



## WHO WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT? DISCUSSION AND STUDY NOTES

*Who Wrote the New Testament?* is an Opus Television production for S4C and S4C International in association with Bible Society and Barcud Derwen.

These notes are designed to help viewers and discussion groups, in settings such as churches, schools and colleges, to engage with the programmes and to discuss and debate the arguments and views presented in them. They provide some brief background and additional perspectives to those highlighted in the programme, and offer questions for discussion and reflection.

## WHO WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT? INVESTIGATIONS

**By Mark RJ Bredin**

These notes also taken into account additional perspectives to those highlighted in the programme.

### PROGRAMME 1: **WHAT IS TRUTH?**

Who wrote the various books and letters of the New Testament? This question has tantalised scholars and Christians from the earliest days of the Church. Yet there are an increasing number of thinkers who feel that the task of identifying the author of a 2000-year-old text is neither possible nor a worthwhile intellectual exercise.

It is true that we are only able to put forward tentative hypotheses concerning the various authors of the New Testament writings. But the question of authorship is important because it is tied up with establishing what the original author/editor of the text intended. Although texts can be infinite in their meaning, we dishonour the text when we show no interest in who wrote it or in what the original author wanted to say.

The question of authorship is also connected with how reliable the text is in its depiction of Jesus and the beginnings of the Early Church. If, for example, all the Gospels had come to us anonymously, what means would we have to establish their reliability? Indeed, if the authors of the Gospels only had second- or third-hand knowledge of the events, how accurate could their writings be? So in asking questions about who wrote the New Testament, we are also looking at what kind of authority we give to these books.

#### **Earliest traditions**

The programme states:

Oral traditions in a largely illiterate society were a powerful force behind the spread of the Jesus story ... "After the Ascension of Jesus, the disciples were left with their memories. So ... a whole collection of individual memories were combined and eventually formed the Gospels." (Father Jerry Murphy O'Connor)

Scholars often call these traditions "the Jesus Tradition". They formed the earliest sources about Jesus' life and teaching. Until the writing of the first Gospels, such traditions were central in sustaining Christians in their discipleship.

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So, it is perhaps better to think of the Gospel writers as editors and custodians as much as authors, but ones who worked with considerable skill. In acknowledging this skill, scholars compare the Gospels in order to see what is distinctive about each. As Mark is the earliest Gospel, and a major source for Matthew and Luke, scholars attempt to draw out the distinctive issues that concerned Matthew and Luke.

However, recent scholarship has urged more caution in making too much of the way Matthew and Luke edit Mark. This is particularly the case where scholars reconstruct the specific social setting (“communities”) of their first readers/hearers. The Gospels are not letters addressing specific issues and it seems methodologically flawed to reconstruct a Matthean or Lucan community simply on the basis of changes Matthew and Luke made to Mark.

However, we can compare Gospels to establish distinctive aspects of each Gospel to appreciate the rich message of the writer. Keith Hopkins in the programme says:

The opening of the Gospel of Matthew is very powerful – the Greek is, “The Book of Genesis” – it’s normally translated as “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ”. But “The Book of Genesis” is stating quite clearly that what the author is writing is an alternative to Genesis ... the Old Testament’s opening book ...

This observation is clearly important in understanding and appreciating the author of Matthew. Matthew clearly felt the need through his reflection to give a certain slant on Jesus as the initiator of a new creation story, comparable to that in Genesis.

### Reflect and discuss

What right do Christians today have to interpret the life and teaching of Jesus for their own cultures/times/needs?

### Earliest manuscripts

James Charlesworth makes the point that “scribes are adding and even deleting to what we call holy writing”. This may come as a surprise to many Christians and puts in question the authority they attribute to the New Testament today. However, in the manuscript evidence available to us – particular Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus – we have a surprising amount of consistency between thousands of fragment manuscripts.

## The Gospels

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**Mark:** Dates from 65 to 75 have been put forward for this, the generally accepted earliest Gospel. Surprisingly, the Mark who wrote the first Gospel is not an apostle. We must assume, therefore, that he was nevertheless very well known in the Christian community.

