**Bibliology 14 ~ The Boundaries and Closing of the Canon of Scripture**

**The “Problem” of Canonical Diversity in the Early Church**

What is the nature of this “problem”?

* The tumultuous history of the NT canon’s reception makes it irrational to believe that books finally received by the church are the ones God intended.
* The canon was not finalized until somewhere between the 4th and 5th centuries.

1. **How Did the Early Church Use Noncanonical Writings?**
2. **Clement of Alexandria (150-215)**
   * Clement cited apocryphal texts and traditions generously.
   * **Michael J. Kruger:** Clement quotes from the Preaching of Peter, the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of the Hebrews, and other noncanonical writings. At the same time, however, he expressly affirms that there are four, and only four, “traditional” Gospels that the church receives: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. At one point, while using a saying from the Gospel of the Egyptians[[1]](#footnote-1), he intentionally downplays its authority by noting that the saying does not occur in our canonical four.[[2]](#footnote-2)
3. **Origen (A.D 184-253)**

* Origen gleaned useful material from writings like the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of the Hebrews without endorsing them completely.
* Yet, he explicitly states that he recognizes only four Gospels as Scripture; he also downplays the authority of the Gospel of the Hebrews.
* **Origen:** “We approve nothing else but that which the Church approves, that is, four Gospels only as proper to be received.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. **False Conclusion Based on These Uses**

* There are countless citations of anonymous, noncanonical Jesus sayings in the writings of the church fathers.
* Based on these uses, it is unlikely that there was a fourfold gospel tradition (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) in the first three centuries of the church.
* The assumption is that just because you recognize certain books as canonical, you can never use noncanonical material in your writings or sermons.
* **Michael J. Kruger:** …the historical situation of early Christianity suggests that we should expect the contrary. We know that oral traditions of Jesus continued well into the second century (and beyond) and were often found to be beneficial and useful. Likewise, Patristic writers would occasionally draw on apocryphal gospels as helpful sources for the life of Jesus. But this did not necessarily mean that they considered these sources equal in authority to the canonical books. Patristic writers were quite capable of distinguishing between material that was Scripture and material that, though not Scripture, was nevertheless useful.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. **Which NT Books Were Disputed, and Why?**
2. **Disputing Canonical Books**

* How much consensus does there need to be before we can say that we have a fixed canon of NT writings?
  + - Some NT books were disputed in the early church.
    - But some take this to mean that unless you have near-100% acceptance of all the NT books in the early church, you cannot have a fixed canon.
  + An example from Origen (184-253)
    - Origen’s comment on 2 and 3 John: *“not all say that these are genuine”*
    - **Michael J. Kruger:** Although Hahneman uses this comment to point out that universal agreement on these epistles has not yet been achieved, he entirely overlooks the implications of Origen’s comments in the other direction, namely, that apparently most Christians do consider them genuine—including Origen himself. The phrase “not all say” indicates that Origen is simply noting exceptions to a more broadly established trend.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* How should we think about the disputed NT writings?
  + - We should actually expect some dispute, because God chose historical means by which to give His revelation to His church.
    - Disputes about certain NT books doesn’t mean there wasn’t a *general* consensus about the NT canon.

1. **A Standard Division of Early Christian Writings by Eusebius (263-339)**
   * + - Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 313-325) uses a fourfold division of early Christian writings in discussing the canon.
2. The Recognized Books (*homolegoumena*): undisputed canonical works

*The Four Gospels, Acts, the Epistles of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation*

**Michael J. Kruger:** Oddly, Eusebius qualifies the inclusion of Revelation by saying “if it seems desireable,” showing that he may have doubted it personally while still acknowledging it was widely received by others.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. The Disputed Books (*Antilegomena*): recognized by many as canonical but disputed by some

*2 Peter, Jude, 2 and 3 John[[7]](#footnote-7)*

Eusebius writes: “…they are nevertheless known to most” (Ecclesiastical History 3.25.3)

1. The Rejected Books (*Notha*): orthodox but not canonical

*The Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache, and the Gospel of Hebrews, [possibly Revelation]*

Eusebius makes a comment that some reject Revelation but others accept it as canonical (5.25.4).

1. The Heretical Books

Includeworks like *The Gospel of Peter, The Gospel of Thomas, The Acts of Andrew, and The Acts of John*

Described by Eusebius as “fictions of heretics” and “wicked and impious.”

1. **The Disputed NT Books**
2. *James*

* Reasons for dispute
  + Faith and works controversy; less theological
* Citations
  + Influenced a number of early Christian writings such as 1 Clement and The Shepherd of Hermas.
  + Irenaeus (140-202) cites it.
  + Clement of Alexandria (150-215) wrote a commentary on it (and on all the other Catholic Epistles), which is now lost (but mentioned in Eusebius’ history).
  + Recognized as canonical Scripture by Origen, who cites it frequently and refers to it as from “James, the brother of the Lord”
* Reception
  + Eusebius acknowledges that some had doubts about it but counts it among the canonical books “known to most.”
  + Fully received by Jerome, Augustine, and the 4th-century councils of Hippo and Carthage
  + Ultimately, the church recognized the complementary nature of James’ message of faith and works with that of Paul.
* Manuscript evidence
  + Several third-century papyrus manuscripts of James: P20, P23, P100.

