

LIGHTS AMID THE DARKNESS:
CREATING THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The aim of liberal education...is to develop free human beings who know how to use their minds and are able to think for themselves.... Our educational problem is how to produce free men, not hordes of uncultivated, trained technicians.

—Mortimer Adler¹

One of the foundational purposes of a university education is to liberalize its students intellectually and culturally, hence the term “liberal education.” By using the word “liberal” I am not referring to political views, nor to cultural relativism. Instead, in a world where popular culture is increasingly narcissistic and solipsistic, instruction in liberal arts introduces the young mind to a new and different cultural milieu, one that challenges students to move out of their cultural comfort zone to engage a variety of alternatives, appreciate them, and incorporate valuable aspects into their own cultural lives. Liberal education at BYU–Idaho should aspire, among other things, to realize the thirteenth Article of Faith, that is, the quest for all that is virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy in the world, collected from the past and the present.

Care must be taken, of course, to encourage cultural engagement without destroying students’ beliefs, hopes, and aspirations. Instead, we should strengthen their faith by following the lead of President Gordon B. Hinckley, encouraging students to cultivate “affirmative gratitude” for the contributions made by other cultures, while avoiding the re-affirmation of a holier-than-thou attitude grounded in existing cultural solipsism or narcissism.² A liberal arts education, as taught in World Foundations, should therefore gently move students toward an informed, liberalized cultural attitude. I attempt to do this by pointing out aspects of common LDS culture that we often treat as doctrinal, but that are, in fact, only cultural.

For example, it is common to use a misinformed, even erroneous, history of the European Middle Ages to justify the “enlightened” and inherent superiority of modern times without consideration of the merits of medieval European culture. When students are introduced to a more factual history of the so-called “Dark Ages,” they often experience cultural dislocation, addressing for the first time, perhaps, the notion that their perception of their cultural heritage may not be intrinsically accurate, and that the inaccuracies may inappropriately undermine doctrinal truth. I call this process “cultural dissonance.” Cultural dissonance addresses

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two important obstacles to affirmative gratitude and the development of a liberalized mind and heart: presentism and ethnocentrism.

Presentism makes it difficult to appreciate contributions made by other cultures in the past, particularly the distant past. The past is unfamiliar territory, and people understandably tend to view the past through the lens of the present. Whenever we project our own cultural values back into time and impose them on peoples of the past, we practice what historians call “presentism.” Presentism not only distorts our view of the past but also results in grossly unfair judgments about peoples of the past. It makes difficult, if not impossible, appreciation and respect for other peoples. Avoiding presentism—by learning about peoples within their own historical context—helps us judge other times and peoples as God judges them and not as other humans judge them. Joseph Smith taught that God “will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to... the facilities afforded them for obtaining correct information.”³ In other words, peoples of the past will be judged by God within their historical context, not ours. God does not practice presentism.

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Ethnocentrism also makes it difficult for us to understand and appreciate the contributions of unfamiliar peoples and civilizations. Ethnocentrism is a strong tendency, present in most, if not all cultures, to see other peoples as strange, foreign, even alien, and consequently as inferior. But strangers play an important role in a culture’s self-definition and its sense of uniqueness. Cultures define themselves not only by what they are, but also by what they are not. Scholars have a term for the role these strangers play in cultural self-definition: “the other.”

Jesus provides a profound example of how to avoid presentism and ethnocentrism through the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus could not have picked as the hero of his story an individual more despised and ostracized than a Samaritan. Samaritans epitomized “the other” in Jewish culture. Samaritans, as you may know, were related to the Jews, but they had intermarried with Assyrian immigrants and thereafter corrupted the Israelite religion. The Jews of Jesus’ day considered the Samaritans half-breed apostates, heretics of the worst stripe. In the parable, a lawyer, a Pharisee, asks Jesus the question, “Who is my neighbor?” The Savior responds by telling him about a good Samaritan. In the parable the religious leaders of Christ’s own culture, the Priest and the Levite, do not help the man who fell among thieves. Instead, a lowly Samaritan stops and helps.

The Samaritan personifies all of the virtues the Pharisees claim to possess. Through the parable Jesus showed the lawyer that a Samaritan understood and practiced the second great commandment (love thy neighbor as thyself) *better* than the Pharisees, the Priest, or the Levite. The Savior thereby turned a Samaritan without any office or status into a

hero. The parable avoids presentism and breaks down ethnocentrism. This is not the only time Jesus attacked the holier-than-thou ethnocentrism in his own culture. He commended Roman centurions who possessed faith greater than all Israel, acknowledged prostitutes who worshipped with fullness of heart, and praised repentant publicans for their humility.

Godliness includes neither presentism nor ethnocentrism, and we should encourage godliness in ourselves and in our students as part of the cultural awareness portion of the Foundations Curriculum. The prudent use of cultural dissonance may prove an effective tool in providing the quality of liberal education the Foundations program aspires to.

What follows is an example of a culturally dissonant essay for World Foundations students.

