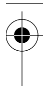
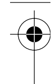



1

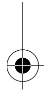
THE NEW TESTAMENT AS PASTORAL RESPONSE

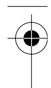
How did we get this collection of texts called the New Testament? The answer moves through two stages: first, the composition of *each* of the texts now included in the New Testament; second, the selection by the church of this *group* of texts to stand in a position of central importance, reference and authority within the church. Both stages can be understood in terms of pastoral response. These texts would never have been written in the first place were it not for the kinds of concerns and challenges that early Christians faced. Each text was written to serve some specific pastoral needs and answer a range of important questions arising out of the life of the church. Because these texts answered those perennial questions so well, they continued to provide the basic point of reference for each successive generation of Christians in ever-widening circles from the texts' places of origin. Faced with the same or new challenges, Christians kept turning to *these* texts to find guidance from the apostolic witness and, ultimately, from their Lord himself. Canonization was a long, natural and consensual process by which the churches in every place throughout the Greco-Roman world came to recognize the indispensable value of *these* texts for their continuing life, nurture and direction.

ISSUES IN THE FIRST-CENTURY CHURCH

A bishop sent a vibrant, innovative minister to a dwindling United Methodist congregation in a big city in the hope that she would build up the congregation. One of the less conventional moves she made was to rent ad space on buses. The side of a bus featured her likeness, adorned in liturgical garb, with a Bible tucked prominently under her arm and a caption that read: "When our new minister came, she brought the manual." The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments function very much as the church's "manual" or "handbook" (*manual* is derived from the Latin *manus,* meaning "hand"). These are the resources that give us our identity, vision, mission and hope, and that orient us to our past, to the world around us and to our future.

The early Christians, however, did not have access to such a manual. From the parent religion, they inherited the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament), which were foundational to the forging of the new group's identity, but not in nearly the same way that they were for the synagogue. Gentile Christians were connected to these texts only on account of their connection with Jesus. Jewish Christians were wholly reoriented to their Scriptures by the same. Both were called together into one new community by the preaching of the apostolic witnesses to what God was doing in Jesus. Access to the traditions about and sayings of Jesus—together with the direction and guidance of reliable apostolic voices—was therefore of critical (and one dare say primary) importance to





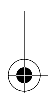
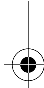
the early church. These voices played the central role in shaping early Christian identity, community life and response to the world, with the Hebrew Scriptures providing legitimation and grounding. This access and guidance came firsthand through leaders like Paul, James, Peter and John, and through those directly trained by them; only after letters and then Gospels began to be written were *texts* available to fulfill the same purpose.

What kinds of questions and challenges would confront the people who joined the early Christian community? First, they would naturally want to learn more about the identity and focus of the movement, the teachings of the one they had come to call "Lord" and the manner in which they should live out their lives as a community. They would be asking

- Who is this Jesus whose identity is to shape ours? What is his significance, and why does he deserve my complete loyalty and obedience?
- What does it mean to follow Jesus? How should calling him "Lord" affect the way I live, the things I do or don't do, the ambitions I pursue or don't pursue, the way I use the things of the world and so forth?
- How is the scandal of the Messiah's disgraceful execution to be understood and made into something positive, purposeful and beneficial? What does the mystery of this crucified, risen and returning Messiah tell us about our relationship with God and place in this world?
- How can we be sure that we are indeed the heirs of God's promises and a legitimate phenomenon in the history of God's dealings with humanity?
- How are we to live together as this new "people of God"? What codes of conduct and values are to guide our interactions with one another? What qualities should be apparent in and what characteristics banished from this new community? (As might be expected, a great deal of the texts that would compose the New Testament addresses these questions.)
- What should our worship look like? What are the distinctive rituals that set us apart and give us identity? How should they be performed, and what is their significance? How are we to regulate the life of the community?
- When will our labors have their reward (that is, when will Christ return)?
- How are we to keep our hearts focused on God's reward, and not be distracted by the temporal ambitions which marked our pre-Christian lives and still mark the lives of our peers?
- How can we discern the true prophet or reliable teacher from the deceiver? Where are the boundaries of this new faith?

