

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Karin Peter 00:33

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast, we are introducing a new series, or maybe it's a sequel to our last series, and it's called New'Brew, which takes us on a journey through the New Testament. Now, many are familiar with the Temple School course from Community of Christ, Introduction to Scripture that helps us with our understanding about Scripture. And this new Project Zion Podcast series walks us through scripture, looking at key themes, genres, narratives, and passages through the lenses of explanation, exploration and experiencing the text. So I'm hoping you will join us as we spend 2022, exploring the New Testament, just as we spent 2021 exploring the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament. Now, I'm Karin Peter, and I'm happy to serve as host for this series, but the heavy lifting will fall to our Scripture guides. Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. So, Tony, some people really like the New Testament, more so than the Old Testament. So what kinds of things will we be talking about in this new series?

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:45

Well, so as we crack open this New'Brew, Karin, there's so many things we want to explore. I think one of the things we want to explore is that the New Testament is not a book. It's a library. It's a collection of books. And so the books are in different genres or types. And so we'll spend time in our episodes, trying to make sense of the different genres because, because in literature, meaning is connected to the type of literature something is, so that's really important for understanding a text well.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:21

And that's really important, too, when, when you read a book, and it sounds like it's preaching at you, "Mmm, hmm. Well, what is it? You know, is it a, it is a sermon?" It might be. There's a few in the New Testament, but it might be a letter where somebody is addressing particular questions that came up in that congregation or some problems. And so they're giving some direction about "how do you solve this?" Or, "What theological ideas do you bring to this?" and it may sound like someone is being very directive, because they are, but it may not be that they're talking to you, they may be talking to somebody in the first century had a very different situation they were dealing with than you are. And so this is, it's really important to know, it's a ladder that was preceded by another letter that had some circumstances or some questions or some problems in it. And so then you can begin to imagine that you're kind of overhearing this conversation or part of this conversation of what's happening in a congregation. And so that is really very helpful when you're getting into some of the literature of the New Testament. "Oh, this is a letter! This has been a correspondence that's been going on for a while, oh, there's problems in a congregation, who knew?"

Karin Peter 03:51

Suprise! Surprise!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:55

"Oh, some of these are similar to things in my congregation, but some of them are not." And that's okay. But to recognize that, what this is, it really, really helps a lot.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:08

And it's gonna be really important to understand that as we are reading somebody else's mail, which is how we'll be approaching this. We're reading somebody else's mail from the Greco Roman world, like literally two millennia ago. And that's really important because because the authors of these New Testament books were shaped, formed, and, you know, guided by their own cultural understandings, which are not our cultural understandings. When the author of the first letter of Peter says that women are the weaker sex or literally in Greek, the weaker vessel, we will have to do some digging because this isn't this is not this is not mailed to us. This is late for century mail and it reflects certain gender, gender biases from that era, i.e that there's that there's one gender, the male gender, and everything else is a deformation of the male gender. Now that that ain't our biology, and I sure hope it I sure hope it's not your biology, Karin, and hope it's not biology being taught in any public schools, but, but we have to understand that that was the and that's part of reading somebody else's mail from the Greco Roman world, and we have to make sense of that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:24

It's their science. It's their anatomy. It's that kind of understanding. And, and we shouldn't confuse that with understandings that we would have today or that shouldn't nullify them, or, or cause us to think that all women somehow are, are weaker and can't do things for themselves. And I was obviously written by a man who'd never had a baby, or menstrual cycle, you know, it's like, really weaker? Hmm. How does one measure that? So it's that's really important to recognize the time that it was written in, and what the cultural understandings are, we'll hit on those fairly often, probably, particularly when we get into some of Paul's writings, which we know Karin, are some of your favorites.

