

# The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Daniel Glynn

*First edition 2001*

*Revised edition 2002*

© 1way2God.net, 2002

---

All Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973,1978,1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of International Bible Society.

The first Christians relied on both the preaching of the Apostles and the Jewish Scriptures as their standard. The Apostles and their disciples wrote letters to churches and to individuals in order to lead and teach them further. Initially, the oral tradition of the Apostle's words were viewed as superior, but by the mid second-century the writings had grown to be more authoritative,<sup>1</sup> and eventually the 'canonical Scriptures' (the standard and authoritative word of God) were born. At this time there existed no upper hierarchy to guide and control the collection of the texts, so to a certain extent it was left to those leading churches and those defending the faith from heresy to investigate and decide which texts were deserving of canonical status.

The letters of Paul, written over at least a fifteen-year period to churches and individuals separated by thousands of miles, were probably the first to be collected together. Paul himself urges that his epistles be shared, as he writes in his letter to the Colossians that they and the neighbouring Laodiceans should read each other's letters.<sup>2</sup> When attempting to determine the date that the Pauline collection began forming, it is most interesting to notice that the Acts of the Apostles, written by AD 90<sup>3</sup>, did not make any reference to a

---

<sup>1</sup> However understandable it was to trust the oral tradition during the lives of the Apostles and their disciples, it was optimistic to assume that an oral tradition could function in this new church over many generations, as it lacked the scholastic institution necessary to maintain such teaching – the Jews had only upheld their oral tradition through rabbinical schools where memorisation was of the highest importance (F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*, London, 1966, p.119).

<sup>2</sup> Col. 4:16. The original Epistle to the Laodiceans (to which Paul is obviously referring) appears to be totally lost. According to Tertullian, the epistle that Marcion later knew as the 'letter to the Laodiceans' was actually the Letter to the Ephesians (C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of The New Testament*, London, 1962, pp.99-201). It nevertheless appears that, assuming the original was actually lost (and is not Ephesians), a 'Letter to the Laodiceans' was later forged to take advantage of the well-known name. (D. A. Carson/D. J. Moo/L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Leicester, 1999, p.369.)

<sup>3</sup> Most scholars now date Acts between AD 80 and 90, as it showed signs of being completed a number of years after the Gospel of Luke, which is commonly held to have been written c.70 AD. Yet this view of the Gospel of Luke is unsure, and could easily have been earlier, thus allowing Acts to be placed in the 70's, which would make sense of the fact that within Acts, no event later than AD 62 is mentioned. It seems likely that Luke would have mentioned the destruction of Jerusalem, which

collection of Pauline writings, yet Clement of Rome in AD 95 did. Whilst treating them as authoritative rather than as scripture, Clement seems to have knowledge of and access to several epistles of Paul, including one epistle to the Thessalonians and those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and the Philippians. This is seen by many to be an indication of an impending collection at the end of the first century.<sup>4</sup>

Further, the reference to multiple epistles of Paul in 2 Peter<sup>5</sup> (even if 2 Peter was written in the early second century<sup>6</sup>) clearly shows that the letters were

---

according to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had prophesied (Luke 21:20); the deaths of Paul and James (AD 62) are not recorded in this account; and the favourable attitude towards the Roman legal system implies that the persecution under Nero had not yet begun. Further, Acts makes no reference to the Pauline writings, which makes later dates less likely. (Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., pp.116-7, 185-94)

<sup>4</sup> B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, Oxford, 1987, p.42-3.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Peter 3:15-16. Peter's reference to Paul's letters being distorted by 'ignorant and unstable people' (3:16) surely implies that authority had been in Paul's letters long enough for multiple 'unstable' people to decide to twist Paul's words (as they would not bother twisting the words of an unimportant document), as well as sufficient time for the author of 2 Peter to notice and comment on this. Peter's further allusion to Paul's writings being considered scripture (3:16) is another important factor which many scholars use to place the date of 2 Peter in the early second-century. (For further discussion, see next footnote.)

<sup>6</sup> Discussion on the authorship and date of 2 Peter is wide-ranging and inconclusive. The author plainly identifies himself as Peter the Apostle, and claims several parts of the Apostle's life as his own (e.g., being witness to the transfiguration [2 Pet. 1:16-18]). The difference in style between 2 Peter and 1 Peter could be adequately explained if Peter used a secretary for one or both of the letters. Further, no one other than the Apostle Peter was or has been suggested as the author of the work. It does not make sense to view the work as pseudepigraphic, as generally these are written to give authority to a heretical viewpoint by using an authoritative name (e.g., Gospel of Peter, Apocalypse of Peter), yet the teaching of 2 Peter is quite orthodox. The author seems to be arguing against gnosticism, which did not exist in its known form in Peter's day, though he may have been arguing against whatever preview of gnosticism existed. Many scholars will cite 2 Peter 3:15-16 as evidence that 2 Peter was written after the formation of a Pauline Corpus (which was most likely well-after Peter's time), yet the reference in 2 Peter only records the fact that Paul had written several letters (which are 'hard to understand'), and that heretics were twisting them to their own meanings. There is also a clear allusion to Paul's writings being considered scripture (3:16). It is possible that these circumstances could be explained if Peter did

both well known and possessing of a certain authority by the early second century, though at this point the Pastoral Epistles are neither generally accepted nor widely known.<sup>7</sup>

It is even harder to date the coming together of the four gospels. The earliest surviving manuscripts containing evidence of the four gospels together (the Chester Beatty Collection and the Sinaitic Syriac) point to c.150 AD.<sup>8</sup> There are scraps of evidence that point to each of the four circulating individually for a time before coming together as a collection.<sup>9</sup> Papius (c.130 AD), in his limited surviving works clearly shows knowledge and use of the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark,<sup>10</sup> and somewhat less clearly, John.<sup>11</sup> Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second-century refers to 'the memoirs of Peter'<sup>12</sup>

---

write the text, though it seems easier to believe that 2 Peter was written in the early second century (which many scholars agree with). There are still more factors to be taken into consideration, but the discussion remains inconclusive. (Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., pp.433-9)

<sup>7</sup> Bruce, op. cit., p.131-2.

<sup>8</sup> Moule, op. cit., p.197; Bruce, op. cit., p.128.

<sup>9</sup> Within the Pauline Epistles, most of the gospel references are from Luke, which implies that it was primarily the gospel of Luke that circulated among the Pauline churches. From this it is suggested that each of the other gospels also circulated within a certain locality (Moule, op. cit., p.195).

