

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

LECTURE 4 – FIRST HERESIES¹ – DOCETISM, GNOSTICISM AND MARCIONISM CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THEM: FORMATION OF NT CANON

Prayer from the years we're going to study:

O Lord God, heavenly King, Father Almighty! We praise You, we bless You, we worship You; we give You thanks for Your great glory.
O Lamb of God, Son of the Father, who sits at the right hand of God the Father, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us: accept our prayer:
O Holy Spirit, you, together with Christ, are most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.
(author unknown, c200)

The rest of this page is an outline of this lecture.

1. INTRODUCTION
2. DOCETISM – Christ only 'seemed' to be human
3. GNOSTICISM – Greek *gnosis* = knowledge; 'we (alone) know more than you'
4. MARCIONISM – part Docetic, part Gnostic, discontinuity between OT/NT

TOPIC BIOGRAPHY OF MARCION

- 4.1 Reasons for popularity of Marcionism
- 4.2 Dangers of Marcionism

5. CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO GNOSTICISM
6. FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON
7. TRADITION – it's place in the Church

¹ Heresy and schism. The word 'heresy' basically meant 'different', but different in a dangerous way, false teaching, wrong teaching, teaching that departed from and challenged the apostolic church. The early Church used it interchangeably with the word 'schism', a division or a split in an organisation. Not until Augustine (bishop in 395) was there a distinction, when heretics were defined as 'those who in holding false opinions regarding God, do injury to the faith itself', and schismatics were defined as 'those who in wicked separations break off from brotherly charity, although they may believe just what we believe.'

1. INTRODUCTION

We saw, in our first Lecture, how the early Church was opposed and sometimes persecuted by (a) Jews, who did not accept that Jesus was the messiah, by (b) local pagans, who saw Christians as a threat to their community, because they wouldn't worship the community gods and by (c) the Roman State, because Christians refused to acknowledge the emperor as divine. All of these were external threats to the young Church but, despite them, the Church grew.

However, from early in its history, a series of movements threatened the Church from within, led by people who wanted to take over the Church: (1) Docetism, (2) Gnosticism, (3) Marcionism (a particular brand of Gnosticism) and (4) Montanism. We'll look at the first three in this lecture, and then at Montanism in Lecture 5, and see how the Church responded to them. We'll draw some lessons for us today, and we'll see how opposing heresy led to the formation of the New Testament; we'll see also that what are now called 'New Age' ideas aren't new at all – they were promoted then and the early Church responded to them.

2. DOCETISM (Cairns, 76, 97; Olson, 38)

The first divergent teaching became known as Docetism. It came in many varieties but the common theme was that God was pure and humanity was evil, so the true God could not have defiled himself by taking human flesh. From the Greek verb *dokein* 'to seem, to appear', they said that Christ only 'seemed' to be human and only 'seemed' to suffer – they've been nicknamed the 'Seemists'.

Some said that the divine Spirit entered the human body of Jesus only when John baptized him, and then left him in the Garden of Gethsemane, so he didn't suffer. Others said Simon of Cyrene was crucified while Jesus looked on from place of safety – there were all sorts of variations. As to the Resurrection, they said that Jesus' Spirit might have returned to the Father, but no way could his body have done so.

The Church opposed them, because if Jesus wasn't really human, as well as truly God, he could not be the Second Adam, the Redeemer of humanity. It's ironic, because many to whom we speak today, evangelistically, accept that Jesus was a good man, a teacher, but won't accept that he was God. The problem for the early Church was that Docetism was so fixated on his divinity that it denied his humanity.

Docetism was answered in John's Gospel and Letters as dangerous heresy, e.g. 'Word became flesh' (John 1:14) and 'every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God' (1 John 4:1.3) and also 2 John 7. We saw in our second Lecture that the Apologists answered the criticism that Christianity was new and therefore couldn't be taken seriously, by stressing that the eternal Son of God, the *Logos*, had existed before the great names in Greek and Roman history, and had now entered into humanity with the birth of Jesus.

It was combated also by the Apostolic Fathers (Lecture 2), e.g.

Close your ears, then, to any talk that ignores Jesus Christ, of David's line; He was the son of Mary. He was really born, ate and drank; was really persecuted in the days of Pontius Pilate, was really crucified and died, in the sight of all heaven and earth and the underworld. He was really raised from the dead.
 Ignatius, *Letter to the Trallians*, 9.11.12.

If the Docetists had succeeded in taking over the early Church, there would be no NT gospel for us today. As Charles Wesley put it, ‘O loving wisdom of our God, when all was sin and shame, a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.’ The true humanity of Jesus is crucial for humanity’s salvation.

Some Docetics went on to embrace Gnosticism (next), claiming superior knowledge, ‘we know secrets that ordinary Christians don’t know’, and they tried to infiltrate the Church with their ideas. All Gnostics were docetic, but not all Docetics became Gnostics, so they require separate treatment here.

3. GNOSTICISM (Cairns, 96-8; Lion, 96-100; Vos, 31-32; Olson, 28-31, 36-39; Hanks, *Great Events*, 55-60)
- 3.1 Who were Gnostics?

