

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

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by

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## **Thesis Statement**

The formation of the New Testament Canon was a necessary process, triggered out of a need to protect the integrity of the church and Christian message, ultimately laying the foundation for the church's understanding of Christ and patterns for church governance.

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## Introduction

At its simplest, in reference to the Bible, the word “canon” has a basic meaning: it describes the list of books contained in scripture as recognized by the organized church and maintained by tradition.<sup>1</sup> The word derives from the Greek *kanōn*, literally meaning a rod used as a rule.<sup>2</sup> The word “canon” encompasses four basic meanings: (1) a rule, law, or decree of the church, (2) may denote the list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired, and if used by other religions, any set of sacred books, (3) in music a canon refers to different parts taking up the same subject one after another, (4) and finally, may indicate a clergyman living with others of the faith, ordering his life according to the canons, or rules, of the church.<sup>3</sup>

For centuries, the New Testament canon has been largely accepted without much question or discussion. The passage of time and ongoing acceptance became tradition that lends strength in the mind of the Christian to the strength and validity of these 27 books and letters collected together. However, in any serious study of the history of the scriptures, the question has to be asked if such an acceptance has a rational basis for which Christians can look to.<sup>4</sup> Practically speaking, the canon “is a fundamentally human construct,”<sup>5</sup> arranged and assembled by different individuals over a large period of time, with various motives for doing so. Also complicating the question is the reality that New Testament writers did not view themselves as

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<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Payne, “Canon: New Testament to Derrida,” *College Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 2, *Literary Theory in the Classroom* (June 1991): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), Kindle location 375.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle location 666.

writing scripture, nor did the original recipients view their writings as such.<sup>6</sup> Having said that, canonization was a necessary process to both stabilize and protect church doctrine and church governance. By establishing authoritative documents, the early church was better equipped to defend against heresy as well as set a course for the future.

### **Development of the Canon**

While some would argue that the process of forming the canon took four centuries,<sup>7</sup> that timeline includes the writing of the books that would become part of the canon as well. From the beginning, writings by the early church fathers were collected, copied, and shared as resources for Christians.<sup>8</sup> There was some recognition that some documents were more authoritative or significant than others, but there was not one established list.<sup>9</sup> The first documented canon, or list of accepted books, known to exist of the New Testament is Marcion's list, formed around the year 140.<sup>10</sup> There were actually a number of gospels and letters purporting to be by the apostles and other church fathers; one author mentions over 30 different gospels that are known of today.<sup>11</sup>

Marcion's list was largely rejected, however, it was the first documented attempt at labeling some texts as more authoritative than others, prompting a more formal debate over the following centuries. The Third Council of Carthage finalized what had largely become the

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<sup>6</sup> Donald W. Riddle, "Factors in the Formation of the New Testament Canon," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (October 1939): 330.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text and Canon*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, Kindle location 10533.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle location 10533.

<sup>10</sup> Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> David Laird Dungan, "New Testament canon in recent study," *Interpretation* 29, No. 4 (October 1975): 346.

accepted canon, and what is presently used by the Western Church, in 397,<sup>12</sup> putting the actual canonization process at around 260 years.

### Marcion

Not much is known about Marcion's early years. While there are some recordings by others about Marcion and where he came from, much of it was recorded later and could be exaggerated or incorrect so as to further discredit him; his theology was so disturbing to other church leadership that much about him was framed in a negative light.<sup>13</sup> Although he becomes known in Rome, he was not from there originally. Tertullian described him as evil, the son of a misguided bishop from Pontus, and excommunicated because he raped a virgin, saying, "Every good tree bears good fruit, but an evil evil."<sup>14</sup> Most of that cannot be confirmed, however, and instead seems to be an attempt at explaining Marcion's heresy as being a result of coming from a family history of sin and disruption.<sup>15</sup>

Essentially, Marcion's heresy was a rejection of the God of the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup> He saw God, as presented in the Old Testament, as inferior to God the Father revealed in Christ, consequently he promoted a "theological anti-Semitism" through his rejection of the Old Testament entirely, and anything from the Christian movement that seemed "infected with Judaism."<sup>17</sup> As a result, Marcion formed his canon, made up of ten letters by the Apostle Paul,

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Foster, "Marcion: His Life, Works, Beliefs, and Impact," *The Expository Times*, Vol. 121, No. 6 (March 2010): 269.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 271.

