

Some Thoughts on the History of the New Testament Canon

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Introduction: the usual approach to the subject

Discussions of the history of the New Testament canon tend to concentrate on the question of when for the first time the early church had an accepted list of Christian books that it set alongside the Old Testament Bible. Von Campenhausen puts it like this,

by the beginning of the canon I do not understand the emergence and dissemination, nor even the ecclesiastical use and influence of what were later the canonical writings. One can, in my view, speak of a 'canon' only where of set purpose such a document is given a special normative position, by virtue of which it takes its place alongside the existing Old Testament 'Scriptures'.¹

Understood in this sense, the first time our New Testament canon can be said to have emerged in complete form is in AD 367 in the Easter letter of Athanasius,² but it was not until some considerable time after that that this list was generally recognized in the church.

Although we can no longer speak with confidence of a *communis opinio* with regard to the question of how the canon evolved (contrast W. Schneemelcher some twenty years ago),³ broadly speaking we can sum up the usual understanding as follows.

The only Scriptures for the apostolic and early post-apostolic church consisted of the Old Testament. Apostolic writings were obviously known, but did not have the peculiar 'scriptural' authority of the Old Testament writings. They existed side by side with an oral tradition which was at least as, if not more, important for the church. Only gradually did the church become aware of the need to have some agreed list of books—a gradual awareness in which the

¹ H.V. Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Tübingen, 1968; ET London, 1972), p. 103. Campenhausen is more rigorous than R. M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (London, 1965). (For a brief statement of Grant's position see his article 'The New Testament Canon' in the *Cambridge History of the Bible*, I, pp. 284ff.) D. E. Groh (*Interpretation* 28, 1974, pp. 331-343) and A. C. Sundberg (e.g. *Interpretation* 29, 1975, pp. 352-371) feel that Campenhausen is not rigorous enough and that he dates the emergence of the canon still too early. See also D. L. Dungan in 'The New Testament Canon in recent study', *Interpretation* 29, 1975, pp. 339-351. Conservative scholars seem to touch upon the subject only rarely. E. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 1969) is one exception, but the book leaves much to be desired. Short treatments of the subject will be found in introductions to commentaries and general New Testament introductions. D. Guthrie gives a short but useful statement in the *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (unfortunately he does not deal with the subject comprehensively in his *New Testament Introduction*).

² See *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, IV, pp. 551f

³ E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Tübingen, 1959; ET London, 1963), p. 29.

appearance of Marcion's canon may have played a greater or lesser role. By the end of the second century the question of the canon was vigorously debated. (The Muratorian Canon, which is usually assigned to this period⁴ is shown as evidence of this debate.) By this time there was no longer any question about the bulk of the New Testament: the four gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul and some of the Catholic epistles. Doubts about the seven 'disputed books' (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation) continued until the fourth century and even after in some regions. This is, of course, no more than a broad outline of the conclusions that are usually obtained with regard to the New Testament canon. There is considerable variation in the details of the argument in the various authors.

Within one article we cannot hope to deal comprehensively with the whole question of the history of the New Testament canon, or to take issue with all the arguments put forward on this subject. It is possible however to raise a few questions on the way in which the subject is usually treated.

1. Early evidence of NT books seen as having scriptural authority

It should be pointed out first of all that the

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evidence we have from earliest Christianity does not always support the assumptions or conclusions we have mentioned above.

As regards the statement that the New Testament writings do not have 'scriptural' authority until the late second century, the evidence is, to say the least, ambiguous. Anyone wishing to make such a claim has to explain the following facts:

