



***Out of Chaos: Let Our Ordered Lives Confess the Beauty of Peace***  
***An Introduction to the Wisdom Books***

This seven-week study will be presented by Facebook livestreaming and Zoom, hosted by Rev. Mo. Martha Rogers. Go to 'Saint Matthew Bible Study,' an open and public group. The Zoom information can be found on our website. We ask that you join the FB group, if you have not done so during our previous studies. The study will include both Jewish and Christian perspectives, and we welcome all to this study, including those who consider themselves 'nones'!

Each week on **Monday, 7 PM PCT, from 7 to 7:30 PM**, we will stream the study, which will also be recorded for those living in a different time zone or who simply want to watch at a different time. There will be weekly handouts provided in advance of the sessions on Facebook. Handouts and video recordings can also be found on our website. The sessions will **begin on Monday, October 12<sup>th</sup>**, and continuing on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup>; and November 2, 9, 16, and 23<sup>rd</sup>.

## **An Introduction to the Wisdom Books**

### **Session 1**

The cover design I chose for this course is an artistic depiction of what seems to happen in seemingly random events – organization actually takes place that we may not easily see or understand. **Chaos** theory is an interdisciplinary theory stating that, within the apparent randomness of **chaotic** complex systems, there are underlying patterns, interconnectedness, constant feedback loops, repetition, self-similarity, fractals, and self-organization. And as we shall see, scripture deals with this idea that bad things happen to good people, that it rains on the good and the wicked equally and our attempts to make meaning out of seemingly random events. This short course will briefly survey what are termed the Wisdom books, some of which are found in the canon of the Hebrew, Protestant, and Catholic Bibles, and some that are considered second tier books in one tradition or another.

How do we make sense of our world? How do we discover or find meaning in our world and in our lives? We hope that our study will be informative, educational, and also a spiritual blessing to each one of you. Thank you for joining us!

#### **Brief Overview of Wisdom Books:**

Wisdom, as reflected in the OT [Hebrew Bible] and NT, refers to the good sense that God gives us that is accessible to us in various ways. The Wisdom texts address the unanswerable questions in life, including suffering and why things are not fair in this world and they do not answer them for us: rather, we are invited to enter into a dialogue with one another and with God.

Wisdom teaching is creation theology, a reflection upon lived experience in our attempt to discern the regularities of life to be taken to be the ordering of reality, that the Creator God has provided. We reach to understand the recurring patterns of behavior and outcomes that lead wisdom teachers to insist that God's world is reliable, rooted in our experience as well as in revelation.

- We receive insight from meditating on the wonders of creation
- from studying the scripture
- from prayer
- from our own life experiences
- from observing others in their life experiences
- through our empirical (scientific) investigation in the world

- through G-d's Holy Presence<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The following was written by our Bishop Peter Hickman at Saint Matthew Ecumenical Catholic Church, Orange CA. It provides a brief understanding from both Jewish and Christian perspectives about the Holy Presence of G-d:

### **The Shekinah - the "Presence"**

#### **The Hebrew Bible:**

The word *shekinah* does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, but the concept clearly does. The Jewish rabbis coined this extra-biblical expression, a form of a Hebrew word that literally means "he caused to dwell," signifying that it was a divine visitation of the presence or dwelling of the Lord God on this earth. The Shekinah was first evident when the Israelites set out from Succoth in their escape from Egypt. There the Lord appeared in a cloudy pillar in the day and a fiery pillar by night: *"After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people"* (Exodus 13:20-22).

God spoke to Moses out of the pillar of cloud in Exodus 33, assuring him that His Presence would be with the Israelites (verse 9). Verse 11 says God spoke to Moses "face to face" out of the cloud, but when Moses asked to see God's glory, God told Him, "*You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live*"(verse 20). So, apparently, the visible manifestation of God's glory was somewhat muted. When Moses asked to see God's glory, God hid Moses in the cleft of a rock, covered him with His hand, and passed by. Then He removed His hand, and Moses saw only His back. This would seem to indicate that God's glory is too awesome and powerful to be seen completely by man.

