

Canon Fire

On the Formation of the NT Canon

J. P. Holding

[[Introduction: The Problem of a Canon](#)] [[General Objections](#)] [[The Basics](#)] [[Quotes from Non-Canonical Material](#)] [[Criterion for Canon](#)] [[Stages of Canonization](#)] [[Early Heretical Influences](#)] [[The Making of Lists](#)] [[On Excluded Books](#)] [[On Later and Modern Disputes](#)] [[The Seven "Fringe" Books That Made It](#)] [[Conclusion](#)] [[Appendix: Did Paul Start the Canonical Process?](#)]

One man saw another sitting at the table with a Bible, pen in hand. He was using the pen to make a series of horizontal lines in the Bible's text.

"Underlining your favorite verses?" the first man asked cheerfully.

"Nope," the man with the pen replied. "I'm crossing out the parts that don't apply to me!"

Having a specialty interest in literature, my personal view of the canon is arrived at in what some would consider an unusual manner. What I have read of the so-called "non-canonical" books indicates to me that there is an obvious literary difference between what they are and what the canonical books are. I can see a difference, in the way they are written, and I attribute that difference to the influence of the Holy Spirit. I do not suppose that most other people can see the literary differences as well, and in the same way as I do, and I would not try to convince them of the differences.

Moreover, as those who have read my essay on [Inerrancy and Human Ignorance](#) will realize, I do not consider belief in inerrancy to be essential to salvation. I do not even think that it is necessary to believe in a fixed canon (although I do). Thus, it should make little difference to the non-believer, in my mind, whether God had anything to do with the formation of the canon or not. The basic claims of Christianity are still there in our faces, canon or no canon.

The anecdote above, indeed, reveals the pointlessness of arguing about the canon. The natural human tendency towards syncretism, and the application of personally-preferred truths to the minimization of those found less comfortable, is inescapable, especially in our modern, post-modern environment. Whether God had a hand in the selection and forming of the canon, or whether it was just a random assortment thrown together by the winds of history, the result will be the same: There will always be those, believer and non-believer alike, who will take mental pen in hand and "cross out" the parts of the Bible (or any set of ideas, for that matter) that they find uncomfortable, or add on things that will personally give them a warm and fuzzy feeling inside. In a sense, we each form our own canon of acceptable ideas; we each have our own "apocrypha" of marginal thoughts, and our own collection of ideas which we discard into the void, dismissing them from our canon of thought entirely. Resistance to a fixed set of ideas, perceived as limiting our freedom to do as we please, is as old a tendency as humanity itself.

However, if we believe in the inspiration of the Bible, then it is also reasonable to assume God's hand in the matter of the compilation of the canon. Although skeptical of many traditional positions on the canon, McDonald rightly perceives that "(t)hose who would argue for the inerrancy of scripture logically should also claim the same infallibility for the churches of the fourth and fifth centuries, whose decisions and historical circumstances have left us with our present Bible." [MacD.FormCB, 255] One cannot sensibly

argue that God inspired certain books of the Bible and then allowed us to mix in books with it that were not inspired. It was either all inspired at its origination, or none of it at all, other than at a basic human level of inspiration - and though, thanks to transcription errors and the like, we have some chaff mixed in with the wheat at present, the ambiguity that is reality at the textual variant level does NOT affect our position on the canon level.

This is all preparatory, of course, to our present work of the formation of the NT canon. We shall cover the matter of the OT canon in [this article](#). We also recommend for this subject Glenn Miller's ongoing [series](#) on canonicity, which studies the impact of the OT canon model upon the NT canon formation.

Objections on the matter of the canon are seldom encountered, but there are two general categories that we can expect to encounter when considering the NT canon:

1. **"Spectre of diversity" arguments.** Skeptics may cite disagreements among believers concerning which books belong in the canon, with the implicit or direct conclusion that these disagreements are prime fodder for skeptics wishing to disprove the veracity of the canonical process. The conclusion is unwarranted, and involves overplaying the disagreements and their importance while ignoring the basic unity of canonical and doctrinal decisions. It is the sort of argument generally offered by the uninformed.

Such objections, when encountered, should be taken seriously ONLY if the arguer can offer some reason why the competing view or book itself ought to be taken seriously. They should also demonstrate some knowledge of the form and content of the book in question. Simply throwing titles in the air and shouting, "Why was/wasn't THIS in the canon, huh???" is not a sufficient form of argument; nor is pointing to this or that church somewhere and asking why they include a particular book in the canon and others do not. Without knowing the history behind such inclusions or exclusions, the argument is little more than parade confetti.

2. **Motivational arguments.** It may be argued that some sort of bias, power play, or other motivational factor was at work in the formation of the NT canon by various church councils. Again, such arguments are generally advanced only by the uninformed. As we shall see, the councils did nothing more than confirm what was already believed by the church at large. The church was not dependent upon the decision of a council for the contents of the NT. As McDonald points out, "(i)n the broadest definition of the term 'canon,' neither the Israelites nor the Christians were ever without a canon or authoritative guide; they always had a story that enabled them to establish their identity and give life to their community." [ibid., 21] And Sanders adds: "Canon functions, for the most part, to provide indications of the identity as well as the lifestyle of the ongoing community that reads it." [Sand.CanPar, 17] The "Canon" with a capital C was merely a written codification of what had already been established for the Jews and the Christians. It is not as though, prior to the NT, Christians ran around willy-nilly not knowing what they believed!

What factors decided the formation of the NT canon? Far from being an arbitrary process, the formation of the canon was the result of carefully-weighted choices over time by concerned church officials and members. Later votes on the canon were merely the most definitive steps taken at the end of a long and careful, sometimes difficult, process. Grant [Gran.FormNT, 10] notes that the NT canon was...

...not the product of official assemblies or even of the studies of a few theologians. It reflects and expresses the ideal self-understanding of a whole religious movement which, in spite of temporal, geographical, and even ideological differences, could finally be united in accepting these 27 diverse documents as expressing the meaning of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and to his church.

And what of those who happened to disagree with one or more choices of these councils, the "final arbiter," so to speak? Of course individual Christians are free to choose for themselves what books are infallible; but in doing so they should not demand that the church alter their own systems of belief to accommodate them.