<sup>16</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grassy Creek, NC: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), Kindle location 224.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle location 224.

and a heavily edited version of the Gospel of Luke.<sup>18</sup> This was not well received; Irenaeus once said, “Marcion and his followers have betaken themselves to mutilating the Scriptures, not acknowledging some books at all; and, curtailing the Gospel according to Luke and the Epistles of Paul, they assert that these are alone authentic, which they have themselves thus shortened.”<sup>19</sup>

Unlike other early movements, Marcion structured his movement to directly rival and challenge the emerging Christian church.<sup>20</sup> Because of its similarities to the Christian church, both in its structure, meeting format, and sacramental rites, his movement was more alarming than previous heretical groups.<sup>21</sup> As a result, he was formally excommunicated in 144.<sup>22</sup> Because of the level of impact he and his followers had, changes were triggered throughout the church; increased structure, more hierarchy, and the beginnings of establishing a New Testament canon.<sup>23</sup>

### Tatian

Tatian was an early church leader, born in Assyria, and mentored by the well-known apologist Justin in Rome.<sup>24</sup> Not much is known of his early years. He seems to have had an insatiable hunger to learn beyond what was available in his local schools and literature, triggering his travels and interaction with Justin.<sup>25</sup> He is most known for writing the *Oratio ad Graecos*, a well-respected work among church fathers.<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus suggested in later writings that

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<sup>18</sup> Riddle, “Factors in the Formation of the New Testament Canon,” *The Journal of Religion*, 331.

<sup>19</sup> Foster, “Marcion: His Life, Works, Beliefs, and Impact,” *The Expository Times*, 273.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 278.

<sup>22</sup> Payne, “Canon: New Testament to Derrida,” *College Literature*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Foster, “Marcion: His Life, Works, Beliefs, and Impact,” *The Expository Times*, 279.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Foster, “Tatian,” *The Expository Times*, Vol. 120, No. 3 (December 2008): 106.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

while Tatian had strong theology while associated with Justin, later in his life he proposed heretical views, referred to as Encratite Christianity – a Gnostic theology that forbade marriage and encouraged vegetarianism.<sup>27</sup>

Tatian's contribution to the formation of the canon comes through another famous writing of his, the *Diatessaron*, a harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which he completed during the second century.<sup>28</sup> Essentially, he merged the four gospels into one narrative. While Tatian's theology does raise some concerns, and his harmony reflected aspects of it, the value of his *Diatessaron* is found and its recognition of the four gospels as more authoritative.<sup>29</sup> It is the earliest indication of the widespread recognition of those four books sharing a status above other gospels, confirmed by its widespread circulation throughout Rome and Northern Mesopotamia; copies of it have been discovered in both Syriac and in Greek.<sup>30</sup>

#### Muratorian Fragment

Cardinal L.A. Muratori discovered an early list of New Testament books in the 1700's which was dated about the end of the second century.<sup>31</sup> It is significant in that it is the earliest known list of what would become the canon by someone other than Marcion. However, it was not considered a canon at the time; Bruce Metzger called it "a kind of introduction to the New Testament,"<sup>32</sup> a precursor to what would one day be completed, perhaps a type of handbook on

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<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 127.

<sup>28</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), Kindle location 517.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 128.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, Kindle location 230.

