

Peter also indicates that Paul's letters had circulated, and that they were viewed as authoritative, even if at times they were difficult to understand:

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, 16 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2Pet 3:15–16)

Here Peter associates Paul's letters with "the rest of the Scriptures" (τὰς λοιπὰς γραφὰς).

There is evidence from the earliest Church Fathers that Paul's epistles were known, and that they were held as authoritative. Clement of Rome, in his epistle to the Corinthians (c. 95 CE) writes, "Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle" (1Clem 47:1). The exhortation presumes that they had Paul's epistle (which ever one is referred to) in their possession. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (who died early in the 1st Century CE) is purported to have memorized 1Corinthians. In his epistle to the Ephesians (12.2) he states of Paul that "who, in every epistle, makes mention of us in Messiah Yeshua."<sup>220</sup> This is no doubt an overstatement, but it gives evidence that Ignatius had Paul's epistles, and that his audience was also aware of their existence.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, who lived from 70–160 CE, also gives evidence in his writings that he had most of Paul's epistles. He quotes or alludes to all of the canonical epistles of Paul with the exception of Colossians, 1Thess, Philemon, and Titus. One quote from Polycarp shows that he held Scriptures from the Tanach and Paul's words as equally authoritative: "Be angry and sin not (Ps 4:5), and let not the sun go down upon your wrath (Eph 4:26)."<sup>221</sup> Similarly, by the middle of the 2nd Century CE, Marcion had limited his canon to one Gospel (Luke) and ten Pauline epistles, thus confirming that most of Paul's letters were collected and recognized by this date.

**p**<sup>46</sup>, one of the Chester Beatty Codices, dated to about 200 CE, is recognized as the earliest extant copy of Pauline letters. Only 86 leaves

220 ὅς ἐν πάσῃ ἐπιστολῇ μνημονεύει ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 5 vols. (Baker, 1981), 4.65.

221 *Epistle of Polycarp* 12.1.

of an original 104 remain, and it contains Hebrews, 1 & 2Cor, Eph, Gal, Phil, Col, and 1Thess. Metzger believes that the seven leaves lost from the end of the manuscript most likely contained 2Thess, but would have afforded insufficient space for the Pastoral epistles. Patzia believes they may have also contained Philemon.<sup>222</sup> On the basis of  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ , many scholars believe that Paul's epistles were circulated in the 1st Century CE as a collection and not as individual books. But the particulars of how the epistles were collected, who collected them, and exactly which epistles comprised the earliest Pauline corpus remain the subject of much debate. There are some scholars, however, who affirm that by the middle of the 2nd Century CE, the Pauline corpus was recognized as an authoritative collection. Everett Harrison, commenting on a Gnostic text ("The Gospel of Truth") that contains many references to Paul's writings, notes:

This recently discovered work with the observable Gnostic tendencies is probably attributable to Valentinus around 140 CE. It has an important contribution to make to the study of the New Testament canon, since its use of the canonical writings is so comprehensive as to warrant the conclusion that in Rome at this period a New Testament was in existence that corresponded ever so closely with what we have today. Furthermore, what is utilized, whether from the Gospels, the Acts, the letters of Paul, Hebrews, or the Revelation, is regarded as authoritative.<sup>223</sup>

While the scholars continue to debate the nature and extent of the early Pauline Corpus, it seems clear on the basis of all the extant evidence that by the middle of the 2nd Century CE, less than a 100 years after Paul's death, his letters had been collected as corpus of authoritative writings. Doubtlessly this process of collecting the Pauline epistles was the first step in receiving them as part of the Apostolic Canon.

### *The Gospels*

As noted above,<sup>224</sup> the majority of scholars who study the Synoptics hold to a Markan priority. The conservative view is that Mark was written sometime around 60 CE, about a generation after the events that the book describes. The other synoptic Gospels probably followed shortly

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222 "Canon" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP, 1993), p. 91.

223 Wegner, *From Texts to Translations*, p. 135.

224 See above pp. 44-45.

thereafter. We should presume that either the gospel writers utilized oral traditions along with their own first-hand witness, or perhaps an early written source of the sayings and teachings of Yeshua (a document some refer to as “Q”).

