

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ANTIQUITY

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Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation

Discursive Fights over
Religious Traditions in Antiquity



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Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity

Towards a New History of the New Testament Canon

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During the second century C.E., as ancient Christians debated what they should believe and how they should worship and behave, they began to use writings produced by Christians, in addition to the Septuagint, as authoritative scripture. The canon of the New Testament was both the subject of such “discursive fights” – that is, what was included and excluded was the subject of controversy – and a weapon in the arsenal of those defending “orthodoxy” – that is, the canon functioned to rule out certain beliefs and practices.¹ The obscure and (at times) overtly political nature of the process by which the New Testament was formed has generated a formidable amount of scholarship during the modern period, including some truly classic works.² What more, then, can be said about the formation of the canon of the New Testament? Except for small things, like the appearance of a new fragment of Athanasius of Alexandria’s famous 39th *Festal Letter* of 367, no new evidence has been uncovered in decades. Rather, scholars re-read the same classic texts – the Muratorian Fragment, Eusebius’s lists in Book III of the *Church History*, Irenaeus’s argument for four gospels, and so on – and they re-consider the same key figures – Marcion, Origen, Athanasius, and so on. It would seem that there would be nothing particularly new to do here. But in fact, several studies over the last couple of decades have made investigating the formation of the canon one of the most interesting areas in the study of the early church – and yet, I believe, we can take the discussion even further. In this paper I outline an alternative approach to this crucial area of early Christian studies – a turn away from a history of the single canon and toward a history of multiple scriptural practices, one of which produced the canon of the New Testament.

A series of important books and articles has provided fresh and illuminating insights into the process of canon formation in the early church since the landmark book of von Campenhausen. In a 2002 essay Harry Gamble provides a detailed history of research, which I commend as the

1 B.D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford 2003), 229–246. I am grateful to the other participants in the conference for their questions and suggestions, especially the formal respondent, Eve-Marie Becker.

2 Above all: H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, Philadelphia 1972 (translated by J.A. Baker).

best guide to these developments and which I will not repeat here.³ Instead, I will highlight three trends that I consider most significant.

First, scholars have done a better job of contextualizing early Christian canon formation in two ways. On the one hand, they have borrowed conceptual tools from the wider study of religion and the fledgling field of comparative studies of scripture. This trend began with Alfred Sundberg's introduction of the distinction between *scripture* and *canon* in the 1960s; scholars now recognize that an ancient Christian's use of a work as religiously authoritative, that is, as scripture, does not necessarily imply a closed list of scriptures, that is, a canon.⁴ More recently, Jonathan Z. Smith's reflections of canonicity and the Indologist Kandall Folkert's delineation of different kinds of "canons" in world religions have enabled scholars to see that not all collections of scripture share the same character and authority.⁵ In his paper in this volume, Stephen Chapman suggests thinking not of "canonicity" as an either/or state, but as a continuum between fixity and openness, along which various scriptural collections might be plotted. These insights have enabled scholars to describe better the different ways in which scriptural collections function and the effects of canon formation on reading and interpretation.

On the other hand, we have seen studies that better contextualize canon formation within specifically ancient Mediterranean ways of using books and granting authority to specific writings. For example, Harry Gamble has directed our attention to how early Christians actually published, reproduced, disseminated, and collected books.⁶ Greg Snyder situated early Christian textual practices among a range of ways in which "pagans" and Jews construed the relationships between teachers and texts.⁷ David Dunagan drew parallels between how philosophical schools and early Christians treated authoritative writings.⁸ These and other studies have helped us to see the distinctively ancient ways in which early Christians approached scriptures. Both aspects of this contextualization may be found in the recent collection, *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*,⁹ edited by Einar Thomassen.

Second, scholars have seriously questioned the argument of historians such as Adolf von Harnack and Hans von Campenhausen that conflict with heretics, especially Marcion and the Montanists, was the decisive factor that drove canon formation in the second century, which was the key period. Skepticism about the impact of Marcion is particularly pronounced: John Barton, for example, has made a compelling argument that Marcion's use of scripture was conservative and even traditional in his context; he did not invent something radically new that forced others to come up with their own canons.¹⁰ This has been a welcome move, but I shall argue below that we can go even farther in this direction.

Third, as Barton points out, among the scholars who spend a lot of time writing about the canon, a seemingly paradoxical consensus seems to have emerged around two points: (a) early Christians treated some Christian writings – the letters of Paul and one or more gospels – as scripture very early, some even in the late first century; (b) the formation of what we mean by a "canon" in the strict sense, that is, a closed collection of texts, did not occur until very late, in the fourth and later centuries. If we were to divide scholars into "liberals" and "conservatives," we might say that they both agree on these two points, but that conservatives emphasize the first and liberals the second.¹¹ But neither group, it seems, has really faced the more basic implication of these two points – that one cannot necessarily then draw a direct line from Christians citing early Christian literature as authoritative in the second century to Christians creating closed canon lists in the fourth century. As Chapman's essay in this volume states, we should not imagine that religious groups always move chronologically from openness to fixity in their use of scriptural collections, but that they can oscillate between these two poles.

In other words, despite these recent advances, historians continue to tell a story with a single plot line, leading to the seemingly inevitable *τέλος* of the closed canon of the New Testament. That is, the question remains, how did the Christians get from having no sacred scripture of their own making, to producing a large number of new texts, to seeing many of these as scripture, to selecting 27 of them to form the canon of the New Testament? In answering this question, a series of representative figures and texts are placed on a single trajectory, leading to the closed New Testament first seen in Athanasius of Alexandria's 39th *Festal Letter* of 369. The key figures are Marcion (140s), Irenaeus (180s), Origen (early 200s), Eusebius of Caesarea (300), and the so-called Muratorian Fragment, a text of disputed date (ca. 200 or late 300s). As they examine this evidence, scholars tend to ask (1) How close or far is this person from the eventual fixed canon? (2) What books does he recognize as canonical and which not?