Any group or organization needs a set of rules or guidelines in order to function. To that end, attempts to change or significantly alter the rules should be put under careful consideration, and, if they significantly alter the purposes of the group, and are not acceptable to the majority, should be rejected. As with any group, of course, there are those who will protest the change or lack thereof; and (in a free organization) they are thereupon left with two choices: either take your lumps and live with the status quo, or leave. This should be kept in mind as we consider, later on, divergences in the early church, in particular those related to Gnosticism. For today, of course, we are free as always to choose what parts of the Bible we accept...Does the letter to the Ephesians offend thee? Pluck it out, and throw it away, and hope that it was not put there under divine guidance! Does the *Shepherd of Hermas* appeal to thee, or Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"? Get thee scissors and paste and add it in - and hope that the warning in Revelation about "adding on" to what has been written means something else other than adding to the Bible! Certainly no divine force stopped President Jefferson from clipping his own "Bible" from the original texts! At any rate, as we have alluded to earlier, if we believe that God had any part in the individual books of the Bible, then it is a necessary corollary that He also took a hand in the formation of the canon; and one who does believe in such influence by God should not take any choice of "which books they regard as infallible" lightly - unless they would care to proclaim themselves to be more "in" with God than those fourth- and fifth-century church councils; in which case, one might as well proclaim that all of us should prefer their choices to those of the councils! (Naturally, the councils should not be given absolute authority; however, given that they represent a voice of a community of the Holy Spirit, their decisions should be accorded very high weight, and require extraordinary evidence to overthrow. Council authority, as with scholarly consensus, has no authority by itself; but if I hold a contrary position I should develop at least two or three times the arguments and/or evidence I would need than if I had agreed with the council.)

We now proceed to an overview of the particulars of the issue of the NT canon.

The NT: Putting It Together

With the New Testament canon, our information is not always as solid as we would like, but it is still fairly good, and amazingly, even liberal and conservative scholars agree on most points of the issue! The data indicates that while "problems" and disagreements did exist, there was remarkable agreement, as a whole, concerning the composition of the NT canon, and relatively quickly. To summarize in advance:

20 of the 27 NT books were accepted easily. Metzger [Metzg.NT, 254]tells us that:

Although the fringes of the emerging canon remained unsettled for generations, a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament was attained among the very diverse and scattered congregations of believers not only throughout the Mediterranean world, but also over an area extending from Britain to Mesopotamia.

And McDonald [MacD.FormCB, 132]adds, with perhaps a touch of hyperbole:

But this question, like most over which Christians disagree, is not the cutting edge of what Christianity is all about...there was division everywhere in the church on the books that might be called the 'fringe,' but there was very little disagreement over what was at the core of the matter...The division of opinion...was not over the core, but over the 'fringe.'

7 books had a more difficult time - a "fringe" Metzger and McDonald write of:

...the determination of the canon rested upon a dialectical combination of historical and theological criteria. It is therefore not surprising that for several generations the precise status of a few books remained doubtful.(ibid.)

There were miscellaneous works that had their own unique histories. Single works such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* bounced in and out of favor rapidly, never achieving the level of acceptance over an extended period as the books eventually deemed canonical did. We will address this matter later in our report, when we consider some of these works.

Objection: The NT authors often quotes non-canonical material. Does this mean that what they quote is canonical?

This is actually a somewhat worthwhile objection; and there is plenty of data behind it. Jude 9 quotes the *Testament of Moses*. Paul quotes Menander, Epimenedes, and other Greek authors; he also apparently uses *Wisdom* 14:22-31 as a source for his arguments in Romans 1:24-32, and *Wisdom* 2:23-4 for Romans 5:12-21. Does this reflect a belief that *Wisdom* was canonical, or worthy of being called Scripture? No: "Wisdom of Solomon's canonicity does not appear to concern Paul, but only the theological arguments in it." (ibid., 101) Paul was out to make a point, as, most likely, were Jude and the others who quote or allude to apocryphal works. Truth and canonicity need not be mutually exclusive categories.

We now move to issue of reasons for inclusion and/or exclusion from the canon.

[Inspiration] [[Rule of Faith](#)] [[Apostolic Authority](#)] [[Usage in the Church](#)]

Discussion Criterion #1 - Inspiration

Were books included or excluded because of their inspirational quality? It may come as a surprise to some - Christians and skeptics alike! - that the Church Fathers "did not seem to have regarded inspiration as the ground of the Bible's uniqueness." [Metzg.NT, 255] Rather, inspiration was just one of many aspects of the life of the church, and one could regularly speak and write under inspiration, as Jerome did. As McDonald [MacD.FormCB, 240] puts it:

There is no question that the early church believed that its scriptures were inspired by God, but...the canonical scriptures were not the only ancient literature that was believed to be inspired by God.

And Gamble adds [Gamb.NTC, 72]: "...we nowhere find an instance of inspiration being used as a criteria of discrimination." So it is that Justin, for example, believed that "inspiration and the Holy Spirit's power were the possessions of the whole church." [MacD.FormCB, 242] Inspiration was not a criterion of canonicity, but a corollary of it: something that was inspired COULD be canonical, but something NOT inspired could NEVER be canonical. In that regard, I am in agreement with the Church Fathers: Truth is truth, wherever you find it. Inasmuch as a writer, even an atheist or a pagan, repeats that which is true (even unwittingly), they reflect some level of inspiration.

Discussion Criterion #2 - The Rule of Faith

The rule of faith criteria states that nothing shall be accepted which is at variance with accepted scriptures or that teaches false doctrine. To be accepted into the canon, a book must conform with the community's rule of faith.

Objection: This is a circular argument: The canon endorses your doctrine and practices, and your practices and doctrine endorse your canon. This cannot be a viable criteria.

Once again, this is an objection generally made by the uninformed: Before being taken seriously, it should at least be accompanied by an exposition of heresies in the early church, their sources, their reasoning, how

many Christians believed what, etc. The argument is circular only when one arbitrarily closes the circle by not pursuing further information!

