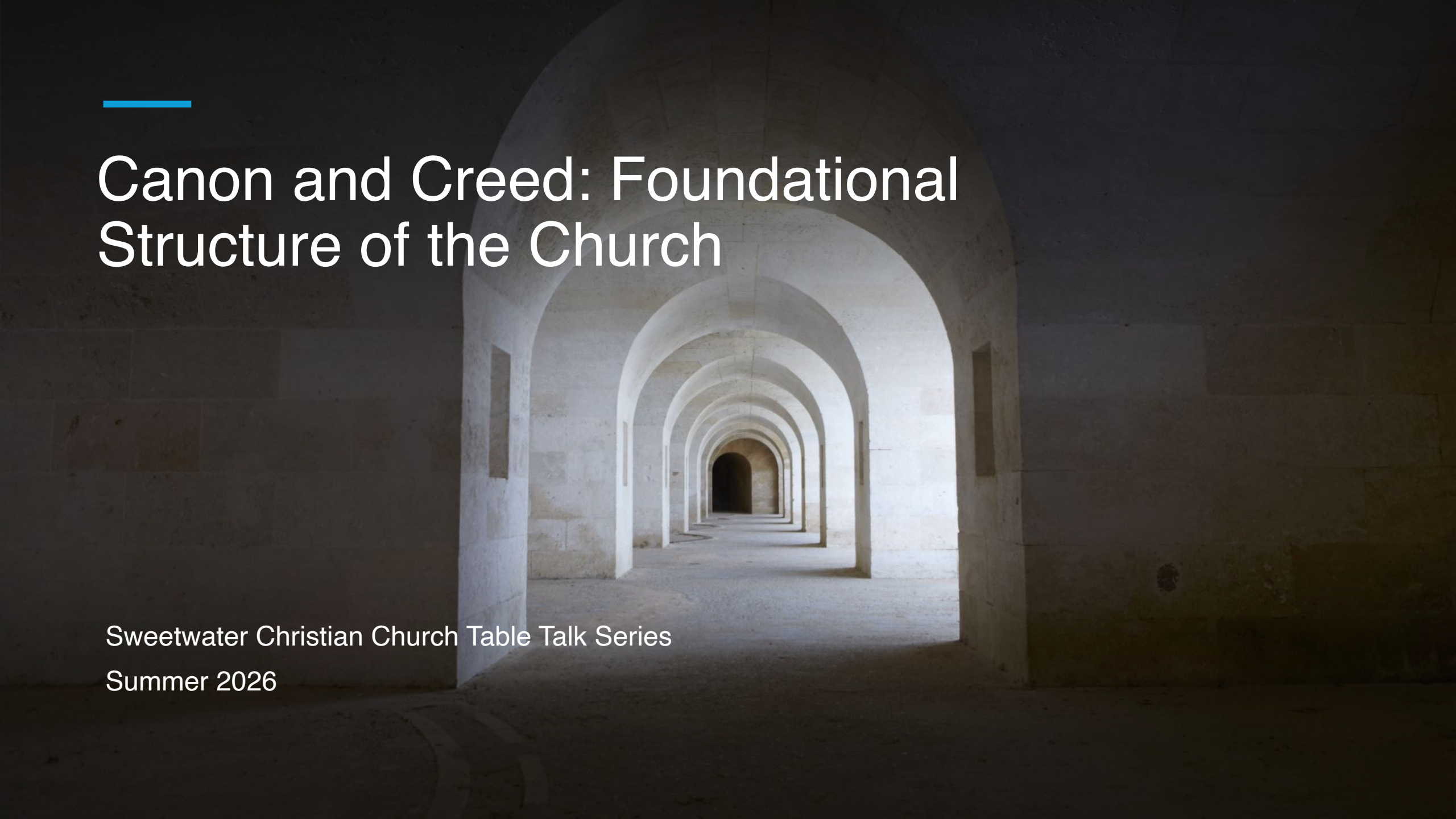




Canon and Creed: Foundational Structure of the Church

Sweetwater Christian Church Table Talk Series
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Uriel Sinai

Part 1: Canon of the New Testament

What is the Bible?

