

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

by
*Richard Carrier*¹

CONTRARY TO COMMON BELIEF, THERE WAS NEVER A ONE-TIME, truly universal decision as to which books should be included in the Bible. It took over a century of the proliferation of numerous writings before anyone even bothered to start picking and choosing, and then it was largely a cumulative, individual and happenstance event, guided by chance and prejudice more than objective and scholarly research, until priests and academics began pronouncing what was authoritative and holy, and even they were not unanimous.

Every church had its favored books, and since there was nothing like a clearly-defined orthodoxy until the fourth century, there were in fact many simultaneous literary traditions. The illusion that it was otherwise is created by the fact that the church that came out on top simply preserved texts in its favor and destroyed (or let vanish) opposing documents. Hence, what we call “orthodoxy” is simply “the church that won.”

Astonishingly, the story isn't even that simple, for the Catholic church centered in Rome never had any extensive control over the Eastern churches, which were in turn divided even among themselves, with Ethiopian, Coptic, Syrian, Byzantine, and Armenian canons all riding side-by-side with each other, and with the Western Catholic canon, which itself was never perfectly settled until the fifteenth century at the earliest, although it was essentially established by the middle of the fourth century.

Indeed, the current Catholic Bible is largely accepted as canonical from fatigue, i.e., the details were so ancient and convoluted that it was easier to simply accept an ancient and enduring tradition than to bother actually questioning its merit. This is further secured by the fact that the long habit of time has dictated the status of the texts: favored books have been more scrupulously preserved and survive in more copies than unfavorable books, such that even if some unfavorable books should happen to be earlier and more authoritative, in many cases we are no longer able to reconstruct them with any accuracy.

To make matters worse, we know of some very early books that simply did not survive at all,² and recently discovered are the very ancient fragments of others that we never knew existed, because no one had even mentioned them. Consequently, to tell the story of how the Bible came to be requires an essay of some length, organized into sections of roughly chronological order as follows:

¹ This essay is a summary of the consensus of scholars on the formation of the *New Testament*, drawn from the far more detailed survey of the subject, viz., Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987). I must excuse the tediousness of this essay, for the subject matter is inescapably complex and confusing. But I have condensed the material of Metzger's 300 plus pages to less than 30 pages, added some of my own observations, and emphasized those facts most relevant to secularists and seekers. Related Documents, see online at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/larry_taylor/canon.html, “The Canon of the Bible” Larry Taylor's critique of Chapter 3 of Josh Modally's (sic, Josh McDowell's) *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif: Here's Life Publishers, 1972, rev. ed. 1979), on the Christian canon. Taylor's critique goes into more detail about the use of books, the *New Testament* and *Old Testament* canon, *Apocrypha*, the effects of the Reformation, and most of all, the modern rules and guidelines for defending canonicity.

² The most astonishing example is Paul's earlier *Epistle to the Colossians*, cf. Col 4:16.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Table of Contents

Old Testament Life and Literature. 2

I. Early Development 2

II. Ambiguous Pre-Canonical References. 4

III. Clear Pre-Canonical References. 5

IV. The Need to Canonize. 8

V. The Gnostics Make the First Move. 9

VI. The Old Testament Canon. 10

VII. Other Canons. 11

VIII. Justin Martyr. 11

IX. Tatian. 12

X. Theophilus and Serapion. 13

XI. Dionysius, Athenagoras and Irenaeus. 14

XII. Pantaenus and Clement: the Seminary at Alexandria. 15

XIII. The Muratorian Canon. 16

XIV. Origen: the Seminary at Caesarea. 17

XV. Tertullian, Cyprian, and the Century of Chaos. 18

XVI. Eusebius, the First History of the Church, and the Earliest Complete Bibles. 19

XVII. Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius of Alexandria, and the Eastern Synods. 20

XVIII. The Eastern Canons. 22

XIX. The Western Canons. 23

Old Testament Life and Literature

An out of print book by a respected professor of Biblical History, Dr. Gerald Larue, now available online, covers the history of the Hebrews, with one chapter dedicated to the development of the *Old Testament*, including its reception by Christians. The following chapter discusses *New Testament* translations and manuscript history.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

I. Early Development³

It is believed that Jesus died *ca.* AD 30. Specifically, if he died under the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, the date must have at least been between AD 26 and AD 36, the ten years we know Pilate to have served in Judaea.⁴ Whatever the date, Paul's conversion follows one to three years later.

The earliest known Christian writings are the epistles of Paul, composed between AD 48 and AD 58. Some of these are of doubted authenticity (and were even in antiquity), but the debate is too complex to summarize here. The other letters, and the *Revelation* (*a.k.a.* the *Apocalypse of John*), are of even more uncertain authorship and date. They are presumed to have been written in the same period or later.⁵

The *Gospels* cannot really be dated, nor are the real authors known. Their names were assigned early, but not early enough for us to be confident they were accurately known. It is based on speculation that *Mark* was the first, written between AD 60 and AD 70, *Matthew* second, between AD 70 and AD 80, *Luke* (and *Acts*) third, between AD 80 and AD 90, and *John* last, between AD 90 and AD 100.

Scholars advance various other dates for each work, and the total range of possible dates runs from the AD 50's to the early AD 100's, but all such dates are conjectural. It is supposed that the Gospels did not exist before AD 58, simply because neither Paul, nor any other epistle writer, mentions or quotes them – and this is a reasonable argument, as far as things go. On the other hand, *Mark* is presumed earlier, and the others later, because *Mark* is simpler, and at least *Matthew* and *Luke* appear to borrow material from him.⁶

All the Gospels (except *John*) contain possible allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, and thus it is likely they were all written after that date.⁷ But that assumes the statements attributed to Jesus are apocryphal – they may have been genuine, the usual doom and gloom apocalyptic fantasizing, and then confirmed only by accident (or, if one is a believer, divine destiny) when the city and its temple were actually destroyed. They could also have been added to the text later.

On the other hand, it has been argued, with some merit, that *Luke* borrowed material from Josephus, and if so, that would date his Gospel (and *Acts*) after AD 94.⁸ Finally, there are good argu-

³ Rather than try to commit to specifics here, I will just give the possible ranges of dates that have been argued and which are at least possible. The material for this section is taken from my own survey of scholarly consensus found in numerous sources.

⁴ Alvar Ellegård, *Jesus One Hundred Years Before Christ* (New York: Overlook Press, 1999), argues that Jesus was not crucified under Pilate, but that visions of Jesus occurred then which began to spark the new creed. Even on this theory, however, Christianity in some sense begins in the term of Pilate, as is confirmed by Paul's only reference to the prefect (1 Tim 6:13). Ellegård is correct that in the Greek this could just as well be a dating of the vision as a reference to any actual contact between Jesus and Pilate, *i.e.*, it could mean "under Pontius Pilate; in the time of Pontius Pilate."

⁵ *First Peter*, for instance, may have been written, some scholars say, as late as AD 110.

⁶ *I.e.*, material that is likely Mark's own invention (*cf.* my review of Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000] online at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/homerandmark.html).

⁷ *Cf.* Luke 19:42-44, 21:5-6, 21:20-24; Mark 13:1-2, 13:14; Matt 24:1-2, 24:15. In the case of Mark, the allusion is less certain to some scholars, but it seems clear enough to me (but some clever analysis is capable of teasing out the impression that Mark was writing during the war itself, thus between AD 66 and AD 70, and was anticipating an inevitable destruction, rather than retrofitting it entirely after the fact). *John* is still dated last by most scholars for a variety of reasons, including the fact that his Gospel is exceptionally and theologically elaborate, and was not used by any of the other Gospel authors, except perhaps in a very small way by Luke.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

ments for the existence of a lost source-text (called *Q*) which was used by *Matthew* and *Luke* to supplement their borrowing from *Mark*, and this has been speculatively dated as early as the AD 50's.⁹

This is only an example of the state of ignorance we are in whenever scholars try to debate the dates of these writings. Although it remains possible that all the Gospels were written after AD 100, those rare scholars who try to place all Christian writings in the second century have nothing to base such a position on. At least some of Paul's epistles can be reasonably taken as dating no more than 16 to 32 years after the oral tradition had begun to flourish after the death of Jesus, although adulteration of those letters by later editors remains possible, and it is also possible that even in Paul's day forgeries were being made and circulated (*cf.* 2 Thess 2:2). The Gospels were not likely to have been written down so soon, and we have clear evidence, in numerous variations, that they were altered at various points in their transmission, and scholarly work in the last two centuries has gone far to get us to the earliest versions possible.

Nevertheless, any number of unknown alterations could still have been made that have not been detected (a great many have been both errors and deliberate alterations or omissions), and it is important to note that the ancients did not have at one glance the scope of manuscript data we have, nor did they (with a few exceptions) even have the analytical and paleographical skills now employed to derive a reliable manuscript archetype from a scientific collation of numerous exemplars. In other words, no one in antiquity ever saw a completely accurate collection of what would eventually become the 27 New Testament books, until perhaps the time of Origen or Clement of Alexandria (see XII and XIV), and even then most likely only those few scholars would have enjoyed the privilege. But this is still doubtful – it does not appear that either man went out of his way to find and trace the history of all existing manuscripts, in all churches, and in all translations, yet that is what would have been required to decisively collate a close approximation to the original texts.¹⁰

II. Ambiguous Pre-Canonical References.

The first Christian text that did not become canonized, but was respected as authentic, is the *First Epistle of Clement* of Rome, reasonably dated to AD 95-6,¹¹ and contained in many ancient Bibles and frequently read and regarded as Scripture in many churches.¹² This is relevant because even at this late date two things are observed: Clement never refers to any Gospel, but frequently refers to various epistles of Paul. Yet he calls them wise counsel, not Scripture – he reserves this authority for the *Old Testament*, which he cites over a hundred times.¹³ On a few occasions Clem-

⁸ *Cf.* Steve Mason, "Josephus and Luke-Acts" in *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson, 1992), 185-225. Also relevant is Gregory Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (1992). Both draw on Heinz Schreckenberg, "Flavius Josephus und die weltanschauung Schriften," *Wort in der Zeit: Neutestamentliche Studien* (1980), 179-209. I have summarized Mason in "Luke and Josephus," online at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/lukeandjosephus.html.

⁹ *Cf.* Howard Clark Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels*, 2d ed., (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 76ff.

¹⁰ With regard to facing an even worse problem today, *cf.* Metzger, "Questions Concerning the Canon Today," in *Canon*, 267-88. For a specific example, see Richard Carrier, "On Calvinist Scorn of Textual Criticism," online at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/bible.html#bible.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹² *Ibid.*, 187-8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 41-3.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

ent quotes Jesus, without referring to any written source. But his quotations do not correspond to anything in any known written text, although they resemble sayings in the Gospels close enough to have derived from the same oral tradition. This suggests that the Gospels were not known to Clement. Yet he was a prominent leader of the Church in Rome. If they had been written by then, they must have not made it to Rome before AD 95. It is possible that they had not been written at all.