The visible manifestation of God's presence was seen not only by the Israelites but also by the Egyptians: *"During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, 'Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt'"*(Exodus 14:24-25). Just the presence of God's Shekinah glory was enough to convince His enemies that He was not someone to be resisted.

#### **The New Testament:**

In the Synoptic Gospels' account of The Holy Transfiguration Jesus and the disciples, Peter, James, and John were surrounded by the "dark cloud" from which the voice of the Father is heard. This is surely a reference to the Shekinah.

#### **In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles:**

- a) In the Ascension Jesus is taken up into a cloud. *"as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight."*
- b) the phenomena of the cloven tongues of fire on the Day of Pentecost also suggests this idea of the Shekinah.

#### **In Paul's Letters**

(I Corinthians 10:1-2) *"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea,<sup>2</sup> and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."*

- We discern and learn from all of these.
- The data are not all in, and are ever developing so -- from a wisdom perspective - ethical judgments and conclusions are endlessly provisional and open to revision. In other words, we live in an open, living system, not a closed one.

Page | 4

We will spend seven sessions studying selected portions of the wisdom books, and I will provide you with very brief meditations to do on your own. Some background on our biblical sources is important to understand the importance of the wisdom books in both Jewish and Christian traditions:

**Structure of the OT [Hebrew Bible]:** The main divisions of the OT [HB] are:

- **The Pentateuch:** Genesis + the Law (Torah) [Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy]. These books come under the authority of the Hebrew priesthood.
- **The Prophets (*Nvi'im*)** such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve “minor prophets.” These books come under the authority of the prophets.
- **The Writings (*Ktuvim*)** which includes Psalms and all the books of wisdom literature plus such books as Ruth, Lamentations, and Esther. These books come under the authority of the sages.
- The entire set (the three categories listed above) is called **TaNaK**, using an acronym taken from the first letters of the Hebrew words: T, N, and K, which is the whole of the Hebrew Bible. Although most Christians refer to this collection as the ‘Old Testament,’ that name implies that it has been replaced by the New Testament, which is both inaccurate and disrespectful to the Jewish faith, and even to our own as they are foundational for Christians as well. It is a tragic thing that we have lost an understanding of these deep underpinnings and connections. Hence, we will refer to this scriptural collection as the Hebrew Bible.
- In both Jewish and Christian traditions, there was a process in which religious writings from ancient times were evaluated by rabbi-scholars or early patristic-scholars in order to determine if they should be in their canons of accepted

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(I Thessalonians 4) "The Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the *clouds* to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord."

#### In the Book of Revelation:

1:7 "Behold, he is coming amid the *clouds*,  
and every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him.  
All the peoples of the earth will lament him.  
Yes. Amen.

scriptures. Both also considered some writings as secondary but still acceptable on a lower tier but not binding. Then, there were other writings that were considered useful or important in order to understand the historical development and evolution of the faith tradition(s) but not recognized as part of their canons.

**Accepted Canon:** Not all known wisdom books have been accepted by all faith groups. All Christians and Jews accept the **Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes**. If one has been raised Protestant, these are included in Protestant versions of the Bible and for Jews, part of the HB.

Page | 5

But if one were raised Catholic, one finds additional books in their Catholic version of the Bible that were unknown to those who were raised Protestant: **Baruch, Tobit, Wisdom, Sirach/Ecclesiasticus** (not to be confused with Ecclesiastes). These were also not part of the first tier Hebrew canon. But they are still studied.

The Jewish canon, for example, did not include Sirach because at the time the canon was formed, the only available manuscript was in Greek. But in the last century Hebrew manuscripts predating the Greek have been recovered for about two thirds of the book. Fragments or more complete texts have been found for all of the recognized books. In any case, rabbinic thought today offers other reasons and perspectives as to why Sirach is not in their canon.

