

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

How was it decided which books would be included in the New Testament?

First, though many devout people have assumed that there must have been one, no “voice from heaven” has ever declared which books belonged in the Bible.

Second, no ecumenical council defined the canon (the list of books comprising the Bible) until the Council of Trent (1545–63), when, countering the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church reaffirmed the inspiration of the Apocrypha. No church council to this day has produced an authoritative canonical list for Eastern Orthodoxy.

Third, it is hard to argue that inspiration can be known by observation or “the inner testimony of the Spirit,” since Christians have not always agreed about which books are inspired.

For example, in Syria until about 400, the Four Gospels were not used at all. Instead the Diatesaron (a weaving together of the four gospels into one longer composite narrative) was used. Syriac Christianity also did not consider canonical any of the catholic epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John and Jude) or Revelation. That changed in about 400 when the Syriac translation called the Peshitta came into use. It added James, 1 Peter, and 1 John, but not the shorter catholic epistles or Revelation. They are still lacking from the Bible of the Nestorian Church.

The whole Greek-speaking, eastern half of the Mediterranean was slow to accept Revelation (and to this day, Revelation is absent from the Greek Orthodox lectionary), while the Latin

Church was slow to accept Hebrews (until Jerome and Augustine argued for it).

Individual congregations seem to have made their own decisions about what books to read in worship services. How did they decide what to read? We know of two criteria they used: “Was the book written by an apostle?” (apostolicity) and “Is it theologically orthodox?”

Since they were taught by Jesus himself, the apostles could be presumed to know what was correct and to not teach anything false. Those whom the apostles taught personally could similarly be trusted.

But the claim of having been written by an apostle was not enough, since there were many Gospels, Acts and Epistles attributed to apostles but with

(mainly Gnostic) theology contrary to the Christianity handed down over generations within congregations. So, for orthodox congregations, a book had to be theologically orthodox, as well as attributed to an apostle. If its theology was heretical, then apostolic authorship had to be mistaken or a falsification.

What are we to conclude? Books got into the New Testament through a complicated historical process involving both the belief in a book’s apostolicity and the congruence of its theology with tradition, the Christianity handed down in churches.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.