Forming a new community, the early Christians would need to come to terms with their relationship with other communities. A number of particularly pressing questions would center on the relationship of this new people of God to the historic people of God, the Jews. These questions would be made more pressing by challenges from and actions performed by some Jews and Jewish Christians, as well as by the fact that the Christian group claimed the Jewish Scriptures as its own. This would raise several prominent issues discussed at length in the early church:

- What is the role of Torah—the law of God and the covenant it regulates—in the new people of God?
- What is the place of Gentiles in the people of God? Must they become Jews first and enter by means of the signs and statutes of the Mosaic covenant?
- If Jesus is the Messiah promised to the Jewish people and prophesied in their Scriptures, why have they responded so poorly?
- What is the church's relationship to the Jewish Scriptures and to the promises made to the particular nation Israel? Does the church exhibit continuity or discontinuity

with Israel and the revealed plan of God?

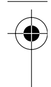
Christians had to come to terms not only with questions of how to relate to the Jewish people and their heritage but also to non-Christian Gentile society (the Greco-Roman society). This would be especially pressing for Gentile converts to Christianity, whose way of life would have radically changed simply by the move from a polytheistic, pluralistic approach to religion to the strict monotheism enjoined by the preachers of the Gospel. Pious expressions of devotion to the gods cradled all kinds of social gatherings, from the household to the business guild, from the private dinner to the civic festival. Refusing to join such rites would be regarded with puzzlement, suspicion and eventually hostility. Moreover, the provinces were generally thriving under Roman imperial rule, and the continued stability of the empire and the order it ensured were highly desirable. Small wonder then that a growing movement that encouraged "impiety" (the avoidance of idolatry) and spoke of an imminent overthrow of the present order (the coming of the kingdom of God) should meet with resistance. Again, this led to a barrage of questions asked by Christians throughout the Roman world:

- How do we make sense of the world's hostility toward the work of God, the alleged good news and the people of God?
- If we are God's children, why do we face shame and marginalization? How are we to maintain self-respect in the face of dishonor?
- When do we "live at peace with all people," and when does accommodation become apostasy?
- How should we relate to non-Christian family members? What effect does our commitment to obey Jesus have on our roles in the household?
- How should we interpret what we see going on around us every day—our neighbors' continued devotion to the traditional religions, Roman imperial presence and propaganda, the economics of empire and province—so we won't be drawn back into the life we left behind?

Of course, other kinds of questions would arise as well. The list could be multiplied. Every New Testament text—whether Gospel or history, epistle or apocalypse—emerged as a response to one or more such pastoral concerns, whether for the nurture of disciples in the faith, the putting out of "fires" in various congregations, the encouragement of faithful witness in the face of hostility, whatever the challenges happened to be. The epistles and Revelation help us become aware of the range of concerns and issues which were being raised within the early church, but these reflect the very same concerns and issues that, in a different way, the Gospels also address. This awareness should help us read the Gospels not only at their face value (i.e., "lives" of Jesus) but also as texts that serve pastoral needs, showing the ways Jesus traditions were applied in the early church to real questions, debates and issues. Moreover, as we become more aware of the kinds of questions these texts were written to answer, we also become more adept at discerning how their answers can address questions that still (or newly) challenge communities of disciples.

Formation of a "New" Testament

Early Christians came to speak of the new covenant (in Greek, this would be indistinguishable from the phrase "new testament") quite early. The concept was made available by Jeremiah, who prophesied concerning a time when God would establish a new covenant unlike the old covenant made at Sinai (Jer 31:31-34). This new covenant would succeed where the old covenant had failed, namely, enabling people to be obedient to God from the heart so that the divine-human relationship would rest secure. The author of Hebrews seizes on this image to explain the significance of Jesus' death and ascension into heaven (Heb



8:1—10:18) as the ratification of this new covenant. The traditions about the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, recorded as early as Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:25; see also Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20), also connects Jesus' death with the inauguration of the new covenant.

