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THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Authoritative Books or Mandated Collection?

COLLECTION AND CRITERIA

Introduction

1. The following is a snapshot of what happened in the early church with regard to the formulation of the New Testament canon.

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.¹

2. That incident provides insight into what was and was not included in canon. More importantly, it illustrates why early Christians decided as they did.

Body

I. Survey of Early Development.²

A. F. F. Bruce has reminded us of the importance of not overstating the matter:

1. "The matter is oversimplified in Article VI of the Thirty Nine Articles, when it says: 'In the name of the holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.' For, leaving on one side the question of the Old Testament canon, *it is not quite accurate to say that there has never been any doubt in the Church of any of our New Testament books.*"³

¹ Carl Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, 840; bibliography part 2. See Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 4.23.11

² Because of time constraints, the following is abbreviated, focusing on the main ideas without corresponding elaboration.

³ Bruce continues: "A few of the shorter Epistles (e.g. 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude) and the Revelation were much longer in being accepted in some parts than in others; while elsewhere books which we do not now include in the New Testament were received as canonical. Thus the Codex Sinaiticus included the 'Epistle of Barnabas' and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a Roman work of about AD 110 or earlier, while the Codex Alexandrinus included the writings known as the First and Second Epistles of Clement; and the inclusion of these works alongside the biblical writings probably indicates that they were accorded some degree of canonical status" (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 16-17; bibliography part 3).

- B. Collections of many of the writings that are included in the New Testament existed well before Constantine and Nicaea in the early 4th century AD (325).
1. Three are part of the Chester Beatty papyri and date from the 3rd century.⁴
 - a) Early 3rd century (ca. AD 200): P⁴⁶ — ten Pauline epistles (all but the Pastorals) and Hebrews.
 - b) First half of the 3rd century: P⁴⁵ — the four canonical Gospels and Acts 4-17.
 - c) Last half of the 3rd century: P⁴⁷ — Revelation.
 2. The Sinaiticus Codex, the oldest existing complete NT manuscript (MS) (early 4th century) contains all the writings that comprise our New Testament, plus the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*.⁵
 3. Other translations also support earlier dates for canonical collections (Syriac, 2nd century; Coptic, 3rd and 4th centuries).
- C. Thus, evidence is strong for the early existence of the gospels (contra Brown's assertion that "Constantine commissioned a new Bible").

II. Developments in the 2nd-4th Centuries.

A. Summary.

1. The church made the essential decisions quickly and definitively (by 125-150 AD).
 - a) By the early second century, consensus had formed about seventeen of the books, the four gospels and the letters of Paul.
 - b) Holladay comments, "Worth noting is how quickly this happened. *After the first Pauline writings appeared in the mid-first century, it took only 70-100 years for Christians to make the basic choices about which writings would constitute the core of their canon.*"⁶
2. Metzger summarizes: "At first a local church would have only a few apostolic letters and perhaps one or two Gospels.
 - a) "During the course of the second century most churches came to possess and acknowledge a canon which included the present four Gospels, the Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, 1 Peter, and 1 John. [20 books, DA]"
 - b) "Seven books still lacked general recognition: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. It is hard to say whether this was the cause or the effect of the divergent opinions concerning their canonicity.
 - c) "Certain other Christian writings, such as the first letter of Clement, the Letter of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Didache, otherwise known as the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, were accepted as scriptural by several ecclesiastical writers, though rejected by the majority."⁷

B. The earliest documented canonical lists.

⁴ For a summary and more discussion of the significance of these papyri, see Bruce, *Documents*, 11-12; and Patzia, *New Testament*, 139-140, 195-196; bibliography part 1.

⁵ The 5th century Alexandrinus MS also includes 1-2 Clement. The P⁷² MS, dated around 300, includes 3 *Corinthians*, a 2nd century pseudepigraphal work. See Holladay, 838-841.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 835.

⁷ Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, 311; bibliography part 2. I have converted Metzger's paragraph into outline form to make it easier to see the different points.

1. The earliest of which we have definite knowledge is Marcion's canon (ca. 140), comprised of an altered ("restored," to remove Jewish themes) version of Luke and ten of Paul's letters (excluding the Pastorals).⁸
 2. Another early list is the Muratorian Canon (ca. 180) which lists the four canonical gospels and includes 23 of our 27 books. It shows that the position of the four gospels was firm and that they were considered to stand together.⁹
- C. Further confirmation for the gospels.
1. Tatian's harmony (*Diatessaron*), ca. 170-180, prepared for Syrian churches, wove the Synoptics into the framework of John and shows high regard for "the four."¹⁰
 2. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (France; ca. 180), was convinced the "rule of faith" began with Jesus and was transmitted to the apostles who passed it on to the next generation of leaders; he argued for the "four and only four" (see *Haer* 3.11.8).¹¹
- D. Developments after the mid-second century.
1. "The only books about which there was any substantial doubt after the middle of the second century are some of those which come at the end of our New Testament."¹²
 - a) Origen (185-254) said **21** of the books were acknowledged by all; disputed were Hebrews, 2 Peter, 3 John, James, and Jude (also *Barnabas*, *Hermas*, *Didache*, and *Gospel according to the Hebrews*).
 - b) Eusebius (265-340) said **22** were generally acknowledged; the majority also recognized James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, although some disputed these.
 - (1) He also listed the "spurious" writings: *Acts of Paul*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Barnabas*, *Didache*, and perhaps Revelation and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*.¹³
 - c) In his *Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter* (367), Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, "calls the **twenty-seven** NT writings 'canonical books' (*biblia kanonizomena*) that are to be distinguished from apocryphal works (*apokrypha*). This is the first time that the term *kanōn* is applied to this collection of twenty-seven writings."¹⁴
 2. In the eastern church, the process took longer; not until ca. 508 (6th century) were 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation included in a version of the Syriac Bible.

