

[The Origin and History of the Bible]

Lecture XII: [Establishing the New Testament Canon]

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1. A: The Book of Revelation

Thus far in the New Testament literature we have taken up the forms of literature, the Epistles, and the Gospels. In the Book of Revelation, we have an entirely different class of literature, but not one which is original in the New Testament, as is the case with the Epistles and the Gospels. In the Revelation of John, we have an example of that class of literature known as the Apocalyptic Literature. It first made its appearance in Jewish literature in the Book of Daniel, written probably in the year 165 B.C. Some of the Old Testament Apocrypha, like Esdras and Enoch etc., are of this class. There was a great deal of it current in the early Christian Church and was widely used. The Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas are of this sort.¹

This Apocalyptic literature is the product of the last strains of the old prophetic spirit. It has neither the intellectual acumen, nor the moral courage of the prophets. No longer does it speak man-to-man in language that no one can mistake, but it hides behind allegory, and it seeks to protect itself as simply the messenger of some heavenly person. It speaks vaguely, and in figures of speech that may be interpreted in a thousand ways. It is not entirely without beauty and dignity but may certainly be spoken of as the least of the prophetic like. But its great service in the history of Judaism, and in the history of the early Christian Church, was its bolstering optimism in the face of persecutions and hardship. It was some satisfaction to the persecuted Christian to call their persecutors, in the name of

¹ The Apocalypse of Peter, or the Revelation of Peter, is an early Christian text of the 2nd century. The author is unknown, although purportedly it was written by the disciple Peter. Among other things, the work examines a vision of the afterlife with heavenly bliss for the saved and punishments for the damned. The Shepherd of Hermas, sometimes called simply, The Shepherd, is another Christian work of the 2nd century. The book presents five visions granted to a former slave, Hermas, followed by twelve mandates or commandments and ten parables. These focus on what is necessary for the Church and her faithful to thrive.

Christ, all sorts of bad names, even if it had to be hidden in the language of symbolism. The danger of such literature is seen in the extent to which the Book of Revelation has been used, and is used today, in support of all sorts of fantastic ideas concerning the Millennium and the anti-Christ, etc. In the long run, it is questionable if this book has not been a positive and definite injury to the religious and ethical development of society.

In the early Christian Church, John, son of Zebedee, was spoken of as the author. Some critics hold today that much of the book was written during the persecutions just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, and that it was written by John with several additions of a later period. That there was apocalyptic material in circulation at that time is witnessed by the fact that such a document is introduced in the Book of Mark in Chapter 13. But the soundest judgement concerning the book is that it was put into its present form about the year 95 [C.E.] by some Jewish Christian, who inserted whole many earlier small fragments, and so wove into the great Babylonian Dragon myth,² and by giving that a symbolic interpretation, added new force to his predictions. It is a document of exceedingly great bitterness and vituperative spirit. Whether that bitterness is directed against the Roman government or Paulinism within the Christian Church is by no means absolutely certain. While it seems most likely that the object of its bitter attack is the city of Rome, yet those who have seen in the document the evidence that Paul was the great anti-Christ have something to say.

One thing is absolutely certain, the revelation of John is not the work of the same writer as the Gospel of John. The latter is entirely different both in spirit and in purpose. The Gospel of John is Grecian in spirit, in language, and its ideas. The Revelation of John is Hebrew, the most Hebrewistic book of the New Testament. In fact, many critics have held that it was simply an old Jewish apocalypse, retouched with Christian editorial matter. In spite of the fact that such apocalyptic literature was very much in favor in the West, the Apocalypse of John had a very hard time to get into the canon, probably because of the suspicion that it was not apostolic in origin.

² According to Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation epic, Tiamat, depicted as a dragon, and is the personification of saltwater, created the first gods from her union with Apsu, the personification of freshwater. Eventually Tiamat was destroyed by Marduk.