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THE BOY JOSEPH READS JAMES

Joseph Smith, troubled by the religious contention dividing his community and family, decided at the age of fourteen to resolve the sectarian debate through recourse to the Bible. Imagine, if you will, that he searched the New Testament, thumbing through Hebrews and stopping at the place where we know the letter of James to be—but in the Smith family Bible he finds no letter of James.⁴ Imagine that James was never there in the first place, since many early Christian leaders argued that it was not true scripture. Joseph therefore found no instruction about asking God for wisdom, no promise that God would not upbraid or chastise him should he pray. This scenario is fictitious, but nevertheless plausible. The New Testament we have today might never have come into existence were it not for a series of bishops in the ancient church who were determined to faithfully collect and preserve the gospels, histories, letters, and revelations that define our faith in fundamental ways.

The compilation of the New Testament canon (a single, authoritative collection that brought the twenty-seven separate books of the New Testament together) began *after* the loss of priesthood authority, which probably occurred between AD 90 and 120. The process of forming the canon took over two hundred more years to complete, in a time with no valid priesthood in the Mediterranean region, no authority to pronounce doctrine, no gift of the Holy Ghost, and no right to revelation.⁵ Nevertheless, working under far less than favorable conditions, in times of persecution, severe internal conflict in the ancient church, and individual battles for power and position, inspired men brought forth the *exact* canon of the New Testament we Latter-day Saints accept today, with no books left out and no unnecessary ones included.

This was no small accomplishment, considering that there were at least seventeen other gospels that might have been included, five additional histories (or writings called “acts”), thirteen epistles, and seven

apocalyptic or revelatory texts. Consider the possibility of exchanging the four gospels in the New Testament for *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (in which a youthful Jesus brings clay sparrows to life in order to escape rebuke by Joseph), *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (in which Simon of Cyrene, not Jesus, is crucified), *The Gospel of Mary* (Mary Magdalene, not the mother of Jesus), and *The Proto-Gospel of James* (which describes the miraculous birth of Mary the mother of Christ). For *The Acts of the Apostles*, substitute *The Acts of Thecla* (a woman who dressed as a man and followed Paul in his journeys). Replace Paul's epistles, that of James, and those of Peter and John, with *The Homilies of Clement* (which detail Clement's own search for truth and conversion to Christianity), *Ptolemy's Letter to Flora* (in which an man named Ptolemy teaches that there are three divinities: God, The Devil, and an Intermediate God between them), and *The Treatise on the Resurrection* (which denies a bodily resurrection but affirms a spiritual resurrection). Exchange the *Revelation of St. John* with *The First Thought in Three Forms* (in which a female God takes on three forms: the Father, The Son, and Mary). In point of historical fact, early Christian groups supported various anthologies of these texts, considering certain groupings of them to be true and faithful accounts of Jesus' life and sayings.

Alternatively, imagine that a consensus was *never* achieved, and the New Testament never came into being at all. Any one of those outcomes might have happened, were it not for the inspiration given anciently to men operating under the difficult conditions following the loss of priesthood. They struggled to keep Christianity alive, paving the way for Joseph Smith to hear religious debate about the New Testament in the early nineteenth century, and preserving the counsel of James, which caused Joseph to comment boldly:

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. (Joseph Smith History: 12, emphasis added)

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The near-exclusion of the Epistle of James from the New Testament should give Latter-day Saints pause, leading to affirmative gratitude for the inspired men of late antiquity who guaranteed its place in our own scriptural canon.

THE GREAT APOSTASY

A generous attitude toward contributions of early Christians contradicts a traditional LDS view of historical consequences of the great apostasy. As Elder Alexander B. Morrison puts it, this naïve view is of a time called the Dark Ages, between the end of priesthood authority in the late first century and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, an

age in which “a blanket of stygian darkness” descended “over the entire earth such that humankind had no contact with God or the Spirit for nearly two millennia.”⁶

This historical perception of the effects of the great apostasy was formulated a century ago, but much new information has come to light regarding the Dark Ages. BYU Professor Eric Dursteler comments:

One would...be hard-pressed to find any historian who would argue that the Middle Ages were a period of political, technological, social, or cultural backwardness, or that the Renaissance was the moment that brought light back into a dark world. Yet curiously, this view has often persisted in LDS narratives of the “great apostasy.”⁷

Elder Morrison concludes that the historical concept of the Dark Ages, borrowed by LDS writers from a hundred years ago, “simply doesn’t stand up to the scrutiny of modern scholarship.”⁸ Quoting eminent historian C. Warren Hollister, Morrison concludes that although “today this ungenerous [view of the history of the Middle Ages] stands discredited,” it nevertheless “persists among the half-educated.”⁹

The conflation of the LDS doctrine of the great apostasy with an erroneous history is troubling: it may appear as if the validity of the doctrine were dependent upon the validity of the faulty historical account. The obvious solution is to separate accepted (but flawed) historical views from the actual doctrine of the great apostasy, allowing the doctrine to stand on its own merits rather than tying it to an incorrect view of the past.