We know a lot about Mark because he's mentioned several times in the Acts of the Apostles as a companion on Paul's missionary travels and in Colossians and Philemon as a prisoner later on. The historian Eusebius records that Bishop Papias, writing in the early second century, said that Mark knew Peter and recalled all that Peter told him. This Mark, according to tradition, is most likely the John Mark of Acts. Because the Church preferred to think that apostles of Jesus wrote the Gospels, and Mark was not one of them, this makes it unlikely that John Mark's name would be attached to it without good reason. There is no reason to believe that Papias' account is spurious and the connection between Peter and Mark may have contributed to the Gospel's inclusion in the early canon.

Yet some caution must be exercised in thinking it is the Mark of Acts. Mark was a very common name at the time of the Early Church and it is likely that there was more than one Mark in the Christian community and who knew Peter. It is improbable that Mark was from Galilee because, as Murphy O'Connor points out in the programme, the writer does not seem to have a good knowledge of the geography of the Holy Land. But Peter could have known a Mark while he was in Rome; a Mark who did not know Palestine. Or, more likely, Mark knew his area of Galilee well but was less sure on other parts of the region. The first century dweller did not travel as easily as we do and neither did they have maps. In sum, at best all we can say is that a Mark who knew Peter was instructed to write down an account of Jesus life somewhere in the Roman Empire.

**Matthew:** The consensus is that Matthew was written between AD 80 and 100. It has been associated with the name Mathew since the early second century. The Gospel itself identifies a Matthew as a tax collector (Matt 10.3) who became a follower of Jesus (Matt 9.9). Against this, the programme asks, "Well over half of Matthew is borrowed from Mark: why should an eyewitness be so dependent on someone else?" Indeed, why would Matthew, the apostle use Mark to tell us about his own calling? On the other hand, an eyewitness may indeed appropriate sources to fit with his eyewitness account.

The Gospel is clearly from a Jewish Christian perspective and this would fit with Matthew the tax collector. Such a person would also be fluent in Greek, a necessary qualification for writing the Gospel. The Gospel also shows a particularly strong interest in money matters and to tax collectors. However, due to its late dating, it is likely that at best Matthew the apostle contributed significantly at an early stage in the composition of the Gospel. The final edition was completed by others.

**Luke:** The author of this Gospel is identified with the writer of Acts. Early traditions affirm the author to be Luke, the companion of Paul (Philemon 24;

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Col 4.14; 2 Tim 4.11). This Luke was not an apostle or prominent person in the Early Church so it is difficult to see why it would invent this connection unless it had a large grain of truth to it. It has also been suggested that because the Gospel was addressed to one person – Theophilus – it follows that it would also have had the author's name attached. The opening four verses of the Gospel states that the author was not an eyewitness and this again is consistent with the author being Paul's companion.

Luke is said to be a physician in Colossians 4.14 and many scholars have argued that a physician author fits with Luke–Acts because of the numerous medical terms that we encounter. But this is much disputed and the question remains unresolved.

**John:** We know that John's Gospel was certainly written not much after AD 100 because the earliest papyrus fragments of any part of the New Testament contains a few verses from John 18. Irenaeus in the second century tells us that the author of the Gospel was John, son of Zebedee, and that he received this tradition from Polycarp who was an acquaintance of the apostles. This soon became the bedrock of early tradition in the Early Church.

One argument in favour of this is that John, unlike some of the other disciples, is only mentioned in 21.20 and we would not expect the author to be constantly mentioning himself. Another is that John was a member of the inner-most circle of Jesus' followers and well-placed to write an intimate account: the Gospel of John states in 21.20 that the one who writes is "the beloved disciple". The traditional argument supports the connection between John, son of Zebedee and this disciple. This view carries some force, though it is not possible to be certain about it. The consensus among scholars supports the view that the Gospel was not the product of one person but that it grew out of the corporate life of an ongoing Christian community in which John was a specially honoured figure.

Bart Ehrman in the programme points out that:

There are good reasons for thinking that the Gospel of John was written late in the first century – it appears to be our theologically most sophisticated Gospel; whoever wrote it had thought for a long time about Jesus and his theological significance.