⁸ He included "Laodiceans," probably the letter we know as Ephesians (Patzia, 137).

⁹ Andrew Walls, "The Canon of the New Testament," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, 640; bibliography part 2. The Muratorian Canon refers to Luke as the "third Gospel,... according to Luke" and says it was written by "the physician Luke" (see Bock & Herrick, ed., *Jesus in Context*, 31; bibliography part 1).

¹⁰ C. E. Hill notes that in about 240—nearly 100 years before Constantine and Nicaea—Origen could say that the four were "the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven" (*Commentary on Matthew* in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.4)." He adds, "That at least two Gospel harmonies combining the accounts of the same four Gospels should appear by the 170s seems to attest a previous recognition of these four as set apart, in at least some Christian circles in Rome and Antioch" (C. E. Hill, "Canon," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., 103, 105; bibliography part 2).

¹¹ See Holladay, 844, 847, 858. Bruce comments, "By the time of Irenaeus, who, though a native of Asia Minor, was bishop of Lyons in Gaul about AD 180, the idea of a fourfold Gospel had become so axiomatic in the Church at large that he can refer to it as an established and recognised fact as obvious as the four cardinal points of the compass or the four winds" (*Documents*, 19).

¹² This statement and comments at a) & b) that follow are from Bruce, 20-21.

¹³ Holladay, 838, who also takes note of Eusebius's fourth category: the "senseless and impious writings" of the heretics (*Gospel of Peter*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Matthias*, *Acts of Andrew*, *Acts of John*, and acts of the other apostles). (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.1-7).

¹⁴ Ibid., 831.

- a) Lists of varying numbers were found into the 10th century and later.
- E. Metzger's summary of Athanasius's letter and subsequent developments is helpful.¹⁵
1. "In the East, Athanasius was the first to name (in his Festal Letter for A. D. 367) exactly the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as exclusively canonical.
 2. "In the West, at the African synods of Hippo Regius (A. D. 393) and Carthage (A. D. 397 and 419) the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were accepted."
 - a) Again, we should be careful not overstate the case: it is not true that 27, no more and no less, was finally settled for everyone at Carthage, even in the West.
 - b) Regarding Carthage, Metzger wrote, "Twenty-seven books, no more, and no less, is henceforth the watchword throughout the Latin Church [after Hippo, 393, and Carthage 397 & 419]. Yet it would be a mistake to represent the question of the canon as finally settled in all Christian communities by the beginning of the fifth century" (emphasis added).¹⁶
 3. "Augustine supported this canon, which through the Latin Vulgate translation of Jerome soon came into general acceptance throughout the Western church.
 4. "Though in the East some continued to have doubts about the canonicity of the book of Revelation, eventually the canon of most of the Eastern churches came to be identical with that of the Western church.
 5. "The Syrian church, however, accepted only twenty-two books: 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation are lacking in the standard version of the Syriac Bible, called the Peshitta, dating from the early part of the fifth century.
 6. "Among Western Syrians acceptance of these books was slow; they were finally included in the Bibles of the sixth and seventh centuries (the Philoxenian version).
 7. "The Eastern Syrian church, having lost contact with the rest of Christendom, continued much longer to hold to the shorter canon."

III. Criteria: How Did They Decide?¹⁷

- A. Apostolicity (which assumes the authority of Jesus—see Patzia).
1. It is important to note that none of the four gospels names its author; the same is true of several other books. Only the Pauline letters, 1-2 Peter, and Revelation are attributed to an author with an apostle's name.¹⁸

¹⁵ The main points in items 1-7 were converted from paragraph form from Metzger, *New Testament*, 316-317.

