

THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON:
DECONSTRUCTIO AD ABSURDUM?

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Today's resurgence of interest in the topic of the NT canon has had noticeable effects. It seems it was not long ago that most laypeople were in the dark about the rise and formation of the NT canon, and had to seek out their pastor or local seminary professor for answers. Today that seems to have changed. If you have found yourself conversing about religion with a stranger in an airport recently, as I have, you are as likely as not to hear at some point in the conversation an echo of the words of Arthur Teabing, in Dan Brown's novel, "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great."

If the stranger does not mention Constantine, he or she may still be quite assured that the selection of books for the Bible occurred several centuries after the time of Christ, and was a process attended by significant political pressures.

One of my son's professors at the University of Florida recently asked his class, "Who decided which books would be included in the Bible?" One student confidently responded, "The people with the biggest army." The professor could think of nothing to add to this brilliant riposte, and simply returned to his lecture.

Similarly, on the question of whether the canon is closed or open, people today seem to know the answer! Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.), for instance, stated publicly last July that, "What Barack Obama has accomplished . . . is so extraordinary that another chapter could be added to the Bible to chronicle its significance."¹

Christians might comfort themselves with the thought that these are not the pronouncement of *bona fide* scholars, but vulgar distortions of history abroad in the popular culture. But the problem is, the lay people actually sound a lot like the scholars.

How was the NT canon formed? David Dungan in his book *Constantine's Bible* says, "the Christian *canonization* process involved a governmental

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¹ Quoted in Josephine Hearn, "Black lawmakers emotional about Obama's success," June 5, 2008, at <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=55D13D94-3048-5C12-00E851454E822F1E> (accessed August 26, 2008).

intrusion,”² and, “When the Roman government, in the person of the emperor, powerfully intruded into the church’s activities, it irrevocably skewed the whole debate by transplanting it into the state’s legal framework where coercive enforcement of the outcome was routine.”³

On the question of whether the NT canon is or should be closed, it may not surprise anyone here that Robert Funk, a member of the Jesus Seminar, says he would like “to issue a revised canon, a new New Testament, by both shrinking and expanding the texts to be included.”⁴ Perhaps more noteworthy are the words of (former) Baptist pastor and Acadia Divinity College President Lee McDonald. At the end of a 400 plus-page study of the rise of the canon McDonald asks whether the church is right “in perceiving the need for a closed canon of Scriptures?”⁵ Since the earliest Christians “did not have such canons as the church presently possesses today, nor did they indicate that their successors should draw them up,” McDonald concludes, “one is forced to ask the question of whether biblical canons are in fact Christian.”⁶

McDonald is by no means out of step with a larger number of scholars who write on the canon. In his 1985 book *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, Harry Gamble had said, “During the first and most of the second century, it would have been impossible to foresee that such a collection [of NT Scripture] would emerge. Therefore, it ought not to be assumed that the existence of the NT is a necessary or self-explanatory fact. Nothing dictated that there should be a NT at all.”⁷

Many would concur with Gamble when he observes that “the historical study of the NT has steadily undermined the traditional legitimations of the canon.”⁸ James D. G. Dunn, for instance, writes that he cannot defend the books of the NT in terms of apostolicity.⁹ He cannot defend them as being more inspired than others, pointing to some compositions of Luther and Wesley as being “at least as inspired as the author of 2 Peter.”¹⁰ Nor can

² David L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible. Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 133.

³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴ Robert W. Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” in Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 549. While generous enough to allow that the Bible still contains some “profound insights,” he regards as a positive aspect of the present day “that the authority of the Bible is eroding by leaps and bounds.”

⁵ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 426.

⁶ McDonald, *Canon*, 426

⁷ Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ James D. G. Dunn, “Has the Canon a Continuing Function?” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate* 577. This is because some NT writings were second or even third generation works, and because the apostles “disagreed strongly on several important points.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 578, claiming also that “[a]lmost every Christian who wrote in an authoritative way during the first two centuries of Christianity claimed the same sort of inspiration for their writing as Paul had for his.”

he defend them in terms of “some kind of orthodoxy,” for, he says, “no real concept of orthodoxy as yet existed in the first century and . . . in terms of later orthodoxy the New Testament writings themselves can hardly be called wholly ‘orthodox.’”¹¹

While the consensus of a significant body of scholars seems to be that “canonization” proper began for the church only in the fourth century, many will acknowledge that a number of persons or movements in the second century paved the way for that later effort.¹² “The impelling force for the formation of the canon, that is, for the singling out of a limited number of traditional writings of Christian authors as authoritative Holy Scripture,” says Helmut Koester, “came from a radical theologian . . . from the tradition of the Pauline churches: Marcion.”¹³

Marcion is said to have been the first to elevate “Christian writings to the status of ‘Holy Scripture’”¹⁴ (which is a bit odd, since Marcion rejected the OT, and so had no Holy Scripture to whose status he could elevate any writings). It has been argued that Marcion was the first to apply the title “Gospel” to certain books,¹⁵ the first to have a biblical canon at all,¹⁶ and the first to call his canonical collection the NT.¹⁷ Along with Al Gore, he also invented the internet and was the first to land a man on the moon.

Some recent assessments, it must be said, see Marcion’s influence on canon formation as quite a bit less spectacular.¹⁸ And many will assign to Irenaeus of Lyons a significant role as a canon precursor,¹⁹ whose influence they regard as very limited until the fourth century.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 319.

¹³ Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2: *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (2d ed.; New York/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000) 8. This is despite the fact that Marcion’s critics (at least from the time of Irenaeus) describe his activities as the curtailment of a well-known set of Gospels and an accepted body of Paul’s Letters.

¹⁴ Ibid. 9.

¹⁵ Ibid. 10.

¹⁶ “[T]o [Marcion] belongs the honor of making the first canon of the NT known to us. Limited as it is by his doctrinal predilections, it yet presents that combination of ‘the gospel’ with ‘the apostle’ which forms the heart of all subsequent canons.” F. W. Beare, “Canon of the NT,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962) 4:526. See also McDonald, *Formation* 155.

¹⁷ W. Kinzig, “Καὶνὴ διαθήκη: The Title of the New Testament in the Second and Third Centuries,” *JTS* 45 (1994): 519–44.

¹⁸ See, e.g., John Barton, “Marcion Revisited,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate* 342–43: “He was not assembling a collection of Christian books, but making a (very restricted) selection from the corpus of texts which already existed and which must already have been recognized as sacred by many in the church—otherwise he would not have needed to insist on abolishing them.”