‘Gnostic’ is an umbrella term for a number of groups, all of whom claimed that they, and they alone, possessed the key to salvation. They claimed to have *gnosis*, the Greek word for ‘knowledge’, (we use it in diagnosis, prognosis). The word ‘*gnosis*’ is not bad in itself but Gnostics challenged the orthodox Church because they said: ‘we know more than you do – only we know more than you’. Gnostics saw themselves as spiritual aristocracy, with deeper wisdom and more mystical experiences than orthodox church leaders and certainly a lot more than ‘ordinary’ Christians. Many claimed secret traditions to link them (alone) to the apostles; some claimed that Christ had utilized the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension to teach a few selected people more than was in the Gospels, and these people had passed it on to them, and to them only, and so only they were truly enlightened Christians, whose souls, on death, would return to God, because they ‘knew the password’.

- 3.2 The problem

Both Paul and John had combated Gnostic ideas (1 Timothy 6:20-21 and throughout 1 John) but the problem became acute in mid C2 when Gnostics claimed that they, not the Church, were the true Christians. It was the most serious threat the Church had faced - here was a movement that infiltrated the Church, claiming that they, and they alone, were the true Church.

The most potent danger of Gnosticism to the Church lay in its secret and pervasive methods. Those who held Gnostic views considered that they had every right to remain in the Church, and, indeed, that they were perfectly orthodox, though adding certain esoteric views to their orthodoxy. No doubt they formed cells within the larger congregations and drew to themselves such souls as seemed especially likely to accept their teaching. Those who had been brought up as pagans, and even in the later part of the second century they probably formed the bulk of the average congregation, would find much that was familiar in their doctrines, and this would make them all the more attractive. Elliott-Binns, *The Beginnings of Western Christendom*, 279.

- 3.3 Background of Gnosticism

Two pagan Greek ideas lay behind Gnostic thought:

- (a) That the material world, including the body, was intrinsically evil, so they viewed the body as a prison, in which the soul, the immortal soul, ‘a spark of God’, was trapped in the body. The Gnostic’s ambition on death was to escape from this evil world to return to the true God. This journey ‘upwards’ for the soul, without its body, lay at the root of all Gnostic thought. But:

- (b) Astronomy made people aware of the many planets surrounding the earth – they believed that the earth was stationary, that it was the centre of the solar system and that the sun and moon and stars rotated round the earth, and Gnostics regarded every planet as having its own spirit ruler, so on death your soul had to get past the planets and stars, to get to the true God.

Every group claimed that it, and it alone, had the best password to do this.

