

Text: various

Last week we began looking at the idea of boundaries to the New Testament canon. We got a start at it, but I think I left some unfinished business. Partly this is because I am deriving my research out of one source and weaving a message around it.

I've pretty well finished with the material I wanted to get out of the book that got me started on this. I think I should make a recommendation here for a blog by one of the authors, Michael Kruger.

- Blog is called *Canon Fodder* (one "n") – Michael Kruger is the president of Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte and a Presbyterian, so... some differences with us! But he is one of the most outstanding writers on the Canon I've ever seen. On his blog he writes at a very accessible level. You can go back and find past series that address some of the questions we've discussed.

So, to the unfinished business from last week... first, let's review some propositions:

1. The idea of a canon (of certain writings being more than mere writings of men) is *latent* in the New Testament, if not explicit.
2. The standard for the NT canon is the OT canon, which the Christian church has always accepted.
3. The church fathers used the NT books *as if* their superiority met the standard of canonicity.

That last one is where I think I was headed last week, but didn't thoroughly explain.

One more time, then, let's use 2 Tim 3.16 as an opening text:

² Tim 3.16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

And I'll use that last proposition for our proposition today:

Proposition: The church fathers used the NT books *as if* their superiority met the standard of canonicity.

I. The history of NT transmission

A. The oral tradition

1. The term “oral transmission” (or similar) not mentioned explicitly
2. Some statements reveal the fact of oral transmission implicitly

1 Cor 15.3-5 ¶ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,⁵ and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Ac 20.35 “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

And three times Peter says, “we are witnesses”

- a. Acts 3.15, preaching after healing of the lame man
- b. Acts 5.32, preaching to the Sanhedrin
- c. Acts 10.39, preaching to Cornelius

Ac 10.39 “We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross.

3. As I’ve said before, I think the oral tradition is behind the similarity in Mt, Mk, Lk: they are reporting the “standard renditions of stories” about Jesus (the oral tradition)

B. The writing impetus

1. We spoke earlier that to write this down was natural, a given
 - a. No one can expect an oral message to travel as far as a written one (in the 1st c. esp.)
 - b. The apostles aren’t immortal – their testimony needs an “authorized” written preservation
2. The second impetus was the rise of doctrinal and practical controversies in the churches
 - a. Questions of theology
 - b. Questions of practice

All these questions need apostolic authority to settle them, and they need something more than “I heard Paul say this..”

Ergo... a written “authorized” document settling questions authoritatively

1 Cor 16.21 ¶ The greeting is in my own hand— Paul.

Gal 6.11 ¶ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

Col 4.18 ¶ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.

Phm 1.19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

2Th 3.17 ¶ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write.

C. The believing acceptance

1. The church accepted these writings as authoritative standards
 - a. They saved them
 - b. They listened to the epistles in their services (some comments in the NT itself)
 - c. They listened to the gospels along with the OT in their services (ancient lectionaries)
2. Also, because they constantly quoted them or alluded to them in their own writings

II. The way the church fathers used the NT

A. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

1. Status:
 - a. An extensive five-volume Bible dictionary

- b. Very thorough, but sometimes not as conservative as one could wish
- 2. Article, “Canon, of the New Testament, The,” by J. S. Riggs
 - a. An example of “not as conservative as one could wish”
 - b. But lots of information
- 3. Example:

“In numerous instances only ‘echoes’ of the thought of the epistles appear; again quotations are incomplete; both showing that Scripture words are used as the natural expression of Christian thought. In the same way the Apostolic Fathers refer to the teachings and deeds of Jesus.”¹

- a. Riggs says this shows the church fathers *did not yet consider* the NT writings as canonical
- b. On the other hand, don’t they show how thoroughly immersed in the NT writings the church fathers were?
 - 1) Frequently making quotations, sometimes obviously from memory
 - 2) Frequently alluding to various accounts or statements
 - 3) Frequently using Biblical words and phrases

This is how we talk when we are making spiritual arguments. Why? Because we see the NT as God’s word.

B. Some examples:

- 1. Polycarp (AD 69-155) was bishop of Smyrna, only surviving writing, letter to the Philippians: “a mosaic of references to the Greek Scriptures”²

¹ J. S. Riggs, “Canon, of the New Testament, The,” in James Orr et al., eds., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 564.

² “Polycarp,” in *Wikipedia*, July 30, 2022,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Polycarp&oldid=1101329568>.