1. *2 Peter*

* Reasons for dispute:
  + Alleged differences in style and content from 1 Peter
* Citations
  + 1 Clement[[8]](#footnote-8) (c. 96) includes several places of overlap with 2 Peter (e.g., 23.3 [2 Pet. 3:4]; 9.2 [2 Pet. 1:17]; 35.5 [2 Pet. 2:2]).
  + The apocryphal work *Apocalypse of Peter* (c. 110) knows 2 Peter.
  + Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) makes a striking allusion to 2 Peter 2:1 in his *Dialogue with Trypho* *82.1*.
    - They both use the rare word *pseudodidaskaloi* (“false teachers”), which only these two sources use up till the late 2nd century.
  + Irenaeus appears to cite 2 Peter 3:8 in *Against Heresies 5.23.2*.
  + Origen cited it six times and clearly received it as canonical.
* Reception
  + **Michael J. Kruger:** Despite some initial hesitancy toward 2 Peter from some quarters of the church, in the end it was widely received by such figures as Jerome, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Augustine. Thus, even with its slow start, it is important to remember that 2 Peter still has significantly more support for its inclusion in the canon than the best of those books that have been rejected.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Manuscript evidence
  + The Bodmer papyrus manuscript (P72), a 3rd-century manuscript from Egypt, confirms the use of Jude and 2 Peter.

1. *2 and 3 John*
   * Reasons for dispute

* Authorship and short length
* Citations
  + - Polycarp (69-155) appears to know both 1 and 2 John. He even cites 2 John 7 in his *Epistle to the Philippians 7.1*.
    - Ignatius (35-108) knew 2 John (Cf. *Epistle to the Ephesians 6.2; 9.1; 11.2*)
    - The Muratorian Canon (c. 170-200) mentions at least two of the epistles of John (and possibly all three).
    - Irenaeus received at least the first and second epistle (*Against Heresies 1.16.3; 3.16.8*)
  + Reception
    - Hippolytus (170-235) accepted at least 1 and 2 John (but is silent about 3 John)
    - Although Origen recognized that some had doubts about 2 and 3 John, he regards them as canonical.
    - Dionysius of Alexandria (died 265) mentions 2 and 3 John quite confidently as canonical Scripture (cf. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History 7.25.11*).
    - The reception of two tiny epistles like 2 and 3 John by the third century, though not used as much as other books, suggests that they were likely bound together with 1 John (and maybe John’s Gospel) at a much earlier point.
  + Manuscript evidence
    - The third-century codex of 2 John, P. Antinoopolis 12 (*P.Ant.12*)
    - This fragment has a high page number, suggesting that 2 John originally circulated with the other Johannine letters, along with other books.

1. *Jude*

* Reason for dispute
  + Its citation of *1 Enoch 1:9*
    - **Jerome (*On Illustrious Men*, Ch. 4):** “Jude the brother of [James](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08280a.htm) left a short [epistle](http://www.newadvent.org/bible/jud001.htm) which is reckoned among the seven [catholic epistles](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03453a.htm), and because in it he quotes from the [apocryphal](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01601a.htm) [Book of Enoch](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01602a.htm) it is rejected by many. Nevertheless by age and use it has gained authority and is reckoned among the [Holy Scriptures](http://www.newadvent.org/bible/index.html).”
  + Jude is very short (only 602 words), which may have led to more dispute.
* Citations
  + Included in the Muratorian canon (c. 170-200)
  + Tertullian (160-220) acknowledged it as apostolic Scripture in his work *On Female Fashion* (1.3.3).
  + Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) clearly cited it.
* Reception
  + Origen (184-253) received it as fully canonical.
  + Eusebius placed it firmly in the canonical “Catholic Epistles” as a book *“used publicly with the rest in most churches.”*
* Manuscript evidence
  + The Bodmer papyrus manuscript (P72), a 3rd-century manuscript from Egypt, confirms the use of Jude and 2 Peter.

1. *Revelation*

* Reception
  + Revelation’s reception is the opposite of the other disputed books: it went from early widespread reception to later dispute.
  + Early widespread testimony that it was written by the apostle John: Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis (died c. 180), the Muratorian canon, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, and others
  + Andrew of Caesarea (563-637) refers to Papias’s (died c. 100) exegesis of Revelation 12:9. He indicates that Papias *“bore witness to its trustworthiness.”*
* Reasons for dispute (in the Eastern church)
  + Dionysius of Corinth (late 2nd-century) criticized the book because of his dislike of millennial teaching.
  + The Montanist heresy in the East[[10]](#footnote-10) accounts for its omission from the canon lists of Gregory Nazianzus, Cyril of Jerusalem, and the Synod of Laodicea (c. 340-400).
* Reception
  + Widely affirmed by others such as the list of Codex Claromontanus (c. 300), Athanasius’s Festal Letter (c. 367), Epiphanius (c. 374), the council of Carthage (c. 397), Jerome (c. 414), and Augustine (c. 426).
* Manuscript evidence
  + P18, P47, P98, P115, and 0308, all from the 2nd and 3rd centuries

