

# The New Testament Canon: *Cur Alii Prae Aliis?*

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[A paper presented to the South Central District Pastoral Conference  
at Shepherd of the Plains Lutheran Church in Lubbock, Texas on April 23-24, 1990.]

The theme assigned this essayist applies the fundamental question of Christian theology to a lesser but significant concern of the formation of the New Testament canon. The canon of the New Testament is not an article of faith; it is the basis or foundation of Christian belief. It is primarily a historical, not theological question. Since the Scriptures do not define the limits or extent of the canon, the question of the canon must always in some respects remain open. Prophetic eras of our faith have seen this clearly, while in more settled times also in Lutheran theology the canon has tended to become closed, with certain questions of history glossed over or ignored. Deuteronomy or Revelation is used to fix the number of the canonical books,<sup>1</sup> whereas these texts speak only to the point that nothing is to be added to or subtracted from the canonical authority, and do not establish what is canonical and what not.

*The Lutheran Agenda* in the rites of confirmation and ordination rightly requires acceptance of “all the canonical books of the Bible” as the binding profession of every member and the governing norm of all teaching in the church, but stops short of fixing the bounds of the canon.

Luther was free in his approach to the canon. In his Prefaces to the Books of the Bible that appeared with the publication of his German translation (1522) Luther wrote: “Hitherto we have had the right certain chief books of the New Testament. The four following (Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation) had, in ancient times, a different reputation.”<sup>2</sup> Luther questions the canonicity of these four books. Typical is his comment on Jude, “Therefore, although I praise the book, it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books, which are to lay the foundation of faith.”<sup>3</sup> This arrangement of his New Testament, with these four books at the end, continued through his final revision of 1545, the Prefaces of 1522 being reprinted and included, excepting the Preface to the Apocalypse, which was replaced with a new, less critical preface in the 1545 printing. But more of Luther at a later point.

C.F.W. Walther stood with Luther, bound to the Word only, in his refusal to support disciplinary measures against a certain Missourian Pastor Roebbelen who did not regard the book of Revelation as canonical. In a *Lehre und Wehre* article entitled, “Is He to Be Declared a Heretic or Dangerous False Teacher Who Does Not Hold and Declare as Canonical All the Books Found in the Scroll of the New Testament?,” Walther gives as his judgment: “We believe that it is improper and probably based on ignorance of the situation to regard an otherwise blameless theologian as a dangerous false teacher who makes God’s Word itself suspect because, even though he sincerely regards all homologoumena (universally accepted books) as canonical, he questions the canonicity of one or the other antilegomena (a disputed book).”<sup>4</sup>

The Roman Church went beyond Scripture and accepted catholic practice by fixing the number of the canonical books at the Tridentine Council, in one stroke dismissing all historical consideration of the distinction between homologoumena and antilegomena and even apocrypha, and attaching an anathema to all who held otherwise. The canonical books are set in Canon XII as follows:

[The Old Testament canon, with the inclusion of the OT Apocrypha is listed.]

Of the New Testament the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Acts of the Apostles written by Luke, the evangelist, 14 Epistles of the blessed apostle Paul,

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<sup>1</sup> De 4:2; 12:32; Re 22:18

<sup>2</sup> Phil. Ed., vol. VI, p. 476.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 479.

<sup>4</sup> Walther, p. 24.

namely, to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews, two of the apostle Peter, three of the apostle John, one of James, one of the apostle Jude, the Apocalypse of the apostle John.<sup>5</sup>

This precipitate action on the part of the Council not only established a permanent, unalterable canon, with no distinction of books, but also canonized the apostolic authorship of books whose apostolic origins are by no means certain.

Reformed theology followed suit, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1562, 1571) and the Westminster Confession (1647) fixing a canon of 66 books of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, excluding the OT Apocrypha.<sup>6</sup>

The later theologians of Lutheran orthodoxy, from Gerhard on, that is to say, after the turn of the seventeenth century, blurred the distinction the ancient church had drawn between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*, substituting in some instances the terms *protocanonical* and *deuterocanonical*, but they did not mean by this what the ancients meant, and what Luther and Chemnitz and Lutheran theology in general through the sixteenth century understood by the distinction. Thus for later Lutheran orthodoxy the question of the canon became a settled matter not really distinguishable from the Reformed position on the canon.

### The Word “Canon”

It may arguably be said that “the word ‘canon’ has had a history unsurpassed in interest, perhaps, by any other word in the Greek language.”<sup>7</sup> Borrowed from an uncertain Semitic source (Heb. קֶנֶה = reed, pipe), *κανών* is a development from the Greek transliterations of this Semitic root (*κάννα*, *κανή*, a cover woven from reeds, cf. English *cane*), although in the LXX *κανών* never directly translates קֶנֶה. The basic meaning of קֶנֶה of *reed* or *pipe* developed in Hebrew use into “a measuring reed or rod or staff, and finally a scales or the arm of a candlestick.”<sup>8</sup> In Greek usage *κανών* closely paralleled the sense development of קֶנֶה and became a straight rod, either marked (notched) for measuring length or with weights on both ends to serve as a level, thus conforming closely also to the Latin *regula*.

