

THE CANON OF THE  
NEW TESTAMENT

*Its Origin, Development, and  
Significance.*

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## Preface

THIS book is designed as an introduction to a topic of theology which, despite its importance and intrinsic interest, receives comparatively little attention. In fact, few works in English consider both the historical development of the New Testament canon and the persistent problems that pertain to its significance.

The word 'canon' is Greek; its use in connection with the Bible belongs to Christian times; the idea of a canon of Scripture originates in Judaism. Each of these statements will be considered in the following pages, the early patristic period receiving the greatest amount of attention.

The development of the canon was inextricably bound up with the history of the ancient Church, both in its literary and institutional aspects. For this reason it seemed necessary to provide, particularly for readers who may have only a limited acquaintance with the Church Fathers, something more than mere lists of the names of those who in the early centuries made use of the several documents that eventually came to be regarded as canonical Scripture. Such biographical information gains in precision when placed in the chronological and geographical framework within which the development took place. Although, as E. R. Dodds once observed, 'There are no periods in history, only in historians', one can detect stages in the clarity with which, in various regions of the early Church, a distinction came to be made between canonical and apocryphal literature.

I wish to thank a number of persons and institutions that have been involved, in one way or another, with the development of the contents of this book. Over the years a succession of students at Princeton Theological Seminary participated in my doctoral seminar on the canon, where we read and discussed the chief Greek and Latin texts that bear on the history of the New Testament canon. I am grateful to those universities and seminaries in North America, Great Britain, Australia, and South Africa that invited me to present lectures involving material now contained in the following pages. Robert W.

## Problems Confronting the Early Church Concerning the Canon

### I. CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING CANONICITY

IN an earlier section (chap. IV) consideration was given to certain outside factors that must, it seems, have promoted, in one way or another, the process by which several Christian documents gradually came to occupy a unique status of sacredness and authority in the Church. Besides these external influences, however, we must also ask what criteria early Christians used in order to ascertain the worthiness of certain books to find a place in such a collection. Patristic writers would sometimes appeal in a more or less reasoned manner to specific criteria bearing on canonicity (*notae canonicitatis*). These were formulated differently at different times and places, but those to which conscious and deliberate reference was most frequently made are the following. One of them involved theological appreciation of the content of a given book, while the other two were based on historical considerations bearing on its authorship and general acceptance among the churches.

(1) A basic prerequisite for canonicity was conformity to what was called the 'rule of faith' (*ὁ κανὼν τῆς πίστεως, regula fidei*), that is, the congruity of a given document with the basic Christian tradition recognized as normative by the Church.<sup>1</sup> Just as under the Old Testament the message of a prophet was to be tested not merely by the success of the predictions but by the agreement of the substance of the prophecy with the fundamentals of Israel's religion, so also under the New

<sup>1</sup> On the meanings given by the Fathers to the 'rule of faith', see especially Bengt Hagglund, 'Die Bedeutung der "regula fidei" als Grundlage theologischer Aussage', *Studia theologica*, xii (1958), pp. 1-44; Richard L. Morgan, 'Regula Veritas: A Historical Investigation of the Canon of the Second Century', unpublished Th. D. diss., Union Theological Seminary (Richmond, Virginia, 1966), esp. chap. xi; and three articles on the *regula fidei* by Albert C. Outler, William R. Farmer, and Philip Schuler in *Second Century*, iv (1984), pp. 133-76.

Covenant it is clear that writings which came with any claim to be authoritative were judged by the nature of their content. The Muratorian Fragmentist will not have 'gall mixed with honey'. He vigorously rejects the literary works of heretics, just as Irenaeus and Tertullian and writers as far back as Agrippa Castor<sup>2</sup> in the time of Hadrian rejected them. Although modern scholars, such as Bauer<sup>3</sup> and Dunn,<sup>4</sup> have questioned whether, at the earliest stage, there was anything approaching to the idea of 'orthodoxy', it does seem to be a fact that, by the time, for instance, of 2 and 3 John, certain convictions about the Incarnation had been established in circles that were influential enough to be reflected eventually in the canon. Furthermore, the 'faithful sayings' in the Pastorals, though not representing in any sense a 'canon', betray an instinct for classification into true or false.