<sup>10</sup> Evidence that the Gospel of Matthew is older than the Gospel of Mark comes from Eusebius' record of Papius' defence of Mark's non-chronologically ordered recording of events. According to Eusebius, Papius wrote: "**Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things done or said by Christ...**" (Eusebius, "*Ecclesiastical History*" in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Series 2, Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, iii, 39) **After a short continued defense from Papius, Eusebius concludes this section concerning Mark with: "These things are related by Papias concerning Mark. But concerning Matthew he writes as follows..."** (Eusebius, op. cit., iii, 39) **Papius' defense of Mark implies the existence of an older, or at least more accepted gospel, which was written in (roughly) chronological order. This seems to have been Matthew. (Bruce, op. cit., p.124-5)**

<sup>11</sup> There is no direct evidence, but Bruce believes that Eusebius' statement that Papius used 'testimonies' from John's first epistle, 'suggests that he must have known his gospel too' (Bruce, op. cit., p.126).

<sup>12</sup> Justin Martyr, "Dialogue of Justin" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, 106.

(probably the Gospel according to Mark<sup>13</sup>), in his *Dialogue*, and in his first *Apology*, refers to the ‘memoirs of the apostles... which are called Gospels’<sup>14</sup>. By the time of Justin’s disciple Tatian, there is no doubt that all four gospels were accepted: after Justin’s Martyrdom in AD 165., Tatian produced the *Diatessaron*, which was a harmonisation of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).<sup>15</sup> To even begin on such a work, Tatian must have been sure of the authority within each of these four, and to achieve such authority, they must have each been generally accepted for some time (at least within the church at Rome and in northern Mesopotamia – these being home to Tatian).<sup>16</sup> Now, it appears somewhat unnatural to go from four individual gospels to one gospel made up of the four, so it seems more likely that there would be an intermediary step, where the four circulated together, equal in authority. If this were the case, it would point towards a date for general acceptance of the individual four early in the second-century.

The only remaining information regarding the collection of the four is that the Gospel of John took longer to receive wide acceptance than the other gospels. This is the case, as the Gnostics viewed it as supporting their beliefs,<sup>17</sup> which scared off most orthodox readers (even though John’s gospel holds the most effective anti-gnostic ammunition of any New Testament book).

So it is generally clear that by the middle of the second-century at least ten of Paul’s writings were in wide circulation, as were the four gospels. The first

---

<sup>13</sup> “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter...” (Papius, quoted in **Eusebius, op. cit.**, iii, 39).

<sup>14</sup> Martyr, “The First Apology of Justin” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, 66. Justin also states that in Church of a Sunday, “...the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits...” (ibid., 67).

<sup>15</sup> *Diatessaron* is a musical term that means ‘harmony of four’. The Gospel according to John was used to provide the majority of the chronology of the *Diatessaron*, with the work beginning with John 1:1-5, followed by Luke’s account of the arrival of John the Baptist (rather than John’s simple statement, “there was a man sent from God whose name was John” [John 1:6]). (Bruce, op. cit., p.127; Metzger, op. cit., pp.114-5)

<sup>16</sup> Bruce, op. cit., p.128.

<sup>17</sup> The earliest known quotation from John comes from the Gnostic writer Basilides (c.130 AD), who quotes John 1:9 and John 2:4. Similarly, the first known commentary written on John was by the Gnostic Heracleon in c.180 AD (Origen quoted this commentary substantially in his later commentary on the Gospel according to John) (ibid., p.128).

extant solid evidence, of both a Pauline Corpus and a fourfold gospel, comes from a wealthy shipowner named Marcion.<sup>18</sup>

Marcion came to Rome in c.140 AD, and studied under a Gnostic teacher named Cerdo, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was not the God proclaimed by the Apostles or in the Apostle’s writings. Within a short time, Marcion developed this teaching to the point where he was able to proclaim that ‘since the God of the Old Testament cared only for the Jews, while the God of the New Testament cared for all people, any new writings that contained references to the Jews as God’s people could not be New Testament Scripture’. Hence, Marcion developed his own list of ‘scriptural books’, which explicitly did not contain any works of the Old Testament, nor Matthew or Mark’s gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, nor the letter to the Hebrews, all due to their Jewish content. In short, Marcion was left with the majority of the Gospel according to Luke and ten letters of Paul<sup>19</sup>. Soon after Marcion’s official excommunication from the Church in Rome in AD 144, Marcionite churches modelled on the Orthodox Church (from now on, ‘Church’), influenced by Gnostic ideas and proclaiming to be Christian, began to be established throughout the Roman Empire.

The question asked by many scholars is whether or not Marcion’s was in fact the first Christian canon. It is simply not clear whether Marcion took an existing Pauline Corpus and arranged it to his liking then added it to his own canon, or whether the Corpus was hurriedly formed after Marcion’s list. Similarly, it is impossible to know whether Marcion chose from an existing fourfold gospel the one of his choice, or whether the four were put together after Marcion’s list, perhaps in response to it. It is clear however, that by the time immediately following Marcion, the existence and substantial authority of the Corpus and the fourfold gospel is undisputed.

Many scholars think that Paul’s letters may not have been as cherished as they are today, and were somewhat neglected until one or more individuals collected them together.<sup>20</sup> Marcion, however, is not the only possibility.

---

<sup>18</sup> Moule, op. cit., p.200.

<sup>19</sup> Being unable to accept the Jewish references (which he considered to be interpolations of the Judaisers), Marcion excluded the first four chapters of Luke (John the Baptist’s birth and the nativity), and some other, much smaller sections, and only accepted the ten non-pastoral epistles of Paul. (H. von Campenhausen, (trans. J.A. Baker), *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, Philadelphia, 1984, pp.153-60)

<sup>20</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.234.

Edgar J. Goodspeed (supported later by John Knox and C. L. Mitton)<sup>21</sup> suggests that following publication of the Acts of the Apostles, Onesimus (a convert of Paul and later bishop of Ephesus<sup>22</sup>), was inspired to collect Paul's writings, and as an introduction to the Corpus, wrote the Letter to the Ephesians himself.<sup>23</sup>

C.F.D. Moule suggests Luke as the collator, editor and augmentor of the Corpus, arguing that it is 'entirely in keeping with his historian's temperament to collect them'<sup>24</sup>. Obviously, since Acts does not mention the existence of a Pauline Corpus, it was suggested by Moule that Luke, after both the writing of Acts and the death of Paul, visited the churches in his writings, and collected copies of letters from Paul at that stage.<sup>25</sup>

A great deal remains unknown as to the actual formation of the *Pauline Corpus*, and it must be pointed out that any attempt to name an individual or specify a process responsible is purely speculative. It remains that a very strong possibility, and also the simplest, is that of a gradual collection. It is clear that Paul's letters were circulating individually among churches as per his request (Col. 4:16), but the actual extent of this is unsure. The churches in Galatia were evidently only sent one copy of his epistle to them, which they passed among themselves, sometimes copying it first.<sup>26</sup> It would also be

---

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p.234.

