are found on an unused roll during this time period, while apocryphal books like the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Fayum Gospel* were, suggests that some Christians *were* making distinctions about the canonical status of books from an early time period. Moreover, those distinctions appear to be remarkably consistent with what would eventually be the final shape of the New Testament canon.” (Kruger, 250-251)
- II Timothy 4:13—is Paul making a distinction here between the Old Testament books and the New Testament documents written on parchment or animal skins and formed into codices?

Conclusion

- When New Testament MSS are viewed as the “husks” that carried the “kernels” of the New Testament text, they can provide important clues as to the way early Christians viewed the boundaries of the canon. In this Lesson, Kruger has led us through an investigation of the following clues:

- “First, the sheer quantity of New Testament manuscripts reveals that these books were by far the most popular books among early Christians, far outpacing the apocryphal writings.”
- “Second, we have seen that from a very early time certain books were textually linked to other books within the same manuscript. This demonstrates that early Christians viewed these writings as somehow connected and belonging with one another (and not with other books).”
- “Third, early Christians, in stark contrast to the surrounding literary culture, vastly preferred the codex book form over the roll. No doubt the adoption of the codex is closely linked to the origins of the New Testament canon and the desire to place multiple books inside the confines of a single manuscript.”
- “Fourth, the visual features of our earliest manuscripts (scribal hand, reader’s aids, line spacing), and the size of the codices themselves, strongly suggest that they were created to be read as Scripture in corporate worship.” (Kruger, 259)
- “All these factors . . . confirm, once again, that early Christians had a canon consciousness from a very early point as they read, copied, collected, and distributed those documents they viewed as central to their religious life and worship.” (Kruger, 259)
- By looking at what early Christians copied and transmitted we gain further insight into what books they viewed as canonical and which ones they did not. In this way there is an important observable linkage between canonicity and transmission established.

Works Cited

Kruger, Michael J. *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.