Chemnitz traces the meaning of *κανών* from the Hebrew קֶנֶה. In this he is working apparently not with the LXX but the Aquila OT translation into Greek. The Christian use and Messianic application of the LXX had become so thorough and dominant in the Mediterranean world

that early in the second century the non-Christian Jews felt that they could no longer regard the book as their own, and a fresh translation into Greek was made for their use by Aquila, (a second century Jew) of Sinope in Pontus. Henceforth the Septuagint was exclusively a Christian book.<sup>9</sup>

*Κανών* in the Aquila translation renders the Heb. קֶנֶה (= measuring line) of Ps. 19:4: “Their *line* (for *voice* of NIV which follows the emended text of the LXX, which reads קוֹלֵם in the place of קֶנֶה; so also Syriac, Jerome, most modern translations) goes out into all the world.” Although the LXX does not use *κανών* to translate קֶנֶה,

<sup>5</sup> Chemnitz, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Thiessen, p. 29; Bettensen, p. 347.

<sup>7</sup> Souter, p. 141.

<sup>8</sup> Kittel, vol. III, p. 596.

<sup>9</sup> Souter, p. 138.

nonetheless the Aquila translation gives some insight into common second century usage of *κανών* as a *measuring line*. “Their *canon*, i.e., ‘measuring line,’ ‘that which measures all things,’ has gone out into all the world” (Ps. 19:4).

From the literal sense of *κανών* as *ruler* or *level* derive a number of metaphorical usages:<sup>10</sup> 1) written laws as standard or rule of behavior; 2) the embodiment of the rule in an exemplary person called a *κανών*; 3) from middle of second century on, the formulated confession of the Christian faith, as in *ὁ κανών τῆς ἀληθείας* (*regula veritatis*), *ὁ κανών τῆς πίστεως* (*regula fidei*), esp. the baptismal creed; 4) from this then any ecclesiastical ordinance, esp. that which issues from a synod or council; 5) = *κατάλογος*, list, index, table (Souter suggests this sense “probably derives from the row of marks indicating scale or measurement on the rule or level”), a common use; 6) the *canon* of the mass, the central, generally unalterable portion of the mass, so-called “probably from the list of persons specially commemorated in it, the saints as well as the living and dead for whom prayers are asked” (Souter), but this point is disputable. To put a dead person in such a list is to *canonize* him. But the canon of the mass could doubtless also take its name from its authoritative position within the mass.

NT occurrences of *κανών* are infrequent and only in Paul. In Ga. 6:16, Paul uses the word much in the sense of *regula*: “Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this *κανόνι*.” The KJV text of Ph. 3:16 has it in the same sense, but this reading is quite certainly a later gloss to the text. The only three other occurrences of *κανών* in the NT are in 2 Co. 10:13-16 where the meaning is uncertain.

If we inquire as to the sense in which the early church applied the term canon to the holy Scriptures, two choices are pressed on us, 1) that which is authoritative and sets the bounds or limits to Christian faith, and 2) a list or *κατάλογος* of accepted books. Theology may play in the choice. “Rationalists use the term canon in the sense of list.”<sup>11</sup> Support for the understanding of *κανών* in the early church as that which is normative, authoritative, comes from Kittel:

Nor is the decisive point the equation of *κανών* and *κατάλογος*, formal though the use of the term may be. What really counted was the concept of norm inherent in the term, i.e., its material content as the *κανών τῆς ἀληθείας* in the Christian sense. The Latins thus came to equate *canon* and *biblia*.<sup>12</sup>

### Early Collections of New Testament Books

The earliest collection of NT books was of the letters of Paul, ten of which at least, excluding possibly the Pastoral Epistles, formed a Pauline corpus prior to 100, as is allowed by Biblical scholarship of virtually every persuasion. Zahn argues for the existence of a Pauline corpus as early as 80, and his arguments ought not be quickly dismissed. Peter writes of Pauline Epistles as being already well-known (2 Pe. 3:15-16). 1 Clement, “written about A.D. 95, also gives clear evidence of acquaintance with a collection of Paul’s ‘letters.’”<sup>13</sup> “In Ignatius and Polycarp we get the first clear traces of knowledge of Paul derived from his letters. The way in which they refer to Paul shows that they can assume knowledge of his letters on the part of the communities they address in Asia.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> After Souter, pp. 141-2, and Kittel, Vol. III, pp. 596-602.

<sup>11</sup> *Lutheran Cyclopaedia*, p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> Kittel, p. 601.

<sup>13</sup> Goodspeed, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> Souter, p. 150.

It is not difficult to visualize the process by which the Pauline Epistles were bound into one volume in a relatively short time after their writing. The letters were written with encouragement that they be circulated among the churches.<sup>15</sup> The four Asia letters would have almost immediately come into a collection, perhaps, at Ephesus; likewise the three Macedonian letters, possibly at Philippi. These, together with the two at Corinth and the one at Rome, required then the travel only to four centers of Christianity for the assembly of the initial corpus. Given the facility of movement of the early Christians described in Acts and the Epistles of Paul, we have no reason to delay for any considerable time the gathering of these Epistles, all of which were written by the early sixties, into a single collection. Goodspeed's conjecture that Ephesians was written by the compiler as an introduction to the Pauline corpus, an opinion followed by much of modern Biblical scholarship,<sup>16</sup> need not be seriously regarded. There is simply no hard evidence, internal or external to Scripture, to force that conclusion.