- From the Koine Greek *ta biblia*
 - Means “the little books”
 - Phoenician city named Byblos (present day Jebeil in Lebanon) which was the center for papyrus and thus scrolls and scribes
 - It is a collection of short writings, like an anthology
 - Were copied and produced as separate books until roughly 300 CE, based on the dating of the Sinaiticus Codex, the oldest collected volume we’ve found



The Canon as a Concept

The Canon as a Concept

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- Canon is a Greek word meaning “reed”, generally referring to any straight stick used for measuring – translated into Latin *canon* is *regula* which is where we get ruler
 - Alexanderian grammarians (City of Alexandria) were the first literary critics, and developed a list of authors and works who were deemed what we would call literature in the modern era – important and examples for modeling
 - They referred to their list as the Canon because it was what other authors and works were measured against

The Canon as a Concept

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- Pre-Christian Rabbis took the concept a step further. For the Scriptures (Old Testament), a list must be crafted that is the ONLY accepted or important works.
 - Different camps – the Levites, the Zadokites, the Prophets, the Judges, etc. produced different works with different ideas and the Rabbis of the 2nd temple era needed to have a common structure of writing identified
 - This changes the idea from a list used as measuring and comparison to a list that excludes non-included texts, no matter how worthy.
 - They then fought for hundreds of years about what the official list is. There were dozens and dozens of lists of what was and was not official Scripture. The fight was still going when Christ was teaching in Galilee. The Pharisees had one list, the Sadducees another, and the Essenes a third for example (and also the Zealots and the Herodians and the Samaritans).

The Canon as a Concept

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- By the time Christians are producing Christian writings, most of them are using a Greek translation of the Hebrew texts that was produced for Greek speaking Jews of the Diaspora
 - This translation was called the Septuagint, and it included the Hebrew Canon and also additional works of folklore, non-religious festival songs, etc...
 - A few hundred years later, Christianity sought to emulate this process for their own writings



The Need for a Christian Canon

Early Christian Writings

- They didn't think they were writing Scripture
- The latest book in our New Testament – probably 2 Peter – was written as late as 150 CE (Jake favors an earlier date, but not before 100 CE)
- Many many writings were around and circulated. Gospels, letters, apocalyptic visions, didactic discourses, and narratives were the most common.
- Most were intended for local church leaders, but a few, including some of Paul's letters we intended to be read aloud to the church congregation.



Early Christian Writings

- As part of worship, the Septuagint was already being read as Scripture; the “addressed to the Church” writings were read at the same time.
- More and more Christian writings were read alongside the Hebrew Scriptures, including older letters not originally intended for congregational presentation. Writings were re-read frequently, and copied and shared with neighboring communities.
- Because they were read alongside Scripture, these writings began to be viewed as similar in authority
- As disputes happened and different regions developed different theological positions, what Christian writings held the “correct” positions became important

