

# The Canon of the New Testament

By F. F. Bruce

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Even when we have come to a conclusion about the date and origin of the individual books of the New Testament, another question remains to be answered. How did the New Testament itself as a collection of writings come into being? Who collected the writings, and on what principles? What circumstances led to the fixing of a list, or canon, of authoritative books?

The historic Christian belief is that the Holy Spirit, who controlled the writing of the individual books, also controlled their selection and collection, thus continuing to fulfil our Lord's promise that He would guide His disciples into all the truth. This, however, is something that is to be discerned by spiritual insight, and not by historical research. Our object is to find out what historical research reveals about the origin of the New Testament canon. Some will tell us that we receive the twenty-seven books of the New Testament on the authority of the Church; but even if we do, how did the Church come to recognise these twenty-seven and no others as worthy of being placed on a level of inspiration and authority with the Old Testament canon?

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. 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 earliest list of New Testament books of which we have definite knowledge was drawn up at Rome by the heretic Marcion about 140. Marcion distinguished the inferior Creator-God of the Old Testament from the God and Father revealed in Christ, and believed that the Church ought to jettison all that appertained to the former. This 'theological anti-semitism' involved the rejecting not only of the entire Old Testament but also of those parts of the New Testament which seemed to him to be infected with Judaism. So Marcion's canon consisted of two parts: (a) an expurgated edition of the third Gospel, which is the least Jewish of the Gospels, being written by the Gentile Luke; and (b) ten of the Pauline Epistles (the three 'Pastoral Epistles' being omitted). Marcion's list, however, does not represent the current verdict of the Church but a deliberate aberration from it.

Another early list, also of Roman provenance, dated about the end of the second century, is that commonly called the 'Muratorian Fragment,' because it was first published in Italy in 1740 by the antiquarian Cardinal L. A. Muratori. It is unfortunately mutilated at the beginning, but it evidently mentioned Matthew and Mark, because it refers to Luke as the third Gospel;

then it mentions John, Acts, 'Paul's nine letters to churches and four to individuals (Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy), Jude, two Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John and that of Peter.' The Shepherd of Hermas is mentioned as worthy to be read (i.e. in church) but not to be included in the number of prophetic or apostolic writings.

The first steps in the formation of a canon of authoritative Christian books, worthy to stand beside the Old Testament canon, which was the Bible of our Lord and His apostles, appear to have been taken about the beginning of the second century, when there is evidence for the circulation of two collections of Christian writings in the Church.

At a very early date it appears that the four Gospels were united in one collection. They must have been brought together very soon after the writing of the Gospel according to John. This fourfold collection was known originally as 'The Gospel' in the singular, not 'The Gospels' in the plural; there was only one Gospel, narrated in four records, distinguished as 'according to Matthew,' 'according to Mark,' and so on. About AD 115 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, refers to 'The Gospel' as an authoritative writing, and as he knew more than one of the four 'Gospels' it may well be that by 'The Gospel' he means the fourfold collection which went by that name.

About AD 170 an Assyrian Christian named Tatian turned the fourfold Gospel into a continuous narrative or 'Harmony of the Gospels,' which for long was the favourite if not the official form of the fourfold Gospel in the Assyrian Church. It was distinct from the four Gospels in the Old Syriac version. It is not certain whether Tatian originally composed his Harmony, usually known as the Diatessaron, in Greek or in Syriac; but as it seems to have been compiled at Rome its original language was probably Greek, and a fragment of Tatian's Diatessaron in Greek was discovered in the year 1933 at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. At any rate, it was given to the Assyrian Christians in a Syriac form when Tatian returned home from Rome, and this Syriac Diatessaron remained the 'Authorised Version' of the Gospels for them until it was replaced by the Peshitta or 'simple' version in the fifth century.

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:

For as there are four quarters of the world in which we live, and four universal winds, and as the Church is dispersed over all the earth, and the gospel is the pillar and base of the Church and the breath of life, so it is natural that it should have four pillars, breathing immortality from every quarter and kindling the life of men anew. Whence it is manifest that the Word, the architect of all things, who sits upon the cherubim and holds all things together, having been manifested to men, has given us the gospel in fourfold form, but held together by one Spirit.

When the four Gospels were gathered together in one volume, it meant the severance of the two parts of Luke's history. When Luke and Acts were thus separated one or two modifications were apparently introduced into the text at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. Originally Luke seems to have left all mention of the ascension to his second treatise; now the words 'and was carried up into heaven' were added in Luke xxiv. 51, to round off the narrative, and in consequence 'was taken up' was added in Acts i. 2. Thus the inconsistencies which some have detected between the accounts of the ascension in Luke and Acts are most likely due to these adjustments made when the two books were separated from each other.

Acts, however, naturally shared the authority and prestige of the third Gospel, being the work of the same author, and was apparently received as canonical by all except Marcion and his followers. Indeed, Acts occupied a very important place in the New Testament canon,

being the pivotal book of the New Testament, as Harnack called it, since it links the Gospels with the Epistles, and, by its record of the conversion, call, and missionary service of Paul, showed clearly how real an apostolic authority lay behind the Pauline Epistles.