Separating doctrine from an erroneous historical interpretation allows for a more positive, more accurate view of the Middle Ages. President John Taylor echoed this positive perception of a brighter Dark Age:

I have a great many misgivings about the intelligence that men boast of so much in this enlightened day. There were men in those dark ages who could *commune with God*, and who, by the power of faith, *could draw aside the curtain of eternity and gaze upon the invisible world*...have the ministering of angels, and unfold the future destinies of the world. If those were dark ages *I pray God to give me a little darkness*, and deliver me from the light and intelligence that prevail in our day.¹⁰

There are signs among living LDS authorities, in addition to President Taylor, that the process of separating doctrine from erroneous history is already underway. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, declining to repeat the customary condemnations of the Dark Age as a period in which God was dormant and humankind was devoid of intelligence or the influence of the Spirit, said:

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We are indebted to the men and women who *kept the light of faith and learning alive through the centuries to the present day*. We have only to contrast the lesser light that exists among peoples unfamiliar with the names of God and Jesus Christ to *realize the great contribution made by Christian teachers through the ages*. We honor them as *servants of God*.¹¹

Elder Oaks focuses on that portion of the light of truth which was preserved “through the centuries,” avoiding entanglements with particular historical persons or events, acknowledging that the light transmitted through the ages (including the Dark Ages) was a “lesser” light.

What are some doctrinal implications of the great apostasy when it is separated from a flawed history of the Middle Ages? One was the loss of priesthood authority. This occurred following the death or translation of the last apostle, sometime after AD 90, but probably before AD 120. A second, the gift of the Holy Ghost, granted only by priesthood authority, was taken from the Old World.¹² This need not mean that God ceased working with mankind, for the *power* of the Holy Ghost was still at work with persons who did not possess the *gift* of the Holy Ghost. And third, plain and precious truths were lost, a phenomenon that includes the corruption of certain passages of scripture. This was occasionally intentional but more often accidental. Hand copying of scripture over the centuries before the advent of the printing press was bound to result in the transmission of inadvertent textual errors.¹³

Did the lack of priesthood authority, the removal of the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the loss of plain and precious truths cause an age of absolute spiritual and intellectual darkness to descend over the Old World? The short answer is “no.” Elder Oaks carefully notes that a “lesser light” was available. Elder Morrison makes a partial list of obvious examples of lesser light, reminding readers that the Middle Ages brought forth “Thomas Aquinas and Dante, Notre Dame de Paris and Chartres [cathedrals], Parliament and the university.” Men who produced great works of architecture and literature, who materially and essentially advanced human knowledge, and who established institutions of learning such as Oxford, Cambridge, and the Sorbonne were luminaries by any standard. The compilers of the canon of the New Testament could be included in this group. They were not apostates by the mere fact of living in the great apostasy but were precursors of the restoration.¹⁴ They were, by and large, dedicated to the preservation of Christianity and its advancement throughout the world. This essay focuses on contributions made in defining the canon of the New Testament from the second through the thirteenth centuries, affirming the truth of Elder Oaks’ statement. The men who helped formulate the canon of the New Testament may be considered—as far as they were able, as far as they were correct, considering the times in which they lived and the resources of truth available to them—“servants of God.”

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DEFINING CHRISTIANITY

Events of the second through fourth centuries compelled leaders of the ancient Church to define Christianity for two audiences, one external to Christianity, the other internal. First, leaders, including bishops, tried to explain and justify Christianity to other religious groups (Jewish and Pagan). This period, which covers most of the second century, is defined as the time of the “apologists.”¹⁵ An “apology” in this sense means a formal defense of belief, not the modern meaning, i.e., “I’m sorry.” The formation of early Christian apologies required textual authority in the form of scripture. Since, however, the apologies were directed toward non-Christians, there was no need for a standard, or canonical, text. Second, disagreements within the Christian community itself intensified in the third century, forcing the ancient Church to settle on a common, canonical text. The intra-Christian debates of this time would be impossible to resolve without a common textual authority. The need for a standard scripture, a “New Testament,” was clear, particularly following a series of bitter crises in the third century.

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The Apologists

Richard D. Draper points out that, during this time it was likely “that no one congregation had a collection of scriptures exactly like another’s.”¹⁶ It appears that, although parts of the New Testament circulated among the congregations comprising the ancient Church, there was no recognized, or orthodox, body of scripture at that time. The writings of the apologists reflect this through their selection of scripture.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) is the preeminent example of the second century apologist.¹⁷ Aiming his arguments at both skeptical pagan priests and hostile rabbis, he “inaugurated a methodical use of Scripture.”¹⁸ Justin did more than merely bear testimony of the validity of the Christian message, or condemn paganism or Judaism, he cited scripture continuously, and methodically. He made abundant use of the gospels of Matthew and Luke in his apology *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin does not reference the epistles of Paul, indicating perhaps that they he did not consider them authoritative, or that he did not have personal access to them. Other apologists followed, each quoting scriptures based upon the author’s personal preference alone.

Theophilus of Antioch (c. late second century) quoted liberally in his apologies from the synoptic gospels as well the Pauline epistles, which he called the “divine word.”¹⁹ Melito of Sardis (c. late second century) relied heavily on scripture, and only scripture, as authority in his apologies and other writings, including his *Homily on the Passion*. His apologies underscored his private selection of scripture as apologetic authority, and

of scripture generally as central to all Christian dialogue.²⁰ But no two authors employed identical sources of scriptural authority.

