

The Emergence of the New Testament Canon

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Conciliar Press is editing this paper to produce a booklet.

All Christians agree that Scripture is the heart of the Christian tradition. However, what they mean by this affirmation often differs. To shed light on how this affirmation ought to be understood, this paper will trace the history of the New Testament canon from the apostolic church to the present. The goal is to show how we know that the Church properly identified all and only those books that belong in Sacred Scripture and to consider the implications of the process of identification.

When the church began, there were no New Testament books. Old Testament texts alone were used as scripture. The first book written was probably I Thessalonians (c. 51) (or possibly Galatians which may be c. 50—there is some controversy over the dating of Galatians). The last books were probably John, the Johannine epistles, and Revelations toward the end of the first century.⁽¹⁾ The books were written to deal with concrete problems in the church—immoral behavior, bad theology, and the need for spiritual “meat”.

Thus, the church existed for roughly twenty years with no New Testament books, only the oral form of the teaching of the apostles. Even after a book was written, it was not immediately widely available. Some books like II Peter were read almost exclusively in their target area, a situation which continued for a long time, leading to their (temporary or permanent) rejection from the canon due to doubts about their apostolic origins. Thus, for instance, II Peter was rejected for centuries by many, and it is rejected by Nestorians to this day.⁽²⁾ Even if not universally accepted, a book was highly regarded by its recipients and those church's in the surrounding areas. This led to *local canonicity*, a book being used in public worship in a particular region. Twenty-seven of these books came in time to have universal canonicity, but others (e.g. Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, Barnabas, I Clement, Gospel of the Hebrews) were rejected for inclusion in the New Testament canon, even though they often retained a reputation for being profitable Christian reading.⁽³⁾

Although the New Testament books we have today were written in the first century, it took time for them to be accepted as universally authoritative. Initially, only the life and sayings of Christ were considered of equal authority with the Old Testament scriptures. For instance, Hegessipus in the first half of the second century accepted only “the Law, the Prophets, and the Lord” as norms “to which a right faith must conform”⁽⁴⁾ The *Didascalia Apostolorum* which appears to have been written in the first half of the third century in Northern Syria similarly states the

authoritative norms are "the sacred scriptures and the gospel of God" (which it also refers to as "the Law, the book of the Kings and of the Prophets, and the Gospel" and the "Law, Prophet, and Gospel").[\(5\)](#)

Moreover, the "Gospel" spoken of was often the Oral Gospel and not exclusively the four Gospels we have in our current Bible. There were also many apocryphal gospels written between the late first and early third centuries. Some of them appear to accurately preserve some of Christ's sayings and were long used in Christian circles (for instance, Eusebius (c. 325) writes that the Gospel of the Hebrews was still in use although not widely accepted); others were written to support some heretical sect.[\(6\)](#) While use was made of the four Gospels,

in the first one and a half centuries of the Church's history, there was no single Gospel writing which is directly made known, named, or in any way given prominence by quotation. Written and oral traditions run side by side or cross, enrich or distort one another without distinction or even the possibility of distinction between them.[\(7\)](#)

The reason for this is that the authority of Christ's words came from Christ having spoken them and not from the words appearing in a sacred text in a fixed form. As a result, sayings from apocryphal sources and the Oral Gospel appear alongside quotes from the four Gospels of our present New Testament.[\(8\)](#) Many early Christians, in fact, had a preference for oral tradition. For instance, Papias in the first half of the second century, said that he inquired of followers of the apostles what the apostles had said and what "Aristion and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord were still saying. For I did not imagine that things out of books would help me as much as the utterances of a living and abiding voice." However, he does mention the Gospels of St. Mark and St. Matthew by name.[\(9\)](#) Early Christian preference for oral tradition had rabbinic parallels—for instance Philo though oral tradition was superior to scripture. In Semitic thought, the idea persisted for a long time. As late as the thirteenth century, Arab historian Abu-el-Quasim ibn `Askir said, "My friend strive zealously and without ceasing to get hold of [traditions]. Do not take them from written records, so they may not be touched by the disease of textual corruption."[\(10\)](#)

St. Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200), Bishop of Lyons and a great fighter against heresy, was the last writer to use the Oral Gospel as an independent source. He initially fought heresy using only the Old Testament and the church's Oral tradition. However, later, in response to needs arising from fighting Gnosticism and Marcionism, he came to use the books of New Testament extensively.[\(11\)](#)

Besides the Oral Gospels, the Diatessaron served as an alternate Gospel. The Diatessaron was a harmony of the four gospels, written c. 150-160 by Tatian. It circulated widely in Syriac-speaking churches—it was their standard text of the gospels until it was superseded by the Peshitta in the fifth century. The Diatessaron's use shows that the four gospels were considered important authorities, but not exclusive authorities. The Diatessaron by itself constituted as the New Testament scriptures for the Syrian churches until the fourteen Pauline epistles were added in the third century.[\(12\)](#)

Thus, we see that for a considerable period of time, many Christians (particularly those in Syria and those from a Jewish background) accepted only the Gospel alongside the Old Testament as

Scripture. Further, many accepted it in the form of the Oral Gospel or of both the Oral and written Gospel (where the written Gospel might contain either more or fewer books than are currently accepted).