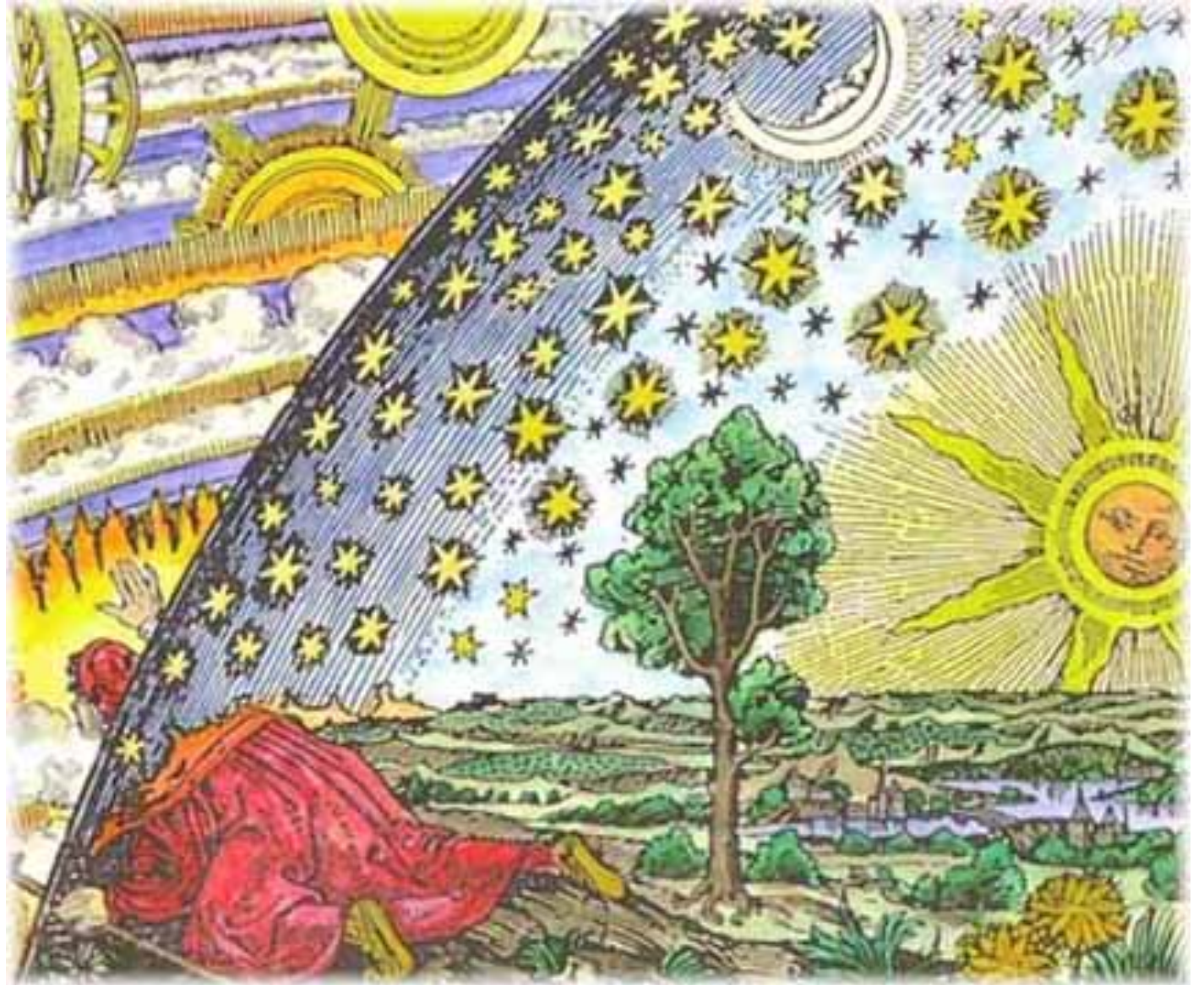


Early Christian Writings

- By the second century the concept of Divinely Inspired writing was floating around. Bishop Irenaeus in 175 CE defended the 4 Gospels from critics by claiming they were written under the influence or inspiration of the Holy Spirit
- By 200 CE Christian writings were held to have the same divine authority as the Hebrew books and formally considered Scripture of equal holiness.
- But there was a LOT of Christian writings, and many of them contradicted each other. Not all held theology that was universally accepted. So which ones were right?
- Of particular concern was Gnosticism



The Gnostic Threat



Gnosticism and the Canon

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- By the start of the second century, Christianity had an outside influence problem
 - Local culture was bleeding in here and there, and Christian life was adapting to it in response to the realization that Jesus' return is not as imminent as everyone thought.
 - Greek Christians in particular felt the need to consider other philosophies and how they might work or interact with the Christian faith
 - Gnosticism was a collection of philosophies that grew into a body of mythology that sought to re-interpret Christian belief and Jesus in particular
 - Cast Jesus as an ascended human who had secret knowledge from beyond creation

Gnosticism and the Canon

- It was recognized as a problem quickly by Church Leaders, and much of the formal development of Theology during the 2nd and 3rd centuries was in direct response to Gnostic influence
- Many individual heresies and heretical movements are classified under the broad label of Gnosticism. Some were Christian and some weren't. All were trying to convert non-Gnostic Christians.
- A Gnostic Leader named Valentinus (whose version of Christianity was very esoteric) announced that the Hebrew God did not know or have access to the true heavenly realm outside of creation, and therefore the Hebrew writings and most of the Christian writings were misleading and omitted key understandings of truth. Jesus had revealed the truth to only a few followers, and only writings related to them should be valued.