Besides 'the rule of faith' other terms with more or less the same meaning occur. 'The canon of truth' (*ὁ κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας*) and 'the rule of truth' (*regula veritatis*) were used apparently by Dionysius of Corinth (c. 160), then by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Novatian; they suggest that the truth itself is the standard by which teaching and practice are to be judged. It is presupposed that this truth takes for the Christian community a definite and tangible form, such as the Mosaic law was for the Jews (Rom. ii. 20). Another formulation, found only in Greek writers and versions made from them, is 'the ecclesiastical canon' or 'the canon of the church' (*ὁ ἐκκλησιαστικὸς κανὼν* or *ὁ κανὼν τῆς ἐκκλησίας*). Used as early as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (Epilog. 2), these phrases refer to the body of church doctrine and institutions. A book that presents teachings deemed to be out of

<sup>2</sup> Agrippa Castor's work has entirely disappeared, but Eusebius says that it was 'a most powerful refutation of Basilides' (*Hist. eccl.* iv. vii. 6).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971). For a critique of Bauer cf. H. E. G. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* (London, 1954), and D. J. Harrington, 'The Reception of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* During the Last Decade', *Harvard Theological Review*, lxxiii (1980), pp. 289-98, reprinted in Harrington's *The Light of All Nations* (Wilmington, 1982), pp. 61-78.

<sup>4</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament, An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1977). For a trenchant critique of Dunn, see D. A. Carson, 'Unity and Diversity within the New Testament', in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. by D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, 1983), pp. 65-95.

harmony with such tradition would exclude itself from consideration as authoritative Scripture.

(2) Another test that was applied to a given book to determine whether it deserved to belong in the New Testament was apostolicity. When the writer of the Muratorian Fragment declares against the admission of the *Shepherd* of Hermas into the canon, he does so on the ground that it is too recent, and that it cannot find a place 'among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the apostles'. As 'the prophets' here stand for the Old Testament, so 'the apostles' are practically equivalent to the New. That is, the apostolic origin, real or putative, of a book provided a presumption of authority, for clearly an epistle attributed to the apostle Paul stood a greater likelihood of acceptance than one attributed, for example, to someone like the Montanist Themiso (see p. 103 above). In the case of Mark and Luke, the tradition of their association with the apostles Peter and Paul respectively was held to validate their writings. We observe, moreover, that in the Muratorian Canon there is still a healthy feeling that the authority of the apostles is not merely of the nature of a dogmatic assertion. In all that the writer says about the historical books of the New Testament, he insists on the personal qualification of the authors either as eyewitnesses or as careful historians.

(3) Another obvious test of authority for a book was its continuous acceptance and usage by the Church at large. This was, of course, based on the principle that a book that had enjoyed acceptance by many churches over a long period of time was in a stronger position than one accepted by only a few churches, and then only recently. Augustine's statement of this principle (see p. 237 above) was supplemented by Jerome who laid emphasis on the verdict of eminent and ancient authors. 'It does not matter', he declares in a letter written A.D. 414 to Dardanes, prefect of Gaul, 'who is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for in any case it is the work of a church-writer (*ecclesiastici viri*) and is constantly read in the Churches' (*Epist.* cxxix). As the Latin Churches reject Hebrews, so the Greek Churches reject the Apocalypse, but Jerome himself accepts both on the ground that they are quoted by ancient writers as canonical.

These three<sup>5</sup> criteria (orthodoxy, apostolicity, and consensus among the churches) for ascertaining which books should be regarded as authoritative for the Church came to be generally adopted during the course of the second century and were never modified thereafter. At the same time, however, we find much variation in the manner in which the criteria were applied. Certainly they were not appealed to in any mechanical fashion. There were different opinions as to which criterion should be allowed chief weight. Sometimes the overriding consideration was the opinion of a much-respected bishop, or the tradition of a leading church of the area. In other words, the determination of the canon rested upon a dialectical combination of historical and theological criteria.<sup>6</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that for several generations the precise status of a few books remained doubtful. What is really remarkable (as was suggested earlier) is that, though the fringes of the New Testament canon remained unsettled for centuries, a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament was attained within the first two centuries among the very diverse and scattered congregations not only throughout the Mediterranean world but also over an area extending from Britain to Mesopotamia.