The Pauline letters achieved acceptance in a fixed form considerably earlier; they were circulating as a body of writing "well before AD 90."[\(13\)](#) In fact, recent research makes it quite likely that *p46*, an early collection of Pauline letters should be dated in the late first century.[\(14\)](#) The letters were known and circulated among both orthodox and heretics as a collection from the early second century. The collection probably contained ten Pauline letters: Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians, and Philemon.[\(15\)](#)

The first person to attempt to define the canon precisely was the heretic Marcion. Marcion believed that the God of the Old Testament, the Creator God, was contemptible, a very different God from the God of the New Testament. He believed the Christian Gospel was a Gospel of Love to the exclusion of Law. He rejected the Old Testament as a result. His message was quite popular-it was the chief rival to Orthodox Christianity in the latter half of the second century.[\(16\)](#) He accepted only the Lukan gospel and ten Pauline letters, which he probably chose based on the standard circulating collection.[\(17\)](#) He felt St. Paul alone understood Christ-he was certain that the disciples completely misunderstood their Master. Marcion's motivation for accepting only St. Luke's gospel is complex; he took St. Paul's reference to "his gospel" or "the gospel" to refer to a particular book at St. Paul's disposal and set out to find it. The Oral Gospel was out of the question as the sayings could not be confirmed and hence were dubious-he wanted documents which might have preserved the truth in a pure form. (Incidentally, he is the only critic of the Oral Gospel, or any written Gospel, known in the early church.) St. Matthew, while the most popular Gospel, was out of the question as too "judaising"; St. Mark was not widely used. St. John was a mixture of things he liked and didn't like-and there were questions on its age and authenticity. From Marcion's perspective, St. Luke's Gospel had the fewest problems; further, St. Luke was associated with St. Paul.[\(18\)](#)

However, Marcion was not satisfied with accepting the eleven books of his canon in the form he received them. He was convinced that they had been interpolated with "judaising" material. He set out to reconstruct the original, uncorrupted text, free from all distortions.[\(19\)](#) His mind was too narrow and his ideology too rigid to conceive that there were multiple perspectives on the same truths in St. Paul, that God's Law and Grace while contrasted were not put into opposition-although God's Law and man's laws were. He eliminated all but one perspective from his Gospel and Epistles. This perspective, however, was not St. Paul's, but Marcion's. However, it should be noted that he only subtracted, he never added to the texts he received.[\(20\)](#) (His canon and a number of other canons are summarized in tabular form in the appendix.)

Before Marcion, the question we are addressing in this paper as to how we can be confident that all and only those books that belong in the New Testament in fact are in the New Testament had not begun to be formulated. Marcion formulated part of the question in his attempt to determine a collection of authoritative books. His answer was very wrong, but he forced the church to consider the question of what books should be included in the canon as Marcion's was clearly too small. It left out too much of the Christian message.

In response to Marcion's canon, the expansion phase of the New Testament canon began. The books in his canon in unmutated form were at the core of both the final canon and most approximations of it on the path to the final canon. The church insisted on a catholic scripture-one that encompassed Jewish and Gentile Christianity and that faithfully reflected the apostolic teachings. (Marcion had accepted only a small strand of Gentile Christianity and added in much that was his own.) The book of Acts is absolutely crucial to a catholic New Testament because it honored Ss. Peter, Paul, and James. Some Jewish Christians revered St. James and hated St. Paul's memory. Some heretics like Marcion rejected all that was Jewish. However, this polarization is impossible for those who take Acts seriously.(21)

St. Justin Martyr (c. 100-c. 165), the preeminent apologist of the early church and a vigorous opponent of Gnosticism including Marcionism,(22) was unwilling to accept Marcion's truncated canon. He ``quoted freely from" the four canonical gospels, Acts, the Pauline Epistles including Hebrews, and I Peter.(23) However, he does not speak of a canon-for instance he was apparently unacquainted with treating the four church gospels as a unit.(24)

