

Episode 194 How We Got Our New Testament with Lee McDonald

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Lee McDonald

Good afternoon, David, it's great to chat with you again. I wanted to say a little bit about my journey of faith and how it led me to some of the directions that I have gone in. I became a Christian in February of 1959. I started college with my pastor who was the close friend of the Dean at Biola. And he called me to say I have a problem because school had already been going on for two weeks. And the Dean said, if you can get him here by Monday, (this was a Friday) we'll let them in. So, I got in college on probation.

I had a lot of fun in high school, so I wouldn't have gotten in on any good grades. Having said that, every year I did better in college and graduated with honors. I went on to seminary and then afterwards I was encouraged to consider doing advanced work and biblical studies. And I went to Fuller Seminary and then I did a PhD in Edinburgh, Scotland. A part of my residence was spent at Heidelberg University. And then subsequently, after a number of years and doing some writing, I went to Harvard and studied with Helmut Koester.

My focus at Harvard came out of a Bible study when a young man came home from college who had taken a course in a secular university on the Bible. And he said, I understand that there's more books that didn't make it into the Bible than actually got in. Why did these get in and the others not? And I began talking to him, and I kept thinking of exceptions to everything I was saying to him. I said to him, I'll get back to you next week. I think I'll have a better answer.

And that started my journey in Canon formation. And when I went to Harvard, I wanted to focus specifically on that. And Helmut Koester said, "Lee, why don't you write on the criteria for canonicity." So, I wrote a term paper on it. And then I wrote another one at Western School of Theology, and he liked it. And then I wrote a thesis on it and expanded it considerably. And I submitted that, and it was accepted with honors at Harvard. And that was the first publication that I had. And I've done now 15 books just on the formation of the Bible, and different aspects of it.

David Capes

Well, you could have just given a career to helping us understand where we got our Bible. Now we could talk about the Bible as a whole. But I want to focus today upon where we got the New Testament. And I know there are lots of ins and outs, and we can point to the 15 books that you've written and lots of articles. But for those who don't have a chance to go read all that. And for a layman, how do you go about saying, where do we get our Bible? Where'd we get our New Testament?

Lee McDonald

It started, of course, with Jesus. Without him, there would be no New Testament. And what was believed about him, namely, that He died for our sins, was buried and raised again; that was the core

element. There are all kinds of variations in what belief systems were going on in early Christianity, but that was at the heart of it all. And the writings that cohered with that are the writings that circulated in the churches.

They were letters initially. The earliest writings we have are the letters of Paul. And when he couldn't get to some place, or he wanted them to know in advance that he's on his way there, he would send a letter. And in those letters, he would articulate the core elements of Christian faith. And the ones that were most popular, of course, were Romans, 1 Corinthians and Galatians. And those that he wrote to the churches. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and the Thessalonians. Those letters gained a great deal of popularity.

But even beyond that, and after him, there were those that wrote down the story of Jesus as best they could. Mark was probably the first gospel to do that. And it was not even called a gospel initially. But it was the story of Jesus. Almost as soon as Mark did his gospel, Luke and Matthew made use of it, and they expanded in different directions. And then later, John. The church loved those gospels, though they weren't called scripture yet. But they were used in the early church well into the first century, and in the second century, they started to be called scripture. And then Paul's writings to the churches began to be called scripture. By the end of the second century, a number of those writings were recognized as sacred scripture in churches.

But they weren't completely clear on the scope of all of the books of the New Testament. Some had a more difficult time getting accepted. No one seemed to know who wrote the book of Hebrews. It finally got accepted because they attributed it to Paul. And it was rejected by a number of folks well into the fourth century. Some books, they're called the minor New Testament or the Catholic epistles, and that's 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and then also Revelation. It's not a part of the minor New Testament. Those books had a rough go of getting accepted into the church. James had a tough time because it wasn't sure if James was going contrary to Paul; and Paul had achieved a higher space in the churches.