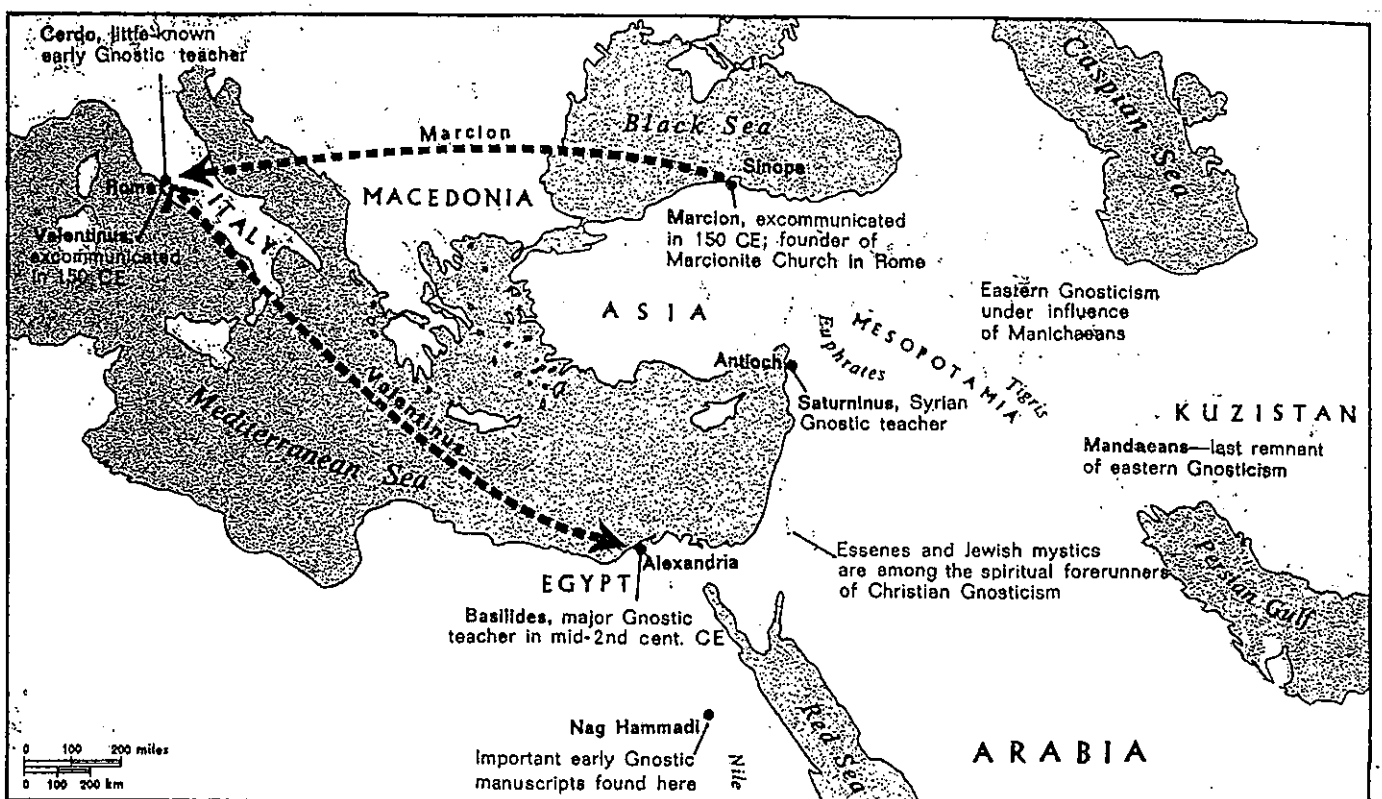
3.4 Gnostic teaching

There were many different teachers, and they all offered their own (exclusive) answer to the question, how can the soul (this divine seed, this divine spark) escape on death from the body (this rotting cadaver in this nasty world) – and find its way to God? The Gnostic explanation for the nastiness of this world and the evil in it, was in two parts:

(a) they contrasted the God of OT, who had created the world, and hadn't done it very well (they said), because he was less than the true God; he couldn't be the true God because he had handled matter; they contrasted him with the true God, proclaimed by Jesus. The true God was unknown until Christ came to reveal him. They called the God of the Jews, God of OT, the creator of world, the 'Demiurge' (Greek for 'architect').

(b) The true God then took pity on the world, and sent Jesus to offer salvation in the form of secret knowledge (*gnosis*) to certain 'spiritual' individuals (them), so that at death they could escape from the prison of the body and pass safely through the planets, which are controlled by hostile demons, to be reunited with God. Most groups claimed they alone possessed the secret knowledge (*gnosis*) of salvation, so 'join us, join our group'.

Gnosticism flourished from C2 to C4 and was a world-wide movement (that is throughout the Roman and Persian Empires).



3.5 Modern Gnosticism

Much in the modern 'New Age movement' explicitly repeats what Gnostics taught: e.g., John Lennon, of the music group 'The Beatles', was a pioneer of New Age and he wrote, 'The only true Christians were the Gnostics, who believed in self-knowledge, that is in being Christ themselves, reaching the Christ within.'

It's said that defining the New Age Movement is like nailing a jelly to the wall – and the same could be said of Gnosticism. The New Age Movement is not about knowing God - it is about knowing your own spiritual self. The actress Shirley McLean, who was a leading spokeswoman for New Age spirituality and who starred in a TV series on the New Age called 'Out on a Limb', said, 'God lies within us and therefore we are each part of God. Since there is no separateness and we are each godlike and God is in each of us, we are literally made up of god-energy'.

In other words, salvation is by knowledge – self-knowledge – not by faith in Christ. This is exactly what the Gnostics said. We know that because in 1945, a library of fifty-two Gnostic books were found at Nag Hammadi north of Luxor in Upper Egypt – see the map at the foot of the previous page – and one of them, called *The Gospel of Truth*, is a call to self-knowledge, to find God for oneself through Gnosis, through self-mastery.

3.6 Gnostic lifestyle

The majority of Gnostics lived disciplined lives, hoping that their divine soul would be set free to think on higher things. However, some drew the opposite conclusion, saying that if matter was ultimately going to be destroyed, then what you did in the body was of no consequence. Gnostics who believed that became notorious for their orgies of immorality, claiming that no external acts could affect their inner person. Parallels today?

4. MARCIONISM (Cairns, 97-8, Olson, 132-3; Lion 104-5)

Although most Gnostics met in small groups, splitting hairs with each other, one man, Marcion, rose above the squabbling and founded a rival church, with its own bishops, ministers and deacons. He was an outstanding organiser, and he had financial resources, so his churches spread all over the empire. This was the greatest challenge that Catholic Christianity had faced so far. So who was he?

TOPIC - BIOGRAPHY OF MARCION - was taken at this point in the Lecture; here, it is printed at the end of the Notes for this Lecture.

4.1 Reasons for the popularity of Marcionism

(a) It appeared to offer the solution to the problem of evil.

Marcion contrasted the God of mercy and love revealed by Jesus (as he read the NT) with the God of wrath and judgement (as he read the OT) by teaching that Jesus revealed a higher God, different from the God of the OT. He said that there was suffering in the world because the Demiurge, the God of the OT had created it badly, and that the God of the NT, in whom they believed, wasn't responsible for evil – problem solved.

(b) It avoided discussing the Church's relationship to Judaism

The Church was trying to work out the relationship between the OT and the embryonic NT, and Marcion said – ‘simple – there isn’t any’ - and this had considerable appeal. Marcion taught that only Paul had correctly understood Jesus' teaching, so he edited ten of Paul's letters, removing every reference to the OT, and he added an abridged version of Luke's Gospel (because Luke was a companion of Paul), and Marcion claimed that these 11 writings were the only authentic Christian writings.

(c) Marcion's organising ability and his wealth.

Marcion used his wealth to promote his cause. He had great organising ability and soon developed network of churches, each under its own bishop. He had genuine missionary concern.

4.2 Dangers of Marcionism

(a) It was plausibly Christian, based on writings with authority of Paul.