A place in this original corpus of Paul's letters is generally denied by modern scholarship to the Pastoral Epistles. "It seems clear, however, that Timothy and Titus were written in the second century to disclaim Marcion and contemporary schisms."<sup>17</sup> This would place the Pastorals toward the middle of the second century. It may well have been that the Pastorals were not found in the earliest collection of Paul's letters, for, after all, it is generally recognized on all sides from internal evidence that they were the last written. But a second century, non-Pauline authorship of them is by no means thereby established. The Pastorals have a wealth of early attestation. "Polycarp not only knows the Pastoral Epistles himself, but presupposes that his readers know them; and whilst in some cases... Polycarp may be referring to some commonplace saying, or to some common basis in his special appeal to his converts, yet in ch. v of his Epistle, 2 Tim. 2:12 is too plainly cited to admit of any such explanation" (Harnack).<sup>18</sup> Also Clement, Ignatius, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Epistle to Diognetus quite clearly refer to the Pastorals, pointing to an early, not late (post-Marcion), date of composition.<sup>19</sup> That which to the early church was universally *homologoumena* (the Pastoral Epistles) cannot by a late 'speaking against,' no earlier than 1804,<sup>20</sup> easily be made to be *antilegomena*.

The gathering of the four Gospels into a single volume followed shortly on the compilation of the Pauline corpus. Higher critical opinion generally supports early compiling of the four gospels into one book. "The new Gospel (John) was designed to meet the religious needs of the Greek public..., and soon after its appearance, certainly by 120 A.D., it was combined with the three earlier Gospels into the great quartet we know so well."<sup>21</sup> Scholarship generally assigns to the four Gospels the dates of composition: Mark between 60 and 70, Matthew and Luke between 70 and 80, and John about 90 to 100. Harnack argues for earlier dates for the synoptics: Mark at latest 50-60, Matthew immediately after 70, and Luke within Paul's lifetime.<sup>22</sup> These dates are subject to wide conjecture. One conservative scholar places Matthew first at 45-50, Luke second at ca. 58, and Mark at 67 or 68,<sup>23</sup> while some, to show just how wide the divergence of opinion, argue Luke was written after 95 because he was dependent on Josephus' *Antiquities*.<sup>24</sup>

Paul refers to a saying of the Lord,<sup>25</sup> but it is not clear that this is based on a written Gospel already in circulation, or on orally transmitted "sayings" or a possible *Quelle*, or collected written source of Jesus' sayings. The earliest mention of a written Gospel, according to Souter, is in the *Didache* (110?), in the passage in 8:2, in reference to the Lord's Prayer: "...but pray thus as the Lord commanded in his Gospel."<sup>26</sup> In this and three

<sup>15</sup> Co 4:16; 1 Th 5:27.

<sup>16</sup> Goodspeed, pp. 63-4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>18</sup> Thiessen, p. 254.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>21</sup> Goodspeed, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Souter, p. 147.

<sup>23</sup> Thiessen, pp. 137, 146, 158.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Co 7:10.

<sup>26</sup> Souter, p. 147; *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 15.

other *Didache* passages, as well as in a passage from Ignatius,<sup>27</sup> roughly contemporary with the *Didache*, “it is perfectly clear that already at this time ‘the Gospel’ was something well known in the churches, a document or body of documents.”<sup>28</sup> Further, since no name of an author is given in the early references to a written Gospel, “this very fact suggests that it was a set of documents, to which the collective term ‘Gospel’ was already applied, as we know it was regularly at a later time.”<sup>29</sup> The overwhelming canonical authority of the four collected Gospels in the early church is seen in the fact that Theodor Zahn, who made an exhaustive study of the early source materials, in the period 95 to 140, could find only four Gospel citations that cannot be derived from our four Gospels.<sup>30</sup>

So we may say with historical confidence that at or before or, at the very latest, shortly after the turn of the first century, already there was in general use in the church a bound New Testament authority that included the four Gospels and the Epistles of Paul, with or without the Pastorals initially.

### Early Witnesses to the Canon

Clement of Rome (c. 30-100) in the letter bearing his name to the Corinthians (*1 Clement*), written about 96, shows knowledge of Matthew, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and is full of references to Hebrews. Possible references to James, 1 Peter, 1 Timothy, and Titus are also found here. Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), a Greek born in Samaria, traveled widely and finally ended up in Rome where he founded a school. He made use of Matthew, Mark (*Memoirs of Peter*), Luke, John, and shows acquaintance also with Acts, 1 Peter, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and the Apocalypse (which he regarded as a work of John).<sup>31</sup> The Gnostics, Basilides (fl. 130) and Valentinus (fl. 140), both teachers in Alexandria, used the New Testament much as we have it. Basilides quotes the NT books in the same manner as the OT, “as it is written,” and “about which the Scripture says.” Their NT use shows little difference between Gnostic and orthodox handling of the NT writings at this point.

Marcion (d. 165), born in Pontus and active in Rome, is of considerable importance in canonical studies because he gives us in 140 the first formal NT canon. His Gnostic background and strongly anti-Jewish bias led him to reject the entire Old Testament and all New Testament books with the exception of Luke and ten Epistles of Paul (excluding the Pastorals) which he received with some mutilation: These books he presented as canonical authority to replace the OT use in the church, and called his collection the *ἀποστολικόν*.