Just as the Jewish Scriptures contained the texts that bore witness to the formation and living out of the first covenant at Sinai, so early Christians began to gather and collect the texts that bore witness to the new covenant in Christ, all the more as the living voice of the apostolic witnesses became less accessible. It was only natural that the books that preserved this apostolic witness and that spoke to the Christian community's central questions and concerns as it dedicated itself to the promises and obligations of this new covenant would rise to a position of authority and centrality in that community.

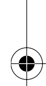
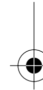
The process of selection was self-evident in many cases. Writings of the apostles who had founded the congregations with their preaching and nurture together with the Gospels that meaningfully brought together large amounts of the traditions about Jesus and sayings of the Lord would naturally continue to be valued and consulted regularly as touchstones for identity and direction. These were the texts into which early Christians could look and remember who they were, texts that accurately reflected the Christians' understanding of who they were. It was equally evident in many cases when a text reflected not the self-understanding and vision of the "Great Church" (that which would emerge as the orthodox church as opposed to heretical movements) but rather the identity and vision of a select few within the church (for example, the reflections of the Gnostic vision in *Gospel of Thomas* or the radical advocacy of celibacy, and thus renunciation of the social and domestic order, in *Acts of Paul and Thecla*).

Although written to specific churches, Paul's letters appear to have enjoyed a wider readership rather early. For example, Paul himself recommends that the Colossians and Laodiceans read one another's letters from himself (Col 4:16), and the reference to "all" of Paul's letters in 2 Peter 3:15-16 suggests that a collection of Pauline letters was already known to the author of 2 Peter. If *any* of the major theories of the composition of the Gospels is correct, then at least the earliest Gospel enjoyed a sufficiently wide and early circulation to have become a source for other Evangelists. A papyrus fragment of the Gospel of John (P^{52}) found in Egypt bears witness that John, probably written in Asia Minor, was read and copied in Egypt by the early second century. Tatian, a student of Justin Martyr, conflated all four Gospels into a single, continuous narrative called the *Diatessaron* in the mid- to late-second century, providing further evidence for the circulation of all four Gospels by the middle of the second century.[1]

The postapostolic fathers (church leaders flourishing between 95 and 150 C.E.) quote many of the texts that would become part of the New Testament, though only in the rarest occasions referring to them as "scripture." Even where direct quotations are not made, these authors show themselves to be deeply informed by and familiar with these texts, their writings very frequently resonating with identifiable passages in the Gospels and epistles.[2] When Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, speaks of the public reading of the "memoirs of the apostles" in the church alongside the Old Testament, he gives

[1]Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 64; Eduard Lohse, *The Formation of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), p. 19.

[2]See the fuller discussion in Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), pp. 39-73.

a clear sign of the growing authority of the written Gospels at that time.

As these texts circulated more widely and began to be set apart as a standard collection of witnesses to Jesus and the apostolic voice, other developments contributed in unforeseen ways to the urgency of defining the boundaries of this collection. First, there was the specific challenge of Gnosticism in the second century, one of the more popular innovations on the apostolic witness. Marcion, an influential proponent of Gnosticism in the West, drew up a list of authoritative apostolic documents that included only the Gospel of Luke (purged of its Jewish connections) and ten letters of Paul (the Pastoral Epistles are omitted). Second, there was a proliferation of spin-off texts patterned after the genres of the literature received by the church as a whole. Many new gospels (such as the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*), further "Acts" of various apostles (the *Acts of Andrew*, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*), a few epistles attributed to one or another apostle, and several apocalypses (of which the most widely read was the *Apocalypse of Peter*) began to circulate. The majority of these clearly promoted a different understanding of Jesus and his significance as well as a different vision for discipleship and the church than what had previously been received as "apostolic."[3]

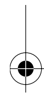
It became increasingly important, then, for church leaders both to promote all those books that had been widely used and accepted by the churches (against the shorter list of Marcion) as well as establish the limits of this authoritative collection (against the proliferation of texts written in the names of apostles). Against the claim that there should be only a single Gospel in witness to Jesus, we hear the late-second-century Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, theologizing about the fourfold Gospel as a reflection of the four winds, the four elements and the four faces of the living creatures that surround God's throne (Rev 4:6-8; cf. Ezek 1:5-14). We find Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement quoting the majority of texts that would be called the New Testament as possessing the authority of the Spirit and of God.