For centuries, the Syrian Christians did not accept those minor New Testament epistles and the book of Revelation. It took them up until the middle of the seventh century before they accepted Revelation. But they still don't use it in Orthodox churches in their liturgies, even though it's in their Bible. It was a debated book for some time. Origen loved the message of the book of Hebrews. And he finally said, who wrote Hebrews, God only knows. Authorship was not a critical issue initially in the churches, and how do I know that? All four gospels were written anonymously, so was the book of Acts. So was Hebrews, so was 1, 2, & 3 John.

David Capes

Only Paul's letters have a name associated with them.

Lee McDonald

Yes. Well, of course. First Peter, and James.

David Capes

Right. But I mean, of those early ones that we talked about.

Lee McDonald

Yes. But the authorship was not a critical issue until the fourth century. Then, by the end of the fourth century, Augustine doesn't want to accept anything, if they don't have the correct author. Athanasius wrote a festival letter to let Christians know when to celebrate Easter. And he always put a message in each one of those. On the 39th letter, letting Christians know when to celebrate Easter, he also had a list of the books that could be read in churches. And that was the idea of a canon and he actually used the word "canon" which had not been used before for that collection of scriptures.

And he accepted a couple of extra books in the Old Testament; Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, and he didn't except Esther. But he did say that Esther could be read privately, along with the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, Tobit and Judith. And he also liked the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas. Those can be read privately.

David Capes

One of the things that people may not realize and our late friend Larry Hurtado was so good at talking about, Christians were very bookish people. And the same thing with Jews. Jews were writing people. Not every religion manifested itself in terms of writings. That seems a little bit counterintuitive for us, because of the way we think about religion, but not so in those days. There were lots of books to choose from, as you've indicated. Books, maybe that you've mentioned that people had never heard of before. There had to be a sifting process to decide which books are in and which books are out. How are they in? How can they be used? Can they be used in liturgy? Can they be used for private devotions or more privately, we could say. But all those are key questions that are being bandied about at that time.

Lee McDonald

Sure. You raise the question of criteria on why these books and not those books, and one of them was catholicity. That is, widespread use in the early churches. And not all of the churches agreed but the majority of churches agreed for most of the books of the New Testament. There were some other books that were quite popular for quite some time. Like the Shepherd of Hermas. The Epistle of Barnabas, the Gospel of Peter. 30 years after Irenaeus said these four: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and no more. He didn't speak for everybody.

About 30 years later, Serapion, the bishop of Antioch, dealt with one of his churches having a dispute over whether to read the Gospel of Peter. And he said, if that's the only problem, let it go. And then he gets back to Antioch, reads it and He said, no, don't do that. So, the criteria was did it abide by the core elements of the early Christian church. So that's a truth criterion.

The early church didn't have a Bible, but they had teaching and preaching that went on in the churches and the songs that were sung. We often say in our generation, we don't get our theology from the hymn book, we get it from the Bible. Well, the early Christians quite often got their theology in the hymns, because they didn't have a Bible. Most of them couldn't read if they had one. That's the criterion of usefulness and is one of the most powerful ones that Origen and Eusebius emphasized greatly. And Eusebius calls it "the widely acceptable books."

And then he raised the question of the antilegomena, those that were disputed. And he adds seven books in that category: James, 2-3 Peter, Hebrews, Jude and the book of Revelation. By the end of the fourth century, all of those were welcomed in a majority of churches. Let me just go back to the criteria. There's usefulness, and then apostolicity. If it was written by an apostle, and we know it was written by an apostle, that got in. Were there some books that they thought were written by an apostle that got in but it wasn't true? Yes, Hebrews, of course. It had too powerful of a message.

Antiquity, the Muratorian fragment speaks about a book that was not welcomed. Shepherd of Hermas because it was written too late. And so those books that were written closest to the time of Jesus. That's true for most of them in the New Testament as they were written before any other books. First Clement was called scripture for a period of time. It was written I think, around 90 AD, possibly a little earlier. And it was rejected eventually. But it was highly praised and used as scripture for some churches well into the 14th century, which was really quite remarkable.