2. B: [Overview of New Testament Literature]

While it has not been possible to give in detail the facts concerning all the books that enter into the literature of the New Testament, yet it has been possible to touch upon all the types, and to indicate something of the method of study and the results. The Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles of John, and the Epistle of James are all interesting subjects of study, but in many respects, they are but repetition of the same facts in new forms. I want now to give a general summary of the New Testament basing what I say upon Julicher.³ It gives what seems to me to be a fair, honest, and discriminating statement. That there is a common spirit beneath these books is apparent to anyone who can read literature with a sympathetic understanding. But beneath this common spirit there are very great contrasts, very profound differences, and very divergent tendencies. The first New Testament document written was written about 30 or 33 years after the death of Christ; the latest was written at least one hundred years after Paul's first Epistle to the Thessalonians, and thus a hundred and thirty years after the time of Christ at least. During the two decades from 50 to 70 A.D. the ten Pauline Epistles were written, possibly the "We portions" of the Acts of the Apostles, and the Logia of Matthew, and the "Original source" of the Apocalypse of John.

Between 70 and 100 A.D. Mark, Luke and Matthew were written. The Epistle to the Hebrews, the completion of the Apocalypse, and probably Acts, and First Peter.

In the beginning of the second century, we have the Gospel of John, and the three Epistles of John, then Jude, and the Pastoral Epistles, and after 125 we have James and the last of all, second Peter.

Then, too, we have to consider the wide differences in the character of these various writings. For example, Philemon is simply a personal letter. The Epistle to the Romans is a doctrinal discussion. In between are various gradations. The Gospel of Mark is a narrative of deeds to prove a thesis. John is the language of a Gnostic mystic, dealing with the reconciliation of Greek philosophy with Jewish ethical religion. There are passages of lofty ethical idealism. There are

³ Adolf Jülicher (1857-1938) German scholar and Biblical expert, Professor of Church History at the University of Marburg.

impressions of great characters. There are narrative descriptions that are of surprising beauty. Not in all literature is there a passage that surpasses in depth of insight the Garden of Gethsemane.⁴ Yet hardly can one find a more narrow and bigoted and revengeful spirit than betrays itself in the Apocalypse of John.

Thus, we see the wide range of subject covered, the diversity of spirit, the variety in form. How it came into being we have seen. How it crystalized and excluded from its midst all material not true to its general character is the theme for tonight.

3. C: [The Gospel of John]

The cue to the character of the times which determined the nature of the Bible, and excluded and included books, is found in the Gospel of John. As Professor Pfleiderer points out, the differences between the presentation of the life of Christ according to John and that of the synoptics is not so much a difference of tradition as it is a difference of half a century, and a difference in a point of view. In the Gospel of John all the old traditional matter is subordinated to the new dogmatic thought that Christ is the divine Logos become man.

The undertaking which the fourth Gospel-writer set for himself was to mediate between the Pauline-Gnostic idea of Christ, and the historic Christ-image of the tradition of the congregation. ...

...

... Hence, the undeniable fact that the Christ of John throughout plays between sublime truth and phantomlike unnaturalness; ... the Son of God or the religion of humanity, freed from the accidents and limitations of individuality and nationality, of time and space, and the latter, in so far as he presents a god wandering about the earth in the garb of a mythical figure.

...

Concerning the composition of the fourth Gospel, this much may be said with certainty, that an eye-witness of the life of Jesus did not write it, hence it was not written by the Apostle John. The Gospel-writer nowhere

⁴ The Garden of Gethsemane is where Jesus and went with his disciples to pray in advance of his arrest there and ultimate crucifixion. See Matthew 26:36-46.

pretends to be the Apostle John, but he refers (19, 35) to the testimony of an eye-witness as a third person, who is not himself, but who is his source, namely the favorite disciple (John).⁵

But how came this mysterious figure of the favorite disciple to be associated with the Gospel, or with the writer's attempt at interpreting the Gospel? The answer is found probably in a record in the apocryphal records of John, a Gnostic novel. In that John is portrayed as the disciple whom Jesus had made his confidant because of his virgin purity, and to whom he confided the higher esoteric knowledge, gnosis, of his divine being. In other words, the situation seems to be that this Gnostic novel of John was one of the attempts of the Gnostic sects to spread their doctrines within the Christian Church under the cover of the name John, and under the cover of a secret tradition given to the beloved disciple.