- 3 H.Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon, Recent Research and the Status Quaestions*, in: L.M. McDonald / J.A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate*, Peabody 2002, 267–294.
- 4 A.C. Sundberg, *Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon*, in: *SIJ* 4 (1966), 452–461.
- 5 J.Z. Smith, *Sacred Persistence, Toward a Reinscription of Canon*, in: J.Z. Smith (ed.), *Imagining Religion, From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago 1982, 36–52; K.W. Folkert, 'The "Canons" of Scripture', in: M. Leventing (ed.), *Rethinking Scripture, Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, Albany 1989, 170–179.
- 6 H.Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church, A History of Early Christian Texts*, New Haven 1995.
- 7 H.G. Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World, Philosophers, Jews and Christians, Religion in the First Christian Centuries*, London 2000.
- 8 D.L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible, Politics and the Making of the New Testament*, London 2007.
- 9 E. Thomassen (ed.), *Canon and Canonicity, The Formation and Use of Scripture*, Copenhagen 2010.

10 J. Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text, The Canon in Early Christianity*, Louisville 1997, 35–62.

11 See Barton, 1997, 1–34.

(3) What criteria does he employ in deciding which books are authoritative? These questions assume that all of these authors were engaged in the same project, namely, forming the New Testament that eventually resulted in the fourth century. And so we tend to think of Origen's canon as "still open" – as if Origen, consciously or not, was creating a closed canon, but just had not finished doing so.

Franz Stuhlhofer made this point already in 1988:

As with all processes that ended in an outcome which is still valid in the present, we as historians are in danger of judging matters with too much regard to the present. This danger is well known from the history of the natural sciences, but also (for example) from the history of the papacy. One is inclined to retroject current states of affairs or points of view into earlier times; and even when one recognizes that the present state of affairs was not yet a reality then, one is fixated onesidedly on the question how far the then state of affairs was still different from the present one, or alternatively how close it already was. Thus, we say, the scientist did not yet know, or did already know, what we know today; the Bishop of Rome was already recognized, or not yet recognized, as pope in the modern sense; and ecclesiastical writers did not yet have, or did already have, our present-day canon. History is being seen as a linear process: people of earlier times already had the same goal as us, but were simply not yet so close to it.¹²

And so it is simply anachronistic to ask of writers of the second century which books were in their canon and which not – for the notion of a closed canon was simply not there. We must not continue to place Christian authors on a trajectory that leads inevitably to Athanasius's supposedly definitive list of 367.

Both Stuhlhofer and Barton see this point clearly, but I am not satisfied with how they try to solve the problem. Stuhlhofer turns to quantifying how often a given text is cited, especially in proportion to its size. Although he does a good job of controlling for certain key variables, I am skeptical that this method can really provide the kind of hard data that he wants to use by taking fully into account rhetorical purposes, the unevenness of the topics that authors discuss, and the problem of textual survival and disappearance. Barton, for his part, provides a series of outstanding insights into key issues, such as Marcion and the persistent importance of orality, but he does not try to offer a new narrative to replace the narrative of linear progression toward the *τέλος* of the closed canon.

12. F. Stuhlhofer, *Der Gebrauch der Bibel von Jesus bis Euseb. Eine statistische Untersuchung zur Kanongeschichte*, Wuppertal 1988, 84 (translated and quoted by Barton, 1997, 16).

The teleological approach and its guiding questions understandably reflect a modern Christian interest in how the churches got their current Bible and why some books are included and others not, but they are bad history. We need a new narrative that does tell the story of how the New Testament canon came to be, but does so without confirming all of our evidence to that particular thread of the story of early Christian scriptures. Moreover, we need to leave behind a vocabulary that reflects an outdated picture of early Christian history – namely, terms such as "external influences" and "internal dynamics" and their variants.¹³ This vocabulary presumes a single early church, with an interior and an exterior (with, obviously, people like Marcion and the Montanists on the exterior), when in fact we must imagine a variety of early Christian groups, with different social characters and with boundaries that were continually asserted, challenged, and renegotiated, instead of simply there.¹⁴ What might such a revised narrative look like?

For inspiration and interpretive clues, I have turned to two scholars of literature, Brian Stock and John Gullory. Of these two, the work of the medievalist Brian Stock is probably more familiar to this audience. Attempting to find a fresh angle on questions of literacy and orality in medieval culture, Stock developed the notion of "textual communities," which he called "microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a script."¹⁵ Stock investigates how the reading or performance of a text can generate a community that might educate its members in certain rules of reading and interpretation and thus create a sense of group solidarity and identity. The text around which a group may form need not be written: it might be oral, or it might be written, but not physically present. To some extent it is how the group reads, not really *what* it reads that determines its character. Canonically and authority are important variables that need to be tracked, especially when applying this concept to antiquity.¹⁶ I have tried to use Stock's theory myself in understanding a specific early Christian text, the

13. For the use of these terms see e.g. E. Ferguson, *Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon. A Survey of Some Recent Studies*, in: L.M. McDonald / J.A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate*, Peabody 2002, 295–320.