The *Didache* (which means “teaching”), an early catechistic work most likely originally written to train Gentile believers in advance of their official acceptance into the community, is the earliest document to quote a written Gospel. The date of the *Didache* is debated among scholars, but most would put it sometime near the end of the 1st Century CE. The *Didache* appears to quote Matthew:

Nor should you pray like the hypocrites. Instead, “pray like this,” just as the Lord commanded in his Gospel: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debt, as we also forgive our debtors; and do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one; for yours is the power and the glory forever.”<sup>225</sup>

Note the opening phrase includes “just as our Lord commanded in His Gospel.” This would seem to refer to a written source. And the quote is nearly verbatim from the Gospel of Matthew.

Ignatius, writing at the end of the 1st Century CE says, “For I heard some men saying, ‘if I find it not in the chapters of the Gospel I do not believe’” (*Philadelphians* 8.2). It would appear that Papius, who also lived at the end of the 1st Century CE, knew the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and perhaps John, as well as the letters of 1Peter and 1John.

There is additional evidence that by the beginning of the 2nd Century CE the Gospels were well established as the authoritative record of Yeshua’s ministry and teachings. Remember that  $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ , a fragment of the Gospel of John, dates to 120 CE. According to Eusebius,<sup>226</sup> Papias, writing in the early 2nd Century CE, mentioned the Gospels of Matthew and Mark by name. In Justin Martyr’s apology (c. 150 CE) he mentions the Gospels. Irenaeus defends the fourfold form of the Gospels in about 180 CE and specifically mentions the Gospel of Matthew. And in 160 CE, Tatian prepared his famous *Diatessaron* in which he blended the four

225 Aaron Milavec, *The Didache* (Newman Press, 2003) takes the position that the *Didache* may have been written before Matthew was committed to writing.

226 *Ecc Hist.* 2.39.14–16.

Gospels into one.<sup>227</sup>

We may conclude, then, that by the beginning of the 2nd Century, and most surely by the end of the century, the four Gospels as we know them were written and received as the authoritative record of Yeshua the Messiah.

### *The Acts*

The necessity of the book of Acts within the gathered writings of the early people of The Way is described by Bruce:

But Acts naturally shared the authority and prestige of the third Gospel, being the work of the same author, and besides, it was a very important book. Not only did it provide the detail to the gospel story, but it was an indispensable companion to the Pauline collection. Who was this Paul? What were the grounds for the apostolic authority which he claimed for himself (as he was manifestly not one of the Twelve whom Jesus had appointed to be with him)? Such questions as these must have occurred to the readers of the group of letters entitled *The Apostle*. But Acts made the source and quality of Paul's apostolic commission and service very plain. It therefore served as a link between the fourfold Gospel and the Pauline corpus . . .<sup>228</sup>

Early evidence for the book of Acts includes the so-called anti-Marcionite Prologue, dated to the end of the 2nd Century CE, which says that a second volume entitled "the Acts of all the Apostles," was written by Luke. The Muratorian Fragment, also dated to the end of the 2nd Century CE, includes Acts. Irenaeus also mentions the book of Acts and that it was written by Luke.<sup>229</sup>

227 Early Church Fathers and Witnesses to the Apostolic Scriptures: Clement of Rome: 60–100 CE, Ignatius: 60 – 177 CE, Papias: 60–130 CE, Polycarp: 70–136 CE, Marcion: 110–160 CE, Justin Martyr: 100–165 CE, Tatian: 110–180 CE, Melito: 110–190 CE, Irenaeus: 150–202 CE, Clement of Alexandria: 155–220 CE, Tertullian: 160–220 CE, Pseudo-Clementines: c. 220 CE, Origen: 185–253 CE, Eusebius (Caesarea): 260–340 CE, Cyprian: (wrote) 248–258 CE, Athanasius: 295–373 CE, Eusebius (Emesa): died 359 CE, Ambrosiaster: (wrote) 366–384 CE, Gregory (Nyssa): 335–394 CE, Ambrose: 333–397 CE, Chrysostom: 344–407 CE, Augustine: 354–430 CE.

228 *The Books and the Parchments* (Revell, 1984), p. 99 – quoted from Wegner, *From Texts to Translations*, p. 137.

229 *Haer.* 3.1.2; 3.14.1.