<sup>22</sup> Onesimus, was the bishop of Ephesus according to Ignatius' letter to Ephesus (Ignatius, "Epistle to the Ephesians" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, 1).

<sup>23</sup> G. Zuntz has refuted the view that the collector of the Corpus was also the author of Ephesians: 'Whoever wrote Ephesians, it was not the editor of the Corpus...[as] faithfulness, completeness and non-interference with the available material [are characteristics of] the traditions of editorship in antiquity generally.' (G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: a Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum*, 1953, quoted by Moule, *op. cit.*, p.205) In addition to Zuntz' view, Carson, Moo and Morris argue that Paul was in fact the author of Ephesians, Acts was probably published much earlier than AD 90 (see footnote 3), and references from 2 Peter 3:16 to a variety of Pauline letters (with the disagreements over the date of publication of 2 Peter [see footnote 6] taken into account) seem also to contradict Goodspeed's conjecture (Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, p.234-5).

<sup>24</sup> Moule, *op. cit.*, p.204.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p.204. Moule further argues, based on the vocabulary, contents and outlook of Luke-Acts and the Pastoral Epistles, that Luke may have authored the Pastoral Epistles, though there is no evidence to suggest that they existed previous to Marcion.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce, *op. cit.*, p.131.

expected that local collections would appear, for example among the neighbouring Macedonian churches of Thessalonica and Philippi, or among the churches in the Lycus valley (the Ephesians and Colossians).<sup>27</sup> From here, it is not too hard to imagine a gradual process of churches gaining copies of Epistles sent to other churches further and further away, in a quest for spiritual knowledge and guidance, and in this way, eventually a core of Pauline writing is collected and at some point named the *Pauline Corpus*.

At any rate, following Marcion, the Corpus probably still did not contain the Pastoral Epistles. John Knox puts forward the idea that the considerable presence of Paul (especially the eventual inclusion of the Pastoral Epistles) in the coming New Testament can also be ascribed to the influence of Marcion.<sup>28</sup>

Knox's view is that Marcion's acceptance of Paul forced the Church to either also fully accept Paul and all his writings, or totally reject both him and them. Obviously we know that the Church accepted Paul's writings, but Knox continues that this acceptance is essentially 'Church strategy'. He argues that the Church, being unable to denounce Paul's writings as heretical in themselves, attempts to 'break the force of these authorities by absorbing them into their own canon', thus allowing the Church to proclaim that Marcion had some scripture, but that this could be easily misinterpreted unless viewed alongside other scripture, which only the Church had canonised.<sup>29</sup>

Knox eventually includes the Catholic Epistles<sup>30</sup> in his theory, restating that Paul's writings and the Catholic Epistles were each included in the orthodox New Testament to balance the influence of Marcion and St. Paul.<sup>31</sup> More specifically, it is suggested that the Pastoral Epistles were added to the accepted writings of Paul to broaden the amount and type of scripture<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, pp.131-2.

<sup>28</sup> J. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon*, Chicago, 1980, pp.36-8.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, pp.37-8.

<sup>30</sup> The 'Catholic Epistles' (James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, and Jude) are so named, as in contrast to Paul's letters (addressed to specific churches/people), the 'Catholic Epistles' have application to the universal ('catholic') church. Origen designates 1 John as a Catholic Epistle and his disciple Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria speaks of 1 John as John's "catholic" epistle (probably in contrast to 2 & 3 John). (Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, p.456.)

<sup>31</sup> Knox, *op. cit.*, p.159.

<sup>32</sup> Knox is advocating the idea that in response to Marcion, the Church immediately recognised several writings as scripture, rather than just authoritative (*ibid.*, p.158ff).

(especially Pauline) that the church possessed in contrast to Marcion's list.<sup>33</sup> This however, is widely viewed not just as a remote possibility, but as an ignorance of the authority already existing in the Pauline writings and the gospels, as Metzger exclaims, "Such estimations of the degree of influence exerted by Marcion's canon fail to distinguish the fundamental idea of canonicity from the actual drawing up of a list of canonical books. The canon of the four gospels was already in the process of development, and the authority of the apostolic writings was beginning to be placed alongside the gospel writings".<sup>34</sup> Further, it seems that Paul's considerable presence within the New Testament (and indeed the make-up of the New Testament as a whole) is simply the result of the desire for apostolic writing within the Church: it appears that every text ascribed (without doubt) to an apostle was eventually canonised; Paul simply wrote more.

It seems clear that whatever influence Marcion had on the contents of the canon, it is more important that his claims highlighted the need for the Church to produce a more comprehensive and less idiosyncratic list.<sup>35</sup> That said, at the same time (mid-second century), the Gnostics and Montanists were a similar influence on the development of the canon.

Gnosticism was one of the chief opponents of orthodox Christianity at the time, and was in general a religion and philosophy that taught that elect souls (being temporarily imprisoned in physical bodies) could obtain salvation through a special *gnosis* ('knowledge') of their origin and destiny. In response to the Gnostic production of rival gospels, Acts and apocalypses, the Church was compelled to determine, and more importantly proclaim, which writings were authentic and could be trusted as divinely inspired ('scripture'). In this circumstance, the Church had to be careful to accept only those texts which were truly apostolic (those written by apostles or significant others close to the apostles) and further insisted that a prerequisite for any scripture was that the text did not contradict apostolic teaching. This came to be known as the

---

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p.160.

<sup>34</sup> Metzger, *op. cit.*, p.99. Further, it seems to me that the Pastorals were widely quoted as authoritative by Church Fathers either before or within too short a time frame for Marcion to have influenced their authority much in any way. 1 Timothy was quoted by Polycarp and Athenagoras; 2 Timothy by Polycarp, Irenaeus, within the letters of Ignatius, and possibly by Clement of Rome; Titus was quoted by Tertullian, Irenaeus and also possibly Clement of Rome. (Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, pp.374, 379 & 382)

<sup>35</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, p.492.