It appeared on surface to be thoroughly Christian, based on the writings of Paul which were already well-established in Church circles. But it was anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish). True God, seeing suffering of mankind, had sent His Son Jesus to redeem us from power of Creator God, the Jewish God. This completely denied the Church's historic roots in Judaism, which we need in order to understand the true Christian faith.

(b) Marcion's Christ was not truly human, so he could not redeem humanity

Marcion was partly Docetic – he denied the incarnation of Jesus and his resurrection. He taught that Christ's body was composed of purely spiritual elements, nothing material, but if Christ was not truly human, he could not redeem humanity. He was also partly Gnostic – only partly. He had the Gnostics' negative view of the body and the physical world, which he said was the creation of the OT demiurge, but he didn't suggest that Jesus had given secret teaching, and he wasn't interested in passwords for a safe passage to eternity.

(c) People could be drawn into Marcionism without realising the difference.

Marcion founded a network of churches, each under its own bishop, which soon spanned the Roman Empire, outwardly so similar to Catholic churches that orthodox leaders had to warn travellers to be careful, when they visited other places, not to confuse the Marcionite church there with the Catholic Church. It was all too easy for people to be drawn into Marcionism without realising that they had deviated from true faith. Marcionite churches survived, in declining numbers, down to the Middle Ages.

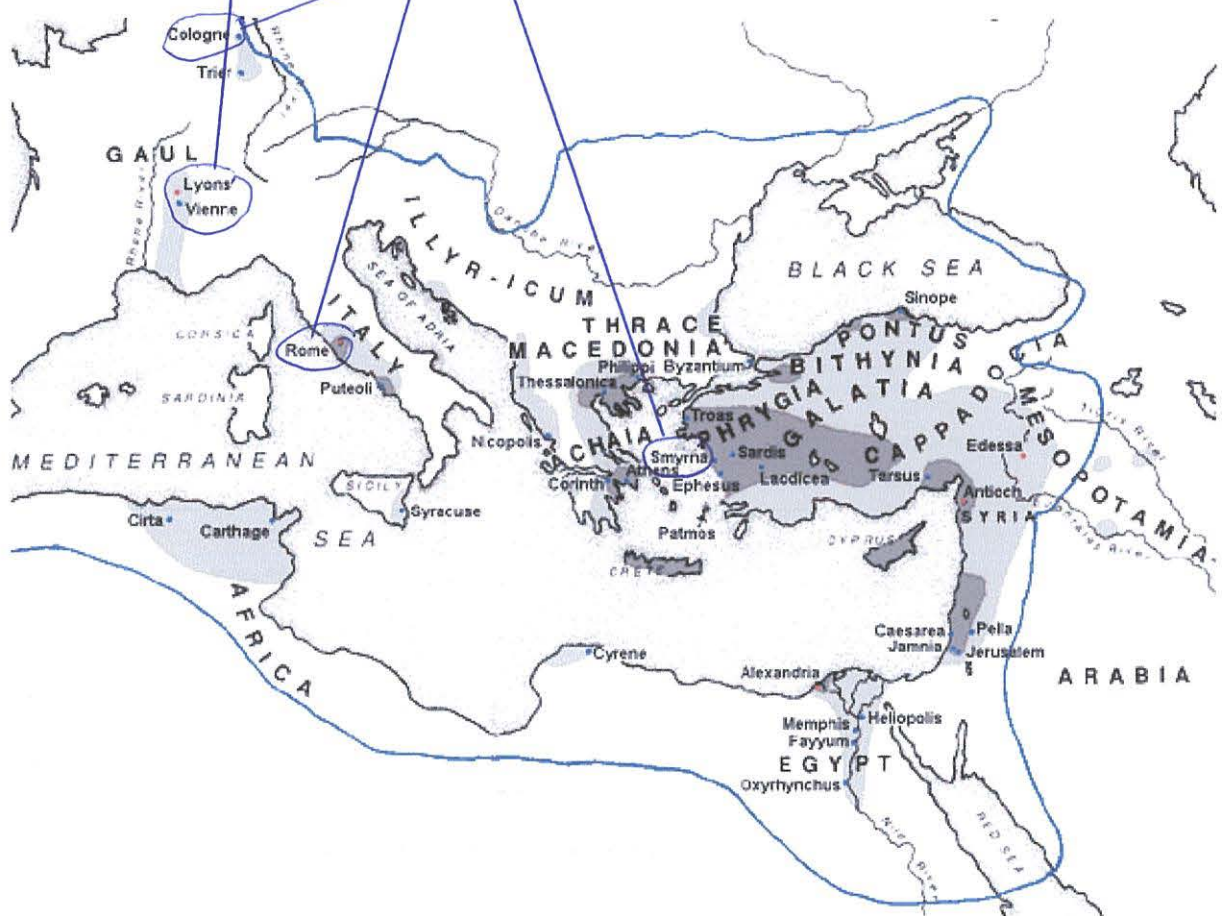
5. CHURCH ANSWERED GNOSTICISM BY 4 INTERLOCKING RESPONSES

We'll look at these four responses through the life of a remarkable man named Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, which is now in France. The following page has two maps to illustrate his life, and the narrative is taken up on page 8.



Two maps to illustrate the life of Irenaeus, whose biography is at page 8 and who was a key figure in the Church's answer to and defeat of Gnosticism in the Church.