- a. In 1 Timothy 5: 18 an Old Testament passage and a gospel quotation are put side by side and introduced by the phrase 'the Scripture says'. Even if Paul is not referring to a written gospel, it certainly means that he puts a saying of the Lord on the same level as Old Testament Scripture.
- b. In 2 Peter 3: 16 the epistles of Paul are referred to and it is said that some people would twist these 'as they also do the other Scriptures'. Here Paul's epistles are certainly seen as equal to Old Testament Scripture.
- c. We should be careful about drawing any firm conclusions from the Didache as long as there is considerable doubt about the exact date (somewhere between AD 70 and 150) and composition of this document, but it is clear (i) that it regards the commandments of the Lord as of the highest authority, (ii) that it uses a written gospel (*cf.* Did. 8. 2 and 15. 3, 4) and (iii) that it enjoins its readers concerning the commandments of the Lord 'Not to add to it, and to take nothing away

⁴ A. C. Sundberg, 'Canon Muratori: a 4th Century List', *Harvard Theological Review* 66, 1973, pp. 1-41, questions this dating.

from it' (Did. 4.13 quoting Dt. 4:2 and 12:32), thus putting these commandments on a level with the law of Moses.

d. The same quotation from Deuteronomy is also found in the Epistle of Barnabas (first quarter of the second century), in Barnabas 19. 11.⁵ In the same work we read 'let us take heed, lest, as it was written, we be found "Many called but few chosen" ' (Barn. 4. 14). A passage from Matthew seems to be referred to as Scripture (Mt. 20: 16 and 22: 14).

e. Ignatius (martyred between AD 98 and 117) names in one breath the gospel, the apostles and the prophets (a customary way of referring to the Old Testament).

f. The Gnostic Basilides (AD 125-150) introduces quotations from Paul's epistles as follows: 'in accordance with what has been written' (followed by Rom. 8: 19, 22) and 'concerning which the Scripture uses the following expressions' (followed by 1 Cor. 2:13). (See Hippolytus Ref. VII 13, 14 in ANF.)

g. Polycarp of Smyrna (martyred probably in AD 155) exhorts the Philippians (PolPhil. 12. 1), 'as it is said in these Scriptures "Be ye angry and sin not" and "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath"'. In the same epistle (6. 3) we also find Christ, the apostles and the prophets named together.

h. 2 Clement (written perhaps around AD 150) in chapter 2. 4 first quotes Isaiah 54: 1 and then says 'and another Scripture also says "I come not to call righteous but sinners" ' (Mk. 2: 17 and parallels)

With regard to the sort of evidence we have produced, R. P. C. Hanson⁶ has argued that it does not prove the point. He claims that only the expression 'the Holy Scriptures' is a reliable indication of the status which the writers of the second Century assigned to the books of the New Testament'; and he finds no example of this usage until shortly after the middle of the second century (in Aristides' Apology 16). But to focus on this particular expression which is used to refer to the Old Testament only once in the New Testament itself (Rom. 1: 2) and which does not reappear until Justin Martyr (writing around AD 160) uses it twice (in more than 70 references to the Old Testament as 'the Scriptures'), is unjustifiable. So long as we find passages from New Testament writings introduced by the same formula as passages from the Old Testament it will be necessary to give good reasons for distinguishing between the authority assigned to each.

2. Oral tradition not seen as in competition with written tradition

⁵ W. C. van Unnik, 'De la règle *mēte prostheinai mēte aphelein* dans l'histoire du canon', *Vig Christ* 3, 1949, pp. 10ff., does not in fact deny that the instance of this phrase in Didache and Barnabas referred to written commandments, but merely notes the difference with the use of the same phrase in later writings.

⁶ *Tradition in the Early Church* (London, 1962), pp. 205ff.

Another issue on which the evidence is ambiguous is the question of oral tradition. There is, of course, no doubt about the existence of an oral tradition, but this fact in itself appears to be taken as somehow diminishing the authority of the written tradition.