In the case of *Mark*, for example, it is often thought that he was writing for an audience in Rome. Thus, it is most remarkable that Clement would not know of this, supposedly the earliest Gospel. But it is also possible that he simply chose not to quote *Mark*, though knew the book – although why he would ignore *Mark* (even in his quotations of Jesus) and yet refer to numerous *Epistles of Paul* is difficult to explain.

The next such text is the collection of letters by Ignatius. However, these were added to and redacted in later centuries, making the reliability of even the “authentic” letters uncertain. Ignatius wrote while on the road to his trial in AD 110 and it is important to note that he appears not to have had references with him, thus any allusions or quotations in his work come from memory alone.¹⁴ He borrows phrases and paraphrases from many Pauline Epistles, yet never tells us this is what he is doing (he probably could not recall which letters he was drawing from at the time). Likewise, he borrows phrases or ideas which are found in *Matthew* and *John*, and on one occasion something that appears to be from *Luke*, but again he never names his sources or even tells us that he is drawing from a source at all.¹⁵ In no case does he name, or precisely quote, any *New Testament* book. But again, this may be due to the unusual circumstances in which he was writing.

Despite the difficulties, it seems plausible that the Gospels had been written by this date, although it is remotely possible that Ignatius is simply quoting oral traditions which eventually became recorded in writing, and also possible that this material was added or dressed up by later editors. Of greatest note is that in his letter to the *Philadelphians*, Ignatius recounts a debate he held with Judaizing Christians in which it is clear that only the *Old Testament* was regarded as an authority.¹⁶ Instead of referring to any *New Testament* writings as evidence, he simply says that Jesus Christ is the witness to the authority of the tradition. This suggests that none of the *New Testament* was regarded even then as an authority. Like Clement, Ignatius and other Christians probably regarded these texts as wise counsel or useful collections of their oral traditions, and not as “Scripture” per se.

Next comes the *Didakhê* (did-a-KAY), a manual of Christianity, which cannot be certainly dated, though it is believed to follow AD 110. Some scholars have weakly tried to place it much earlier, even to the time of Paul¹⁷ – others have proposed a much later date for the existing text, as late as the fourth century (though it existed in some form without a doubt before the third century). Its detailed account of a church hierarchy and rituals and the text’s unusual organization into “The Way of Life” and “The Way of Death,” among other details, likely suggest a second century date.¹⁸ It does not name any written sources, but quotes exactly the *Gospel of Matthew* as just the “Gospel” of Jesus.¹⁹ No references are made which show any clear connection with the epistles, but the *Old*

¹⁴ Ibid., 43-4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45-7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48-9.

¹⁷ Of particular note in this category is the rather challenging thesis set forth by Alvar Ellegård, *Jesus One Hundred Years Before Christ* (New York: Overlook Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Metzger, *Canon*, 49.

¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Testament is quoted a few times. It is worth noting that the book attributes its ultimate source to unnamed itinerant evangelists,²⁰ showing that anonymous oral tradition was still king when the *Didakhê* was written. It is also worth noting that this text was regarded as canonical scripture by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and perhaps in the Egyptian churches for quite some time.²¹

Unfortunately, we cannot date this text well enough for it to be helpful, and the same problem is faced by the *Epistle of Barnabas*,²² which cites many *Old Testament* books by name and uses many phrases which appear in the Gospels, but never names any *New Testament* book – and the allusions are of the sort that could merely reflect common oral traditions. The date of this letter is unknown and could be anywhere from AD 70 to AD 130.²³ It was for a long time actually a part of the *New Testament* canon itself, appearing at the end of the oldest surviving complete Bible, the *Codex Sinaiticus*.²⁴

III. Clear Pre-Canonical References.

The first author who shows a more concerted interest in textual sources is Papias. We do not know when he wrote, but presumably it was between AD 110 and AD 140, and most likely AD 130 or later.²⁵ What he wrote has not survived, apart from fragmentary quotations in other works of his “Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord” which purported to be a collection of things he had actually heard said by the students of elders who claimed to have known the first disciples (yes, this sounds a lot like “a friend of a friend of a friend”), since he specifically regarded this as more useful than anything written, according to a quotation of his preface by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.4), where Papias says: “I did not think that information from books would help me so much as the utterances of a living and surviving voice.”²⁶ Thus, Papias reveals the early Christian preference for oral rather than written tradition. It was only in the later second century that this preference began to change. Other quotations of his work show how destructive this ‘preference for oral tradition’ was, since Papias apparently recorded the most outlandish claims as if they were true, such as the fact that Judas’ head bloated to greater than the width of a wagon trail and his eyes were lost in the flesh, and that the place where he died maintained a stench so bad that no one, even to his own day, would go near it.²⁷

Of note in the surviving quotations of this same work are his claims about the writing of *Mark* and *Matthew*. The latter, he claimed, was a collection by Matthew of the sayings of Jesus in Hebrew, which several others had translated “as best they could.”²⁸ This is the origin of the belief that the *Gospel of Matthew* was originally written in Hebrew, but there are three points against such a belief. First, we have seen that Papias is hugely unreliable. Second, he is not describing a Gospel at all, but a collection of sayings. He is thus describing some other book now lost (some have suggested it was the Q document), or that had never existed in the first place. Third, it is distinctly possible, since

²⁰ Ibid., 51.

²¹ Ibid., 187.

²² Ibid., 56-9.

²³ Barnabas was supposedly a companion of Paul

²⁴ Transcribed in the fourth century AD, possibly based on a text produced by imperial commission, cf. XVI.

²⁵ Ibid., 51-2.

²⁶ Ibid., 52.

²⁷ From book 4 of the Expositions, quoted by Apolinarius of Laodicea, cf. footnote 23 in Metzger, *Canon*, 53.

²⁸ Ibid., 54.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

the text is vague, that instead of the “Hebrew sayings of Jesus” this book contained the “Hebrew (*i.e.*, *Old Testament*) prophecies about Jesus,” which curiously fits the fact that the *Gospel of Matthew* is the one to include many of these prophetic claims and allusions. Moreover, the word for “translated” may mean “interpreted,” in which case what Papias is describing is perhaps a proto-Matthew containing a bare collection of *Old Testament* prophecies, from which were drawn a few by the later author of the *Gospel of Matthew*, who had done his own “interpreting” of how they applied to Jesus. But this is speculative. At any rate, Papias only hints at a possible name for a possible Gospel author. And this reference is most likely to a different, now lost, work. This remark of Papias thus could have become an inspiration for naming a certain Gospel after the same man. So this is not entirely helpful.

Papias’s account of *Mark* is stranger still. He says that Mark was Peter’s secretary,²⁹ and though he had never known Jesus, he followed Peter around and recorded everything he said, leaving nothing out and changing no details.³⁰ However, he did not “set in order” the sayings of Jesus. It is hard to tell what Papias means, but scholars see in his account a growing apologetic in defense of *Mark*.³¹ What is evident is that this, the first historical thinking about Christian literary traditions, shows a possible corruption of reliability by oral transmission and a readiness to engage in apologetic distortions.³² This does not create much confidence in later reports, and raises the real possibility that other claims to authority are rhetorical rather than genuine (such as that made in the closing paragraphs of the *Gospel of John*). But at least we now discover (perhaps), between AD 110 to 140, the first definite name of a Gospel author, *i.e.*, *Mark*.

There is one outstanding problem for these references to *Mark* and *Matthew* in Papias. They appear only in Eusebius, who is notorious for reporting (if not creating) forgeries.³³ We cannot establish whether this has happened in this case, but there must always remain a pall of suspicion.³⁴ Even if accurate, there is another side of the story: the situation evident in Papias is that there is little regard for any written Gospels, in contrast with nearly complete faith in oral tradition, with lit-

²⁹ Perhaps getting the idea from 1 Peter 5.13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54-5.

³¹ The implication is that Mark’s own testimony could not be regarded as true, simply because he did not personally know Jesus. Apparently, this is the reason why Papias thought that Mark was attacked for being incomplete and disorderly. Therefore, it is in this sense that Papias finds it necessary to come to Mark’s defense by putting him in the entourage of the Apostle Peter, and asserting that Mark faithfully recorded what Peter testified, which were not just Mark’s own creations.

³² Inexperienced observers might remark that an author engaging in apologetic invention would want to ascribe a text to an actual apostle, an eye-witness, not to a mere companion (like *Mark* or *Luke*; *John* appears to claim eye-witness authorship at 21:24, and *Matthew* was believed by later church scholars to be the apostle, and thus an eye-witness). But in fact, the history of ancient forgery does not bear this out. It was actually a common practice to invent a companion, or other second-hand witness, as an author to lend greater credibility (by reverse psychology: after all, liars know very well what looks more and what less like a lie) and to create a good ground for excusing charges of omission or chronological error or stylistic inferiority. As a result, some forged Christian texts were attributed to such “secondary authors” (*e.g.*, the *Acts of John*, *cf.* n. 8). Examples in the pagan tradition include the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, whose author, Philostratus, appears to have invented just such a secondary author as an authority (*cf.* Felix Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker* (continued by J. Radicke), § 1065, “Damis of Niniveh,” 1999), following a tradition also evident in Antonius Diogenes, *Wonders Beyond Thule, and the Trojan Novels of Dictys and Dares*.

³³ Unfortunately, Eusebius is often our only source for much of the early history of Christian texts, and so I am forced to cite him frequently. Even when I appear to cite him confidently, readers must keep in mind that he is not exceptionally trustworthy.

³⁴ See appendix 1.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

the critical thought being applied.³⁵ More importantly, the context seems to be one where there were perhaps no set written Gospels in his day, but an array of variously-worked texts. And this picture is somewhat confirmed by the remarkable discovery of fragments dated *ca.* AD 130-180 from a lost synoptic Gospel, the composition of which has been dated “not later than AD 110-30.”³⁶ In this text, there are echoes from all four Gospels, but also miracles and sayings of Jesus found nowhere else, and it appears the author was working not from textual sources but from memory, and composing freely in his own style.³⁷ It is likely that this, in part, is how all the Gospels were written. Moreover, it is possible that the canonical Gospels did not achieve their final (near-present) form until during or shortly after the time of Papias.

In the same period, Polycarp wrote a letter in which he cites “Jesus” for certain sayings a hundred times, and the sayings match closely those appearing in the Gospels (and even things written in numerous *Epistles*, which were not originally attributed to Jesus), but he does not name any sources.³⁸ We see the authority of oral tradition is again elevated above the written – like all the previous authors, no *New Testament* text is called scripture, though many *Old Testament* texts are, and the only cited source for *New Testament* information is the report of ‘unnamed’ evangelists (*Epistle of Polycarp*, 4.3). However, a sign of a change lies in the very purpose of the letter: it is a preface to a collection of letters by Ignatius which another church had requested be copied and sent on to them. The interest in written documents is thus rising among Christian congregations in this period (unfortunately, this could also be a source of interpolated Gospel quotations in Ignatius). And so it is in this milieu, between AD 138 and AD 147, that the first philosophical defense of Christianity addressed to an Emperor (Antoninus Pius) appears, written by Aristides of Athens, in which there was vaguely mentioned “what [the Christians] call the holy Gospel writing,”³⁹ which is alleged to be powerful in its effect on readers.