14. See K.L. King, *Which Early Christianity?*, in: S.A. Harvey / D.G. Hunter (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Oxford 2008, 66–84; D. Brakke, *The Gnostics, Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, Cambridge 2010, 1–28. C. Marksches suggests thinking of second-century Christianity as a "laboratory," where different Christians proposed a series of new ideas; C. Marksches, *The Canon of the New Testament in Antiquity. Some New Horizons for Future Research*, in: M. Finkelberg / G.G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Home, the Bible, and Beyond. Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 2, Leiden 2003, 175–194 (177).

15. B. Stock, *Listening for the Text. On the Uses of the Past*, The Middle Ages Series, Philadelphia 1990, 23. Stock had developed this concept earlier in: id., *The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Princeton 1983, 16. Stock, 1990, 150f.

Apocryphon of James, and there I noted some of its virtues and shortcomings.¹⁷ Here I suggest that Stock invites us to think less about the contents of any particular list or precisely which books an author cites, and instead to describe how Christians used texts and how they formed groups for using them. That is: What are the characteristics of the reader(s) around which a group gathers? To what kinds of written and oral texts does the reader appeal? What norms are invoked for reading? What forms of behavior and group adherence do the group's reading practices promote? What new authoritative texts does the group produce? The answers to these questions provide data for what I propose to call "scriptural practices."

In his book *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*,¹⁸ John Guillory examines the debate that raged in the United States in the late twentieth century over which works of literature should be studied in colleges and universities as part of the "canon" of classic works. As Guillory himself states, the use of the term "canon" for the works of English literature that are considered great and worthy of continued study creates an analogy between this ill-defined set of texts and the closed scriptural canon. But Guillory rightly points out that it is not at all clear that "the process by which a selection of texts functions to define a religious practice and doctrine is really similar *historically* to the process by which literary texts come to be preserved, reproduced, and taught in the schools."¹⁹ Still, I think that we can learn something from Guillory's argument, which shifts the scholar's focus away from examining the *contents* of the list and purported *criteria* of selection and exclusion, toward investigating the *institutions* that enable list creation and the *interests* that they serve. Guillory writes:

An individual's judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the *reproduction* of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers. The work of preservation has other, more complex social contexts than the immediate responses of readers, even communities of readers, to texts; as we shall see, these institutional contexts shape and constrain judgment according to *institutional* agendas, and in such a way that the selection of texts never represents merely the consensus of a community of readers, either dominant or subordinate. The scene in which a group of readers, defined by a common social identity and common values, confronts a group of texts with the intention of making a judgment

as to canonicity, is an *imaginary* scene. That imaginary scene must now be sent against what happens in a real place, the school.²⁰

Translating Guillory's point to the study of the formation of the New Testament in antiquity is not straightforward. Indebted to Marxist traditions of analysis, Guillory uses terms like *institution* in what we might call a hard sense: he hopes to understand how a well-developed social institution, the school, controls access to a scarce and valuable commodity, cultural capital, in a context of economic and social competition marked strongly by class divisions. Turning to late antiquity, I use *institution* in a weaker sense, using it to draw attention to (usually embryonic) social formations that claimed access to and the ability to grant the desired commodities of religious knowledge and ultimately salvation in a pluralistic religious context (pluralistic both among "Christians" and among the variety of other religious options). From this perspective, what Clement or Origen or the Muratorian fragment or Eusebius or anyone else may say about the authority of a particular early Christian work matters less than the social contexts in which they do their work, the particular practices that their reflections on textual authority are meant to serve, and the strategies available to them to reproduce their decisions. In Guillory's terms, the imaginary scene of "the early Christians" or "the Great Church" reaching a consensus about the contents of the New Testament must be sent against the real social groups in which texts were used, cited, and reproduced – as much as our spotty evidence will allow. Guillory's emphases on social institutions and their interests provide a fuller social, even political, dimension to my concept of scriptural practices.

One virtue of Athanasius of Alexandria's famous 39th *Festal Letter* of 367 is that it does give us a glimpse of the differing Christian social groups that promoted and used earlier texts as scripture – although, to be sure, this view is seriously deformed by Athanasius's polemical rhetoric. In two articles I have offered detailed analyses of this letter and its social context, and I have responded to the major objections to my reading.²¹ To be brief, in the letter as we now know it, Athanasius makes a variety of arguments against the use of non-canonical books, but he devotes considerable attention to two themes. The first is the irrelevance or even danger of human teachers. The Word of God is the only true Teacher – after all, he is Truth itself, and he never needed anyone to teach him. The Word's truth is to be found completely and plainly in the Scriptures, and so there is no need to seek it in other books or from other teachers. The second theme is the non-existence of any "apocryphal" books that really come from Isaiah, Moses, Enoch, or

17 D. Brake, *Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the Apocryphon of James*, in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999), 187–218 (211–213).

18 J. Guillory, *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago 1993.

19 Guillory, 1993, 6.

20 Guillory, 1993, 28.

21 D. Brake, *Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter*, in: *HTHR* 87 (1994), 133–158; id., *A New Fragment of Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter, Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon*, in: *HTHR* 103 (2010), 47–66.

any other authoritative ancient figure. They all published their teaching openly, and any "apocryphal" books attributed to them must be recent inventions of heretics. He accuses the Melitians specifically of composing and promoting the use of apocryphal books.