It is unfortunate that Campenhausen⁷ should still see Papias (writing perhaps between AD 110-130) as believing in the 'superiority of the oral tradition', because Papias writes 'That which comes from books seems to me not to be of such service as that which begins as living speech and remains so' (Eus. E.H. III 39. 4, Campenhausen's translation). That this is not the most obvious reading of the text in Eusebius has been shown some time ago by J. B. Lightfoot⁸ and more

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recently by others (named by Campenhausen). It seems that Papias was in fact relying upon oral tradition only for his commentary on the words of the Lord, not for the actual content of the words of the Lord themselves. The disparaging remark about books may well be a reference to heretical documents which, we know, sought at this time to do the same thing as Papias, *i.e.* elucidate the sayings of the Lord from their own perspective. From what Eusebius says about him, the picture we get of Papias seems to be one of a second century fundamentalist, who not only holds to pre-millennialism, but also to the inerrancy of the New Testament gospels, in that he argues strongly that the lack of chronology in Mark's Gospel does not imply error on the part of the author. (An odd thing to say for someone who prefers oral over written tradition.)

Although there is evidence of the continued existence of some oral tradition, we certainly find no evidence that oral tradition was competing for authority with written tradition.⁹

3. The important question one of authority, not of canonical listing

More important than these points regarding the use of evidence by those who have written on the subject of the canon is the question of their methodology. Are they asking the right kind of questions in their investigation of the history of the canon?

The question that is usually asked seems to be: when do we find the earliest evidence for the existence of an agreed list of books of binding authority for the church? The quotation from Campenhausen we gave at the beginning of this article puts it rather well. One can speak of a canon only where of set purpose a document or group of documents is given a special normative position, by virtue of which it takes its place alongside the existing Old Testament Scriptures. (The assumption that the Old Testament canon was in fact firmly established during the period with which we are concerned is not shared by all scholars.)

⁷ Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, pp. 130ff. Cf. also R. M. Grant in *CHB*, p. 291.

⁸ *Essays on the work entitled Supernatural Religion* (London, 1893), pp. 156ff.

⁹ An extremely useful work on the relation between tradition and Scripture in the early church is the book of that title by E. Flesseman-Van Leer (Assen, 1953).

This means in fact that we take our present understanding of 'canon' and seek to find evidence for the existence of such a thing in the early church. We are then particularly interested in finding, or proving that one cannot find (as Campenhausen wishes to do),¹⁰ longer or shorter lists of accepted books in certain periods of the history of the early church.

But is the question of official lists really the most important question at issue? It is true that the word 'canon' means list, and therefore that in a strict sense canonization may have been relatively late. But it is quite misleading to suggest that the point of drawing up lists was the first time that the books of the New Testament came to be regarded as authoritative.

When Campenhausen tells us that, 'In the Early Church the term "christian bible" signifies... simply the Old Testament taken over from the synagogue and given a Christian interpretation. As yet there is no mention of a New Testament canon, for the thing itself does not exist...,"¹¹ he may technically speaking be correct. But at the same time he shows the inadequacy of his whole methodology. The real issue is that of authority and if Campenhausen were to claim that the only, or even the highest, authority for the early church was 'simply the Old Testament' the absurdity of such a position would be immediately apparent. At no time since the day of Pentecost has it been true in the church that the Old Testament constituted the only or even the highest authority.

In Acts 2 Luke describes the first church for us as a community of people who devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. The authority of the apostles and the teaching of Christ mediated through them was of a higher order than the authority of the Old Testament, in that the Old Testament now had to be understood in the light of the teaching of Christ and the apostles. Outside the New Testament writings themselves this comes out clearly in a debate Ignatius records for us (Philad. 8. 2), in which some men (probably Judaizers) said to him, 'Unless I can find a thing in our ancient records (the Old Testament?), I refuse to believe it in the gospel.' When Ignatius assured them that it was indeed in the ancient Scriptures, they replied, 'That has got to be proved', to which Ignatius says 'But for my part, my records are Jesus Christ, for me the sacred records are his cross and death and resurrection and the faith that comes through him.' That the authority of the apostles was regarded as paramount by the early Christians, even set above the Old Testament, can hardly be questioned. There is no reason to suppose that this authority only attached to their spoken teaching; it will almost certainly have attached to their writings from the beginning.