Karin Peter 06:18

Yes, yes, yes, some of my favorites. So I'm hoping that we will continue in the vein that we did with He'Brew, Charmaine, where you will, at the end of our episode, help us explore some of these passages, particularly some of those that are difficult, in ways that might take away some of the misunderstandings that have been kind of layered over passages through time so we can see them better. We'll hope.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:45

That's what we plan to do, and we hope that will help to reveal some of the message that is timeless, and, and usually, when we can figure out what's timeless and what's time bound, then we can let go of some stuff and figure out what stuff still is relevant to us. And what stuff is first century geography or biology or psychology? And, and let that be.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:15

So we've got lots of lots of fascinating books and authors to explore in this. And one of the questions that, that we might ask as well, you know, why is there a New Testament, right? Why why is there such

a thing? Why is there this library? And there's a couple of ways you could answer that one? One way to answer that is one of one of my favorite authors, favorite scholarly authors in the New Testament is Luke Johnson. And Luke Johnson makes a statement, I think it's really helpful for answering that question. He says, "Well, the the ultimate cause of why there's a New Testament is that there's this new experience of God, in and through the person of Jesus, his message, His death, His resurrection, and that without without that experience, there would have been no early Christian community out of which these writings came." So that's one way to answer the question, why is there a New Testament at all? Why? Why did you write, think, do anything? Well, if there had not been this experience of as Johnson calls it, empowerment, they came through this disfigure Jesus of Nazareth, but nobody would have written anything, it would have been simply lost to history. So that's one way to answer the question, why is there a New Testament?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:32

Another way to answer it is to remember, and we have to do this pretty often because somehow we've absorbed a different narrative, but to remember that the first Christians, actually, the first two and a half centuries of Christians, the Scripture they had was the Old Testament. These things that we have now called the New Testament are writings, like, like from a leader a letter to, from a leader to a congregation to help them deal with some issues, that had special meaning and was copied and distributed among over decades. And, you know, because this letter had some things for this congregation, yes. But there were some things that were relevant to the congregation down the road, and one further down the road. And so some of these things got copied and disseminated out through throughout the Christian world. But it's not until late in the fourth century, that they become officially scripture. And so up to that time, the Hebrew Scriptures are the primary scriptures for Christians. And so part of the why is it why is the New Testament is that these writings, some of the writings that were going around in the first century, were found to be more helpful or valuable. and more sustaining more standing the test of time. And over this long period of mostly in little congregations of people, little groups of people was one or two of Paul's letters, or gospel, saying this is helpful, this helps us get centered in who this God is and who Jesus is in relationship to that what it means to follow. And, and this is going to help guide us as much as the Hebrew Scriptures are going to guide us. And so it's a very long process, but it's pretty organic. And it's happening in these little house churches originally. And then, as the church gets more organized in the second and third set, country, these are distributed more widely and quoted, they're starting to be quoted. You find some, some pieces of the, of the letters quoted in other letters, and, you know, the Gospels quoting each other. And so there's this kind of conversation going on, and these writings become then this not a replacement for the Hebrew Scriptures. But this more recent chapter of how the how this the followers of Yahweh. And now, by the second, third century, the sense sense of the trinity of Jesus and God, and the Spirit being one thing, how knowledge of and worship of this, we've got more testimonies, and people who were with Jesus and those who came shortly after. And so we want to have that have that same weight as the Old Testament. I'm just gonna do a share screen here. And so this is a composition in canonization of the New Testament writings for those of us who like to have some visuals. So here's the timeline, zero being going from BCE to CE II or Christian era. And you see the cross up here above 30 record representing Jesus ministry and death. And that's, so that's around 30. And then the earliest writings are from around 50. And that would be Paul's writings. And between 50 and probably 64 are the seven

letters of Paul that we know are his. And then the later Paulin authors go in beyond that probably into the