In order to overcome this error of the Gnostics, the Gospel-writer wrested the authority of their Apostle and prophet John from them, by making the [disciple John vouch for the writing of the fourth Gospel. With this ground of Gnostic conflict, the writer of the fourth Gospel sometime in the second century, and writing as if he were presenting the teaching of John, opposed the heretical Gnosis with his true church knowledge, but at the same time](#) he wished to contrast it with the early-Christian Peter-tradition as the *higher* revelation, transmitted by the spiritual disciple.⁶

From this point of view may be understood the setting of the Gospel as a setting of rivalry between Peter and John [as] the favorite disciple. But this rivalry is really the rivalry between the new semi-Gnostic form of faith that had developed in the Church and was contending with the older Peter-tradition. It is a second century development of the feud between Peter and

⁵ Otto Pfleiderer (1839-1908) German Protestant theologian. This quote is from his book, *Christian Origins*, Daniel Huebsch, translator, New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1906, pp. 275-277.

⁶ This quote is clearly taken from Otto Pfleiderer, *Christian Origins*, Daniel Huebsch, translator, New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1906, pp. 277-278. However, some of the words in the quoted passage I cannot find in the source. Possibly Davis was using a different edition of Pfleiderer that I cannot find. In any case, I have colored the text I cannot find in my copy of Pfleiderer in blue.

Paul at the council of Jerusalem. The setting is changed but the principles involved are the same. This conception of the Gospel of John as the middle of the road writing, between the orthodox Christianity and the Gnostic heresies of the second century, accounts also for the contradictory traditions concerning its authorship. Some held that it was written by Cerinthus,⁷ the great Gnostic in defense of Gnosticism, and others held that it was a document against Gnosticism. It was, in a way, both. It was a compromise between the two, and probably was written about the time of, say about 140 to 150.

This explanation of the Gospel of John, which I have given is that of Pfleiderer. It represents what seems to me to be a valid point of view. Not all critics hold this explanation of the Gospel. Yet all hold that the forces which were at play at this time were such as above described, but the detail of their developments does not command such unanimity of opinion.

4. D: [Forces Behind the Creation of Church Authority and the New Testament Canon]

As we have seen the early Christian Church was not only surrounded by heretical movements, but it was honeycombed by them. In fact, these so-called heretical movements that surrounded the early Christian Church were not distinct from the Church itself or its thought and development. They were extreme developments of the ideas and institutions and principles that were the foundation of the Christian movement. But as the Christian movement developed, and especially under the pressure of opposition, it began to have a certain self-consciousness that, as we have already seen, separated it from the Jews on the one end and the Hellenists on the other. In the second century the Jewish danger was no longer a menace, but the Grecian, the general heathen religious cults, especially the mystery cults were a menace.

Against the danger of this heathen set of influences, which we will call the Gnostic tendency, the Church of the second century set up three fences during the second century. First, it strengthened its ecclesiastical organization by adopting the office of Bishop. For example, a letter of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch warns every congregation to subordinate itself to the bishop.

⁷ Cerinthus (c.100-c.150) an early Gnostic.

Obey the Bishop as Jesus Christ the Father, and the Presbyters as the Apostles, but honor the deacons as the law of the Lord! No one should do anything relating to the Church without the Bishop. Only that eucharist ... shall be considered the right one which the Bishop or his appointee administers. Wherever the Bishop appears, let the many (the congregation) be, as the church is there, where Jesus Christ is. Baptism without the Bishop is not allowed, nor may the love-feast be partaken of; only what he sanctions is pleasing to God, so whatever happens will be safe and firm ... Whoever honors the Bishop is honored of God; whoever does aught behind the Bishop's back deserves the devil.

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This is decidedly different from the free democratic congregations to whom Paul wrote his letters. In all Paul's questions of discipline, he does not tell the bishop what to do, but he tells the congregation. So, this is what the Church was doing to protect itself from breaking on the rocks of heresy and slack discipline.