Further, he says:

This Gospel wasn't written by an Aramaic-speaking fisherman. It was written by a well educated Greek-speaking Christian.

This view is not generally accepted. John is a Jewish text with simple Greek and not the work of one who is classically trained. The argument that the theology needed time to develop uses an evolutionary model for the history of Christian doctrine and this argument has many flaws.

### Discussion

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We can be confident that people who had good information about the life of Jesus wrote the Gospels. But we certainly cannot be sure of the exact identities of any of the writers. This leads us to consider the view that all we can say of any author of the Gospels is what that author/s have chosen to show us through their books.

- List what you believe the Gospel texts tell us about their writers, e.g. their interests and intentions.
- In what ways do you expect the Bible to speak with authority and why? How important is the question of knowing an author's identity to this?
- What other factors are as or more important in establishing the value and authority of the New Testament?

### For further reference

*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* edited by J.B. Green, S. McKnight and I.H. Marshall (Leicester: IVP, 1992).

See Mark Goodacre's web site: <http://NTGateway.com>.

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**By Mark RJ Bredin**

These notes also taken into account additional perspectives to those highlighted in the programme.

### PROGRAMME 2: **MAINTAINING THE TRUTH**

As the Church grew, it was inevitable that problems would occur. We see strong hints of this in the New Testament. Different groups and individuals debated among themselves as to who and what Jesus did and expected. In the New Testament letters, leaders encourage and admonish Church members to maintain the truth that has been handed to them. It was paramount for the New Testament letter writers that the truth that Jesus taught should not be corrupted and lost in the process of change. The second programme explores these letters and particularly who and what kind of persons wrote them.

#### **Discussion**

- How important is it that we know who wrote the New Testament letters?
- Does their authority of these writings depend on the author having apostolic authority? What is apostolic authority (Read Acts 1.21-26)?
- How might the authority of the letters be affected by having several authors?

#### **Reflect**

It is important to remember that letters are written to address real situations and do not set out to give an account of history. With this in mind:

- How can letters that address a situation from two thousand years ago have relevance for us today?
- How can they help us understand the origins of the Church?

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- What difficulties arise when the original situation letters respond to is unknown to us (see 2 Thessalonians 2.5–6)?

### The letters of James and Jude

**James:** The letter is attributed to Jesus' brother. However, Jerome was uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus having a brother and so identified the author with Jesus' cousin. But the issue of whether Jesus had brothers and sisters is not disputed by scholars today. The letter states (James 1.1) that its author is James, a servant of God. This title assumes that readers will immediately recognise who this James is. It corroborates his stature and seems to support the author being Jesus' brother, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. The letter's content suggests that the author was a devout Jew and erudite in his use of the Old Testament, another factor consistent with the author being James, the brother of Jesus.

**Jude:** The author is identified as "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James". The Greek is "Ioudas". Several people with this name are mentioned in the NT. However, the writer expects there to be no confusion in his readers' minds. Identifying oneself as someone's brother is an unusual custom and makes it likely that he was the brother of the famous James, brother of Jesus. The letter assumes a quite specific situation where the gospel is being corrupted by false teaching. Like James, the author was a devout and learned Jew.

### Reflect

Why would James and Jude not write "brother of Jesus Christ?"

*Paul: His letters or not his letters?*

Paul's letters are the earliest recorded writings of the New Testament. He made many converts and travelled great distances to teach about Jesus. We learn a lot about Paul from the letters he sent to the churches. Moreover, we know of Paul from Luke's second volume the Acts of the Apostles. Keith Hopkins, however, undermines Luke as a historian:

When we deal with Paul we should make a clear distinction between Paul the letter writer and Luke's description of Paul's mission in Acts. Luke is a propagandist. Luke is writing history after Paul's death – 30 years afterwards. He's blown up out of all proportion in my view.

We need to ask the question why would Luke fabricate Paul's life when he claims to have followed his sources accurately? Secondly, some of Luke's readers might have remembered Paul and questioned the accuracy of Luke if his presentation of Paul was so wrong. In addition, scholars have shown that

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there is little in Acts that contradicts Paul's letters. For example, there are strong echoes of Paul's choice of language in Acts 20.18–35.