St. Irenaeus, who was previously mentioned in connection with the Oral Gospel, produced the first known catholic canon. He was the first to adopt Marcion's notion of a new scripture. He used this idea to fight heresies, including Marcion's. He recognized the four gospel canon as an already established entity and championed it as ``an indispensable and recognized collection against all deviations of heretics."(25) Thus, sometime in the last half of the second century, the four church gospels began to be viewed as a single unit. He defended the four gospels by letting the various heresies that accepted only one of the gospels testify on behalf of the gospel they adhered to (the Ebionites, Docetists, Marcionites, and Valentinians for the gospels of St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John respectively.) He refused to accept new gospels, arguing from symbology the appropriateness of having four gospels. He defended Acts by pointing out that it is illogical to accept St. Luke's gospel and reject Acts (as the Marcionites did). The Pauline letters needed no defense as even the heretics acknowledged them as authoritative.(26) He cited most of them, in fact he cited from every New Testament book except Philemon and III John.(27) (Given that both are extremely short, this does not indicate one way or the other what he thought of their canonicity.) While citing both Revelations and the Shepherd, he did not cite them as canonical books, although he considered them important.(28)

St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215) made use of an open canon. He seemed ``practically unconcerned about canonicity. To him, inspiration is what mattered."(29) In addition to books that did not make it into the final New Testament canon but which had local canonicity (Barnabas, Didache, I Clement, Revelation of Peter, the Shepherd, the Gospel according to the Hebrews), he also used the Gospel of the Egyptians, Preaching of Peter, Traditions of Matthias, Sibylline Oracles, and the Oral Gospel.(30) He did, however, prefer the four church gospels to all others, although he supplemented them freely with apocryphal gospels. He was the first to treat non-Pauline letters of the apostles (other than I Peter) as scripture-he accepted I Peter, I and II John, and Jude as scripture.(31)

The expansion phase considerable enlarged the accepted canon. It reached near final form in many quarters by around 200, containing the four gospels, Acts, and the Pauline Epistles. The main books disputed after that time were: Revelations, Hebrews, Philemon, and the Catholic

Epistles (I and II Peter, I and II and III John, and Jude).[\(32\)](#) For instance, the Old Latin translation of the New Testament (c. 200) contained the present day canon other than II Peter, James, and Hebrews.[\(33\)](#)

The Muratorian Canon written c. 200 by a private theologian states that the New Testament canon consists of the following: the four gospels (the beginning of the document is mutilated, but it speaks of "the third book of the gospel: according to Luke," which almost certainly implies the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark were included), Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, two letters of John (probably I and II John), Jude, and Revelation-as well as the Revelation of Peter ("which some of our people will not have to be read in the church," but which "may be read") and the Wisdom of Solomon.[\(34\)](#) However, it rejected the Shepherd for public reading in church because it was "written by Hermas in the city of Rome quite recently, in our own times, when his brother Pius occupied the bishop's chair in the city of Rome." (Pius was bishop of Rome during part of the reign of Antoninus Pius whose reign ran from 138-161.) It was, however, considered good private reading.[\(35\)](#) The reasoning is that the work was post-apostolic and hence that it could not possibly be canonical. (The history backing up the reasoning is open to debate, dates as early as 90 and as late as 157 are plausible.[\(36\)](#))

The expansion phase was forced to come to an end by the Montanist heresy, an apocalyptic movement that demanded incredible moral and ascetic rigor of its adherents and was convinced that it was Spirit-inspired prophets and not clerics who should lead the church. Montanists claimed that they were completing Christ's unfinished work, that rejecting their three prophets was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Just as Marcion forced the church to think about what books ought to be in the canon of New Testament scripture, the Montanists forced the church to think about what should be excluded from the canon.[\(37\)](#) The attitude that the canon is closed can be found in a quote in Eusebius written "more than thirteen years" after the last of the three Montanist "prophets" died. The writer explains that he was hesitant for a time to write against Montanism

not from inability to refute falsehood and witness to the truth, but a precaution against the danger that some people might think I was adding another paragraph or clause to the wording of the New Covenant of the Gospel, to which nothing can be added, from which nothing can be taken away, by anyone who has determined to live by the Gospel itself.[\(38\)](#)

Scripture came to be seen as a fixed collection of authoritative books, and it was believed to be presumptuous to add to the collection.[\(39\)](#)

