

CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

I. Two Preliminary Considerations. - The canon is the collection of 27 books which the church (generally) receives as its New Testament Scriptures. The history of the canon is the history of the process by which these books were brought together and their value as sacred Scriptures officially recognized. That process was gradual, furthered by definite needs, and, though unquestionably continuous, is in its earlier stages difficult to trace. It is always well in turning to the study of it to have in mind two considerations which bear upon the earliest phases of the whole movement. These are:

1. Early Christians Had the Old Testament: (1) The early Christians had in their hands what was a Bible to them, namely, the Old Testament Scriptures. These were used to a surprising extent in Christian instruction. For a whole century after the death of Jesus this was the case. These Scriptures were read in the churches, and there could be at first no idea of placing beside them new books which could for a moment rank with them in honor and authority. It has been once and again discussed whether Christianity from the first was a "book-religion." The decision of the matter depends upon what is referred to by the word "book." Christianity certainly did have from the very beginning a book which it revered—the Old Testament—but years passed before it had even the beginnings of a book of its own. What has been called "the wealth of living canonical material," namely, prophets and teachers, made written words of subordinate value.

2. No Intention of Writing the NT: In this very teaching, however, with its oral traditions lay the beginnings of that movement which was ultimately to issue in a canon of writings. (2) When the actual work of writing began no one who sent forth an epistle or framed a gospel had before him the definite purpose of contributing toward the formation of what we call "the Bible." All the New Testament writers looked for "the end" as near. Their words, therefore, were to meet definite needs in the lives of those with whom they were associated. They had no thought of creating a new sacred literature. And yet these incidental occasional writings have come to be our choicest Scripture. The circumstances and influences which brought about this result are here briefly set forth.

II. Three Stages of the Process. - For convenience of arrangement and definiteness of impression the whole process may be marked off in three stages: (1) that from the time of the apostles until about 170 AD; (2) that of the closing years of the 2nd century and the opening of the 3rd (170 AD - 220 AD); (3) that of the 3rd and 4th centuries. In the first we seek for the evidences of the growth in appreciation of the peculiar value of the New Testament writings; in the second we discover the clear, full recognition of a large part of these writings as sacred and authoritative; in the third the acceptance of the complete canon in the East and in the West.

1. From the Apostles to 170 AD: (1) The first period extending to 170 AD - It does not lie within the scope of this article to recount the origin of the several books of the New Testament. By the end of the 1st century all of the books of the New Testament were in existence. They were, as treasures of given churches, widely separated and honored as containing the word of Jesus or the teaching of the apostles. From the very first the authority of Jesus had full recognition in all the Christian world. The whole work of the apostles was in interpreting Him to the growing church. His sayings and His life were in part for the illumination of the Old Testament; wholly for the understanding of life and its issues. In every assembly of Christians from the earliest days He was taught as well as the Old Testament. In each church to which an epistle was written that epistle was likewise read.

Paul asked that his letters be read in this way (1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16). In this attentive listening to the exposition of some event in the life of Jesus or to the reading of the epistle of an apostle began the "authorization" of the traditions concerning Jesus and the apostolic writings. The widening of the area of the church and the departure of the apostles from earth emphasized increasingly the value of that which the writers of the New Testament left behind them. Quite early the desire to have the benefit of all possible instruction led to the interchange of Christian writings. Polycarp (110 AD ?) writes to the Philippians, "I have received letters from you and from Ignatius. You recommend me to send on yours to Syria; I shall do so either personally or by some other means. In return I send you the letter of Ignatius as well as others which I have in my hands and for which you made request. I add

them to the present one; they will serve to edify your faith and perseverance" (Epistle to Phil, XIII). This is an illustration of what must have happened toward furthering a knowledge of the writings of the apostles.

Just when and to what extent "collections" of our New Testament books began to be made it is impossible to say, but it is fair to infer that a collection of the Pauline epistles existed at the time Polycarp wrote to the Phil and when Ignatius wrote his seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, i.e. about 115 AD There is good reason to think also that the four Gospels were brought together in some places as early as this. A clear distinction, however, is to be kept in mind between "collections" and such recognition as we imply in the word "canonical." The gathering of books was one of the steps preliminary to this. Examination of the testimony to the New Testament in this early time indicates also that it is given with no intention of framing the canonicity of New Testament books. In numerous instances only "echoes" of the thought of the epistles appear; again quotations are incomplete; both showing that Scripture words are used as the natural expression of Christian thought. In the same way the Apostolic Fathers refer to the teachings and deeds of Jesus. They witness "to the substance and not to the authenticity of the Gospels." That this all may be more evident let us note in more detail the witness of the subapostolic age.