Yet the question remains: did Paul write all the letters that are attributed to him? In fact, as the programme points out, Paul only physically penned Philemon. We know that he would have dictated many of his letters to a secretary. But, more importantly, scholars have questioned the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, as well as parts of other letters. One example Bart D Ehrman picks up on is 1 Corinthians 11 and 14:

This passage says that women are to be silent – but just three chapters earlier Paul says that women are to pray and prophesy out loud in church so long as they have a veil over their head. So it appears this passage in Chapter 14 of I Corinthians contradicts the passage in Chapter 11 and so scholars commonly think that Paul did not write that.

Ehrman's view is probably accepted by most scholars today with some challenging it. Let's now consider in more detail the comments made about the dubious authorship of letters traditionally attributed to Paul.

### 2 Thessalonians:

Ehrman states:

According to 2 Thessalonians some people are so convinced that Jesus is returning right away that they quit their jobs...This doesn't sound like the same teachings you find in 1 Thessalonians where the end is coming immediately like a thief in the night and so this is one thing that's led people to suspect that Paul didn't write both books.

Despite this, other scholars argue that the differences between the two letters can be explained if the second letter is seen as correcting misapprehensions about the nearness of the coming of Christ that arose from a reading of the first letter.

### Ephesians and Colossians:

Ehrman again expresses a skeptical view:

Paul didn't also write Ephesians and Colossians. Not just because of the writing style, although that's important, but also because of this different theological perspective.

The majority view is that Ephesians is the work of a later writer who has attempted to show what he knew of Paul's teaching in a form that would speak to the particular situation he addressed. He knew the letters of Paul and certainly Colossians and that is why the letters are so similar. He may well have written both. However, Paul was a versatile thinker and he was quite capable of being all things to all people. Is it not possible that Paul did write Ephesians and Colossians? Their theology differed from other of Paul's

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letters because he was in process of developing and adapting his theology in response to ever-new situations.

### The Pastoral Epistles:

Scholars dispute whether Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. The programme says: "This letter to Titus, like the two to Timothy, were written decades after Paul's death. Are they blatant forgeries then?" Tradition has it that Paul was beheaded during Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome. Paul was under house arrest in the capital at this time. This is around 64 AD.

Bart D Ehrman says:

Scholars are reasonably convinced that these were written near the end of the first century by somebody who is writing them in Paul's name but not Paul himself.

Nevertheless, there are scholars who argue for Pauline authorship. They argue that Paul writes to colleagues rather than communities and that this accounts for some differences in style and vocabulary. Paul was also writing from prison and probably used a different scribe to help him. It has also been pointed out that the letters show similarities with Luke–Acts and suggested that Luke constructed them using rough drafts of a Pauline letter. But whoever the author was, the programme helpfully states: "Their intention was to answer the problems of the Church in their day in the way that they thought Paul would have advanced."

### The letter to the Hebrews:

Origen (c.185–c.254) remarked: "Who wrote the letter is known only to God alone." So it seems we have little chance of establishing the writer. The letter does not name its author or the location of its audience. Paul's authorship was accepted in the Eastern Church and by some in the Western Church, but their arguments are not weighty. In other writings Paul always followed the normal practice of Greek letter-writers, in introducing himself. Moreover, those writings leave us in no doubt who their readers are. Hebrews does neither. The most we can know of the author is gleaned from our reading of the letter.

Significantly, the acceptance into the canon of a book by an unknown author demonstrates that authorship was not the only criteria the Church used when recognising a document's value.

### Peter:

The programme says of Peter: "A giant of the Church, no doubt. And yet two comparatively short letters are the only compositions in the New Testament that carry his name..." Furthermore, the Petrine authorship of these two letters is challenged. Bart D Ehrman says:

1<sup>st</sup> Peter for example is allegedly written by Simon Peter the disciple of Jesus. In the Book of Acts though we're told that Peter was illiterate ... If he could read or write he would have

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been able to read or write Aramaic – his native language. But 1<sup>st</sup> Peter is written in Greek, in fact in very good Greek ...