Gnosticism and the Canon

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- Next comes a guy named Marcion. He established a Christian church that excluded the Old Testament because its God was not the father of Jesus.
 - Marcion proposed a “New Testament” (the first to use that term) that only included the Gospel of Luke and 10 Pauline letters, all of which he edited to conform to his Theology.
 - These are the guys (among others) who Irenaeus defended the Gospels against, arguing that the Holy Spirit, poured out upon the faithful as a whole, enabled them to write Scripture. He also validated the unity of the Old Testament and the newer Christian writings.

Time for an Official Ruling

- It became clear that to combat ideas such as Valentinus and Marcion, the Church would have to produce an official ruling on what writings were to be treated as Scripture and which ones were not.
- There was no unified leadership at this time. An ancient fragment found by an Italian historian named Muratori has the oldest list of “official” Christian writings.
- The famous 4th century Christian historian Eusebius published his own Canon of Christian Writings – suggesting that such lists were known but not commonly accepted.
- Finally during the latter 4th century Athanasius put forth his idea of the Canon, which is more or less what we have today. It took another few centuries of arguing for the Church as a whole to agree to accept Athanasius’ list.

CANONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT		
THE MURATORIAN CANON (SECOND TO FOURTH CENTURY)	THE LIST OF EUSEBIUS (EARLY FOURTH CENTURY)	THE CANONS OF ATHANASIUS (367 CE)
[Matthew] ¹ [Mark] Luke John Acts 1 & 2 Corinthians Ephesians Philippians Colossians Galatians 1 & 2 Thessalonians Romans Philemon Titus 1 & 2 Timothy Jude 1 & 2 John ² Wisdom of Solomon Revelation to John	Matthew Mark Luke John Acts Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Ephesians Philippians Colossians Galatians 1 & 2 Thessalonians Philemon Titus 1 & 2 Timothy [Hebrews] ³ 1 Peter 1 John [Revelation to John] ⁴ Disputed books: James Jude 2 Peter 2 & 3 John	Matthew Mark Luke John Acts James 1 & 2 Peter 1, 2, & 3 John Jude Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians Hebrews ⁵ 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon Revelation to John
1. The MS begins in the middle of a line, but the inclusion of Matthew and Mark is virtually certain. 2. Some scholars argue for a conjectural reading that would support inclusion of all three letters of John. 3. Elsewhere, Eusebius regards Hebrews as by Paul. 4. Also listed as "disputed." 5. Athanasius regards this as by Paul.		

What didn't make the cut?

- We don't really know all the writings that were not included. By not being canonized there was no imperative to ensure their survival across the centuries.
- We are aware of something over 50 texts that were not included for various reasons – some of which we have, some of which we only know of by their mention in other writings. These include Gnostic texts such as the Gospel of Thomas, and some writings we have only rediscovered recently (past 100 years) via the Dead Sea Scrolls and the library of Nag Hammadi and similar discoveries.
- There are about 20 books mentioned in the Bible (mainly in the Old Testament) that are now lost.

The Canon Today

- While the fight over what is Canonical has largely cooled, it never fully disappeared. Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, etc. tried to alter the Canon based on their views with varying degrees of success.
- As a result, the typical Protestant Bible has 66 canonical books across the OT and NT.
- The Catholic Bible has 71, Eastern Orthodox has up to 84.
- The New Testament is largely the same across the whole Church; Canon differences are all Old Testament books.