*Early Heresies*²¹

While apologists were busy explaining Christianity to Jews or Pagans, other battles were heating up within the ancient Church itself. During the second and third centuries sects began to form, and their doctrinal and dogmatic differences led to conflict within the Body of Christ. Each group, naturally, came to regard their own version of events and doctrines as correct (i.e., orthodox), and viewed others in conflict with their own as false (i.e., heretical). Some of the differences in history, doctrine and practice were irreconcilable, and created a crisis that threatened to fragment the Church so deeply that Christianity itself might not have survived the conflict. It became clear to many of the leaders of early Christianity that the only way to resolve the crisis was by establishing a widely acceptable recorded version of events. They likewise recognized that this was only possible if there was a standard version of authorized scripture (a “canon” of scripture) that could be used to define correct belief. The inter-Christian battle over doctrine became a battle over canon scripture, with many groups advancing their own gospels, epistles, and histories. Three examples illustrate just how divisive this conflict was the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics.

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The Ebionites were Christianized Jews who taught that no one could become Christian unless they were a Jew in the first place. Ebionites also taught, among other things, Jesus was not divine in nature, born of the Father, but was, instead, the “adopted” Son of God. Jesus was, therefore, not born of a virgin. Consequently, Joseph was Jesus’ true father. Thus, Jesus only became the Messiah at the time of his baptism. The Ebionite version of the gospels, a compilation of portions of the three “synoptic” gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called the *Gospel of the Nazareans*, has the Father addressing Jesus only after he was baptized by John. In that scripture, the Father speaks to Jesus, quoting the second chapter of Psalms: “Thou art my Son; *this day* have I begotten Thee.”²² The Ebionites argued that the meaning of “this day” was that prior to his baptism, Jesus was not the Son of God. This doctrine is called “adoptionism.” Just as Jesus, who was first a Jew and was only later adopted by the Father as the Messiah to usher in the age of Christianity, so too, the Ebionites held, must all be Jews first, and only later become Christians. Adoptionism could only be maintained if certain parts of today’s canon scripture were either removed or ignored. It should come as no surprise that the first two chapters of Matthew’s gospel as we know it are missing in the Ebionite *Gospel of the Nazareans*, since those chapters concern the miraculous conception of Jesus, teaching that before Joseph and Mary

“came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.”²³ Likewise, the teaching that all Christians must first be Jews meant that all Pagan males converting to Christianity must first be circumcised. This was, of course, contrary to the teachings of Paul in the second chapter of *The Epistle to the Romans*. Consequently, the Ebionite canon did not include the epistles of Paul.

The Marcionites rejected Ebionite doctrines, together with “all things Jewish.”²⁴ Marcion (b. ca. AD 100) was the son of the Bishop of Sinope, in Asia Minor. He developed unique views of Christianity at an early age, and was expelled from the congregation at Sinope, possibly excommunicated by his own father. Marcion could not reconcile his vision of a vengeful god of the Old Testament with the mercy-based teachings of Christ he read about in the gospels. The Law of Moses was, for Marcion, the product of wrath, focused upon “harsh commandments, guilt, judgment, enmity, punishment, and death.”²⁵ In contrast, Marcion considered the god of the New Testament to be loving, merciful, forgiving, redemptive, and living. He therefore taught that there were, in fact, two different gods altogether: the wrathful god of the Old Testament, and the merciful god of the gospels, who was Jesus’ father. The god of the New Testament, seeing the suffering of humanity at the hands of the god of the Old Testament, sent Jesus down from heaven to save mankind from damnation and wrath. Marcion’s wrestle with the wrathful law and the merciful gospel is reflected in his canon of scripture, which excluded the entire Old Testament (since it was written by the god of wrath and vengeance), but included the writings of Paul (who taught that the law alone could not produce salvation).²⁶ The rival teachings of the Ebionites and the Marcionites could not be reconciled in terms of their doctrine and theology, because the two groups could not agree on a common scripture from which to advance their respective claims. The fact that the Marcionite sect grew rapidly in the second century made its conflicts with the Ebionites and other Christians acute. Another group was forming in the ancient Church, called the proto-orthodox (the early believers whose views came to dominate “orthodox” Christianity as we now know it), and they could no longer ignore the erroneous teachings of the Ebionites or the Marcionites.

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The Gnostic Crisis

Whereas the conflict between the Ebionites and the Marcionites involved disagreements over the role of Judaism in the new Christian faith, the Gnostics presented a far more serious challenge, by discarding the entire Judeo-Christian cosmology completely. A number of religious groups emerging in the second and third centuries believed that salvation was available only to persons who possessed secret knowledge (Greek, *gnosis*).²⁷

They called themselves “Gnostics.” The historical origins of Gnosticism are not clear, and it may well be that its fundamental concepts were drawn from sources outside the Judeo-Christian theological, cosmological, and doctrinal framework, either from Greek philosophy, some form of Judaism, or even Zoroastrian dualism. Some Gnostic sects were Christian, while others were not.²⁸ The various scriptures written and used by the Christian Gnostics, many of them discovered in the mid-twentieth century at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, illustrate the need for an acceptable canon of Christian scripture as a prelude to (1) the elimination of heresy, (2) the definition of orthodoxy, and, (3) possibly even the continued existence of Christianity beyond its first centuries.