*The Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse)*

Most likely, the Apocalypse was written by John, the author of the Gospel that bears his name, during the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE). The fact that the Greek of the Gospel of John does not match that of the book of Revelation has caused some scholars to doubt the Johannine authorship of the Apocalypse. Others have suggested that John employed a scribe for the writing of his gospel, something that was not possible when he wrote the Apocalypse as an exile on the island of Patmos. The Revelation was debated early on as to whether it should be included in the canon, owing no doubt to its apocalyptic nature, and the many apocalyptic works of dubious character that were popular in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries CE.

Early witnesses to Revelation include Melito, who wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse around 170 CE. Justin Martyr wrote (c. 135 CE) that John was the author of Revelation. The Muratorian Fragment (end of the 2nd Century CE) acknowledges the book of Revelation. And Irenaeus mentions the book and claims that it was written by John.<sup>230</sup>

The evidence, then, clearly shows that the Book of Revelation was well known in the 2nd Century CE, and that it was held by many to be numbered among the authoritative Apostolic writings.

*The General Epistles (Hebrews; James; 1 & 2 Peter; Epistles of John, Jude)*

The General Epistles are those which were epistles written to communities throughout Asia Minor (with the exception of 2 and 3 John). They faced a more difficult battle in terms of their acceptance most likely because there were questions about their authorship. The text of Hebrews, for instance, does not contain the author's name (some later Greek manuscripts insert Paul's name in a heading). Though the author identifies himself the Epistle of James, there were questions regarding which James this was. The Epistles of Peter bear his name, but the style and vocabulary of 2 Peter bear marked differences from the earlier epistle, and in an era where many pseudepigraphal writings were emerging, 2 Peter was put to a greater scrutiny. The Epistles of John do not bear his name directly, but only cryptically.<sup>231</sup>

Clement appears to quote Hebrews (without explicitly naming the

230 Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 5.18.14; Haer. 4.14.2; 4.17.6; 4.18.6; 4.21.3; 5.28.2.

231 1Jn simply indicates the author was an eyewitness of Yeshua, 2 & 3 John identify the author as "the elder".

source).<sup>232</sup> 1Clement is dated as early as the end of the 1st Century CE. Justin Martyr knew of the book of Hebrews.<sup>233</sup> Irenaeus quotes Hebrews.<sup>234</sup> Hebrews is found in **P**<sup>46</sup> dated about 200 CE. Tertullian (160–220) held that Barnabas wrote Hebrews (“On Modesty” *Anti-Nicean Fathers*, 4.97).

By the end of the 2nd Century, Jude is well attested. Tertullian, Clement of Rome, Origen, and the Muratorian Canon all refer to Jude in the context of the authoritative writings of the Apostles. The identity of the author, however, was questioned, since at least five people by that name (Jude = Judas in the Greek) are known in the Gospel accounts, and since “brother of James” found in the opening verse of the epistle was still not specific enough since a number of men in the Apostolic circle also had the name James.

The Muratorian Canon listed Jude and 1John and 2John, but does not mention James, 1Peter and 2Peter, or Hebrews. Polycarp (70–156 CE) used 1Peter, and Clement of Alexandria (155–220) comments on 1Peter, Jude, and 1John and 2John. The earliest clear citation from James appears in the 3rd Century CE in the Pseudo-Clementine.<sup>235</sup> However, Origen (185–253 CE) and Eusebius (260–340) both considered James to be canonical.

Irenaeus considered 1John to be canonical<sup>236</sup> as did Clement of Alexandria,<sup>237</sup> Origen,<sup>238</sup> Tertullian,<sup>239</sup> and Eusebius.<sup>240</sup> The first clear quote from 1John is in Polycarp.<sup>241</sup>

2John is quoted by Irenaeus.<sup>242</sup> Origen notes that there was some doubt as to the canonicity of the General Epistles<sup>243</sup> but Eusebius indicates that they were generally received by the church.<sup>244</sup>

The evidence show, then, that by the 2nd Century CE, the believing communities generally recognized the General Epistles (sometimes called the “Catholic Epistles,” the word *catholic* meaning “general” or

232 1Clem 17:1 quotes Heb 11:37; 1Clem 36:2–6 quotes Heb 1:3–5.

233 *Apology* 12.9; *Dial.* 13.1.

234 Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 5.26.3...