Part 2: The Creed



Early Church Organization

The Start of the Church

- initially no organization, just scattered cells/groups of believers
 - second coming and judgment day around the corner
 - didn't see a need for larger organization, just for the message to spread
- it was a small movement with congregations sharing leadership roles
 - leadership was more about personality and inspiration than training
- traveling teachers brought clarification and new ideas
 - there was no formal theology developed yet, Jesus' teachings were remembered by word of mouth and Jewish scripture and tradition was still the main guide

The Start of the Church

- eventually there was a separation of laity and clergy
 - prompted by the realization that the second coming not so soon
 - number of Christians growing
 - created a need for a few individuals to devote all their time to religious work
 - constant movement of traveling leaders demanded an agreed upon set of beliefs; this required training or instruction specific to leaders

The Start of the Church

- first officials were called presbyters (elders) or bishops (overseers)
 - by 2nd century presbyters and bishops were two distinct roles
 - priests (from presbyter) ran satellite churches and reported to a bishop
 - bishops ran the central church in a metropolitan area
 - bishops were recognized as direct successors of the Apostles, all of whom were deceased by this point
 - the notion of “inherited” authority and leadership succession takes hold



The Impact of Emperor Constantine

Constantine's Rise to Power

- Diocletian steps down in 305 CE (51st Emperor of the empire)
 - first Emperor to voluntarily abdicate
 - no clear successor
- Dust settled with Maxentius, Licinius, and Constantine forming a Triumvirate of control
- Maxentius tries to take power via military; declares war on Constantine
- Battle of Milvan Bridge October 28, 312 CE
- Constantine victorious, Maxentius dead (trying to swim away drowns)
- Constantine consolidates authority, Licinius around but not as active in ruling
- Eventually Constantine and Licinius have it out, and Constantine is in sole power by 324 CE

Constantine's Conversion

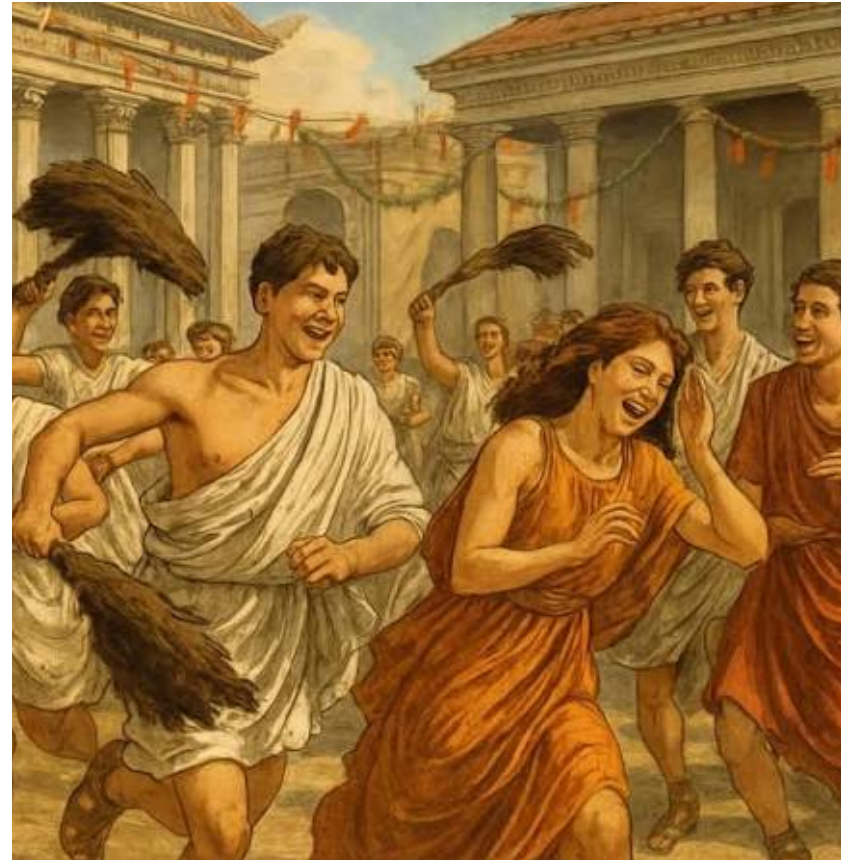
- Told as epic miraculous story:
 - Saw a vision before battle of Milvan Bridge
 - looked at Sun, saw a cross and heard a voice say "by this win!"
 - had his soldiers put the Chi-Rho (X with P) on shields; and they won
- What we know as actual fact
 - He was exposed to Christianity by his Mother Helena
 - After the battle he ignored altars of Roman gods and just went straight to palace
 - this broke long standing tradition – did not attribute victory to (any) Gods
- was actually 42 before declaring himself a Christian (which happened after Milvan)
- Waited until his death bed to be baptized (23 years after battle)