Tatian (b.c. 120) was born in Syria and later came to Rome as a student of Justin Martyr, replacing him on his death as teacher. Though his influence was ultimately far-reaching in the East, we list him here as a representative in his time of the canon in the West. About 170 he produced a striking harmony of the Gospels, using precisely the texts of our four Gospels, and none other, known as the *Diatessaron*. Thought originally to have been produced in Syriac, it is now generally agreed that this work appeared first in Rome and was later translated to become the official Gospel of the Assyrian Church for two centuries, until episcopal authority sought (with some difficulty) to displace it with the *Peshitta*. Tatian was familiar with virtually all the New Testament as we know it.

The Old Latin Version (before 170), in wide use in Africa, according to Wescott presents a canon of the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen Epistles of Paul, the three of John, 1 Peter, Jude, and the Apocalypse. The Epistle to the Hebrews was added a little later but before the time of Tertullian (fl. 197-220). There is no positive evidence of James and 2 Peter, but also no evidence that they were not included.<sup>32</sup>

Irenaeus (c. 140-203) a student of Polycarp in Asia, possibly born in Smyrna, made his mark on the church as bishop of Lyons in Gaul (c. 180-190). “It is in Irenaeus...that we first find something like a whole

<sup>27</sup> Philad. 8:2, in *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 227.

<sup>28</sup> Souter, p. 148.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>31</sup> Thiessen, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

New Testament freely quoted.”<sup>33</sup> He quotes the four Gospels, Acts (in long extracts), the Epistles of Paul (with the exception of Philemon), 1 Peter, 1 & 2 John, and the Apocalypse (again in long extracts). “If we add to these the Epistle of Philemon and 3 John, we shall probably not be far from the complete New Testament as recognized by Irenaeus.”<sup>34</sup> In a number of significant passages on the Gospels Irenaeus shows the unquestioned authority in the church of our four Gospels, which apparently had persisted for some time.

The Muratorian Fragment (c. 170-200), so called for the Italian scholar who first published it from a Milan manuscript in 1740, a fragment of unknown authorship, produced in Rome, or as some suppose, in Alexandria and brought to Rome before the turn of the second century, lists the NT books recognized as canonical woven into a poetic text describing the books and their author. The fragment begins with the mention of Luke as “*tertium euangelii librum*” implying the listing of Matthew and Mark in the lost beginning section.<sup>35</sup> All the books of our New Testament are found in this list with the exception of Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, and 3 John. However, as Goodspeed notes, “the early writers sometimes thought of 1, 2, & 3 John as one letter (Irenaeus), and sometimes as two (Muratorian Canon).”<sup>36</sup> If this is the case, all three of John’s Epistles would be included in the Canon’s phrase, “*suprascripti Iohannis (epistolae) duae in catholica habentur.*”<sup>37</sup> Significant here is the distinction between accepted books that are to be “read,” but not to be “read publicly”: the *Shepherd of Hermas* “*legi... oportet, sed publicare uero in ecclesia populo neque inter prophetas, completo numero, neque inter apostolos in fine temporum potest.*”<sup>38</sup> The Apocalypses of both John and Peter are “accepted,” “although some of us do not wish it (Peter) to be read in the church.”<sup>39</sup> Only those books of recognized canonical authority are to be publicly read. So, as we have seen, the Shepherd, though highly regarded, is not to be given the canonical recognition of the public reading in the churches.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-c. 215) has left us three major works in which he shows acceptance of all the books in our present New Testament, including a number disputed by some, as Jude and the rest of the Catholic epistles. He thought that Hebrews had been written by Paul in Hebrew and later translated by Luke into Greek. But Clement knew and used a variety of other writings and it is not always clear what he regarded as Scripture and what not. Besides the four Gospels and fourteen letters of Paul he recognized also as apostolic 1 Peter, 1 & 2 John, and Jude, and with them 1 Clement and Barnabas. He included as Scripture not only John’s Apocalypse, but also that of Peter and the Shepherd of Hermas. He made free use also of the Preaching of Peter, perhaps the earliest of Christian apologies, citing it as “Peter says in his preaching.” He quotes a line of the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles as Scripture. He is familiar with the Gospels of the Hebrews and the Egyptians although he does not appear to regard them as Scripture. What we see then in Clement is a canon less developed than that of Rome or Africa, including many books of questionable origins and authority that through the influence of Alexandria found their way not only into the fourth century Codex Sinaiticus which has Barnabas and the Shepherd at the end following Revelation, and the fifth century Codex Alexandrinus which concludes with 1 and 2 Clement, but doubtless also played a major role in the shaping of the extended Ethiopic NT canon of 35 books. Unfortunately, the loss of Clement’s famous work, the Outlines, which contained his accounts of the books of Scripture, makes it impossible to determine in any precise way his canon. It fell to Origen, becoming head of the Christian school in Alexandria in 202, still within Clement’s lifetime, to do a more careful work on the canon.

### The Canon at the End of the Second Century

<sup>33</sup> Souter, p. 156.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>35</sup> The complete Latin text is found in Souter, pp. 191-3.

<sup>36</sup> Thiessen, p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> Souter, p. 193.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

By the year 200 twenty-one books had achieved a secure position in the canon, the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John. The Apocalypse of John, generally accepted at the turn of the century, was increasingly challenged, along with the other books that came to be called antilegomena.

