THE BEREA PAGE

"Examining . . . to see if these things are so" ~ Acts 17.11

The Books in the Canon: How Did They Decide?

David Anguish

As with the discussion of the story of the selection of the NT canonical books (issue 1.11), I am summarizing the criteria they used to determine the books to include in one longer article.

The following illustrates how the early church decided which writings were canonical.

> In the late second century, the *Gospel of Peter* was being read in worship by the church in Rhossus, a town in Cilicia located northwest of Antioch of Syria. When a dispute arose within the church over whether the *Gospel of Peter* should be read, Serapion (died ca. 211 C.E.), bishop of Antioch, initially approved of the practice. After examining the writing more closely, Serapion discovered that it contained Docetic teaching and rejected it (Holladay 2005, 840).[1]

We see a deliberative process in which both leaders and individuals used some criteria to determine canonicity. Wording varies, but there is agreement that the criteria included whether a writing was associated with an apostle, was orthodox, was used widely, and was inspired.[2]

The Criteria

Apostolicity

Eighteen of the canonical writings have a named author—Paul's letters, James, 1 & 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation.[3] The remaining nine—the gospels, Acts, Hebrews, and John's letters—are anonymous. But by the 2nd century, Christian writers consistently attributed the four gospels to one of the twelve (Matthew, John) or associates of Peter (Mark) and Paul (Luke). Other writings were similarly connected to apostles. As Holladay writes, "the early emergence of these apostolic ascriptions to anonymous writings and the tenacity with which they were defended show the importance of apostolic authority as a means of vouching for the authority of a given writing." It also shows how quickly the church came to accept them as apostolic.

> Apostolic authorship was closely related to canonical credibility. If a writing were demonstrably apostolic, it could be linked more closely with Jesus himself, the one who called the Twelve and made an appearance to Paul. Besides establishing a direct connection between apostolic witness and Christ himself, the criterion of apostolicity is a test of

[1] To see the church's respect for apostolic teaching and how that influenced canon decisions see Eusebius's account of Serapion's "literary industry" and especially his citation of Serapion's account of his evaluation of *Gospel of Peter* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.12.1–6 (online **here**).

[2] To illustrate, Holladay 2005, 852-855, has four headings: (1) inspiration; (2) apostolicity; (3) orthodoxy; (4) catholicity/universal usage. Patzia 2011, 168-176, has five: (1) authority of Jesus; (2) apostolicity; (3) usage in the church; (4) orthodoxy; (5) inspiration. Gamble 2002, 67-72, has five: (1) apostolicity; (2) catholicity; (3) orthodoxy; (4) traditional use; (5) inspiration.

[3] Revelation is ascribed to "John" but the writer does not refer to himself as an "apostle" (cf. Rev 1.4, 9; 22.8). There was early widespread understanding that John the apostle wrote Revelation, but the view was not unanimous. See e.g., Carson and Moo 2005, 700-707. (Note that Paul did not refer to himself as an apostle in the greetings of four letters: Philippians, 1 Thessalonians [but see 2.6], 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon.)

> chronological and geographical proximity. Determining apostolic authorship was often a matter of deciding how close in time and place a writing (or the traditions lying behind a writing) was to the originating figure, Christ (Holladay 2005, 853-854).

Orthodoxy

Closely connected to apostolicity was whether a writing conformed to what has been variously called the "canon of faith," "rule of faith," or "truth of the gospel." Serapion's decision illustrates. He accepted the apostle Peter's authority, but rejected the *Gospel of Peter* because its teaching was docetic.

When the first century church faced threats from false teachings, they protected the truth of the gospel (Gal 1.6-9) with appeals to the traditions of the apostles (Col 2.6, 8; 2 Thess 2.15; 1 John 1.5), the word of truth (2 Tim 1.14; 2.15; 3.8), good doctrine (1 Tim 4.6), sound doctrine (1 Tim 6.3; 2 Tim 1.13; 4.3; Tit 1.9; 2.1), the faith (2 Tim 4.7; Jude 3, 20), and testing the spirits (1 John 4.1-4). Church leaders in the 2nd-4th centuries did the same, recognizing that the apostle's teaching had not changed and was no less authoritative in the writings that remained after their deaths.