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Although the variety of Gnostic beliefs makes it difficult to speak of an overarching Gnostic religion as such, there are nevertheless common principles and teachings shared by most, if not all, forms of Gnosticism.²⁹ In reading the following common principles, keep in mind the question, “how well do Gnostic ideas compare with the doctrines and teachings of the New Testament canon of scripture as we know it today?”

Dualism. Gnostics considered all matter as inherently evil, and all spirit as inherently good. Matter and spirit were in conflict with one another, and salvation consisted primarily in the complete release of spirit from matter.

Theology. Gnostics believed in the One True God. The True God existed in a place called “The Fulness” (Greek, *Pleroma*). The True God was purest spirit only, and therefore completely good. Because humankind can only know and learn through the senses, and the True God had no material existence, Gnostics believed that the True God was not only unknown to humankind, but was essentially unknowable.

Cosmogony. The True God was not the creator of the universe. The True God existed not in the material universe, but in the *Pleroma*. The True God was not alone, having created a number of divine beings called Aeons, who also inhabited The Fulness. One of the Aeons became attracted to matter, and left the *Pleroma*, resulting eventually in the creation of the material universe. This rebellious Aeon was known as the Demiurge, or the “Craftsman.” The beings created by the Demiurge, called the Archons, turned upon their creator, dividing her into a myriad of pieces, called Divine Sparks. The Divine Sparks became trapped in matter through the process of birth. Gnostics therefore regarded the body itself as an evil prison. The Divine Sparks were trapped in matter perpetually through reincarnation. Salvation was only possible when a Divine Spark was released from matter (i.e., the body) permanently, and returned to The Fulness.

Anthropology. Gnostics believed that humans were composed of three parts: body, soul (Greek, *psyche*), and spirit (Greek, *pneuma*). Consequently there were three kinds of humans, depending upon which “part” dominated within a

particular individual. Gnostics regarded persons in whom the *body* dominated as animals, incapable of salvation at all, whose very existence ended at death. They regarded those in whom the *soul* dominated as mainstream Christians, who through faith and works could achieve a limited form of salvation after death, but not The Fulness. Those in whom the *spirit* dominated possessed a Divine Spark, and could return to the presence of the True God through acquiring secret knowledge, that is, through possession of *gnosis*. The Gnostics considered themselves as Divine Sparks, entrapped in mortality, seeking the knowledge that would lead to salvation and release from matter entirely.

Salvation. Complete salvation was only available to Gnostics who learned the *gnosis* necessary for release from matter. Gnostics, therefore, rejected salvation through the power of God, through faith, through works, and through covenant. For Christian Gnostics, *gnosis* had to come directly from the *Pleroma*, through revelation by an Aeon, a messenger from the True God. Jesus was the messenger from on high, an Aeon specifically sent to impart *gnosis*. Consequently, Jesus did not, and could not possess a real body, but instead only *appeared* to be incarnated. Christian Gnostics either rejected the other teachings of Jesus regarding good works and faith entirely, or ignored them.

In light of Gnostic cosmology and theology, the scriptures found in the accepted canon of the New Testament were of little value to Christian Gnostics, with the exception of the Gospel of John, as they interpreted it. Instead, they created their own canon, consisting primarily of books completely unknown to modern Christians. Several Gnostic texts were anciently gathered into books (*codex*, pl. *codices*). In 1945, the discovery of ancient Gnostic texts began in Egypt, resulting in the discovery of 51 books, known collectively as the Nag Hammadi texts. They reveal a Gnostic canon consisting of several works such as the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *Gospel of Truth*, the *Apocryphon of John*, and *The Gospel of Thomas*. Needless to say, the content of Gnostic scripture differed profoundly from the content found in the texts of other early Christian communities, particularly those communities called proto-orthodox. Several Christian leaders, mostly Bishops of the second and third centuries, considered the Gnostic scriptures a serious threat to the Christian religion itself.

The Heresiologists

Alarmed generally by the spread of Gnostic doctrine and theology, bishops and other proto-orthodox thinkers appeared on the scene to engage the Gnostic heretics in outright battle, which focused on the formulation of a single, authoritative canon of scripture that could be brought to bear directly against the Gnostic heretics. Bart D. Ehrman calls the leaders in this battle to define an orthodox canon “heresiologists.” They wrote

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numerous treatises against a variety of heresies, directly aimed against the Gnostics. Christian Gnostics, for their part, did not bear the attacks of the heresiologists in silence, but wrote their own polemics, in which they treated the heresiologists with contempt. The Gnostic authors concluded that proto-orthodox Christianity was woefully naive, inadequate, and superficial.³⁰ Ireneus (c. AD 130-202), Bishop of Lugdunum (Lyons, France), led the charge against the Gnostics. He wrote a five-volume polemic, commonly called *Against the Heresies*. The full title of the work is *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-called Gnosis*. Each volume attacked Gnosticism from a different doctrinal angle. *Against the Heretics* was distributed well beyond the geographic confines of Ireneus's own diocese in Gaul, and copies have been found scattered throughout the ancient Christian world. Ireneus made liberal use of scripture in his attacks on heresy, but these verses were not necessarily scriptures approved by various Gnostic groups, or even universally accepted in other parts of the Christian world.³¹

