

PUTTING IT ALL

The Canonization of the Christian Scriptures

By J. M. Stephanos



One fascinating aspect of early Christianity that one may study is the lengthy process that led to the compilation and canonization of the New Testament scriptures. Indeed, it is a field that may seem uninteresting or irrelevant to one who has never acquired a taste for historical inquiry or for him who has not yet begun a study of the scriptures themselves. However, when one approaches biblical history with a right heart, one comes to realize that he is not studying a mere historical “process”—not a mechanical and, as it were, incidental development—but truly a major work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the burgeoning church.

The Sowing of the Seed

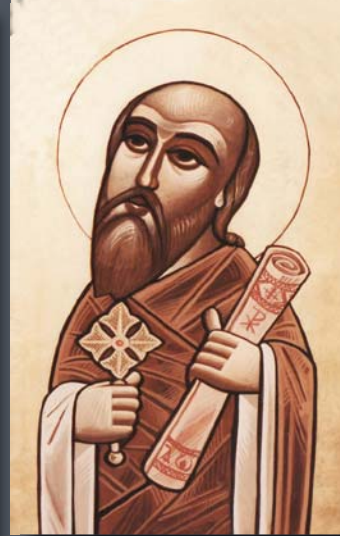
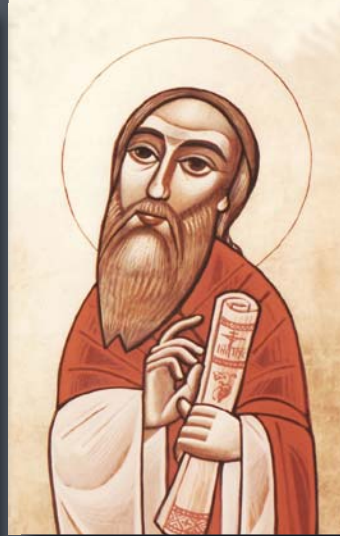
The canonization process was long and gradual. It was not accomplished by a single pronouncement of a Church Father or by the decision of a single Church council. In fact, the early Church did not intend to form a new canon of scripture—the scripture of the early church was the Septuagint. But all the books of the New Testament, soon after being written,

inevitably became integral and living parts of the church’s worship. The Pauline epistles, for example, were cherished and read repeatedly by the churches that received them, and by others who came to appreciate them as valued testimonies from the Apostolic Age. When St. Paul wrote an epistle to the church in Rome, their reaction would not have been, “This is the New Testament,” or “This is Scripture,” but they would have seen it as an illuminating explanation of Christian doctrine.

In the decades immediately following the birth of the Church, the sayings and works of Christ were not communicated in written form but were remembered and preached by the apostles and thereafter passed on to posterity by oral tradition. They were known as the “good news” that was quickly spreading throughout the churches, rather than as a new “Scripture” that needed to be reverently written down and preserved. That is, the gospel was seen more as, “Hark, the Scriptures have been fulfilled! The Messiah has come!” And less as, “We have a new doctrine to follow now.” An example

of this comes from the book of Acts. When the very early Christians quoted Christ, they would typically say, “Remember the words of the Lord Jesus...” Instead of the familiar Old Testament line “As it is written...” In quoting Psalms, the book of Acts employs the phrases, “*The place in the Scripture which he read was...*” (Acts 8:32) and, “*As it is also written in the second Psalm...*” (Acts 13:33). In contrast, St. Paul is recorded saying, “*remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*” (Acts 20:35) Although Christ’s words and deeds were initially passed on by oral tradition, they were given as much authoritative weight as the Septuagint. This was because the people recognized that He spoke with an authority no less than that of the Jewish Scriptures; He aligned His utterances with the precepts of the ancient Law, correcting and fulfilling them. So the early Church treasured and quoted the words and works of Christ as being equal or even superior to those of the Old Testament. This is why St. Paul appeals so strongly to the words of the Lord when

TOGETHER:



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enforcing a lesson (*1 Corinthians 9:14*) or confirming a holy mystery (*1 Corinthians 11:23*).

The Gospels in Written Form

By the mid to late 1st century, the four evangelists finally put the Gospel into written form. It is not clear why God waited several decades before putting it in print; but it is important to note that the writers were not giving an account of Christ that had yet to be heard. They were giving written expression to the faith and tradition of Christ that already existed in the churches. Or put another way, the Gospel did not begin with the evangelists—the gospel was already alive in the churches. However, God chose to have it recorded on paper, which the Holy Spirit accomplished through the evangelists.

Once the Gospels were written down, they still were not primarily considered to be part of a “Christian Scripture.” The Church did not bind them together with other New Testament books or write verse-by-verse commentaries on them. Their primary function, as seen by

the Church, was *liturgical*: prayer and worship. That is, the Gospels were incorporated into the prayer books of the churches—in a very similar manner to the *katameros* of the Coptic Church. And thus it can be seen why the Coptic Church so rightly and correctly *chants* the gospel during the Liturgy and has the entire congregation stand up: she is telling us that we are not just listening, but we are also worshipping.