235 *De Virginitate* 1.11.4

236 *Haer.* 3.16.5, 8

237 *Paeda.* 82, 98; *Strom.* 3.32, 43, 44, 45.

238 *Comm. on Matthew*, 13.26.

239 *Ag. Praxeas.*

240 *Eccl Hist* 3.24.17; 3.25.2.

241 *Philippians* 7.

242 *Haer.* 1.16.3; 3.16.8.

243 *Johannem* 5.3.

244 *Eccl Hist* 3.24.17; 3.25.2–3.

“universal”) grouped together with the authoritative writings of the Apostles, which included the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles.

*The History of Canonization*

The earliest list of canonical books of the Apostolic Writings is found in Eusebius (*Eccl Hist.* 3.25), written 320–330 CE. He categorizes the various books in his list under three headings: *Homologoumena* (“recognized”), *Antilegomena* (“disputed”), and *Notha* (“spurious”).

| Homologoumena            | Antilogoumena           | Notha              |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Four Gospels             | James                   | Gospel of Peter    |
| Acts                     | Jude                    | Gospel of Thomas   |
| Epistles of Paul (+Heb?) | 2Peter                  | Gospel of Matthias |
| 1John                    | 2–3John                 | Acts of Andrew     |
| 1Peter                   | Acts of Paul            | Acts of John       |
| Revelation (some doubt)  | Shepherd of Hermas      | Others unnamed     |
|                          | Apoc of Peter           |                    |
|                          | Epistle of Barnabas     |                    |
|                          | Didache                 |                    |
|                          | Hebrews (?)             |                    |
|                          | Revelation (some doubt) |                    |
|                          |                         |                    |
| Total: 21 (22)           | Total: 10 (12)          |                    |

Eusebius simply says “the Letters of Paul,” without giving us the list of books that his designation includes. Since, however, the earliest extant manuscript of Paul’s epistles (P<sup>46</sup>) includes Hebrews, one might be inclined to include it. The fact that Eusebius includes a note that some dispute Hebrews (“with which those of the Hebrews that have received Christ are particularly delighted”) does not necessarily remove it from the general listing of Paul’s letters.

It is interesting to note that if Hebrews is included in the Pauline Letters as far as Eusebius was concerned, then the number of “received”

books was 22, the exact number listed by Josephus for the Hebrew Canon. It may have been that Eusebius was hinting at an Apostolic Canon that matched that of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In 1740 Cardinal L. A. Muratori discovered in a library in Milan an 8th Century CE Latin manuscript which included an early list of Apostolic books. Its 85 lines begins mid-sentence, and its ending is abrupt, leading most scholars to presume that text is missing at both ends. However, the listing of the books, which begins with Luke as “the third gospel” must surely have included Matthew and Mark.

The primary issue surrounding the Muratorian Fragment is its date. Until recently, most scholars held that it was to be dated in the late 2nd or early 3rd Century CE. Muratori himself dated it to this period, and noted that it was a poorly translated Latin copy of an original Greek text. However, some scholars of late (particularly A. C. Sundberg) have argued for a 4th Century date. Still, significant scholars such as F. F. Bruce and Bruce Metzger maintained their position that the fragment originated in the late 2nd Century CE.

The author of the fragment does not suggest that his list is novel, but that it represented the general practice of the “catholic church” (meaning universal church). Furthermore, it clearly states that Revelation of Peter is not accepted. He also notes that the Wisdom of Solomon is included in the “extra books” which some receive. This indicates that the author is aware of various opinions with in the “church,” but that he lists those books which he considered generally accepted. The list of received books is: (Matthew, Mark), Luke John, Acts, 1 & 2Cor, Eph, Phil, Col, Gal, 1 & 2Thess, Rom, Phil, Titus, 1 & 2Tim, 1 & 2John, Jude, Revelation, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Revelation of Peter* (with the Revelation of Peter denied, but noted to be received by others).

In the 2nd through the 4th Centuries CE, various Church Fathers give evidence of not only having certain of the Apostolic writings, but also treating them as authoritative. That is, they give commentary upon them, or they use them as a source for their teachings which they expect to be received with authority. As such, we may conclude that they received them with a level of authority not normally accorded to other writings. In some cases, they specifically note those books which are generally received by the wider community of believers, those which have a tradition among the fathers as worthy to be read and having value for a spiritual and moral life, and those which are spurious and not to be received on the same level as Scripture.