Born and brought up in Smyrna,
 He was sent by the Church to Rome
 and then to Lyons, where he became bishop.
 Under him, evangelists went up the River Rhone
 and down the River Moselle, as far as Cologne.



- Extent of Christian communities by the 1st century
- Extent of Christian communities by 185 (the time of Irenaeus)
- Early centers of Christianity
- Boundary of the Roman Empire for most of the 1st and 2nd centuries

5.1 Biography of Irenaeus of Lyons (c130-202)

(Cairns, 107-8; Lion, 100; Olson, 68-78; Vos, 17; Lane, 15-6; Hanks, *Great Events*, 57-60; *70 Great Christians*, 17-21.)

He was the first truly international, cross-cultural Christian leader – I'll explain that in a moment – and the first to ask publicly, 'What is Christianity? What are its essentials? What is non-negotiable?' If someone today was brought up in Britain, then lived for a while in South America and also spent time in Africa, we would say that person had 'international experience'. Irenaeus was the first Christian leader to have truly international experience. Follow his life on the map on the previous page.

He was born into a Christian family in the seaport of Smyrna, in Asia Minor (see map) (Izmir in modern Turkey), c130, so his background was in Greek civilization. The Church sent this promising young man for further study in Rome, (see map), where he learned about Roman culture and he may have studied under Justin Martyr (Lecture 2); many other Greeks had gone to Rome, but the Church then sent Irenaeus further West, to minister to and evangelise Greeks who had emigrated from Asia Minor to Gaul (France). He settled in Lyons in the Rhone valley (see map). Lyons was the capital and most important city in Roman Gaul, where educated people spoke Latin as their first language but people in the countryside spoke Gaulish, and Irenaeus was equally at home among them all – truly cross cultural. He understood how the Church was *katholikos*, empire-wide, better than anyone else we know.

He quickly rose through the leadership of the church in Lyons, and in 176 they sent him as an emissary to Rome. This saved his life, because while he was away, there was a ferocious persecution in Gaul in 177 and the Bishop of Lyons was martyred at the age of ninety. As soon as peace was restored, Irenaeus was recalled from Rome and appointed as bishop. He had very successful episcopate (bishop) at Lyons from 178-202, during which Christianity made great advances in Gaul, up the Rhone and down the Mosel (through Trier, see map), which was as far as they could to go, because the Rhine was the boundary of the Roman Empire.

In 202 there was another persecution, and Irenaeus was among those killed.

How did he answer Gnosticism? He looked at these disparate groups of Gnostics, who not only called themselves Christian but claimed that their group alone were authentic Christians, and he began to write a book to describe them and to show why they were not Christians at all – and the more he wrote, the more he found. He had what we call a photographic memory and he listed 217 varieties of Gnosticism in his longest work, *Five Books of Unmasking and Overturning of Knowledge Falsely So-called* - commonly referred to as *Against Heresies*.

He answered the Gnostics in four interlocking ways, numbered here 5.2 to 5.5

5.2 First Response to Gnosticism – established authority of the orthodox leaders

Irenaeus showed that Church bishops taught what apostles had taught and did so consistently and with one voice; Gnostics relied on teaching that was not in the public domain. They claimed secret traditions to link them (alone) to apostles. As a young man, Irenaeus had been taught by Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, who, as a young man, had been taught by the apostle John, who lived in Ephesus until c96. So Irenaeus answered Gnostic's claims that they alone taught what Jesus had taught by saying: 'Look, Jesus taught John, John taught Polycarp, Polycarp taught me, and what you say Jesus was teaching is just not true.' What's more, he said, all the Catholic churches teach the same, but you Gnostics – 217 different groups – claim that your particular

brand of Christianity is the only true one. He ridiculed the idea of all claiming that they alone were correct. He laid down two tests, to establish whether leaders had authority:

(a) Is their ministry open and public? Don't go to a secret guru. If you want to find true Christianity, go to churches founded by the apostles, see what has been publicly read and openly taught ever since the Apostles. There was no place, he said, for 'secret traditions' which heretical sects claimed that they, and they alone, had learned from the apostles. Orthodox leaders are in direct succession from Christ and they speak with one voice.

(b) Is their teaching consistent throughout the known world? People could go to any of the churches founded by the apostles, Irenaeus contended, and find that all the bishops had consistently taught what apostles had taught, and did so with one voice, whereas competing Gnostic sects changed their teaching as they vied with one another.

5.3 Second Response to Gnosticism - unity of OT and NT

Irenaeus demonstrated by careful argument from Bible the harmony of creator God of Israel (OT) with Father of Christ (NT), where Gnostics drove wedge between them. Irenaeus showed that God's people developed progressively, and that if OT legislation was less perfect than NT, both were still work of same God. Creation was not the product of an inferior demiurge, but noble workmanship of heavenly Father of Jesus Christ, refuting the Gnostic argument that Jesus came to reveal a different God. He demonstrated the continuity of the NT with the OT and in doing so, was the first to coin the phrase 'New Testament'.