While the ideas of a canon became more clear, only the core described previously was certain. Revelation in particular was attacked by many because Montanism had made apocalyptic material suspect. Gaius of Rome, an early third century churchman, attacked the inclusion of the Gospel of St. John, Hebrews, and Revelation on anti-Montanist grounds (he ascribed St. John's Gospel and Revelation to Cerinthus, a Gnostic heretic who was a contemporary of St. John).[\(40\)](#) In general, however, apocalyptic material, while treated with caution, was not considered as suspect in the West as in the East. The Shepherd was dropped from the Western canon; the Revelation of Peter and the Revelation of John were both challenged. However, in the East (the Greek speaking parts of the world and Egypt), there was nearly universal refusal to allow apocalyptic writings into the canon until Western influence began to sway the Eastern Christians

in the fourth century. Moreover, Hebrews was rejected in the West because it was used by the Montanists to justify their harsh penitential system and because the West was not certain of its authorship. Hebrews was not accepted in the West until the fourth century under the influence of St. Athanasius.[\(41\)](#)

Origen (c. 185-c. 254), the most influential Biblical commentator of the first three centuries of Christianity, categorized books into three categories: those acknowledged by all the churches, the disputed books which some churches accepted, and the spurious books. The acknowledged books were the four gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistle, I Peter, I John, and Revelation. The disputed books were II Peter, II John, III John, James, and Jude.[\(42\)](#) He may have considered Barnabas, Didache, and the Shepherd canonical as well—he used the word “scripture” for them. Both Bruce and von Campenhausen indicate that Origen did view them as canonical (although, Origen became more cautious about both Revelation and the Shepherd in later life), while Davis states that even though Origen used the word “scripture” for them, Origen “did not consider them canonical.”[\(43\)](#) Origen personally came to consider Hebrews as canonical, stating

In the epistle entitled *To the Hebrews* the diction does not exhibit the characteristic roughness of speech or phraseology admitted by the Apostle himself, the construction of the sentences is closer to Greek usage, as anyone capable of recognizing differences of style would agree. On the other hand the matter of the epistle is wonderful, and quite equal to the Apostle's acknowledged writings: the truth of this would be admitted by anyone who has read the Apostle carefully ... If I were asked my personal opinion, I would say that the matter is the Apostle's but the phraseology and construction are those of someone who remembered the Apostle's teaching and wrote his own interpretation of what his master had said. So if any church regards this epistle as Paul's, it should be commended for so doing, for the primitive Church had every justification for handing it down as his. Who wrote the epistle is known to God alone: the accounts that have reached us suggest that it was either Clement, who became Bishop of Rome, or Luke, who wrote the gospel and Acts.[\(44\)](#)

Origen's views were important in making Hebrews widely accepted throughout the East; it had previously been accepted as Pauline and canonical only in Egypt. In time, Eastern acceptance led the West to accept Hebrews as scripture.[\(45\)](#)

For instance, Eusebius wrote in his *History of the Church* (c. 325) that Paul

was obviously and unmistakably the author of fourteen epistles, but we must not shut our eyes to the fact that some authorities have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, pointing out that the Roman Church denies it is the work of Paul.[\(46\)](#)

Eusebius' view of the canon was very similar to Origen's, both for the canon's bounds and for the method of specifying the bounds—the main difference being Eusebius' outright rejection of Barnabas, Didache, and the Shepherd. Eusebius followed Origen's classification of alleged New Testament books, stating

It will be well, at this point, to classify the New Testament writings already referred to. We must, of course, put first the holy quartet of gospels, followed by the Acts of the Apostles. The next

place in the list goes to Paul's epistles, and after them we must recognize the epistle called I John; likewise I Peter. To these may be added, if it is though proper, the Revelation of John, the arguments about which I shall set out when the time comes. These are classed as Recognized Books. Those that are disputed, yet familiar to most, include the epistles known as James, Jude, and II Peter, and those called II and III John, the work either of the evangelist or of someone else with the same name.

Among Spurious Books must be placed the `Acts' of Paul, the `Shepherd', and the `Revelation of Peter'; also the alleged `Epistle of Barnabas', and the `Teaching of the Apostles' [Didache], together with the Revelation of John, if this seems the right place for it; as I said before, some reject it, others included it among the Recognized Books. Moreover, some have found a place in the list for the `Gospel of Hebrews', a book which has a special appeal for those Hebrews who have accepted Christ. These would all be classed with the Disputed Books, but I have been obliged to list the latter separately, distinguishing those writings which according to the teaching of the Church are true, genuine, and recognized, from those in a different category, not canonical but disputed, yet familiar to most churchmen; for we must not confuse these with the writings published by heretics under the name of the apostles, as containing either Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Matthias, and several others besides these, or Acts of Andrew, John, and other apostles. To none of these has any churchman of any generation ever seen fit to refer to his writings. Again, nothing could be farther from apostolic usage than the type of phraseology employed, while the ideas and implications of their contents are so irreconcilable with true orthodoxy that they stand revealed as forgeries of heretics. It follows that so far from being classed even among Spurious Books, they must be thrown out as impious and beyond the pale.[\(47\)](#)