<sup>32</sup> E. J. Schnabel, "The Muratorian Fragment: The State of Research," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (June 2014): 239.

the Bible.<sup>33</sup> Having said that, there is some debate about the dating of the Fragment in recent years, with some scholars placing the date in the fourth century; strong arguments can be made for either date, while tradition holds to the late second century date.<sup>34</sup>

Named for the Cardinal, the Muratorian Fragment is just that, a fragment of larger document. It is a list of writings, many of which are included in the modern day canon. It is 85 lines long, with the first recovered line describing Luke as the third gospel (the assumption is that Matthew and Mark are listed previously, but were not part of the surviving fragment).<sup>35</sup> While the copy discovered by Muratori was in Latin, it is generally agreed that it was originally written in Greek.<sup>36</sup> In addition, portions of the Muratorian Fragment have been discovered in several manuscripts from the 11<sup>th</sup> century and one manuscript from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, pointing to its significance in history.<sup>37</sup>

The Muratorian Fragment describes<sup>38</sup>:

- Origins of the Gospels of Luke and John (lines 1-33), with an allusion to 1 John (lines 26-31)
- Origins of the Book of Acts (lines 34-39)
- Origins of thirteen epistles of Paul (lines 39-67), as well as descriptions of John's Apocalypse being written to seven churches (lines 57-59)
- Origins of the epistle of Jude and two epistles of John (lines 68-69)
- Origins of the apocalypses of John and Peter, with the comment that Peter's is not accepted for public reading in the church (lines 71-80)
- Books to be excluded are two alleged letters of Paul thought to be forged (to the Laodiceans and the Alexandrians); the writings of Arsinous, Miltiades, and Valentinus; a new book of Psalms for Marcion; and the writings of Basilides and the Cataphrygians (lines 81-85)

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>34</sup> Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Schnabel, "The Muratorian Fragment: The State of Research," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 231.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 233.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 239.

There are several reasons why the discovery of the Muratorian Fragment are significant. First, it is the earliest documentation of the grouping of the four gospels, as well as the collecting of Paul's writings.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, it emphasizes the universal validity of the canon; the writings of the Apostles are valued equally with the writings of Paul.<sup>40</sup> Third, it presents both institutional origins, as well as historical, ecclesiastical, and theological ramifications through its impact.<sup>41</sup> Fourth, it includes the concept of required criteria for canonicity, with some writings being accepted and others being rejected.<sup>42</sup> Finally, it attempts to synthesize different styles, genres and authors; there is both a unity and a diversity in the list of works being recognized as authoritative.<sup>43</sup>

### Athanasius

An Egyptian, Athanasius was the bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century.<sup>44</sup> He was born around 299, and from an early age was recognized by the religious leadership as having potential.<sup>45</sup> As a result, he was given opportunities to grow as well as have a thorough Biblical education.<sup>46</sup> In his desire to use Christianity to unify his empire, Constantine brought the Christian leaders together to bring them to an agreement on theology. Out of this council was born the Nicene Creed, heavily influenced by Bishop Alexander and his protégé Athanasius.<sup>47</sup> Out of this came the result that the dissenting leaders, the Arians, were defeated and deposed;

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<sup>39</sup> Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament*, 140.

<sup>40</sup> Schnabel, "The Muratorian Fragment: The State of Research," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 254.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 263.

<sup>44</sup> David Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth 'Festal Letter,'" *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (October 1994): 396.

<sup>45</sup> Bryan M. Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: an Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), Kindle location 2607.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle location 2607.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle location 2687.

