



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Series Notes

Collecting the Canon

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Introduction

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

It is the story of a Syrian Antioch bishop named Serapion, from the early 200s.¹ One of the churches that recognized Serapion's authority was reading a document known as the Gospel of Peter, treating it as Scripture. Serapion allowed this without much comment until he read Peter and determined it to be Docetic. He then forbade the churches in his region from reading it because it failed the test of orthodoxy as compared with the four canonical gospels.²

2. That gives insight into what was and was not included in the canon. Of more importance, it shows why early Christians decided as they did.
3. Before we explore these matters more, let's review some ideas from part 1.
 - a. We noted the claim that the authorized list of New Testament books resulted from political motivations by the Emperor Constantine.
 - b. We examined how the oral presentation of the gospel story needed to be put into written form (see Luke 1:1-2 and Hebrews 2:2-3).
 - c. We also considered some important questions that the early church had to address because of its literary proliferation.

Body

- I. Some Things We Know About the New Testament Writings & Their Collection.
 - A. Collections of most of the writings that are included in the New Testament existed well before Constantine and Nicea in the early 4th century AD.³
 1. Three different collections associated with what are known as the Chester Beatty papyri date from the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries.
 - a) AD 200 (p⁴⁶) — ten Pauline epistles (all but the Pastorals) and Hebrews.

¹ See <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/serapion.html>. Accessed April 23, 2016.

² From the oral presentation, "The Jesus Conspiracy: A Conversation with Carl Holladay on the Canon," in which Jody Vickery interviewed Dr. Carl Holladay, Professor of the New Testament at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University (May 21, 2006, Campus Church of Christ, Norcross, GA). I have an mp3 file that is available upon request. (Permission to cite the presentation granted via email by Jody Vickery, April 23, 2016.)

³ As summarized in Dr. Ron Rhodes, "Crash Goes the Da Vinci Code," <http://ronrhodes.org/articles/crash-goes-the-da-vinci.html>. Accessed April 23, 2016. I also have a pdf copy of this article in my files.

- b) 3rd century (p⁴⁵) — the four canonical Gospels and Acts 4-17.
- c) 3rd century (p⁴⁷) — Revelation 9:10-17:2.
- 2. The Sinaiticus manuscript (MS) dates to the early 4th century and contains all the writings that comprise our New Testament, plus writings such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas.⁴
- 3. Other translations also support earlier dates for the canonical writings (Syriac, 2nd century; Coptic, 3rd and 4th centuries).
- B. We also have evidence of the writings that existed in the earliest centuries from thousands of quotations of the New Testament in early Christian writings (e.g., the church fathers) and several thousand lectionaries.⁵
- C. The evidence for the early existence of the gospels (*contra* Brown's assertion that "Constantine commissioned a new Bible") is also strong.⁶
- II. The Process of Development.
 - A. We need to revisit, from a different perspective, the fact that the Bible did not come down from heaven "fully assembled."⁷
 - B. In summary, here is the process of development.
 - 1. "The church made the essential decisions quickly and definitively" (by 125-150).⁸
 - 2. "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.

⁴ See F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th ed. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 17. The chapter on "The Canon of the New Testament" is also available online at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/bruce1.html>. Accessed April 23, 2016..

For the texts of Barnabas and Hermas, see Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

⁵ Rhodes writes, "There are also some 86,000 quotations of the New Testament from the early church fathers and several thousand Lectionaries (church-service books containing Scripture quotations used in the early centuries of Christianity). In fact, there are enough quotations from the early church fathers that even if we did not have a single manuscript copy of the Bible, scholars could still reconstruct all but 11 verses of the entire New Testament from material written within 150 to 200 years of the time of Christ."

⁶ Rhodes writes, "Christian leaders who lived between A. D. 95 and 170 consistently point to the reliability of the New Testament Gospels." Specific examples include: Clement of Rome (95 A. D.), Papias (ca. 130), Justin Martyr (ca. 140), the Didache (ca. 110) [see Holmes], Irenaeus (ca. 170-180), the Muratorian Fragment (ca. 175), and Papyrus 45 (ca. 200 [see above]).

⁷ Bruce, 16-17, wrote, "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."

⁸ Carl Holladay, oral presentation, May 21, 2006.