The following chart lists six of the Church Fathers and the collection of books which, in their writings, or in lists they specifically give of the

received books, they apparently received as the canon of Scripture. In some cases it is difficult to ascertain how they viewed certain books. For instance, if they note that not all receive a given book, this notice may or may not indicate whether they received that book themselves. In some instances, they specifically state that some receive a given book, with the inference that they themselves do not. To mark these I have added (?).

In a few cases, and especially in Eusebius and Athanasius, certain books are listed as commonly held by Christian communities, but are said not to be genuine, or not to be included in the canon of Scripture. These I have marked with (\*).

It should be noted that the order of the lists is not necessarily found in the various writings of the fathers. In fact, the order in which the books should be found in the received corpus of Scripture is not consistent whatsoever in the various listings of the Church Fathers. I have simply listed them in the order we are now accustomed to seeing, in order to make the comparisons obvious.

By comparing the various lists in the table, several observations can be made: 1) the “extra books” are not consistently listed, and by the end of the 4th Century CE are specifically said to be outside of the canon of Scripture; 2) the books which were earlier disputed (especially among the so-called General Epistles) are eventually accorded a position within the received canon. This evidences the on-going debates over these particular books, and the fact that in the end, they proved themselves to contain the quality of divine inspiration; 3) Of the so-called “Extra Books,” there are several which enjoy a long reception among the communities of the emerging Christian Church. These are The Epistle of Barnabas, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas; 4) It can be seen that the complete reception of the 27 books we now know as the Apostolic Scriptures did not occur (at least from the extant data) until the 4th Century CE. This does not mean that those particular books which were debated were any less endowed with the character of divine inspiration. If any thing, the long and arduous debates that occurred over these few books witnesses both to the high value of Scripture that precipitated the debates in the first place, as well as the genuine quality of Scripture which these books actually contained, evidenced by their final reception.

| <b>Clement<br/>(155–220)</b> | <b>Tertullian<br/>(160–220)</b> | <b>Hippolytus<br/>(170–235)</b> | <b>Origen<br/>(185–254)</b> | <b>Eusebius<br/>(260–340)</b> | <b>Athanasius<br/>(296–373)</b> |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Matthew                      | Matthew                         | Matthew                         | Matthew                     | Matthew                       | Matthew                         |
| Mark                         | Mark                            | Mark                            | Mark                        | Mark                          | Mark                            |
| Luke                         | Luke                            | Luke                            | Luke                        | Luke                          | Luke                            |
| John                         | John                            | John                            | John                        | John                          | John                            |
| Acts                         | Acts                            | Acts                            | Acts                        | Acts                          | Acts                            |
| Romans                       | Romans                          | Romans                          | Romans                      | Romans                        | Romans                          |
| 1Cor                         | 1Cor                            | 1Cor                            | 1Cor                        | 1Cor                          | 1Cor                            |
| 2Cor                         | 2Cor                            | 2Cor                            | 2Cor                        | 2Cor                          | 2Cor                            |
| Gal                          | Gal                             | Gal                             | Gal                         | Gal                           | Gal                             |
| Eph                          | Eph                             | Eph                             | Eph                         | Eph                           | Eph                             |
| Phil                         | Phil                            | Phil                            | Phil                        | Phil                          | Phil                            |
| Col                          | Col                             | Col                             | Col                         | Col                           | Col                             |
| 1Thess                       | 1Thess                          | 1Thess                          | 1Thess                      | 1Thess                        | 1Thess                          |
| 2Thess                       | 2Thess                          | 2Thess                          | 2Thess                      | 2Thess                        | 2Thess                          |
| 1Tim                         | 1Tim                            | 1Tim                            | 1Tim                        | 1Tim                          | 1Tim                            |
| 2Tim                         | 2Tim                            | 2Tim                            | 2Tim                        | 2Tim                          | 2Tim                            |
| Titus                        | Titus                           | Titus                           | Titus                       | Titus                         | Titus                           |
|                              |                                 |                                 | Philemon                    | Philemon                      | Philemon                        |
|                              | Hebrews                         | Hebrews                         | Hebrews(?)                  | Hebrews                       | Hebrews                         |
|                              | James                           | James                           | James(?)                    | James(?)                      | James                           |
| 1Peter                       | 1Peter                          | 1Peter                          | 1Peter                      | 1Peter                        | 1Peter                          |
|                              |                                 | 2Peter                          | 2Peter(?)                   | 2Peter(?)                     | 2Peter                          |
| 1John                        | 1John                           | 1John                           | 1John                       | 1John                         | 1John                           |
|                              | 2John                           | 2John                           | 2John(?)                    | 2John(?)                      | 2John                           |
|                              |                                 |                                 | 3John (?)                   | 3John (?)                     | 3John                           |
| Jude                         | Jude                            | Jude                            | Jude                        | Jude                          | Jude                            |
| Revelation                   | Revelation                      | Revelation                      | Revelation                  | Revelation                    | Revelation                      |