¹⁹ McDonald, *Formation*, 141, says, “It is largely with Irenaeus . . . that the move of the center of authority away from oral tradition to a fixed normative text began to take place, even though the promptings for such a move in the ‘orthodox’ community may have come from Marcion.” This view has recently been affirmed by Arthur Bellinzoni: “Irenaeus . . . writing at the end of the second century, essentially created the core of the New Testament canon of Holy Scripture. It was he who placed side by side with the Old Testament a New Testament canon consisting of the Pauline letters,

We are left in any case with the present NT as a collection of writings which, while still serving as religious authorities to many, are increasingly seen as indistinguishable from a larger class of similar texts,²⁰ a set of writings not originally written to be Scripture,²¹ but selected to be such for us by people of a remote time and culture, who used principles of selection now considered indefensible and obsolete. The deconstruction of the NT canon appears to be complete. This is probably why some recent treatments, in the end, can muster no more than a grudging resignation to the present canon as a historical reality, and wish to point away from the canon to something the author regards as more important.

In this environment the fundamental question is no longer, "how do we know that we have the right books in the canon?" but rather, "how do we know there should be a canon at all?"

I. DEFINITIONS AND APPROACH

There are, of course, some important matters of definition.²² The word "canon," as used for Scripture, it is true enough, seems to arise in fourth-century discussions, when a catalogue or list of the writings in the Bible is in view.²³ Yet the word had been earlier used in other contexts in its more original sense of "rule" or "authority," and in this sense could arguably be used by the later reader to describe how Christians viewed their Scriptures even in the second century. I am not so interested here in defending a broader or narrower definition of "canon" (Canon 1 or Canon 2). If the documents which make up the canon qualify in no intrinsic sense to fall under Paul's designation "divine oracles,"²⁴ and if their authority goes no higher than the highest church council or pope or emperor, then it is of much less interest whether we define canon as an authoritative rule or norm, or an officially sanctioned list of books exclusive of all others. Then it is a matter of secondary importance whether the church chose Matthew or *Thomas*, James or the *Didache*, the Apocalypse of John or the *Apocalypse of Peter*.

some of the Catholic epistles, and the four separate gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." See his "Luke in the Apostolic Fathers," in A. Gregory and C. Tuckett, eds., *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 49, n. 17.

²⁰ Gamble, *Canon*, 13: "Examined within the full context of early Christian literature, the documents which came to constitute the NT canon are not, as a group, recognizably unique." Again, "the traditional boundaries of the NT canon have been deprived of clear and self-evident validity" (p. 83).

²¹ See McDonald, *Canon* 249.

²² See the discussion of Harry Y. Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the *Status Quaestionis*," in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate* 271.

²³ Eugene Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate* 34, prefers the definition of canon as "a closed list of books that have been considered, debated, sifted, and accepted," and so concludes that "talk of an open canon is confusing and counterproductive."

²⁴ John C. Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity," *Trinity Journal* 28 NS (2007) 229–49, speaks of canon as either a community pronouncement, or more essentially, an inherent quality divinely infused.

II. THE SCRIPTURAL SELF-ATTESTATION

1. The OT authorization.

a. *The pattern of revelation.* Many approaches to the subject present themselves as uncompromisingly historical.²⁵ As such they do not give much place to something the Scriptures call “the word of God,” in theological terms, the concept of revelation, or to the question, “Has God spoken?” By training and by taste, historians characteristically wish to detach themselves from a question such as this.²⁶ But ultimately, this is the question that must be asked. For inevitably even such historical studies are more than historical, they are theological, as evinced by the fact that they often end by telling us that we must now view the authority of the NT (or the OT, for that matter) differently, in accordance with the findings of historical study.²⁷

The assumption is that God has not spoken, or that if he has, it would be irrelevant to what is essentially a matter only addressable by the methods of critical historical inquiry. The simple historical question is: By what historical processes did the church come to determine the books of a closed list of authoritative Scriptures? But what if this is not the way the actors in the story perceived what they were doing? What if they, like Irenaeus, saw themselves not as “determining” the documents they found most useful, but as “recognizing” and “receiving” what God had given through Jesus and his apostles? For if God has spoken (this seems to have been their mindset), surely one does not choose, one can only respond as Eli told Samuel to respond: “Speak, LORD, your servant heareth” (1 Sam 3:9). Shall the historian dismiss such comments, presuming to know that Irenaeus and others were really were doing something else (such as playing power politics), despite what they said? Such cynicism does not speak well of the ideal of objectivity. It is easy for us to forget that most of the people we study in this enterprise did not think like we do. They did believe, even if we do not, that God has spoken, and they did believe, even if we do not, that this fact was relevant.

²⁵ See McDonald, *Formation* 319: “Since the origin of the biblical canon is a historical question, it seems that the only defensible position is one that can be historically coherent.”

²⁶ H. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (trans. H. De Jongst; rev. R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1988; 2d rev. ed. [Dutch original 1955]) 3, observes that “separating the theological and historical perspectives can neither cure the creeping sickness suffered by the church because of uncertainty about its foundation nor remedy the situation that divorces the study of the canon from Christian faith, thereby completely robbing such study of its theological character.”

²⁷ E.g. Gamble, *Canon* 86: “Taken as a whole, therefore, the canon cannot constitute a sharply effective theological norm. But once a formal, dogmatic conception of the canon is given up in frank recognition of its inner diversities, it becomes necessary to conceive its normative function in another way.” He goes on to speak of a “canon in the canon,” the specification of a “hermeneutical criterion by which to discern the fundamental meaning of scripture and to allow that meaning to operate as a theological standard.” Gamble, it may be observed, thinks this necessity has arisen more from “the exegesis of NT texts than by the history of the canon.” He believes that “the authority of the canon can also be maintained by the claim that it constitutes the original, earliest, or primary tradition of Christianity, and that it has unique significance because it stands in close spatio-temporal relation to the generative events of Christianity which are otherwise inaccessible” (p. 91, citing Ebeling and Hahn for support).

