

CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

„The prophets” in the Christian Church, speaking themselves, under inspiration, and those having the Spirit’s gift, „the discerning of spirits,” acted as checks on the transmission of error *orally* before the completion of the *written* word. Secondly, it was under their inspired superintendence that the New Testament Scriptures were put forth as they were successively written. (1 Cor. 14:37.) „If any man ... be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write ... are the commandments of the Lord.” Thus, by the two-fold sanction of inspiration, that of the authors and that of the judges, the canonicity of each book is established. By God’s gracious providence most of the books of the New Testament were in the Church’s possession years before the death of leading apostles, all of them before the death of John. If spurious books had crept into the cycle of professedly inspired books, they would have been at once removed by apostolic authority. ... The earliest notice of a collection is in 2 Pet. 3:1-6, which speaks of „all the epistles” of Paul as if some collection of them then existed, and was received in the churches as on a par with „the other Scriptures.” The earliest uninspired notice is that of the anonymous fragment of „The Canon of the New Testament” attributed to Caius, a Roman presbyter. It recognizes all the books except Ephesians, Hebrews, James, the two epistles of Peter, and perhaps 3 of John. It condemns as spurious „The Shepherd, written very recently in our own times at Rome by Hermas, while his brother Pius was bishop of the see of Rome”—*i.e.*, between A.D. 140 and 150. Thus the canon, in far the greater part, is proved as received in the *first* half of the second century, whilst some of John’s contemporaries were still living. In the same age the Peshito or Syriac version remarkably complements the Muratorian fragment’s canon, by including also Hebrews and James. In the latter part of the second century, Clement, of Alexandria, refers to „The Gospel” collection and that of all the epistles of „The Apostles.” The anonymous epistle to Diognetus still earlier speaks of the „Law, the Prophets, the Gospels and the Apostles.” Ignatius, of Antioch, a hearer of John, terms the written gospel „the flesh of Jesus,” and the apostles, *i.e.*, their epistles, „Presbytery of the Church.” Theophilus, of Antioch, and Irenaeus term the New Testament writings „the Holy Scriptures.” Tertullian uses for the first time the term, „New Testament,” and calls the whole Bible „the whole instrument of both Testaments.”

Thus there is a continuous chain of evidence from the apostles down to the third century. The quotations by the fathers (of whom, Origen quotes at least two-thirds of the New Testament), and the oldest versions, the Syriac, Latin and Egyptian, prove that their Scriptures were the same as ours. Eusebius, the ecclesiastical historian (A.D. 330), mentions all the 27 books of the New

Testament, dividing them into the *universally acknowledged* and *the debated*; the latter the Ephesians, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Apocalypse „received by the majority,” and at last received by all the churches when the evidence had been more fully tested. A third class he calls „the spurious,” as the „Shepherd of Hermas,” „the Epistle of Barnabas,” „the Acts of Paul,” which all rejected. Moreover, *all* our oldest Greek MSS. of the epistles contains those epistles once doubted by some; so do all the versions except the Syriac; see above. ... The transition from oral to written teaching was gradual. Catechizing, i.e., instructing by word of mouth, was the mode at first, and „faith” then „came by hearing” (Luke 1:4; Romans 10:17), in which, however, there was always an appeal to Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 17:11). But that the orally taught might know more fully „the (unerring) certainty of those things wherein they had been instructed,” and to guard against the dangers of oral tradition (illustrated in John 21:23,24), the word was committed to writing by apostles and evangelists, and was accredited *publicly* by the churches *in the lifetime of the writers*. The approach of their death, their departure to foreign lands, their imprisonment, and the need of a touchstone to test heretical writings and teachings in their absence, all made a written record needful. The cessation of miracles and *personal* inspiration was about the same time as the *written inspired word* was completed. Bishop Kaye (Eccles. Hist. 98-100) observes that Justin Martyr, Theophilus, etc., only make *general* assertion of miracles still continuing, being loathe to see what seemingly weakened their cause, the cessation of miracles; but they gave no *specific* instance. ... With much good that is in the apostolic fathers, their works „remind us what the apostles would have been had not they been inspired, and what we ourselves should be if we had not the written word” (Wordsworth, Canon Scr., page 137).

So far from there being a gradual waning of inspiration from the writings of the Apostles and Evangelists to those of succeeding Christian writers, there is so wide a chasm (the more remarkable as the early fathers had the apostolic writings to guide them) that this alone is a strong proof that the Scripture writers were guided by an extraordinary Divine power. Their previous habits (as being some of them illiterate, and *all* bigoted Jews) prove that nothing but Divine power could have so changed them from their former selves as to be founders of a spiritual and worldwide dispensation (see Luke 24:25-49), utterly alien to their Jewish prejudices. Their *style* accords with their supposed position, simple and unlearned (except Paul’s), yet free from aught offensive to the polished. If it be asked why we do not receive the epistles of Barnabas and of Clement, the Acts of Paul and Thecla (one of the earliest apocryphal writings),

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etc., we answer, not because (as Rome would have us say) the Churches *could not* err in judgment in rejecting them, but because, as a matter of *evidence*, we believe they *did not* err. These works were not received by contemporary Christians who had the best of opportunity of knowing evidences of authenticity and inspiration. If one or two cite them, it is an exception, not

invalidating the otherwise uniform testimony against them. The internal evidence of their style is fatal to their pretensions. So „the Acts of Paul”, Tertullian testifies its author was excluded by John from the office of presbyter for having written it. The New Testament is a complete organic whole, so that even one book could not be omitted without loss to the completeness of the Christian cycle of truth.—*Fausett*.

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