Second, it was developing a creed. Probably by the middle of the second century the so-called Apostles Creed was a rule of faith. This was an emphasis upon God as creator as against the Gnostic idea, that the God, whose son Christ was, was not the creator of the world, but another God. Also, the articles concerning Jesus were to emphasize the humanity of Jesus as against the Gnostic idea of his deity or divinity.

The third development which took place was the defining [of] just what literary documents were to be regarded as sound and as valid for use in disputations and argument.

About the year 140, Marcion, a Christian Gnostic, who taught in Rome, gathered together the first Christian canon to be used in place of the Old Testament, which he had rejected. In the Bible which Marcion thus selected for use, in place of the Old Testament, we find the Ten Epistles of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel was somewhat different from the Luke we have, at least it did not have the first two chapters. This is the first evidence of a New Testament canon. It was a strictly

⁸ This letter from Bishop Ignatius of Antioch (dates unknown, late first century C.E.) is quoted in Otto Pfleiderer, *Christian Origins*, Daniel Huebsch, translator, New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1906, pp. 283-284.

Pauline Bible. But Marcion's attempt to regulate artificially what was already developing naturally forced some definite consideration of the question by the people in the churches. The narrow Pauline canon was not enough. Several books were added, some deleted and many that were considered were rejected. It took two or three hundred years before the question was officially settled, yet, as a matter of fact, it was to all intents and purposes settled in the second century.

But even the frequent use of the New Testament by Church Fathers beginning, say, in the second or third decade of the second century does not imply that the books then written and referred to were regarded as scripture with the same authority as the Old Testament was regarded. Indeed, Barnabas wrote [in] about 119, and only once does he quote from the New Testament, and that is so prefaced by the phrase, "As it is written," indicating the possibility of this quotation as "Scripture." But that citation is uncertain. The passage in Matthew, which is said to be thus quoted by Barnabas is 20:16 or 22:14, but the Matthew passage is itself quoted from 4 Esdras 8:3.

Papias, about 150 A.D., of whom we have learned through Eusebius, seems to have known nothing of a New Testament canon. He knows of several of the books of the New Testament, but they are not "Scripture" to him.

In the shorter Greek recension of the Ignatian Epistles (about 175 A.D.) the idea of a New Canon is suggested. The Gospel and the Apostles are recognized as parts of a book. But the writer used the Gospel to the Hebrews.

In the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (about 170 A.D.) Paul's life is said to be described in "Holy Books," meaning his own Epistles and Acts.

Justin Martyr, 150 A.D., knew the first and third Gospels, possibly Mark, and probably not John. Also, he used an apocryphal gospel, possibly Hebrews, but to him these documents were not authoritative Scripture.

Perhaps one of the most interesting illustrations of the status of these new books at this time is seen in the apology for Christianity which Athenagoras of Athens wrote to Marcus Aurelius, 176 A.D. In this, he uses written and unwritten tradition, and everything is tested by the Old Testament. This was his only authoritative canon. He makes no use of the

Christian documents and introduces words of Jesus (Tradition) by "He Says."

In fact, the earliest example of reference to any portion of the New Testament as Scripture is found in Second Peter, 170 A.D., 3:16. Says Davidson:

The conception of a Catholic *canon* was realized about the same time as that of a Catholic *church*. One hundred and seventy years from the coming of Christ elapsed before the collection assumed a form that carried with it the idea of *Holy* and *Inspired*. ... It is clear that the earliest church fathers did not use the books of the New Testament as sacred documents clothed with divine authority, but followed for the most part, at least till the middle of the second century, apostolic tradition, orally transmitted.

But,

In the second half, then, of the second century there was a canon of the New Testament consisting of two parts called *the gospel* and *the apostle*. The first was complete, consisting of the four Gospels alone;⁹

(Although a few writers refer to one or two of apocryphal.) The second, incomplete, contained Acts, thirteen epistles of Paul, one of Peter, one of John and the Revelation, or twenty in all. The general statement is based upon the fact that Irenaeus, Clement and Tertullian recognized such a canon.