Grant writes that such an argument, as above, from authority "is" circular; but only in that such arguments "lie of the edge of a circle drawn around the center, which is Christ." [Gran.FormNT, 186] Gamble says[Gamb.NTC, 69]: "By a fruitful synergy, scripture helped to mold the tradition of faith, and the tradition of faith helped to shape the canon of scripture" - and adds that, in any event, this criteria was NOT applied to the Gospels and the Pauline letters, which means that the circle had a solid center at any rate! Even McDonald, who (wrongly, I believe) finds no unified view of orthodoxy in the NT, goes as far as saying that "If the NT has a theological core everywhere acknowledged or reasonably assumed, it is simply this, that 'Jesus-the-man-now-exalted' is worthy of faithful obedience and that the promise of the blessing of God awaits all who follow him." [MacD.FormCB, 233]

Discussion Criterion #3 - Apostolic Authority

Here is what is, in our opinion, the primary consideration for acceptance of the a work into the NT canon: A work must have been authored by an Apostle or an immediate follower of an Apostle. And of course this is a sensible idea: the persons most qualified to write about a great teacher or leader, whether it be Jesus, Martin Luther King, or Gandhi, are usually either: a) family (as with James and Jude, who by virtue of their association with Jesus and decision to follow Him became de facto Apostles), b) immediate followers (the Apostles), or c) immediate followers of those followers (Mark, Luke).

We have previously noted our seven "fringe" books - the history behind these demonstrate the care which was taken to ensure that the criterion of apostolic authority was followed. These seven books listed gained access to the canon only after considerable debate over whether they could be attributed to the persons that bear their names (or in the case of Hebrews, to Paul or one of his close companions such as Barnabas, Luke or Apollos). It would be quite correct to say of the NT as a whole that those who doubted apostolic authorship of a particular book also denied that book's canonicity - and as we shall see, this was still a means of denying a book's canonicity thousands of years later!

Discussion Criterion #4 - Church Usage

One final criteria we will consider that may have acted for inclusion of certain books is usage in the church. It stands to reason, of course, that no book could be canonized unless the church used it! Thus, McDonald [MacD.FormCB, 116]:

Although a number of Christians have thought that church councils determined what books were to be included in the biblical canons, a more accurate reflection of the matter is that the councils recognized or acknowledged those books that had already obtained prominence from usage among the various early Christian communities.

Similarly, Patzia [Patz.MNT, 104]:

It appears that the books that finally were canonized are those that enjoyed a special status and were utilized both frequently and universally by the church.

However, let it not be said - and here we disagree with McDonald - that "(w)idespread usage in the churches appears to be the best explanation of why some writings were recognized and preserved as authoritative..." [see also Wall.NTC, 167] We may agree that this played some role, but it cannot be the primary criteria, for there was surely some reason WHY these books became widely used! (I would argue that, based on the evidence, apostolic authority was the primary criteria, with the "rule of faith" as a corollary, though not in a secondary way.)

[Founders' Authority] [[Clarification/Protection: Heretical Influence](#)] [[Basilides](#)] [[Valentinus](#)] [[Marcion](#)] [[Montanists](#)] [[Eastern Stages](#)] [[Western Stages](#)] [[Muratorian Canon](#)] [[Final Stage](#)] [[Persecution as Continual Corollary](#)]

Now, let us consider the process whereby the NT was canonized.

Stage One - Founders' Authority

As would be expected, in the earliest stage of church history (mid-to-late first/early second century) the words of Jesus Himself were considered to be authoritative: "The earliest canon of faith for the Christian community was Jesus himself, whose words and deeds were interpreted afresh in the numerous sociological contexts of the early Christians...what Jesus said, whether it existed in written or in oral form, was authoritative for the church and was held in the highest regard." (ibid, 138-9) As early as Paul, the words of Jesus "already have a fixed form and uncontested validity." [VonCamp.FCB, 112] Extant writings of the Apostolic Fathers (Clement, Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp) indicate a body of authoritative literature and sayings that was called upon, although this authority was not officially recognized as a "canon." In this stage, we find what Metzger calls "the warranty arising from the fact that these words are preserved in such and such books which deserve the readers' confidence." [Metzg.NT, 73] We also find a reliance on oral tradition, which relates in part, perhaps, to a "cultural presupposition" that writing was an unworthy means of transmission. (We look at the matter of oral transmission in our [article here](#).) As the Apostles pass away, authority is then vested in "apostolical men" like Papias and Polycarp who can still bring to the fore direct memory of the teachings of the Apostles. [Black.Marc, 11]

The Epistle of 1 Clement (ibid, 41), for example, dated by some to c. 95 AD (we prefer a pre-70 date), exhorts readers to "remember the words of the Lord Jesus" and contains quotations from Jesus which are found in our present texts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. 1 Clement also contains allusions to Romans, Galatians, Philippians, and Ephesians, as well as possibly Hebrews, Acts, James, and 1 Peter. The former "may presuppose the existence of a collection of Pauline Epistles." (ibid., 42) Paul's works, and therefore Paul himself, are clearly recognized as authoritative. (For more on this, see our Appendix at the end of this work.)

Per Metzger, NT works cited or alluded to - in actuality and in probability - by Apostolic Fathers are:

- All Four Gospels;
- Acts
- All Pauline epistles except three (see below)
- Hebrews
- 1 John
- 1 Peter
- James
- Revelation.

Not cited or alluded to are Titus, Philemon, and 2 Corinthians; 2 Peter, Jude, 2 and 3 John. However, no conclusions may be drawn from this for two reasons:

First, except for 2 Corinthians, all of these books are so short that it is possible that there was never any need to refer to them - especially in light of the fact that:

Second, as Metzger indicates, the total extant works of the Apostolic Fathers fits "a volume about the same size as the New Testament"! (ibid., 72) It would therefore have been very fortunate if we had indeed had witness to all 27 NT books.

At this stage, none of the NT books was recognized as Scripture (with the exception of a verse from Luke being recognized as Scripture in 1 Timothy - which of course requires defending the early date of that book, which we will not engage here, but will look at elsewhere); but they did function as Scripture in the means whereby they were used, for they were used authoritatively. McDonald: "It is clear that the sayings of Jesus had a scripture-like status from the very beginning of the church." [MacD.FormCB, 143]

From what I have seen so far - and I will note if I find out otherwise - NONE of the non-canonical works of the NT are recognized or quoted as authoritative in this stage! We DO have several quotations that were evidently preserved by means of oral tradition - but NONE that appear uniquely in the non-canonical works. This would point to the non-canonical works being of a later date than the canonical works (range of 50-100 AD), and would certainly move to destroy any claim that they were written by authoritative eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus!