¹⁶ Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 238; bibliography part 3. He adds: "The manuscripts of the Epistles of Paul (and of entire Bibles as well) which did not include the Epistle to the Hebrews were not immediately enlarged, or rather replaced by complete copies, so as to enable the Epistle actually and everywhere to take the place that was officially recognized as its own. For example, the Greek and Latin codex Boernerianus (MS G) of the ninth century lacks Hebrews. On the other hand, manuscripts turn up containing the Epistle to the Laodiceans. Thus, despite the influence of Jerome and Augustine and the pronouncements of three provincial synods, *more than once in the following centuries we come upon evidence of divergences in the canon, either by way of addition or subtraction*" (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Specific wording varies, but most who discuss it include essentially the same criteria for inclusion. Compare Holladay: (1) inspiration, (2) apostolicity, (3) orthodoxy, (4) catholicity / universal usage (852-855); with Patzia: (1) authority of Jesus, (2) apostolicity, (3) usage in the church, (4) orthodoxy, (5) inspiration (168-176); and Gamble: (1) apostolicity, (2) catholicity, (3) orthodoxy, (4) traditional use, (5) inspiration (*The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, 67-72; bibliography part 3).

¹⁸ Revelation names John, but designates him as a "seer," not "apostle," and a reference in Eusebius to the writings of Papias raises the question whether multiple men named John authored the gospel, epistles, and apocalypse (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.5-7; for an updated translation, see Paul L. Maier, translation and commentary, *Eusebius: The Church History* [Kregel Publications, 1999, 2007], 112).

2. But, by the 2nd century, all four gospels are either attributed to an apostle (Matthew, John) or to an associate directly influenced by an apostle (Mark-Peter; Luke-Paul).
 - a) 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 authorship as a means of vouching for the authority of a given writing."¹⁹
 - b) Furthermore, "apostolic authority 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 chronological and geographical proximity."²⁰
- B. Orthodoxy.
 1. Closely connected to apostolicity was orthodoxy, "whether a writing conformed to what was variously referred to as the 'canon of faith,' the 'rule of faith,' or the 'truth of the gospel.'" Serapion's decision regarding the *Gospel of Peter* illustrates.²¹
 2. Note Patzia's summary: "The church existed under the threat of false teachings and found it necessary to protect the truth of the gospel (see Gal 1:6-9)... In the first century this was done by appealing to apostolic teaching and traditions (Col 2:6, 8; 2 Thess 2:15; 1 Jn 1:5), the word of truth (2 Tim 1:14; 2:15; 3:8), good doctrine (1 Tim 4:6), sound teaching and 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 Jn 4:1-4)..."²²
- C. Catholicity or Universal Usage.
 1. "Writings that gained early and wide acceptance in all regions of the church, both East and West, such as the Gospels, the Pauline letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation (initially), were read as Scripture, cited as authoritative, and included in canonical lists. Those that were unable to pass the test of universal usage, such as Hebrews and Revelation (after its status became disputed), had a more difficult time achieving the authoritative status of the writings that were widely accepted."²³
 2. See also Patzia's summary: "It appears that the books that finally were canonized are those that enjoyed a special status and were utilized both frequently and universally

¹⁹ Patzia, 169, notes that "the criterion of 'antiquity' may come into play here as well.... In other words, the antiquity of a document enhances its credibility in much the same way that apostolicity guarantees it."

²⁰ Holladay, 853.

²¹ Ibid., 854.

²² He adds this important qualification: "Orthodoxy, however, does not mean that there was a sterile or even uniform theology in the early church" (Patzia 171-172).

²³ Holladay, 854. One of the clearest statements of this criterion comes from Augustine: "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 of Christ*, 2.8.12; in Philip, Schaff, eds. *St. Augustine: The City of God and Christian Doctrine*, Vol. II of A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Accordance electronic ed. New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886.)

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.... This criterion appears to be more significant in canonizing a book than either apostolicity or catholicity."²⁴

D. Inspiration.

1. Difficulties.
 - a) Exactly how much inspiration was taken into account is debated and, as Holladay points out, "claims of inspiration were notoriously difficult to authenticate."
 - b) Also, while explicit claims of inspiration in NT books varied (compare Revelation with Luke / Acts), other Christian writings claimed to be inspired (e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*).
2. It is safe to say that inspiration was "a crucial consideration," but it was by no means "the sole differentiating criterion."
3. 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.*"²⁵

Conclusion

1. While appreciating the complexity of the evidence—and we should not shy away from or fear an examination of what really occurred—Metzger's express the confidence we should have about the New Testament canon.

It is ... not surprising that for several generations the precise status of a few books remained doubtful. 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.

When, toward the close of the fourth century, 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.*

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" (emphasis added).*²⁶

2. What remains is for us to ask how well we are using it.

²⁴ Patzia, 170.

²⁵ The above from Holladay, 852-853. Patzia is more reserved in his assessment, noting that "initially, the concept of inspiration was not crucial to the canonicity of the New Testament," but citing with approval Metzger that "gradually, the church came 'to recognize, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the church'" (Metzger, *Canon*, 287) (Patzia, 172-173).

²⁶ Metzger, *New Testament*, 318-319; the quotation at the end of the last paragraph is from William Barclay, *The Making of the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1961), 78.