## II. INSPIRATION AND THE CANON

It will have been noticed that in the preceding discussion concerning criteria used by early Christians in discerning the

<sup>5</sup> Among minor criteria that the ancients sometimes applied was what may be called 'number-symbolism', of which we have conspicuous examples in Irenaeus and the Muratorian Canon. According to Irenaeus, as was mentioned earlier, there must be four Gospels, as there are four quarters of the globe and four cardinal winds (*Adv. Haer.* iii. xi. 8). Even Origen compares the four Gospels to the four elements (*Com. in Evang. Joan.* i. 6). And the Muratorian Fragmentist finds satisfaction in the circumstance that the apostle Paul wrote to exactly seven churches, as John had done also in the letters incorporated in the Apocalypse. It is no doubt true that this use of numbers was more often a symbolical interpretation of the facts after the settlement of the different parts of the canon than as a means of determining that settlement. One can, however, suspect that it may have had at least something to do with predisposing people's minds to accept the Epistle to the Hebrews as Paul's and so making up a total of fourteen Epistles (2 × 7), and also perhaps in determining the number of the Catholic Epistles.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the interplay of historical and theological criteria, see Sigfred Pedersen, 'Die Kanonfrage als historisches und theologisches Problem', *Studia theologica*, xxxi (1977), pp. 83-136.

limits of the canon, nothing was said concerning inspiration. Though this silence may at first sight seem to be strange, the reason for it arises from the circumstance that, while the Fathers certainly agreed that the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments were inspired, they did not seem to have regarded inspiration as the ground of the Bible's uniqueness. That is, the inspiration they ascribe to the Scriptures was only one facet of the inspiring activity of the Holy Spirit in many aspects of the Church's life.<sup>7</sup> For example, while Clement of Rome speaks of the sacred Scriptures (here referring to the Old Testament) as 'true and given through the Holy Spirit' (lxiii. 2), the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* writes for his own part to his correspondent: 'If you do not offend this grace, you will learn what the Word (*λόγος*) talks about through those through whom he wishes to talk, when he pleases. For whatever we have been moved painstakingly to utter by the will of the Word that commands us, it is out of love for the things revealed to us that we come to share them with you' (xi. 7-8). Among the writings of Eusebius there is a sermon attributed to the Emperor Constantine; whether or not this attribution is correct, the preacher clearly does not consider inspiration to be confined only to the Scriptures. He begins his sermon with the prayer, 'May the mighty inspiration of the Father and of his Son . . . be with me in speaking these things' (*Orat. Const.* 2).

Not only do early ecclesiastical writers view themselves to be, in some degree at least, inspired, but also others affirm, in a rather broad sense, the inspiration of their predecessors, if not their contemporaries. In a letter that Augustine addressed to Jerome, the bishop of Hippo goes so far as to say (*Epist.* lxxxii. 2) not only that Jerome has been favoured with the divine grace, but also that he writes under the dictation of the Holy Spirit (*Spiritu Sancto*)—which may seem to be rather strong hyperbole

<sup>7</sup> See Gustave Bardy, 'L'Inspiration des Pères de l'Église', *Mélanges Jules Lebreton*, ii; *Recherches de science religieuse*, xl (1951-2), pp. 7-26; Everett R. Kalin, 'Argument from Inspiration in the Canonization of the New Testament', Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1967 (summary, *Harvard Theological Review*, lx [1967], p. 491); idem, 'The Inspired Community: A Glance at Canon History', *Concordia Theological Monthly*, xlii (1971), pp. 541-9; Albert C. Sundberg, Jr., 'The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration', *Interpretation*, xxix (1975), pp. 352-71; and Enriques Nardoni, 'Origen's Concept of Biblical Inspiration', *Second Century*, iv (1984), pp. 9-23.

applied to the often irascible Jerome. That Gregory the Great enjoyed the reputation of being inspired is easier to understand than is the case of Jerome, and Gregory's biographer, Paul the Deacon, describes how the Holy Spirit, 'under the form of a dove whiter than snow', would explain to him the mysteries of Scripture (*Vita S. Gregorii*, 28).