Stage Two - Clarification and Protection

All too soon, it seemed, the "honeymoon" was over. The syncretistic beast of Gnosticism was starting to breathe down the Church's neck, ready to absorb Jesus into its fold. Because of this, a need arose to ensure the "stamp of apostolic guarantee" on all materials - and at the same time, oral tradition lost its importance. To keep Gnosticism and other heresies from destroying Christianity, or else morphing it out of all recognizance, it was seen to be necessary to set things down "in stone" once and for all. In a perverse sort of way, heretics were partially responsible for the formation of the NT canon! They motivated the church to identify - and eventually canonize - the true works of the Apostles. These heretical movements, therefore, had a "collective" influence on the setting of the canon. [Gamb.NTC, 65]

Let us consider briefly some of these heretics and what they stood for.

Heretic #1 - Basilides (117-138 AD)

There were undoubtedly many heretics before Basilides, but he is the first major heretic for whom we have any significant evidence. His prime point was that he "denied that Jesus really suffered on the cross" [Metzg.NT, 79] - in line with the Gnostic idea that a divine being could not undergo such suffering. Instead, Basilides proposed that at the last minute, Simon of Cyrene was switched with Jesus, and as Simon was crucified, Jesus laughed at His enemies, and ascended into heaven.

Clearly, this view is antithetical to Christianity, which holds that Jesus' suffering on the cross paid for our sins. If there was no cross for Jesus, then there was no payment for sins. Basilides would have gutted Christianity and turned it into a form of Gnosticism, and that would have rendered it sterile for REALLY changing lives and for God's design for transforming the world.

One positive thing that was left behind by Basilides, however: he is known to have quoted the book of 1 Corinthians with the formula, "the scripture says" - the first recorded incidence of a NT quote by that formula (other than the reference in 2 Timothy to Luke).

Heretic #2 - Valentinus (135-165)

With Valentinus, we have a heretic who not only tried to change Christianity - using a mix of his own teachings, genuine Christian ideas, and "Oriental and Greek speculations" - but also wrote his own Gospel, which he called "The Gospel of Truth." (ibid., 81) Now it is evident that there is a recognition here of the authority of a written work - and also, indirect evidence that Valentinus was aware that OTHERS made use of books that were considered authoritative; or else, he would not give his work such a bodacious name as "The Gospel of Truth"! He undoubtedly had to compete with the authoritatively-recognized works of Christianity, so he did what would approximate in our day to putting a label on his work that said, "New and Improved"! In any event, being that he was obviously creating his own material, and was not vested

with apostolic authority, there was absolutely no reason to recognize anything he wrote or said as being authoritative for Christianity.

Heretic #3 - Marcion

We come now to the heretic who is credited more than any other for forcing the issue of the creation of a canon - the man who "tabled once and for all the question of a new canon." [VonCamp.FCB, 147ff.] This was the heretic Marcion.

Marcion was no slouch. He was a wealthy shipowner, and manifestly quite intelligent. But in July 144 AD, he was called upon by the clergy in Rome to expound upon some views of his that he had been promulgating - and what he said was so shocking that it resulted not only in his excommunication, but also in the return of a substantial amount of largesse that he had donated to the church. (Regardless of what any skeptic might say, the clergy were certainly men of principle in that regard!)

What did Marcion believe? His basic idea was that the God of the OT was incompatible with the Jesus of the NT - and so he sought to sever the connection between the two. He believed in a sort of Zoroastrian dualism (described by Blackman as "grotesque" - [Black.Marc, 66]), with the OT God being the just and severe Creator, and the NT God a god of love, combined with an "exaggerated Paulinism" [ibid., 103]. To the end of promoting his view, Marcion went through the Pauline epistles, choosing only some of them (Galatians, the Corinthian letters, Romans, the Thessalonian letters, Ephesians [as Laodecians], Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon - Harr.IC, 210) and "removed whatever he judged were interpolations - that is, anything that did not agree with his understanding of what Paul should have written." [Metzg.NT, 93] He also gutted the Gospel of Luke for his purposes, accepting only about 3/4 of it as authentic [Knox.MarcNT, 3] and with the sliced-and-diced Pauline epistles, created his own informal "canon." The result of his changes, which were in the main omissions with a few additions and substitutions [Black.Marc, 47], was a set of books completely emasculated of Jewish elements, "an anti-Jewish rejection of both the value of the OT scriptures and the Jewish influence on the Christian community"[MacD.FormCB, 155]. The Marcionite churches promoted a few other oddities: For example, Marcionism forbade marriage and children, so that (like the modern Shakers) all converts had to come from outside. No one was born a Marcionite - not legally in their view, at any rate!

Some things should be noted here:

- It is obvious that a collection of Paul's Epistles existed at the time for Marcion to pick apart: "Gamble is undoubtedly correct in assuming that Marcion took over an existing collection of Paul's writings." (ibid., 157) This is a sign of a literal "pre-canon," or an idea of a canon, quite some time before the fourth century, even if it was not a closed canon. Metzger therefore notes that Marcion did not create the idea of a canon, but did accelerate a process of fixing the canon that had already begun! (On the other hand, it seems that the Marcionite heresy caused some reactionary church officials, including Justin Martyr, to avoid quoting Paul for a while.)
- Marcion appealed to the authority of the writings of the Apostle Paul. Even though he conformed the texts to his own ideas, he clearly realized that only with apostolic authority could his ideas get anywhere; for heretics likely had to "justify their vagaries by appeals to acknowledged standards." [Harr.IC, 210]
- Even with the riches of a wealthy shipowner, there was no way to change what was TRULY considered authoritative. A "political war" in the church was not won by whoever had the largest wallet and the greatest influence; else we might today be known as Marcionites rather than Christians!
- The above point is magnified when we read of Ireaneaus' complaint concerning Marcion: "He persuaded his disciples that he was more trustworthy than the apostles who transmitted the gospel." [Gran.FormNT, 125] To have to persuade his followers of this presumes that Marcion was stepping on what was already regarded as authority - and thus we see "apostolic authority" as a criteria in action!

