

Father's Christmas

A non-canonical book is one that was not recognized as belonging to the 66 inspired books that comprise the completed Bible.

Undoubtedly the most famous of these books is *The Book of Enoch*. In Jude we read, "Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him." nThese are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling *words*, flattering people to gain advantage" (v14, 15 & 16).

Take a guess: How many non-canonical books do you think are referred to in the 66 inspired books that comprise the completed Bible?

At least 20 in the Hebrew Bible & 13 in the New Testament.

Some you might say, "O, yeah, now I remember:

- Paul's letter to the Corinthians before First Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:9).
- *The Book of Jasher* is mentioned in Joshua 10:13 and Second Samuel 1:18 and also referenced in Second Timothy 3:8.
- *The Book of Gad the Seer* (also called *Gad the Seer* or *The Acts of Gad the Seer*) referenced in First Chronicles 29:29.

Mennonite scholar David Ewart has mentioned that *Nestle's Greek New Testament* lists some 132 New Testament passages that appear to be verbal allusions to non-canonical books. Also in the NT at least 4 pagan authors are alluded to.

Last week I told you that I have been looking at some first century writings by the so-called early Church fathers. I'm doing it because there is a movement growing in popularity to return to what is being called historic pre-millennialism. It is a view of the future that insists the Church fathers taught a post-tribulation rapture. They insist that no Church father is on record ever mentioning a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church.

We talked about a reference from Irenaeus that was clearly pre-tribulational. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John.

They are not correct, but even if they were, it would make no difference. What does the Word say? It says, in Daniel 12:4, that much prophecy was to be “shut up” until the end of the ages. Irenaeus says as much. We thus expect new developments in our eschatology.

One more observation regarding the end times. It is also growing in popularity to identify the antichrist as a Muslim. It is therefore interesting to learn that Irenaeus (and others) insisted he would be from the tribe of Dan. Again, it is not authoritative. But if you had a choice between a guy who occasionally talked to the apostle John and a modern commentator...

Let me say this before we go too far. These extra biblical, non-canonical books are not inspired. We are not to read them the way we read the Word of God. Having said that, however, since the Bible pretty often refers to them, we certainly can glean from them, too.

While scanning YouTube, my research assistant, who happens to be my wife, came across some early Church father’s references to the birth of Jesus. It’s super cool.

In the spirit of this Christmas season and the universal call to encounter Christ anew, let us look back in time at what some of the ancients had to say about Christmas and the Nativity.

I’ll start with the best of the best, Julius Africanus. He was a Christian historian who lived and wrote from AD 160-240.

He recorded the Magi’s own account of the star of Bethlehem and Christ’s birth.

(This account is found in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 6, under *Africanus - Existent Writings*; free to download on e-Sword).

And we came to that place then to which we were sent, and saw the mother and the child, the star indicating to us the royal babe. And we said to the mother: What art thou named, O renowned mother? And she says: Mary, masters. And we said to her: Whence art thou sprung? And she replies: From this district of the Bethlehemites. Then said we: Hast thou not had a husband? And she answers: I was only betrothed with a view to the marriage covenant, my thoughts being far removed from this. For I

had no mind to come to this. And while I was giving very little concern to it, when a certain Sabbath dawned, and straightway at the rising of the sun, an angel appeared to me bringing me suddenly the glad tidings of a son. And in trouble I cried out, Be it not so to me, Lord, for I have not a husband. And he persuaded me to believe, that by the will of God I should have this son.

Then said we to her: Mother, mother, all the gods of the Persians have called thee blessed. Thy glory is great; for thou art exalted above all women of renown, and thou art shown to be more queenly than all queens.

The child, moreover, was seated on the ground, being, as she said, in His second year, and having in part the likeness of His mother. And she had long hands, and a body somewhat delicate; and her colour was like that of ripe wheat; and she was of a round face, and had her hair bound up. And as we had along with us a servant skilled in painting from the life, we brought with us to our country a likeness of them both; and it was placed by our hand in the sacred temple, with this inscription on it: To Jove the Sun, the mighty God, the King of Jesus, the power of Persia dedicated this.