That the early Church saw the inspiration of the Scriptures as but one aspect of a much broader activity of inspiration is clear from the use made of the word *θεόπνευτος* ('divinely inspired'). This word, which is used in the affirmation that 'all Scripture is given by inspiration of God' (2 Tim. iii. 16), is chosen by Gregory of Nyssa in referring to his brother Basil's commentary on the first six days of creation as an 'exposition given by inspiration of God... [admired] no less than the words composed by Moses himself' (*Hexaemeron*, proem.). The same word is used also in a synodical epistle from the Council of Ephesus to describe the council's condemnation of Nestorius as 'a decision given by inspiration of God'. Indeed, a still later writer even describes the epitaph on the grave of Bishop Abercius 'as a commemorative inscription inspired of God' (*Vita Abercii* 76). Thus, the Fathers do not hesitate to refer to non-Scriptural documents as 'inspired', a circumstance showing that they did not consider inspiration to be a unique characteristic of canonical writings. (See p. 211 n. 6 above.)

The same impression is conveyed when we examine patristic usage of the designation 'non-inspired'. While the Fathers again and again use the concept of inspiration in reference to the Scriptures, they seldom describe non-Scriptural writings as non-inspired. When, in fact, such a distinction is made, the designation 'non-inspired' is found to be applied to false and heretical writings, not to orthodox products of the Church's life. In other words, the concept of inspiration was not used in the early Church as a basis of designation between canonical and non-canonical orthodox Christian writings.

In short, the Scriptures, according to the early Fathers, are indeed inspired, but that is not the reason they are authoritative. They are authoritative, and hence canonical, because they are the extant literary deposit of the direct and indirect apostolic witness on which the later witness of the Church depends.

As time went on, however, theologians of the Church began to give attention to the special character of the inspiration of the Biblical writers.<sup>9</sup> According to modern theologians, the canonical books are one and the same as the inspired books. As du Toit puts it:

The two terms merely represent two different ways of approaching the books of the Bible. The words 'canonical' lays emphasis on the normative aspect, while 'inspired' has become the technical term to indicate that the writings in question were produced by God's special operation through the Holy Spirit. The two concepts coincide because they both refer to precisely the same books and distinguish these books from other writings.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, however, there is also truth in what another Reformed theologian, Auguste Lecerf, acknowledges: 'We do not deny that God inspired other writings than those which constitute the canon.'<sup>10</sup> Thus, while it is true that the Biblical authors were inspired by God, this does not mean that inspiration is a criterion of canonicity. A writing is not canonical because the author was inspired, but rather an author is considered to be inspired because what he has written is recognized as canonical, that is, is recognized as authoritative in the Church.

### III. WHICH PART OF THE NEW TESTAMENT WAS FIRST RECOGNIZED AS AUTHORITATIVE?

Opinions differ as to which part of the New Testament was first in attaining general recognition as authoritative in the Church. Harnack<sup>11</sup> held that the Gospels were the nucleus of the canon, and that the Pauline Epistles followed soon after. The Acts of the Apostles was added chiefly to prove Paul's

<sup>9</sup> The Church universal, however, has never defined the inspiration of the Scriptures; it can be recognized rather than defined.

<sup>10</sup> A. B. du Toit, 'The Canon of the New Testament', *Guide to the New Testament*, i (Pretoria, 1979), p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London, 1949; reprinted, Grand Rapids, 1981), p. 318.

<sup>12</sup> Adolf Harnack, *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200* (Freiburg i. Br., 1889); *History of Dogma*, ii, pp. 38-66; and *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation* (New York, 1925). For a sharp critique of the last book, see H. C. Vedder in the *Union Seminary Review* (Richmond), xxxviii (1926-7), pp. 146-58.