Constantine as a Christian

- Did not change his behavior towards traditional religion of Rome
 - If people believe you are a god, I mean come on
 - officially retained high priest title of Pontifex Maximus
 - hated animal sacrifices but didn't stop them
- not a bad Christian, just sensitive to cultural importance of conventional religious symbols
 - coinage etc... was not altered
 - Roman religious symbols not removed from official buildings, etc.
 - was a savvy politician. Much of Imperial authority was tied to the Imperial Cult

Constantine as a Christian

- Edict of Milan 313 CE granted freedom of religion, returned confiscated church property
- Starts showing open favor to Christians and passes favorable legislation
 - not just ends persecution - open promotion of Christianity
 - passes legislation that legitimized church as public body with official status
 - this was huge - underground to public eye, persecution was just two years prior
 - Christians preferred for admin positions (even over more qualified applicants)



Constantine as a Christian

- huge financial support for Christianity from government
 - enormous sums of money to rebuild churches destroyed in persecution
 - gave vast resources for maintenance of property and churches & charity programs
 - financed the copying of scriptures after widespread destruction in persecution
 - not just Rome - Nicomedia, Antioch, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Palestine (huge churches and Basilicas were financed)
- before, becoming Christian was a major personal choice based on faith; now people are becoming Christian for social and political advancement and prestige



New Rome



- Constantine wants to build a New Rome, to be the center of a Christian Empire, a city with no pagan influence
- Builds Constantinople over old Byzantium ruins, takes 6 years
- No temples, only Churches
- Huge social and political upheaval as he moves the center of the Empire to Constantinople
 - Enables him to take power from legacy families and positions, and redistribute based on merit and favor
 - Replaced a lot of old established Roman corruption with new, young, ambitious corruption
- Most important person in Rome is now the Bishop



Arianism

Arius Starts the Fight

- 318 Arius, presbyter of Alexandria got into a dispute with Bishop Alexander of Alexandria
- Was a popular preacher, had a lot of followers and was of strong character
- Most of our surviving evidence is from his opponents
 - Portrayed as devious philosopher led astray by subtle logic
 - Grudgingly recognized him as devote, smart, and inspired
 - “too smart for his own good” – beginnings of anti-intellectualism leanings in Christianity
- In reality Arius saw himself as a conservative trying to keep traditions from being corrupted

Arius' Beliefs

- Wanted to anchor dogma in scripture text, not metaphysics
- Wanted to find a way to tell the story of Jesus in a way that did not jeopardize the “otherness” of God the Father
- Thought Christ’s human vulnerability was evidence that he is not God in the same sense as the Father
- Considered “Son of God” as a title of divine grace & favor, not a familial relationship
- Said as only begotten one (John 1:18) Jesus’ origins lay before time but was not coeternal with the Father
- Saw “First Born over all creation” (Col 1:15) as evidence that Jesus was not eternal
- Wisdom of the first of Gods works (Prov. 8:22-36) exalted over all creatures
 - Could be said as “divine” but still a creature
 - If you’re the “first” then you must have had a beginning
- So he saw Jesus as not God as God the Father is God
 - The Son is not by nature sinless and immutable in the way God is
 - He (Jesus) could not fully know God himself, instead was divinely enabled to reveal the Father to the world
 - His moral life set an example
 - By following in his footsteps his “Son-ness” becomes ours by grace
- Focused on the practical business of Salvation

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Reaction to Arius

- It blows up big. Really big.
- Arius writes letter to Alexander explaining his thoughts
 - Not Homousios “of one substance”
- Alexander freaks after reading the letter, censures Arius and his top supporters
- Arius was surprised by the response. He complains to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia
 - Constantine is living in Nicomedia, this is a low-key appeal to the top
 - Eusebius is sympathetic to Arius – there’s very little codified theology at the time