Clement of Rome, in 95 AD, wrote a letter in the name of the Christians of Rome to those in Corinth. In this letter he uses material found in Mt, Lk, giving it a free rendering (see chapters 46 and 13); he has been much influenced by the Epistle to the Hebrews (see chapters 9, 10, 17, 19, 36). He knows Romans, Corinthians, and there are found echoes of 1 Timothy; Titus 1:1-3:15; 1 Peter and Ephesians.

The Epistles of Ignatius (115 AD) have correspondences with our gospels in several places (Eph 5; Rom 6:1-7:25) and incorporate language from nearly all of the Pauline epistles. The Epistle to Polycarp makes large use of Phil, and besides this cites nine of the other Pauline epistles.

Ignatius quotes from Matthew, apparently from memory; also from 1 Peter and 1 John. In regard to all these three writers—Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius—it is not enough to say that they bring us reminiscences or quotations from this or that book. Their thought is tinted all through with New Testament truth. As we move a little farther down the years we come to "The Teaching of the Twelve

Apostles" (circa 120 AD in its present form; see DIDACHE); the Epistle of Barnabas (circa 130 AD) and the Shepherd of Hermas (circa 130 AD). These exhibit the same phenomena as appear in the writings of Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp as far as references to the New Testament are concerned. Some books are quoted, and the thought of the three writings echoes again and again the teachings of the New Testament. They bear distinct witness to the value of "the gospel" and the doctrine of the apostles, so much so as to place these clearly above their own words. It is in the Epistle of Barnabas that we first come upon the phrase "it is written," referring to a New Testament book (Matthew) (see Epis., iv.14). In this deepening sense of value was enfolded the feeling of authoritativeness, which slowly was to find expression. It is well to add that what we have so far discovered was true in widely separated parts of the Christian world as e.g. Rome and Asia Minor.

The literature of the period we are examining was not, however, wholly of the kind of which we have been speaking. Two forces were calling out other expressions of the singular value of the writings of the apostles, whether gospels or epistles. These were (a) the attention of the civil government in view of the rapid growth of the Christian church and (b) heresy. The first brought to the defense or commendation of Christianity the Apologists, among whom were Justin Martyr, Aristides, Melito of Sardis and Theophilus of Antioch. By far the most important of these was Justin Martyr, and his work may be taken as representative. He was born about 100 AD at Shechem, and died as a martyr at Rome in 165 AD His two Apologies and the Dialogue with Trypho are the sources for the study of his testimony. He speaks of the "Memoirs of the Apostles called Gospels" (Ap., i.66) which were read on Sunday interchangeably with the prophets (i.67).

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Here emerges that equivalence in value of these "Gospels" with the Old Testament Scriptures which may really mark the beginning of canonization. That these

Gospels were our four Gospels as we now have them is yet a disputed question; but the evidence is weighty that they were. (See Purves, Testimony of Justin Martyr to Early Christianity, Lect V.) The fact that Tatian, his pupil, made a harmony of the Gospels, i.e. of our four Gospels, also bears upon our interpretation of Justin's "Memoirs." (See Hemphill, The Diatessaron of Tatian.) The only other New Testament book which Justin mentions is the Apocalypse; but he appears to have known the Acts, six epistles of Paul, Hebrew and 1 John, and echoes of still other epistles are perceptible. When he speaks of the apostles it is after this fashion: "By the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the Word of God" (Ap., i.39). It is debatable, however, whether this refers to more than the actual preaching of the apostles. The beginning of the formation of the canon is in the position and authority given to the Gospels.

While the Apologists were busy commending or defending Christianity, heresy in the form of Gnosticism was also compelling attention to the matter of the writings of the apostles. From the beginning gnostic teachers claimed that Jesus had favored chosen ones of His apostles with a body of esoteric truth which had been handed down by secret tradition. This the church denied, and in the controversy that went on through years the question of what were authoritative writings became more and more pronounced. Basilides e.g., who taught in Alexandria during the reign of Hadrian (A.D. 117-38), had for his secret authority the secret tradition of the apostle Matthias and of Glaucias, an alleged interpreter of Peter, but he bears witness to Matthew, Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians in the effort to recommend his doctrines, and, what is more, gives them the value of Scripture in order to support more securely his teachings. (See Philosophoumena of Hippolytus, VII, 17). Valentinus, tracing his authority through Theodas to Paul, makes the same general use of New Testament books, and Tertullian tells us that he appeared to use the whole New Testament as then known.