The conflict was not limited to written polemics and invectives exchanged between proto-orthodox leaders and Gnostic thinkers; it also included the outright forgery of scripture.³² For example, the Gnostics probably forged the *Gospel of Thomas*. The polemical nature of this book seems clear. In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus himself teaches numerous Gnostic viewpoints, and ridicules those of the proto-orthodox. *The Gospel of Thomas* begins with Jesus' promise that "whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings shall not experience death."³³ The Gospel has Jesus attacking the practices of the proto-orthodox, and the very concept of worship through good works. Verse fourteen says, "Jesus said unto [the disciples], 'If you fast, you will give rise to sin for yourselves; and if you pray, you will be condemned; and if you give alms, you do harm to your spirits.'"³⁴ Reinforcing the Gnostic doctrine that Jesus was not born but instead descended directly from The Fulness without taking flesh, the *Gospel of Thomas* has Jesus saying, "When you see the one who was not born of woman, prostrate yourselves on your faces and worship him. That one is your father."³⁵ Confirming the Gnostic teaching that there are very few Gnostics (humans who have a Divine Spark, in addition to a body and soul), Jesus says:

The Kingdom of God is like a shepherd who had an hundred sheep. One of them, the largest, went astray. He left the ninety-nine and looked for that one until he found it. When he had gone to such trouble, he said to the [one lost] sheep, "I care for you more than the ninety-nine."

The *Gospel of Thomas* ends with a denunciation of Mary and of all women (who were, after all, responsible for clothing each Divine Spark in evil flesh, that is, a body):

Simon Peter said unto them, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'³⁶

As the conflict between the proto-orthodox and the Gnostics moved into the third century, the number of questionable gospels, epistles, histories, and apocalypses grew apace, complicating the task of eliminating heresy and establishing orthodoxy. Without an accepted canon of scripture, the conflict could never be resolved, and Christianity as we know it may have never survived. The invectives and polemics of the heresiologists were not sufficient to carry the day against the Gnostics.

Canonical Lists

The creation of a list of canon scripture (the “canonical lists”) became a key element of the proto-orthodox attack on Gnosticism. Establishing a widely accepted canon proved difficult, given the relatively equal authority of each bishop within his own diocese. No single bishop dominated the church as a whole, and could not, therefore, impose any church-wide uniformity regarding canon scripture. Unless a majority of bishops agreed on a canon list the anti-Gnostic project would fail, leaving the field of battle open to the heretics. There were, as many of these bishops knew, no more apostles to whom they could appeal for guidance. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (d. AD 265) lamented that important questions of scriptural interpretation could be conclusively resolved “if Christ and his Apostles were still here.”³⁷ They were on their own, and they knew it. In the absence of apostles, they could choose either to do their best to create orthodoxy, or they could give up on the Christian project entirely and allow the church to fragment or dissolve. Fortunately, they choose to create orthodoxy, without which there would likely have been very little, if anything, of Christianity remaining for Joseph Smith to work with.

In the absence of living apostles, bishops did their best by creating canon lists for the guidance of their congregations and for use in the rituals of the church. Three kinds of canon lists emerged by the end of the fourth century. First, there were lists produced to advance the agenda of a particular group, or sect. Such was the case with the Marcionite canon, which is the first canon list we have record of. Composed sometime in the second century, Marcion’s canon list clearly reflected his anti-Jewish views, and his reliance upon Paul (including some forged books, supposedly written by Paul). Consequently, St. Hypolitus of Rome (d. AD 235) was believed to have written the “Muratorian Canon” sometime between AD 180 and 190, which was aimed directly against the Marcionite’s canon. Second, a few bishops created canon lists for use within their own diocese. These include lists written by Ireneus (d. ca. AD 200), Bishop

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of Lugdunum, who identified twenty-one of the New Testament books as canonical, including the four gospels, Acts, twelve of the Pauline epistles, but not the epistle of James. Also included are the lists of bishops Clement of Alexandria (d. after 217), and his successor, Origen (AD 185-255), intended for use only within the diocese of Alexandria. Third, by the fourth century, other bishops presented canonical lists for adoption as orthodox, universally applicable to the entire Church, not confined to their own diocese. This later group of Bishops included Athanasius of Alexandria (AD 293-373), who authored a list in AD 367 consisting of the identical twenty-seven books of the New Testament accepted by the LDS church today. This last group of “orthodox” lists was derived in large measure from the application of certain rules, or criteria, agreed upon by most bishops as necessary for inclusion in the canon, to the bewildering array of candidate books circulating in ancient Christianity.

In order to qualify for the scriptural canon, a book must be:

Ancient. The text must have been written near the time of Jesus, and not be of recent creation. This eliminated books such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which were widely read, but not ancient.