Bart Ehrman<sup>2</sup> has written that criteria which were almost certainly applied by various Jewish authorities in deciding which books belonged in their canon were the criteria listed below. The five books making up the *Torah* were finalized by the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the *Nevi'im* [prophets] by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, and the *Kethuvim* [writings] about 70 CE.

- (1) **Language:** Only books written in Hebrew – even Aramaic was not considered acceptable.
- (2) **Age:** The books had to have ‘venerable authority,’ not be written after 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. But some books that were written later but mistakenly thought to have been written earlier, such as Daniel, were included.
- (3) **Usage:** If the books were used in a wide range of Jewish communities, they were considered to have authoritative tradition and eventually included by those making the decisions.

Similarly, the church fathers who determined the NT canon applied several criteria, as listed below. Note how similar they are to Jewish criteria. The Jewish canon was accepted by Christians but over time, texts that were in the first generation by followers who had known Jesus came to be regarded as equal. Ehrman notes that debates continued for several centuries about which books would be accepted and the first to list the 27 books that make up the NT was Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt [367 CE].

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<sup>2</sup> Bart D. Ehrman (2014). **The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction**. NY: Oxford University Press, page 377, 380-381.

- (1) **Antiquity:** The book had to go back to the early Christian development in order to be included.
- (2) **Apostolicity:** Books written or purported to have been written by the apostles, including the disciples of Jesus or other followers in the first generation. Some books were anonymous but they had to be attributed to the apostles or their generation.
- (3) **Catholicity:** They had to be universally accepted throughout the church, and not 'local favorites' that had not been accepted by most.
- (4) **Orthodoxy:** The book had to be considered 'orthodox' or proto-orthodox, or 'right teachings.' We should note that in the first two to three hundred years, doctrine and dogma were in a flux and there were several competing understandings.

**Other Important Old Testament Perspectives regarding Wisdom:** From a Jewish perspective, many parts of the Hebrew Bible are also regarded as wisdom literature even though found in other sections.

**Genesis:** The story of Adam and Eve is a Wisdom story. The sin of Adam and Eve is not the desire for knowledge (Wisdom) but in failing to follow the ordering that God gave for seeking it. Seeking your own wisdom leads to death.

**Story of Noah and the beginning of the Covenant:** From the time of the promise to Noah, no longer will there be an immediate reward for virtue and an immediate punishment for vice. The rain will fall on the just and the unjust alike, meaning God will let us all live together. The rainbow of promise and the earth renewed after the Flood is the promise of the Covenant. The Lord withholds wrath at injustice and instead instructs people in the ways of wisdom so that they may learn by their free choices to please God. God's self-imposed distance is like that of a parent, giving us the conditions of freedom in order to learn to choose. But in Wisdom, justice does not come immediately. We may not even see Justice come in our lifetimes.

Let us end today in prayerful meditation of the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence recognized in both Jewish and Christian traditions. The term does not actually occur in the Bible and arose in early rabbinic literature.

The **Shekhinah** (Biblical Hebrew: שְׁכִינָה *šekīnah*; also Romanized *Shekina(h)*, *Schechina(h)*, *Shech이나(h)*) is the English transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning "dwelling" or "settling" and denotes the dwelling or settling of the divine presence of God.

***Chokmâh*** (Biblical Hebrew: חֲכֹמָה, ISO 259 *ḥokmah* or *khok-maw'*) is the Biblical Hebrew word rendered as "wisdom" in English Bible versions (LXX σοφία, *sophia*; Vulgate *sapientia*).

The word occurs 149 times in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. It is cognate with the Arabic word for "wisdom", *ḥikma* حِكْمَة (Semitic root *ḥ-k-m*).

Let us close with a prayer and blessing from Jewish tradition that Jetty and I have added to our nightly prayers in the last few months. I hope you love it as much as we have come to do.

In the name of Adonai, the God of Israel:

May the angel Michael be at our right,

And the angel Gabriel be at our left,

And in front of us, the angel Uriel,

And behind us the angel Raphael,

And above our heads, the Sh'khinah, Divine Presence.