My reading contextualized these two themes by associating them with two forms of Christian spirituality, authority, and social organization that were traditional in Egyptian Christianity, but which Athanasius opposed. The first I called, following Rowan Williams, academic Christianity, a tradition of study under the guidance of a learned and inspired teacher, which I traced back to Alexandrians such as Basilides, Clement, Valentinus, and Origen and saw exemplified by Arius in the fourth century.²² In an earlier *Festal Letter*, that for 352, Athanasius had similarly contrasted "the words of the saints" and "the fancies of human invention"; only the New Testament authors transmit the teachings of the Word "without alteration," and thus "of these the Word wants us to be disciples, and they should be our teachers, and it is necessary for us to obey only them."²³ The second was an apocalyptically oriented mode of piety, which could be found in the traditions that David Frankfurter studied in his book on the *Apocalypse of Elijah* and which I saw continuing into the fourth century in the cult of the martyrs and the use of so-called apocryphal books, both taken up most enthusiastically by the Melitians.²⁴ In the *Festal Letters* that follow the 39th, Athanasius complains about revelations that occur at martyr shrines, which he says the Melitians promote.²⁵ In contrast to these modes of spirituality, Athanasius offered an episcopally centered piety, which valued adherence to the clergy and its sacraments and found revealed truth not through study under a learned teacher, nor through revelations at martyr shrines, but through a learned canon of Scriptures, interpreted by the official catholic Church. I summed up the differences among these competing modes of Christian spirituality in terms of three authoritative figures: the teacher, the martyr, and the bishop. In this view, it was not so much the specific "heresies" named by Athanasius ("Arians" and "Melitians") that prompted the letter and the promulgation of a canon, as much as the general forms of spirituality, social organization, and authority that they represented.

With some modifications, I still think that this picture accurately represents the forms of piety and religious authority that provided the context for Athanasius's promulgation of a closed canon of Scripture in fourth-century

22 See R. Williams, *Arius, Heresy and Tradition*, London 1987, 82-91.

23 Ath., ep. fest. 2.7 (which is actually no. 24 for 352), in: W. Curreton, *The Festal Letters of Athanasius: Discovered in an Ancient Syriac Version*, London 1848, 24f.

24 See D. Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt: The Apocalypse of Elijah and Early Egyptian Christianity*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity, Minneapolis 1993.

25 D. Brakke, "Outside the Places: Within the Truth," *Athanasius of Alexandria and the Localization of the Holy*, in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 134, Leiden 1998, 445-481.

Egypt. I now want to generalize from these specifically Alexandrian and Egyptian social forms of Christian life to sketch out three types of early Christian scriptural practices, that is, three sets of characteristic social groups, authoritative figures, and literary activities that form the "institutional" contexts in which Christian readers made judgments about texts, insured their reproduction, and reintroduced them to new generations of readers. They are (1) study and contemplation; (2) revelation and continued inspiration; and (3) communal worship and edification. Each of these scriptural practices had its particular social setting(s), authoritative persons, reading strategies, and spiritual goals. Each granted scriptural status to existing religious texts and so created sets or collections of scriptures, which differed in how bounded or defined they were or meant to be. Each also involved the production of new texts, oral and written, which could gain authoritative status of their own.

This list of three scriptural practices is provisional and not meant to be exhaustive. Moreover, I intend these categories to function like Weberian ideal types: although I will cite specific examples of each from the first four centuries of Christian history, there is no pure representative of any of these practices. Nonetheless, I argue that they do enable us to disentangle some bits of evidence that have been inappropriately conflated, and they can help us to write a history of early Christian formation that is less linear or teleological and more attentive to the differing ways that Christians appropriated and produced sacred texts. In what follows, I sketch each form of scriptural practice (without the kind of detailed annotation with examples that a monograph would require), along with fuller discussions of some key examples.

1. Study and Contemplation

Some Christian groups met in study circles that resembled contemporary philosophical schools in their aims and practices. Such Christians gathered around a teacher/philosopher, who legitimated his authority by appealing to his academic training and his personal insight. These groups participated in the rituals of academic study - lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and the like - and may have engaged in ritual activities that were more distinctively "religious," such as prayer and contemplation. The goal of such groups was personal and communal transformation, the turning away from vice toward virtue and from ignorance toward knowledge.

Alongside an oral tradition of teachings that the philosopher may have inherited and transmitted, texts provided a crucial means of access to the doctrines of the academic school's founding figures and to knowledge of ethics, the natural world, and the divine. Texts could be evaluated for their legitimacy as works of past masters and their disciples, and they might be edited to remove corruptions. They served primarily as objects of close

reading and interpretation, often allegorical interpretation, and learned readers produced new texts – commentaries, scholarly tools such as text editions, and new philosophical treatises. The “canons” of such groups – if we wish to use that term – were flexible, often consisting of a central core of truly authoritative works and then a shifting body of other significant and learned literature.

The examples of this type of scriptural practice are readily identified and hardly surprising: Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Valentinus and his successors, Origen, and so on. And I expect that I need not go into detail about how these persons fit this type. But I wish to focus on two representative figures who may be less obvious: Marcion of Sinope and Eusebius of Caesarea.

My understanding of Marcion is indebted to recent studies by John Barton, David Dungan, and Einar Thomassen.²⁶ All three of these scholars, in very different ways, create pictures of Marcion that make him less radical in his original context than previous treatments. Marcion, of course, taught in Rome in the 140s, having moved there from Asia Minor. He argued that the God one meets in the Jewish Scriptures, the Septuagint, is not the God of Jesus Christ. These texts, then, are not false – they do provide accurate information about that God and his dealings with humanity – but they are not authoritative for Gentile Christians because Christians do not worship the God of Israel; rather, they were liberated from him.

Instead, Marcion sought religious truth in those documents that gave him the fullest and best access to the Gospel, the good news that a hitherto unknown God of love and mercy has sent his Son Jesus to redeem us. Such documents were a written Gospel, which scholars usually identify as similar to Luke, and a set of letters by Paul. These texts had suffered some corruption in their transmission, and thus Marcion edited them to remove interpolations. This was standard procedure for scholars and teachers when they approached texts that offered authoritative access to the teachings of earlier figures. Barton has suggested that Marcion’s decision not to read the Septuagint allegorically may follow from his rejection of its authority, rather than the other way around: allegory was the standard way to read a sacred text, and for him the Septuagint was not sacred.²⁷ Marcion’s “canon,” if we should even call it that, is not a truncated or embryonic predecessor of Athanasius’s canon, but a different creature entirely, the product of a scholar’s search for religious truth.