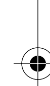
An early and important monument to this process is the Muratorian Canon, a fragmentary discussion of the canon dating from the end of the second century.[4] This catalog of texts sought to provide a comprehensive list of the church's Scripture and mark the boundaries by discussing several kinds of excluded texts. The beginning of the discussion is lost, picking up at the close of the discussion of Mark's Gospel. The catalog goes on to discuss the church's acceptance of the Gospels of Luke and John, the Acts of the Apostles, all thirteen letters ascribed to Paul, Jude, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation (probably the text intended by "Apocalypse of John"). It also specifically mentions the Wisdom of Solomon (usually thought of as being included in the Old Testament)[5] and the *Apocalypse of Peter* among the received books, although the author acknowledges that the public reading of the latter in church is a matter of dispute. It commends the *Shepherd of Hermas* as edifying reading, but denies it the status of the others since it was written after the time of the apostles. The writings of various Gnostic sects and specifically the "forged" *Letter to the Laodiceans* and *Letter to the Alexandrians* are rejected from the reading list, saying "it is not fitting for gall to be mixed with honey."

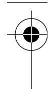
[3]See further, ibid., pp. 75-106; F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 134-57.

[4]Bruce, *Canon of Scripture,* pp. 158-69; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament,* pp. 191-201. The second-century date, however, is vigorously debated by A. C. Sundberg Jr., "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List," *HTR* 66 (1973): 1-41.

[5]Protestant Christians would, of course, later separate this text out as apocryphal, including it in the Old Testament Apocrypha.







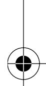
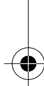
A number of important observations can be made from this text. First, the author is concerned to provide a list of what texts are, by consensus, received and read by the churches he is familiar with, but not unilaterally impose a standard list on his readers. The honest mention of dispute concerning *The Apocalypse of Peter,* without attempting to force a judgment, reveals this. The list bears witness to a basic consensus regarding the Gospels and Paul, but a certain fluidity in usage as far as the General Epistles are concerned. Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John do not appear on the list at all, for example. It also bears witness to the increasing importance of apostolicity as a criterion of value. For all its devotional worth, *Shepherd of Hermas* cannot claim to have been written by an apostle or at an apostle's direction, so it remains at a second tier of importance for the churches. Despite their claims to apostolic authorship, the *Letter to the Laodiceans* and *Letter to the Alexandrians* are examined and rejected as spurious on the basis of their content, which witnesses not to the Pauline gospel but to Marcion's innovations thereof.

Origen, a third-century Alexandrian church father, and Eusebius, a well-known Christian scholar flourishing in the early fourth century, also discuss the state of "consensus" among the churches regarding the Christian Scriptures. These authors use the categories of "acknowledged" and "disputed," with the Gospels and Pauline corpus well established among the former and Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation tending to fall among the latter. Hebrews, for example, is by this point well established in the East, being read as Pauline, but not in the West, where its apostolic origin is (rightly) disputed. Revelation is firmly established in the West, though not in the East. Origen and Eusebius also take note of those books that were explicitly rejected from standing as part of this central core. Some of these rejected books were still highly regarded as edifying, like the *Shepherd of Hermas* or the letters of Ignatius, Polycarp and Clement. While these texts clearly reflected the church's sense of its authentic identity, their distance from and dependence on "apostolic" writings and witness made their authors stand more "with us" (the readers) than at the church's roots and foundation. Rejection for others, however, like the *Gospel of Thomas*, meant their disdainful dismissal as heretical.[6]

