

The New Testament Canon

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Chapter 2 from *The New Testament Speaks*, by Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

The New Testament canon is the New Testament thought of as a rule of faith which possesses divine authority over the church. As canonical writings the twenty-seven books constitute the definitive witness to Jesus Christ as Lord, and are regarded by Christians as the infallible rule of Christian faith and life, the inspired deposit of God's revelation. Two questions in particular may be raised concerning the canon of the New Testament: 1. Historically, how early may we trace the origin of the canon? 2. Theologically, what does the collection and recognition of the authoritative character of the several books mean?

1. The Origin and Development of the Canon

In the one-hundred-year period extending roughly from A.D. 50 to 150 a number of documents began to circulate among the churches. These included epistles, gospels, acts, apocalypses, homilies, and collections of teachings. While some of these documents were apostolic in origin, others drew upon the tradition the apostles and ministers of the word had utilized in their individual missions. Still others represented a summation of the teaching entrusted to a particular church center. Several of these writings sought to extend, interpret, and apply apostolic teaching to meet the needs of Christians in a given locality.

From the beginning it was expected that certain of these documents would be read in the public gatherings of the church. The final instruction in Paul's earliest epistle is a solemn admonition to see that "this letter be read to all the brethren" (1 Thess. 5:27), while to the Colossians he wrote, "when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans" (Col. 4:16). The opening verses of the Book of Revelation envisions the churches gathered in worship: "Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein" (Rev. 1:3). Frequently a document demanded its wide circulation, as in the case of Galatians ("to the churches of Galatia") or Second Corinthians ("to the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia"). The churches increasingly found it profitable to share their literary holdings with one another, with the result that copies of the earliest writings began to circulate among the several centers of Christendom.

As the amount of material circulating increased, it was inevitable that similar materials should be collected together in order to protect against loss as well as to make them more available for study and use within the churches. There appears to be some evidence that the first formal collection consisted of ten of Paul's letters which were bound together and published as a single corpus sometime prior to A.D. 100. ⁽¹⁾

Not long after, the Gospels were also collected and published as a single corpus. ⁽²⁾ The consequence of this action was to prove an even greater benefit to the church than had the publication of the Pauline corpus. Prior to this event, each of the Gospels had been identified with a particular geographical region: Mark with Rome, Matthew with Antioch and Syria, John with Ephesus and Asia, and Luke with Paul's churches in Greece. The differences among them were freely acknowledged, but only when the Gospels began to circulate beyond their

own immediate environment were these differences accentuated. ⁽³⁾ This invited not only comparison but even choice among them, as some groups preferred one Gospel and some another. The collection of the four Gospels into a single corpus, and its publication as the fourfold *Gospel* of the church, preserved all four documents for the life and edification of each church. No longer required to compete for their existence, the Gospels were now allowed to complement each other. ⁽⁴⁾

These two collections of material served as the solid core for a new body of literature which began to take its place alongside the Old Testament Scriptures. Very early the Book of Acts, First Peter, First John, and Revelation were added to this core. In individual regions additional writings were also included, not all of which finally achieved canonical status. Such documents as Clement's letter to Corinth continued to be read in that church until the fifth century; ⁽⁵⁾ there was extensive use of the *Didache* in Syria, of the *Epistle of Barnabas* in Alexandria, of the *Shepherd of Hermas* in Carthage, and of the *Apocalypse of Peter* in Rome. None of these documents, however, succeeded in establishing its authority over the larger church. They were seen to be examples of edifying literature which had proven useful for a time but which lacked the permanent validity of the apostolic writings.

It was probably the rise of heretics—especially Marcion, who adopted as his canon a truncated form of Luke and Paul's ten letters to churches—which forced the church to declare itself regarding the relative authority of the documents currently read in the churches. This new body of Christian literature only gradually imposed its authority on the church. In spite of the practice of publicly reading from the newer documents in services of worship, there is no clear, early evidence that they were considered to be equal in authority to the scriptures of the Old Covenant. If the term "Scripture" could be applied to Paul's letters (2 Peter 3:16) or later to the Gospels (II Clement, Justin), not until the end of the second century were the expressions "inspired writings," "Scriptures of the Lord," and "the Scriptures" used indiscriminately of both the Old Testament and the core of the New. At this time the designation "the New Testament" made its appearance and ultimately displaced all earlier names for the collection of the new books. Henceforth it was no longer a question of the nature of the canon, but only of its extent.