Likewise, too, Eusebius of Caesarea’s tortured musings on “the New Testament writings” in his *Church History* represents a scholarly attempt to sort out which works are in his tradition “recognized”, “disputed”, and “spurious” – terms that would have been familiar to, say, Diogenes

Laertius (Eus., *h.e.* 3.25).²⁸ Even scholars who wish to reserve the term “canon” for a definitive and closed list sometimes bring their narratives of canon formation to a close with Eusebius.²⁹ They do so presumably because Eusebius supposedly could enforce his list thanks to the support of Constantine, who in a letter to the Caesarean bishop ordered the production of fifty Bibles for church reading, which possibly could have functioned as exemplars that could promote standardization (Eus., *v.c.* 4.36f.). If this was in fact the case, and if Eusebius was in charge of saying what would be in those Bibles, then it is hard to know how that project could have succeeded. To be sure, Eusebius’s list attempts to sort out and summarize the judgments of the “ecclesiastical men” who preceded him, but in the end, as Eric Junod, puts it, “Eusebius presents the fruits of a scientific and personal investigation, not an ecclesiastical decision.” His New Testament is a “scholarly construction.”³⁰ Some texts are ruled out completely, but others remain “disputed,” and presumably discoveries of new apostolic writings are possible, if highly unlikely.

Indeed, Eusebius writes much as his hero Origen did – as a scholar who sorts through his sources for the most reliable witnesses and the most trustworthy sources of proper doctrine. In such cases, the judgments of one’s predecessors are important data. Thus, when he investigates Peter, he notes that “one epistle, which is called his first, is recognized, and the ancient elders use it as unquestioned in their own writings, but the so-called second (epistle) we have received as not secure, although it appears useful to some people and is studied along with the other scriptures” (Eus., *h.e.* 3.31). The explicit criteria of judgment that Eusebius invokes – antiquity, origin among the founding apostles or their students, widespread use by earlier scholars, and proper doctrinal content – all make perfect sense within the world of scholars and their students.

As in the case of Marcion, I suggest that it is wrong to describe Eusebius as having created a “canon” that is “still open” or “approaching closure,” as if Eusebius knew he was working on the same project as Athanasius some sixty years later. His lists summarizing the judgments of “ecclesiastical men” are simply a different, even if related, phenomenon.

2. Revelation and Continued Inspiration

Christians experienced new revelations of the Holy Spirit in a diversity of social settings – reading groups similar to the study circles I have just described, gatherings for worship, ritual commemorations at martyr shrines,

²⁶ See Dungan, 2007, 34–42, on Laertius.

²⁷ See Dungan, 2007.

²⁸ E. Junod, *D’Eusèbe de Césarée à Athanase d’Alexandrie en passant par Cyrille de Jérusalem. De la construction saignée du Nouveau Testament à la clôture ecclésiastique du canon*, in: G. Aragonne / E. Junod / E. Norrili (eds.), *Le canon du Nouveau Testament. Regards nouveaux sur l’histoire de sa formation*, Mōbi 54, Geneva 2005, 169–195 (177).

²⁶ Barton, 1997, 35–62; Dungan, 2007, 43f.; E. Thomassen, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Second-Century Rome*, in: *HTHR* 97 (2004), 241–256.

²⁷ Barton, 1997, 56–62.

and others. In these settings the authoritative figures could be dead or alive – although that description comes from my perspective. Whether the seer was a revered figure from the past – Moses, Isaiah, John of Patmos – or a martyr whose relics remain among the group or a current member of the community, the seer was present to the group and the living medium of divine communication. It was such previously unknown divine information that such groups sought, whether that information concerned the meaning of recent events, the ethical condition of the community, or whether an individual should get married or take a new job.

Previously existing texts, read with the proper guidance of the Spirit, generated new insights into God's plans and his desires for the community. Stories that ostensibly narrated events of long ago and referred to individuals and communities of the past in fact carried messages for the present-day community of God's elect. Indeed, received scriptures provided the materials for the writing of new revelations, as visionary accounts were recycled or narratives were simply rewritten. New visions and revelations, often provoked through scriptural study, could also provoke new oracles and scriptures, sometimes attributed to figures of the past, but not always. The "canons" of such groups, if we want to use that term, were not only flexible but also expanding.

Arguably many of the writings of the New Testament are products of such scriptural practices, as those who experienced new revelations of Jesus and the Spirit drew on the Septuagint and other Jewish writings in writing their own texts. Other examples include the New Prophecy movement and some millenarian and monastic groups in Egypt. My primary examples, however, will be the Gnostic school of thought and Melitian movement of fourth-century Egypt.

The Gnostics may have identified themselves as a *αἰρετικὸς* or school of thought, a philosophical term, but their scriptural practices distinguish them from Clement of Alexandria, the Valentinians, and other persons and groups that belong more to my first category.³¹ Unlike Valentinus and his students, Gnostic authors, particularly in the second century, did not publish works in their own names or legitimate their teachings by pointing to their academic pedigrees and intellectual training. Instead, they produced revelatory literature that they attributed to persons of the past. *The Reality of the Rulers*, for example, takes its inspiration from Paul, attributes much of its content to the ancient figure of Norea, and closely mimics the Genesis of the Septuagint. New revelations produced new texts that modeled themselves after existing genres, such as heavenly

ascend literature (*Zōstrianos*). Some of this literature appears intended to supplement existing scripture with a similar level of authority (*The Secret Book According to John*) while other works seem to replace Genesis (*The Revelation of Adam, The Reality of the Rulers*).