Apostolic. The book had to be written by an apostle, or by the companion of an apostle. Several forgeries by the Marcionites and others were thus eliminated. However, other books eventually accepted into the canon were considered to be of doubtful authorship, including the *Apocalypse* (or “Revelation”) of *John*, and *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

Universal. The book had to enjoy a widespread acceptance in the more established congregations. *The Apocalypse of Peter* was thus eliminated as a candidate for inclusion, whereas the epistles of 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, and *Jude* were nearly excluded.

Orthodox. A book must conform to the views of the proto-orthodox leaders. Because the *Gospel of Peter* appeared to support the Gnostic view of Christ as spirit only, with no body, it was rejected as canon scripture.

The acceptance of these four criteria did not resolve all differences of opinion, but provided a starting point for separating obvious candidates for inclusion from questionable, or unacceptable ones. Although the battle over inclusion in the canon continued for decades among the proto-orthodox, the list of twenty-seven books composed by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in AD 367 was eventually accepted by the proto-orthodox Church as canonical. As a result, numerous heretical texts were eliminated from the canon, particularly Gnostic books.

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REVISITING THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

We now return to our hypothetical account of Joseph Smith and the “missing” *Epistle of James*.³⁸ There was serious debate in the ancient Church as to whether or not James met the criteria for canonicity. The authorship of the epistle was in doubt. The “James” cited as its author may have been the brother of Jesus (as mentioned in *Jude*, another book that almost failed to make the canon), or someone else entirely.³⁹ The question of apostolic authorship may have been a reason why the epistle was not included in the earliest canon lists. Eusebius wrote, in the fourth century, that the letter’s authenticity was, at that time, “strongly disputed.”⁴⁰ Additionally, the letter seems to have had a rather limited distribution in the first and second centuries.⁴¹ Lack of familiarity among ancient bishops may also have played against its canonicity, since it was not “universal.” As late as the 1520s, Martin Luther attacked the epistle’s canonicity, calling it the “epistle of straw.” It was included, perhaps reluctantly, at the very end of Luther’s German translation of the Bible, physically separating the book of James from the other apostolic epistles. It was not until 1548, at the Council of Trent, that the Roman Catholic Church officially affirmed its canonicity, although in practice its position as part of the New Testament canon was long assured before that time.

The intra-Christian battles of the second, third, and fourth centuries nearly destroyed Christianity, which would have made the restoration of the gospel by Joseph Smith a much more complicated, if not virtually impossible, task. The establishment of proto-orthodox communities within Christianity provided a necessary stability to the religion’s development, so that Christianity would continue through the centuries to the present time. The battle to establish canon scripture through the promulgation of canon lists over several generations clarified and defined orthodox belief in several fundamental ways that are still felt today. Instead of demeaning and ridiculing early Christian leaders, perhaps we should re-evaluate the accepted, but historically unsupportable view of the “Dark Ages,” and cultivate what President Hinckley called “affirmative gratitude”⁴² in recognition of their efforts. If the *Epistle of James* did not truly meet all the ancient criteria for canonicity, then we are left to wonder how it made it into the New Testament. Its inclusion is due, in large measure, to the canonical list written by Athanasius in AD 367. It appears, therefore, to be a result of inspiration, wrought upon many sincere Christian leaders of late antiquity, such as Athanasius. Although these leaders were wrong on certain points of doctrine, they were correct regarding others. They thus preserved a core of true Christian belief, as precursors to the restoration. They were thus lights amid the darkness, paving the way for one particular scripture in the book of James to

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penetrate the heart of one young man in nineteenth-century New York, convincing him to seek wisdom from God directly. ☪

NOTES

- 1 For this quotation and other views of Mortimer Adler on education, see <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>.
- 2 Gordon B. Hinkley, Teachings of Gordon B. Hinkley, “Out of Your Experiences Here,” BYU Devotional and Fireside Speech, October 16, 1990, 663; “The Work Moves Forward,” Ensign May 1999, 4.
- 3 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Joseph F. Smith, ed. (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, June 1977), 218-219.
- 4 It is possible that the Epistle to the Hebrews would not have been there either, since, anciently, its authorship was in doubt.
- 5 Bishops acknowledged the lack of apostolic power and accompanying right to revelation for the entire Church as early as the second century. See, generally, Hugh Nibley, “Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity,” *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, volume 15 (Salt Lake City, and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book Company and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005).
- 6 Alexander B. Morrison, *Turning From Truth: A New Look at the Great Apostasy* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 2. Readers may notice that this period (late first century to the sixteenth century) does not coincide with the Dark Ages as understood in outdated histories of Europe, from the end of the Roman Empire (c. AD 476) to the Protestant Reformation (which began in earnest under Martin Luther in 1517). The reason for beginning the period more than three centuries earlier is to bring it, for the purpose of this essay, into conformity with the common LDS perception of the coincidence of a Dark Age with the great apostasy rather than with the European Middle Ages. There is no reason, from an LDS doctrinal perspective, to wait for the end of Rome in the fifth century, because the Dark Age supposedly began with the loss of priesthood authority.
- 7 Eric R. Dursteler, “Inheriting the Great Apostasy: The Evolution of Latter-day Saint Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (Ed. Noel B. Reynolds. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), 2005), 29-65.
- 8 Morrison, 2.
- 9 Ibid. In addition to Morrison’s book, Tad Callister recently published *The Inevitable Apostasy and the Promised Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2006), which presents early Christianity and medieval Europe in a more accurate historical light. However the tendency in the book to gloss over the early achievements of Christians, and medieval Christians, is a shortcoming. One would have hoped that the book would give the same attention to the Middle Ages it gave to selected portions of early Christianity.
- 10 Quoted in Morrison, 4, emphasis added.
- 11 Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign* May 1995, 84-85, emphasis added.
- 12 The Gift of the Holy Ghost was presumably still available to Book of Mormon peoples