By A.D. 200, twenty-one of the books of the New Testament had a secure position in the canon. In the course of discussion it was possible to group a book according to one of three categories: (1) the *homologoumena* or universally accepted writings; (2) the *antilegomena* or disputed books, accepted by some churches but challenged by others; and (3) the *notha* or clearly spurious documents. During the third century, James, Jude, Second and Third John, Second Peter, and Hebrews were frankly disputed in different sectors of the church, so that Origen and Eusebius classified them among the *antilegomena*. ⁽⁶⁾ Revelation had enjoyed wide acceptance at the beginning of the century, but in the ensuing years it was subjected to challenge and discrimination. The dispute over questions of authorship, authenticity, style, and doctrine subsided by the middle of the fourth century, and these documents also took their place in the lists of books accepted by the bishops of the church. The church fathers Jerome and Augustine acknowledged the entire twenty-seven books of the canon, as did the councils of Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397. By the end of the fourth century the limits of the New Testament canon were irrevocably settled in both the Greek and Latin churches. Only in the churches of Syria and elsewhere in the East did the question continue to be debated. Even here all of the books accepted elsewhere in the church finally achieved recognition.

The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their

origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level.

No less remarkable is the way in which this fourth-century conclusion continued to be vindicated and maintained throughout the history of the church. The canon of twenty-seven books endured the schisms of the fifth century, the division of the church into East and West in the ninth century, and the violent rupture occasioned by the Reformation in the sixteenth century. When diverse elements within the church found it impossible to find or maintain agreement on any other subject, they continued to honor the same canon.

The significance of this fact to the important dialogues which are taking place in our own generation can scarcely be overestimated. F.W. Beare has aptly said:

In our own time, hopes of reunion could hardly be entertained, and the ecumenical movement would be all but inconceivable, were it not that all the churches are in substantial agreement in recognizing the unique authority of the same twenty-seven books as constituting the canon of the New Testament, in employing them constantly in public and private devotions, and in appealing to them for guidance in faith and order. ⁽⁷⁾

2. The Meaning of the Canon

The question regarding the meaning of the canon is far more complex than questions of origin and development. It focuses primarily on the process by which the several books were collected and recognized as authoritative and inquires concerning the relative validity of that process. Ultimately it seeks to know the "truth" of the canon. Is the existence of a New Testament canon the intention of sacred history or a fortuitous accident within it?

Although ultimate answers concerning the "truth" of the canon cannot be found from its history, several factors can be examined which help create confidence in that history. First among these is the character of Scripture itself. The concept of "sacred Scripture" did not originate in the early church, but was already an essential part of the Jewish heritage. Moreover, the attitude which the Christians developed towards Scripture was drawn directly from Jesus, who confirmed to his disciples its character as the divine truth. He established the divine authority of Scripture by identifying the Old Testament with the word of his Father. He further demonstrated the divine nature of Scripture insofar as the effect of his coming was to realize its fulfillment. Jesus entered history as the Messiah promised according to the revelation the Father had given to Israel through Moses and the prophets. The implication which this had for the Christians was twofold: (1) It established the place and the function of the Old Testament in the life of the church; (2) It prepared the way for a new word of Scripture. If it was proper and necessary that God's word revealed to Moses and the prophets should be preserved and recorded, how much more important was it that the word given through the Son and proclaimed by the apostles should be preserved by the same process?

A second factor which has direct bearing on the meaning of a New Testament canon concerns the function of the church with regard to sacred documents. The church did not act to "commission," or "authorize," the writing of any materials. Holy Scripture remained the prerogative of God. The precedent was already established in Israel's history. The nation was never authorized to create its own prophets; prophecy owed its origin not to human desire but to the impulse of the Holy Spirit of God (cf. 2 Peter 1:19-21). Similarly, God by his Spirit raised up unknown prophets and teachers to accomplish his will in the church. Among those whom God selected as writers of the New Testament documents no more than three were immediate disciples of Jesus. The initiative to call men to this task remained God's; the function of the church was to receive what God had given to the community of faith. He

selected the time, the circumstances, and the human instrument through whom the divine word of revelation should find written expression.