5.4 Third Response to Gnosticism - a 'Rule of Faith', to test teaching (Cairns, 114; Lion, 115-8)

By late C2 (possibly earlier) Church had two complementary summaries of Christ's life and work and of Church's teaching. They developed in tandem - not in competition - and had different purposes:

(1) Scriptures, which already were agreed to consist of four Gospels and other books as set out in section 6 of this Lecture, and which in due course it became our NT. As John 21:25 states, world itself could scarcely contain all books that could be written about Jesus. However, even summaries contained in books we now call Gospels were too large for new converts - many illiterate - so essentials of faith were set out in summaries of apostolic teaching, called 'Rule of Faith':

(2) Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*) was a précis of essential beliefs that distinguished Catholic Church from other groups claiming to be Christian, providing a yardstick to test whether doctrines now taught by the Gnostics were what the apostles had taught. Different regions faced different challenges, so the Rule of Faith had regional variations - they were not contradictory, but, as seen on the chart on the next page, focusing on the particular issues encountered at Lyons (left), at Carthage (centre) and at Alexandria (right).

An illustration of how the Rule of Faith was used in practice is set out at the top of page 11, following, on page 10, three examples of the Rule as it was used in Lyons, Carthage and Alexandria.

Rule of faith in Lyons (Irenaeus c190), Carthage (Tertullian c200) and Alexandria (Origen c220)

Irenaeus

For the Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world. . . has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith:

in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all things that are in them;

and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation;

and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the incarnate ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His future manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father, to 'sum up all things' (Ephes. 1.10) and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord and God and Saviour and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, 'every knee should bow, of things in heaven. . . etc. (Phil. 2.10-11). 'and every tongue confess' and that He should execute just judgement towards all; that He may send 'spiritual likenesses' (Eph. 6.12), and the angels who transgressed and came into a state of rebellion together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into the everlasting fire; but may as an act of grace, confer immortality on the righteous and holy, and those who have kept his commandments, and have persevered in his love, some from the beginning, and others from their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.

Tertullian

Now, as to this rule of faith. . . it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that

there is one only God, and that he is the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through his own Word, First of all sent forth;

that this Word is called his Son, and under the name of God, was seen in divers forms by the patriarchs, ever heard in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of God the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh, although he was God. . . He made flesh in her womb and, being born of her, lived as Jesus Christ; thenceforth he preached a new law and a new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles, was crucified, and rose again the third day;

He was caught up to the heavens, and sat down at the right hand of the Father;

He sent instead of Himself the power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe,

He will come again with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh.

This rule was taught by Christ, and raises among ourselves no questions except those which heresies introduce.

Origen (abridged)

. . . The holy apostles, when preaching the faith of Christ, took certain doctrines, those namely which they believed to be the necessary ones, and delivered them in the plainest terms to all believers. . . The kind of doctrines which are believed in plain terms through the apostolic teaching are as follows:

First, that God is one, who created and set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be. He is God from the first creation and foundation of the world, the God of all righteous men (OT heroes listed). This God in these last days, according to the precious announcements made through his prophets, sent the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then again: Christ Jesus, he who came to earth, was begotten of the Father before every created thing. . . in these last times he emptied himself and was made man, was made flesh, although he was God. . . He took to himself a body like our body, differing in this alone, that it was born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit. And this Jesus Christ was born and suffered in truth and not in mere appearance, and truly died our common death.

Moreover he truly rose from the dead, and after the resurrection companied with his disciples and was then taken up to heaven.

Then again the apostles delivered this doctrine, that the Holy Spirit is united in honour and dignity with the Father and the Son. . .

Next after this the apostles taught that the soul. . . will be rewarded according to its deserts after its departure from the world; for it will either obtain an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness. . . or it must be given over to eternal fire and torments. . . Further there will be a time for the resurrection of the dead. . .

(Origen then adds a number of further doctrines as apostolic: freewill, the struggle with the devil, the help of ministering angels in bringing about salvation; and observes a number of doubtful points which are open to investigation)

Note: a number of these excerpts leave out quotations from scripture for the sake of space.

An illustration of whether writings circulating even under name of apostle could be accepted by the Church depended on whether their contents agreed with Rule of Faith. Bishop Serapion of Antioch visited Rhossus, near Antioch, and heard Gospel of Peter being read. Initially he approved, because of author's name, although he did not know book. Returning home, he read it and found it docetic, measured against Rule of Faith. He went back to Rhossus, forbidding further use of Gospel of Peter and correcting error in congregation. Because of author's name, he had accepted it at first, but measured against *regula fidei*, he changed his mind. No suggestion that Rule of Faith was different from Scripture – it was condensation of message contained in Scripture.

5.4 Fourth Response to Gnosticism - Canon of NT Scripture

Because Marcion constructed his own 'New Testament', the Church had to consider what was and what was not NT Scripture. Many 'apocryphal' books tried to fill in gaps in the life of Jesus. Heretics said 'their' books were canonical, to authenticate their message. What books are you prepared to die for, if the Empire demands that 'Scriptures' are to be handed over for destruction? This will be explored now.

6. FORMATION OF NEW TESTAMENT CANON²

(Cairns, 115-6; Lion, 106-8, 130-36; Vos, 36-39; Olson, 131-135;
Hanks, *Great Events*, 77-83.)

6.1 Gospels

The sayings and doings of the Lord were handed down orally for c30 years, then, as those who knew the Lord in the flesh passed away, the Church became ever more dependent on written records. Mark's Gospel is usually reckoned to be first and dated c68; by the end of C1, there were four 'canonical' Gospels, John's being reckoned to be last and dated c96.