We may conclude the study of this period of the formation of the NT canon with the summary statement of Wescott:

From the close of the second century the history of the Canon is simple, and its proof clear. It is allowed even by those who have reduced the genuine Apostolic works to the narrowest limits, that from the time of Irenaeus the New Testament was composed essentially of the same books which we receive at the present, and that they were regarded with the same reverence as is now shown to them.<sup>40</sup>

To this Souter adds the testimony: “The Canon which we know was then for most of its books already settled before the middle of the third century, and, we might say, probably seventy-five years before that even.”<sup>41</sup>

### *Antilegomena and Homologoumena*

To Origen (c. 185-c. 253) we owe the distinction between the *homologoumena*, or universally accepted books, and the *antilegomena*, or disputed books. Origen came into prominence in the church in Alexandria in connection with the persecution under Severus in 202 that drove so many Christian teachers out of Alexandria that Origen, a mere youth of 18 years, became head of the Christian school there. For more than fifty years he wrote and taught, first at Alexandria, and then, driven by his own bishop out of Alexandria in 230, at Caesarea. He traveled extensively, to Rome, Athens, Syria, Cappadocia, and Arabia, everywhere acquainting himself with the Biblical texts available. A rich benefactor supplied him with a good number of stenographers and copyists that helped him become the most prolific of Christian writers. Recognizing problems associated with the unclarity of the precise contents of the New Testament, Origen nonetheless did not attempt to settle the question of the canon, but carefully classified the books of the NT as “accepted,” or acknowledged by all the churches, and “disputed,” or questioned by some of the churches.

Origen listed as *homologoumena* twenty-one (twenty-two?) books: the four Gospels, the thirteen Epistles of Paul, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and the Apocalypse. The question mark is for Hebrews. Souter lists Hebrews among Origen’s disputed works although he concedes “(Origen) himself, especially in his earlier works, cites (it) as Pauline and canonical.”<sup>42</sup> But Goodspeed includes Hebrews as a definite fourteenth Epistle of Paul, accepted by Origen: “We know that Hebrews was not yet accepted in the West, but Origen included it in his list of acknowledged books nevertheless.”<sup>43</sup> As *antilegomena* Origen lists (Hebrews), 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, Barnabas, the Shepherd, the Didache, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.

Origen’s contemporary in Rome, Hippolytus (ca. 235), had a more limited canon. He knew twenty-two accepted books, identical with Origen’s, with the exclusion of Hebrews and inclusion of 2 John. Hippolytus is representative of the western canon which was slow to accept the canonicity of Hebrews.

A year after Origen was driven out of Alexandria (231), Dionysius became head of the famous school there and remained in that position until 247, becoming known for his writing and influence as Dionysius the Great. His farthest reaching canonical influence concerned the book of Revelation, whose apostolic authorship he questioned while yet according it high esteem. Due to his doubts about the apostolic origins of Revelation much of the Eastern Church for generations was led to reject its canonicity. Fully two-thirds of the Greek manuscripts extant omit it.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Thiessen, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Souter, p. 162.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>43</sup> Goodspeed, p. 66.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 265-340) through his adopted father Pamphilus inherited the library and traditions of Origen. In his great Church History, completed in 326, he fortunately included lengthy quotations from the principal Christian writers of the previous three centuries, particularly where they spoke on the New Testament. He provides us with a wealth of material on the canon. Eusebius maintained Origen's earlier distinction between *antilegomena* and *homologoumena*, and further refined it. The *antilegomena* he divided into those he accepted and those he rejected. Thus to determine Eusebius' canon one must take the *homologoumena* together with the *antilegomena* that he did not reject. When we do this, we find that Eusebius regarded as "accepted books" the four Gospels and Acts, fourteen letters of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 John and 1 Peter. The disputed books accepted by him were James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and, "if it really seems proper," Revelation. Thus we have in Eusebius the exact New Testament that we have today, with some lingering suspicion regarding Revelation, due no doubt to the persistent influence of Dionysius.

The *antilegomena* rejected by Eusebius were the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Revelation of Peter, the Letter of Barnabas, and the Teaching of the Apostles. Eusebius added a fourth category of books that he called *notha*, i.e., spurious or definitely heretical, among which were the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Traditions of Matthias, the Acts of Andrew, and the Acts of John.

Among the criteria we see employed by these early writers in determining canonicity was apostolicity, whether or not the book was written by an apostle or by someone in a close relationship to an apostle. The canonicity of Mark, Luke; and Acts, particularly turned on this latter question. For the early church the direct revelation of God ceased with the close of the apostolic age. A second criterion was the contents of the book. Was the book free from heresy and schismatic bias? On this point most of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books were eliminated. A third criterion was catholicity, whether or not the book was universally received in the church. This aided in the rejection of unworthy books, but also prolonged the debate concerning the *antilegomena* for a considerable time.

### **The Canon Takes Its Final Shape**

In the East the great bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius (288-373), in his annual Easter letter to the churches of his diocese in 367 gave a list of the books of Scripture. He was perhaps the first to apply the term "canonical" to the exact twenty-seven books that we now have in our New Testament. Athanasius had made use of the Shepherd of Hermas in earlier writings, but by the time of the Pastoral letter he had given up on the idea that it should be viewed as Scripture, and his visits to the West had restored his confidence in the Apocalypse so as to include it in his canon.