The final form of the canon was nearly at hand. Emperor Constantine's order for fifty copies of scripture may have been important in the process. While their exact contents are not certain, some surmise that these copies may have contained the 27 books of the final New testament canon.[\(48\)](#) The canons of the council of Laodicia (c. 363) accepted all the books of the final canon except Revelation.[\(49\)](#) The first list of canonical books of the New Testament that exactly matches our own, having neither more nor fewer books, was contained in St. Athanasius' Easter Letter of 367 which states that

Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.[\(50\)](#)

In addition to the books of the canon, he mentions that other books are profitable for instruction, that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and

Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles [Didache], and the Shepherd. But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read.(51)

The ancient distrust of the Western Church for Hebrews continued. It was probably St. Athanasius' influence during his stay in Rome (he fled there in 339) which helped convince many influential Western churchmen to accept Hebrews as canonical, although not necessarily Pauline. A diversity of opinion as to its authorship continued, but it was eventually accepted.(52)

The final acceptance of exactly this set of 27 books by everyone except the Nestorians (who accept five fewer) and the Ethiopians (who accept more) took some time particularly for Hebrews (because the Roman church was unsure of its authorship), Revelations (because it was easily misused by those with apocalyptic fantasies), and Jude (because it quoted from the apocryphal book of Enoch). While II Peter previously was the most disputed book,(53) by this point, it was less controversial to the Christian mainstream. For instance, St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-386) and St. Gregory Nazianzus (329-389) accepted all 27 books except Revelation. On the other hand, in 405, Pope Innocent I wrote a letter which affirms a 26 book canon that excluded Hebrews.(54) Clearly, it took some time to achieve universal acceptance among the Orthodox for Hebrews in the West, and Revelation in the East.

The Western Council of Hippo (393) was probably the first council to specify the limits of the canon, and it accepted the 27 book canon, allowing only them to be read in church under the name of canonical writings. It ``permitted, however, that the passions of martyrs, be read when their [martyrdoms'] anniversaries are celebrated."(55)

Some accepted larger canons as well. St. Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315-415) accepted all 27 books but also accepted the Wisdom books of Solomon and Ben Sirach. The late fourth century *Codex Sinaiticus* included Barnabas and the Shepherd ``at the end but with no indication of secondary status." The early fifth century *Codex Alexandrinus* made ``no demarcation between I and II Clement" and the rest of the New Testament. St. Jerome (c. 342-420), the translator of the Vulgate and one of the greatest scholars of the early church, seemed to believe that Barnabas and the Shepherd were worthy of inclusion. However, he recognized that they were not in the accepted canon, and he did not believe that anyone had the authority to add them. He also noted that many still rejected Jude because of its quotation from Enoch.(56)

The canon of the Syriac-speaking churches in the third century included the Diatessaron and the fourteen Pauline epistles. In the early fifth century, the Peshitta became the official text of Syriac-speaking churches. It replaced the Diatessaron with the four gospels. It contained the 22 books of our New Testament other than II Peter, II John, III John, Jude, and Revelation. (The Peshitta is traditionally held to be the work of Rabulla, bishop of Edessa from 412-435. However, it probably built on work of the previous century.) The Nestorian church still uses this 22 book canon. In 508, the Jacobite branch of the Syriac church came to accept the standard 27 book canon.(57)

The longest Biblical canon belongs to the Ethiopian church. Their Old Testament contains the Septuagintal books, Jubilees, the Ethiopic Enoch, IV Edras, the Rest of the Words of Baruch, the Ascension of Isaiah, and other books. Their New Testament includes the Shepherd and other

books. Some manuscripts of the Ethiopian New Testament include the Epistle of Eusebius to Carpianus and the Eusebian Canons which were written by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c. 260-c. 340).[\(58\)](#)

Thus, we see that producing the final form of the New Testament canon took a considerable period of time. It took still longer to produce near universal agreement. However, to this day, there exist ancient churches which have either never accepted certain books or which accept more than 27 books. The canon in its present form was not a self-evident fact, but the result of a prolonged struggle—we reap the fruits of other men's labors.