It was a given among Jews as well as among the early Christians that God had spoken to mankind and that some portion of what he had said had been permanently set down in written form in what Paul called “the oracles of God”; what Josephus called, “the sacred books” (ιερώων βιβλίων, *C. Apion*, 1.1);²⁸ or what Philo and Paul called “the sacred writings” (τὰ ἱερά γράμματα).²⁹ One scholar who took account of these Scriptures as divine revelation, Geerhardus Vos, made an important observation with regard to the Bible, perceived as divine revelation: “[R]evelation does not stand alone by itself, but is (so far as Special Revelation is concerned) inseparably attached to another activity of God, which we call Redemption. . . . Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must, therefore, unfold itself in installments as redemption does.”³⁰ He observed that divine, word revelation both attends and follows God’s new acts of redemption. Redemptive acts are, of course, revelatory in themselves. But “such act-revelations are never entirely left to speak for themselves,” says Vos, “they are preceded and followed by word-revelation. The usual order is: first word, then the fact, then again the interpretative word.”³¹

The Law and the Prophets, acknowledged by Jews and early Christians as given by God as his word to his people, leave Israel with an expectation. It is no accident that the NT writings, contemporary Jewish sources, and ancient secular historians converge to reveal a strong expectation of a new divine act of deliverance at around the turn of the era.³² People were looking for “the consolation of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:25; cf. Isaiah 40) or “the redemption of Israel” (Luke 2:38), usually tied to the coming of a messianic figure or figures, whether he be a Jesus, a Theudas,³³ or a Bar Cochba.

From this point of view, it is only to be expected, then, when the long-awaited redemptive action of God came, through a heralded messianic figure, that a new installment of word revelation should result. After all, something greater than Solomon had come (Matt 12:42; Luke 11:31), something greater than the Temple had appeared (Matt 12:6), the one David called “Lord,” came, and he came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Moreover, from the point of view of OT religion, if a new written corpus should arise with the claim of embodying that new revelation in the wake of a supremely important new redemptive act by God, this can hardly be called unnatural or wholly unanticipated. One might in fact regard it as practically stipulated by the observable pattern of redemption and revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures.³⁴

If a new set of holy writings were to emerge, however strange the process by which they did so, and however long and messy the process by which

²⁸ Also “the decrees of God” (θεοῦ δόγματα, *Against Apion* 1.42).

²⁹ Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*, cited in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.17.10, 20; Paul: 2 Tim 3:15.

³⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology. Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977 [repr. of 1948 ed.]) 5–6.

³¹ *Ibid.* 7.

³² See, e.g., John 1:20–21; 4:25; 5:43; 7:27, 31, 41–42; 11:27; 12:3.

³³ Acts 5:34–36. The Theudas mentioned by Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97–98 is evidently a later rebel.

³⁴ See Vos, *Biblical Theology* 300: “The Old Testament, through its prophetic attitude, postulates the New Testament.”

they might find wide recognition, their foundations must be seen to go much deeper than the second-century church. With all due respect to Professor Koester, “The impelling force for the formation of the canon,” then, cannot not be Marcion (or Irenaeus, for that matter), but the Scriptures of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, or rather, the God who gave them.

But we have more than simply a pattern of redemption and revelation, and the presumption that it creates. There are strands of revelation in the old covenant Scriptures that foretell a new period of divine self-disclosure.³⁵

b. A new and eschatological revelation.

(1) *A new prophet like Moses.* From the time of the Pentateuch has existed the expectation of one who would come as a prophet like Moses, whose word the people would obey (Deut 18:15–19). Preaching about Jesus in Acts 3, Peter reminds his audience that “Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people’” (Acts 3:22–23).

The author of Hebrews writes, “Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later,⁶ but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son” (Heb 3:5–6).

“The Law was given through Moses,” John tells us, “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” So much is he the epitome of communication between God and man that he is called “the Word.” It is he, the one in the bosom of the Father, who has made the Father known (John 1:17–18).

All this is appropriate for the one who repeatedly placed his words alongside Scripture (“you have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you”) and who announces that his words are more lasting than the heavens and the earth (Matt 24:35/Mark 13:31/Luke 21:33).

And it is not simply the words spoken personally by this new prophet like Moses that are foretold by the OT Scriptures.

(2) *A new word and law: τὸ εὐαγγέλιον.*³⁶ In that memorable scene late on the day of resurrection in Luke 24, we are told that Jesus opened the disciples’ minds to understand the Scriptures.

³⁵ Vos (ibid. 301) cited only one strand of biblical evidence, that having to do with a new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer 31:31–34), then instituted by our Lord at the Last Supper, and proclaimed as now in effect by Paul (2 Cor 3:6ff) and the author of Hebrews. He recognized, however, that the passages which speak of this “new covenant” described “a new era in religious access to God” but not “a new period of divine self-disclosure,” though Vos thought such self-disclosure “is presupposed under the general law that progress in religion follows progress in revelation.” Of 2 Cor 3:6ff, he says, “Here also, to be sure, we have in the first place a contrast between two religious ministrations, that of the letter and that of the Spirit, that of condemnation and that of righteousness. Nevertheless, the idea of difference in revelation, as underlying the difference in ministration between Moses and Paul, clearly enters” (ibid.).

³⁶ For what follows, see in more detail, C. E. Hill, “God’s Speech in These Last Days: The New Testament Canon as an Eschatological Phenomenon,” in Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington, eds., *Resurrection and Eschatology. Theology in Service of the Church. Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008) 203–54.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:44–47, cf. vv. 25–27).³⁷

Jesus here teaches his disciples that the Scriptures predicted not only the Messiah's suffering, not only that he would rise from the dead, but also that a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations! From Jesus' summary of Scripture, it is just as "necessary" that this message be preached in the name of Jesus to all nations as it is for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead.³⁸ If this word does not go out to all nations, the Messiah's mission, and the prophetic word, will have failed.

One of the texts Jesus must have had in mind as authorizing the carrying of this message is alluded to in Luke 24:47, "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Isaiah 2:2–3 (par. Mic 4:1–2) predicts what would happen "in the latter days": "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

The same text lies behind the reiteration of Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8, where the apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are to be Jesus' "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."³⁹ By these allusions Jesus gives notice to his disciples that this eschatological mission of "the word of the Lord" in the latter days has commenced, and that it will go forward from Jerusalem through them.

In the second century, Justin Martyr would narrate the fulfillment of Isa 2:2–3 in this way: "For from Jerusalem there went out into the world men, twelve in number, and these illiterate, of no ability in speaking; but by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God (διδάξαι πάντας τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ λόγον)" (*I Apol.* 39.3; cf. *Dial.* 24.1, 3).⁴⁰

³⁷ It is worth noting that besides this reference to an apparent threefold division of the Scriptures, there is also Luke 24:27, "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." Here it is said that Jesus "began" with Moses and all the prophets; the further reference to "all the Scriptures" must then also refer to a set of Scriptures beyond those two sections, and the later reference to "the Psalms" is legitimately understood as a representative rather than exhaustive description.