- It is an interesting question, too, as to WHY Marcion would have drawn up such a list, if other "lists" did not already exist. Where would Marcion have gotten the exemplar to argue as he did? Being that Marcion was manifestly a copycat, it seems quite likely that he got his idea for a list from somewhere else - and we have seen that a previously-established collection of Pauline epistles were at the core of his scheme.

In closing: While some have greatly overvalued Marcion's contribution to the formation of the NT canon (see particularly Knox.MarcNT, 31 and Hoff.Marc), he certainly did serve as a wake-up call for the church.

Heretic #4 - The Montanists

The Montanist heresy, which began either 156 or 172 AD, was perhaps not as destructive as other heresies, but like Marcionism, it spurred the church onwards to the fixing of a canon. The Montanists focused on "ecstatic utterances" and created "new scriptures" based on those utterances. (None of these works are today extant.) Obviously, there would be a need to ensure that none of these "uttered" works somehow became confused with those that had apostolic authorship!

At around the same time, a lesser group called the Alogi rejected the books of Revelation and John's Gospel, and Hebrews as well, arguing that the first two were not by John the Apostle, but by the heretic Cerinthus (ibid., 150-1), and the latter was not by Paul. Note again that it is apostolic authority that is being used as a criteria for acceptance!

Stage Three - Lists and Canons

The last major stage consists of final forms of the New Testament canon. Here we will find, as Metzger tells us, a striking agreement as far as the core of the NT, in spite of barriers of distance and doctrine. It is at this time, c. 200 AD, that Campenhausen tells us that the NT truly reached its final form and significance [VonCamp.FCB, 327]. This is not, we should point out in response to certain skeptics, due to any kind of influence or force being used or because of power plays by church officials. Rather, Von Campenhausen writes [ibid., 331-2]:

...official decisions by the Church are not involved. Synodal judgments and episcopal pastoral letters concerning the contents of the Bible become usual only in the fourth century, and at first are of only local importance. They encourage uniformity between the various areas of the church, but are unable to bring about a completely uniform canon until the Middle Ages.

Lert it not be said, then, that force was the prime mover behind acceptance of the NT canon!

Metzger divides his history between the Eastern and Western sectors of the Roman Empire; we shall follow suit for convenience.

Eastern Stages

Metzger notes these three significant developments in the Eastern half of the late Roman Empire in the late 2nd century AD:

The four Gospels became a sort of "mini-canon," a closed collection which would admit no other Gospels. "...the Gospels became part of the (final) canon as a collection and not individually." (Patz.MNT, 64; see also Gran.FormNT, 148)

The Pauline letters, Acts, and Revelation are accepted as divine Scripture. For the first, we have seen that Marcion evidently had some collection of Pauline letters; but the "final" set of 13 attributed to Paul, we may safely say was assembled as a corpus by the beginning of the third century. [Patz.MNT, 88]

Other letters are on the fringe of acceptance: Hebrews, James, Jude, and letters attributed to Peter and John.

The East saw the invention of the very first harmony of all four Gospels: Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Composed around 156 AD, this work demonstrates that the four Gospels we have today were considered authoritative; no other Gospels were included, other than an occasional phrase or clause.

In Tatian, incidentally, we see a perfect example of someone who "crossed out" things he did not like. He rejected the authenticity of 1 Timothy, and was the founder of the Encratites, a group that rejected marriage, meat, and wine - the latter of which is recommended for stomach disorder in 1 Timothy! [Metzg.NT, 116]

Somewhat later, Clement of Alexandria (180-211) is found quoting all of our current NT books as authoritative except Philemon, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. Except for James, these books are so short that Clement may not have had cause to cite them. He also refers to the Gospels as "Scripture." [VonCamp.FCB, 294] At this point, aside from the Gospels, the canon is still "open." [Metzg.NT, 135]

Origen (185-250) is the first writer to use the name "New Testament" and to indicate a classification of its works. He divided the NT into two collections: Gospels and works of the Apostles. These he proclaimed as "divine Scriptures," written by the evangelists under the same Spirit of the same God as in the OT. He also makes note of heretical Gospels: those of Thomas, Matthias, the 12 Apostles, Basilides, and the Gospel of the Egyptians. However, Origen does not issue any directive that these alternate Gospels be burned or thrown away; indeed, he does quote them, though with the qualifying phrase, "If anyone receives it..."

Origen accepts the four Gospels, the 13 letters of Paul, and Revelation [Gamb.NTC, 50]. He also comments on several works that were on the "fringe" of acceptance as authoritative. Of 2 Timothy he writes: "...some have dared to reject this Epistle, but they were not able." Of Peter's Epistles, he notes of one that is acknowledged, and "possibly a second, but this is disputed." To John he attributes one Gospel and one Epistle, "and, as it may be, a second and third - but not all consider these to be genuine." Of James, he implies some doubt as to its authenticity; but does accept the genuineness of Jude. He also mentions two books outside of our current NT: the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which he calls "divinely inspired," and the *Preaching of Peter*, which he rejects because: 1) it was not composed by Peter; 2) it was not inspired by the Spirit of God, although he recognizes in it "elements of inspired value." (ibid., 136-141) He also felt free to use works like the *Acts of Paul* and the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*.

It is important to note here that:

- Origen does NOT tell people to burn or get rid of the heretical Gospels. Quite the contrary, he expresses admirable tolerance for them, even as he rejects their authenticity. That he does not viciously attack them indicates that the presence of false Gospels was an accepted fact, but one easily dealt with, not requiring any kind of "political war" to get rid of them or the views they express! This would also suggest that the false Gospels were so poorly grounded in reality that they had to struggle to survive (as indeed may be seen from those that survive to this day).
- The authenticity of 2 Peter, James, and 2 and 3 John are apparently being discussed throughout the church - based on their genuineness! The issue, again, is apostolic authority: do these books truly come from the hands of an Apostle? The church did NOT rush to judgment on these issues; although if they had, I wonder if skeptics would criticize them for being to hasty in their decisions!