'rule of faith'. Further, the outright rejection of the Jewish Scriptures by many Gnostics compelled the Church to seek a just view of the relation between what would become the Old Testament and the New, and in so doing, the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, the Gnostics' influence in the development of the canon was chiefly that of forcing the issue upon the Church. It seems evident from previous discussion regarding the Pauline Corpus and the fourfold gospels that a Christian collection of Scripture would inevitably form. The influence of Marcion and the Gnostics simply made it seem expedient and provided new reasons for the creation of a canon. But whereas Marcion and the Gnostics influenced the Church to produce a canon, the Montanist sect during the latter half of the second century, influenced the Church to close it.

The Montanist sect first appeared in c.170 AD.,<sup>37</sup> and was most recognised for its emphasis on apocalyptic material. The 'prophetic' utterances of the founders were written down and treated as scripture. As a result of the use of this prophetic material by the Montanists, a distrust of all apocalyptic material was founded among members of the Church. Some even rejected the Book of Hebrews due to the Montanist use of it. The Church responded by rejecting the Montanist Apocalypses, and by so doing, took the first step towards a closed canon.<sup>38</sup>

Following the influences of the heretics, the Church from the mid second-century was on the path to produce a list of New Testament documents that are uniquely the word of God (a canon of Scripture). However, there appears to be several major influences other than the heretics on the 'idea' of the New Testament. The first such influence was the Jewish canonisation of their Scriptures in AD 90. at the so-called Council of Jamnia (or Jabne). This

---

<sup>36</sup> Metzger, *op. cit.*, pp.76-7.

<sup>37</sup> Epiphanius records the first appearance of Montanism in the year AD 156, while Eusebius states the year to be AD 170. The general trend seems to be towards accepting Eusebius' view. The founder, Montanus, and two co-founders Prisca and Maximilla proclaimed that the Heavenly Jerusalem would soon descend to earth and remain at the Phrygian town of Pepuza. So the three settled at Pepuza and began to utter prophetic oracles, which were written down and soon treated as scripture by members of the Montanist sect. Within a few decades, Montanism was declared to be heretical, on the basis that its prophecy was from demons. (Although known to be some twenty miles north-east of Hierapolis, travellers in Asia Minor have sought Pepuza for around one hundred years.) (Metzger, *op. cit.*, pp.99-106.)

<sup>38</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, p.492; Metzger, *op. cit.*, p.106.

obvious example of canonising scripture could only have been a decisive influence on the Church.<sup>39</sup>

The use of the ‘codex’ or ‘leaf-book’ by the beginning of the second century would also have been an influence. Previously, all texts were written on scrolls, which had the disadvantage of being limited to a certain size.<sup>40</sup> The scroll also did not promote the grouping of texts, since the only way to do so would be to store and transport the group in the same container. The codex, however, not only eased the grouping of texts, but also promoted a certain fixed sequence within this grouping. The adoption of the codex to general use at the time of the beginnings of the formation of the canon, presumably provided incentive to use it as the media for a New Testament canon.<sup>41</sup>

There were other types of canons being formed at the same time as the New Testament that could easily have had some guiding influence. The first to be mentioned is that of the beginnings of a legal precedent system, assembled by the Roman Jurist, Ulpian, based on the legal decisions made by previous Roman Emperors. The second is an Alexandrian custom of writing standard lists of authors whose works in any given literary genre were considered to be standard.<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned previously, the Church had made several big steps in the formation of the canon between AD 150 and 170. At this time of transition from collection of writings to deliberate canonical standardisation, Irenaeus of Lyons was the first to move from the majority use of the Old Testament to the inclusion of a wide-ranging set of New Testament documents as scripture, in an effort to both defend the Church’s existing tradition and attack the heresies of the Gnostics. In his *Against Heresies*, a work against the heresy specifically of the Gnostics, but often with consideration given to Marcionism, Irenaeus first shows the unity of the Old and New Testaments, then uses the New Testament documents as scripture in his arguments against the heresy. In contrast to the previous Apologists (such as Justin and Athenagoras), Irenaeus

---

<sup>39</sup> Metzger, op. cit., pp.109-10.

<sup>40</sup> 11 metres (35ft.) was considered to be the general maximum length of a parchment scroll. A scroll any longer than this would be both too large and heavy to effectively manoeuvre as needed. As an indication of the length of texts, the Gospel according to Luke would have required approximately 10.6 metres of scroll, as would the Acts of the Apostles. (ibid., p.109)

<sup>41</sup> ibid., p.109.

<sup>42</sup> ibid., pp.110-1.

quotes from the New Testament documents more often than the Old.<sup>43</sup> A list of those New Testament texts quoted by Irenaeus includes the Four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, twelve from Paul (not including Philemon<sup>44</sup>), the Epistle of James, the first from Peter, the first and second from John, the Apocalypse of John and the Shepherd of Hermas.

Within his work, we find that Irenaeus explicitly states his belief that the Gospels must be four in number<sup>45</sup> (and thus closed to new gospels), that the Pauline Epistles together with the Gospel According to Luke are Scripture, and also that the Acts of the Apostles is to be regarded as Scripture.<sup>46</sup> In the preface to the third volume of his great Apologetic, Irenaeus states his basic principle regarding the authority of the Apostles:

The Lord gave the apostles the power of the Gospel, and it is through them that we know the truth of the Son of God. No others were entrusted with this Gospel and so it is through them that we receive this knowledge, at first through their preaching, and then through their scriptures, on which we are to found and base our faith. They did not preach until they had been ‘invested with power from on high’ at the coming of

---

<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus quotes 1,075 passages from the New Testament: 626 from the Gospels, 54 from Acts, 280 from the Pauline epistles, 15 from the Catholic Epistles, and 29 from the Revelation of John (Metzger, op. cit., p.154); whilst only quoting 629 from the Old Testament (Campenhausen, op. cit., p.185).

<sup>44</sup> Metzger feels however, that Irenaeus may have viewed Paul’s letter to Philemon as scriptural, but simply failed to quote from it as it is too short to hold a helpful quote (Metzger, op. cit., p.155).

<sup>45</sup> Irenaeus’ reasons for a fourfold gospel may be viewed as somewhat imaginative today, but nevertheless expresses his opinion that the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John alone were true Gospels: “It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.” (Irenaeus, “Against Heresies” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, III, xi, 8)

<sup>46</sup> ibid., III, xii, 9.

the Holy Spirit, who gave them all perfect knowledge of the Gospel. And thus they all possess authority from God.<sup>47</sup>

And so, in Irenaeus' view, the accepted scriptures should all be of apostolic origin, as the apostles uniquely had divine authority to preach the gospel, which had been made clear to them by the (more common) oncoming of the Spirit of God.