³⁸ Joel Green, *Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 856, n. 19, "This structure is difficult to represent in English, but obvious in Greek: οὕτως γέγραπται παθεῖν . . . ἀναστήναι . . . κηρυχθῆναι."

³⁹ The phrase "to the end of the earth" is not found in Isaiah 2 but comes from Isa 45:22; 48:20; and esp. 49:6, the latter being quoted later in Acts by Paul (13:47).

⁴⁰ See C. E. Hill, "Justin and the New Testament Writings," in E. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica* 30 (Leuven: Peeters, 1997) 46. Justin also sees the preaching ministry of the apostles predicted in Ps 110:2 (*I Apol.* 45.5); Exod 28:33 (*Dial.* 42.1); and Ps 19:2 (*Dial.* 64.8). This same understanding of Isa 2:2–3 is presupposed in Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha* 7, developed by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.34.1, 4 and then adopted in Christian tradition generally. Reidar

But Isa 2:2–3 is only the small end of a wedge of Isaianic and other prophetic texts seen by Jesus, and the authors of the NT as authorizing in the latter days a new word revelation, to be carried to the ends of the earth. These included (and I leave it to you to ruminate over their NT uses, reading in the contents of Carson and Beale’s *Commentary on the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament!*):

Isa 49:6:⁴¹ “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Isa 52:7:⁴² “How beautiful upon the mountains⁴³ are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace (εὐαγγελιζομένου ἀκοὴν εἰρήνης), who brings good news of happiness (εὐαγγελιζόμενος ἀγαθά), who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”⁴⁴

Isa 61:1–2a:⁴⁵ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor (ἔχρισέν με εὐαγγελίχασθαι πτωχοῖς). He has sent me to proclaim liberty (ἄφεσιν) to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The word εὐαγγελίζομαι in these and other texts thus become the major source for the use of the word among NT writers, also thereby providing them with the noun εὐαγγέλιον⁴⁶ which often characterized their message about Jesus.

The apostles and the early Christian communities understood these and other Scriptural texts⁴⁷ to provide the foundation for the apostolic preaching and teaching mission in the last days. They predict, and authorize, as Jesus said, the publishing of a new message, the good news of a reigning God who has redeemed his people through Jesus Christ, issuing in forgiveness of

Hvalvik writes that “in the early church Isa 2:3 (Mic 4:2) is the central proof-text for the apostolic mission” (“Christ Proclaiming his Law to the Apostles: The *Traditio Legis*-Motif in Early Christian Art and Literature,” in John Fotopoulos, ed., *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Context: Studies in Honor of David E. Aune* (NovTSup 122; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 419). Hvalvik discusses the motif in early Christian art and cites more instances of the patristic exegesis which supports it. Among these is Augustine, *City of God* 10.32, which directly links Isa 2:2–3 to Jesus’ words in Luke 24:44–47.

⁴¹ See Luke 2:32; Acts 1:8; 13:47.

⁴² See Acts 10:36; Rom 10:15; Eph 2:17; 6:15.

⁴³ See Isa 40:9: “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news”; and the initial Isaianic, eschatological good-news text, Isa 2:2.

⁴⁴ This verse looks back to Isa 40:9 at the outset of Isaiah’s prophecy of restoration (chaps. 40–55) and just after the prophecy that heralded the preparation of the way of the LORD (40:3–5), which was understood to signal the ministry of John the Baptist. On the εὐγγελίζομαι word group, see William Horbury, “‘Gospel’ in Herodian Judaea,” in Markus Bockmuehl and Donald A. Hagner, eds., *The Written Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 7–30.

⁴⁵ Actually, as Fitzmyer says, “a conflation of 61:a,b,d; 58:6d; 61:2a.” See Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1970) 532.

⁴⁶ The LXX of Isaiah uses only the verb and not the noun (the cognate feminine εὐγγέλια is used four times in 2 Samuel and once in 2 Kings).

⁴⁷ Cf. Isa 42:1–4 in Matt 12:18: “I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.”

sins. These texts therefore authorize the eventual appearance of a new set of Scriptures to undergird the new covenant.

(3) *The Messiah's commission.* The Isaianic texts in particular, as interpreted by Jesus and his disciples, already show that the Messiah's becoming a light to the nations, the task of preaching good news to the nations, was to involve not only the Messiah, personally. It is Christ's own commission that further defines how this prophesied mission to the nations will come about: through a specially-chosen, equipped, and commissioned group of apostle-witnesses.

(i) Apostle. "He who receives you receives me," Jesus told his apostles, "and he who receives me receives him who sent me" (Matt 10:40). For Paul in Acts 13, the Isaianic mission of Jesus to be a light to the nations was his own mission as apostle of Jesus. Thus he would not boast of anything but what the Lord had done through him to bring about obedience from the Gentiles (Rom 15:18). To the apostles, and NT prophets—those entrusted with the authoritative new law and word of the Lord and the Spirit's power—were given the task of laying the foundation for the church (Matt 16:18; Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 3:10–12; Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1).⁴⁸

(ii) Witness. In that same encounter on the day of resurrection, according to Luke, Jesus appointed eleven to be his "witnesses." In the continuation of the story in Acts 1, before his ascension, Jesus reiterates his commission: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Witness, μάρτυς, here does not mean first and foremost "eyewitness" (though this is presupposed) but one who bears witness, and one has to be authorized to be one. Jesus is appointing and equipping these men and just these, at this time, to carry out a designated role of "ministry and apostleship" (Acts 1:25) that no one else is authorized to fulfill.

Paul does not even include himself among this number of apostles specially commissioned to be Jesus' witnesses to the people of Israel (Acts 13:31). Paul, of course, received a commission commensurate with theirs when he was called, out of time, and himself appointed to be a μάρτυς (Acts 22:14–15; 26:16–17). We may well surmise, from his role in Acts and Galatians, and the report Paul gives of his encounter with the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:7), that James the Lord's brother received some similar call, possibly others as well.

(iii) Inscripturation: a consequence of the eschatological universality and permanency of the new covenant word. Recently, Robert Funk has written, "The transition from oral to written goes together with the move away from

⁴⁸ Irenaeus picked up on this in *Against Heresies* 3.1.praef. 1: "For the Lord of all gave to his apostles the power of the gospel, through whom also we have known the truth, that is, the doctrine of the Son of God; to whom also did the Lord declare: 'The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.'" Then, referring to the truths taught in their writings, "If any one does not agree to these truths, he despises the companions of the Lord; nay more, he despises Christ himself the Lord; yea, he despises the Father also, and stands self-condemned" (translation adapted from ANF).

the free expression of the spirit to the controlled expression of bishops in an institution. It marks the transition from word *of* God to word *about* God.”⁴⁹

Frankly, it is hard to take such a statement seriously, not only because the most common experience of a written text in antiquity was the experience of “hearing” it read orally, but because of the assumed or stated role of the Holy Spirit in the production and actualization of the written Scriptures (as when Peter says in Acts 1:16, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David”).⁵⁰ And yet, Funk seems to reflect the attitude of many today.