As all this is going on, however, one of the first written texts to become universally popular and an object of praise among Christians is none other than the *Book of Hermas*, a.k.a. “*The Shepherd*,” an unusual (to us) collection of “visions, mandates, and similitudes” (the names of the three books that comprise it). This was written at some time in the second century, and we have papyrus fragments from that very century to prove it.⁴⁰ It may date even from the first century,⁴¹ but references inside and outside the text create likely dates ranging from AD 95 to AD 154,⁴² but it is probably more likely later than earlier in that range.

So popular the *Shepherd* was that it was widely regarded as inspired – it was actually included, along with the *Epistle of Barnabas*, as the final book in the oldest *New Testament* codex that survives intact, the Codex Sinaiticus (*ca.* AD 300). But even the book of Hermas never names or quotes exactly any New Testament text. It contains many statements which resemble those in various *New*

³⁵ Another extant Docetic text that was known by Clement to be circulating *ca.* AD 200 is the *Acts of John*, supposedly recorded by a certain “Leucius, a real or fictitious companion of the apostle John” (Metzger, *Canon*, 177). No information allows us to date this text’s origin, but presumably it was composed later rather than earlier in the second century. A similar text, the *Acts of Peter*, may date from around the same time (Metzger, *Canon*, 178-179).

³⁶ Metzger, *Canon*, 167.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 159-61.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 127-8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-4.

⁴¹ Cf. *op. cit.* n. 1.

⁴² Both Origen and Jerome thought the author was the very Hermas known to Paul, *i.e.*, Romans 16.14.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Testament books, but this could just as well reflect a common oral tradition. It is noteworthy that the only book actually named by Hermas is an apocryphal Jewish text, the *Book of Eldad and Modat*. In contrast, it is notable that none of the Gospels or canonical Epistles ever name any book of any kind apart from *Jude* – which cites another apocryphal text, the *Book of Enoch* (vv. 14-15).

IV. The Need to Canonize.

In all the texts examined so far, the only recognized authority is “Jesus Christ” as related orally by unnamed evangelists, and not any written text apart from the *Old Testament*. It is always “the Gospel” and never any particular Gospel. In such a state of affairs, it is no wonder that Gnostic and other heresies could grow in a century of transmission where New Testament writings were of little account in contrast with oral authority. And it was ultimately because of this problem that opponents of Gnostic and other sects had to find writings which could plausibly be advanced as authentic but which did not support Gnostic or “heretical” teachings. Thus, the group that decided which texts would be heretical was that which had the most vested interest in such a project: the most powerful leaders of the various churches whose authority was being challenged. It should not be forgotten however that the challengers were also leaders of their own churches.

The second point that this presses upon us is that since the drive to find canonical written texts was created by the need to refute heretics, anti-heretical and other rhetoric, influenced both the selection of texts, as well as the editing or writing of the texts themselves. And so far, as of about AD 130, we have no clear evidence of any complete, much less named, written Gospel, although it seems some of the Epistles were widely circulated. Although we have seen a few exact quotations from the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, this in no way establishes that these sentences came from what we now know as that Gospel, since anything could have been added, removed, or altered to suit the needs of the various churches engaged in this ideological propaganda war. Even according to Eusebius, Bishop Dionysius of Corinth wrote some time in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180) that “the devil’s apostles have filled” his own epistles “with tares, taking away some things and adding others,” and he concludes revealingly, “small wonder, then, if some have dared to tamper even with the word of the Lord Himself” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 4.23).

Once we start to find writings (late second century papyri are our earliest sources), then the ability to alter the tradition becomes increasingly more difficult, but not impossible. It is only by the third century that this becomes all but impossible as thousands of copies and dozens of translations were in circulation, all derived from the texts selected in the middle of the second century by the church that won the propaganda war. This is all the more real given that almost all the non-canonical Gospels that survive are the scores which were buried in AD 400 at Nag Hammadi – thus, we cannot know if this is representative of any such texts that could have been written in the first or second century, so we do not know if there were other, now lost Gospels, just as old as those in the *New Testament*. We may never know.

V. The Gnostics Make the First Move.

Around AD 135 the Gnostic Basilides composed a mighty treatise called the *Exigetica* which, judging from quotes by critics, contained lengthy exegesis on Gospel stories like the Sermon on the Mount and the Rich Man and Lazarus.⁴³ We do not know if he was drawing on any actual Gospels, or oral tradition. Nevertheless, the attack was underway: whoever disagreed with him had to respond in kind, with their own texts, and somehow win the resulting propaganda war. For this pur-

⁴³ Metzger, *Canon*, 78-9.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

pose the New Testament was all but born. And in addition to this was the political need for a scapegoat: pressure against Christians by the Roman authorities prompted many to criticize other Christian sects with the general theme “they are the bad Christians, but we are the good ones, so you should punish them instead.” Thus, pro-Roman elements, and the absence of anti-Roman features, were a precondition for the canonical texts of any church with a chance of success, and this also affected the formation of the surviving canon — and, incidentally, given the tense relations between Rome and the Jews, anti-Semitic features would also win Roman favor and release the Christians from Roman hostility toward Jews, although one could not take this pandering too far in a church largely comprised of Jews or their descendants.

In AD 144, Marcion proposed a reform of Christianity for which the church leaders expelled him merely for suggesting: that the Old Testament was contradictory and barbaric and that the true Gospel was not at all Jewish, but that Jewish ideas had been imported into New Testament texts by interpolators, and only Paul’s teachings are true. Moreover, he rejected the idea that Jesus was flesh, and the idea of Hell. But what is significant for us is that this implies a recognition of “texts” as being authoritative.⁴⁴ Expelled, Marcion started his own church and was the first to clearly establish a canon, consisting of ten of the Epistles and one Gospel, which Tertullian decades later identified as the *Gospel of Luke*, though stripped of “unacceptable features” such as the nativity, *Old Testament* references, etc. Yet Tertullian attacks Marcion for not having named the author of the book, but simply calling it “the Gospel” (*Against Marcion*, 4.2), even though everyone had been doing just the same thing before him. Thus it is possible, if not likely, that by AD 144 the *Gospel of Luke* had not yet received its name. We have already seen how around AD 130 Papias perhaps names Mark so as to defend its authority, and alludes to a text by *Matthew* which could have inspired naming another Gospel after him, the one which seemed to rely most on *Old Testament* prophecies. Thus, the very need to assert authority is perhaps compelling church leaders to give names to the Gospel authors sometime between AD 110 and AD 150, in order that the authority of certain Gospels can be established.

Marcion’s canon influenced the final canon of the Church. His prefaces to the letters of Paul that he thought authentic were even retained in several versions of the Latin Vulgate Bible, and many of his proposed emendations of these letters and the *Gospel of Luke* have turned up in numerous surviving manuscripts, showing that his legacy was intimately integrated at various levels throughout the surviving Church, affecting the transmission as well as the selection of the final canonical texts.⁴⁵

The next stage in this process was also spurred by the “heresy” of Montanism in AD 156, an apocalyptic, grass-roots church movement of “inspiration” and speaking in tongues very reminiscent of revivalist “the end is nigh” movements that arise still to this day, especially in its popular anti-clerical attitudes, and its appeal to non-elites by admitting women into the leadership. This movement persisted long enough to win over Tertullian in AD 206, even though the congregations were cut off from the church as demon-inspired. But this push back to personal revelation among the non-elites drove the elites to seek a decisive written text to counter it and maintain control of doctrine. Consequently, we find the first reference to the term “New Testament” (*kainê diathêkê*) in an anti-Montanist treatise.⁴⁶ This controversy also led to a long-standing hesitancy to canonize the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 90-94.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 94-9.

⁴⁶ Written by an unknown author in AD 192, quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.2ff.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Revelation, which was associated with a Montanist emphasis on personal apocalyptic visions, and was perhaps a little too anti-Roman to be safely approved.⁴⁷

VI. The Old Testament Canon.

Here I will pause briefly to describe how the *Old Testament* canon was established, since this process had occurred before the *New Testament* canon was even an idea, and though it went on largely independent of Christianity, it may have had an influence. Certainly, since the Bible is generally taken today as a whole, how the books of the *Old Testament* were chosen is a relevant topic. Evidence points to the completion of the *Old Testament* canon by a Synod at Jabneh (or Jamnia) between AD 90 and AD 100, where an assembly of rabbis decided which books of the *Ketuvim* were to be regarded as genuine.⁴⁸ Although there was no effective hierarchical organization to enforce adherence, by the following century the decision of this council came to be accepted by all parties, including the Christians. But the *Ketuvim* only consists of all books that are not prophetic or part of the Torah (the Pentateuch), although *Daniel* was accepted in this collection, having been rejected among the prophetic books.

The Torah had already been canonized in some form possibly as early as 622 BCE (when the true Torah was “discovered” and ceremoniously declared official by King Josiah, according to the Bible itself), though it was most likely significantly edited after the Babylonian Exile in the time of Ezra ca. 500 BCE. The surest decision was made in the second century BCE when the Septuagint, an “official” Greek translation, was made of it by a council of seventy Jewish scholars in Alexandria.

The prophets, not including Daniel (which did not become part of the Hebrew canon until the synod of Jabneh, and then only as part of the *Ketuvim*), appear to have been “canonized” by tradition alone sometime before the fourth century BCE, we don't know when or how. And to all this the Christians appear to have added certain Apocrypha, although, since all Greek versions remaining are Christian, we cannot tell if any of these books had been accepted by the Alexandrian synod or were inserted later by Christians. It should be noted that the Samaritans rejected all the books of the Bible except the Torah. We know that Christians adopted the Jewish ruling on the Old Testament canon, from a letter of Melito, bishop of Sardis (in Lydia) in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180), where he explicitly states that, to establish which Old Testament books were authoritative, he went to Palestine and inquired among the Hebrews (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 4.26.13). Nevertheless, there remained numerous “apocryphal” *Old Testament* books that Christians variously accepted or rejected, some still in some Bibles even to the present day (such as *I and II Maccabees*, *Ecclesiasticus*, the *Book of Wisdom*, among others). This essay does not discuss the Christian canonization of the Old Testament in any detail, but more can be learned from Gerald Larue's chapter on this subject.