This scriptural practice should not be distinguished from study and contemplation in terms of learned versus unlearned, or rational versus irrational, or even scientific versus inspired.³² Rather, the practices of effacing one's own identity as reader and writer and of producing new texts that mimic the genres of existing scriptures construct different understandings of how scripture is inspired, how learning is applied, and how divine knowledge is revealed. Again, we are not dealing here with an alternative canon or a competing Bible, but with a specific way of reading and writing within a religious movement.

Likewise, too, we cannot distinguish the Melitian movement of fourth-century Egypt from the imperially endorsed church network of Peter of Alexandria and his successors Alexander and Athanasius in terms of charisma versus bureaucracy, for the Melitian churches formed a network with a hierarchical clergy. Rather, many of the Melitians organized their self-understanding and their scriptural practices around the authority of the martyr, understood not as a model from the past but as a living presence in the community. The movement's spiritual and penitential rigor attempted to bring the martyrs' spirituality of resistance into the more ambiguous present of the Christian empire. Martyrs literally came into the community as their bodies were exhumed, sometimes after discovery by revelation, and moved into existing churches or new shrines.³³

The reading of revelatory works like the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Apocalypse of Moses* cohered with this martyr-oriented spirituality, as these texts linked the sufferings that their heroes endured with their receptions of divine visionary experiences. The Melitians created new texts in the form of hymns and oracular responses that were received at the martyr shrines. As they doubtless read, studied, and proclaimed the same works that appear in Athanasius's canon of 367, the Melitians looked to a wider variety of revelatory literature, some of which they promoted as "apocryphal," previously hidden but now available. This positive use of the term "apocryphal" suggests that they were playing off the canon of public worship – that the Melitians not only were aware of a set of works to be read publicly in worship, but also made use of such – and yet that liturgical function and its books did not completely determine their scriptural practices.

31 My understanding of "Gnostic" and "Gnostic school of thought" does not conform to the standard scholarly concept of "Gnosticism," but basically follows B. Layton, *Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism*, in: L.M. White / O.L. Yarbrough (eds.), *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, Minneapolis 1995, 334–350. For a full discussion of this issue, see Brakke, *Gnostics*, 2010, 29–51.

32 On some of these distinctions, as they are deployed both by ancient polemicists and modern historians, see L.S. Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly: Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity*, HTS 52, Cambridge 2003.

33 Brakke, 1998, 463–469; D. Frankfurter, *Where the Spirits Dwelt: Possession, Christianization, and Saints' Shrines in Late Antiquity*, in: HTR 103 (2010), 27–46 (30–33).

3. Communal Worship and Edification

Melitians and other Christians gathered also for shared worship, frequently centered on the Eucharist, and often formed stable communities with worship as their basis. Bishops and presbyters, teaching figures in their own right, guided these groups by presiding at rituals and instructing their flocks. They sought to insure proper worship of God, correct faith, and a moral lifestyle, and they formed networks of affiliation with bishops and presbyters in other locations.

At worship gatherings excerpts from scriptures were read that would support these goals, and oral preaching often took these readings as its basis. Existing scriptures, then, were either appropriate to read to the gathered community or not. Or there might be a provision for the tiered status of the worshipping community, which included catechumens who were not yet eligible for full participation. This practice generated new texts as well: homilies, church orders, statements of faith, and the like.

The simplest description of this scriptural practice is to be found in Justin Martyr's *First Apology*. Justin's scriptural practices in the study circles that he guided belong more to my category of study and contemplation, but he participated in a worshipping community as well. As he describes it, when Christians meet for worship, "the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things" (Just., 1 apol. 157). The reading is pragmatically determined by how much time is available, and the preaching is oriented toward moral exhortation. The goals of correct faith and moral virtue eventually required careful consideration of what should and should not be read at gatherings for worship – hence, the rather rigid tone of texts like the Muratorian fragment and Athanasius's 39th *Festal Letter*.

The author of the Muratorian fragment expresses concerns that fit the context of communal worship and edification.³⁴ The community of interest is described variously as "the church" (*ecclesia*), "the universal church" (*ecclesia catholica*), and "the people in the church" (*in ecclesia populus*) (40. 41. 43. 45). The "universal church" refers to a network of communities, "diffused throughout the whole globe of the earth" (35), and these communities appear to be gatherings of people, in which acceptable writings may be "read" or "published" (43. 45). Some writings may be acceptable or worthy of reading, and yet not fitting for the gathered community: these include "the apocalypses of John and of Peter," and the *Shepherd of Hermas* (43–47).

Writings that may be read in the assembly promote "the faith of believers" (16). They address a general audience of churches, not just

individual communities with their parochial problems and interests (even if they were originally sent to specific churches). Or, if they are directed to individuals, "an ordination of churchly discipline" has rendered them holy "in honor of the universal church" (38). Whatever that means. Moreover, the writings that can be read to people in the church come either from the time of the prophets or from that of the apostles, both of which lie in the past; writings from "our times," even if they are worthy of reading, are not suitable for proclamation in church (44–47).

This author, then, imagines what we would call a "closed canon," but he also understands that there are different kinds of scriptures or different collections of authoritative writings for different purposes. His list does not determine all possible legitimate Christian scriptural practices; rather, it addresses a particular social setting and its practices – to promote the faith of believers in the assembly and its unity with other such communities elsewhere in the world.