2. Ignatius, traditionally martyred about AD 115, wrote seven letters to seven churches on his journey to execution by ordeal in the Colosseum.
3. Ignatius (AD 115) – cites or alludes to four gospels, uses lang of nearly all of Paul’s epistles, quotes Mt, 1 Pt, 1 Jn
4. Clement of Rome (AD 95) – cited Mt, Lk, Hb, Rm, Co, 1 Tim, Tit, 1 Pt Eph
5. Didache (c. 120), Epist Barn (c. 130), Hermas (c. 130): same kinds of references to NT books, with Barn using “it is written.”

“Their thought is tinged all through with NT truth.”³ This comment belies Riggs’ doubts about their treatment.

III. The reasons the church moved to establish boundaries

A. Two forces calling for identifying the authoritative writings:

1. Gov’t pressure: apologists cited NT scriptures in their defense
2. Rise of heresy, disputing authentic books, touting false books

B. Examples:

1. Apologist Justin Martyr equated the gospels w/ OT scriptures, refers to Revelation, knew Acts, at least six epist of Paul, Hb, 1 Jn
2. Heretic Marcion, ca. AD 140, rejected Mt, Mk, Jn, accepted only Lk (partially) and ten of Pauls, rejecting the pastorals, Hb, Ac, Pt, Jas, Rev (made edited editions of the parts of Luke and Paul he accepted)

“Such use of the Scriptures inevitably called forth both criticism and a clearer marking off of those books which were to be used in the churches opposed to heresy.”⁴

³ J. S. Riggs, “Canon, of the New Testament, The,” in Orr et al., *ISBE (1915)*, 564.

⁴ J. S. Riggs, “Canon, of the New Testament, The,” in Orr et al., 564.

C. The early and clear references to the basically complete list of NT books

1. Muratorian fragment dated from about AD 170, lists NT books (as noted previously), lists four gosp, Ac, all Paul's epist, Rev, 1 & 2 Jn, Jd: does not mention Hb, 1 & 2 Pt, Jas
2. Origen (ca. AD 250)
 - a. Famous for his allegorical method of interpretation (and his theological issues)
 - b. But notice this in a sermon on Joshua destroying Jericho with the blasts of the trumpets on the last day of circling the walls:

“But when our Lord Jesus Christ comes, whose arrival that prior son of Nun designated, he sends priests, his apostles, bearing ‘trumpets hammered thin,’ the magnificent and heavenly instruction of proclamation. Matthew first sounded the priestly trumpet in his Gospel; Mark also; Luke and John each played their own priestly trumpets. Even Peter cries out with trumpets in two of his epistles; also James and Jude. In addition, John also sounds the trumpet through his epistles, and Luke, as he describes the Acts of the Apostles. And now that last one comes, the one who said, ‘I think God displays us apostles last,’ and in fourteen of his epistles, thundering with trumpets, he casts down the walls of Jericho and all the devices of idolatry and dogmas of philosophers, all the way to the foundations.”⁵

- 1) Note: Paul had 13 epistles, Origen is including Hebrews
- 2) Kruger notes that some copies of this document include “and the Apocalypse” as part of John’s “trumpet”⁶

⁵ Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, ed. Barbara J. Bruce and Cynthia White, vol. 105, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 74–75.

⁶ Michael Kruger, “10 Misconceptions about the NT Canon: #10: “Athanasius’ Festal Letter (367 A.D.) Is the First Complete List of New Testament Books”,” *Canon Fodder*, December 11, 2012, <https://www.michaeljkruger.com/10-misconceptions-about-the-nt-canon-10-athanasius-festal-letter-367-a-d-is-the-first-complete-list-of-new-testament-books/>.

3. Athanasius (ca. AD 297-373):

“Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.

“These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these. For concerning these the Lord put to shame the Sadducees, and said, ‘Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures.’ And He reproveth the Jews, saying, ‘Search the Scriptures, for these are they that testify of Me.’”⁷

Conclusion:

Proposition: The church fathers used the NT books *as if* their superiority met the standard of canonicity.

They had complete confidence in the twenty-seven books we have and gave no confidence to anything else.

We have no reason to be swayed by claims of “competing orthodoxies.”

⁷ Athanasius, Letter 39, 5-6 in Philip Schaff, *The Post-Nicene Fathers*, electronic ed. (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000).