The best-known list of accepted books from this time is the Muratorian Fragment. Believed to have been written approximately AD 170<sup>48</sup> in the western Church, it was discovered (in partial form<sup>49</sup>) by Ludovico Antonio Muratori in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>50</sup>, and was written as an introduction to the texts that were considered to be Scripture. The significance of the fragment with regard to the formation of the New Testament canon is found in its list of what was considered in the latter second-century to be the 'scriptural books'. From

---

<sup>47</sup> My paraphrase of Irenaeus, "Against Heresies", op. cit., III pref. & III, i, 1.

<sup>48</sup> F. F. Bruce briefly records the views of A. C. Sundburg, Jnr., who put forward the possibility of fourth-century authorship, based on his view of the similarities with fourth-century lists of eastern origin. However, within the text itself is written that the Shepherd of Hermas was written, "very recently, in our times, in the city of Rome." (Metzger's trans., "The Muratorian Canon" in *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, Oxford, 1987, A.IV, I, line 74) It is still generally viewed that late second-century authorship is most likely (Bruce, op. cit., p.158; Metzger, op. cit., p.194)

<sup>49</sup> The Fragment actually begins mid-sentence, after assumedly dealing with the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark: "at which, nevertheless he was present, so he placed them in his narrative. The third book of the gospel is that according to Luke..." (Metzger's trans., op. cit., lines 1-2) Similarly, the end of the Fragment is missing, although not quite as obviously as the beginning, and certainly after the list of accepted writings was completed. The author had clearly moved on to stating those texts that were viewed as heretical.

<sup>50</sup> Muratori found the fragment in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, and originally published it as an example of the poor standard in which scribes of the Middle Ages copied manuscripts. This particular work was copied by 'barely literate scribes' in the monastery in Bobbio, in Lombardy, in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries (Bruce, op. cit., p.158). Metzger explains further (regarding a text recorded alongside the Fragment): "The lack of care by the scribes can be measured by the presence of thirty blunders in the thirty lines that have been written twice. Several are omissions or additions that destroy the sense, and a few changes appear to be intentional alterations. Besides those that pertain to substance there are many instances of misspelling." (Metzger, op. cit., p.192)

a reading of the Fragment, a feeling of established group agreement (rather than individual perspective) clearly arises from phrases alluding to mutual acceptance or rejection, while the wider view of the Church itself is implied with multiple references to the listed books being accepted or declined by 'the Catholic church'<sup>51</sup>.

We can safely assume that the gospels according to Matthew and Mark were mentioned within a lost section of the work,<sup>52</sup> and so we find great acceptance not just of the four, but also of the diversity of the four. Part of the statements concerning the gospels read: "...though various elements may be taught in the individual books of the Gospels, nevertheless this makes no difference to the faith of believers, since by the one sovereign Spirit all things have been declared in all [the Gospels]..."<sup>53</sup> And so we surmise that the Muratorian canon contained the four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's thirteen, the three Epistles of John, the Epistle of Jude, and the Apocalypse of John, as well as the Wisdom of Solomon, the Apocalypse of Peter and The Shepherd of Hermas. Of the list, the Shepherd was to be read only in private, due to its recent (and therefore, non-apostolic and non-prophetic)<sup>54</sup> authorship, and only the Apocalypse of Peter was doubted: "we receive only the Apocalypses of John and Peter, though some of us are not willing that the latter be read in church"<sup>55</sup>. This frank statement of doubt by the author concerning one book, gives greater authority to the assumption that the others were widely accepted.<sup>56</sup>

Following the Muratorian Fragment and towards the end of the second-century, Theophilus of Antioch (the sixth bishop of the area according to Eusebius<sup>57</sup>) wrote several works in defence of the Christian faith. Those surviving are the three written to his friend Autolycus setting out the Christian

---

<sup>51</sup> References alluding to group agreement can be found on lines 71, 72 & 80; references to the perceived view of the Church can be found on lines 62-3, 66 & 68.

<sup>52</sup> We can assume the inclusion of the gospel of Matthew and Mark for two principle reasons. Firstly, the four gospels were widely circulating together for decades previous to the Fragment's authorship, secondly (more specifically) the first complete sentence reads: "The third book of the gospel is that according to Luke", implying previous (though lost) mention of two other gospels.

<sup>53</sup> Metzger's trans., op. cit., lines 16-20.

<sup>54</sup> The Fragment refers to Hermas being 'counted neither among the Prophets, as their number is complete, nor the Apostles as it is after their time' (ibid., lines 79-80).

<sup>55</sup> ibid., line 72; There is no reason given to explain the doubting of this text.

<sup>56</sup> Metzger, op. cit., pp.191-201.

<sup>57</sup> Eusebius, op. cit., iv, 20.

idea of God, and the superiority of the doctrine of creation. Throughout his works, he quotes from Matthew, Luke and John, and once refers to John as a ‘Spirit-bearing man’. He also alludes to references from the Acts of the Apostles, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and the three Pastorals.<sup>58</sup> In addition to these, Eusebius mentions that in another writing entitled *Against the Heresy of Hermogenes*, Theophilus uses ‘testimonies from the Apocalypse of John’.<sup>59</sup> However, throughout these works the Jewish scriptures appear to be treated with higher regard than the newer documents, as they are referred to a great deal more often, and are introduced as scripture regularly, whereas the only such reference for the newer documents is one introduction of the form: “the divine word teaches us...”, before quoting a combination of Titus, 1 Timothy and Romans.<sup>60</sup> We learn from Theophilus himself that he was brought to Christianity through the reading of the Jewish scriptures, and holds them in the highest regard.<sup>61</sup> It seems that it would then be somewhat natural for him to hold a higher regard for the Jewish Scriptures than those around him, and thus a lower (though not *low*) regard for the newer documents.

Whether or not Theophilus and his Church viewed the arising Testament as scripture, it remains that a core list consisting of the gospels, the Acts and the Pauline epistles, were attributed authority, along possibly with the Revelation of John. Study of Clement of Alexandria (post AD 190)<sup>62</sup> and Tertullian (c.195 AD)<sup>63</sup> leaves testimony to similar views on the authoritative texts previous to the beginning of the third-century.

In summary, a listing of the generally accepted books at the end of the second century includes the fourfold canon, the Acts, the complete Pauline Corpus

---

<sup>58</sup> Metzger, op. cit., pp.117-8.