5. E: [Early Authorities on the New Testament Canon]

[a.] Irenaeus. Irenaeus, 180 A.D., wrote against the heresies of his time. He had a canon, which was based upon the measure of apostolic origin. The writings included in this canon were authoritative and binding. His canon contained our four Gospels, the Acts, thirteen Epistles of Paul, the first Epistle of John and Revelation, or 21 books out of our 27. He had a second group of books which he highly esteemed but not on a part with the first: Second John, First Peter, and Shepherd of Hermas.

⁹ Samuel Davidson (1806-1898) Irish biblical scholar. This quote is from his book, *The Canon of the Bible: Its Formation, History, and Fluctuations*, London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1880, pp. 136-137.

[b.] Clement of Alexandria. Clement of Alexandria, who was head of the Catechetical schools in the second half of the second century, also had an authoritative collection. He had the same list as Irenaeus with several additions. The Epistle to the Hebrews, 2 John, Jude, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistles of Clement, and Barnabas.

[c.] Tertullian. Tertullian lived in Northern Africa and wrote many books during the closing years of the second century and the opening years of the third century. His canon consisted of the four gospels, Acts, thirteen epistles of Paul, the Apocrypha, and first John. His secondary canon was the epistle to Hebrews, Jude, Shepherd of Hermas, 2 John, and First Peter.

These three fathers had a canon, each his own standard, but the limits of the canon were not defined, and not uniform.

[d.] Murator fragment. A fragment, giving a list of books in the New Testament, was discovered by an Italian Ludivico Muratori¹⁰ in the Ambrosian Library at Milan. He published it in 1740. It is a fragment whose date, origin and authenticity can only be established by inference. The fragment is mutilated at both ends, and in bad shape in many ways. Scholars have generally agreed as to a date about the year 170. It is possible that it dates as early as 160, but highly improbable, and it may be as late as 200 A.D. It may have originated in Rome. It includes four gospels, Acts, thirteen epistles of Paul, the epistles of John, Jude, and Apocrypha. The epistle to Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter and James are not mentioned. The epistle to the Laodiceans, and the epistle to the Alexandrians, (Hebrews).

[e.] Clermont MS. D. [This manuscript] was read in the African Church in the third century has its list as follows. Matthew, John, Mark, and Luke. Ten epistles of Paul, two of Peter, James, three of John and Jude. The epistle to Hebrews, the revelation of John, Acts of the Apostles, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Revelation of Peter, thus including three apocryphal books.

[f.] Origen. Origen is one of the greatest of the Church Fathers, who wrote about the middle of the third century, divides the list into three groups, those accepted, four gospels, 13 Pauline epistles, 1 John, 1 Peter, Acts, Revelation

¹⁰ Ludivico Muratori (1672-1750) Italian Catholic priest and church historian.

of John, and the Epistle of Hebrews—so far as it contains Pauline ideas. In the second group were the doubtful ones, which according to his mind were the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Acts of Paul, the Gospel according to the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Egyptians, and the preaching of Peter. In the third class of these not authentic he puts James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John.

[g.] Eusebius. Finally, we come to the list that was prepared by the great Church historian, Eusebius about the year 332. Constantine, the Roman emperor, instructed Eusebius to prepare a list for the Catholic Church, i.e., the Christian State Church of the Empire. But in his Ecclesiastical History he speaks of the Canon, and divides the books into three classes, those received, four gospels, the Acts, thirteen epistles of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter and the Apocalypse. The second class he subdivides into two groups, the mixed controverted writings are James, 2 Peter, second and third John, Jude. The spurious controverted writings are the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd, the revelation of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, the doctrines of the Apostles, the Apocalypse of John, the Gospel according to the Hebrews. In the third class of heretical books, he included the Gospels of Peter, of Thomas, the tradition of Matthias, the Acts of Peter, Andrew, and John.