The new message authorized by the OT Scriptures and by Jesus, in order to go to all nations, quite obviously, must last as long as the mission lasts. And Jesus said the mission would last “until the end of the age” (Matt 28:19–20). Jesus made the astounding claim, recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels, that heaven and earth would pass away, but that his words would not pass away (Matt 24:35/Mark 13:31/Luke 21:33). It is fair to say at this late date, that the only words of Jesus which have not passed away are those that were written down!

From the time of the Pentateuch on, writing has often been associated with permanency, as when Isaiah, is told, “And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever” (Isa 30:8).⁵¹

The records show from the beginning Jesus and his first followers possessing a clear desire for the preservation and transmission of their teaching (2 Thess 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2, cf. v. 23; 15:3). And in time, the apostles, and their assistants in apostolic mission,⁵² actually did what no self-respecting

⁴⁹ Robert Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” in McDonald and Sanders, *Canon Debate* 544.

⁵⁰ See also Acts 28:25: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet”; Heb 3:7: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice’”; Heb 10:15–17: “And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,’ then he adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more’”; 1 Pet 1:10–11: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories”; 2 Pet 1:20: “knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

⁵¹ See also Exod 17:14: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua’”; Deut 31:24–27: “When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, ‘Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you. For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death!’”; Ps 102:18, “Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.”

⁵² Paul himself approves the inclusion of his ministry assistants in his apostolic enterprise of letter-writing when he includes some of them as co-senders of his letters. This in principle opens the way for others, such as Luke, the author of Hebrews, Mark, and possibly the translator of Aramaic Matthew.

neo-orthodox kerymatist would dare to do. They pressed stylus to papyrus and inscribed in written words the gospel they preached, the good news which they asserted had been predicted by Isaiah and the other prophets (Rom 1:1–2; 1 Pet 1:10–11). “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God,” commenced one. “That which was from the beginning, which we have seen and heard . . . we proclaim also to you,” began the letter of another.

It is important to note that these apostle-witnesses wrote not as a leisurely pastime, but in the performance of their commissioned apostolic ministries. Paul tells the Ephesians (and possibly other churches), “*When you read this (ἀναγινώσκοντες)* you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph 3:4–5). Making that mystery plain is precisely what Paul says is the purpose of his calling as a minister and apostle (Eph 3:9; 6:19).

Peter’s self-description in 1 Pet 5:1 as μάρτυς of the sufferings of Christ and partaker in the glory to be revealed in effect presents his own writings as the writings of one of those witnesses specially commissioned by Christ in accord with the presentation in Luke and Acts.

It appears, then, that one can, and should, speak of the “inevitability” of the appearance of a corpus of NT Scripture, as the natural consequence of the coming of the promised Messiah. Because God’s Anointed has come, the evangel about him, his words, his work, and the forgiveness available through him, went out from Jerusalem to the end of the earth through messengers designated by Jesus to be his witnesses. That original apostolic witness was not entrusted wholly to the safekeeping of oral transmission. Rather, the testimony of these apostle-witnesses, of eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, was committed to writing in the course of the original apostolic mission. What emerges has the appearance of a deliberate construction of a legacy, a written legacy, of apostolic/prophetic teaching:

Luke’s Gospel refers to earlier attempts to “compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1). Despite the fact that some see Luke’s narrative itself as a dishonoring of all previous attempts, as not being “sacrosanct,” his words seem to be an acknowledgment that at least some other accounts had been “delivered to us” from “eyewitnesses and ministers⁵³ of the word” (Luke 1:2). It is quite plausible to see in 1 Tim 5:18 a ratification of Luke’s account, where Paul calls “Scripture” a saying of Jesus only recorded in Luke’s Gospel. A Pauline corpus,⁵⁴ in turn, is ratified by 2 Pet

⁵³ On ὑπηρεῖται see Acts 26:16; 1 Cor 4:1.

⁵⁴ A sense of the lasting significance of Paul’s letters is clear from at least the time when Paul’s letters were collected to be preserved and copies made available for other churches. And there is good reason to think that this happened either with Paul himself, or at the latest with his assistants not long after his death. Cf. Gamble, “Recent Research” 286: “Yet it is hard to imagine that the attested early editions of the Pauline corpus arose through happenstance or merely by agglomeration. Their clearly methodical features betray deliberate activity informed by particular motives, conceptions, and aims. Taking into account that the corpus as we know it contains pseudonymous as well as authentic letters and retains signs of editorial activity, there is perhaps no better place to locate such effort than in the context of a Pauline school that had its ultimate roots in the circle of

3:15–16, a book which by implication also ratifies 1 Peter and, in principle, other apostolic letters. The Johannine corpus, in my view comprising the latest of the NT books, offers probably the most explicit self-testimony in the NT, the Gospel presenting itself as the eyewitness testimony of one who received the Spirit and thus Jesus' guarantee of remembrance of what he had delivered to his disciples (14:26), and a commission (17:20; 20:21); the first letter presenting itself as the instruction of an eye- and ear-witness of the Word (1:1–3); Revelation presenting itself with so many indications of direct inspiration by God⁵⁵ that even McDonald acknowledges that it has a self-consciousness of its own scriptural status.⁵⁶

We have, of course, no dominical or apostolic decree as to the number of writings which the apostolic mission should produce. However, we can say that only certain books—of books that survive, I have no qualms in suggesting that these are simply and only the books in the present NT—manifest themselves as being the artifacts of that original commission delivered by Jesus to his apostle-witnesses. It is noteworthy that writings such as 1 Clement, Pseudo-Barnabas, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp, as highly valued as they were by segments of the ancient church, expressly distinguish themselves from this unique apostolic authority.

III. RECOGNITION OF THE NEW COVENANT SCRIPTURES

1. *Early signs of the concept of a closed corpus of Scriptures.*⁵⁷ One of the assured results of recent canon studies seems to be that Christians for about three centuries felt no concern about the boundaries of their slowly-developing Scriptures. One scholar writes that “fourth-century Christianity suddenly, and without intending to do so, acquired a *canon* of holy scripture.”⁵⁸ I guess it was something like catching a bad cold.