<sup>59</sup> Eusebius, op. cit., iv, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Theophilus, “To Autolycus” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, iii, 14; quoting mixtures of Tit. 3:1, 1 Tim. 2:2, Rom. 13:7-8.

<sup>61</sup> Theophilus, op. cit., i, 14; cf. ii, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Clement of Alexandria had a somewhat ‘open’ canon (he quoted copious numbers of texts, from many different types of sources), but at core, had the four gospels, the 14 letters of Paul (including Hebrews), Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John and the Apocalypse of John as authoritative (Metzger, op. cit., p.134-5).

<sup>63</sup> Tertullian (c.195AD) cites the eventual canonical books except for 2 Peter, James and 2 & 3 John. He viewed those books (which he quoted) as equal in authority to the divinely inspired Old Testament, and he believed that text that didn’t conform to the ‘rule of faith’ could not be scripture (Metzger, op. cit., p.160).

(13 books), the Revelation of John and usually 1 Peter, 1 John and Jude. We also see, from the lists studied thus far, that the generally accepted (though not officially agreed) practice for determining canonicity rested primarily on the authority of the writer of the text. In general, the Apostles (and to a slightly lesser degree the Apostle’s disciples) were considered to be ‘those in authority’, largely as the Apostles were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life. This criterion for canonicity was evidenced by the Muratorian Fragment’s declination of the Shepherd of Hermas based on its non-apostolic authorship. The canonisation of such texts as the Gospels of Mark and Luke show authority of writer by association with an apostle: neither Mark nor Luke were eyewitnesses, but they were both close to an apostle (Peter and Paul, respectively). However, due to doubt over the identity of authors of several texts (and as a rule to combat the heretical texts of the time), the ‘rule of faith’ (as mentioned earlier) was introduced and used by many Church Fathers,<sup>64</sup> which stipulated that any writing that contradicted an apostolic teaching (most notably that of salvation by grace) could not be scripture.<sup>65</sup>

Those texts generally accepted thus far, had been so as any debate over authorship had been settled, or at least partially put to rest. Compared with the eventual canonical twenty-seven, those remaining to be generally accepted were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. Interestingly, by the early fourth century, almost exactly the same state of affairs is found in Eusebius’ writings concerning his time.

Eusebius (c.260-c.340 AD), the highly appreciated church historian recorded the views current at the time (c.325), apparently using the opinions of witnesses from other churches,<sup>66</sup> and then sorting texts as to whether they were accepted, disputed or heretical. Into the first category – those that were universally accepted – he placed the ‘holy quaternion of the Gospels’, followed by the Acts of the Apostles, the epistles of Paul (including the Epistle to the Hebrews), the first epistle of John, the first of Peter, and then possibly the Apocalypse of John. Eusebius was unclear regarding the Apocalypse, as he unmistakably placed it in the accepted books, but qualified this by saying that some disagree, and he later placed it with the heretical

---

<sup>64</sup> For example: Dionysius of Corinth, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Novatian (Metzger, op. cit., p.252).

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, pp.251-2.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, p.203.

books.<sup>67</sup> In this sense it is interesting that he did not simply place it with the disputed books, and discuss it later. Metzger suggests that the historian within Eusebius forced him to acknowledge the universal acceptance of the book, but the churchman within was unhappy with the Montanist and other heretical use of it, and so was happy to report it later as heretical.<sup>68</sup> A wider view is that the doubt recorded is the product of repeated attempts by some in the Church to weaken the position of heretical movements who used the Apocalypse, by questioning its canonical status or authorship.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, according to Eusebius, the disputed texts were the Epistles of James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. Within the third category (the heretical), Eusebius included the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, the so-called Teachings of the Apostles, the Gospel according to the Hebrews, and the Apocalypse of John (as discussed previously). These he later divided into either ‘spurious’, or ‘heretical forgeries’, the latter of which included the Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Matthias, and the Acts of Andrew, John, and that of the other Apostles; and concluded that these (heretical forgeries) should ‘be cast aside as absurd and impious’.<sup>70</sup>

As mentioned previously, the ‘accepted’ according to Eusebius, matches with those of general acceptance at the conclusion of the second century, except for Jude which had moved to the ‘disputed’ and Hebrews which had moved to the ‘accepted’. Jude appears to have lost popularity during the third and early fourth centuries due to doubts over its use of Apocryphal texts, which some in the church considered to be a characteristic not consistent within canonical writings. In time however, these doubts receded and Jude regained its place among the ‘accepted’.<sup>71</sup>

The Eastern Church never doubted that Hebrews was authoritative; however they could not identify its author and as such, could not classify it as

---

<sup>67</sup> Eusebius, *op. cit.*, iii, 25.

<sup>68</sup> Metzger, *op. cit.*, p.205.

<sup>69</sup> The inflicted doubt concerning the Revelation of John appears to continue with Cyril of Jerusalem (c.350 AD) who accepted all the texts that would eventuate as canonical except for the Revelation of John. Obviously the need for John’s Apocalypse within the canon eventually outweighed the perceived need to weaken the heretical movements in this way, as it remained largely unquestioned after the mid-fourth century. (Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, pp.480-1)

<sup>70</sup> Eusebius, *op. cit.*, iii, 25.

<sup>71</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, p.461.

‘apostolic’.<sup>72</sup> For the same reason, within the Western Church, Hebrews was widely known and quoted, but it was always disputed, and it was not until the influence of Augustine and Jerome that it was really accepted.<sup>73</sup>

In AD 367, Athanasius of Alexandria wrote his 39<sup>th</sup> Festal letter,<sup>74</sup> which, after an introduction akin to that of Luke, proceeds to list his decision on the books of the Old Testament<sup>75</sup> and those of the New. These, according to Athanasius

---

<sup>72</sup> Hebrews was always associated with Paul, but not always ascribed to him. The major problems with Pauline authorship of Hebrews are found in the high-quality Greek used (more ‘polished than that of Paul’) and the lack of characteristic Pauline introduction. Clement of Alexandria and Origen in particular defend Paul’s authorship of Hebrews. Doubtless noticing the similarities between the quality of Greek in Hebrews and in Luke-Acts, Clement suggests that Paul wrote to the Hebrews in Hebrew, and our Greek translation is by the hand of Luke. He further suggests that the lack of a Pauline introduction can be explained by the possibility that Paul did not want to antagonise the Hebrews (who had formed a strong bias against him), so he wrote anonymously. Origen ascribes the writing of the letter to one of Paul’s disciples, who took notes of what the apostle said, then composed the letter. Some suggest Luke as that disciple, others Clement of Rome, but Origen did not speculate (Origen quoted in Eusebius, *op. cit.*, vi, 25). Tertullian suggested Barnabas, and it appears from his writing that this is not an unpopular view at his time. The Western Church did not receive Hebrews as Pauline until the joint influence of Jerome and Augustine, who argued that it didn’t matter who the author really was, as the work is ‘honoured daily by being read in the churches’. Today we are no closer to determining the author of the letter to the Hebrews. (Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, pp.394-7)

<sup>73</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, pp.395, 404.