The most noted of the Gnostics was Marcion, a native of Pontus. He went to Rome (circa 140 AD), there broke with the church and became a dangerous heretic. In support of his peculiar views, he formed a canon of his own which

consisted of Luke's Gospel and ten of the Pauline epistles. He rejected the Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews, Matthew, Mark, John, the Acts, the Catholic epistles and the Apocalypse, and made a recension of both the gospel of Luke and the Pauline epistles which he accepted. His importance, for us, however, is in the fact that he gives us the first clear evidence of the canonization of the Pauline epistles. Such use of the Scriptures inevitably called forth both criticism and a clearer marking off of those books which were to be used in the churches opposed to heresy, and so "in the struggle with Gnosticism the canon was made." We are thus brought to the end of the first period in which we have marked the collection of New Testament books in greater or smaller compass, the increasing valuation of them as depositions of the truth of Jesus and His apostles, and finally the movement toward the claim of their authoritativeness as over against perverted teaching. No sharp line as to a given year can be drawn between the first stage of the process and the second. Forces working in the first go on into the second, but results are accomplished in the second which give it its right to separate consideration.

2. From 170 AD to 220 AD: (2) The period from 170 AD to 220 AD - This is the age of a voluminous theological literature busy with the great issues of church canon and creed. It is the period of the great names of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, representing respectively Asia Minor, Egypt and North Africa. In passing into it we come into the clear light of Christian history. There is no longer any question as to a New Testament canon; the only difference of judgment is as to its extent. What has been slowly but surely shaping itself in the consciousness of the church now comes to clear expression.

Irenaeus. - That expression we may study in Irenaeus as representative of the period. He was born in Asia Minor, lived and taught in Rome and became afterward bishop of Lyons. He had, therefore, a wide acquaintance with the churches, and was peculiarly competent to speak concerning the general judgment of the Christian world. **As a pupil of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John, he is connected with the apostles themselves.** An earnest defender of the truth, he makes the New Testament in great part his authority, and often appeals to it. The four

Gospels, the Acts, the epistles of Paul, several of the Catholic epistles and the Apocalypse are to him Scripture in the fullest sense. They are genuine and authoritative, as much so as the Old Testament ever was. He dwells upon the fact that there are four gospels, the very number being prefigured in the four winds and the four quarters of the earth. Every attempt to increase or diminish the number is heresy. Tertullian takes virtually the same position (Adv. Marc., iv. 2), while Clement of Alexandria quotes all four gospels as "Scripture." **By the end of the 2 nd century the canon of the gospels was settled.** The same is true also of the Pauline epistles. Irenaeus makes more than two hundred citations from Paul, and looks upon his epistles as Scripture (Adv. Haer., iii.12, 12). Indeed, at this time it may be said that the new canon was known under the designation "The Gospel and the Apostles" in contradistinction to the old as "the Law and the Prophets." The title "New Testament" appears to have been first used by an unknown writer against Montanism (circa 193 AD). It occurs frequently after this in Origen and later writers. In considering all this testimony two facts should have emphasis:

(1) its wide extent: Clement and Irenaeus represent parts of Christendom which are widely separated; (2) the relation of these men to those who have gone before them. Their lives together with those before them spanned nearly the whole time from the apostles. They but voiced the judgment which silently, gradually had been selecting the "Scripture" which they freely and fully acknowledged and to which they made appeal.

The **Muratorian** Fragment. - Just here we come upon the Muratorian Fragment, so called because discovered in 1740 by the librarian of Milan, Muratori. It dates from some time near the end of the 2 nd century, is of vital interest in the study of the history of the canon, since it gives us a list of New Testament books and is concerned with the question of the canon itself. The document comes from Rome, and Lightfoot assigns it to Hippolytus. Its list contains the Gospels (the first line of the fragment is incomplete, beginning with Mark, but Matthew is clearly implied), the Acts, the Pauline epistles, the Apocalypse, 1 and 2 John (perhaps by implication the third) and Jude. It does not mention Hebrews; 1 and 2 Peter, James. In this list we have virtually the real position of the canon at the close of the 2 nd century Complete unanimity had not been attained in reference to all the books which are now between the covers of our New

Testament. Seven books had not yet found a secure place beside the gospel and Paul in all parts of the church. The Palestinian and Syrian churches for a long time rejected the Apocalypse, while some of the Catholic epistles were in Egypt considered doubtful. The history of the final acceptance of these belongs to the third period.

3. 3 rd and 4 th Centuries: (3) The period included by the 3 rd and 4 th centuries-It has been said that "the question of the canon did not make much progress in the course of the 3 rd century" (Reuss, History of the Canon of Holy Scripture, 125). We have the testimony of a few notable teachers mostly from one center, Alexandria. Their consideration of the question of the disputed book serves just here one purpose. By far the most distinguished name of the 3 rd century is Origen. He was born in Alexandria about 185 AD, and before he was seventeen became an instructor in the school for catechumens. In 203 he was appointed bishop, experienced various fortunes, and died in 254. His fame rests upon his ability as an exegete, though he worked laboriously and successfully in other fields. His testimony is of high value, not simply because of his own studies, but also because of his wide knowledge of what was thought in other Christian centers in the world of his time. Space permits us only to give in summary form his conclusions, especially in regard to the books still in doubt. The Gospels, the Pauline epistles, the Acts, he accepts without question. He discusses at some length the authorship of He, believes that "God alone knows who wrote it," and accepts it as Scripture. His testimony to the Apocalypse is given in the sentence, "Therefore John the son of Zebedee says in the Revelation." He also gives sure witness to Jude, but wavers in regard to James; 2 Peter 1:1-3:18; 2 John, and 3 John.