|                      |                         |                         |                     |                        |                                 |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Clement<br>(155–220) | Tertullian<br>(160–220) | Hippolytus<br>(170–235) | Origen<br>(185–254) | Eusebius<br>(260–340)  | Athanasius<br>(296–373)         |
| Extra Books          | Extra Books             | Extra Books             | Extra Books         | Extra Books            | Extra Books                     |
| Barnabas             | Wisdom of Solomon       |                         | Barnabas            | Barnabas (*)           | Wisdom of Solomon (*)           |
| Clement of Rome      | Rev of Peter (*)        |                         | Didache             | Didache (*)            | Wisdom of Sirach (*)            |
| Rev of Peter         |                         |                         |                     | Rev of Peter           | Add to Esther, Judith, Tobit(*) |
| Shepherd of Hermas   |                         |                         | Shepherd of Hermas  | Shepherd of Hermas (*) | Shepherd of Hermas (*)          |
| Preaching of Peter   |                         |                         |                     | Acts of Paul (*)       | Didache (*)                     |
| Total: 26            | Total: 26               | Total: 25               | Total: 24           | Total: 22              | Total: 27                       |

(?) = disputed; (\*) = noted as non-canonical

*The Criteria Used for Judging Books as Canonical*

Whether or not the Muratorian Fragment is dated early (2nd Century CE) or late (4th Century CE), it gives a general outline of the criteria (by way of emphasis) upon which the judgment of various books was made. These criteria are:<sup>245</sup>

- 1) Was the book written by an Apostle, or at least by someone recognized with authority because of his association with the Apostles?
- 2) Does the book agree with the “canon of truth,” that is, is the book consistent in its teaching and presentation of the Apostolic truth contained in those writings already recognized as Scripture?
- 3) Has the book shown itself to be widely accepted among the communities of believers? In other words, does the book evidence a spiritual quality that has been recognized universally by the

245 For a full translation of the Muratorian Fragment, see Wegner, *From Texts to Translations*, p. 145.

communities of faith?

- 4) Does the book bear the intrinsic weight of divine authority? Does it bear a self-authenticating characteristic?

### *Apostolic Authorship*

The issue of being an eyewitness to the life and teachings of Yeshua was a critical factor in accepting a given book as canonical. This is an indication of how firmly the early emerging Christian Church was attached to her Jewish roots. In rabbinic law, a witness is not credible unless he personally witnessed the events to which he applies his words as a witness. It is understandable, then, why the Gospels were so quickly received as canonical. Likewise, the epistles of Paul were more quickly received, because each one contains a notice of Paul as the author, and because Paul was directly commissioned as an Apostle by the risen Messiah. Thus, Hebrews, which the Eastern Church ascribed to Paul, was received in the East before it was espoused in the West. No doubt the Western Church was hesitant to assign Pauline authorship to Hebrews on account of the fact that Tertullian had assigned it to Barnabas.

The same may be said of Peter's epistles. His first epistle was received early, but the dispute over whether the second epistle which bore his name was actually from the Apostle's hand made its reception less automatic. Once the Petrine authorship was affirmed, it too was received without hesitation. And the same issue obtains with the second and third epistles of John.

This also helps us understand why some of the apocryphal works were received at first. Many of them were written under the false pretense that they were actually the work of an Apostle (such as the Apocalypse of Peter). But once it was determined that these were actually not written by the Apostle to which they were ascribed, they were dismissed as spurious.