Instead, pre-fourth century Christians, unmoved by the constricting activities of Marcion or the expansive tendencies of the Montanists, but satisfied with what Dungan calls their “boundless, living mass of heterogeneous sacred texts,”⁵⁹ are said to have remained oblivious to any movement

Paul's historical associates and coworkers, and that labored to perpetuate, interpret, and elaborate Paul's legacy in the latter half of the first century. Conceptions of a Pauline school are admittedly vague and indeterminate, and need to be worked out in better detail, but that Paul had such successors is a certainty.”

⁵⁵ The author claims that on several occasions he was told by the risen Christ himself or by an angel particular words to write (1:19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:19; 21:5), and was told by Christ to write in a book all that he saw and to send that book to the churches (1:11).

⁵⁶ McDonald, *Formation* 42. See also Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church. A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995): “[I]t is not too much to say that the author of the Apocalypse, despite his idiosyncratic grammar and style, may be the most textually self-conscious Christian writer of the early period. In no other early Christian text do the notions of books, writing, and reading occur so prominently.”

⁵⁷ Much of the following section is based on C. E. Hill, “The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon,” *WTJ* 57 (1995) 437–52.

⁵⁸ Dungan, *Constantine's Bible* 128.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 132–33.

towards a finer definition of their Christian Scriptures.⁶⁰ The effect of this approach is to make the very idea of a closed canon appear all the more foreign to the mindset of Jesus, the apostles, and the early Christians for quite a long time, and therefore to make it appear a very dubious idea.

I have suggested above that Jesus' authorization of only a circumscribed number of people to be his authoritative representatives, to speak in his name by the Spirit's power, to become the unique and unrepeatable foundation of the Church, already set inherent limits on what could ever function as his authoritative word for the ongoing life of the Church. This kind of evidence, however, is usually bypassed in favor of an almost exclusive starting point in the second century when the church is portrayed as already surrounded by a "mass of heterogeneous" texts, and experiencing the dawning awareness that it might be good to begin sorting out this literature and using some of as authoritative sources for its liturgy, catechesis, and self-definition.

a. *The Muratorian Fragment.* The currently popular view of the development of the NT canon requires as one of its corollaries a late, fourth-century dating of the Muratorian Fragment, for this much debated text comments on the books received by the church and shows a willingness to exclude certain books from their number. John Barton claims that "[t]here is really only one possible piece of evidence for the desire to *limit* the canon as early as the second century: the Muratorian Fragment. But the recent detailed study by Geoffrey Hahneman, following A. C. Sundberg, seems to have shown convincingly that this is a fourth-century text."⁶¹ To those who are impressed with the Sundberg-Hahneman argument for a fourth-century origin for the Muratorian Fragment, I would recommend Joseph Verheyden's dismantling of that argument in the 2003 Auwers-de Jonge volume *The Biblical Canons*.⁶²

Of the present canon the fragment is missing 1 and 2 Peter, James, possibly (though not certainly)⁶³ one of John's epistles, and Hebrews. It has been suggested by many (and is accepted by Hahneman) that some of these, in particular 1 Peter and James, could be accidental omissions attributable to the sad shape of the Latin text. The fragment explicitly rejects the *Shepherd of Hermas* because the latter was written lately, "almost in our own day." The only non-canonical NT work it contemplates (its mention of the *Wis. Sol.* has to do with the OT) is the *Revelation of Peter*, which it says is judged not suitable for reading in church by some.

⁶⁰ Barton, "Marcion Revisited" 354: "Christian teachers reacted [to Marcion] rather by insisting on the authority of more texts than he allowed, and refusing to 'close' the 'canon' (both terms are rather anachronistic in any case for this period, as I have tried to show elsewhere)."

⁶¹ Barton, "Marcion Revisited" 343.

⁶² Joseph Verheyden, "The Canon Muratori: A Matter of Dispute," in J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge, *The Biblical Canons* (BETL 163; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003) 556: "None of the arguments put forward by Sundberg and Hahneman in favour of a fourth-century, eastern origin of the Fragment are convincing." He mentions the abundance of "circumstantial evidence" for the traditional dating, and concludes that "the suggestion of a fourth-century, eastern origin of the Fragment should be put to rest not for a thousand years, but for eternity" (p. 556)!

⁶³ See C. E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 136.

As I have suggested, the new “consensus” view requires the elimination of the Muratorian Fragment from the late second or early third century. An early date for the Muratorian Fragment, on the other hand, though I believe it is correct, is not required for the historian to recognize that a concern for the boundaries of the NT Scriptures existed at a time when Barton, Hahneman, McDonald and others believe it did not.

b. *Tertullian’s councils.* Tertullian tells us in *De pudicitia* 10, “But I would yield my ground to you, if the scripture of ‘the Shepherd,’ which is the only one which favours adulterers, had deserved to find a place in the Divine canon (*divino instrumento*); if it had not been habitually judged by every council (*concilio*) of Churches (even of your own) among apocryphal and false (writings).” Hahneman tries to dismiss this reference to multiple councils simply by appealing to Tertullian’s famous rhetoric.⁶⁴ But it is hard to imagine how Tertullian thought a reference to councils that both he and his opponents knew were bogus could have helped his case with those same opponents. I have suggested elsewhere that the Muratorian Fragment may in fact be a document from one of these conciliar meetings.⁶⁵ In any case, these councils, which must have taken place at least by about AD 210, were concerned enough about “canon” questions to deliberate on and reject Hermas. In this they agreed with the judgment of both the Muratorian Fragment and of Tertullian himself.

c. *Clement of Alexandria.* One reason given for the need to redate the Muratorian Fragment to the fourth century is that there is allegedly nothing like it any earlier. Besides the councils mentioned by Tertullian, we ought not neglect what Eusebius says about a lost work of Clement of Alexandria. Eusebius says that in his *Hypotyposes* Clement “has given concise explanations (διήγησεις) of all the Covenantal (ἐνδιαθήκου) Scriptures, not passing over even the disputed writings, I mean the Epistle of Jude and the remaining Catholic Epistles, and the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Apocalypse known as Peter’s” (6.14.1–2). Eusebius is certainly armed with his own idea of what is “covenantal” and what is not, but it is of interest that he says Clement gave “concise explanations,” of all of them, even the disputed writings. This sounds much like the practice we see in the Muratorian Fragment, which is not a bare list of books but a sort of “digest.”

d. *The anonymous anti-Montanist cited by Eusebius.* Writing c. AD 196, an anonymous anti-Montanist writer cited by Eusebius⁶⁶ says he had long

⁶⁴ G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 63, says, “[Tertullian’s] statement that it was rejected by every synod of the churches, even those of the non-Montanists, however, cannot be objectively verified, and might be thought of as an example of his famous rhetoric”; and, “Tertullian’s reasons for rejecting the Shepherd are clearly sectarian and it should not be thought that there was widespread rejection of the work.”