It was not until the middle of the fourth century, with the "Easter Letter" written by Bishop Athanasius in 367 C.E. and disseminated throughout the churches, that we can begin to speak of an endpoint to this process of striving after consensus. His listing of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we now know it shows that by this point even the collection of the General Epistles had advanced far toward a point of agreement between the churches, an agreement that was ratified at the Council of Carthage in 397 C.E. These acts by bishops, however, merely represent the formalization of what the church universal, with a very few exceptions, already knew; it was an attempt to make public throughout the churches the standard collection that the church universal (that is, the apostolic church) had selected as the authentic witnesses to the apostolic gospel.[7]

[6]See Lohse, *Formation of the New Testament,* pp. 23-24; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament,* pp. 135-41, 201-7; Bruce, *Canon of Scripture,* pp. 192-95, 197-207.

[7]The process of the formation of the New Testament was somewhat different in the Syrian churches. First, Tatian's *Diatessaron,* the conflated harmony of the Gospels, was widely used in place of the four separate accounts until the fifth century C.E. Second, a number of the General Epistles took much longer to gain acceptance (and in some small circles of the Syrian church still do not have acceptance as canonical). See, further, Lohse, *Formation of the New Testament,* pp. 24-25; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament,* pp. 218-23; Patzia, *Making of the New Testament,* p. 100.

The endpoint of a process of consensus, however, is rarely so cleanly achieved. The fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus and the sixth-century Codex Claromontanus, two important manuscripts of the Christian Bible (including both the Old and New Testaments), continue to include the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *Shepherd of Hermas,* and the latter also includes the *Acts of Paul* and the *Apocalypse of Peter* while omitting Hebrews. The fifth-century Codex Alexandrinus includes two letters attributed to Clement of Rome (the first, authentic letter would have been written about 95-100 C.E.). Whether these were attempts to save these texts from oblivion by continuing to copy them (to provide a Christian community with easy access to these texts) or to make statements about the authority of these texts for the community that produced them is difficult to assess with certainty, but the likelihood of the second of these possibilities remains quite strong.

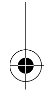
Despite such ongoing debates in some circles, the limits of the New Testament observed by the fourth-century bishops came to define the second Testament for the Christian church as a whole. As we examine this process, we can begin to recognize criteria of canonicity. It would be misleading, however, to think of councils of bishops voting on each book of the New Testament with a checklist of criteria in hand, although a number of these criteria became important where a book was disputed. It is more to the point that these criteria appear to have been at work at the grassroots level as Christian communities elevated certain texts as having lasting and central value. These include

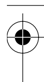
- apostolicity: first, in the sense of agreement with the faith, ethos and practice learned from the apostles and received throughout the church;[8] second, in the sense of being authored by, or at least authorized by, an apostolic witness
- antiquity: thus Ignatius, Polycarp and Hermas, though orthodox, do not become standard texts
- catholicity: both in the sense of the applicability of these texts to the church in every place and in the sense of the widespread use of and reverence for these texts in churches throughout the Mediterranean basin

Although *inspiration* would later become linked with *canonicity,* the early church did not equate the two. Everything in the New Testament was deemed to be inspired, but everything inspired would not be found in the New Testament. The churches of the first two centuries were very much aware of the activity of the Spirit and the prophetic word in the congregation and among church leaders. Many noncanonical authors considered their works inspired (e.g., Ignatius, Clement of Rome), and the writings of Gregory the Great and Basil of Nyssa could be lauded as inspired by others.[9] The attempt to define a standard collection of inspired texts was not an attempt to distinguish between words that God had inspired and words that God had not inspired, but rather an attempt to gather together the resources that would continually and reliably point the churches back to the apostolic witness. The canon acted as an anchor to keep the church moored in the harbor of orthodoxy and a fountain that would continue to refresh them with the voice of the apostles and the voice of Jesus as they continued to wrestle with endless permutations of the same questions and challenges that had called those texts into being in the first place.

[8]This first aspect of apostolicity is sometimes treated separately under the heading of "orthodoxy," as in H. Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 69-70.

[9]Patzia, *Making of the New Testament,* p. 106; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament,* p. 256.





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