VII. Other Canons.

Connected with this process was the canonization of the Talmud, which began in AD 200⁴⁹ with the first “authoritative” written edition of the Mishnah being established by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, presumably from oral traditions. Though not part of the Bible, the very fact that a canonical set of Talmudic texts was being sought at this time also suggests a possible influence upon the Christians to do the same with their writings, as does the very different move to canonization made by the

⁴⁷ Metzger, *Canon*, 105-6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 109-10, esp. footnote 81 for sources.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Roman jurist Ulpian around the same date, who sought to marshal all the past legal decisions of prominent jurists for the last few centuries and edit them into a single authoritative text. This latter process had already been begun by the Emperor Hadrian when he asked the jurist Julian to write a final, authoritative Praetorian Edict which defined many basic laws and legal procedures of Rome, and made them unchangeable by future praetors, and this was enacted by the Senate on AD 131. Other related trends in literature date back to the great beginnings of the library at Alexandria, where “canons” of authoritative texts were established for various Classical authors, including especially Homer, from 285 BCE onward. This is in fact where the word was established with such a meaning, after being adopted from its use in philosophy to mean “method,” “measure” or “standard.” Likewise, magical writings were canonized in some fashion around AD 199,⁵⁰ and similar attempts to establish the authoritative writings of Plato, Aristotle and later Plutarch, among several other authors, were also afoot in the very time that the Christians began thinking about doing the same.

VIII. Justin Martyr.

Justin Martyr of Rome composed his first Apology to an emperor in AD 150, the second around AD 161.⁵¹ He also wrote a Dialogue with Trypho [the Jew] which relates what purports to be a debate held around AD 135.⁵² In the first of these works, Justin describes “Memoirs of the Apostles” (borrowing consciously from the idea of Xenophon’s “Memoirs of Socrates”) which he says are called Gospels (*First Apology*, 66.3). He quotes *Luke*, *Matthew* and *Mark*, and uses distinctly Johannine theology, which accords to a great deal with the Judaized Neoplatonism of Philo the Jew, who wrote *ca.* AD 40. Justin calls *Mark* the “Memoirs of Peter,”⁵³ perhaps influenced by Papias (or both are following a common oral tradition). Justin also tells us that services were conducted by reading from these books, followed by a sermon, then communal prayer (*First Apology*, 67.3-5), demonstrating the rising interest in and use of written texts in the churches. Justin’s choice of Gospels could have been influenced by his location (Rome) or some other preferences unknown to us, but it is a crucial consideration because the first “orthodox” canon is devised by Justin’s pupil, Tatian, who would thus have favored the choices of the man who had converted and instructed him. Finally, Justin quotes a lot of additional oral tradition outside these Gospels,⁵⁴ including the belief that Jesus was born in a cave outside Bethlehem (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 78.5). He also refers to the Revelation to John, but never mentions or quotes any Epistles.

IX. Tatian.

Curiously, the first “orthodox” Christian move toward canonization begins outside the Roman Empire, in the Syrian church. Moreover, this canon was ultimately not in Greek, but was a Syrian translation.⁵⁵ The single man responsible is Tatian, who was converted to Christianity by Justin Martyr on a visit to Rome around AD 150, and, after much instruction, returned to Syria in AD 172 to reform the church there, banning the use of wine, the eating of meat, and marriage.⁵⁶ At some

⁵⁰ Ibid., 111-112.

⁵¹ Scholars continue to debate whether there were really two, whether the two we have were originally those two, or only one of them that was later split up, and so on.

⁵² Ibid., 143-8.

⁵³ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 147-8.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 114-17.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

point in all this (it is suggested *ca.* AD 160) he selected four Gospels (the four we now know as the canon, and which no doubt supported his own ideology and that of his tutor, Justin) and composed a single harmonized “Gospel” by weaving them together, mainly following the chronology of John. This is called the *Diatessaron* (“That Which is Through the Four”) and it became for a long time the official Gospel text of the Syriac church, centered in Edessa. The Syriac Doctrine of Addai (*ca.* AD 400) claims to record the oldest traditions of the Syrian church, and among these is the establishment of a canon: members of the church are to read only the Gospel (meaning the *Diatessaron of Tatian*), the *Epistles of Paul* (which are said to have been sent by Peter, from Rome), and the *Book of Acts* (which is said to have been sent by John the son of Zebedee, from Ephesus), and nothing else.⁵⁷ This tradition is traced back to Tatian.

Unfortunately, we lack any complete versions of this, the first Christian canon outside of the Gnostic tradition (see XVIII). We do not know which Epistles he accepted as authentic, yet we know he rejected some (*cf.* Jerome, “On Titus,” *pr.*), including *First Timothy* because it allowed the taking of wine, meat, and marriage. Other references allow us to guess at some of those he thought authentic.

But of the original *Diatessaron* we only have one fragment and a few quotations, although the fragment is very close to the original – within eighty years.⁵⁸ The fragment matches the narrative just after the crucifixion and just before the body of Jesus is taken down, with verses mainly from the three synoptic Gospels, and one from *John*. However, in other quotations of the *Diatessaron* (and in late copies in Syriac and Armenian, which are not securely reliable) there are phrases which seem to come from other sources, such as the *Gospel of Hebrews* and the *Protoevangelium of James*, suggesting that the four Gospels at that time may have contained verses now missing or altered. The only complete work of Tatian’s that survives is his “Oration to the Greeks” which is a scathing attack on Greek culture. We know he wrote books prolifically on a number of other topics. He was probably the first Christian to do so, apart from Justin.

What is significant is that it is shortly after Tatian and Justin’s contributions that we discover the first instance of organized action against authors of new Christian source-texts. Although such action is necessary for there to be any hope of control over a reliable textual tradition in a milieu of wanton invention and combative propaganda, the fact that it only begins at such a late date is another blow against those who set their hopes on having complete confidence in the present canon. It means that a century of prolific writing went largely unchecked before the church took any concerted action to stop it.

This first case is reported by Tertullian (*On Baptism*, 17). The story goes that a well-meaning priest in Asia Minor wrote the *Acts of Paul* to honor the Apostle, sometime around AD 170. He was brought before a church council, convicted of falsification, and removed from office.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, though universally condemned by church leaders, it remained lastingly popular among educated church laymen, and one section of this text remains a part of the Armenian Bible to this day. But disturbingly, Tertullian attacks the book primarily because it depicts a woman (Thecla, a disciple of Paul) preaching and administering baptism. Thus, as we will see more than once, doctrine, not objective concern for history, loomed large behind the charge of falsification – so we are faced with uncertainties all over again. Indeed, Tertullian, as a hostile witness set on abolishing the text,

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 113-14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

might not be telling us the truth about its author or date of origin. This is all too likely, since there are indications that Tertullian was not an honest man (see XV).

It must also be noted that our evidence for church reactions to texts is incredibly scarce. For there were books that were extant in the second century yet never mentioned and thus entirely unknown until recovered in more recent times. How many other Christian writings are there that we are completely ignorant of? For instance, traces of a forged Epistle survive in the Coptic (Egyptian) and Ethiopian manuscript traditions: the almost ridiculous *Epistle of the Apostles*, a semi-apocalyptic text written by the “eleven disciples” after the resurrection “to the churches of the East and the West, the North and the South,”⁶⁰ even though there could not have been any such churches at that time. This text has been plausibly dated to *ca.* AD 180 (it does fit the mystical orthodoxy of Irenaeus), and even earlier than AD 120 by some scholars. It is too derivative and fantastic in my opinion to come so early, but redaction evidence points strongly to a middle date: the End Times is placed at 120 years after the Resurrection in one redaction, and this was altered to 150 years in another – a possible sign that the text was written shortly before 150 and then amended when the End did not come. Yet no extant Christian writer even took notice of this book – not even to denounce it. As another example, we have already discussed above the “lost synoptic Gospel” recovered in a second century papyrus fragment.

X. Theophilus and Serapion.

Near Tatian’s Syrian church, but across the border in Roman territory (and amidst a decidedly Greek culture) flourished bishop Theophilus at Antioch, around AD 180.⁶¹ Theophilus is important for a variety of reasons: he was the second, very shortly after Athenagoras (below), to explicitly mention the Trinity (*Ad autolyicum*, 2.15); he may have composed his own harmony and commentary on the four Gospels chosen by Tatian; and he wrote books against Marcion and other heretics. He is also a window into the thinking of converts: he was converted by the predictions concerning Jesus in the *Old Testament* (*Ad autolyicum*, 1.14), perhaps the weakest grounds for conversion. But most of all, he routinely treats Tatian’s Gospels as holy scripture, divinely inspired, on par with the Hebrew prophets.⁶² He also refers to John’s *Revelation* as authoritative.

Theophilus’ successor, Serapion, reveals the next stage in the process in AD 200. While touring churches in Asia he came upon a dispute in a village in Cilicia about whether the *Gospel of Peter* could be read in church. He tentatively agreed, but after reading it he closely instructed them not to use it anymore because it supported the Docetic heresy – the belief that Jesus only “seemed” to be a man, and was not really flesh⁶³ – so he concluded on this ground alone that it was falsely ascribed to Peter.

Thus, doctrine more than objective evidence of historicity was driving the selection of canonical texts. This despite the fact that this Gospel may have been written as early as AD 100-130,⁶⁴ again if not earlier, although a later date is still possible, especially if the four canonical Gospels are likewise given later dates than usual, since Peter may have drawn on them.⁶⁵

Unfortunately, we do not know if this *Gospel of Peter* was the same as the surviving Gospel of that name, but if it is, Jürgen Denker has shown that, for instance, “almost every sentence in the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 180-2.

⁶¹ Ibid., 117-19.

⁶² Ibid., 118.

⁶³ Ibid., 119, *cf.* 77.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 172, fn. 18.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

passion narrative of this gospel was composed on the basis of Scriptural references in the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah and the Psalms,”⁶⁶ which makes this text much more like what we would expect a Jewish messianic sect to compose, even more than what we find in the canonical Gospels, and this allows that Peter may in fact have preceded the canonical Gospels: we know that the Gnostics began canonization and reliance on writings first, and it is possible that “less Gnostic” texts (the present Gospels) were then created in response, even if by drawing on other, no longer surviving works. There really is no way to resolve this question. At best (or at worst, depending on your point of view), it remains only a faint possibility. If the Gospels are believed to date according to simplicity and lack of embellishment, then Peter must come later than the canonical four – but this method of dating texts is not always sure to be correct. Sometimes simpler redactions follow, rather than precede, the originals.

XI. Dionysius, Athenagoras and Irenaeus.

In this same period we know these books were being doctored and battles were being fought over authenticity along ideological lines. In the letter from Dionysius cited earlier, where he informs his readers that even his own letters are being cut up and added to, he quotes the curse for such people in *Revelation*, which reveals that this sort of license was being exercised widely enough even when the *Revelation* was written that a curse had to be reserved for it.⁶⁷ He notes that this was being done even with the “scriptures of the Lord,” thus recognizing certain New Testament books as scripture, but also that their integrity was being compromised at the very same time (and probably for the same reason). Dionysius is also notable for having tried to resolve doubts about the authenticity of the *Apocalypse of John* by ascribing it to a John other than the Apostle.