In the West the translation of Jerome of Pannonia, Rome, and Palestine (c. 340-420), made toward the end of his life, contained the same twenty-seven books of our present New Testament. He explains how the various Catholic Epistles came to be recognized in the church, accounting for the difference in vocabulary between 1 and 2 Peter, e.g., on the grounds that Peter had a different "interpreter" for the two. In a letter to a friend in the West Jerome argues persuasively for the inclusion of Hebrews in the canon since all the churches in the East accepted it as by Paul, although he admits some think it was written by Barnabas or Clement.<sup>45</sup> Bolstered by the support of Augustine (354-430), who appears to have still held some reservations about the canonicity of Hebrews, and by Athanasius, who, as we noted, had already recognized the identical canon of our twenty-seven books, the appearance of the Vulgate virtually ended the debate on the canon in the West. In both the Greek and Latin churches the Athanasian canon prevailed. By the end of the fourth century in the West, and the fifth in the East, the question of the canon was a settled matter for the Greek and Latin churches.

### **The Councils and the Canon**

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<sup>45</sup> Thiessen, p. 24.



“It is a remarkable fact that no early Church Council selected the books that should constitute the New Testament canon. The books that we now have crushed out all rivals, not by any adventitious authority, but by their own weight and worth.”<sup>46</sup> “The church councils did not so much form the New Testament canon as recognize views about it that had taken shape in church usage.”<sup>47</sup>

The Council of Nicea (325) and the Damascine Council in Rome (382) gave no decrees regarding the canon. The Synod of Laodicaea (363) includes a list of canonical books, but this is now recognized as a later addition. The Council of Hippo (393) gives us the first conciliar recognition of the canon of Scripture, and it lists precisely the twenty-seven books of the present New Testament canon. The Council of Carthage (397) followed suit, with a special explanation attached to Hebrews, and the next Council of Carthage (419) includes the same twenty-seven book list with no special singling out of Hebrews.

That there was no early conciliar action to declare which books were canonical and which not is of high significance in the light of claims that the church made or created the canon of Scripture and therefore possesses a higher authority than the canon itself which it “created.” The Holy Spirit by inspiration, not the church, created the canon of Scripture. The canon of the New Testament preceded in time any church decree.

### Further Developments

We have noted lingering reservations about the canonicity of Hebrews in the West matched by doubts regarding Revelation in the East that were finally overcome. By the end of the fourth century in the West and the fifth in the East, the canon of the Greek and Latin churches was settled at the twenty-seven books of our New Testament. Jerome in the West, with the support of Augustine, and Athanasius in the East were the chief influences in this development. Two major peculiarities of canonical development remained in the short Syriac canon of 22 books and the long Ethiopic canon of 35 books, together with a minor issue in the West that we will dispose of first.

One oddity in the West was the inclusion of a spurious Epistle to the Laodiceans, a cento from the genuine epistles, that found its way into over a hundred of the Old Latin and Vulgate manuscripts, and although rejected by Jerome, was translated into Old English and German, followed Galatians in all High German Bibles from 1466 until Luther, and was defended as Paul’s fifteenth epistle even as late as 1536 by the French scholar Faber Stapulensis.<sup>48</sup>

In the Syriac Church, despite the fact that Theophilus, early Bishop of Antioch (c. 115-c. 188), appears to have accepted the bulk of our New Testament canon, a short canon of 22 books became standard through the appearance of the Peshitta New Testament early in the fifth century. This was comprised of the four Gospels (now displacing the Diatessaron of Tatian), Acts, fourteen Epistles of Paul, James, 1 Peter, and 1 John. Dionysius the Great’s pervasive influence showed also here in the rejection of Revelation. “It was not until the beginning of the sixth century that the remaining five books were translated by order of Philoxenus, and the Syriac New Testament thus made identical with our own in contents.”<sup>49</sup> But a contrary opinion has it that “the Peshitta continued to prevail among the Syrians as they scattered over the world, and it has never admitted the other four general letters nor the Revelation to its canon.”<sup>50</sup> St. John Chrysostom (347-407), Presbyter of Antioch, who became Patriarch of Constantinople, betrayed his Syrian origins in his canon, which contained only the twenty-two books of the Peshitta. Another Antiochan, Theodore of Mopsuestia in Cilicia (c. 350-428), worked with even a more limited canon, rejecting all seven general epistles and the Apocalypse.

Might the Syriac short canon of twenty-two books, as well as the NT canons of twenty-two books of Origen in Alexandria and his contemporary Hippolytus in Rome, whose twenty-two book Roman canon might

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Goodspeed, p. 68.

<sup>48</sup> Latin text is found in Souter, p. 177.

<sup>49</sup> Souter, pp. 169-170.

<sup>50</sup> Goodspeed, p. 68.

well have been known a few decades earlier by Tatian and carried by him to Antioch with his Diatessaron, have all, in part, been attempts to match the number of the twenty-two book OT canon?

The Ethiopic extended canon of thirty-five books, consisting in our twenty-seven supplemented by the so-called “Clement” and the Synodus—“Clement” including among other things, an expanded form of the Revelation of Peter,<sup>51</sup> doubtless was influenced by Egypt and the broad canon of Clement of Alexandria from the end of the second century, before Origen began his thorough investigative work of the canon at Alexandria in the beginning of the third century.

This is how matters stood through the Middle Ages with the three standard canons, the Greek-Latin, the Syriac, and the Ethiopic.