And taking the child up, each of us in turn, and bearing Him in our arms, we saluted Him and worshipped Him, and presented to Him gold, and myrrh, and frankincense, addressing Him thus: We gift Thee with Thine own, O Jesus, Ruler of heaven. Wert things unordered be ordered, wert Thou not at hand. In no other way could things heavenly be brought into conjunction with things earthly, but by Thy descent. Such service cannot be discharged, if only the servant is sent us, as when the Master Himself is present; neither can so much be achieved when the king sends only his satraps to war, as when the king is there himself. It became the wisdom of Thy system, that Thou shouldest deal in this manner with men.

And the child leaped and laughed at our caresses and words. And when we had bidden the mother farewell, and when she had shown us honour, and we had testified to her the reverence which became us, we came again to the place in which we lodged. And at eventide there appeared to us one of a terrible and fearful countenance, saying: Get ye out quickly, lest ye be taken in a snare. And we in terror said: And who is he, O divine leader, that plotteth against so august an embassy? And he replied: Herod; but get you up straightway and depart in safety and peace.

And we made speed to depart thence in all earnestness; and we reported in Jerusalem all that we had seen. Behold, then, the great things that we have told you regarding Christ; and we saw Christ our Saviour, who was made known as both God and man. To Him be the glory and the power unto the ages of the ages. Amen.

Irenaeus (AD 120-200), the disciple of Polycarp:

- In Book 3, Chapter 18, Section 1, Irenaeus talks about the importance of Christ's birth from a virgin, highlighting the connection between the Virgin Mary and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah's birth: "The Virgin Mary, being obedient to His word, received from an angel the glad tidings that she would bear God."
- Another reference can be found in Book 3, Chapter 19, Section 1, where Irenaeus discusses Jesus as the Word Incarnate: "For the Word of God, who is God, from the beginning, is in fact the divine substance of the Father, and therefore the Word became flesh, and the Son of God became the Son of Man."

Church father Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-253) in *Against Celsus* 1:60, stated that the Magi had a copy of the prophecy of Balaam, found in Numbers 24, about the star coming out of Jacob. It was given to them by Daniel after the time of Cyrus' taking the kingdom. Origen also stated, in *Against Celsus* 1.58, that historical records indicated that the Magi were not Chaldeans, but Persians.

Tertullian (AD 190-210) stated, in *Idolatry* 1.9, that astrology is simply a form of idolatry, but he believed that the science of the magi was totally different from the pagan form of astrology.

From here we jump to circa AD 400. The following excerpts are taken from the Christmas sermons of a few of the guys.

St. Leo the Great, *Sermon on the Feast of the Nativity*, AD 400's.

The birth of Christ is the source of life for Christian folk, and the birthday of the Head is the birthday of the body. Although every individual that is called has his own order, and all the sons of the Church are separated from one another by intervals of time, yet as the entire body of the faithful being born in the font of baptism is crucified with Christ in His passion, raised again in His resurrection, and placed at the Father's right hand in His ascension, so with Him are they born in this nativity.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 300's). "But let us believe in Jesus Christ, as having come in the flesh and been made Man, because we could not receive Him otherwise. For since we could not look upon or enjoy Him as He was, He became what we are, that so we might be permitted to enjoy Him."

John Chrysostom (AD 349 - 407) was famed for his preaching epithet, "Chrysostom" which means *golden-mouthed*. His *Nativity Sermon*:

Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness diffused, and spreads on every side, a heavenly way of life has been implanted on the earth, angels communicate with men without fear, and men now hold speech with angels.

Jerome (AD 347-420), best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin, popularly known as the Vulgate. In *On the Nativity of the Lord*, wrote, "He found no room in the Holy of Holies that shone with gold, precious stones, pure silk, and silver. He is not born in the midst of gold and riches but in the midst of dung, in a stable, where our sins were filthier than the dung. He is born on a dunghill in order to lift up those who come from it: "From the dunghill He lifts up the poor."

I'd rename his sermon, *Dung da-dung-dung*