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Page | 7

### **Bibliography:**

Dianne Bergant (1997). Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading. Augsburg Fortress Press, Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440.

Richard J. Clifford (1998), The Wisdom Literature. Abingdon Press, Nashville.

Anthony R. Cereskos (2005). Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545.

The following historical information was lifted from Wikipedia, eliminating links and footnotes for readability:

**Hebrew Canon:** Rabbinic Judaism recognizes the 24 books of the Masoretic Text<sup>3</sup>, commonly called the *Tanakh* or Hebrew Bible, as authoritative. Modern scholarship suggests that the most recently written are the books of Jonah, Lamentations, and Daniel, all of which may have been composed as late as the second century BCE. Rabbinic sources hold that the biblical canon was closed after the end of the Babylonian Exile.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The **Masoretic Text[a]** (**MT** or **מ**) (masorah תנ"ך) is the authoritative Hebrew Aramaic text of the 24 books of the Tanakh in Rabbinic Judaism. The Masoretic Text defines the Jewish canon and its precise letter-text, with its vocalization and accentuation known as the *masorah*. It was primarily copied, edited and distributed by a group of Jews known as the Masoretes between the 7th and 10th centuries of the Common Era (CE).

The oldest extant manuscripts date from around the 9th century. The *Aleppo Codex* (once the oldest-known complete copy but since 1947 missing the Torah) dates from the 10th century.

The ancient Hebrew word *mesorah* (מסורת) broadly refers to the whole chain of Jewish tradition (see Oral Torah), which is claimed (by Orthodox Judaism) to be unchanged and infallible. Referring to the Masoretic Text, *mesorah* specifically means the diacritic markings of the text of the Hebrew scriptures and the concise marginal notes in manuscripts (and later printings) of the Tanakh which note textual details, usually about the precise spelling of words.

Modern scholars, and believers seeking to understand the writings of the Old Testament use a range of sources other than the Masoretic Text. These include early Greek (Septuagint) and Syriac (Peshitta) translations, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Dead Sea Scrolls and quotations from rabbinic manuscripts. Most of these are older than the oldest surviving Masoretic text and occasionally present notable differences. Which of the three commonly known versions (Septuagint, Masoretic Text, Samaritan Pentateuch) is closest to the theoretical Urtext is disputed. The text of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Peshitta reads somewhat in-between the Masoretic Text and the old Greek. Although the consonants of the Masoretic Text differ little from some Qumran texts of the early 2nd century, it has many differences of both great and lesser significance when compared to the manuscripts of the Septuagint, a Greek translation (about 1000 years older than the MT from 3rd to 2nd centuries BCE) of a more ancient Hebrew Scriptures that was in popular use by Jews in Egypt and the Holy Land (and matches the quotations in the New Testament of Christianity, especially by Paul the Apostle). A recent finding of a short Leviticus fragment, recovered from the ancient En-Gedi Scroll, carbon-dated to the 3rd or 4th century CE, is completely identical with the Masoretic Text.

<sup>4</sup> Among those who accept a tradition (Jeremiah 29:10) that the **exile** lasted 70 years, some choose the dates 608 to 538 BCE, others 586 to about 516 BCE (the year when the rebuilt Temple was dedicated in Jerusalem).

The Book of Deuteronomy includes a prohibition against adding or subtracting, which might apply to the book itself (i.e. a "closed book", a prohibition against future scribal editing) or to the instruction received by Moses on Mount Sinai.

The book of 2 Maccabees, itself not a part of the Jewish canon, describes Nehemiah (around 400 BCE) as having "founded a library and collected books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings" (2:13–15). The Book of Nehemiah suggests that the priest-scribe Ezra brought the Torah back from Babylon to Jerusalem and the Second Temple around the same time period. Both 1 and 2 Maccabees suggest that Judas Maccabeus (around 167 BCE) also collected sacred books.