Western Stages

Justin Martyr, c. 150 AD, refers to "memoirs of the Apostles" and quotes them as authoritative. Allusions in his work are identifiable from Mark, Matthew, Luke, and possibly John and Revelation. Metzger notes that these works were "read interchangeably with the Old Testament prophets," indicating their importance and authority in the eyes of Justin. (ibid., 145; see also MacD.FormCB, 163-4)

Hippolytus (170-235), mirroring developments in the East, accepts all four Gospels as Scripture; he also acknowledges as authentic 13 Pauline Epistles (not including Hebrews), Acts, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation. He does quote Hebrews, though not as Scripture; other works he quotes less authoritatively, including the *Shepherd of Hermas*. His work may show knowledge of 2 Peter and James. [ibid., 150]

Irenaeus (130-202) quotes all of our present NT works except Philemon, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude - whether due to length or lack of recognition cannot be determined. He sees the Gospels quartet as fixed: the famous "four winds" quote, which many skeptics misuse, thinking it means that 4 Gospels were chosen, and not 3 or 5, because there were 4 winds; more likely, though not discernibly, Irenaeus was "simply confirming a concept that (was) well established in the churches" [Patz.MNT, 65] by means of a natural analogy. The rest of the forming canon, however, is still open. Irenaeus does identify two criteria for acceptance: 1) apostolic authority, and 2) agreement with the traditions maintained by the church.

Tertullian (converted to Christianity c. 195) made citations to every current NT book except 2 Peter, James, and 2 and 3 John - again, possibly due to their length, or perhaps due to ignorance of their existence! [Metzg.NT, 159-60] He regarded the books he quoted as being equal in stature to the OT Law and Prophets. The Book of Hebrews he accepted on the basis of authorship by Barnabas, an associate of Paul (again, note that apostolic authority plays a role in acceptance). On the other hand, he used Jude to argue for the status of Enoch as Scripture. (Important point here: It is assumed that apostolic authorship of Jude was adequate authoritative basis to decide questions of OT canon - showing a high degree of authority has been accorded to Jude!), and early in his career accepted the *Shepherd of Hermas* as inspired, although he later rejected it when he converted to Montanism.

Cyprian of Carthage (converted 246 AD) cites as authoritative all four Gospels, all of the Pauline Epistles (except Philemon), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. He does not cite Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude - but again, whether due to shortness or rejection, we cannot say. (ibid., 160-1)

The Muratorian Canon, by an unknown author, is usually dated to the end of the second century; attempts to date it later have been unconvincing, according to Metzger, although McDonald provides an opposite view dating it to much later that contains some persuasive elements. A very persuasive case for a fourth-century date is presented by Hahneman [Hahn.MurFrag], from whom we gain much of our material below on the subject.

Discovered by the Italian historian, archivist, and librarian Ludovico Antonio Muratori, and published in 1740, this fragment indicates books that are accepted and rejected by the church. The only books clearly missing from the text are James and Hebrews, but Hahneman suggests that we have simply lost these references from the fragment, which has a number of defects. 2 and 3 John may be missing; but that is a matter of debate: The text indicates two epistles of John as accepted, and these may be 2 and 3 John, with 1 John subsumed categorically under John's Gospel. (Hahneman notes that the close relationship of 2 and 3 John make it improbable that the fragment only knows of 1 and 2 John.) Only one presently non-canonical book was noted as accepted: A book of Wisdom by Solomon. Two apocalypses are mentioned, of John (Revelation) and Peter, though it is noted of the latter that "some of us are not willing that (it) should be read in church." There are also indications in the Canon as to which books are to be rejected as heretical.

The list of Eusebius refers to all 27 of our current books. 22 of the 27 were placed in the "universally accepted" category: The four Gospels, Acts, Paul's 13 epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John, and finally, Revelation "if it really seems proper." The 5 remaining books were placed in a category that were "disputed, but familiar to the people of the church." A final list set out books that were to be rejected or were heretical; curiously, Eusebius puts Revelation in this category also, saying that it should be excluded if it seems proper!

The "final" listing comes from 367 AD, at which time Athanasius of Alexandria set forth a NT canon with a listing of books identical to those we have today [Gran.FormNT, 175]. Councils at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) confirmed this enumeration. To be sure, this was not the end of the controversy (as we shall see) - but when has the resolution of any issue among human beings ever been simple?

Corollary to Stages: Persecution

"Persecution" could not properly be called a "stage" in the canonization process, for it was existent to some extent through each of these stages we are studying. However, it was certainly a motivating factor in the formation of the canon.

Why was this so? Well, imagine that you are being persecuted as a Christian, and that your holy books are a target and will be confiscated. If you don't turn them over to the authorities, you may be harmed or killed. Wouldn't you want to be sure you were not just suffering for the sake of something that was not a genuinely authoritative work? Indeed, during the persecution of Diocletian (303 AD), this is exactly what happened: Scriptures were burned, churches were demolished, and Christian meetings were banned, with the bans enforced on pain of torture, imprisonment or death. Also, individual houses were searched for copies of Christian scriptures.

[\[Epistle of Barnabas/Shepherd of Hermas\]](#) [\[Laodiceans/1, 2 Clement\]](#) [\[Preaching of Peter, Apocalypse of Peter\]](#) [\[Gospels of the Egyptians and the Hebrews\]](#)

Excluded Books

Let us now briefly consider a few of the books that did not make the canon cut, and look for reasons why. Again, any time these titles are brought up, it is a good idea to see if whoever flies them on the flagpole knows what they actually contain and what their history is. If they do NOT know, then they are just blowing hot air or arguing for the sake of it.

We will ask the basic question of WHY these books we will examine (and dozens of others) were even put under consideration - and achieved what Metzger calls "temporary canonicity." [Metzg.NT, 165] First, what were the contents of these works? "It is obvious the great majority...are the result of attempts to produce literary forms that parallel those of the several genres of literature (in the NT)," that is, gospels, acts, apocalypses, and epistles. Epistles were the fewest made, "for clearly, it was more difficult to produce an epistle that possessed some semblance of authority than it was to draw up a narrative of events in which Jesus and various Apostles figured as heroes." In other words, it was easier to write about events that no one could verify than to pretend to be someone with the authority to write an epistle! (For more on this, see Glenn Miller's excellent work on "[pseudox](#)" - and note that the church would indeed have been on the lookout for false or pseudonymous works of all types!)