The reasons for formalizing the canon included determining which books should be used liturgically and in theological and moral reasoning, heretical stimuli (e.g. Marcionism, Montanism), the "missionary stimulus" which required determining which books to translate, and the need to know which books must be preserved at all costs in persecution. There were a number of principles used in formalizing the canon. Apostolic authority (which required that the book have been written by an apostle, by someone associated with an apostle—for instance St. Mark and St. Luke, or by a member of the Lord's family) was a crucial principle in determining canonicity. A corollary was that the book had to be from the apostolic age. It had to conform to Orthodoxy as opposed to Docetism and Gnosticism. Regular use of a book liturgically was also an important principle—and the book must have been widely accepted for a long time and in many places. Note that liturgical use both provided a powerful motivation to produce the canon (since knowing what books ought be used in public worship was critical) and was itself an important determinant in setting the bounds of the canon.[\(59\)](#)

The complexity of the process demonstrates that we can know that all and only those books that belonged in the canon are in fact in the canon only because we know that God is faithful, that He will give us all that is necessary for salvation, that He promised to protect His Church so that the gates of hell will be impotent to prevail against her. If, however, we accept that He led the Church aright in the matter of preserving the apostolic teachings, it seems logical that He must have preserved His bride from errors in other matters as well. The myth of the Church abandoning its Master's precepts shortly after the apostolic age or after the beginning of the Constantinian era must be abandoned by those who wish to affirm the New Testament scripture for those scriptures were recognized by that church.

Many practices that are deplored by Protestants were common before the beginning of the fourth century, a time when many if not most Christians rejected inclusion of at least some of the following books in the canon: Hebrews, James, II Peter, II and III John, Jude, and Revelations; while others accepted additional books like Barnabas and the Shepherd. For instance, the practice of praying for the dead comes to Christianity from Judaism. This practice is testified to in II Macabees 13:42-45 (RSV) which tells how Judas Maccabeus (d. 161 B.C.)[\(60\)](#) and his men

turned to prayer beseeching that the sin which had been committed [by their dead comrades] might be wholly blotted out... In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the

splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sins.

II Timothy 1: 16-18 may also be a prayer for a departed believer; I Corinthians 15: 29 speaks not merely of prayer for the dead, but even of baptism on their behalf. Many inscriptions in the catacombs contain prayers for the souls of the departed—for instance an inscription for "the dear and well-loved Sirica" concludes with the prayer "Lord Jesus, remember our daughter." The inscription for Agape pleads, "I beg you to pray when you come here and to entreat Father and Son in all your prayers. Do not fail to remember dear Agape so that God Almighty may keep Agape safe forever."[\(61\)](#) The early liturgies typically commemorated the dead. The writings of Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225), St. Cyprian (d. 258), and others demonstrate that private prayers for the dead were also common. While the fourth-century heretic Aetius denied the "efficacy and legitimacy" of such prayers, his views on this and other matters were rejected.[\(62\)](#)

Similarly, requesting the prayers of the departed was also common. For instance, the catacombs contain inscriptions like "Atticus, sleep in peace, carefree in your security, and pray earnestly for our sinful selves," and "Holy Xystus, have Aurelius Repentinus in mind during your prayers." Inscriptions like "Paul and Peter, pray for Victor" appear frequently.[\(63\)](#)

The tangible expressions of God's grace through the relics of the saints is attested to in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, II King 13: 21 (RSV) states,

And as a man was being buried, lo, a marauding band was seen and the man was cast into the grave of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet.

The woman with the issue of blood was healed by touching Christ's garment and not his person (Matthew 9: 21). Also, Acts 19: 11-12 (RSV) states that

And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

This knowledge that God's grace is associated in a special way with objects from holy persons led the early church to pay great respect to the relics of the martyrs. Thus, in The Martyrdom of Polycarp 18: 2, 3, we read that after St. Polycarp (traditionally c. 69-c. 155)[\(64\)](#) was killed and his body burned, his congregation

later took up his bones, more precious than costly stones and finer than gold, and deposited them in a suitable place. And there, in so far as it is possible, the Lord will grant that we come together with joy and gladness and celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom both in memory of those who have contended in former times and for the exercise and training of those who will do so in the future.[\(65\)](#)

Here, we see both the honoring of relics and the celebration of saints' days.

These practices, though an integral part of the faith of the early Christian martyrs are tragically a source of divisions among Orthodox and Protestants. It is not because they differ on the central role of scripture in the life of faith. Both Protestants and Orthodox affirm that

everything in the Church is judged by the Bible... Nothing in the Church may contradict it. Everything in the Church must be biblical; for the Church, in order to be the Church, must be

wholly expressive of the Bible; or more accurately, it must be wholly faithful and expressive of that reality to which the Bible is itself the scriptural witness.(66)