Immediately following the first century, the Christian literature had grown into a sizable corpus, and there grew a need to formally declare which books were essential to the life of the Church and which were only edifying. Second-century church leaders such as Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Rome, for example, were still writing epistles to their churches which were marked by great spiritual depth. But simultaneously, these writers recognized the superior standing of the apostolic writers who lived so close to the time of Christ’s earthly ministry. For all the light shining from an epistle of St. Clement, it could not compare to the radiance of an epistle of St. Paul or St. James. And since the Gospels were

seen as the center of the Good News, it was natural that the Church aspire to delineate which epistles were truly canonical.

Heresies

There were two different but complementary dangers that arose at this time which put immense strains on the canonization process. The first was a group of writings that came out of the second century known as the apocryphal gospels, a collection of fantastic and legendary accounts of Christ’s life that claimed to be of equal authority as the Four Gospels. These “gospels” were written mainly to fill in the “gaps” in Christ’s life, apparently to satisfy people’s curiosity. For example, one major blank left by the Four Gospels (for so God would have it) was Christ’s childhood. We know nothing about it except for one brief incident of the twelve year old Jesus in the temple. The apocryphal gospels, however, furnish us with a multitude of incidents of His childhood, such as the following: five year old Jesus was playing by a brook one day and made 12 sparrows from clay. A Pharisee

complained to Joseph that Jesus broke the Sabbath; Jesus clapped His hands and said, “Off with you!” And the birds flew away chirping.

One can immediately feel the difference in an apocryphal miracle like this one. It has a strange, occultist cast to it, and it is done purely for show; no one is healed, no one is given faith, no problem is set right. Although the apocryphal gospels sometimes mimicked the Four Gospels very closely and were widely circulated, the Church was quick to condemn them. In addition, their rejection was a catalyst for the Church’s efforts to bring to completion her canonized scriptures.

The second threat to rise in the early centuries was a pagan heresy known as Gnosticism. It was a syncretistic (mixed and confounded) religion based on elements of oriental



mysticism, Greek philosophy, Judaism, and a warped Christianity, and it permeated the intellectual atmosphere of the first centuries. Basically, Gnosticism taught that human souls are divine sparks temporarily imprisoned in physical bodies as a result of a pre-cosmic catastrophe; so our bodies, along with the rest of the material creation, are fundamentally evil. The only way to salvation is to revile and spit upon our bodies and the earth, as well as by possessing a special gnosis, or knowledge, of the spiritual world. The poison of Gnostic teaching was copiously transfused into most of the apocryphal gospels; the apocryphal writers were themselves Gnostic. A certain one named Marcion even produced his own “bible” composed

of an edited form of Luke and several epistles, and he began a whole Marcionite church which lasted several centuries. Another, by the name of Tatian, decided to blend the Gospels into one continuous narrative (the Diatessaron) to do away with the apparent differences and difficulties of the Four. But the Church repudiated it for its elimination of the multiplicity of the gospels—a key trait ordained by God Himself.

Toward Canonization

Starting in the third century, in order to attend to an increasing need for a standard Christian scripture and to protect against heresy, the Church began making a deliberate effort to define exactly which books belonged to the Christian canon. Typically, to be considered canonical, a document had to pass three basic tests. It had to be: (1) written by an apostle or an immediate disciple of an apostle; (2)

New Testament books were listed. “These,” he declares, “are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied by the living words which they contain. In these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away from them.” Thus, 367 AD marks the first time the scope of the whole New Testament is clearly defined.

During that same period, the Church Fathers, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and others, began making lists of what the canon should include. In the West, two church councils (Hippo, 393 AD and Carthage, 397 AD) defined the same canon as that noted in St. Athanasius’ festal letter of 367 AD. In these councils, St. Augustine had considerable influence on the selection of the New Testament scriptures.

Again, no one Father or church council can be given final responsibility

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recognized as authentic by most of the churches at large; (3) consistent with apostolic doctrine—the rule of faith preserved by the living tradition of the Church.

The most influential Father in defining the canon, as noted by most western and eastern scholars, was St. Athanasius. He was the first bishop to use his position as head of an extensive and important diocese (Alexandria) to deal with the question of the biblical canon. It was ancient custom that every year after Epiphany, the bishop of Alexandria would write a festal letter to all the churches and monasteries of Egypt, informing them of the date of the Resurrection feast and the beginning of the Lenten fast. In St. Athanasius’ 39th festal letter of 367 AD, he made a complete list of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. Twenty-seven

for defining the boundaries of the Christian scriptures. All they did was give official approval of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament that were already recognized among the churches to be unique and divine in their message. That is, the Church did not endow the New Testament with authority but simply recognized its long-standing existence. The Holy Spirit who guided the apostles in writing the holy books also guided the Church in determining its canon.

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