- living in the second century.
- 13 For a summary of textual errors in the New Testament, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2003), 203-258. The advent of printing did not result in an error-free process either. The so-called “Wicked Bible” printed in 1631 incorrectly cites Exodus 20:14 saying, “Thou *shalt* commit adultery,” an error of some significance. Fortunately the error was not included in subsequent editions of the bible. Textual error is an inherent product of human intervention in reproducing a text, whether or not the book is produced using machinery or by hand.
 - 14 To qualify as an apostate, one must first possess true doctrine or valid authority. Since the compilers of the New Testament lived after the loss of true doctrine and priesthood (apostolic) authority, they were not qualified to be apostates in the first place. See Morrison generally.
 - 15 The term “apologist” is used in its narrower, technical, sense, meaning “one who defends a controversial position or theory.”
 - 16 Richard D. Draper, “The Earliest ‘New Testament,’” *How the New Testament Came to Be*, Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd, Jr., eds., (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, and, Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), 2006), 243.
 - 17 “Martyr” is not a formal surname in this case, but indicates that Justin was killed for his faith, and is therefore a martyr in the cause of Christianity.
 - 18 C. Kannengiesser, “Biblical Interpretation in the Ancient Church,” *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, Donald A. McKim, ed. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 3.
 - 19 Ibid.
 - 20 Ibid., 4.
 - 21 I am indebted to Bart D. Ehrman for the outline to my discussion regarding early heresies (Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics).
 - 22 Psalms 2:7. Compare the three synoptic gospel texts: the Ebionite version of the Father’s words is in harmony with the book of Luke (3:23), but not the books of Mark (1:11) or Matthew (3:17).
 - 23 Matthew 1:18.
 - 24 See generally Ehrman, 99-112.
 - 25 Ibid., 104.
 - 26 Marcion produced the first “canonical list” we know of. It included ten of Paul’s letters found in our current New Testament, but excluded, for reasons unknown, Paul’s Pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Ehrman, 105-107.
 - 27 G. W. MacRae, “Gnosticism,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Thomson-Gale: 2003), 255.
 - 28 German theologian Adolph von Harnack gave a famous summation of Gnosticism as “the acute Hellenization of Christianity.” However, since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts in 1945 (Harnack died in 1930), Harnack’s thesis has been seriously undermined to a great degree. Some scholars go so far as to claim that the “Gnostics can no longer be considered Christians, half-formed ones perhaps, who tried to absorb into Christianity

certain mythological and speculative currents of the Hellenistic World at large....
Gnosticism remains essentially a form of paganism." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 256. In
spite of this obviously orthodox assertion, the fact remains that some ancient Gnostics
considered themselves Christian, and the purest Christians, at that. They should be
considered "Christian Gnostics."

- 29 The list of universal Gnostic principles and doctrines was compiled from a number of
sources, including the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Gnosticism," and Ehrman, *Lost
Christianities*, 113-134.
- 30 Because heresy and orthodoxy had not been given definitive shape at this early stage
of Christianity, the group that eventually prevailed and defined acceptable (orthodox)
Christianity is often referred to as "proto-orthodox."
- 31 See Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 188-189.
- 32 The battle over orthodoxy was not limited to the proto-orthodox and the Christian
Gnostics, but included the Marcionites and others. There is evidence that both Gnostic and
proto-orthodox writers forged scriptures.
- 33 Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New
York: Oxford University Press: 2003), 20.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 37 Nibley, *Apostles and Bishops*, 216-217.
- 38 See generally Rainer Riesner, "James," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, John Barton and
John Muddiman, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1255-1263, for a discussion
of why James was almost excluded from the canon of the New Testament.
- 39 Some ancient Christians considered him to be Jesus' stepbrother, allegedly born to Joseph
from a prior marriage. For reasons unknown, James was not a follower of Jesus during the
Lord's lifetime, but converted later, having seen the resurrected Christ. He later became
the leader of the church in Jerusalem and was martyred for his acceptance of Jesus as
Messiah.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 1256-1257.
- 41 *Ibid.* The book of James was not included in the second century Muratorian canon but was
included in the fourth century canon list of Athanasius. The synods of Hippo (AD 393)
and Carthage (AD 419) in North Africa accepted the epistle as canonical.
- 42 Quoted in James Toronto, "A Latter-day Saint Perspective on Muhammad," *Ensign August*,
2000, 51.