6.2 Paul's letters

Paul requested that (copies of) his letters should be circulated - e.g. letter to Colossians was to be read also in church of Laodiceans and Colossians were to read his letter to Laodiceans (Col. 4:16) and he addressed the Galatian letter 'to the churches of Galatia' (Gal. 1:2), and urged that 1 Thessalonians be read 'to all the brethren' (1 Thess. 5:27).

Local churches, founded by Paul, read his writings when they gathered for worship week by week, and, as time went on, collections of Paul's letters acquired an authority of their own, especially after Paul was martyred.

6.3 Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, wrote c110, about Mark and Matthew.

Papias (c60 - 130) lived when it was still possible to learn details of life of Christ from living tradition. Papias had heard John preach and he wrote five books, 'Explanations

² Greek *kanon* means 'rule' or 'measuring rod' or standard' or 'fixed reference point', so phrase 'canon of Scripture' refers to limited and defined group of writings, which were ultimately accepted as authoritative within Christian Church, ones we now possess in our Bibles. Word 'canon' was later used for Church pronouncements – we now talk about Canon Law – but in Early Church, it meant catalogue or list of documents accepted as Scripture.

of the Sayings of the Lord', c110. Unfortunately only a few fragments survive, but they give us the origins of Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Mark had been the interpreter of Peter and had committed to writing what was said or done by Christ, so far as he remembered it, not however in order.[chronological or factual?] Matthew compiled the sayings in the Hebrew tongue.

6.4 'Muratorian Fragment' c200

By c200, an orthodox list was circulating at Rome, giving the general consensus of orthodox opinion. It is known to-day as 'Muratorian Fragment on Canon' because was published by L. A. Muratori (1672-1750) in 1740. See the chart on the next page; it wrongly includes James, which was still disputed in West.

NT was determined by general usage, not by any authoritarian pronouncement. There was no formal act of 'Canonisation' of the NT, no Committee decision, – C2 Church was too loosely organised for that. We'll see at 6.7 what the criteria were.

6.5 Origen of Alexandria (c250) and Eusebius of Caesarea (c330)

See chart on the next page. There are now (a) recognised books, (b) disputed works and (c) writings advanced by heretics in name of apostles.

6.6 Athanasius' Easter letter of 367 and Council of Carthage, 397

First witness to current twenty-seven books of NT as alone being canonical is Athanasius of Alexandria's Easter letter of 367. He was not being innovative, he was writing down what was generally accepted. This was backed up in the West by the Third Council of Carthage (397), confirmation of the final definition of the Canon.

6.7 Criteria used in recognition of canonical books

(a) Apostolicity – were they written by or on behalf of an Apostle? Matthew and John were no problem, they were first-hand accounts. Mark and Luke were strongly linked with Apostles, Mark with Peter and Luke with Paul. James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John were borderline for a long time because of questions about their authorship, James and Jude because they represented themselves as 'servants' rather than 'apostles'; 2 Peter because it differed in style and vocabulary from 1 Peter; 2 and 3 John because the author called himself an 'elder' rather than an 'apostle'. This also meant initial exclusion of Hebrews, because its authorship was uncertain, and eventually to exclusion of Shepherd of Hermas and epistle of Clement to Corinthians (not apostolic).

(b) Orthodoxy. If writing did not cohere with what was generally accepted as core teaching, i.e. teaching passed on by apostles or their successors, writing was unacceptable. Yardstick of orthodoxy was Rule of Faith – e.g. Bishop Serapion, p. 11.

(c) Antiquity. Claims of Montanists c200 that they were bringing fresh revelation further encouraged Church to close canon, and to insist that revelation had ended with close of apostolic age. There was no sympathy for Montanist claims that new prophesies could be added to scripture.

(d) Usage. How a book served churches in worship and instruction played a major role in determining which scriptures were preserved and became part of biblical canon. Thus books which had been recognised as authoritative by earliest Christians were received more quickly than others.

The New Testament As It Gained Acceptance by the Early Church

200	250	300	400
<p>New Testament used in the church at Rome (the "Muratorian Canon")</p> <p>Four Gospels Acts Paul's letters: Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon</p> <p>James</p> <p>1 & 2 John Jude Revelation of John Reverleation of Peter Wisdom of Solomon</p> <p>To be used in private, but not public, worship The Shepherd of Hermas</p>	<p>New Testament used by Origen</p> <p>Four Gospels Acts Paul's letters: Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon</p> <p>1 Peter 1 John</p> <p>Revelation of John</p> <p>Disputed Hebrews James 2 Peter 2 & 3 John Jude The Shepherd of Hermes Letter of Barnabus Teaching of Twelve Apostles Gospel of the Hebrews</p>	<p>New Testament used by Eusebius</p> <p>Four Gospels Acts Paul's letters: Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon</p> <p>1 Peter 1 John</p> <p>Revelation of John (authorship in doubt)</p> <p>Disputed but well known James 2 Peter 2 & 3 John Jude</p>	<p>New Testament fixed for the West by the Council of Carthage</p> <p>Four Gospels Acts Paul's letters: Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon</p> <p>Hebrews James 1 & 2 Peter 1, 2, & 3 John Jude Revelation of John</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>To be excluded The Shepherd of Hermes Letter of Barnabus Gospel of the Hebrews Revelation of Peter Acts of Peter Didache</p> </div>