In AD 177, Athenagoras of Athens composed a lengthy philosophical essay, *Defense of the Christians*, addressed to the emperor Marcus Aurelius in which the first articulation of a theory of the Trinity appears. He quotes the *Old Testament* and *New Testament* several times, but does not name his sources from the *New Testament*. The quotes or paraphrases that he uses happen to come from a few Epistles of Paul, and from all the Gospels in a mishmash,⁶⁸ suggesting a harmonic source like the *Diatessaron*. But the respect that this defense, and others like it, earned among orthodox Christians contributed to forming decisions on canonicity based on whether they accorded with works like it.

Shortly after AD 177, Irenaeus was asked to compose an account of the persecutions in Lyons for the churches in Asia, and this letter is preserved by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.*, 5.1ff.). This text quotes or paraphrases various *New Testament* books without naming them. Some years after this he composed a mighty treatise *Against All Heresies* and a *Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching*. In these he quotes exactly almost every book of the *New Testament*, numerous times, demonstrating that the orthodox canon, though not established officially, was by this time generally accepted in practice.⁶⁹ And in an account of the martyrs of Scillium (in Numidia, *i.e.*, Tunisia) who were tried

⁶⁵ Another extant Docetic text that was known by Clement to be circulating *ca.* AD 200 is the *Acts of John*, supposedly recorded by a certain “Leucius, a real or fictitious companion of the apostle John” (Metzger, *Canon*, 177). No information allows us to date this text’s origin, but presumably it was composed later rather than earlier in the second century. A similar text, the *Acts of Peter*, may date from around the same time (*ibid.*, 178-9).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 123-4, *cf.* Rev 22.18ff.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

in Carthage in AD 180, we find an overt mention of Christians carrying around “the books,” including Paul’s letters. Metzger reasons this as proof that Latin translations of the letters and Gospels existed by then, though this is a shaky argument at best.⁷⁰

However, Irenaeus, whose voice is as close to official as any of the time, has this to say about the selection of the four Tatian Gospels (which he calls “the four-form Gospel” or “one Gospel in four forms”):

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are, since there are four directions of the world in which we are, and four principal winds...the four living creatures [of Revelation 4.9] symbolize the four Gospels...and there were four principal covenants made with humanity, through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Christ. (*Against All Heresies*, 3.11.8).⁷¹

Clearly, less than scholarly reasoning was affecting the canonization process.⁷² Moreover, Irenaeus includes the book of Hermas as Holy Scripture, a part of the *New Testament* (*Against All Heresies*, 4.20.2).

XII. Pantaenus and Clement: the Seminary at Alexandria.

The first Christian seminary was established in Alexandria around AD 180 by Pantaenus, whom Eusebius claims had found a Hebrew version of the *Gospel of Matthew* in India, or perhaps Ethiopia or Arabia.⁷³ Although the story is not entirely vouched for even by Eusebius (he presents it only as something that “is said”), it no doubt contributed to the belief that *Matthew* had originally been composed in Hebrew.

Pantaenus is also the first to defend the *Epistle to the Hebrews* as authentic (this had long been in dispute even by his time), on the argument that Paul wanted to compose it anonymously for that particular audience,⁷⁴ and this opinion is generally carried as authoritative.⁷⁵ Naturally, the formation of a ‘school of Christian teaching’ is a decisive moment in compelling the selection of a canon, if nothing else as a textbook, and fittingly for this task the next head of the school (in AD 190), Clement of Alexandria, represents the most scholarly Christian to date: in his surviving works, he cites other written sources about 8000 times, over 2500 of those citations being of works outside the Christian or Jewish tradition,⁷⁶ the mark of a true scholar.

By about AD 200 we find from Clement’s researches that he regarded the Tatian selection as being the primary source of the Gospel tradition, and that he believed that the chronological order of the books was *Matthew* and *Luke*, then *Mark*, and finally *John*, but he also acknowledged as authentic the *Gospel of the Egyptians*,⁷⁷ the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and the *Traditions of Matthias*,⁷⁸ as well as *Hermas*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*,⁷⁹ and the *Didakhe*.⁸⁰ But

⁷⁰ Ibid., 156-7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 263.

⁷² Irenaeus’ reasoning may reveal an earlier, more profound basis for the four Gospels: cf. Darek Barefoot, “The Riddle of the Four Faces: Solving an Ancient Mystery”

⁷³ Metzger, *Canon*, 129.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 131.

⁷⁷ Not the same as the one recovered from Nag Hammadi, but still likely a Gnostic text, *ibid.*, 171.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

he also recorded certain additional oral traditions that he thought were authentic as well, including three sayings of Jesus that did not make it into any known written text.⁸¹ The rest of his loose “canon” included the fourteen Pauline *Epistles*, *Acts*, *1 Peter*, *1 John*, and *Revelation*.

The *Apocalypse of Peter* is especially worth mentioning here. It was probably written between AD 125 and AD 150 and remained in various church lists as a canonical text for centuries.⁸² It gives detailed accounts – in the words of Jesus as he instructs Peter after the Resurrection – of signs of the End Times and then of the various kinds of punishments awaiting sinners in Hell, and the pleasures of Heaven. This text was not only popular and often treated as the genuine work of Peter (even by the very scholarly Clement), but its influence on the Christian religion as a whole is profound: this is the first text to introduce detailed pagan ideas of heaven and hell into Christian belief (drawing on Homer, Virgil, and Plato, as well as Orphic and Pythagorean traditions), and the popular view of these destinations, adopted and embellished by Dante centuries later, as in all Medieval art, is a direct outcome of this early Christian book and its widespread influence in the church for many centuries. What is of interest to us is that this book should have been regarded as obviously false, yet instead was generally received as genuine – its eventual omission from the canon was more the result of the fact that some church leaders did not want it read aloud,⁸³ perhaps because its descriptions were so disturbing.

In addition, thanks to Clement, we know of a Gospel written some time in the first half of the second century (if not earlier) that did not make it into the final canon despite having been held as canonical by Clement, and many others (including Jerome): the *Gospel of the Hebrews*.⁸⁴ This was used as an authority in Syria even as late as the fourth century, and might have originally been composed in Aramaic. Though it only survives in a few quotations, we know it was only slightly shorter than the present *Gospel of Matthew*. It has some interesting features, such as Jesus calling the Holy Spirit his “mother.” And it clearly presents James, not Peter, as the first to see Christ risen. In fact, James is depicted as having expected and anticipated the resurrection, even fasting until it should occur. If true, this is an excellent starting point for possible hallucinations of a risen Christ: deprivation and expectation. The loss of this text, and thus our inability to assess its merit, is another fact that greatly obscures any attempt to get at the historical truth behind the origins of Christianity.

Finally, Morton Smith discovered a very late copy of a certain letter by Clement which has something unusual to say about the *Gospel of Mark*. Though Smith’s scholarship has been questioned, the find has been accepted as authentic.⁸⁵ The letter asserts that there are three versions of Mark: a shorter one written in Rome based on Peter’s teaching, a longer “more spiritual” (more Johannine?), one written in Alexandria by Mark after Peter’s death, and a “secret” version left by Mark before he died, carrying on a tradition of Christian mysteries initiated by Peter. The last was supposedly smuggled out of the library at Alexandria and “corrupted” by the heretic Carpocrates

⁷⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 187.

⁸¹ Ibid., 134, cf. *Stromata* 1.28: 94.5, 158.2, and 177.2.

⁸² Ibid., 184-6.

⁸³ According to the *Muratorian Canon*, cf. *ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 169-70.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 132-3.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

between AD 100 and AD 125. Whether the letter is authentic or not, this betrays a problem for current scholars: secret traditions. To what extent were these lost, or incorporated in orthodox or heretical writings? Since secret traditions are the easiest to lose or corrupt, there may be a lot to the Christian creed in the first century that is lost to us today and that would, if found, radically change what we think about Jesus or the first evangelists and their beliefs. There may also be doctrines or sayings among the Gnostics which are authentic, but indistinguishable from others that are not.

XIII. The Muratorian Canon.

The “Muratorian Canon,” is a strange, badly written Latin list with brief comments on the books read in the church.⁸⁶ It cannot be adequately dated, and arguments have ranged from late second century to the fourth century. The earlier date is more likely, hence I am placing it here in my chronological account, although the manuscript tradition is clearly too poor to exclude alterations made over time. We don't know who wrote it, when, why, or whether it has been compromised over time, nor is it complete, and it is so badly written its meaning is unclear, as is the competence of its author and copyists. Most importantly, this text is never referred to by anyone, and would have remained thoroughly unknown if it had not been recovered in fairly recent times. Even Eusebius (below) shows no awareness of it. Thus, its influence, if any, on later decisions cannot be known.

The list begins with the four Gospels in their present order (the number is clear in the text, but Matthew and Mark can only be reasonably conjectured – the first line of the list is missing). It may have preserved the tradition that Mark was Peter's secretary (the second line implies parallels with remarks about this by Papias). But it clearly states the belief that Luke was a physician and Paul's secretary (based no doubt on Col 4.14, Philem 24, and 2 Tim 4.11), and adds that John was written by the Apostle John and then reviewed and approved by all the other Apostles. It is notable that the author ascribes all he says about Luke to anonymous “received opinion” (ex opinione). The list also claims Hermas was written ‘recently’ (unfortunately, we cannot trust that the author was correct about this), and is to be regarded highly and read privately but not held in the same esteem as the other books. The list also upholds, in addition to most of the Epistles (all but *Hebrews*, *James*, *1* and *2 Peter*, and *3 John*), the *Apocalypse of John* and also that of Peter (noting only that some didn't like it being read in church), and, strangely, the *Book of Wisdom* (which the list's author says was written by the friends of King Solomon). Curiously, it claims that Luke ends his *Acts* when Paul left him for Spain, and one wonders what happened to Paul if that was the case – and why we have none of his letters from that period of his life.

The list at relatively great length attacks Marcionism (a heresy of the mid-to-late second century), and a few other early heresies (Montanism and the Valentinians), and may in fact represent an early attempt to counter the first Christian canon (that of Marcion) by declaring one opposed to it. Of particular note, it rejects a now-lost letter of *Paul to the Alexandrians* as a Marcionite forgery. If this document genuinely preserves orthodox sentiments late in the second century, this confirms my general impression that the traditional canon was more or less established by then (perhaps under the influence of Justin and his pupil Tatian), that it was driven primarily by the need to oppose the heresy of Marcion and others, and it was brought about haphazardly, without any official vote or decision, and before any serious scholars (such as Clement or Origen) examined the case. Once such scholars finally faced the question, they were already bound by faith to a received

⁸⁶ Ibid., 191-201, 305-7.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

tradition and creed, as well as by the need to remain orthodox members of the church at large, and thus were not likely to have been entirely objective, or to have had unbiased resources at hand.