But Acts states that James and Peter were uneducated and ordinary men, not that they were illiterate (see Acts 4.13). This probably means that Peter had no rabbinic training. However, we might expect that a man who ran a fishing business and came from a Hellenised town would be able to communicate in Greek. Also, many have gone too far in stressing the refined and rhetorical character of the Greek. Semitic expressions are noticeable in the letter.

### Reflect and discuss

We have seen that some New Testament letters were attributed to important men. The real author intentionally used the better known name to give the letter authority. Does this unsettle you, excite you, or, raise further questions?

### Further reading

*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* edited by G.F. Hawthorne, R.P Martin and D.G. Reid (Leicester: IVP, 1993).

## WHO WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT? INVESTIGATIONS

### Discussion and study notes for the *Who Wrote the New Testament?* DVD

By Mark RJ Bredin

These notes also taken into account additional perspectives to those highlighted in the programme.

### PROGRAMME 3: **BUT, WHOSE TRUTH WAS THE TRUTH?**

#### Reflect

Revelation has inspired filmmakers and artists alike. Yet it is the least used book of the New Testament among mainline Christians. Why do you think this is?

#### Considering Revelation

Scholars generally accept that Revelation originates in the 90s AD during Emperor Domitian's reign. However, there is no evidence that Domitian instigated a full-scale persecution against Christians. Chapters 2 and 3 suggest that some Christian churches appeared to be flourishing.

**Search:** Read Revelation 2–3 and look for any hints that the churches were either suffering or doing well.

#### **Who wrote this book?**

The book is associated with "John", but the programme says: "The identity of this John is a mystery." The programme tells us that some hold the view that:

the John of Revelation is the John of the Gospel, the very same John who also wrote three of the letters in the New Testament – two of them the shortest compositions in the whole book.

The programme comments that this view is generally not accepted. Scholars point out that John's Gospel is written in good Greek and Revelation is not. Charlesworth further adds to the argument:

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Why was it so hard for scholars to finally agree ...? First, it was questioned – had an apostle written it? Secondly, it seems to be parochial – focused on only seven churches in what is now Turkey. Thirdly, the portrayal of Christ seems to be bloody and militant.

Perhaps the first observation has most weight: the acceptance of Revelation into the canon was much debated because there was little confidence that John, the Gospel writer, was the author. Regarding the third point, we should acknowledge that John's Gospel, too, contains passages expressing God's judgement: those who reject Jesus will be condemned. And Revelation, like the Gospel, features non-violence: the dominant picture of Jesus is as a suffering servant depicted as a slain lamb. (Also, consider Revelation 13.10.)

### Clement of Rome

St Clement, like Paul, wrote letters to help young churches. As the programme states: "Two of these letters became much read, revered and indeed included in many early versions of the New Testament." Clement was probably the third Pope. It is possible that he knew Peter. Paul Lawlor observes the significance of the letters:

In this letter he's telling the Church of Corinth that they have to accept really the leaders which succeed those appointed by the apostles. They can't choose whomever they wish... He's acting as Bishop in Rome certainly during a time of persecution... In the letter of Clement we hear of terrible persecution – large numbers having been killed, and no doubt his work was encouraging...

The programme states that: "The episode in Corinth shows a church in turmoil. Corinth was but one instance – throughout the Mediterranean the whole faith was in turmoil." Certainly, by the second century the mainline churches with their established teachings faced new challenges. The great threat came from Gnosticism. The question of whose truth is the truth was a crucial one in the period following the first century. The first epistle of Clement had much to commend it and the Church took it seriously. But it was not accepted because it did not fit the key criteria (see "But what Scripture?", page 4) that the Church deemed necessary to be part of the canon.

**Reflect:** If this book was "much read" in the Early Church, what should our attitude be to it today?

### Rejected truth

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The question of who wrote the New Testament also means asking who didn't get into the New Testament. Among these were writings influenced by the thinking known as Gnosticism.

As the second programme shows, parts of many of the letters were aimed at combating teachings that were contrary to the understanding of Jesus as both fully human and divine and which denied the reality of his suffering and death. Early Gnosticism is probably the danger warned against in a number of the New Testament books. The programme sums up the beliefs of the Gnostics: "fundamental to Gnosticism is the belief in a dual world of good and evil; of light and darkness. Gnostics claimed that a person could be saved only by having the proper knowledge – *gnosis* – the divine spark." Why do you think these ideas were rejected?