The point of disagreement is, then, not on scripture's role, but on the proper method of interpreting scripture. The differences comes not because one group studies scripture more carefully and respects it more. Commendable as such diligence is, careful and respectful study, while indispensable, is insufficient to discover the truths of the Christian faith if one comes to the Bible with the wrong set of assumptions. Most Orthodox and Protestant believers must admit that the Jehovah's Witnesses study scripture more carefully than they do-the Jehovah's Witnesses may even respect it more. However, like all of us, the Jehovah's Witnesses come to scripture with a set of presuppositions-this cannot be avoided since complete objectivity is impossible, even in perceiving the physical environment. What one knows already, one's presuppositions and expectations will not only have a tremendous effect on what one sees and how one interprets but may even *determine* what one sees.(67)

The Jehovah's Witnesses provide a sobering warning that one's devotion to scripture is not enough-the presuppositions of their tradition prevent them from seeing scripture clearly despite their devotion to it. It is also clear, for instance, that the presuppositions of an early Christian who grew up in a Judaism that was used to praying for the dead will be quite different from those of a twentieth century Protestant who grew up in a culture that has deplored prayer for the dead for over four-hundred years. Both would read the New Testament as justifying their *status quo*, but the *status quo* being justified would be quite different. However, it makes more sense to assume that the interpretations of the early church are correct; being closer to the founding of the faith, they share more of the presuppositions of Christ and the apostles, both in terms of general cultural assumptions and in terms of oral tradition.(68) Only scripture is ultimately authoritative for the defense of doctrine, but only with tradition can we obtain the correct presuppositions so that we can interpret scripture aright. Personal interpretation leads only to the chaos of literally tens of thousands of denominations-established because each founder, having his own personal presuppositions, taught a somewhat different gospel.

In avoiding the pitfall of incorrect interpretation, then, good intentions are insufficient. Wisdom, accurate information, and the leading of the Spirit are all required-if one is missing any of them, one will almost certainly go astray. However, an accurate reading of history tells us that the Church existed about twenty years with no New Testament books; roughly 150 years before most of the books of the final New Testament canon were known and accepted by *some* important churchmen-and then, they accepted some additional books and did not know or knew and rejected some of the 27 books; almost 340 years before the first list that exactly matches the final canon was produced; and almost 480 years before the present canon was accepted by the last major group to resist (other than the Nestorians who reject five books to this day). Clearly, it was possible for people to be Christians with something less than total clarity about the contents of the New Testament. They were able to be Christians because they belonged to the Church which existed before the New Testament existed and has frequently been forced to make do with no written copies in whole areas due to persecution or poverty. The Church preserved and preserves the teaching of Christ and of His apostles, and not only the words on the pages of sacred scripture, but also the correct set of presuppositions, the authentic tradition which is required to interpret scripture correctly. Scripture is only properly interpreted in the context of the Church. If one's presuppositions are leading one to conclusions that differ from those of the

early Church, one needs to change one's presuppositions. The simplest and safest way to do this is to learn and obey the tradition of the Church.

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End Notes

(1)

F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1974), pp. 134, 300, 544, 1365. Herbert May and Bruce Metzger, ed., *The New Oxford Study Bible* (New York: Oxford Press, 1977), pp. 1286, 1433, 1484, 1489, 1490, 1493. Note that I am rejecting these sources' second century date for II Peter. It is traditionally ascribed to St. Peter, and possible citations from it exist in I Clement and Barnabas, both of which were written in the first century-see scripture index in Jack Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1978), p. 328, particularly to the similarities to II Peter 3: 4, 8 in those books.

(2)

Carsten Peter Thiede, "A Testament is Born," *Christian History*, 43 (1994), 28. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 215.

(3)

Norman Geisler and William Nix. *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), p. 313.

(4) Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Canon*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 167.

(5) von Campenhausen, p. 167. Cross and Livingston, p. 401.

(6) Cross and Livingston, p. 7. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 88.

(7) von Campenhausen, p. 121.

(8) *Ibid*, p. 121.

- (9) Eusebius, pp. 102-104.
- (10) von Campenhausen, p. 130.
- (11) von Campenhausen, pp. 185, 202. Cross and Livingston, p. 713. The books he used will be discussed later in the paper.
- (12) Cross and Livingston, pp. 400, 1067. Davis. von Campenhausen, p. 203 states that Acts, too, was included in the third century Syrian canon.
- (13) H[enry] Cha[dwick], "Christianity Before the Schism of 1054," *Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 1977 ed.
- (14)

Thiede, p. 27. The standard dating was previously c. 200.

(15)

Bruce, pp. 130-131.

(16)

Cross and Livingston, p. 870.

(17)

von Campenhausen, p. 153. Bruce, p. 148.

(18)

von Campenhausen, pp. 151, 152, 155, 156, 159, 160.