Now let us look at these books individually:

- **Epistle of Barnabas.** If this book was truly by the companion of Paul, then there might be reason to consider it for the canon. But there is insufficient proof of this, and its late date (c. 90-130) makes it unlikely to have been written by Barnabas [MacD.FormCB, 146]. It also makes use of numerology.
- **Shepherd of Hermas.** Reading this book, which Von Campenhausen describes as "more jejune and superficial than the Johannine Revelation," [VonCamp.FCB, 216] brought to mind another book - Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is, like that work, self-evidently allegorical, and perhaps indeed inspired; but it was obviously written too late (2nd century) to be attributed to the Apostles.
- **Paul's Epistle to the Laodiceans.** Metzger notes that this work was finally, once-and-for-all excluded from the canon in the mid-1400s. Now of course it should be easy to see why this work hung around for as long as it did: if it truly is a work of Paul, then it meets the criteria of apostolic authority and deserves to be considered for the canon. But there is nothing to assuredly connect it to Paul, and even if there were, it is in content "almost entirely a compilation of extracts from the Pauline Epistles." [Black.Marc, 61] In other words, without Laodiceans, we ain't missin' nothin' anyway!

- **1 Clement** (also consider 2 Clement). It comes as no surprise that the works of Clement (or works allegedly by him - 2 Clement's authenticity is questionable) were considered by some as worthwhile, for he was a disciple of Peter. Hence, under the criterion of apostolic authority, his works could have entered the canon under the same principles as Luke and Mark did, but he is disqualified by other criteria. In particular, 1 Clement refers to a phoenix as an actual living creature!
- **Preaching of Peter.** Although recognized (by ONE PERSON that we know of!), a late date makes this document unlikely to have been written by Peter.
- **Apocalypse of Peter.** Same as the above. This work was written around 125-50 AD [Metzg.NT, 184], too late for Peter. It bears a haunting resemblance to works like Dante's *Inferno*, and thus may be inspired in the same category as the *Shepherd*.
- **Gospel According to the Egyptians.** This work was written around 150 AD (ibid., 169) and was accepted as canonical only in Egypt (naturally). It appears to have been written to promote the doctrines of the Encratites.
- **Gospel According to the Hebrews.** We have no current translation of this work (ibid., 169) so we cannot evaluate it, other than to say that it was probably written in the middle of the second century.

For none of the above books, therefore, do we have any evidence that would indicate that in any sense they deserved to make the "final cut" for the canon of the NT.

[\[2 Peter\]](#) [\[Jude\]](#) [\[James\]](#) [\[Hebrews, 2-3 John, Revelation\]](#)

Later Disputes and Diversity

A final, "last-ditch" sort of objection relies upon more modern deviations within the canon. Martin Luther's rejection of James as an "epistle of straw" is particularly cited in this regard, but there are many other bits and pieces of history that are taken as problematic as well. However, when all the tempest storms are blown over, we find that these more modern debates involve either a) inclusion of a fairly standard set of apocryphal works; or, b) the exclusion of those same seven books on the fringe - Revelation, James, Jude, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John. What we are left with this: 7 out of 27 books disputed, some more than others; BUT 20 out of 27 NOT questioned, ever. These, then, are tempests in teapots; they are merely examples of the natural human tendency to reject what we do not agree with or understand. In that view, it is easy to see why people have had a problem with Revelation; apocalyptic literature takes an acquired taste! We see, too, why Luther and others rejected James: They perceived (wrongly) that it emphasized works over faith, which hit Luther right in his gut, because he was intimately concerned with faith being the only way to salvation - which it is, as a proper reading of James reveals (see below).

Concerning those seven books, we should briefly consider reasons why these books remained on the fringe for so long, and still are, according to some [Patz.MNT, 94-100]:

- **2 Peter.** This is admittedly the most problematical book in the NT - the primary issue being whether this letter was actually authored by Peter. Cited against Petrine authorship are:
 - 1) Differences in style and vocabulary from 1 Peter.** This criteria, may I say as a literature specialist, should be axed forevermore for consideration of ANY work of the Bible for ANY reason. Two small letters is not sufficient to determine any writers' capacity for style and vocabulary. (Commentators note that it is possible that Peter had a secretary write this letter for him as a "last will and testament.")

2) An allusion to an earlier generation. (2 Pet. 3:2, 4) This is rather a weak appeal; if Peter were an old man at the time of the writing of this letter, as is presumed, it would be natural for him to write in this fashion.

3) The reference to Paul's letters as a collection. (2 Pet. 3:15-16) This would supposedly indicate a later date for 2 Peter, but from the cite, it is not clear whether the author refers to a fixed collection of Paul's letters, or just to those he has seen. Even so, there is good reason to suppose that Paul himself was assembling his letters into a collection rather early. (See Appendix.)

4) Incorporation of material from Jude. There are many similarities between the two books; it is possible, however, that rather from one borrowing from the other, each independently used "several independent tracts that were circulating in the Christian communities." (See also the discussion of the interrelation of 2 Peter and Jude in John A. T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*).

- **Jude.** In addition to the borrowing issue referred to above, Jude's use of Apocryphal books (see above) has caused problems for some. However, Jude was accepted as genuine by earlier Church fathers (Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria). It appears to have been only AFTER the debate over the canon became important that others (Jerome, Eusebius) questioned whether it should be in the canon - reflecting, perhaps, a drawing away from the idea of inspiration being found not just in Scripture (as well as demonstrating the cautious decision-making of the early church).
- **James.** Of this letter, it is noted that it was accepted into the church rather slowly. It's assumed authorship by the brother of Jesus may have carried it. Later, the seeming emphasis on works hurt it (as with Luther), but Metzger notes that when comparing the ideas found in James to those found in Paul's letters regarding faith, one finds "what seems to be a reasonable resolution when one observes that the two authors were considering the nature of faith as it existed within each of the two different polemic situations in the church." (ibid., 280)
- **Hebrews.** The big problem, obviously, is the anonymous authorship of this work. The Eastern churches accepted it as canonical by the 3rd century, and the Western churches, by the 4th.
- **2 and 3 John, Revelation.** Authorship again was a key question - were these works by the Apostle? Content, in the case of the latter, was also an issue, and often still is!