Another noted name of this century is Dionysius of Alexandria, a pupil of Origen (died 265). His most interesting discussion is regarding the Apocalypse, which he attributes to an unknown John, but he does not dispute its inspiration. It is a singular fact that the western church accepted this book from the first, while its position in the East was variable. Conversely the Epistle to the He was more insecure in the West than in the East. In regard to the Catholic epistles

Dionysius supports James; 2 John, and 3 John, but not 2 Peter or Jude.

In the West the name of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (248 AD - 258 AD), was most influential. He was much engaged in controversy, but a man of great personal force. The Apocalypse he highly honored, but he was silent about the Epistle to the Hebrews. He refers to only two of the Catholic epistles, 1 Peter and 1 John.

These testimonies confirm what was said above, namely, that the end of the 3rd century leaves the question of the full canon about where it was at the beginning. 1 Peter and 1 John seem to have been everywhere known and accepted. In the West the five Catholic epistles gained recognition more slowly than in the East.

In the early part of the 4th century Eusebius (270 AD - 340 AD), bishop of Caesarea before 315, sets before us in his Church History (III, chapters iii-xxv) his estimate of the canon in his time. He does not of course use the word canon, but he "conducts an historical inquiry into the belief and practice of earlier generations." He lived through the last great persecution in the early part of the 4th century, when not only places of worship were razed to the ground, but also the sacred Scriptures were in the public market-places consigned to the flames (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII, 2). It was, therefore, no idle question what book a loyal Christian must stand for as his Scripture. The question of the canon had an earnest, practical significance. Despite some obscurity and apparent contradictions, his classification of the New Testament books was as follows:

(1) The acknowledged books. His criteria for each of these was authenticity and apostolicity and he placed in this list the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's epistles, including He. (2) The disputed books, i.e. those which had obtained only partial recognition, to which he assigned James, Jude 1,2 Pet and 2 Jn. About the Apocalypse also he was not sure. In this testimony there is not much advance over that of the 3rd century. It is virtually the canon of Origen. All this makes evident the fact that as yet no official decision nor uniformity of usage in the church gave a completed canon. The time, however, was drawing on when various forces at work were to bring much nearer this unanimity and enlarge the list of acknowledged books. In the second half of the 4th century repeated efforts were made to put an end to uncertainty. Athanasius in one of his

pastoral letters in connection with the publishing of the ecclesiastical calendar gives a list of the books comprising Scripture, and in the New Testament portion are included all the 27 books which we now recognize. "These are the wells of salvation," he writes, "so that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the sayings in these. Let no one add to these. Let nothing be taken away." Gregory of Nazianzen (died 390 AD) also published a list omitting Revelation, as did Cyril of Jerusalem (died 386), and quite at the end of the century (4th) Isidore of Pelusium speaks of the "canon of truth, the Divine Scriptures." For a considerable time the Apocalypse was not accepted in the Palestinian or Syrian churches. Athanasius helped toward its acceptance in the church of Alexandria. Some differences of opinion, however, continued. The Syrian church did not accept all of the Catholic epistles until much later.

The Council of Carthage in 397, in connection with its decree "that aside from the canonical Scriptures nothing is to be read in church under the name of Divine Scriptures," gives a list of the books of the New Testament. After this fashion there was an endeavor to secure unanimity, while at the same time differences of judgment and practice continued. The books which had varied treatment through these early centuries were He, the Apocalypse and the five minor Catholic epistles. The advance of Christianity under Constantine had much to do with the reception of the whole group of books in the East. The task which the emperor gave to Eusebius to prepare "fifty copies of the Divine Scriptures" established a standard which in time gave recognition to all doubtful books. In the West, Jerome and Augustine were the controlling factors in its settlement of the canon. The publication of the Vulgate (Jerome's Latin Bible, 390 AD - 405 AD) virtually determined the matter.

In conclusion let it be noted how much the human element was involved in the whole process of forming our New Testament. No one would wish to dispute a **providential overruling** of it all. Also it is well to bear in mind that all the books have not the same clear title to their places in the canon as far as the history of their attestation is concerned. Clear and full and unanimous, however, has been the judgment from the beginning upon the Gospels, the Acts, the Pauline epistles, 1 Peter and 1 John.

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