⁶⁵ Hill, *Johannine Corpus* 132–34.

⁶⁶ Misidentified by McDonald, *Canon* 340, as Apolinarius, whom Eusebius had mentioned in the previous sentence. McDonald quotes, but does not comment on, the section quoted above.

resisted the request to write against the Montanists, “not through lack of ability to refute falsehood and bear witness to the truth, but from fear and extreme caution, lest I might seem to some to be adding a new article or clause to the word of the New Covenant of the Gospel⁶⁷ to which no one who has purposed to live according to the simple Gospel may add, from which no one may take away” (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.16.3).

Much more could be said about this citation, but plainly the author seems to conceive of the “word of the new covenant of the gospel” as represented by a “closed” literary corpus, subject neither to expansion nor diminution.⁶⁸

e. Irenaeus of Lyons. Some years earlier Irenaeus, after speaking about the normative nature of the fourfold Gospel, also spoke of “the unfeigned preservation, coming down to us, of the scriptures, with a complete collection allowing for neither addition nor subtraction” (*Against Heresies* 4.33.8).⁶⁹

A complete collection of Scriptures allowing for neither addition nor subtraction sounds a lot like a closed canon. The collection known to Irenaeus must have looked a lot like our own twenty-seven book collection. We know it contained at least the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline corpus (including the Pastorals), 1 and possibly 2 Peter, 1, 2, and possibly 3 John, Revelation, and possibly Hebrews. Many would like to argue that Irenaeus was well ahead of his time, and out of touch with his contemporaries on these matters. If he is out of touch, it is probably not so much with his contemporaries, as with some recent canon historians, who do not seem to give his words in *Against Heresies* 4.33.8 much attention.⁷⁰

f. Melito of Sardis. In around AD 170, Melito in his *Extracts* commends one Onesimus for inquiring into “the accurate facts (ἀκριβερᾶν) about the

⁶⁷ ἐπισυγγράφειν ἢ ἐπιδιατάσσεσθαι τῷ τῆς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου καινῆς διαθήκης λόγῳ.

⁶⁸ W. C. van Unnik, “De la règle même προσθεῖναι μήτε ἀφελεῖν dans l’histoire du canon,” *VC* 3 (1949) 1–36, read it this way, but later changed his opinion in “Η καινή διαθήκη—a Problem in the early history of the Canon,” *Studia Patristica* 4 (1961) 212–27. The reasons for his change of opinion are odd: “[T]his list is not yet water-tight, because there could be a chance that his own book would be reckoned with it. Had a fixed canon existed already by that time, later well-known difficulties about certain books would have been impossible” (p. 218). The anonymous’s argument presupposes that neither he nor anyone else could add to the “word of the new covenant,” but his rhetoric is lit up by the accusation that Montanists were, in effect, trying to do just that with their promulgation of allegedly revelatory literature (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.18.5; 6.20.3). And even if the anonymous is judged to be naïve in his assumption of a closed “canon,” his words reflecting such an assumption cannot simply be swept aside as if they did not exist.

⁶⁹ The translation of Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 161. Rousseau’s translation: “parvenant jusqu’à nous, une conservation non feinte des Écritures, une compte integral de celles-ci, sans addition ni soustraction, une explication correcte, harmonieuse, exempte de peril et de blaspheme.” See A. Rousseau, B. Hemmerdinger, C. Mercier, and L. Doutreleau, *Irénee de Lyon: Contre les Hérésies Livre iv* (2 vols.; SC 100, t. I; Paris: Cerf, 1965). The SC text is, *quae pervenit usque ad nos custoditio sine fictione Scripturarum, plenissima tractatio neque additamentum neque ablationem recipiens, et lectio sine falsatione, et secundum Scripturas expositio legitima et diligens et sine periculo et sine blasphemia*. . . . Rousseau’s retroversion of *tractatio* is συλλογισμός, a reckoning together.

⁷⁰ Granted, the ANF translation is quite ambiguous, but Rousseau’s edition and translation have been available for forty years and Grant’s for over a decade.

ancient writings, how many they are in number (πόσα τὸν ἀριθμὸν), and what is their order (τάξιν)” (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.26.13). Melito reports that on a journey to the east, he came to “the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament” (ἀκριβῶς μαθὼν τὰ τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης βιβλία, Eusebius, *HE* 4.26.13–14).⁷¹ He then gives a catalogue⁷² or “canon” of these books. Given this manifest concern for the accurate facts about the books of the “old covenant,” are we to suppose that it never occurred either to Onesimus or to Melito that there should be a similar list of the books of the new covenant? Is the reason for the lack of mention of such a catalogue because nobody even thought in those terms, or because these books were common knowledge in their Christian community, so that Onesimus did not have to inquire about them?⁷³

I am not suggesting that a “closed canon” agreed upon by all existed in the second century. Doubts and disagreements are well known. Yet among many there is an assumption that if anyone had doubts about a book, everyone had doubts. If some were unsure of the exact contents of the divine Scriptures, all were unsure. This simply does not follow. If the lack of universal agreement in the early period means we choose to say there was no NT “canon” then, this does not mean that nobody thought there was one. And evidence that some did think there was one has been all but ignored in much recent scholarship.

2. *Selection vs. recognition and the so-called “criteria of canonicity.”* I can only say a little here about the so-called “criteria of canonicity.” When certain doubted books are discussed, and rejected, reasons are sometimes given for that rejection, as when the Muratorian Fragment rejects the *Shepherd*. This makes it look like criteria are being employed. But there is need for caution here. Whatever reasons are given, these do not seem to be functioning as external criteria set up by the church by which it autonomously judges what is

⁷¹ Of interest is the fact that Melito refers to his extracts as taken from “the Law and the Prophets,” even though he goes on to list the entire Scriptures, including the Writings as well (nor can we suppose that any list of OT extracts which were taken to speak of Christ would not contain at least several from the Psalms).