The entire passage of Eusebius, Book III, Chapter 25, dealing with this canon is interesting, not only as showing the attitude and the state of flux concerning the canon of the New Testament in the year 332 A.D., but also as showing the attitude of the Christian Church at this time. He says,

Since we are dealing with the subject it is proper to sum up the writings of the New Testament that have already been mentioned. First then we must put the holy quaternion of the Gospels, following them with the Acts of the Apostles. After this must be reckoned the Epistles of Paul; next in order the extant former Epistle of John, and likewise the Epistle of Peter, must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seems proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These then being among the accepted writings (Homologoumena). Among the disputed writings (Antilegoumena) which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called Epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second Epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist

or to another of that name. Among the rejected writings (Notha) must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant Epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books. And among these some have placed also the Gospel according to the Hebrews, with which those of the Hebrews that have accepted Christ are especially delighted. And all these may be reckoned among the disputed books. But we have nevertheless felt compelled to give a catalogue of those also, distinguishing these works which, according to ecclesiastical tradition are true and genuine [and commonly accepted] from those others which, although not canonical but disputed, are yet known to ecclesiastical writers—we have felt compelled to give this catalogue in order that we might be able to know these works and those that are cited by the heretics under the name of apostles, including for instance, such books as the Gospels of Peter, of Thomas, of Matthias, or of any other besides them, and the Acts of Andrew and John, and the other apostles, which no one belonging to the succession of ecclesiastical writers has deemed worthy to mention in his writings. And further, the character of the style is at variance with apostolic usage, and both the thought and the purpose of the things that are related in them are so completely out of accord with true orthodoxy that they clearly show themselves to be the fictions of heretics. Wherefore they are not to be placed even among the rejected writings, but all of them are to be cast aside as absurd and impious.

Vedder's *Our Testament*, p 368.¹¹

6. F: [Making It the New Testament Canon]

For the next two generations after Eusebius the development was in the direction of confirming the lists which he made important. The process of creating and selecting a New Testament was practically complete, but it remained for someone to officially say so, or for someone whose influence was such that

¹¹ This long-translated-quote from Eusebius is provided by Henry Clay Vedder (1853-1935; American Baptist church historian) in his *Our New Testament: How Did We Get It?* Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908, pp. 368-369.

his statement would amount to an official acknowledgement of the fact that the New Testament literature was complete.

It was Augustine¹² who accomplished this result. Pope Damasus¹³ had suggested as far back as 382 that the results that Augustine worked for should be brought about. At three synods, one in Hippo in 393, one in Carthage in 397, and again in Carthage in 419, passed canons ordaining that the 27 books which we know as the New Testament should constitute the Christian scripture. The decrees in all of these councils were the same except that in the first two councils, the provision was "for thirteen letters of Paul, and the letter to the Hebrews by the same." In the last decree it read, "Fourteen letters of Paul."

The list, which these councils supported was the list as we know it, i.e.:

four books of the gospel, According to Matthew, according to Mark, According to Luke, according to John; fourteen Epistles of the Apostle Paul—one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, two to the Thessalonians, one to Colossians, two to Timothy, one to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two to Peter, three of John, one of Jude; and one of James; one book of the Acts of the Apostles; and one of the Revelation of John.
Vedder, 376.¹⁴

But it remained for Pope Galasius¹⁵ in the year 496 to put the finishing touches on the process by his declaration of that year 496,

¹² Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) theologian and philosopher was bishop of Hippo Regius in Numidia from 395 until his death.

¹³ Pope Damasus (305-384) was bishop of Rome from 366 until his death.

¹⁴ This translated quote from Augustine is provided by Henry Clay Vedder in his *Our New Testament: How Did We Get It?*, Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908, pp. 376-377.

¹⁵ Pope Gelasius I (-496) was bishop of Rome from 492 until his death.

Likewise the order of the scriptures of the New Testament, which the Holy Roman Catholic Church receives and venerates: etc.¹⁶

¹⁶ Quoted in Vedder, *Our New Testament: How Did We Get It?*, Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908, p. 379.