- 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.”⁹
- C. The earliest stages of canonical lists.
1. The earliest of which we have definite knowledge is Marcion’s canon (ca. 140).
 - a) Marcion sought to remove all Jewish ties and so abandoned the Old Testament as the work of an inferior god (he also sought to remove all Gnostic elements).
 - b) He did embrace Paul, whom he saw as the champion of Christian liberty.
 - c) He restricted his canon to writings that he found to be without Jewish influences: Galatians, 1-2 Corinthians, Romans, 1-2 Thessalonians, Laodiceans, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians, and an altered (“restored”) edition of Luke.¹⁰
 - d) What exactly we are to make of Marcion’s canon has been debated, but we are probably safe in saying “that Marcion (and the need to answer him) may have hastened and concentrated a process already begun — a process implied in the very concept of apostolicity.”¹¹
 2. Another early list is the Muratorian Canon which lists the four canonical gospels and 23 of our 27 books;¹² it is dated ca. 180 AD.¹³
 - a) The beginning of the text, a translation from Greek into Latin, is missing.
 - b) What exists begins with concluding observations about Mark, a reference to the author of Luke, and a longer account of some details about John.¹⁴
 - c) The Muratorian fragment demonstrates two things.
 - (1) “The position of the four gospels is firm. Despite the overlapping material in the Synoptics and despite the differences between the Synoptics and John, the four stand together.”
 - (2) But, notice that “the consensus has rejected both reduction to one (as Marcion attempted) and conflation of the four into a single harmony, like Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, which was produced for some Syrian churches.”¹⁵

⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, 3rd ed., revised and enlarged (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 311. I have converted Metzger’s paragraph into outline form to make it easier to see the different points.

¹⁰ Andrew F. Walls, “The Canon of the New Testament,” in Frank E. Gæbelein, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 635.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 636.

¹² See Rhodes.

¹³ Walls, 640.

¹⁴ The quotation regarding Luke may be found in Wilhelm Scheemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, Eng. trans. ed. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Clarke; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 34. It also appears in Darrell L. Bock and Gregory J. Herrick, eds., *Jesus in Context: Background Readings for Gospel Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 31.

¹⁵ Walls, 640. Notice also his summary of the importance of the Muratorian fragment for “set[ting] the outlines for the NT Canon that were able to hold for some time to come” (641).

(3) In light of Brown's claims, it should be noted that these lists were in place well before the Council at Nicea.

D. Some additional developments.

1. "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."
2. "By the time of Iranaeus, 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."
3. Paul's letters were being collected at about the same time.¹⁶

E. 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."¹⁷
2. Elaboration.¹⁸
 - a) "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 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.
 - b) "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."¹⁹
 - c) "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."

F. Metzger's summary is useful:²⁰

¹⁶ Bruce, 18-20.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ The following are from Bruce, 20-21.

¹⁹ Regarding Eusebius's contribution, Metzger, 316, wrote: "Among the church fathers who made a careful study of the usage throughout the church was Eusebius of Caesarea, who quotes in his *Ecclesiastical History* the pronouncements of earlier writers concerning the limits of the canon. In summarizing the results of his investigations (book III, chap. 25), he divides the books into three classes: (a) twenty-two are generally acknowledged to be canonical, namely the four Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation (though see Eusebius' comment cited in [c] below); (b) five are widely accepted, though disputed by some (apparently all were accepted by Eusebius himself), namely James, Jude, 2 Peter (earlier regarded by Eusebius as spurious), 2 and 3 John; and (c) five are spurious, namely the Acts of Paul, Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas, and the Didache; Eusebius continues, 'To these perhaps the Revelation of John should be added, as some reject it while others count it among the accepted books.' It will be observed that this is virtually the canon as we know it today. After Eusebius' time (about A. D. 325), the fluctuations in the canon are limited and very occasional."

²⁰ Ibid., 316-317. As I did above, I have converted Metzger's paragraph into outline form for clarity.

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.
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."

Conclusion

1. We will conclude with this statement of reassurance from Metzger:

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 and 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 mine).*²¹

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²¹ Ibid., 318-319; the quotation at the end of the last paragraph is from William Barclay, *The Making of the Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1961), p. 78.