Likewise, Athanasius' *Festal Letter* finds its religious setting in local communities gathered for worship and united with other such communities.³⁵ By its nature the letter's context is liturgical: it announces the dates of Lent and Easter and summons Egyptian Christians to "keep the feast according to the tradition of our ancestors" (15). Athanasius invites the hearers of the letter to imagine him present with them "in a single house, 'the church of God, the pillar and strength of truth' (1 Tim 3:15)" (32). Athanasius presents two lists of authoritative writings, distinguished by the two groups of worshipping Christians: the "canonized," which are intended for public worship, and the "read," which are appropriate for the instruction of catechumens.

The apocryphal books that the Melitians promote are not to be read at all. "Even if a useful word is found in them," Athanasius writes, "it is still not good to trust them" (23). Here we see a marked difference from the readers engaged in study and contemplation, who may find something true and useful in a work that they otherwise do not approve.

Athanasius's approved scriptures function as the Muratorian fragment suggests: they promote the faith of the believers. Faith here is understood to be holding basic orthodox doctrines – "the teaching of piety" (19). "The faith," Athanasius claims, is found in the Scriptures – "that we might believe in the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit." This belief has a creedal character, both positive and negative. Positively, each step in the career of the incarnate Word appears in the scriptures: his incarnation as a human (John 1:14), his resurrection (Matt 22:31f.), and his future judgment (2 Cor 5:10) (24). Negatively, passages refute specific heretical teachings – namely, the Manichaean doctrine that matter pre-existed God's

³⁴ The text is found in D.J. Theron, *Evidence of Tradition*, Grand Rapids 1980, 106–113; the translations are my own, and references are to the line numbers in Theron's text.

³⁵ I refer here to the section divisions established by A. Campanari, *Athanasio di Alessandria. Lettere Festali. Anonimo. Indice delle Lettere Festali*, LCPM 34, Milano 2003, and found in my English translation in Brake, *New Fragment*, 2010.

creation of the cosmos; the Marcionite doctrine that the Law is no longer valid for Christians; the New Prophecy doctrine that the Holy Spirit came with Montanus, Priscilla and Maximilla; and the Arian doctrine that the Word did not always exist (25). Because the books listed by Athanasius contain the complete faith, they are a sufficient collection: "Let no one add to or subtract from them" (19). Among the texts, persons, and groups that I have discussed in detail, Athanasius is the only one to make such a definitive and declarative statement.

What difference does it make for the history of canon formation to identify these varied scriptural practices among early Christians? For one thing, it makes clear that the classic passages and lists that scholars traditionally gather and study in their reconstructions of a linear progress toward the eventual New Testament canon do not in fact describe or pertain to the same thing. They are not points along a trajectory toward the *ré*Λογ of Athanasius' list. Marcion's editorial work on the sources of Christian faith and the Gnostics' production of new "rewritten scriptures" neither anticipate nor transgress the church's development of a closed canon. Rather, they represent different scriptural practices, with their own characteristics and histories.

In this narrative, the hotly contested dating of the Muratorian fragment becomes a less urgent question. It is neither surprising nor historically crucial that a Christian in the West around the turn of the third century would worry about what should and should not be read in the worshiping assembly, and the same can be said of a Christian in the East during the late fourth century – these are, of course, the two competing hypotheses for the context of the Muratorian fragment. This mode of approaching scripture is one we find in a variety of contexts in the early Christian movement.

This proposal not only removes the closed canon of Athanasius and others as the center and *ré*Λογ of our history, but also better fits a model of pre-Constantinian Christianity that does not place a so-called "Great Church" or "proto-orthodoxy" at its center. Instead, it considers different Christian social forms and spiritualities as engaged in a complex process of mutual self-differentiation that cannot be reduced to a conflict either between "orthodoxy" and "heresy" or among competing "varieties of early Christianity."

Moreover, we need alongside the history of the canonical history of the *apocryphal*. The term *apocryphal* and its cognates function in diverse ways, which are not always negative. Athanasius argued that "apocryphal" books do not really exist, and even if they do, they should not be trusted. This argument suggests that some Christians in his context could value a writing's status as "apocryphal," as indeed I have argued some did when seeking revelation and continued inspiration. Moreover, in the Nag Hammadi codices, also from fourth-century Egypt, some texts have the term *apocryphon* in their titles. The *Gospel of Thomas* calls its sayings "hidden"

or "obscure," suggesting that this property makes them salvific. Even after the promulgation of Athanasius's canon, a Christian like Priscillian could offer a spirited defense of the use of apocryphal literature by the discerning reader.³⁶ The valence of the terms *apocryphal* and *apocryphon* had differing functions in different contexts, particularly before and after the promulgation of the *canonical*.

Here too we might take inspiration from John Guilleury's discussion of the term "noncanonical" in contemporary literary scholarship. What is not canonical can become a category of its own, which signifies more than what is not canonical:

But paradoxically, the most surprising aspect of the current legitimation crisis is the fact that the 'noncanonical' is not what fails to appear in the classroom, but what, in the context of liberal pedagogy, signifies exclusion. The noncanonical is a newly constituted category of text production and reception, permitting certain authors and texts to be taught as noncanonical, to have the status of noncanonical works in the classroom. The effect is quite different from the effect of total absence, of nonrepresentation *tout court*.³⁷

We are certainly familiar with this phenomenon in the present day, when our colleagues market collections of noncanonical early Christian texts precisely as noncanonical – *Lost Scriptures! The Gnostic Bible!* – and thus as valuable and possibly more insightful for the modern reader than the canonical Bible. But what about this phenomenon in antiquity: what role did it play in the various scriptural practices that I have sketched?