There is no scholarly consensus as to when the Hebrew Bible canon was fixed: some scholars argue that it was fixed by the Hasmonean dynasty (140–40 BCE),<sup>5</sup> while others argue it was not fixed until the second century CE or even later.

**New Testament Canon:** The apostles did not leave a defined set of scriptures; instead the canon of both the Old Testament and the New Testament developed across somewhat overlapping time frames. Different denominations recognize different lists of books as canonical, following various church councils and the decisions of leaders of various churches.

For mainstream Pauline Christianity (growing from proto-orthodox Christianity in pre-Nicene times) which books constituted the Christian biblical canons of both the Old and New Testament was generally established by the 5th century, despite some scholarly disagreements, for the ancient undivided Church (the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, before the East–West Schism). The Catholic canon was set at the Council of Rome (382), the same Council commissioned Jerome to compile and translate those canonical texts into the Latin Vulgate Bible. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent (1546) affirmed the Vulgate as the official Catholic Bible in order to address changes Martin Luther made in his recently completed German translation which was based on the Hebrew language *Tanakh* in addition to the original Greek of the

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<sup>5</sup> The **Hasmonean dynasty** Hebrew: חֶשְׁמוֹנָאִים, *Hašmona'aim*) was a ruling dynasty of Judea and surrounding regions during classical antiquity. Between c. 140 and c. 116 BCE the dynasty ruled Judea semi-autonomously from the Seleucids. From 110 BCE, with the Seleucid Empire disintegrating, the dynasty became fully independent, expanded into the neighboring regions of Samaria, Galilee, Iturea, Perea, and Idumea, and the rulers took the title "basileus". Some modern scholars refer to this period as an independent kingdom of Israel.<sup>[5]</sup>

... The dynasty survived for 103 years before yielding to the **Herodian dynasty in 37 BCE**. The installation of Herod the Great (an Idumean) as king in 37 BCE made Judea a Roman client state and marked the end of the Hasmonean dynasty. Even then, Herod tried to bolster the legitimacy of his reign by marrying a Hasmonean princess, Mariamne, and planning to drown the last male Hasmonean heir at his Jericho palace. **In 6 CE, Rome joined Judea proper, Samaria and Idumea (biblical Edom) into the Roman province of Judaea.** In 44 CE, Rome installed the rule of a procurator side by side with the rule of the Herodian kings (specifically Agrippa I 41–44 and Agrippa II 50–100).

component texts. The canons of the Church of England and English Presbyterians were decided definitively by the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), respectively. The Synod of Jerusalem (1672) established additional canons that are widely accepted throughout the Orthodox Church.

Various forms of Jewish Christianity persisted until around the fifth century, and canonicalized very different sets of books, including Jewish–Christian gospels which have been lost to history. These and many other works are classified as New Testament apocrypha by Pauline denominations.

Page | 10

The Old and New Testament canons did not develop independently of each other and most primary sources for the canon specify both Old and New Testament books. For the biblical scripture for both Testaments, canonically accepted in major traditions of Christendom, see Biblical canon § Canons of various Christian traditions.

The Early Church used the Old Testament, namely the *Septuagint* (LXX) among Greek speakers, with a canon perhaps as found in the Bryennios List or Melito's canon. The Apostles did not otherwise leave a defined set of new scriptures; instead, the New Testament developed over time.

Writings attributed to the apostles circulated among the earliest Christian communities. The Pauline epistles were circulating in collected forms by the end of the 1st century AD. Justin Martyr, in the early 2nd century, mentions the "memoirs of the Apostles", which Christians (Greek: Χριστιανός) called "gospels", and which were considered to be authoritatively equal to the Old Testament.

**Marcion's list:** Marcion of Sinope was the first Christian leader in recorded history (although later considered heretical) to propose and delineate a uniquely Christian canon (c. AD 140). This included 10 epistles from St. Paul, as well as a version of the Gospel of Luke, which today is known as the Gospel of Marcion. By doing this, he established a particular way of looking at religious texts that has not persisted in Christian thought today.