This means that our questions concerning the history of the canon have to be formulated rather differently. Our concern is not to track down early

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¹⁰ Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

lists of approved books, but is to find out whether the writings which later came to be listed were regarded as apostolic and authoritative before then, *i.e.* whether they were practically, though perhaps not officially, canonized. This is in many ways a more difficult thing to ascertain than tracing lists of authoritative books; but certain observations may be made.

a. Authority reflected in early use of NT writings

We have already seen some early evidence for the New Testament being regarded as having scriptural authority (point 1, above). We may here add further evidence about the usage of the New Testament in the early church.

Campenhansen states that the fact that New Testament writings are echoed or utilized or alluded to is not 'canonization'.¹² This is true, given Campenhansen's understanding of 'canonization', but, if he means that echoes, allusions and quotations do not tell us something about the authority of the books thus referred to, his statement needs to be justified in view of some obvious objections.

His statement would be valid if it could be shown that the early Christian authors echoed, alluded to and quoted texts which we know with certainty were not regarded as authoritative in the same way. As it is, this use of New Testament writings accurately mirrors the way in which the Old Testament is echoed and alluded to in the New Testament writings themselves and in early Christian writings generally. Such allusions and veiled references are found far more frequently than formal quotations.

Is it not legitimate to see this manner of referring to New Testament writings in the way in which Westcott saw it, when he said concerning the apostolic fathers,

The words of Scripture (*i.e.* of the New Testament) are inwrought into the texture of the books, and not parcelled out into formal quotations. They are not arranged with argumentative effect, but used as the natural expression of Christian truths. Now this use of the Holy Scriptures shews at least that they were even then widely known and therefore guarded by a host of witnesses; that their language was transferred into the common dialect; that it was as familiar to those first Christians as to us who use it unconsciously as they did in writing or in conversation¹³?

Even in the attempt to ascertain which New Testament writings were known and used by the post-apostolic Christian authors, there has been too little of that close analysis by which such echoes, allusions and veiled references might be discovered. The search has all too often focused on explicit quotations instead. There is room here not only for a much deeper literary examination, to detect similarity of language, vocabulary and grammatical construction, but also for an inquiry into similarity of thought and theology.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ B. F. Westcott, *A general survey of the history of the canon of the New Testament* (London, 1896), p. 49.

The apparent authority of the New Testament books used by the early Christian writers is strikingly confirmed by the use made of the same books by the second-century heretics.

We have already mentioned above that the Gnostic Basilides, in the first half of the second century quoted Paul's epistles as Scripture. When Marcion, around the same time, set up his own 'canon', this was obviously not meant to give certain books a higher authority, but rather to reject the authority of the other apostolic writings. The Gnostic Valentinus (mid-second century), according to Tertullian,¹⁴ did not invent new Scriptures, but rather distorted the meaning of the accepted Scriptures by his own expositions. W. C. van Unnik¹⁵ argues that the Valentinian 'Gospel of Truth' in the Jung Codex tends to confirm the statement of Tertullian. Elsewhere Tertullian argues that '(the heretics) actually treat of the Scriptures and recommend (their opinions) out of the Scriptures. To be sure they do. From what other source could they derive arguments concerning the things of the faith except from the records of the faith?'¹⁶ Irenaeus speaks of the four gospels as follows: 'So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these (documents), each one of them endeavours to establish his own particular doctrine.'¹⁷

b. The disputed books: also authoritative from an early date

To focus on the question of the authority and use of the New Testament writings, rather than on the question of formal lists of authoritative books, may also help to put one particular problem with regard to the history of the canon in a different perspective.

We know that the debates on the extent of the

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canon in the third and fourth centuries were particularly concerned with the status of seven books, the Antilegomena or 'disputed books' (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation) which were not universally accepted by the church. It is usually argued that the exact status of these books was in doubt until the fourth-century church decided to include them in the New Testament canon. The evidence does not necessarily bear out this claim. It would appear rather that allusions and references to these books can be found up to the middle of the second century and that their authority is not challenged until the end of the second century, by which time the flood of heretical literature demanded a conscious reflection upon the authority of certain books over against others. All the evidence points to their acceptance before the end of the second century in those regions where they were known (it is important to stress this point,

¹⁴ *De Praescr. Haer.* 38 (in the Ante-Nicene Fathers).