XIV. Origen: the Seminary at Caesarea.

In AD 203 Origen became head of the Christian seminary at the age of 18, a true prodigy. Due to a dispute with the bishop of Alexandria, Origen was expelled from that church and his post around AD 230, and he went and founded a second seminary at Caesarea which stole the spotlight from Alexandria. Origen is crucial in the tradition because he is known to have traveled widely, West and East, and was a voracious scholar and prodigious writer and commentator on the *Old Testament*, *New Testament* and other texts. He is also exceptional in being a relatively skeptical scholar. Even though only a fraction of his works have survived, even those fill volumes.⁸⁷ He completes what had already been going on by this point by declaring certain texts to be equally inspired alongside the Old Testament and calling them, as a corpus, the “New Testament” (*De Principiis*, 4.11-16).

Origen declared the Tatian four in AD 244 as the only trustworthy, inspired Gospels,⁸⁸ simply because they are the only Gospels that no one “disputes”,⁸⁹ although we have seen that these “disputes” were usually doctrinal in nature,⁹⁰ and the trust placed in the Tatian four was likely out of respect for the decisions of the first Christian scholars (Justin and his pupil Tatian). There is no sign that Origen was employing here any objective historical or textual criteria. Nevertheless, Origen also declares that the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Book of James* (the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*) are also trustworthy and approved by the church, and he puts some trust in the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and even calls the book of *Hermas* “divinely inspired” (ca. AD 244-6, *Commentary on Romans*, 10.31). Like his tutor, Clement, he also includes the *Didakhe* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* as scripture.⁹¹ Yet he still passes on as authentic various oral traditions of the sayings of Jesus that are found nowhere else.⁹²

Origen doubts the authenticity of 2 (and 3) *John* and 2 *Peter*, and in AD 245 admits some doubts about the author, not the validity, of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*,⁹³ suggesting that it may have been written by Luke or Clement of Rome, not Paul – and for this he uses the evidence of significant differences in style and quality of language; but Origen’s tutor, Clement of Alexandria, suggested it was originally written by Paul in Hebrew and translated into Greek by Luke or Clement. Origen writes at length on the brother of Jesus but he never mentions the Epistles of James as being by him (*Commentary on Matthew*, 2.17). It appears that, thanks to Origen’s exhaustive scholarship (perhaps tinted slightly by the pressure to remain orthodox and exclude perceived heretics), and received tradition beginning with Tatian, the *New Testament* was almost entirely accepted in its present form by AD 250, and not much changed from its apparent form in AD 180, though nothing as yet was ‘official’.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 135-6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 136-7.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 191, cf. Eusebius, *Eccl. hist.*, 6.25.

⁹⁰ E.g., Origen is not counting the opinion of men like Marcion with whom he disagrees doctrinally, cf. V.

⁹¹ Metzger, *Canon*, 187.

⁹² Ibid., 137.

⁹³ Ibid., 138.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

XV. Tertullian, Cyprian, and the Century of Chaos.

Tertullian, a highly-educated lawyer, converted to Christianity in AD 195, and was an avid proponent of orthodoxy in Carthage, until AD 206 when, as Jerome reports (*On Famous Men*, 53), “distressed by the envy and laxity of the clergy of the Roman church,” he became a leader of the Montanist sect of Christianity. Tertullian generally accepts the traditional canon, including *Hermas*, until his conversion to Montanism, at which point he declares it false,⁹⁴ and tells a story, somehow never mentioned before, that its author was kicked out of the church for composing a lie. Unfortunately, Tertullian is notoriously prone to reporting fabulous lies in support of his views, very much in the fashion of a slimy lawyer, and the most notorious case is when he claims that Tiberius asked the Senate at Rome to recognize Christianity as an official religion (*Apology*, 1.5).

Cyprian follows, and as a convert in AD 246, then bishop and martyr in AD 258, he repeats the superstitious rationale for the four-Gospel tradition: they are four in number “like the rivers of Paradise” (*Epistles*, 73). Worse, he says Paul and John each wrote to seven churches according to “the seven sons in the song of Hannah.”⁹⁵ Whatever his reasons, Cyprian rejected the canonicity of *Philemon*, *Hebrews*, *James*, *2 Peter*, *2 and 3 John*, and *Jude*, and this opinion carried for a while in the West.⁹⁶

The first organized Imperial persecutions of Christianity (under Decius and Valentinian, and then Diocletian and Galerius) took place in this period, and by the beginning of the fourth century involved the outlawing and destruction of Christian literature. Even more than combating heresy, this became an important factor in compelling decisions of canonicity by forcing Christians to decide which books could be surrendered to authorities and burned without committing a sin, in contrast with those that were worth dying for.⁹⁷ Once again, the very nature of the situation meant that doctrine decided the case more than any objective historical criteria, but our evidence from the third century, a century of near-perpetual civil war and economic and political chaos throughout the Roman world, is too scanty to draw out any stories about what finally happened to the Bible as a result.

But the persecutions did not prevent even more spurious works from being generated. *The Epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans*, a poor forgery written perhaps near the end of the third century (inspired by Col 4:16), remained part of many accepted Bibles throughout the Middle Ages, and continued to be included in some printed Bibles as late as the 17th century.⁹⁸ On the other hand, the *Apocalypse of Paul*,⁹⁹ purporting to be written by Paul himself, but really composed in the third century as well, was never taken anywhere near as seriously. It was apparently admired by many monks in the early Middle Ages, yet never had a chance at the canon, and it is best classified with the third century Christian novels and other works of Christian fiction that proliferated in this period.

⁹⁴ Another example of doctrine driving decisions regarding canonicity, as opposed to objective historical investigation; *ibid.*, 159-60.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160-3, 232.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 106-8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 182-3, 239-40.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 186-7.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

XVI. Eusebius, the First History of the Church, and the Earliest Complete Bibles.

The first Christian scholar to engage in researching and writing a complete history of the Christian church, Eusebius of Caesarea, reveals the embarrassing complexity of the development of the Christian canon, despite his concerted attempt to cover this with a pro-orthodox account. Two things must be known: first, Eusebius was either a liar or hopelessly credulous,¹⁰⁰ and either way not a very good historian; second, Eusebius rewrote his *History of the Church* at least five times,¹⁰¹ in order to accommodate changing events, including the ever-important Council of Nicea, where Arianism, the view that Christ was created by God and not entirely identical to God (the greatest advocate of this was Eusebius' contemporary Arius, after whom the doctrine was named, but the idea was not entirely original to him), was decisively declared heretical, and for the first time in history this decision had the full backing and enforcement of the Roman Empire. Eusebius was an Arian until that day, and, not desiring to lose his position in the church, he abandoned his Arianism. We may never know what effect this had on his final revision of his history – but any view he may have taken about the canon that was pro-Arian was certainly expunged. This may reveal once again how doctrine more than objective scholarship affected Christian choices concerning canonical texts.

Even in AD 327, when Eusebius published the final draft of his *Church History*, two years after the great Council of Nicea, which set out to establish a decisive orthodox creed that would be enforced by law throughout the world, there was no official Bible. Bruce Metzger paints the picture superbly, for what drove Eusebius to pay so much attention to the history of the Bible must have been

Eusebius' search for certainty as well as ...the absence of any official declaration having an absolute value, such as a canon issued by a synod, or the collective agreement among churches or bishops. Of these there is not a trace in the long series of literary notices, so conscientiously amassed by the historian. But, when all is done, the most that Eusebius can register is uncertainty so great that he seems to get confused when making a statement about it.¹⁰²

The only standard Eusebius employed in deciding which texts to call “recognized” is to accept every book that is recognized by every (orthodox) author he knows (*Church History*, 3.25).¹⁰³

The next category of texts includes those that are recognized by some, but disputed at least by someone.¹⁰⁴ The final category of texts includes those universally regarded as heretical by those adhering to his idea of orthodoxy. This standard is obviously multiply flawed: first, it begins with his own subjective doctrinal judgment of who is orthodox and thus whose opinion counts at all, and second it is based solely on the doctrinal opinions of these writers. There is no reference to standards of historical research or textual criticism, for example. And against general sentiment, Eusebius only voices one opinion of his own, in defense of the *Revelation of John*, which was already in the second category and thus half-way to being canonical.

In giving priority to the Four Gospels, Eusebius calls them the “Holy Quaternion,” thus showing signs of the belief that there could only be four Gospels for mystical or numerological reasons,

¹⁰⁰ See appendix 1.

¹⁰¹ Metzger, *Canon*, 202, fn 29.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 201-7.

¹⁰⁴ Someone, that is, who was regarded by him as orthodox, hence, the opinions of early church leaders like Marcion did not count.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

a belief we have seen before (in the cases of Irenaeus and Cyprian). He adds to these *Acts*, *1 Peter*, and *1 John*, and all the *Epistles of Paul*.¹⁰⁵ Eusebius hints that there were some disputes about the *Apocalypse of John*, but places it confusingly in the first category. Among disputed, but not heretical texts, he places *James*, *Jude*, *2 Peter*, and *2 and 3 John*, but also confuses the case further by including among these “partly disputed” texts some other works that he otherwise classifies as *notha*, “base” or “counterfeit” (viz., “bastard texts”), giving no indication of what he means by that, or what criteria he applied. These include the *Acts of Paul*, the book of *Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and a certain “Teachings of the Apostles,” but also, confusingly, the *Apocalypse of John* again. As heretical forgeries he identifies the *Gospels of Peter*, *Thomas*, and *Matthias*, and the *Acts of Andrew*, *John*, and others.

Most astonishing is the fact that, after leaving us with this confusing state of affairs, Eusebius reports that the Emperor Constantine commissioned Eusebius personally to produce fifty excellent copies of the sacred scriptures which would be the basis, no doubt, of the official imperial Bible (*Life of Constantine*, 4.36.37), yet we are never told what books Eusebius chose to include, or on what authority or criteria. Two nearly-complete Bibles survive from the fourth century which some believe may be copies of this imperial standard text: the *Codex Sinaiticus*, which has the four *Gospels*, *Acts*, fourteen *Pauline Epistles* (including *Hebrews*), seven *Catholic Epistles*, the *Revelation of John*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *book of Hermas*, and the *Vaticanus Codex*, which appears to contain the same material in the same order, although both texts are incomplete (*Sinaiticus* breaks off in the middle of *Hermas*, *Vaticanus* in the middle of *Hebrews*). We may wonder what books, if any, were appended after *Hermas*.

Finally, we have another anonymous list (in Latin) of the books included in the Bible, found in a sixth century manuscript, which cannot be dated securely, though *ca.* AD 300 is most likely, and it confirms the state of confusion met by Eusebius, as well as the esteem still reserved for certain books no longer in the Bible today.¹⁰⁶ The list includes the four *Gospels* and *Acts*, as well as the *Acts of Paul* (astonishingly, *cf.* discussion of this text above), only ten of Paul’s *Epistles* (it excludes *Hebrews*, *Philippians*, and *1 and 2 Thessalonians*), *1 and 2 Peter* (curiously, the list says these are letters to Peter), *James*, *Jude*, *1, 2, and 3 John*, *Barnabas*, *Hermas*, and the *Apocalypses of John and Peter*. Metzger suggests likely scribal errors here,¹⁰⁷ but clearly, before the late fourth century, the contents of the Bible were neither entirely settled, nor quite like what they are today.