Universal Use (Catholicity)

All regions of the church, in both East and West, gave priority to the apostles' writings. Thus, early on, the gospels, Paul's letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation were read as Scripture, cited as authoritative, and included in canonical lists. Books that were unable to pass the test of universal use—such as Hebrews and, after its status began to be disputed, Revelation—had a more difficult time being seen as authoritative and were thus slower to be accepted. Augustine (354-430) shows how they applied the catholicity criterion.

> Accordingly, among the canonical Scriptures he will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received by all, he will prefer such as have the sanction of the greater number and those of greater authority, to such as are held by the smaller number and those of less authority. If, however, he shall find that some books are held by the greater number of churches, and others by the churches of greater authority (though this is not a very likely thing to happen), I think that in such a case the authority on the two sides is to be looked upon as equal" (Augustine, *Doctrine,* 2.8.12).

Note that they were as much concerned with *use* as with *universality* and that neither aspect existed in isolation from the question of orthodoxy, especially with regard to worship, teaching, and proclamation. Patzia comments,

> It appears that the books that finally were canonized are those that enjoyed a special status and were utilized both frequently and universally by the church. In other words, believers accepted certain Christian writings as authoritative for their faith because they transcended the immediate or particular situation for which they initially were written. Such writings apparently met the worship, teaching and missionary needs of the church. Thus Brevard Childs observes that "the actual determining of criterion was the experience of the church in its various forms of usage (liturgical, catechetical, proclamation) in arriving at a writer's conformity to a rule of faith." Those that possessed only a temporary importance were not given canonical status. This criterion appears to be more significant in canonizing a book than either apostolicity or catholicity (Patzia 2011, 169-170).

Inspiration

How important inspiration was for canon inclusion is debated. Inspiration claims were hard to authenticate and not all the NT books make explicit inspiration claims (compare Revelation with Luke-Acts). The matter is further complicated by the fact that some rejected writings claim inspiration (e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas* and *Apocalypse of Peter).*

Having taken note of these challenges, it is nevertheless significant that multiple writers in the 2nd-4th centuries claim the authors of the various NT books had written under the Spirit's direction and thus considered those books to be on par with the OT writings.[4] For example, a 4th century canonical list compiled

[4] See *1 Clement* 47.3, the letter addressed to the church in Corinth, which says, "Truly he wrote to you in the Spirit about himself and Cephas and Apollos, because even then you had split into factions" (Holmes 2007, 109).

by Amphilochius, bishop of Iconium in Lycaonia, said the writings listed were the "'most reliable [lit., 'unfalsified'] canon of the divinely inspired scriptures'" (Holladay 2005, 853).[5]

In summary, "inspiration may not have been the only decisive criterion, but it was a prerequisite for canonicity. *No writing could have been included in the NT canon had it not been regarded as inspired"* (Holladay 2005, 853).

Conclusion

As Bruce Metzger observed, the complex and often fluid nature of the story of the selection of the books (**issue 4/11**) and criteria used to determine it should not undermine our confidence in the canon.

> What is really remarkable is that, though the fringes of the New Testament canon remained unsettled, a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament canon was attained within the first two centuries among the very diverse and scattered congregations not only in the Mediterranean world, but also over an area extending from Britain to Mesopotamia.
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> When … church synods and councils began to issue pronouncements concerning the New Testament canon, they were merely ratifying the judgment of individual Christians throughout the church who had come to perceive by intuitive insight the inherent worth of the several books. In the most basic sense, neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church.
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> Put another way, instead of suggesting that certain books were arbitrarily or accidentally excluded from the New Testament (whether the exclusion was the activity of individuals, or synods, or councils), it is more accurate to say that certain books excluded themselves from the canon.… In the words of a well known Scottish author, "It is the simple truth to say that the New Testament books became canonical because no one could stop them doing so" (Metzger 2003, 318-319).[6]

www.davidanguish.com

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[5] Key Greek words in Amphilochius's statement are *apseudestatos* (unfalsified), *kanōn* (canon), and *theopneuston graphon* (inspired scriptures; cf. 2 Tim 3.16).

[6] The "Scottish author" is William Barclay, *The Making of the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1961), 78.