Books Debated for Inclusion in the New Testament Canon

QUESTIONED BOOK	REASONS GIVEN FOR ACCEPTANCE	REASONS GIVEN FOR EXCLUSION	RESULT
HEBREWS	Thought Pauline in East	Thought non-Pauline forgery in West	Accepted
JAMES	Thought genuine in East	Authorship questioned in West	Accepted
2 PETER	Petrine authorship	Authorship questioned Similarity of chapter 2 to Jude	Accepted
2-3 JOHN	Johannine authorship	Lack of citations in early writings	Accepted
JUDE	Early citations Apostolic authorship	Authorship questioned	Accepted
REVELATION	Widely recognized as Johannine	Questioned by Eusebius largely because of his opposition to chiliasm	Accepted
THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS	Edifying contents Visions from God	Nonapostolic origin Late date	Excluded
DIDACHE	Record of genuine apostolic traditions	Uncertain origin Late date	Excluded
REVELATION OF PETER	Suspected Petrine authorship Similarity to Johannine Apocalypse	Authenticity doubted	Excluded

7. TRADITION

7.1 Scripture and Tradition - then

In early Church, word 'tradition' had a technical meaning, teaching of Christ and his apostolic eye-witnesses – Paul commended the Corinthians for maintaining 'traditions as I delivered them to you' (1 Cor: 11.2) and urged the Thessalonians to 'stand firm and hold to traditions you were taught by me' (2:2:15). In early Church, tradition was therefore key to orthodoxy - tradition in sense of what Lord and apostles had committed to the Church.

7.2 Scripture and Tradition - now (Lion, 17-19)

There are now two views, which distinguish Protestant Church from RC and Orthodox Churches. All agree that Tradition means 'doctrine and teaching which has been handed down through Church', but Protestants believe that Scripture embodies all the Tradition which is of final authority and that no other Tradition carries authority; by 'fixing of canon', the Church deliberately drew a line between Traditions coming from apostles (which became NT Canon) and other Traditions (which did not make it into Canon).

Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches believe that Tradition has come down to us in two forms, (1) Scriptures of Old and New Testaments and Apocrypha and (2) teaching of Church, written and oral, and that they have equal authority and that we must obey both equally. This became official dogma of Catholic Church when Gregory (540-604) was Pope, and a reasonably contemporary Roman Catholic official definition of place of Tradition is:

The inspired writings have an important and unique place. ... This is not to fall into the error of maintaining that the Scriptures are the sole rule of faith. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, is also with the Church, and it is through the living tradition of the Church that the Scriptures reach man. ... We need some authority to tell us what are the inspired Scriptures and how they should be interpreted. ... Both the Bible and the Church have their part to play in the rule of faith. *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 1967, vol 12, 'Scripture and Tradition' p. 707

This has practical and profound consequences for evangelical Christians. It makes resolution of inter-faith issues almost impossible, because Evangelicals accept only what is in Scriptures of Old and New Testaments and Roman Catholics and Orthodox give equal authority to Traditions of their Churches, saying that their Church has a continuing role and that Church's traditions over centuries stand alongside Bible as twin authorities for Christian life and practice.

Finally, as a thought for discussion, if Roman Catholics have (erroneously in view of Protestants) magnified the authority of Tradition since the Council of Trent, as an authority independent of the Bible, have some Protestants have adopted an unnecessarily negative attitude to Tradition or even neglected it altogether? Some evangelical churches make no mention in their services of events which others build into their Church Calendar – Advent Sunday. Palm Sunday. Pentecost Sunday – perhaps we could recognize them without being bound by the traditions surrounding them?

OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

TOPIC FOR LECTURE 4 – MARCION

Please give us a short biography of Marcion (c85-160), and outline such aspects of his teaching (other than those below) as you consider most important for our understanding of him. (Cairns, 97-98; Lion, 104-5; Olson, 132-3)

After the Topic, the Lecture will look at:

Reasons for the popularity of Marcion's teaching, and
Dangers he posed for the Early Church

You can see Marcion's name on the map on page 4 of the Lecture Notes, above the top dotted line. He was born c85 at Sinope, a port on the Black Sea, the son of the bishop there, so he had a Christian home. He became a ship-owner, made a fortune and about age 55 he moved to Rome and joined the church there. However, a Gnostic persuaded him to distinguish the God of the Old Testament from the father of Jesus Christ, and he was excommunicated from the Church in Rome in 144 (aged 60).

Marcion's writings:

Antitheses, to claim there were differences between god of Old Testament and true God.

Euangelion, or Gospel of the Lord, (= Luke's Gospel, abridged)

Apostolikon, ten epistles of Paul, not including pastorals.

Some contemporary attacks on Christianity are merely restating Marcion's heresies. For example, in his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins writes,

'The God of the Old Testament is ... the most unpleasant character in all fiction ...'. That could equally well have been written by Marcion, and is equally unfair.

This 10th century miniature in Cathedral of St. Bravo in Ghent, Belgium, is said to depict Marcion (left) with Apostle John, to whom he 'brought scriptures from the brethren in Pontus', (i.e., Marcion's truncated New Testament), but John reproved him and rejected his 'scriptures'. Picture is obviously imaginary, because John had been dead for over forty years before Marcion came to his heretical understanding of New Testament.