XVII. Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius of Alexandria, and the Eastern Synods.

Around AD 350, for his churches in Jerusalem, Bishop Cyril composed a set of lectures with the explicit purpose of indoctrinating new members of the Church, which explained every aspect of the orthodox faith, including the texts to be regarded as holy scripture (*Catechetical Lectures*, 4.33-36).¹⁰⁸ This is the first time anything like this had been done: an official pronouncement from a high-ranking church official on what the Bible was to consist of, enforced on a major diocese by an imperial Church authority. Moreover, Cyril declares that no other books are to be read, not even privately. This was the decree and decision of one man, and we are given no insights into what cri-

¹⁰⁵ Whether he meant to include *Hebrews* is unknown – he elsewhere supports the view advanced by Clement of Alexandria that it was written by Paul in Hebrew and translated by Luke or Clement of Rome, *cf. Eccl. hist.*, 3.3, 3.38.

¹⁰⁶ Metzger, *Canon*, 310-11.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 209-10, 311.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

teria he employed. His canon consists of the four *Gospels*, *Acts*, and the now-standard *21 Epistles*, in short the present Bible, minus the *Revelation*.

The first synod ever held to decide the official contents of the Bible was the Synod of Laodicea (Asia Minor) in AD 363, consisting of twenty to thirty bishops.¹⁰⁹ The resulting decree stated quite simply that it was now officially resolved: “Let no private psalms nor any uncanonical books be read in the church, but only canonical ones of the New and Old Testament.” The list that follows matches what we now have in modern Bibles, minus the *Revelation*. The influence of Cyril is almost certain. At any rate, we have no idea what criteria were used to decide this canon, and it is likely that mere authority overwhelmed any other consideration — since Cyril had decreed a canon, that was the canon, and the purpose of the synod was merely to assert the fact that nothing else was to be read. Since the canon list does not even appear in some versions of the synodic decree, it has also been suggested that the synod did not in fact name the books that were canonical but merely assumed the Cyrilian canon, and that someone later decided the decree had to be clarified by adding the list of books accepted by the church. In such a case, the decision behind the list was even less reflective or objective.

The next step was taken by the rabid anti-Arian conservative Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria.¹¹⁰ The Bishop of Alexandria was one of the most important men in the Church for one simple reason: the Festal Epistle written by that bishop to the churches in Egypt was considered the authoritative statement on the dates of Christian festivals, in deference to the presence of astronomical experts at Alexandria. It was consequently read and employed by the Syrian churches (via Antioch) and the Western churches (via Rome). In AD 367 Athanasius took the chance afforded him and included in his Festal Epistle of that year what he declared to be the canonical texts: the very Bible we now know (*Gospels*, *Acts*, *21 Epistles*, and *Revelation*). “Let no one add to these,” he declared, “let nothing be taken away from them.” This became the Western Catholic canon, again by fiat of one man, and through deference to his authority by the rest of the Church. However, men like Gregory of Nazianzus still rejected *Revelation*, and other ideas of what the Bible should contain persisted here and there — either adding books (such as the *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Ecclesiasticus*, added to the Old Testament), or rejecting them (*Jude*, *2 Peter*, and *2 and 3 John* especially).

It was not until AD 692 when this decision became anything official. That year the Trullan Synod was comprised of several Eastern bishops convened by Emperor Justinian to settle and organize the authorities for Christian law (just as Justinian had commanded for secular law). This decreed that, for instance, both the Synod of Laodicea and the Epistles of Athanasius were to be considered authoritative, even though they contradicted each other on whether *Revelation* was to be included.¹¹¹ Furthering the confusion, this Synod also codified as official the so-called “Eighty-Fifth Apostolic Canon”¹¹² which was probably written in the late fourth century but attributed to Clement of Rome — this decree established the two letters of Clement as “sacred books” and part of the “venerable and holy” Bible, along with eight other books “which it is not appropriate to make public before all, because of the mysteries contained in them.” This mysterious remark is troubling, but reflects the problem, already mentioned earlier, of secret doctrines and sayings that are lost to us yet could be older and more authoritative than anything that survives.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 210, 312.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 211-12.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 216-7.

¹¹² Ibid., 313.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Where this mysterious “canon” fits into history is unclear. It seems to accept the Laodicean canon, while adding the letters of Clement and eight unnamed “secret” books, for no clear reason. That this canon was actually written by Clement of Rome, as it implies, is all but impossible, since it is never mentioned by anyone before the fourth century despite its author being an important early authority, and *1 Clement* never cites or mentions any texts apart from a few Pauline Epistles, much less a “holy and venerable” canon of “sacred books.” But it would be intriguing if it were actually written by Clement of Alexandria – the reference to secret books would fit Morton Smith’s discovery of a Clementine reference to a *Secret Gospel of Mark* (see XII). At any rate, the official 7th century declaration was thoroughly contradictory regarding the canon, and the members of the Trullan Synod obviously, in Metzger’s words, “had not even read the texts thus sanctioned.” Their decision gave license for confusion: at least six different lists of canonical texts were still in use in the East by the tenth century.¹¹³ And to this day, *Revelation* is not included in the Syrian Bible.

XVIII. The Eastern Canons.

For centuries the *Diatessaron of Tatian*, along with *Acts* and the *Pauline Epistles* (except *Philemon*), comprised the only accepted books in the Syrian churches, meaning that Tatian’s stricter views, resulting in the rejection in *1 Timothy*, did not win out. Moreover, after the pronouncements of the fourth century on the proper content of the Bible, Tatian was declared a heretic and in the early fourth century Bishop Theodoretus of Cyrrhus and Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (both in Syria) rooted out all copies they could find of the *Diatessaron* and replaced them with the four canonical Gospels.¹¹⁴ Thanks to them, no early copies of the *Diatessaron* survive – although a very early fragment suggests it would have been crucial evidence for the true state of the early Gospels (see IX).

By the fifth century the Syrian Bible, called the *Peshitta*, became formalized somehow into its present form: *Philemon* was accepted, along with *James*, *1 Peter* and *1 John*, but the remaining books are still expelled (*2 and 3 John*, *2 Peter*, *Revelation*, and *Jude*). After the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, the Eastern Syrian church, in turn divided between the Nestorian and the Syrian Orthodox Churches, broke away, and retained this canon of only 22 books (the *Peshitta*) until the present day. However, to confuse matters, a monument erected by a Nestorian in China in AD 781 states that there were 27 holy books (the number in the standard Western Bible of today), although they are not named and there is debate over what books are meant. Meanwhile, the Western Monophysite Syrian church, at the urging of Bishop Philoxenus in AD 508, abandoned the *Peshitta* altogether and adopted a new Syriac translation of the Catholic Bible, yet the Harcleans still insisted on including *1 and 2 Clement* in their Bible, the last surviving copy of which dates to AD 1170.¹¹⁵

Then there is the Armenian Church, significant not only in being a breed apart, but also in being the first “national church” in Christian history – the royal family, and thus at their behest the rest of the nation, converted to Christianity a few years before Constantine. The Armenian Bible is essentially the same as ours, with one addition: a third letter to the *Corinthians*, actually taken directly from the *Acts of Paul*,¹¹⁶ became canonized in the Armenian Church and remains a part of the Armenian Bible to this day. *Revelation*, however, was not accepted into the Armenian Bible until ca. AD 1200 when Archbishop Nerses arranged an Armenian Synod at Constantinople

¹¹³ Ibid., 217.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 215.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 218-22.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 176, 182, 219, 223; cf. also IX.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

to introduce the text. Still, there were unsuccessful attempts even as late as AD 1290 to include in the Armenian canon several apocryphal books: *Advice of the Mother of God to the Apostles*, the *Books of Criapos*, and the ever-popular *Epistle of Barnabas*.¹¹⁷

Then there are the African canons. The Coptic Bible (adopted by the Egyptian Church) includes the two *Epistles of Clement*, and the Ethiopic Bible includes books nowhere else found: the *Sinodos* (a collection of prayers and instructions supposedly written by Clement of Rome), the *Octateuch* (a book supposedly written by *Peter to Clement of Rome*), the *Book of the Covenant* (in two parts, the first details rules of church order, the second relates instructions from Jesus to the disciples given between the resurrection and the ascension), and the *Didascalia* (with more rules of church order, similar to the *Apostolic Constitutions*).

XIX. The Western Canons.

Bishop Hilary gained respect and authority among the Western orthodoxy for his clever and impassioned attack on Arianism at the Council of Seleucia in AD 359. Since he had an affinity for some of the books accepted in the East but rejected in the West, this had the effect of turning the tide of opinion in the Western Church.¹¹⁸ The great scholar Jerome was influenced by this, and by his Eastern education, and when he decided to replace the numerous conflicting Latin translations of the *New Testament* texts his choices would be decisive for the rest of Western Christendom, for his translation would become a monumental masterpiece in its own right, winning respect for its literary competence and unity. Once it won the endorsement of the pervasively-influential Augustine of Hippo in the early fifth century, its authority would never be questioned. This was the *Latin Vulgate Bible*, of which the Gospels were completed and delivered to the Pope in AD 384. It is debated whether Jerome himself finished the rest, or if it was completed by others, but the finished project contained all the 27 books now found in the Bible, no more and no less, and the choice was almost certainly Jerome's, since his many other works all speak of these books as authoritative, and a letter he wrote listed all these books as his ideal canon — a letter which was placed as a preface to many of his Latin Bibles.¹¹⁹

We have some insights into his thinking. On several occasions he makes statements that entail the belief that those books were to be accepted which had gained authority merely by having been long held in respect by the churches.¹²⁰ Not an objective criterion, this is a vote by fatigue, a tacit acceptance of *argumentum ad nauseum*. Yet this manner of thinking has resulted in a certain contradiction in thinking about Biblical canonicity that remains to this day: *Jude* was accepted as canonical simply because it was long held in respect. But *Jude* quotes the book of *Enoch* as an authority (vv. 14-15) — yet the *Book of Enoch* was rejected because it was not so widely respected. Curiously, *Jude* is the only book in the New Testament that actually cites any other book outside of the *Old Testament*, and such a citation by its force and uniqueness should have won *Enoch* a place in the *New Testament*. For if *Enoch* is false, so must be *Jude*, at least in part — it makes no sense to call *Jude* an authority, and yet reject his sources. Similarly, Jerome fully believed that the *Epistle of Barnabas* was authentically written by the companion of Paul,¹²¹ a fact that surely should have won it a place in the *New Testament* (*Luke* and *Acts*, even in tradition, have no better authority than

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 224.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 232-3.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 234-5.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 235.

¹²¹ Ibid., 236.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

this), yet because it was not universally popular it was not accepted into his idea of the Bible. In direct contrast, though he declared that no one really knew who wrote *Hebrews*, he still accepted it as an authority. This is a method that contradicts all objective sense. Yet thus came the Bible.