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:35

70th to early hundreds.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:37

Yeah, so in this time period, so that gives us the first earliest writings, Paul's letters, to those congregations that were struggling and little, and hearing, you know, with, often with many Gentiles, for whom this was all new, they were learning about God, and they were learning about Jesus all at the same time. earliest of the Gospels, Mark, somewhere between 65 and 70, is probably when it was written. And you'll hear more about that as we go. And then the other gospels, Luke, and Matthew, probably between 80 and 90, and Gospel of John, probably around 100. And you'll see that it's kind of the dates here for these difference with first, second, third, John and Second Peter being the last written, Not revelation. So, we're so we're already getting this sense that, that books in this New Testament are not put in chronological order. If they were, you'd have First Thessalonians at the beginning of the New Testament, and you'd have second Peter at the end. And so this whole idea of canonization, easiest way to think about it is that from the time of Jesus resurrection, we have the telling we have the women in all the Gospels are the ones who tell who are there, who are The Proclaimers that pass on that message that has been passed on, verbally, from generation to generation to now, which is kind of amazing started with those women in Jerusalem. And we still are hearing it all around the world today. And then starting again at around 50, is the writings and for the New Testament, the writings fall between that time of about 50 to about 120, maybe 130 for the latest of the writings that are in the New Testament. And then the using and this was that whole way in which some of these writings became began to have a similar status to the Hebrew Scriptures, and because they were being used and they were relevant and they were being passed along. and they fit, they fit the words, and the things being written about fit their experience of community of the Spirit, the ways in which the Spirit touches and changes things. And the differences that it made in trying to follow Jesus, what kind of strength you get from that the words in the stories were fitting their own experience. And so those scriptures were being used. And, and, and strengthening people even as they do today. Again, that's another line that keeps on going there. And then, from 100, to about 200, that are being collected. And here, it's just saying, Oh, I've got a letter of Paul, and you've got a letter of pilots, which, you know, let's make copies and and we'll start collecting these into like things. So you know, a couple of gospels, maybe maybe a third one in some places. And, and so you're starting to coalesce some theology, actually, as these are being collected, it's good to know that there's just a lot of other writings out there around this time, too. But some of them aren't meeting these criteria of, you know, are they useful in teaching new Christians? who Jesus is and who God is? Do they are they from that early in 100, and some years of that first century, that would have been just to bond two to three generations removed from direct experience with Jesus? So there's these different criteria? Do they? Do they? Do they fit with? What the Hebrew Scripture say about who God is? In a general way? Are they consistent? So there's the that's part of the collecting and the and then the selecting is, it's, I always think of this as about three, three columns, you know, you've got all these writings that are floating around. And so the first column is, these are good, these are solid, they're solid for Christian teaching and preaching. Keep these for sure. Then there's the second one is like, Oh, these would be good for personal study,

probably shouldn't preach on these, there might be some speculative stuff in here, that could be kind of misunderstood or worked a little bit. And then there's this other list of Hmm. Probably stay away from those.

Karin Peter 17:31

Yeah, not so much.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:32

Yeah, new Christians. That's just gonna be confusing, more mature Christians, it might be intriguing. But it shouldn't be, it shouldn't be the core of what we're reading. So that's what's happening in selecting. And it's, again, it's a natural kind of organic process that's happening over the space of a couple 100 years. And this is the selecting, is coming in, those are my three columns, partly because there's other philosophies that are trying to kind of use Christianity to promote their own view. But they're really inconsistent with very incompatible with some basic things like the creation is good, that the body is good, and was created intentionally and had and is not just an evil in our lives. So there's some other philosophies that were really kind of warping, some of those early Christian ideas. And so then down at the end, at the ratifying is when in 400, the church is pretty organized by now. So there's bishops in different areas. And there have been some lists that have been mean being made in the last 50 years or so from about 350 to 400. And people start comparing their lists and realizing that they have a lot of the same books that they really think should be in that first column of these are solid, these will be useful. And so that those 27 books then become the new testament, canonized by the early church within that first four centuries.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:17

So one of the one of the things we'll want to insist on, and probably come up several times is that canonization of the writings of became a New Testament was not a conspiracy. It was not done by hierarchs just kind of foisting these books on and writing others off.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:36

Right. And that's what I that's what I heard as I was kind of getting involved more as a young adult. It's like, you know, the reason why the the New Testament books get used against women so often is because it was a bunch of old white guys who made the decision about who was going to be in there and of course, they were promoting their particular view. And that's why there's all of these things in there about how, you know, you're got to control women? Well, actually, there's not that many things in there. But if we begin to see an expression in a lot of pro women kinds of things in there, if you, if you look, and if you haven't been blinded already, to what is there, so we tend to read the Bible as we're told to read the Bible, and we sometimes miss the really important things. Anyhow, so, so the old white guys thing and, and so it's, it's really far more organic, it's small groups, and then larger groups, saying, you know, these are, these writings really do help us to, to grow in faith, to be reassured that this is a loving God, this is a gracious God gives us some guidelines about how to live with each other and community. And it also, there's enough letters written about the struggles in congregations that it's like, okay, yeah, being in a congregation is a struggle. And that's a given, and that's okay. And we do need help and support in order to grow and congregation. So it's lots of pluses once you start digging into what's there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:22

And besides, these were Mediterraneans, right? The nearest Anglo Saxon was like 1000 miles away

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:26

There wasn't going to be white guys anyhow.

