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Session 5 - Christmas and Canon

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You know, we all love a good story, and there are very few stories more famous, more well-known than the one we tell every single Christmas. But what if the story we think we know is really just the beginning? Today, we're going to unwrap the history behind the Christmas story itself to ask an even bigger question. Where did the whole Bible actually come from? Okay, let's get into it.

Go ahead, picture it in your head: a quiet, starry night in Bethlehem. You've got this cozy wooden stable, a few gentle animals just kind of looking on. Mary and Joseph are gazing at baby Jesus, who's sleeping peacefully in a manger filled with soft, clean hay.

It's that serene, perfect image we see on Christmas cards every year, right? It's a beautiful picture, for sure. But is it accurate? What if our traditions, our favorite Christmas carols, have kind of filled in some of the gaps in the story? What if the reality was a little bit grittier, a little more human, and maybe even more powerful because of it? Let's take a closer look at what the text might actually be suggesting. Look, it's totally natural that we approach these ancient texts with our own modern ideas.

We can't help it. Our culture, our traditions, they all act like a filter. So what we're going to do is try to peel back that filter for a minute and see how understanding the first-century context can completely change how we picture that first Christmas.

First up, the famous inn with no room. Well, the text doesn't actually mention an innkeeper or a commercial hotel. The Greek word that's used, *katalouma*, it just means guest room.

See, Joseph was from Bethlehem. He was going home. So instead of a cold innkeeper turning them away, you should probably picture a relative's house already jam-packed with family who were all in town for the census.

So if there was no inn, where were they? Well, the text never actually says stable. In a typical house back then, animals were often brought inside into a lower level of the home for warmth and for safety at night. So when it was Mary's time to give birth, they weren't sent out to some drafty barn.

They were likely given the only private space left, that lower level. It's humble, yeah, but it's inside the home. And the manger? Yeah, forget that cute wooden cradle.

Mangers in that part of the world at that time were often made of stone, a heavy, carved-out block of rock used as a feeding trough. Laying a newborn baby in that? Well, it makes the humble circumstances of his birth feel incredibly real, a little raw even. Okay, so if we can so easily misunderstand a few key details in one of the most famous stories ever told, it kind of begs a bigger question, right? How did we get this entire collection of 27 books that we call the New Testament? How did the early church decide which stories were in and which were out? And to answer that, we have to understand this one word, canon.

It comes from a Greek word for a reed, which people used back then as a measuring stick. So when we talk about the canon of scripture, we're talking about the collection of books that measured up, the ones that became the standard, the authoritative writings for the Christian faith. Now, let's get one thing straight.

Popular fiction loves this idea of some secret council meeting in a dark room, picking and choosing books they liked. But history tells a totally different story. It wasn't a conspiracy.

It wasn't even a sudden decision. It was a gradual, organic, and very human process where the early church came to recognize the books they already saw as being authoritative. And this process, it did not happen overnight.

After the last book of the New Testament was written, it's not like the church just woke up the next day with a fully bound Bible on their nightstand. No way. It took nearly 300 years of use, discussion, and debate to formally land on the collection of 27 books we have today.

And what's so cool is that this process started early. Even inside the New Testament documents themselves, you can see these little hints of a canon consciousness. The author of 2 Peter, for instance, puts Paul's letters on the same level as the other scriptures.

Paul himself tells the church in Corinth that his instructions are a command of the Lord. And the book of Revelation ends with this powerful warning not to add or subtract from its words, which is language pulled straight from the Old Testament. The first big thing that really forced the church to think more formally about its canon came from this guy named Marcion around 144 AD.

He had this idea that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the New. So he took a pair of scissors, so to speak, to the scriptures. He cut out anything that sounded too Old Testament and made his own much shorter version.

And that move basically forced the rest of the church to say, whoa, wait a minute. What books do we actually consider to be the real deal? This timeline really puts the whole journey into perspective. From the last book being written around 95 AD, it takes almost 50 years before Marcion even shows up and forces the question.

And then look at this huge gap. It's not until 367 AD that we see the first complete list of our 27 New Testament books. This was not a sprint.

It was a marathon that went on for centuries. And that brings us to this really crucial date, 367 AD. A church leader named Athanasius of Alexandria wrote this Easter letter to all his churches.

And in it, he listed the 27 books that he and, by extension, a huge part of the church recognized as the New Testament. This is our first surviving complete list that matches the one we have in our Bibles today. It's a huge moment in this story.

So how did a book measure up? I mean, what made the Gospel of Matthew make the cut, but not some of the other gospels that were floating around back then? Well, it wasn't like the early church had some formal checklist they were taking off. Instead, they were

recognizing books that already shared a few key things in common. They were basically asking three big questions.

First, apostolic origin. Is this thing connected to an apostle or at least someone who knew them? Second, rule of faith. Does it actually line up with the core message about Jesus that everyone already agreed on? And third, universality.

Was this book being used by churches everywhere from Rome to Egypt or just by one little fringe group? So we have our 27 books, but the story's not quite over because here's the thing. The New Testament isn't really a single book. It's more like a library.

And just like any library, it's filled with different kinds of writing. Recognizing that is absolutely essential to understanding it the right way. As the scholar Dave Mathewson puts it here, God used the normal, common ways of writing from that time to communicate.

He didn't invent some new holy language. He used the tools that were available. Things like historical biographies, personal letters, and apocalyptic prophecy.

Think about it like this. You instinctively know how to read a Peanuts cartoon, right? You see the little speech bubbles and the different frames, and you know not to take it as a literal historical account. Well, the same principle applies to the Bible.

You read the Gospels, which are a type of ancient biography, differently than you read Paul's very personal letters to a church. And you read both of those differently than the wild, visionary prophecy of the book of Revelation. The genre is like the roadmap for how to read it.

Realizing that the Christmas story is maybe even richer and more real than we thought, and that the New Testament itself is this library that was carefully recognized over centuries through a very human process, doesn't diminish it. If anything, it makes it more fascinating. It invites us to read with a little more curiosity, with more context, and with a bit more wonder.

So how does knowing the story behind the stories change the way you'll read it next?