

The Development of the New Testament Canon

The number of heretical Gospels and epistles known to have existed or extant today in fragments attests to the diversity of early Christian belief in the second and third centuries A.D.

At the same time, the selection of the New Testament canon was hardly an arbitrary process.

- From an analysis of writers dating from the end of the first century to the beginning of the second century, one can see that many of the canonical books were already recognized as authoritative and in use.
 - Col. 4:16 (“After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea”) and 2 Pet. 3:15-16 already presume that the apostolic letters are more than just occasional writings of local relevance.
 - In Polycarp's epistle to the Philippians (c. 108), we find the following cited: the four Gospels, 1 Peter, the Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews and some of Paul's Epistles
 - See the further summary of writers now recognized as canonical treated as authoritative in the sub-apostolic writers in Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, p. 153 and compare Origen's later list in Hennecke-Schneemelcher, pp. 52-54);
 - The four Gospels, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), 1 Peter and 1 John seem to have enjoyed early wide circulation and acceptance.
 - the authoritative use of these books (later affirmed as canonical) confirmed by the witness of the earliest heterodox writers, e.g. the Gnostic writer Basilides (Alexandria; c. 125 A.D.; in Hippolytus *Haer. ref.* VII.25,26) is seen to have cited Rom. and 1 Cor. as authoritative.

The Criteria for the Selection of the New Testament Canon

- From the end of the first century onward, certain books were attributed to members of the apostolic circle, while other books were recognized to be sectarian productions associated with a certain later individual or group;
 - the four canonical Gospels alone recognized as authoritative in Irenaeus (III.11.8; Stevenson, *NE*, pp. 117-118), writing between 182 and 188.
 - the uncertainty about the authorship of Hebrews may have been the reason for the slowness in accepting the book in Rome and North Africa, where in any case it was less frequently read
- Certain books were recognized as having been regularly read in the public worship of churches across a wide geographic region. This disqualified books that had only a local following and were not read publicly in church but rather were considered edifying literature studied by catechumens (i.e. people receiving instruction in preparation for baptism) and other morally serious individuals (e.g. the *Shepherd of Hermas* in Rome or the *Didache [Teaching of the Twelve Apostles]* in Alexandria; perhaps also the *Revelation of Peter* in some parts of the Greek East).

(a) Note that this meant that certain shorter books, whose teaching largely replicated that appearing in other biblical books (e.g. 2 and 3 John; 2 Peter) took much longer to become canonical because there was not as much incentive to read/preach from them on a regular basis.

- James--not challenged, but contains moral teaching found elsewhere in the New Testament and less frequently read
- Jude--not challenged, but not read as frequently as longer epistles
- 2 Peter--even less well known plus reduplicates Jude; occasionally challenged
- 2 and 3 Jn.--less well known; occasionally challenged
- The above books also not frequently read in the Syrian church.

(b) This also meant that books that were read and preached from in the church less frequently because of their mystical character and relatively indefinite meaning (e.g. Revelation) took longer to become canonical.

- Also questions about the author of Revelation being the presbyter/elder John, as opposed to the Apostle John (concerns already raised in the first half of the second century, probably due to the dissimilarity of the language/style used in Revelation with the language/style used in the Gospel and letters of John) or with the teaching of Cerinthus (concerns raised from the second century to the middle of the third century).
- Revelation not received as authoritative in Asia Minor until end of the fourth century or later.
- A related question was whether the contents of the book were recognized to match the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*), which was a statement of the fundamental concepts of the Christian faith, paralleling the more formal statement of basic beliefs in the baptismal creed and, like the latter, being handed down within the Church.
 - The rule of faith is not a tradition that originated independently of the apostolic writings.
 - The rule of faith is a consciousness handed down in the Church, because the Church accepted the apostolic preaching and has continued to read the apostolic writings, that certain things are basic to the Christian faith and are the measure or norm by which
 - the accuracy of preaching may be evaluated (i.e. whether preaching accurately reflects the overall sense of Scripture) or
 - the content of a book of debatable origin may be assessed.
 - Against the Gnostics, there were no secret traditions or writings privately delivered by the Apostles to some teacher and transmitted in private only to a few worthy students.
 - All that the Apostles taught as basic and necessary for faith and life was public teaching and received and transmitted by the churches as such.

On this notion of the rule of faith, see

- Ignatius *Trall.* 9; *Magn.* 11;
- Justin Martyr *Apol.* I.6;

- Tertullian *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1
- Origen, *De principiis (On First Principles)* I. pref. 3-8 (tr. Butterworth, pp. 2-5).