### *Agreement with the "Canon of Truth"*

Sometimes the Church Fathers speak of the "canon of faith" (*regula fidei*) or the "canon of truth" (*regula veritatis*). Since the Gospels and most of Paul's epistles were received very early as authoritative Apostolic witness to the life and teachings of Yeshua, those other books that were being considered could be scrutinized along doctrinal lines with the rule of Apostolic Scripture already in place. Where there were obvious contradictions, the book was rejected. Thus, those works which

championed the tenets of rising heretical groups (such as the Gnostics or Docetics) were easily seen to contradict the teaching of Yeshua in the Gospels, and Paul's teaching in his epistles, and were therefore marked as spurious.

We should note that this rule, standing by itself, would not have been sufficient to judge those books that were disputed. Some of the apocryphal books (e.g., the *Didache*, Shepherd of Hermas) do not contain material clearly in conflict with the Gospels or Paul. They failed the test of canonicity on other grounds. Thus, Luther's objections to James (for instance), because in his way of looking at things it contradicted the Pauline teaching of justification by faith, gained no leverage. James had been received for centuries by the communities of faith, and the apparent contradictions that Luther saw were actually a result of his own fight with the papacy, and not the result of a wider accepted exegesis of the supposed conflicting passages. This leads to the next criterion for judging canonicity.

### *Universal Acceptance*

By the time of the 3rd and 4th Centuries CE, the Christian Church had divided into the Western and Eastern segments. This division came about because of a number of issues, some more important than others. Yet in the providence of God, this division allowed for a kind of "checks and balances" in the canonizing process. In spite of the differences exhibited in certain doctrinal positions of the two wings of the Christian Church, they both realized that the issue of canonicity, by its very nature, needed to be universal. Thus, until both the Western and Eastern Churches agreed upon the canonicity of a given book, it was held as disputed. The book was received only when its innate character as divine Scripture was clearly attested.

Once again, this parallels the canonization process of the Tanach. Those few books that were debated among the rabbis, only gained their final canonicity when there was universal agreement that they evidenced the divine quality of Scripture. Thus, the stamp of approval for any given book could not come from an individual, nor even from a small group of leaders. The canonization process was clearly a community-wide issue. And the reason is obvious: if the book actually was divinely inspired, then it would prove itself universally to all who were of genuine faith. Once again, this principle was worked out in the later debates that arose in the period of the Reformation. Luther's own stance against James and Revelation could not stand, because other leaders in the Reformation,

and the communities that they led, had received these books. The wider acceptance of a book as canonical gave witness to its intrinsic, divine character.

### *Self-Authenticating Nature*

As I have noted earlier, the character of Scripture stems from the fact that all Scripture is God-breathed, i.e., inspired. It was not as though certain Church Fathers, or even various communities that made up the Christian Church, endowed the various books finally received with the character of canonicity. The Scriptures, divinely inspired, already had the divine *imprimatur* of canonicity. The duty of the believing communities with her leaders was to recognize this divine quality. As Bruce has noted:

We may believe that those early Christians acted by a wisdom higher than their own in this matter, not only in what they accepted, but in what they rejected. Divine authority is by its very nature self-evidencing; and one of the profoundest doctrines recovered by the Reformers is the doctrine of the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, by which testimony is borne within the believer's heart to the divine character of Holy Scripture. This witness is not confined to the individual believer, but is also accessible to the believing community; and there is no better example of its operation than in the recognition by the members of the Early Church of the books which were given by inspiration of God to stand alongside the books of the Old Covenant, the Bible of Christ and his apostles, and with them to make up the written Word of God.<sup>246</sup>

Though I would take exception to Bruce's use of the term "Old Covenant" to designate the Tanach ("old covenant" is only used once in the Scriptures, by Paul in 2Cor 3:14, and it there refers to the reading of the Tanach apart from the illuminating work of the Spirit), still, his point is right on the mark. The ultimate criterion for recognizing Scripture as Scripture, is the divinely endowed quality of inspiration. And this quality is exhibited to the individual believer as well as to the wider community of believers as the Scriptures are read and studied. In concert with the former criteria (Universal Acceptance), the quality of Scripture as divinely inspired is fully recognized by those who possess the work

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246 *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 107.