Constantine wanted unity in the church. Three years later, in the year 328, Bishop Alexander passed away, with Athanasius named his successor in spite of some claiming that his young age (under thirty) did not qualify him for the position.<sup>48</sup>

One of the decisions at the Council of Nicaea of lesser importance regarded the date of Easter; rather than having churches throughout the known world disagreeing over when Easter should be placed each year, it was decided that the Bishop of Alexandria would decide the date and communicate it to the other bishops.<sup>49</sup> Over the course of his time as Bishop, Athanasius wrote 45 of these “festal letters,” seizing the opportunity to include in the letters a message to deal with other issues of importance in the Christian faith.<sup>50</sup> He also earned a reputation for being a defender of the faith, standing firm against heresy – so much so that he was actually exiled five times by three emperors, for a total of 17 years of his 46 years as Bishop.<sup>51</sup>

Athanasius’ contribution to the process of canonization came in the form of his 39<sup>th</sup> festal letter, in the year 367.<sup>52</sup> In the letter he dealt with the canon of the Old and New Testaments, providing the earliest known list to list exactly the 27 books that would eventually become the accepted canon.<sup>53</sup> He is also the first to have used the term “canonized” to describe the books list in his Old and New Testament canons, a canon he described as closed, saying “In these books alone the teaching of piety is proclaimed. ‘Let no one add to or subtract from them.’”<sup>54</sup> He claims in the letter that his motive for doing so is based out of concern related to some who were

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, Kindle location 2687.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 77.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>51</sup> Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, Kindle location 2525.

<sup>52</sup> Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 395.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 395.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 396.

mixing what he believed to be heretical or apocryphal works with what he deemed to be holy scriptures.<sup>55</sup>

The significance of Athanasius' canon goes beyond simply listing what would eventually become the accepted canon. David Brakke calls it "one of the most significant documents in the history of the Christian Bible."<sup>56</sup> It gives the modern day reader insight into the complicated religious scene in fourth century Christianity, with various groups and various theologies vying for attention.<sup>57</sup> The festal letter was an important step towards not just establishing an accepted canon, but also in developing the official Catholic church in Egypt, with parish centered leadership.<sup>58</sup> In addition, Athanasius puts a heavier weight on the teaching of scripture versus what the readers may hear from teachers, labeling them irrelevant or even dangerous.<sup>59</sup> It is another strong step towards the church as a whole recognizing a body of writings as authoritative above other documents.

### Church Councils

In 393, Augustine, a significant church leader and influencer in the development of the canon saw a church council held in the see of Hippo where he would later become Bishop.<sup>60</sup> The synod of Hippo was the first of a series of church councils initiated by Augustine and Aurelius, the primate of Carthage.<sup>61</sup> Augustine was recognized as an intellectual, a leader within the

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<sup>55</sup> Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 78.

<sup>56</sup> David Brakke, "A New Fragment of Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter: Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon," *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (January 2010): 47.

<sup>57</sup> Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt," *Harvard Theological Review*, 396.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 396.

<sup>59</sup> Brakke, "A New Fragment of Athanasius's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter," *Harvard Theological Review*, 51.

<sup>60</sup> Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 95-97.

<sup>61</sup> Jane Merdinger, "One the eve of the Council of Hippo, 393: The background to Augustine's program for church reform," *Augustinian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (March 2009): 27.

church at a time when there was great confusion and perceived chaos, especially with the ongoing concerns about the rival Donatist movement.<sup>62</sup> Under his leadership, councils gained in importance as he saw them as great necessity in church authority. He wrote in his work, *de Utilitate credendi*<sup>63</sup>:

When, therefore, we see such great help from God, so productive and so beneficial, shall we hesitate to hide in the bosom of his Church? From the apostolic throne, through the chain of succession of the bishops, it occupies the pinnacle of authority, acknowledged by the whole human race. In vain do the heretics howl around her, condemned variously by the judgement of the ordinary people themselves, by the weight of authority of the councils, by the grandeur of miracles.

The leadership of Augustine and Aurelius paved the way for the councils to begin meeting, bringing order and stability back to the church.<sup>64</sup> At both the synod of Hippo (393) and the Third Council of Carthage (397), the 27 books that make up the modern day canon were affirmed.<sup>65</sup> While the proceedings of the synod of Hippo were not preserved and are unknown today, they were summarized and confirmed at the Third Council of Carthage. Ultimately, neither council added anything new to the debate, instead simply recognizing and affirming what had already been widely accepted and practiced by the church.<sup>66</sup>

### **Ramifications of the Canon**

While the previous pages have not outlined all of the influences in the formation of the canon, they do reflect some of the significant players. At the same time, in many ways they seemed to have documented something that was happening regardless of their involvement – the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>65</sup> Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, Kindle location 8252.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 97.

recognition of certain texts as carrying a deeper authority than others. Having established a canon that has stayed largely untouched for the past 1600 years, as well as remained closed to the addition of other books, the formal canon has had certain ramifications.