Therefore, we can see that there was good reason for these works being on the "fringe" as they were, and in some cases, still are. The early church was being cautious, and we may appreciate that they were!

One final point to close out: the triumph of the inspired works, these "fringe" works, over the power of men, is quite significant! In SPITE OF such radical questioning by leaders throughout time, these books have stayed in the canon - not ONE has ever been thrown out! Every possible argument has been used against them; and yet they outlast the leaders of every age! The same 7 books have been disputed, and the same 7 remain --and there are no additions, either. The durability of these works in the hearts of the people of God may be taken as ample evidence of their inspired character.

Conclusion

Human beings will never agree unanimously on anything, even the canon of Scripture. Even today, many groups (such as the Mormons) seek to add to what has been written. This, of course, is their right; but the fact remains that the canon has been fixed, not by some 4th-century Church Council, but by the witness of history itself. As Metzger writes: "the canon cannot be remade - for the simple reason that history cannot be remade." (ibid., 275) The books that made it into the canon did so by means of "survival of the fittest" - it was not a random drawing with all participants beginning on equal footing. The church did not create the canon, "but came to recognize, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the Church. If this fact is obscured, one comes into

serious conflict not with dogma but with history."(ibid., 286) We may freely learn from the non-canonical literature [MacD.FormCB, 257], and it may be that some of that literature contains authentic strands of teaching by Jesus. Nevertheless, we have our canon. We are each free to take it or leave it; and if it offend thee - take up scissors and paste, and make what thou considerest a better effort than others!

Sources

1. Black.Marc - Blackman, E. C. *Marcion and His Influence*. London: SPCK, 1948.
2. Gamb.NTC - Gamble, Harry Y. *The New Testament Canon*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
3. Gran.FormNT - Grant, Robert M. *Formation of the New Testament*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
4. Hahn.MurFrag - Hahneman, Geoffrey Mark. *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
5. Harr.IC - Harris, R. Laird. *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957.
6. Hoff.Marc - Hoffman, R. Joseph. *Marcion on the Restitution of Christianity*. Chico: Scholars Press, 1984.
7. Knox.MarcNT - Knox, John. *Marcion and the New Testament*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1942.
8. MacD.FormCB - McDonald, Lee M. *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995.
9. Metzg.NT - Metzger, Bruce Manning. *The Canon of the New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987.
10. Patz.MNT - Patzia, Arthur. *The Making of the New Testament*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1995.
11. Rich.SLP - Richards, E. Randolph. *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1991.
12. Sand.CanPar - Sanders, James A. *Canon as Paradigm*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.
13. Trob.PLC - Trobisch, David. *Paul's Letter Collection*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994.
14. VonCamp.FCB - Von Campenhausen, Hans. *The Formation of the Christian Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968.
15. Wall.NTC - Wall, Robert W. *The New Testament as Canon*. Sheffield: JSOT, 1992.

Appendix: Did Paul Start the NT Canon?

The subject of this special appendix is a theory once put forward by van Soden in 1913, and alluded to briefly by Richards [Rich.SLP], but developed by David Trobisch [Trob.PLC] which gives credit for the first collection of NT books not to any person in the second or third century, but to the Apostle Paul himself. Naturally no solid proof can be offered for this assertion, and we do not agree with the entirety of Trobisch's conclusions, which is why we cover this in an appendix. But given the sociological data offered, Trobisch's ideas should be given strong consideration.

Trobisch's case starts not with the NT or even with Paul, but with the ancient practice of collection of letters. Having studied the compilation process of over 200 collections of letters dated from 300 BC to 400 AD, Trobisch notes three central and essential stages:

1. **Letter are collected and prepared for publication by the author.** For example, Cicero, when collecting his letters, went over them personally making corrections and emendations - polishing them up, getting rid of trivial material, and eliminating the names of deceased persons. He then selected which letters of his he wished to have published.

Related to the Pauline letters, Trobisch suggests that Paul himself put together Romans, the Corinthian letters, and Galatians to form the core of his collection. (He suggests that 2 Corinthians is actually a Pauline compilation of several different letters sent to the Corinthian church, an idea that is not entirely without support.)

2. **The issuing of an expanded edition after the death of the author.** A slave of Cicero published more of his masters' letters after his death.
3. **The issuing of comprehensive editions** from steps 1 and 2.

These latter two steps, Trobisch does not develop in detail related to Paul's letters, other than to suggest that the remaining letters were the product of steps 2 and 3. We may suggest that Luke himself was the person who undertook the final compilation, perhaps with help from church leaders like Timothy and Titus. All of this, of course, is completely theoretical, but certainly it is significant that a standard "process" existed whereby the preservation, collection, compilation and publication of Paul's letters might have been accomplished - and fit hand-in-glove with the process of canonization.

In addition, a few other interesting elements added by Richards [Rich.SLP, 6ff, 50] help explain some of the "puzzles" about the canon that have been bewildering NT scholars for years:

1. Why does 2 Corinthians 10-13 seem so different from the rest of that letter? Some scholars, including Trobisch, propose internal editing; but Richards suggests, based on parallels with other letters and the distribution of pronouns in 2 Corinthians, that 10-13 is a postscript added by Paul himself to the original letter, 1-9, which was a joint composition with his companions like Timothy.
2. Why are we missing the "harsh letter" between 1 and 2 Corinthians which Paul only alludes to? If both Trobisch and Richards are right, Paul himself is responsible for this, and it is not a matter of churches losing the letters, or carelessness, or what have you.
3. Who put the final collection together? Probably Luke, who, if he had been with Paul when he died (2 Tim. 4:11), would have inherited the letter collection.
4. Finally, it was a standard practice for a man of letters to keep copies of his letters. We may suggest that this is how Paul started the collection, as opposed to the standard critical idea that the churches found them in the attic somewhere and they somehow got thrown together by an unknown process.