<sup>74</sup> It was tradition for the bishop of Alexandria to write each year, a ‘Festal letter’ to the Egyptian churches and monasteries under his authority, within which he informed them of the date of the coming Easter. It seems also that the Western and Syrian Churches used the letter to fix the date of Easter and other religious events. The Festal letter was also usually used for pastoral purposes, and so it is that within Athanasius’ 39<sup>th</sup> such letter that he recorded his views on the contents of the New Testament. (Metzger, *op. cit.*, p.211)

<sup>75</sup> Athanasius’ Old Testament contained twenty-two books, which he records as being those accepted scriptures of the Hebrews: “The first is Genesis, then Exodus, next Leviticus, after that Numbers, and then Deuteronomy. Following these there is Joshua, the son of Nun, then Judges, then Ruth. And again, after these four books of Kings, the first and second being reckoned as one book, and so likewise the third and fourth as one book. And again, the first and second of the Chronicles are reckoned as one book. Again Ezra, the first and second are similarly one book. After these there is

are the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the 7 ‘Catholic Epistles’ (James, two of Peter, three of John, and Jude), also fourteen of Paul (including Hebrews), and the Revelation of John.<sup>76</sup> Following this listing, Athanasius claims:

These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these. For concerning these the Lord put to shame the Sadducees, and said, ‘Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures.’ And He reproved the Jews, saying, ‘Search the Scriptures, for these are they that testify of Me.’<sup>77</sup>

Athanasius’ is the earliest extant listing of the 27 books that would become canonical. Athanasius was an important and respected Church Father, but his decision was not final, and seems to be only his opinion of the canonical books.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, this is evidence that each of Eusebius’ ‘disputed’ books in c.325 had overcome problems associated with their authorship, to become somewhat accepted less than fifty years later.

It seems that initially, the Epistle of James was somewhat neglected, due to its lack of theological ammunition (its content is practical and Jewish). It experienced further problems due to the uncertain identity of its author: there were several well known James’ closely associated with the early Church, including two of the Twelve, and Jesus’ brother James.<sup>79</sup> Origen (in the early

---

the book of Psalms, then the Proverbs, next Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Job follows, then the Prophets, the twelve being reckoned as one book. Then Isaiah, one book, then Jeremiah with Baruch, Lamentations, and the epistle, one book; afterwards, Ezekiel and Daniel, each one book. Thus far constitutes the Old Testament.” (Athanasius, “39<sup>th</sup> Festal Letter” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Series 2, Volume IV*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, 4.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Metzger, *op. cit.*, p.212.

<sup>79</sup> The introduction of the letter itself claims to have been written by “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1, NIV). It has been suggested that the simplicity of the introduction implies a well-known James, as a newcomer would probably identify himself more fully. The well-known James’ of the early Church were: James the Apostle, son of Zebedee and brother of John; James, another Apostle,

third century) was the first to cite James as Scripture, and although Eusebius classed James as ‘disputed’, he also claims it as canonical.<sup>80</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that the second epistle of Peter is the most disputed book that eventuated as canonical. Origen records 2 Peter as being disputed;<sup>81</sup> the text is not mentioned much in the Alexandrian Church, nor in the Churches of Asia Minor, and not at all in the Latin Churches of Africa. Uncertainty as to whether the Apostle Peter wrote 2 Peter (as the text claims)<sup>83</sup> appears to have made the church ‘hesitate’, though after Athanasius, it seems to have been generally accepted.<sup>84</sup>

Origen writing in AD 231 records that John left a gospel, an apocalypse, an epistle (of ‘very few lines’), and perhaps two more epistles, ‘but not all consider them genuine, and together they do not contain [a] hundred lines’.<sup>85</sup> Eusebius in the fourth century also recorded them as ‘disputed’ yet generally recognised. Both were generally well-known and commonly received within the Church at Alexandria throughout its history, yet not so within any of the other major churches.<sup>86</sup> Again, the problem was the chance of non-Johannine authorship. This possibility is generally traced to the introduction of 2 and 3 John, which identifies the author simply as ‘the elder’.<sup>87</sup> Problems of

---

the son of Alphaeus; James the father of Judas; and James the brother of Jesus. It seems that the latter is the most obvious, although doubt is thrown on this by the lack of any reference within the text to a special relationship (i.e., brother) between the author and Jesus. Many scholars at this point also argue that the Letter of James may be pseudonymous, however Carson, Moo and Morris conclude with a strong declaration of authorship by James, the brother of Jesus (though the nature of Carson, Moo and Morris’ work seems to tend toward such emphatic decisions). (Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, pp.410-3.)

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p.417.

<sup>81</sup> Origen quoted by **Eusebius, *op. cit.*, vi, 25.**

<sup>82</sup> B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*, Cambridge, 1881, p.368.

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion on the authorship and date of 2 Peter, see footnote 6.

<sup>84</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, p.440.

<sup>85</sup> Origen quoted by **Eusebius, *op. cit.*, vi, 25.**

<sup>86</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, *op. cit.*, p.456; Westcott, *op. cit.*, sect. II, ch.ii.