¹⁵ W. C. van Unnik, 'The "Gospel of Truth" and the New Testament' in F. L. Cross (ed.), *The Jung Codex* (London, 1955), pp. 79ff.

¹⁶ *De Praescr. Haer.* 14 (in ANF).

¹⁷ *Adv. Haer.* II 11. 7 (in ANF). Westcott, *op. cit.*, pp. 278f, 404ff. devotes two chapters to the testimony borne by the heretics to the canonical books. Cf. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Livres de Poche, p. 260): 'Les hérétiques au commencement de l'Église servent à prouver les canoniques.'

since it helps to explain the doubts that were voiced about them at a later stage). We can only briefly mention here the following facts:

(a) Hebrews is quoted extensively in 1 Clement (AD 90-110) and is used by various writers. It is only at the beginning of the third century that we find from Tertullian that the North African church did not have it in its list of New Testament books.

(b) James is attested by 1 Clement and Hermias (mid-second century) among others.

(c) It is my opinion that Jude 18 quotes 2 Peter 3: 3 and there are traces of 2 Peter in some of the apostolic fathers (1 Clem. 9: 3; 11: 1; 23: 3; Hermas Vis. IV 3: 4; Sim. VIII 11: 1). It is generally recognized to be the least well attested of the Antilegomena.

(d) 2 and 3 John present a difficulty of their own. Although there are some traces of them in early Christian writings, it would appear from the records of the 7th Council of Carthage (AD 256) and from two passages in Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* I 16: 3; III 16: 8)¹⁸ that at least the First and Second Epistles of John may have been known as one epistle, since we have quotations from 2 John introduced as 'from the epistle of John'. As long as we do not know in what form the three epistles were known, and the evidence is ambiguous, we can only say that there appear to have been no doubts about the authenticity of these epistles until the end of the second century.

(e) We find traces of Jude in the apostolic fathers, and the way in which Tertullian quotes the book (in *De Cult. Fem.* 3) suggests that it had long been accepted as authentic and authoritative in North Africa.

The book of Revelation appears to have been accepted widely until well into the third century. The fact that the authenticity and authority of these books were doubted when the extent of the canon began to be debated at the end of the second century is largely explained by the fact that they were known in certain regions only and were hardly known in other regions. The other reason for these doubts may be found in the attempt at that time to limit the concept of apostolicity to mean no more than apostolic authorship. Since the exact authorship of these books (except for 2 Peter) was unknown or ambiguous, it was natural that questions should be raised with regard to them, while the place of Mark, Luke and Acts was already firmly enough established not to cause any difficulty.

Conclusion

It is obvious that all this provides no more than a sketchy outline of the way in which the subject of the history of the canon might be approached. Certain points we have mentioned may also help to show the weakness of some standard presentations on the subject.

¹⁸ See Westcott, *op. cit.*, pp. 372, 380, 390.

Theo Donner, "Some Thoughts On The History Of The New Testament Canon," Themelios 7.3 (April 1982): 23-27.

It is clear that any discussion on the authority of New Testament writings in the post-apostolic church needs to take into account the wider question of authority in the church at this time. It is also clear that an inquiry along the lines we have suggested by no means diminishes the importance of the investigation into the gradual emergence of a 'canon' of New Testament writings; it rather seeks to widen the scope of that investigation and put it in its proper framework.

Our 'bird's-eye' view on the authority of the New Testament writings in the early church suggests that it is by no means impossible, or intrinsically unlikely, that all the apostolic writings which today make up our New Testament were accepted as apostolic and therefore as authoritative by the post-apostolic church and that their authenticity only came to be doubted at a later date for certain recognizable reasons, which do not cast doubt on their acceptance as apostolic by the post-apostolic church. A much more thorough analysis of all the evidence is necessary to confirm whether the evidence supports this suggestion. As yet such an analysis does not seem to be available.

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