(19)

A mission repeated in our day by those on a "quest for a historical Jesus" and those infatuated with higher criticism.

(20) Bruce, p. 152. von Campenhausen, p. 161.

(21) Bruce, p. 152.

(22) Cross and Livingston, p. 770. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 77.

(23) H. G[rady] D[avis], "Biblical Literature," *Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 1977 ed.

(24) von Campenhausen, p. 171.

(25)

Ibid, pp. 172, 186.

(26)

Ibid, pp. 189, 196, 201.

(27)

Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), I, 599-602. These pages contain an index to scriptural references in St. Irenaeus. The index showed more books being cited than some of my secondary sources (e.g. Davis) indicated.

(28)

von Campenhausen, p. 219.

(29)

Davis. Cross and Livingston, p. 303.

(30)

Bruce, p. 190.

(31)

von Campenhausen, p. 213, 294.

(32)

Ibid, p. 327.

(33)

R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible: An Historical and Exegetical Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), p. 217.

(34)

Davis. von Campenhausen, p. 244. Bruce, pp. 159-161. A translation of the Muratorian Canon appears in Roberts and Donaldson, V, 603, 604.

(35)

Bruce, pp. 161, 166. van Campenhausen, p. 259.

(36) ``Books that Almost Made It," *Christian History*, 43 (1994), 30.

(37) Henry Chadwick, 1993, pp. 52, 53. Andrew Louth, ``Who's Who in Eusebius" in *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (New York: Penguin, 1989), pp. 396, 397.

(38) Eusebius, p. 160, 163.

(39) von Campenhausen, p. 230.

(40) von Campenhausen, p. 238. Louth, p. 369. Eusebius, p. 91.

(41) von Campenhausen, pp. 232, 233, 235, 237. Bruce, p. 221.

(42) Bruce, pp. 192, 193. Davis. Cross and Livingston, p. 1008.

(43) von Campenhausen, p. 320. Bruce, p. 194. Davis.

(44) Eusebius, p. 202.

(45) von Campenhausen, pp. 232, 233.

(46)

Eusebius, p. 66.

(47)

Ibid, p. 88.

(48)

Bruce, pp. 203, 205. Geisler and Nix, p. 282.

(49)

Bruce, p. 210.

(50)

Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2nd series), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), IV, 552.

(51)

Ibid, p. 552. The "[Didache]" interpolation is mine, while "[merely]" appeared in the translation. Note that while the vast majority of Christians agree on the books of the New

Testament canon, there is great disagreement to this day on the bounds of the Old Testament.

(52)

Bruce, p. 221. Cross and Livingston, p. 101.

(53)

Geisler and Nix, p. 299. It was disputed because of doubts that it was a genuine writing of St. Peter due to stylistic differences between I and II Peter.

(54)

Norman Geisler and William Nix, p. 104. Bruce, pp. 211, 212, 234. Cross and Livingston, pp. 369, 599.

(55)

Bruce, p. 232.

(56)

Bruce, p. 213, 214, 227. Cross and Livingston, p. 309, 310, 464, 731. Davis.

(57)

Cross and Livingston, p. 1067. Bruce, p. 215. Davis.

(58)

A[rthur] V[ööbus], "Eastern Christianity, Independent Churches of," *Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 1977 ed. Cross and Livingston, pp. 475, 481.

(59)

Geisler and Nix, p. 277. Bruce, pp. 256-269. von Campenhausen, p. 331.

(60)

Cross and Livingston, p. 763.

(61)

Robert Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 36, 37.

(62)

Cross and Livingston, pp. 367, 381, 1352.

(63)

Milburn, p. 38

(64)

Cross and Livingston, p. 1107. Some following Eusebius place his death in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and his birth a corresponding amount later. His birth year is estimated using his trial statement that he had served Christ for 86 years.

(65)

Sparks, p. 148.

(66)

Thomas Hopko, "The Bible in the Orthodox Church," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol 14, No. 1-2 (1970), 66, 67.

(67)

Mary Sanford, "An Orthodox View of Biblical Criticism," *Sourozh*, 26 (November 1986), 30. Emphasis in the original.

(68)

"the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" II Thessalonians 2:15 (RSV)

Most Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are based on the LXX, not the Hebrew. Of particular interest is Paul's use of the LXX since, as a student of Gamaliel, he would have had ample knowledge of the difference between the Greek and Hebrew texts. Most scholars are skeptical of the fabulous details which developed around the story of the translation of the LXX, but the main historical facts have been accepted. Formulating a canon of Scripture was never up for discussion. However, if it had been, the Apocryphal books would have certainly received a warm response. Here are excerpts from the acts of two early local synods.