Finally, if we de-center the closed canon within our narrative, then there is no reason simply to stop either with Eusebius of Caesarea, as most scholars usually do, or with Athanasius, as most scholars actually should in the traditional model. Instead, surely the definition and enforcement of a closed canon for communal worship and edification had important effects on other scriptural practices. Study and contemplation, for example, continued to exert an expansive effect on notions of Christian scripture, as the reading practices of Didymus the Blind show.³⁸ We should add to my typology of scriptural practices ascetic and/or monastic reading and writing. In Pachomian monasteries monks memorized scripture and recited it as they worked, and they produced new texts (rules, biographies) that gained scriptural status of their own. Shenoute of the White Monastery appealed to and created archives of authoritative monastic texts; modeling his persona

36 See A.S. Jacobs, *The Disorder of Books: Priscillian's Canonical Defense of Apocrypha*, in: *HTHR* 93 (2000), 135–159.

37 Guilleury, 1993, 9.

38 B.D. Ehrman, *The New Testament Canon of Didymus the Blind*, in: *VigChr* 37 (1983), 1–21; R.A. Layton, *Didymus the Blind and his Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria. Virtue and Narrative in Biblical Scholarship*, Urbana 2003.

on the prophets of the Old Testament, he organized many of his own works into a set of books that he called *Canons*.³⁹ Urban ascetics took on reading programs designed to facilitate their progress in virtue and knowledge, and mentors like Jerome emerged to guide ascetics in their study of scripture. In this way, the earlier tradition of Christian scholarship took new forms closely allied with ascetic self-formation and under the constraints of the new closed canon.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, and closely related to monastic reading practices, was the use of scriptural texts in ritual contexts in addition to the Eucharistic liturgy that Athanasius envisioned. A monk, for example, could use scriptural passages to thwart demons.⁴¹ The so-called magical papyri use scriptural texts to invoke supramundane beings and to make things happen in the social and physical worlds. These practices should be studied alongside the enforcement of an authoritative canon and in continuity with the liturgical use of texts in the official church context.

So the typology that I have laid out here, based as it is on Athanasius' *Festal Letter of 367*, is certainly incomplete, and I wish to reiterate its ideal character as well. That is, someone like Origen participated in activities that would fall under both my first and third categories. The typology is meant to function not as a set of self-contained boxes, but more like a multi-axial grid that can plot several variables of reading, writing, authority, ritual, and the like. Despite these caveats, I believe that it can help us to construct a history of scriptural practices that accounts for the formation of the closed New Testament canon of 27 books, without depicting that collection as the inevitable *τέλος* of all Christian uses of authoritative writings in the first four centuries. (And, of course, we must not forget that Athanasius' list did not prevail everywhere, for example, not among the Armenians, who continued to use 3 *Corinthians*.) Such a history would not minimize the importance of the New Testament canon, but it would undermine its centrality before the fourth century and its ultimate inevitability. It would indeed describe a discursive fight or, rather, several discursive fights over what should count as "the Christian tradition," but struggle and conflict would not be its only themes. Rather, it would emphasize too the immense creativity and diversity of the ways in which early Christians used texts to shape themselves and their communities.

Second Temple Jewish Hermeneutics

How Canon is Not an Anachronism

Stephen B. Chapman

Considerable scholarly energy is currently being directed against the traditional terms "Bible" and "canon" as descriptions of scripture in Second Temple Judaism.¹ Indeed, even the term "scripture" has become suspect, increasingly viewed as historically vague and tainted with anachronistic presuppositions.²

The arguments go like this: were not the individual writings of the later Tanakh originally produced without regard for any "scriptural" status and in fact subject to a long history of editorial change, the effect of which was gradually to harmonize them with each other and thereby render them suitable for a religious function? When, it is asked, were such writings then actually elevated to scriptural status, and how can we tell? Moreover, from twentieth century manuscript discoveries like those at Qumran and in the Judean desert, it is now clear that a wider variety of religious texts existed than only those which were eventually included within the biblical canon. For this reason, to refer to "biblical" or "canonical" texts is inappropriate because it risks prejudging so-called "extrabiblical" or "noncanonical" texts as somehow inferior.³ Similarly, those same discoveries have revealed not just a wealth of ancient texts but a fluidity of text types. So how can one entertain the idea of any sort of religiously authorized collection of writings without the existence of a uniform text representing them? For all these reasons, it is accurate and important to observe that Second Temple Jews did not have a "Bible" in the later sense. The spiritual fabric of their lives was rather different, so the argument goes, and not to acknowledge this point firmly is to fall prey to a "protestant" overemphasis on the significance of written texts within religious tradition.

39 S. Esmail Sironiou's *Literary Corpus*, CSCO, New Haven 1993, 599f.; Leuven 2004.

40 M.H. Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship*, Chicago 2006.

41 *Diagnoses of Poritis: Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, CistISS 229, Collegeville 2009 (translated by D. Brakke).

1 J.E. Bowley / J.C. Reeves, *Rethinking the Concept of "Bible": Some Theses and Proposals*, in: *Henech* 25 (2003), 3-18. See the Society of Biblical Literature's consultation on the topic "Rethinking the Concept and Categories of 'Bible' in Antiquity".

2 See the discussion of W.C. Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*, Minneapolis 1993, 119-122, although he himself ultimately redefines and retains the terminology.

3 See J.H. Charlesworth, *Writings Ostensibly Outside the Canon*, in: C.A. Evans / E. Tov (eds.), *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology, Grand Rapids 2008, 63, 67.

4 Charlesworth, 2008, 63f.