Karin Peter 21:28

That came much later.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:32

Part of that fallacy of, you know, how did it come together? And it's, you know, it, yes, it was a some people in power, who, who finally ratified, but that's really like just putting their seal of approval on what's been happening over the previous centuries. And well, that

Karin Peter 21:52

that's why those timelines are so helpful. Because when we just hear the dates, well, Mark was about 50-60, or our Paul was, and then Mark, and then we end over here at about 100. That doesn't mean a thing. But if we look at our, our own understanding of time, and we're sitting at the end of 2021, right now, as we're speaking, and think about 50 years ago, so the 1970s, I would be looking back and thinking, What have I read that was written in the 1970s, that's worth carrying forward in my library, as I go on. And so if we start to think of it more, and that way that there was all this time to look and go, what's worth being carried forward? That's what we're talking about.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:36

Yeah. Exactly.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:37

And also, I think something that will inform us along the way is that in, in Community of Christ circles, and in most critical scholarship circles, nobody thinks of the Bible as an Instagram post from God. Right? These, these are human writings, and the question of canonization, and the question of, we'll say, inspiration has to do with how, how the Divine Spirit uses these, these works, how and how we responsibly let the Spirit use these, these writings, in our work, in our ministry, in our lives in our discipleship in our spirituality. So it's not something to try to find some, some, some little canon that with that had that had all Tony's private beliefs, and that justified them would not be what we've got in the Bible. And that would be that would be simply a mirror, ie a form of narcissism. So we what we really want is a canon that we have to wrestle with and struggle with and try to say, what did these what are these first Christians, what what happened to them? What grasped them about this figure, Jesus of Nazareth, that made them risked so much to be part of these weird little early Christian communities, that that that drew the ire of the Roman Empire by the end of the first century.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:57

And I think it's important to remember that these writers didn't know they were writing anything that was going to ever be considered scripture. They're writing things to help each other, grow and stay in their

faith. And so, you know, that's why they're not worried that there's four gospels, and they have different storylines. You know, there's some things that are pretty basic and all of them, but there's some big disagreements on some things. And they, they've described Jesus in different ways. But that's not a problem because they didn't see it as being there's only one way and this is the right way. There's like all these different elements to bring. And it's been it doesn't make it a problem that Paul says to one congregation one thing and then says something quite different, almost opposite to another, but because we can recognize that, you know, these are our different situations that but they're not writing for us. They're writing for people in their time and we may be able to overhear it and we make get something from it. Because these books have been valuable, and they've helped people, they've been places where people can meet God and not as in, well, God is dictating and you know, if we read it will get, but but actually a meeting place where our our longing for God and God's longing for us join as we enter into and make ourselves open to the story to the story of other people's struggles, other people's experience with Jesus. So I think that's kind of an important piece when we're looking at that timeline too, is that these writers, they don't know, this might eventually be scripture, this is practical. This is necessary for passing on identity and faith and belief. And, and though there's lots of theology, theology is not the primary thing, hearing the story, being invited into the story, follow Jesus, right where you are now. And it's going to be an interesting journey, and, and you're going to fall and fall. And it's okay. There's, you're going to be invited to get up and join again. And when you look at the big picture of the New Testament, you get to see these, these messages coming through.

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:25

So as we did in the Hebrew series will do in this series, we kind of have a holistic approach to the study the Bible, critical scholarship, and asking tough questions, and not shying away from the difficulties that are in texts. But at the same time, recognizing that because scripture has proven to be reliable meeting place will also try to experience what's there. So that so that, you know, will will bring head, heart, soul, mind

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:54

and maybe hands and feet

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:56

into our encounter with these texts. They really deserve that kind of attention.

Karin Peter 27:02

Well, I'm looking forward to it. This exploration, even through the books I'm not as fond of as we as we go on because it really is about following. And so we appreciate Tony and Charmaine, that you're willing to be our guides through this as we explore following Jesus as given to us through the writings of the New Testament. So for our listeners, if you'll join us through 2022 We'll be exploring the New Testament through new brew and I'll be your host, Tony and Charmaine will be our guides. Thanks so much for listening.

Josh Mangelson 27:45

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