### Luther and the Canon

Luther approached the canon of the New Testament fully informed of the distinction the fathers had drawn between the *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*. In contrast to the accepted books Hebrews, James, Jude and the Apocalypse “had, in ancient times, a different reputation.”<sup>52</sup> He questions Hebrews on the grounds of apostolicity. The authorship, he says, is not “St. Paul’s nor any other apostle’s.”<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, “we should not be hindered, even though wood, straw or hay be mixed in with them, but accept this fine teaching with all honor; though to be sure, we cannot put it on the same level with the apostolic epistles.”<sup>54</sup>

Luther worked with a theological as well as historical definition of apostolicity (“*ob sie Christum trieben*”), which he applies to the canonicity of the Epistle of James: “What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic, even though Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod did it.”<sup>55</sup> Of James Luther concludes: “I cannot put him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting him where he pleases and estimating him as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in him.”<sup>56</sup> Jude, to Luther, is a copy of 2 Peter, written long after the time of the apostles. “This moved the ancient Fathers to throw this Epistle out of the main body of the Scriptures... Therefore, although I praise the book, it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books, which are to lay the foundation of faith.”<sup>57</sup>

Luther saves some of his harshest canonical criticism for the Apocalypse:

About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own ideas, and would bind no man to my opinion or judgment; I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic.

The apostles do not “deal with visions, but prophesy in clear, plain words.” Even the OT prophets do not “deal so out and out with visions and figures. And so I think of it almost as I do of the Fourth Book of Esdras, and can nohow detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.” The author of Revelation praises himself in ways that are not befitting an apostle. Although Jerome thinks highly of this book, and everyone may think of it as he will,

my spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it,—Christ is not taught or known in it; but to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle is bound, above all else, to do... Therefore I stick to the books which give me Christ, clearly and purely.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>52</sup> Phil. Ed., vol. VI, p. 476.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 476.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 478.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 479.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 479.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

But these comments must be balanced by the fact that Luther replaced this Preface to Revelation of 1522 with an entirely new several-page, extended preface in his 1545 edition, in which canonicity is no longer the issue. As far as the presence of Christ in the book is concerned, Luther now concludes: “for we see, in this book, that, through and above all plagues and beasts and bad angels, Christ is with his saints, and wins the victory at last.”<sup>59</sup> In regard to Luther’s celebrated remark on James that it is “an epistle of straw,” it needs to be remembered that Luther always included the book in his editions of the Bible, and he could also write of it, “I praise it and hold it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God’s law.”<sup>60</sup>

When these statements of Luther are introduced in modern Luther scholarship to demonstrate that Luther had a low regard for inspiration and for Biblical authority, that he believed in “a canon within a canon” (Pelikan),<sup>61</sup> and that for him not all of Scripture but only that in Scripture which “deals with Christ” is divine truth, an element of scholarly dishonesty displays itself since the question here clearly is not Luther’s attitude toward the inspiration and authority of Scripture but the extent of the canon, not how is the canonical Scripture to be treated, but what is and what is not to be considered canonical. These are two separate questions, the one decided for Luther as well as for us by the Word of God, the other open to historical inquiry.

### **Lutheranism and the Canon in Post-Reformation Times**

Martin Chemnitz deals with the *antilegomena* of the New Testament much in the same way as Luther. There is some question that attaches to these books because of the conflicting testimony we find in the early church and they therefore “must be explained and understood according to the analogy of those things which are clearly taught in the canonical books.”<sup>62</sup> In his monumental *Examination of the Council of Trent* Chemnitz argues exhaustively and convincingly against the arbitrary Conciliar decree that set the OT apocrypha and NT *antilegomena* on equal footing with the canonical Scripture. It is not the church that establishes the canon. That which was to those close to the time of writing held to be in question (the *antilegomena*) cannot by a later decree of the church be changed to have been not in question.

Still within the sixteenth century, Aegidius Hunnius regarded the *antilegomena* as apocryphal. Haffenreffer called them the apocryphal books of the New Testament “which do not have the same authority as the *homologoumena* and yet possess more authority than the apocrypha of the Old Testament.”<sup>63</sup> Thus through the sixteenth century the approach of our theologians to the canon was consistent in maintaining the distinction of the Fathers between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena*.

From Gerhard onward a little after the turn of the seventeenth century, however, a decisive shift may be noted. Even though a certain distinction was still maintained between what our later theologians called *protocanonical* and *deuterocanonical* books, or books of first and second rank, corresponding to the ancient distinction of *antilegomena* and *homologoumena*, for our later theologians the question pertained only to the secondary authorship of the disputed books and not to the primary authorship and inspiration of these books. This sharply contrasted with Chemnitz’ position that the whole question reduced to one of inspiration: “Therefore this whole dispute revolves around this question, whether it is certain and beyond doubt that those books on which this controversy turns were either published or approved as divinely inspired Scripture.”<sup>64</sup> Thus for our later theologians all real distinction between *antilegomena* and *homologoumena* ceased to exist. In arguing that the early Fathers questioned only the human authorship of the disputed books and did not challenge the divine authority of these books, our later theologians either failed to understand the historical situation or feared to allow “a historical judgment concerning the authenticity of authorship of a book to affect saving

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 488.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>61</sup> Am. Ed., vol. 21, p. xv.

<sup>62</sup> Chemnitz, p. 189.

<sup>63</sup> Preus, *Inspiration*, p. xiv.

<sup>64</sup> Chemnitz, p. 188.

faith.”<sup>65</sup> “The acceptance of the antilegomena as canonical begins with Gerhard. Before his time the question of the antilegomena was definitely open.”<sup>66</sup> We have already seen that Walther in this country parted company with the later theologians of orthodoxy on this point.