A third factor concerned the criteria which the churches apparently employed in recognizing the inspired character of the New Testament writings. While caution is necessary due to an insufficiency of evidence, it seems that subject matter, authorship, and evidence of continued use within the churches all contributed to the ultimate recognition of a document. In subject matter, was that which was written a genuine witness to Christ and from Christ? Did it conform to the words of Jesus and the apostolic tradition preserved within the church by prophets and teachers? Any document purporting to have been written by an apostle or by one who had labored closely with an apostle had a presumption in its favor that it was true to the received tradition. But the mere presence of a claim to trusted authorship was not sufficient to win enduring approval for a writing. The existence of the tradition in oral form provided the basis for testing such claims and resulted in the discrimination between authentic and spurious documents. The church was confident that if a document were genuinely inspired it would conform to the truth which God had revealed through tested witnesses. Finally, documents which imposed their authority upon the churches and continued to reflect use by the Spirit of God were acknowledged to be inspired. Thus writings such as Hebrews and James proved their worth in the daily life of the church and were recognized as canonical even though they could not with certainty be identified with apostolic authorship.

When one therefore examines the criteria used by the church and sees the care with which they were applied and the time allotted for decision, the confidence which he has in the results is strengthened. Ultimately, of course, one's confidence rests not in the process but in him who gives the Scripture to his church. For whatever weakness might be involved in the procedures of man, it is not such that it can set aside the firm intention of God.

Pertinent Data on the New Testament Books

Due to the nature of the New Testament material, the matter of authorship, date, and place of origin is necessarily tentative and conjectural. Books which treat this material in a more extensive form include Feine-Behm-Kümmel, *And Introduction to the New Testament* (Protestant Liberal); D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3 vols. (Protestant Conservative); and A. Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (Roman Catholic). Our suggestions are as follows:

	Authorship	Date	Place of Origin
Matthew	Apostle Matthew	75-85	Antioch
Mark	John Mark	67-72	Rome
Luke	Luke	75-90	Greece?
John	Apostle John	90-100	Asia Minor
Acts	Luke	75-90	Greece?
Romans	Apostle Paul	55-56	Corinth
1 Corinthians	Paul	54-55	Ephesus
2 Corinthians	Paul	55	Macedonia
Galatians	Paul	55	Ephesus?
Ephesians	Paul	60-62	Rome
Philippians	Paul	60-62	Rome
Colossians	Paul	60-62	Rome

1 Thessalonians	Paul	50-51	Corinth
2 Thessalonians	Paul	50-51	Corinth
1 Timothy	Paul	62-64	Macedonia
2 Timothy	Paul	64-68	Rome
Titus	Paul	62-64	Macedonia
Philemon	Paul	60-62	Rome
Hebrews	Anonymous	62-66	Asia Minor?
James	James, the brother of Jesus	50-60?	Unknown
1 Peter	Apostle Peter	63-64	Rome
2 Peter	[Apostle Peter]	80-90?	Unknown
1 John	Apostle John	90-100	Asia Minor
2 John	Apostle John	90-100	Asia Minor
3 John	Apostle John	90-100	Asia Minor
Jude	Jude, the brother of Jesus	70-90?	Unknown
Revelation	Apostle John	96	Asia Minor

Notes

1. Cf. G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* (1953), pp. 14-17, 276-83. Zuntz argues on the basis of textual features that the ten Pauline letters to the churches existed as an entity known and used by Ignatius and Polycarp, demonstrating the existence of the Pauline corpus by A.D. 100. The fact that *1 Clement*, written A.D. 96, refers to Romans and First Corinthians but not to the other epistles suggests that the corpus may have come into existence around the turn of the century.

2. E.J. Goodspeed dates this collection A.D. 115-125 (see *An Introduction to the New Testament* [1937], p. 314). Floyd V. Filson, *A New Testament History* (1964), p. 391, suggests A.D. 125.

3. Cf. the language of the *Muratorian Fragment* (late second century): "And therefore, though various beginnings are taught in the several books of the Gospels, it makes no difference to the faith of believers, since by one guiding Spirit all things are declared in all of them." For the complete text, see D.J. Theron, *Evidence of Tradition* (1958), pp. 107-13.

4. See Oscar Cullmann, "The Plurality of the Gospels as a Theological Problem in Antiquity," in *The Early Church* (1956), pp. 39-54.

5. Cf. the letter of Dionysius of Corinth (circa 167-170) to the Romans under their bishop, Soter: "Today we observed the holy day of the Lord, and read out your letter, which we shall continue to read from time to time for our admonition, as we do with that which was formerly sent to us through Clement" (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* IV, xxiii, 11).

6. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* III, xxv, 1-4; VI, xxv, 3 ff.

7. "Canon of the New Testament," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (1962), p. 520.

Selected Reading

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