### ***The Gospels of James, Thomas and Philip:***

Bart D Ehrman states:

These followers of Jesus didn't actually write these documents. They were written much later – decades later. The people who wrote them claimed to be these followers of Jesus so that other people would read these Gospels ...

As time progressed it was bound to happen that people debated more and more about what Jesus taught and achieved. The beliefs expressed in the Gnostic Gospels show similarities with ideas that John and Paul, in particular, rejected. These texts represent ideas contrary to the overall ideas expressed in the New Testament.

### **Thinking more deeply**

Consider the following Gnostic beliefs that differ from New Testament teaching: 1) portraying the material creation as evil; 2) salvation is received through special knowledge gained from escaping the prison of the body; 3) indifference about how one treats the body or the bodies of others; 4) belief that the procreation of children multiplied the souls in bondage to the powers of darkness.

### **New heresy**

We see the Church of the fourth century struggling to establish which truth is true. Arius in the fourth century believed that Jesus was created by God as a semi-divine being. This conflict resulted in the council of Nicea which led to the rejection of Arianism as heresy. Christ, the council decreed, was truly divine – of one substance with the Father. The council also recognised an urgent need to establish which Scriptures would be placed in every church.

### **But what Scripture?**

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It was inevitable that the Church's battle over what is true would result in a canon of important texts being established. Eusebius, an important bishop, was given the important task of bringing this about. The Codex Sinaiticus, written at this time, may represent the books that Eusebius included. The programme mentions that it includes "two strange books" the epistle by Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. It should be noted, however, that these two books come after the New Testament in the Codex. So for Sinaiticus, the epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas were distinguished from the other books. Bart D Ehrman comments:

The Epistle of Barnabas ... is vehemently anti-Jewish. The theme of the letter of Barnabas is that Judaism is and always has been a false religion ...

The programme points out that: "If the Christian Church was to include the Old Testament in its Bible then the epistle of Barnabas couldn't possibly stay in the canon." However, we ought to note that the epistle uses the Old Testament itself to critique the Judaism that later emerged. It is not against the Old Testament, so it doesn't follow that this is why the epistle was rejected later.

As for the Shepherd of Hermas, this was neither seen at any time as the work of an apostle nor were its teachings ever seen as significant enough to be included in the canon. Again, we are left in the same position as we were with the first epistle of Clement: do we accept the Church's criteria of canonicity, or do we form our own?

This brings us now to the establishment of the 27 works which now form our New Testament. Athanasius was central to this. Athanasius, hero of the council of Nicea, established the New Testament canon as we have it today. Bart D Ehrman comments:

...by and large it was Athanasius's view that became dominant until today the 27 books are widely accepted – almost universally accepted – as the New Testament.

What criteria do you think were central for Athanasius? Here are some of them:

- 1) Books should testify to Jesus as active in human history both as divine and human.
- 2) Books should show that Jesus fulfilled all the Old Testament revelation of God.
- 3) Books should show that Jesus was the promised Messiah of both Jews and Gentiles.

### What about the other books?

Charlesworth points out that:

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there are other writings, perhaps writings that in antiquity the scribes didn't know about ...

Charlesworth mentions the Odes Of Solomon. Actually, in this case, it is quite likely they were known in the second century and it is true that the early Christian Fathers did not regard the NT canon as a hard and fast line. They drew on a wider canon and quoted other sayings attributed to Jesus quite freely. This was because the need for a formalised canon emerged gradually in the face of heresy.

Charlesworth seems to be arguing for an open canon that we can all add to or subtract from. But this would be highly subjective. The New Testament is the one document of the Church. All of its constituent parts together make a whole that has been inspirational to the Church since the second century.

### Discussion

As a collection, the Church came to believe that the New Testament is unique and irreplaceable, even though some parts of the collection were of less value than others. Is there any value, then in attempting to add to or to subtract from the New Testament canon?

Why are those documents that did not get into the canon worthy of reading and study?

### Further reading for Revelation

*Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students* edited by DL Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).



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