### Positives

In a landscape of changing theologies, heresies, and false teachers, formally identifying a canon contributed to doctrinal stability and gave authority to something bigger than any one individual. In addition, the process forced leaders to identify criteria and standards for canonization beyond tradition<sup>67</sup>:

1. Divine Qualities. If it is to be considered of God, it must bear the stamp of the divine. It should be evident that it is the work of the Spirit.
2. Corporate Reception. Scriptures were not just written for individuals, they were written for the body as a whole. As such, the corporate church should have predominant unity in recognizing and receiving a book's divine authority.
3. Apostolic Origins. The apostles played a unique role in church history, and as such, are best equipped to reflect on, and document teachings from God. As such, only writings by the apostles, or their direct disciples were considered for the canon.

Beyond identifying criteria, forming a canon was a part of the process of the church viewing itself as a larger organization, not simply individual, disconnected bodies, but a united body spread across the world. This increased accountability, raised expectations of leadership, and lent strength to the united voices of church leaders.

### Negatives

One of the most significant criticisms of the canon, as mentioned early, is the reality that the authors of the New Testament did not view themselves as writing scripture, nor did the

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<sup>67</sup> Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, Kindle location 2618.

original recipients view it as such. They were considered useful writings, valuable for learning and understanding church practice, and as such they were copied, preserved, and shared from church to church, but it was not until significantly later that these writings began to obtain the status granted to the Old Testament canon.

Other than the criteria involving apostolic authority, there is much room for accusation of undefinable, subjective standards in creating the canon. Further, as pointed out previously, in many ways the formation of the canon seems more driven out of defensive motives than a desire to identify the divine; whether as a reaction to Marcion's heresies, or to defend against other movements, such as the Donatists, or even seeing the process used as a tool by Constantine to see the church united, making his intent to rule more effectively more attainable, it becomes clear that the first priority in forming the canon was not always about recognizing divine inspiration. As such, does it then create room for accusations of fallibility or misguided criteria?

In addition, by defining a canon of 27 books, the church has grown to largely ignore the writings of other early church fathers and authors who contributed greatly to the understanding of early church theology and practice. In so doing, the result has been a narrowing focus which may have hindered the body at times.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, it is important to recognize that the process of canonization was not about creating the canon. Instead, it documented a process that was already happening, a gradual recognition across the early church of certain writings being something more significant than others. Over the course of influences cited previously, rarely did they document or recognize as

canon something the church at large did not already use as such. F.F. Bruce said it well when he wrote the following<sup>68</sup>:

“One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect.”

A further testimony to the recognition of the church as a whole of the authority of the canonical books, regardless of the documented moments of canonization, is the sheer volume of copies possessed today from the days of the early.<sup>69</sup> The meticulous way in which they were copied, the number of copies – far more than any other type of ancient manuscript, as well as their preservation all point to a body of believers recognizing and attributing authority to them long before it was formally done.

At the same time, with constant threats of disruption to Christian worship, practice and theology, from growing numbers of false teachers, heresies, and threatening governmental leaders, it becomes apparent that the formalized formation of the New Testament Canon was in fact a necessary process, triggered out of a need to protect the integrity of the church and Christian message, and ultimately documenting the foundation for the church’s understanding of Christ and patterns for church governance.

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<sup>68</sup> Bruce, *The New Testament Documents*, Kindle location 294.

<sup>69</sup> Dungan, "New Testament canon in recent study," *Interpretation*, 341.

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