Augustine all but codified this method, declaring without qualification that one is to “prefer those that are received by all Catholic Churches to those which some of them do not receive” (*On Christian Doctrines*, 2.12). Of course, this whitewashes the fact that by “Catholic Churches” he means those whose opinion he accepts (a problem we have seen throughout the history of *New Testament* canonization), since many Eastern Churches rejected some of the very books Augustine upheld as universally received. In the same passage, Augustine allows these dissenting churches to be outweighed by the opinions of “the more numerous and weightier churches.” Thus, this is a purely circular argument: those books are to be accepted by the Church that are accepted by the Church. This is not an objective methodology by any stretch, and is entirely driven by blind tradition and the demands of authoritarian dogma.

Augustine effectively forced his opinion on the Church by commanding three synods on canonicity: the Synod of Hippo in AD 393, the Synod of Carthage in AD 397, and another in Carthage in AD 419 A.D.¹²² Each of these reiterated the same Church law: “nothing shall be read in church under the name of the divine scriptures” except the *Old Testament* and the 27 canonical books of the *New Testament*. Incidentally, these decrees also declared by fiat that *Hebrews* was written by Paul, ending all debate on the subject. That may have been convenient for the Church, but it was hardly honest. Nevertheless, *Hebrews* continued to be excluded from many Bibles in the West, while the bogus *Epistle to the Laodiceans* (see XV) continued to be found in hundreds of Bibles in various languages until relatively recent times.

Strangely, this is essentially where the story ends. It is most curious that there was never any pronouncement by any central authority such as the Pope in all of Christian history as to which books belonged in the Bible, until AD 1443, at the conclusion of the Council of Florence – yet this only carried weight in the West. This pronouncement excluded *Laodiceans* and included *Hebrews*, thus effectively ratifying the 27 books that had been the staple of orthodox opinion since the fourth century AD.¹²³ This no doubt arose because for the first time in almost a thousand years scholars were once again starting to question the authenticity of certain books in the canon, for example the authorship of *Hebrews*.

A telling case is that of Erasmus, who, after being chastised by the Church, renounced his rational doubts about this and various Biblical books, on the ground that “the opinion formulated by the Church has more value in my eyes than human reasons, whatever they may be” (*Response to the Censure of the Theology Faculty at Paris*, 9.864)¹²⁴ No freethinker he. No one can trust the opinions of such a man. Nevertheless, the canon of Florence was still not enforced by threat of excommunication until the canon was made an absolute article of faith at the Council of Trent in AD 1546. Almost all the Protestant churches followed suit within the next century with essentially identical conclusions,¹²⁵ dissenting only by excluding the Old Testament apocrypha held as canonical by the Catholics.

But it is worth adding an interesting irony: for with the Reformation the history of canonization came almost full circle. Luther wrote prefaces on the books of his Bible, and ordered the books

¹²² Ibid., 237-8.

¹²³ Ibid., 240.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 241.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 246-7.

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

consciously in descending degrees of credit,¹²⁶ and his entire scheme reveals a pervasive criterion: everything that agrees with Paul and preaches Christ is *a priori* true and to be held in highest esteem, while everything else is to be doubted. And he repeats the argument from fatigue: though he explains why certain books like *Hebrews* and *Jude* are to be doubted — namely, they contradict the teachings of Paul — he goes on to declare that he does not want to remove them from so venerable a collection.

Thus, not only dogmatic presupposition, but mere tradition wins the canon — not objective scholarship. The irony is that Luther is almost a twin of the heretic Marcion, who was, if you recall, the first man in Christian history to propose a canon. For Marcion believed that only Paul's doctrine was true — although he was in a better position to be more consistent about this by rejecting all books that contradicted Paul. And it is well known that Luther was rabidly anti-Jewish — as was Marcion. Though the two men differed on many key points, in a small sense the Reformation effectively re-launched the old Marcionite heresy, at the very end of the process of canonization that Marcion had begun.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Ibid., 242-3.

¹²⁷ I have left out of this entire account the internal problem of canonicity: which manuscript types of each book, actual or reconstructed, is canonical? This is a question that the Church never addressed, and still has not, in any official capacity whatsoever. This has resulted in an almost complete loss of history regarding which manuscript traditions are more or less authentic, or were even regarded as authentic. Particularly vexing, and seriously problematic for Bible advocates, are the undecidable questions about when, how, and why the ending of Mark became garbled with corruptions — the traditional 16:9-20 is one of two endings, both even being combined in some manuscripts, and both omitted altogether in the oldest examples; similar problems exist for Luke 12:43-4, John 7:53-8:11, and Acts 8:37, among others. Scribal errors are also a problem little dealt-with by any church authority, an issue I discuss briefly in an example elsewhere. Perhaps one of my favorite examples, with which I will close, is the famous King James line “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14), which even still gets repeated in nativity plays, “peace on earth, and good will toward men,” and is treated as an example of the ultimate moral nobility of Christianity. But not until recent times was it discovered that a scribe long ago had failed to record a single letter (a sigma, “s”) at the end of this line. The Latin Vulgate Bible, translated late in the fourth century, copied from a correct edition and thus has also preserved the original meaning, which is now correctly reconstructed in more recent Bible translations: “peace on earth toward men of goodwill,” which is not as noble — since it does not wish peace on anyone else — and it is perhaps even less noble still, since the same phrase more likely means “peace on earth toward men [who enjoy God's] goodwill,” in other words peace only for those whom God likes. All from a single mistake of one letter.

Appendix 1

On the Reliability of Eusebius.

There are three examples that we cite here of questionable methodology of Eusebius.

1. Eusebius is the first author to quote the infamous “Testimonium Flavianum” (see also Evidence), and he does so without a hint of skepticism (*Hist. eccl.*, 1.11), and there is strong reason to believe that he was the one who forged the entire passage.¹²⁸
2. Eusebius is the only author to quote certain imperial letters which he claims were attached to the Apologies of Justin Martyr, but they are obvious forgeries (*ibid.*, 4.9, 4.12-13) and there is reason to believe that the copies attached to the surviving manuscript of Justin were in fact drawn from Eusebius and possibly even written by him; Eusebius quotes a letter written by Jesus, again with total confidence in its authenticity (*ibid.*, 1.13).
3. Eusebius is also infamous for saying that it was necessary to lie for the cause of Christianity. In his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 12.31, listing the ideas that Plato supposedly plagiarized from Moses, he includes the idea: That it is necessary sometimes to use falsehood as a medicine for those who need such an approach. [As said in Plato’s *Laws* 663e by the Athenian:] ‘And even the lawmaker who is of little use, if even this is not as he considered it, and as just now the application of logic held it, if he dared lie to young men for a good reason, then can’t he lie? For falsehood is something even more useful than the above, and sometimes even more able to bring it about that everyone willingly keeps to all justice.’ [then by Clinias:] ‘Truth is beautiful, stranger, and steadfast. But to persuade people of it is not easy.’ You would find many things of this sort being used even in the Hebrew scriptures, such as concerning God being jealous or falling asleep or getting angry or being subject to some other human passions, for the benefit of those who need such an approach. To understand what Eusebius means, it is important to know how the Platonic dialogue he quotes continues (John Burnet’s 1903 translation, 663e-664b): Athenian: Be it so; yet it proved easy to persuade men of the Sidonian fairy-tale, incredible though it was, and of numberless others. Clinias: What tales? Athenian: The tale of the teeth that were sown, and how armed men sprang out of them. Here, indeed, the lawgiver has a notable example of how one can, if he tries, persuade the souls of the young of anything, so that the only question he has to consider in his inventing is what would do most good to the State, if it were believed; and then he must devise all possible means to ensure that the whole of the community constantly, so long as they live, use exactly the same language, so far as possible, about these matters, alike in their songs, their tales, and their discourses. If you, however, think otherwise, I have no objection to your arguing in the opposite sense. Clinias: Neither of us, I think, could possibly argue against your view. Plato had already had the Athenian argue that justice is the only real road to happiness, and therefore by this argument people can be persuaded to be good. But he then addresses the possibility that the truth will not suffice, or that justice is not in fact the only real road to happiness, by arguing that lying is acceptable, and even more effective in bringing about what is desired, that the people will be good, and thus the government’s teachers should employ lies for the benefit of the state. Regarding Eusebius’ use of this and other passages in book 12, Edwin Hamilton Gifford says “In Books X-XII Eusebius argues that the

¹²⁸ See Ken Olson, “Eusebius and the Testimonium Flavianum,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61:2 [April, 1999]: 305-22, who also gives other examples of clear and deliberate distortions of his sources.

Appendix 1

Greeks had borrowed from the older theology and philosophy of the Hebrews, dwelling especially on the supposed dependence of Plato upon Moses.” (Introduction, Preparation for the Gospel, 1903). So in a book where Eusebius is proving that the pagans got all their good ideas from the Jews, he lists as one of those good ideas Plato’s argument that lying, indeed telling completely false tales, for the benefit of the state is good and even necessary. Eusebius then notes quite casually how the Hebrews did this, telling lies about their God, and he even compares such lies with medicine, a healthy and even necessary thing. Someone who can accept this as a “good idea” worth both taking credit for and following is not the sort of person to be trusted.

Appendix 1

B i b l i o g r a p h y

Old Testament Canon.

- Beckwith, Roger T. *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.
- Ellis, Earle E. *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991.
- Larue, Gerald A. *Old Testament Life and Literature*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1968.
- Ohler, Annemarie. *Studying the Old Testament: From Tradition to Canon*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985.
- Soggin, Alberto J. *Introduction to the Old Testament: From its Origins to the Closing of the Alexandrian Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1999.

New Testament Canon.

- Bauer, Walter. *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. 2d ed. Edited by Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971.
- Carrier, Richard. "Review of The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark" by Dennis R. MacDonald (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). Online at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/homerandmark.htm.
- _____. "On Calvinist Scorn of Textual Criticism." Online at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/bible.html#bible.
- Ellegård, Alvar. *Jesus One Hundred Years Before Christ*. New York: Overlook Press, 1999.
- Harrison, Everett F. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
- Kee, Howard Clark. *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels*, 2d ed. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.
- MacDonald, Dennis R. *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Mason, Steven. "Josephus and Luke-Acts" in *Josephus and the New Testament*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson, 1992.
- McDowell, Josh. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1972, rev. ed. 1979.
- Metzger, Bruce Manning. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987.
- _____. *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1977.

Appendix 1

Robinson, James M. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. San Francisco: Harpersanfrancisco, 1990.

Schreckenberg, Heinz. "Flavius Josephus und die weltanschauung Schriften," *Wort in der Zeit: Neutestamentliche Studien* (1980), 179-209.

Sterling, Gregory. *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography*. Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1992.

Taylor, Larry. "The Canon of the Bible." Online at http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/larry_taylor/canon.html.

Wake, William, and Lardner, Nathaniel Lardner. *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Mokolumne Hill, Calif.: Health Research, 1970.