<sup>87</sup> There is nothing within 2 or 3 John that points unambiguously towards a specific author. Irenaeus links 2 John with 1 John, and ascribes them both to John the Apostle and author of the fourth gospel. It appears that Origen was the first to mention all three, though according to Eusebius, he mentioned the second and third whilst pointing out that not all viewed them as authentic (**Eusebius, *op. cit.*, vi, 25.**)

authorship were eventually overcome however, and the latter two epistles were generally accepted, at least in the Western Church from the mid-fourth century.<sup>88</sup>

Thirty years after Athanasius' testimony, at the Third Council of Carthage in AD 397 (at which Augustine was both present and very influential<sup>89</sup>), a list of the accepted canonical books was agreed upon<sup>90</sup>:

Besides the canonical Scriptures, nothing shall be read in church under the name of divine Scriptures. Moreover, the canonical Scriptures are these: [then follows a list of Old Testament books<sup>91</sup>]. The [books of the] New Testament: the Gospels, four books; the Acts of the Apostles, one book; the Epistles of Paul, thirteen; of the same [writer] to the Hebrews,

one Epistle; of Peter, two; of John, apostle, three; of James, one; of Jude, one; the Revelation of John.<sup>92</sup>

Following the decision at the Third Council of Carthage, there was little deviation in the Western Church until the time of the Reformation. The Eastern Churches, however, remained holding different views: the Syriac (*Peshitta*) excludes 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation, but this does not reflect the view of all Eastern Church Fathers as many accepted the standard twenty-seven. The Ethiopian Church, however, moved to the opposite extreme with the acceptance of the twenty-seven, and an additional eight others.<sup>93</sup>

Although an indication of the exact criteria used by the Council of Carthage to decide on those canonical texts does not appear to have survived (or existed), it is evident from the continued use of the same basic methods from the second-century onwards,<sup>94</sup> as well as a somewhat relevant testimony from Augustine himself,<sup>95</sup> that the decisions made were largely based on the views of the churches at the time.

---

Arguments that 2 and 3 John came from a different author than that of 1 John become evidently problematic when considering content and vocabulary, as several distinct thematic links exist between the first epistle and the last two. Much of the foundation of the view of separate authorship comes from the self-identification of the writer of 2 and 3 John within the text as 'the elder'. Many scholars (including Eusebius) view it as unlikely that John the Apostle would refer to himself as 'the elder', yet it is not impossible. In many ways, it would make sense, as the Apostle John was the last apostle left alive and reputedly lived to an old age. It would then be quite natural to refer to himself as 'the elder' as he truly was in a special position. If, on the other hand he had referred to himself as 'the Apostle', simply because he was the last apostle alive, this would have been both presumptuous and out of character (Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., pp.446-50).

<sup>88</sup> The Eastern Church did not include 2 or 3 John until the publication of the Philoxenian version of the *Peshitta*, in AD 508 (ibid., p.456).

<sup>89</sup> Metzger, op. cit., pp.237-8.

<sup>90</sup> The first Council to actually accept the current twenty-seven books appears to have been the Council of Hippo in AD 393, though the records of this Council are now lost. Four years later, the Council of Carthage simply read and agreed upon the decisions concerning the canon made previously, hence our New Testament. (ibid., pp.314-5)

<sup>91</sup> The Old Testament according to the Council of Carthage is actually quite interesting: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I-IV Kings, the Chronicles, Job, Psalms, five books of Solomon, 12 books of the Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 'two books of Esdras', and two books of the Maccabees. (Westcott, op. cit., p.440)

---

<sup>92</sup> Metzger, op. cit., pp.314-5. Following this listing is the statement, 'Let this be made known also to our brother and fellow-priest Boniface, or to other bishops of those parts, for the purpose of confirming that Canon, because we have received from our fathers that those books must be read in the Church.' This raises a problem, as Boniface did not succeed to the Roman chair till the year AD 418. This problem can be resolved by considering that in the year AD 419, the Canons of the African Church were collected and formed into one code. It would then appear quite natural that this segment be inserted so that other Churches would be made aware of the decisions that had taken place during the string of councils between 390 and AD 419 in the African Church. (Westcott, op. cit., pp.440-1)

<sup>93</sup> Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.493.

<sup>94</sup> Metzger, op. cit., p.254.

<sup>95</sup> Augustine's statement of how to determine if a text is scriptural in his work, *On Christian Doctrine* (written c.397 AD), instructs the Christian to, "...prefer those [texts] that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received by all ... prefer such as have the sanction of the greater number and those of greater authority, to such as are held by the smaller number and those of less authority..." (Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine" in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Series 1, Volume II*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, ii, 8). However, this does not necessarily imply that this criterion was used during the Council.

It is in this way that the Council of Carthage was a culmination of three centuries of the canonisation process, as the decisions made and accepted over time by those churches were based on previous investigation of each text's authority, which in turn were based fundamentally on one prerequisite and one criterion: each text had firstly to fall in-line with apostolic teaching, and following this, the text was appropriated according to the authority of its writer. In the few cases where the identity of the author remained unresolved, the use of the text by churches over time was taken into consideration and judged accordingly (e.g., the letter to the Hebrews).

In conclusion, it seems that after the loss of the Apostles as leaders of the Church, the value and appreciation of apostolic writing grew and matured. Hence the Church sought out those writings that best seemed to have been written either by one of the apostles or one close to the apostles. The heretics and their influence offered new reasons to search out the authentic writings and gave added incentive to the Church to produce an authoritative list. By the end of the second century, the majority of the twenty-seven texts now accepted were viewed widely as authoritative. Those that remained 'disputed' until the late fourth-century were classed as such largely due to questions over their authorship. Finally, those texts that were eventually accepted into the canon included some that had close to apostolic origin, but certainly with apostolic content; while the remaining majority included every text genuinely and undisputedly ascribed to an apostle.

## Bibliography

---

### Primary

- Athanasius, “39<sup>th</sup> Festal Letter” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Series 2, Volume IV*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000.
- Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Series 1, Volume II*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000.
- Eusebius, “Ecclesiastical History” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Series 2, Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), Ages Digital Library, 2000.
- Ignatius, “Epistle to the Ephesians” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), Ages Digital Library, 2000.
- Irenaeus, “Against Heresies” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), Ages Digital Library, 2000.
- Martyr, Justin, “Dialogue of Justin” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), Ages Digital Library, 2000.
- Martyr, Justin, “The First Apology of Justin” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), Ages Digital Library, 2000.
- Theophilus, “To Autolycus” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers – Volume I*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), Ages Digital Library, 2000.
- All Scripture quoted taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version.

### Secondary

- Bruce, F.F., *The New Testament Documents (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966.
- Bruce, F.F., *The Canon of Scripture*, Glasgow: Chapter House Ltd, 1988.
- von Campenhausen, Hans (translated by J.A. Baker), *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
- Carson, D.A., Moo, Douglas J., and Morris, Leon, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Leicester: Apollos (Inter-Varsity Press), 1999.
- Du Toit, Andrie B., (article in) *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp.102-104.
- Grant, Robert M., *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament*, London: Collins, 1974.
- Johnson, Paul, *A History of Christianity*, London: Penguin Group publishers, 1990.
- Knox, John, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Metzger, Bruce M., *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965.
- Metzger, Bruce M., *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.
- Moule, C. F. D., *The Birth of The New Testament*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962.
- Westcott, Brooke Foss, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*, Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1881.