David Capes

Among early Protestants books like the Wisdom of Solomon, aren't to be read as scripture, but they are certainly profitable to be used. So, they found profit in them without necessarily describing them and ordaining them as scripture.

Lee McDonald

That's correct. Interestingly, the first King James Bible, and most of the Bibles in English before that included what we call in a Protestant tradition apocryphal books. The Catholics call them Deuterocanonical, a second canon. The Orthodox call them inspired noncanonical scriptures. I was speaking to a group of Orthodox professors, and gave me that lineup and I said, boy that's a contradiction in terms.

David Capes

Inspired noncanonical. That's interesting.

Lee McDonald

Yes, but the churches found books that advanced the Christian mission and told the truth about Jesus were the ones that were most acceptable. Now, there's some disputes about some of the books like 1 Clement. A number of people have said, the biblical canon was settled at Nicaea. No, it wasn't. And it never even came up.

David Capes

Nicaea would have been the fourth century.

Lee McDonald

Yes, about 325 AD, the Council of Nicaea called by Constantine, but that dealt with the identity of Jesus, who was he? And that's when our word "trinity" begins to emerge within the churches to articulate what they saw. They use the writings of the New Testament, but they didn't identify any of them in that council. The first time you find a council identifying the books of the New Testament, and the Old

Testament is 360 AD at the Council of Laodicea. And then 382 at the council at Rome, 393 and 397 councils at Hippo and Carthage in 416.

But there were still debates going on, on which books could be read in churches, well into the ninth century. There's a thing called the Stichometry of Nicephorus. Stichometry is the means of counting the different lines in a particular writing. And they paid the person who copied them accordingly. These are the books and they give the names and the numbers of books or lines in the books. But they still say in the ninth century, you really shouldn't read a Shepherd of Hermas. And you shouldn't read all of these other books, the apocryphal books, but that continued.

I've often gotten a remarkable response from folks when I asked, do you know when the first New Testament appeared with only, and all of the current New Testament books included? It's about 1000 AD but you still find books and manuscripts even after that they are many and Christians continued to use 3 Corinthians well into the 1800s. And the Protestant Bibles included most of the apocryphal books well into about 1800s, when that just died out.

Then Revised Standard Version came out with the Protestant Bible. And they put the apocryphal books in between the Old and New Testaments following the example of Luther. He didn't like to use those books, but his people wouldn't let him get rid of them. They included them between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And we got our word "Apocrypha" at that period of time. But the Catholics and Orthodox use Apocrypha books that are totally rejected. They don't read them at all.

David Capes

It's interesting how different Christian communities have looked at these questions and have come to different conclusions over time with at least when it come to the New Testament. Right now, we're fairly close to our Catholic brothers and sisters, even though the Ethiopian Christians and some of the other orthodox might have a different judgment on that. If somebody's really interested in this topic, what's the book that you would recommend of yours that you've written on this particular topic?

Lee McDonald

The one that I wrote for laypeople, and it's in a second edition now is *The Formation of the Bible*. And Hendrickson, now owned by Tyndale, has just published it a few months ago. I expanded the first edition by about 30 pages so it's better. I added a section on the early churches' use and production of pseudepigrapha for literature. And that's the final chapter in it. And that helps clarify that there were books that didn't make it in and which books do we have in mind.

David Capes

All right. *The Formation of the Bible* published by Hendrickson initially, but now the second edition coming out, by Tyndale. This is a complicated question, isn't it? I mean when somebody says, where do we get our Bible, there's not a thirty second answer to that question.

Lee McDonald

Well, my two-volume work, I don't recommend for laypeople at all, because it's got a lot of language in it.

David Capes

You don't mean bad language, do you? No, I'm just kidding!

Lee McDonald

No! The Old Testament Volume One and the New Testament is volume two. Doctoral students generally read that one as do scholars. But I wouldn't recommend it for even a college class. It's more detailed.

David Capes

Yes, a lot of Greek, Latin and those kinds of things. Well, we look forward to having you back here at the Lanier Theological Library in the near future Dr. Lee McDonald, from your cozy place out there on the West Coast. Thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Lee McDonald

Thank you very much.