1. **The Apocryphal Books**
2. *The Shepherd of Hermas* (unknown author; c. 2nd-century)

* A series of visions and revelations given by an angel (sometimes dressed as a shepherd) to a Christian from Rome named “Hermas”
* The work doesn’t claim to be apostolic.
* It was rejected by the Muratorian canon (c. 170-200) because it was written *“very recently, in our times.”*

1. *The Epistle of Barnabas* (unknown author; c. 130)

* Concerned with how the Jews have misunderstood the OT and how Christ fulfills the sacrificial portions of the Old Testament.
* Even though Clement of Alexandria wrote a commentary on it, he never calls it Scripture and even critiques it.
* Although Origen quotes it with the phrase “as it is written,” he leaves it out of his canon lists.
* Absent from the Muratorian canon

1. **The Heretical Books**
2. *The Gospel of Thomas* (2nd-cent.; unknown author)

* Gnostic theology: prompts us to find the divine spark within ourselves
* Famous final line: “*Jesus said…‘For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’”*
* No biographical aspects of the life of Christ like the other Gospels

1. *The Gospel of Peter* (2nd-cent; unknown author)

* Embellishments of the canonical story: a “giant” Jesus who exits the tomb with his head reaching beyond the heavens and a cross that follows Jesus out of the tomb and begins to speak.
* Some have seen Gnostic tendencies in the Gospel of Peter as Jesus hangs on the cross while feeling no pain and cries, “My Power, my Power, why have you forsaken me?”

1. **What Did the Early Church Think About a Closed Canon?**
2. **Dionysus of Corinth (c. 170)**
   * Distinguishes his letters from the “Scriptures of the Lord”
   * Specifically mentions that he only wrote “when Christians asked me” and even refers to his own letters as “inferior”
3. **Irenaeus (c. 180)**
   * *“It is not possible that the gospels can be either more or fewer than the number they are.”*
4. **Anonymous critic of Montanism (c. 196).** 
   * Eusebius relays the comments of an anti-Montanist writer who is hesitant to produce a document against the Montanists because…
     + “…not from the lack of any ability to refute the lie . . . but from timidity and scruples lest I might seem to some to be adding to the writings or injunctions of the word of the new covenant of the gospel to which no one . . . can add and from which he cannot take away.”
5. **Gaius (c. 200)**
   * Eusebius mentions that Gaius affirmed a thirteen-letter collection of Paul and that Gaius rebuked his Montanist opponents for their *“recklessness and audacity . . . in composing new Scriptures.”*
6. **Origen (c. 250)**
   * Origen draws up a list of all 27 books of the NT in a sermon on Joshua (*Homilies on Joshua 7.1*)
7. **What Are the Biblical Arguments for a Closed Canon?**
8. **Hebrews 1:1-3 ~ the finality of the revelation of God in His Son**
9. **Ephesians 2:20 ~ the foundational role of NT authors** 
   * **Muratorian Canon, lines 78-80:** (78) it cannot be read publicly to the people in church either among (79) the Prophets, whose number is complete, or among (80) the Apostles, for it is after [their] time.[[11]](#footnote-11)
   * **Herman Ridderbos**: When understood in terms of the history of redemption, the canon cannot be open; in principle it must be closed. That follows directly from the unique and exclusive nature of the power the apostles received from Christ and from the commission he gave them to be witnesses to what they had seen and heard of the salvation he had brought. The result of this power and commission is the foundation of the church and the creation of the canon, and therefore these are naturally unrepeatable and exclusive in character.[[12]](#footnote-12)
10. **Revelation 22:18-19 ~ the final warning against tampering with Scripture**
11. **Practical Implications**
12. **A closed canon means that no new books can be added to the Scripture.**
13. **A closed canon means that there are no post-apostolic apostles or prophets**
14. **The only revelation for the church is the previously given revelation of the Old and New Testaments.**

1. Also known as *The Greek Gospel of the Egyptians*, based on its first line. Written c. 120-150. Takes the form of a dialogue between Salome and Jesus. Espouses celibacy and has Gnostic tendencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kruger, Kindle Locations 8019-8026. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Kruger, Kindle Locations 8031-8041. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kruger, Michael J. *Canon Revisited* (Kindle Locations 7986-8000). Crossway. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kruger, Kindle Locations 8063-8067. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kruger, Kindle Locations 8080-8084. Cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.25.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eusebius is unsure whether 2 and 3 John were written by the apostle John or some other John. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Letter addressed to the church at Corinth on the occasion of their deposing of certain elders. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kruger, Kindle Locations 8151-8162. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There are several voices of acceptance in the Eastern church, including Amphilocius of Iconium (c. 340-395); Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315-403); Basil the Great (c. 330-379); Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395), Basil’s brother [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html (Accessed 1-4-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cited by Kruger, Kindle Locations 8325-8330. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)