**Marcion of Sinope** (/ 'ma:rʃən, -ʃiən, -siən/; Greek: Μαρκίων Σινώπης; c. 85 – c. 160) was an important figure in early Christianity. Marcion preached that the god who sent Jesus into the world was a different, higher deity than the creator god of Judaism. He considered himself a follower of Paul the Apostle, who he believed to have been the only true apostle of Jesus Christ. He published the earliest extant fixed collection of New Testament books, making him a vital figure in the development of Christian history.

Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian denounced Marcion as a heretic, and he was excommunicated by the church of Rome around 144 AD. He published the first known canon of Christian scriptures, which contained ten Pauline epistles (the Pastoral epistles weren't included) and a shorter version of the Gospel of Luke (the Gospel

of Marcion). This made him a catalyst in the process of the development of the New Testament canon by forcing the proto-orthodox Church to respond to his canon.

Sometime in the late 130's CE, Marcion traveled to Rome, joined the Roman church, and made a large donation of 200,000 sesterces to the congregation there. Conflicts with the church of Rome arose and he was eventually excommunicated in 144 AD, his donation being returned to him. After his excommunication, he returned to Asia Minor, where he continued to lead his many church congregations and teach the Gospel of Marcion.

According to Christian sources, Marcion's teacher was the Simonian, Cerdo. Irenaeus writes that "a certain Cerdo, originating from the Simonians, came to Rome under Hyginus ... and *taught that the one who was proclaimed as God by the Law and the Prophets is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (*Against Heresies*, 1, 27, 1). Also, still according to them, Marcion and the Gnostic, Valentinus, were companions in Rome.

In 394 CE, Epiphanius claimed that after beginnings as an ascetic, Marcion seduced a virgin and was accordingly excommunicated by his father, prompting him to leave his home town. This account has been doubted by many scholars, who instead think (as Bart D. Ehrman stated) that "seduction of a virgin" was a metaphor for his corruption of the Christian Church, with the Church portrayed as the undefiled virgin. "Marcion, it appears, has become the victim of the historicisation of such a metaphor, even though it contradicts the otherwise firm tradition of his strict sexual probity". Similarly doubtful is Tertullian's claim in *The Prescription Against Heretics* (written ca. 200) that Marcion professed repentance, and agreed to the conditions granted to him—that he should receive reconciliation if he restored to the Church those whom he had led astray—but that he was prevented from doing so by his death.

After Marcion, Christians began to divide texts into those that aligned well with the "canon" (measuring stick) of accepted theological thought and those that promoted heresy. This played a major role in finalizing the structure of the collection of works called the Bible. It has been proposed that the initial impetus for the proto-orthodox Christian project of canonization flowed from opposition to the list produced by Marcion.

**Apostolic Fathers:** A four-gospel canon (the *Tetramorph*) was asserted by Irenaeus in the following quote: "It is not possible that the gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four-quarters of the earth in which we live, and four universal winds, while the church is scattered throughout all the world, and the 'pillar and ground' of the church is the gospel and the spirit of life, it is fitting that she should have four pillars breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh ... Therefore, the gospels are in accord with these things ... For the living creatures are quadriform and the gospel is quadriform ... These things being so, all who destroy the form of the gospel are vain, unlearned, and also audacious; those [I mean] who

represent the aspects of the gospel as being either more in number than as aforesaid, or, on the other hand, fewer."

By the early 3rd century, Christian theologians like Origen of Alexandria may have been using—or at least were familiar with—the same 27 books found in modern New Testament editions, though there were still disputes over the canonicity of some of the writings (see also *Antilegomena*). Likewise by 200 CE, the Muratorian fragment shows that there existed a set of Christian writings somewhat similar to what is now the New Testament, which included four gospels and argued against objections to them. Thus, while there was a good measure of debate in the Early Church over the New Testament canon, the major writings were accepted by almost all Christians by the middle of the 3rd century.