In Gerhard’s favor, however, ought to be cited this remark in connection with his discussion of the Apocalypse, which he regarded as canonical:

In the meantime, however, because there was at times doubt in the primitive church on the part of some about the author of this book, we for this reason refer it to the canonical books of the second rank; not indeed detracting from its canonical authority, still not simply and in all respects classifying it with the rest of the canonical books about which there never was any doubt; and by the fairest right we demand that the interpretation of such a book in no manner conflict with the canonical books of the first rank.<sup>67</sup>

But this in fact amounts to no less than the distinction that the church has always observed between the *antilegomena* and *homologoumena*.

The self-authenticating nature of the Holy Scriptures and the role of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* in convincing of the truth of Scriptures are not strictly canonical questions and are treated by our dogmatists as church doctrine under the heading of the authority of Scripture. Therefore they do not belong properly in a discussion of the canon. It may be mentioned here, though, that the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit was never meant by our theologians to be understood as a subjective principle by which the individual child of God reads and determines for himself what is and what is not the Word of God. What they appear to be saying is that the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit alone, not the church or any human agency, determines and establishes the canon.

Our Lutheran Confessions use the principle of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit only in connection with the witness of the Spirit through Word and Sacrament to our spirit that we are the children of God. If we now apply this principle to the holy Scripture, as our later theologians do, it is only in this sense that the Spirit by bringing us to faith in Jesus brings us also to accept the Word of God. Our later theologians are sometimes accused of taking over Calvin’s use of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum* as an external proof of the truth of the Bible. But this charge fails to take into account that our theologians speak of this witness to the truth of Scripture always in the context of the Spirit’s affirming of faith through the power of the Gospel. “Confidence in the authority of Scripture can never be divorced from faith in the Gospel” (Hollaz).<sup>68</sup>

### Summary and Conclusions

We have seen that very early, still within the apostolic age, the church recognized a written New Testament canonical authority that was used side-by-side with the Old Testament writings as the Holy Scriptures of the church. Before the living voice of the Gospel had passed away with the death of the last apostle, John, the Holy Spirit was already making sure the future transmission of the Gospel through the assembling of the bound corpus of the Epistles of Paul, perhaps at first without the Pastorals, possibly as early as 80 A.D., but certainly no later than the turn of the century. Shortly thereafter, the four Gospels were collected and published as a single volume, perhaps still within the first century but no later than 120.

If the church today possessed only this original canon, and no more, it would lack nothing. The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture assures us of this. As Pieper notes,

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<sup>65</sup> Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, p. 305.

<sup>66</sup> Preus, *Inspiration*, p. xiv.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, p. 336.

<sup>68</sup> Preus, *Theology*, p. 303.

It has been correctly pointed out that the single Gospel according to Matthew contains the entire Christian doctrine and that missionaries among the heathen for years got along with this one Gospel...and from it taught all the articles of the Christian faith. Anyone can convince himself that the Gospel according to Matthew contains the revelation of all doctrines that our Lutheran Church confesses in the Book of Concord. At the same time we thank the Lord for the fuller exposition of the saving doctrine which he gave us in the remaining books of the New Testament.<sup>69</sup>

We have a clear New Testament canonical authority, established beyond dispute or doubt by the Holy Spirit, from the earliest times, and this is sufficient for our faith.

Very early Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation were added to this core although later on Revelation came to be seriously questioned. In the sifting and sorting process that followed in the third and fourth centuries in the West, and third through fifth centuries in the East, numerous books that had achieved local and temporary canonicity, but never succeeded in establishing authority over the larger church, notably 1 Clement in Corinth, the Didache in Syria, the Epistle of Barnabas in Alexandria, the Shepherd of Hermas in Carthage, and the Apocalypse of Peter in Rome, were excluded by the Spirit from the canon while Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation again, found a place in the canon, though with some reservations as *antilegomena*.

The early church did not act to commission or authorize the writing of any materials, but merely recognized or accepted what the Holy Spirit gave to it as canonical authority for the governing of the teaching of the church. The canon, which preceded in point of time any formal decree of church or council, was not created by the church, but was itself the means by which the church was created. The canonical authority was created by the Holy Spirit through his inspiring of the apostles and evangelists to write, and by his supplying of the holy writers with the very thoughts and words they were to commit to writing as holy canonical Scriptures.

Since the canonicity of certain books of the New Testament was disputed from the earliest times on the grounds of authorship and contents, namely, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Revelation, the distinction between *antilegomena*, books spoken against, and *homologoumena*, books universally recognized, arose. Nothing we can do in modern times, no fiat or decree of the church or individual Christian, can alter the fact that these books very close to the time of their original writing were spoken against. So they remain to this day the “spoken against” (*antilegomena*) books. This cannot be changed.

Therefore we retain with no apprehension the ancient distinction between the disputed and universally-accepted books. With Chemnitz we concur that

no dogma ought therefore to be drawn out of these books (the *antilegomena*) which does not have reliable and clear foundations and testimonies in other canonical books. Nothing controversial can be proved out of these books, unless there are other proofs and confirmations in the canonical books.<sup>70</sup>

At the same time we affirm that we find nothing in the disputed books contrary to the canonical Scriptures, and commend them without reservation to our churches for their reading and preaching and devotional study to the edifying of faith.

<sup>69</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, p. 337.

<sup>70</sup> Chemnitz, p. 189.

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