⁷² He gives what Eusebius calls a “catalogue” (κατάλογον) of the confessed (acknowledged) Scriptures of the Old Covenant” (τῶν ὁμολογουμένων τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης γραφῶν ποιεῖται κατάλογον, 4.26.12). Cf. what Eusebius says about Origen, while expounding the first Psalm, setting forth “the catalogue of the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament” (ἐκθεσιν πεποιήται τοῦ τῶν ἱερῶν γραφῶν τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης καταλόγου), 6.25.1. This very much corresponds to the way in which many writers today speak of what they believe ought to be signified by the word “canon.”

⁷³ Evidence is not lacking elsewhere of a concern about the boundaries of the NT corpus. One may cite the practice of categorizing NT writings in terms of Gospel(s) and Apostle(s), and sometimes the entirety of the new covenant writings in terms of “the Lord,” already in the second century: Hegesippus (writing ca. 170–180) categorizes writings as “the law, the prophets, and the Lord” (*HE* 4.22.3), where ὁ κύριος stands for a known set of writings, on a par with “law” and “prophets.” Eusebius says Hegesippus also discussed “the so-called Apocrypha” and “relates that some of them were fabricated (ἀναπεπλάσθαι) by certain heretics in his own time” (*HE* 4.22.9). Dionysius of Corinth’s designation “dominical Scriptures” (τῶν κυριακῶν . . . γραφῶν) could reflect the idea of a definite body of NT writings.

Scripture and what is not. They are internal qualities by which the authentic makes itself known and recognized. Also, they only seem to function negatively, when a given book is challenged, not positively, applied *a priori* before anything is to be considered as Scripture. Most of the books of the NT in fact never seem to have been significantly questioned within the church.

For some writers today, the chief criterion for the selection of NT books was their perceived usefulness. McDonald concludes, “[F]or whatever reasons, the literature that best suited the needs of the church is the literature that survived in its traditions and became of [*sic*] a part of its sacred scriptures.”⁷⁴

This sounds reasonable, but the strange fact is this: as far as we can judge from surviving documents, the church apparently never found James exceptionally useful! Nor Jude, nor 2 Peter, nor 3 John, nor even Philemon (though its Pauline character was never doubted)! Judging from the fragments that have come to light, *The Shepherd* was much more “useful” to the church (i.e. more popular) than these, and others.⁷⁵ What, then, could have induced the church to acknowledge these “under-utilized” books as part of sacred Scripture?

I would suggest we will never understand this until we understand that the church essentially did not feel it had a choice in the matter! It did not feel it had the right to construct its own canon or set of Scriptures. This is why the Muratorian Fragment, Irenaeus, Serapion of Antioch speak of “receiving,” “recognizing,” or “confessing” certain books and not “selecting” or “choosing” them.⁷⁶ It is why Clement in Alexandria, Serapion in Antioch, and Irenaeus in Lyons speak of the Gospels as “the four Gospels that have been handed down to us” (ἐν τοῖς παραδεδομένοις ἡμῖν τέτταρσιν εὐαγγελίας).⁷⁷

In this context, that Scripture is “handed down” means that it was handed down not by some authoritative church, council, or pope, but as Irenaeus says, “handed down to us from the apostles” (*Against Heresies* 3.11.9), which is to say, received as divine revelation. As early as the late first century, Clement of Rome confesses this point of view: “The apostles were given the

⁷⁴ McDonald, *Formation* 319.

⁷⁵ Of course, this is probably not the best way to conceive of the situation. Although *The Shepherd* may well have been used as Scripture for a time in certain places, the fragments which have been discovered only give us a very partial, unscientific, and perhaps unrepresentative picture, and may better represent reading on the popular level in a given locality.

⁷⁶ The Muratorian Fragment speaks of certain books which cannot be “received” into the catholic church (*quae in c(h)atholicam ecclesiam recepti non potest*, lines 66–67; cf. 1.82: *nihil . . . recipemus*) and tells of Andrew and others receiving or recognizing (*recognis*, l. 14) the Gospel John wrote. Irenaeus criticizes Marcion and his followers for not “recognizing” (*non cognoscentes*) some books of the NT (*Against Heresies* 3.12.12), and others for “confessing” (*confitentur*) the Scriptures but perverting them with their interpretations (*Against Heresies* 3.12.12); “others . . . do not admit that . . . presented by John’s Gospel . . . but set aside (*repellunt*) at once both the Gospel and the prophetic Spirit” (3.11.9). Serapion of Antioch wrote to the Church in Rhossos, “For our part, brethren, we receive (*ἀποδεχόμεθα*) both Peter and the other apostles as Christ but the pseudepigrapha written in their name (τὰ δὲ ὀνόματι αὐτῶν ψευδεπίγραφα) we reject (*παριστοιόμεθα*), as men of experience, knowing that we did not receive such by tradition (*οὐ παρελάβομεν*)” (*Hist. Eccl.* 6.12.3–6).

⁷⁷ Clement, *Strom.* 3.13.93 (Stählin, GCS 15, p. 238). Cf. Serapion in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.12.3–6.

gospel for us by the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was sent from God. Thus Christ came from God and the apostles from Christ" (*1 Clem.* 42.1–2).

The attitude—demonstrable in the latter half of the second century, but surely existing earlier—seems to be that Scripture is something given by God and that only he can determine what it is. The role of the church, therefore, is essentially receptive, to recognize what he has given. All the disagreements, the efforts to defend certain books that were questioned and to exclude others which had become “useful,” have to be viewed in this light.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the third century, Julius Africanus and Origen exchanged letters in a conversation over whether it is right to refer to certain books in the LXX but not among the Jewish Scriptures. No matter how we finally judge the cases they each presented, it is of interest to note Origen’s appeal to the words of Prov 22:28: “Thou shalt not remove the ancient landmarks which thy fathers have set” (*To Africanus* 5).⁷⁸ That is, it is not for us to tamper with what was set for us by the ancients. If participants in modern canon debates wish to reject Origen’s advice, they may at least want to consider that it provides a window into the mindset of the early church.

In the end, the creation of the NT cannot be attributed to Constantine, the Nicaean Council, or “the people with the biggest army.” Bruce Metzger wrote, “[N]either individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church.”⁷⁹ And this is because, when it is all said and done, Jesus’ sheep hear his voice.

⁷⁸ Cf. his citation of this verse in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (*Origen. The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies*; trans. and annotated by R. P. Lawson; ACW 26; New York: Newman, 1956) 56.

⁷⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament, Its Background, Growth and Content* (3d rev. and enl. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) 318.