Reaction to Arius



- Bishop Alexander doubles down, issues a letter telling all Churches that Arius is condemned by the Libyan and Egyptian Bishops
 - Lays out his main beef with Arius:
 - It implies God is not always the Father (because there's not always a Son)
 - The Word is not from eternity but was made out of nothing
 - Says there was a time when the Son was not
- Arius is formally excommunicated as a result
 - He and followers are forced to leave churches
 - Arius writes his own letters gets support of Palestine, Syria, and Eusebius of Caesarea

Constantine gets Involved

- By 324 Church is split in half and Constantine is grumpy about it
- Decides to take Marcellus Bishop of Ancyra's suggestion and have a council to settle this
- Picks Nicea as location

First Council of Nicea

May 20th to July 25th 325 CE

- First general council of Church since apostolic council in Jerusalem (50 CE) – 275 years
- Held in an Imperial building, not Church property, Constantine is present
- About 220-318 Bishops in attendance
 - 1800 invited (1000 east 800 in west), which was everybody they had record of
 - Every region of empire was represented except Great Britain
 - Could bring 2 priests and 3 deacons (totaling up to 2,000 attendees)
- Constantine firmly instructs council in need to make decision
 - A general vibe of fight it out as much as you need to, but after this it's over forever
- The council lasts 2 months
- No record has survived, no minutes, notes taken during, etc..
 - Our knowledge of it is from later evidence, reflections years later

First Council of Nicea

May 20th to July 25th 325 CE

- The Council quickly decided Arius is wrong
- Arius responds with “Okay, so what’s right if I’m wrong?”
- Council could not decide on a statement of faith; dissolves into theological camps
 - There had never been an opportunity to discuss theology on this level before, alliances are formed and discarded, people hear new ideas and agree or disagree
 - Much of debate dealt with what is meant by specific words as used in Scripture, specifically the words we translate into English as “born,” “Created,” & “begotten”
 - Got so heated that at one point Nicholas of Myra slapped Arius in the face
 - The Challenge of the Council
 - Come up with a statement of faith that would express the relationship of Father & Son that did not reduce the divinity of the Son nor say that Father & Son are different temporal manifestations
 - i.e. the church needs a Creed
 - Argued about language for weeks, but eventually settled on the Nicene Creed

The Nicean Creed

- Creed = profession of beliefs, *credo* Latin for “I believe”
 - Today catholic, orthodox, magisterial reformation have creeds (Lutheran, Methodist, Puritans, etc...) (Apostles Creed is most commonly used)
 - Most radical reformation do not (Calvinism, Baptist, Pentecostals, Quakers, etc...)
- The Big Deal with the Nicean Creed
 - Meant to be universal
 - Homousios
 - Not biblical verbiage
 - Means talking about God in terms that were philosophical or conceptual, not scriptural
 - Arius has serious problem with this – sound theology should be biblical in idiom
 - First introduced into theological discussions by Gnostic teachers – which was a huge problem for many
- None-the-less all but 2 of the Bishops agreed to sign the Creed

The Nicean Creed

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth];

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

The Nicean Creed

- At first glance the Church was united against Arianism
 - It was more complex than that; the Nicean Creed was a compromise
 - Homousios could be understood in a variety of ways
 - Literally means “same in being”
 - Sameness can mean “identical to” or “exactly like”
 - Different forms of being: Human & animal are beings
 - Some felt that it meant “One and the Same Being”
 - Some felt that it meant “Exactly Like in Being”
 - Same as God implies no distinction between Son & Father meaning Father is not Source of Godhead
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 - This suggests that Father & Son are not distinct but different modes in which God appears
- Last Section of Creed was specifically designed to condemn language of Son as a Created being with a specific beginning

First Council of Nicea

May 20th to July 25th 325 CE

Council concludes on July 25 325 CE with a banquet to celebrate Constantine's 20th year reign. All matters of theology are settled and there will never need to be another Council again! (HA HA HA not really)