The *corpus Paulinum*, or collection of Paul's writings, was brought together about the same time as the collecting of the fourfold Gospel. As the Gospel collection was designated by the Greek word *Euangelion*, so the Pauline collection was designated by the one word *Apostolos*, each letter being distinguished as 'To the Romans,' 'First to the Corinthians,' and so on. Before long, the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews was bound up with the Pauline writings. Acts, as a matter of convenience, came to be bound up with the 'General Epistles' (those of Peter, James, John and Jude).

The only books about which there was any substantial doubt after the middle of the second century were some of those which come at the end of our New Testament. Origen (185-254) mentions the four Gospels, the Acts, the thirteen Paulines, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as acknowledged by all; he says that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude, with the 'Epistle of Barnabas,' the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and the 'Gospel according to the Hebrews,' were disputed by some. Eusebius (c. 265-340) mentions as generally acknowledged all the books of our New Testament except James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, which were disputed by some, but recognised by the majority. Athanasius in 367 lays down the twenty-seven books of our New Testament as alone canonical; shortly afterwards Jerome and Augustine followed his example in the West. The process farther east took a little longer; it was not until c. 508 that 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation were included in a version of the Syriac Bible in addition to the other twenty two books.

For various reasons it was necessary for the Church to know exactly what books were divinely authoritative. The Gospels, recording 'all that Jesus began both to do and to teach,' could not be regarded as one whit lower in authority than the Old Testament books. And the teaching of the apostles in the Acts and Epistles was regarded as vested with His authority. It was natural, then, to accord to the apostolic writings of the new covenant the same degree of homage as was already paid to the prophetic writings of the old. Thus Justin Martyr, about AD 150, classes the 'Memoirs of the Apostles' along with the writings of the prophets, saving that both were read in meetings of Christians (*Apol* i. 67). For the Church did not, in spite of the breach with Judaism, repudiate the authority of the Old Testament; but, following the example of Christ and His apostles, received it as the Word of God. Indeed, so much did they make the Septuagint their own that, although it was originally a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek for Greek-speaking Jews before the time of Christ, the Jews left the Septuagint to the Christians, and a fresh Greek version of the Old Testament was made for Greek speaking Jews.

It was specially important to determine which books might be used for the establishment of Christian doctrine, and which might most confidently be appealed to in disputes with heretics. In particular, when Marcion drew up his canon about AD 140, it was necessary for the orthodox churches to know exactly what the true canon was, and this helped to speed up a process which had already begun. It is wrong, however, to talk or write as if the Church first began to draw up a canon after Marcion had published his.

Other circumstances which demanded clear definition of those books which possessed divine authority were the necessity of deciding which books should be read in church services (though certain books might be suitable for this purpose which could not be used to settle doctrinal questions), and the necessity of knowing which books might and might not be handed over on demand to the imperial police in times of persecution without incurring the guilt of sacrilege.

One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognising their innate worth and general apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa – at Hippo Regius in 393 and at Carthage in 397 – but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities.

There are many theological questions arising out of the history of the canon which we cannot go into here; but for a practical demonstration that the Church made the right choice one need only compare the books of our New Testament with the various early documents collected by M. R. James in his *Apocryphal New Testament* (1924), or even with the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, to realise the superiority of our New Testament books to these others.

A word may be added about the 'Gospel according to the Hebrews' which, as was mentioned above, Origen listed as one of the books which in his day were disputed by some. This work, which circulated in Transjordan and Egypt among the Jewish Christian groups called Ebionites, bore some affinity to the canonical Gospel of Matthew. Perhaps it was an independent expansion of an Aramaic document related to our canonical Matthew. It was known to some of the early Christian Fathers in a Greek version.

Jerome (347-420) identified this 'Gospel according to the Hebrews' with one which he found in Syria, called the Gospel of the Nazarene, and which he mistakenly thought at first was the Hebrew (or Aramaic) original of Matthew. It is possible that he was also mistaken in identifying it with the gospel according to the Hebrews; the Nazarene Gospel found by Jerome (and translated by him into Greek and Latin) may simply have been an Aramaic translation of the canonical Greek Matthew. In any case, the Gospel according to the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Nazarenes both had some relation to Matthew, and they are to be distinguished from the multitude of apocryphal Gospels which were also current in those days, and which have no bearing on our present historical study. These, like several books of apocryphal 'Acts,' and similar writings, are almost entirely pure romances. One of the books of apocryphal Acts, however, the 'Acts of Paul,' while admittedly a romance of the second century, is interesting because of a pen-portrait of Paul which it contains, and which, because of its vigorous and unconventional character, was thought by Sir William Ramsay to embody a tradition of the apostle's appearance preserved in Asia Minor. Paul is described as 'a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, full of grace, for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel'.