

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON¹

by F. F. BRUCE, M. A., D. D., F. B. A.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

The thoughts which find expression in the following words have been stimulated in the first stages of preparing a fuller treatment of the history of the New Testament canon. So far as this lecture is concerned, they are confined mainly to the period before Irenaeus—the most problematical period in the history of this subject.

I

The Christian church possessed from its inception a canon of sacred books—the books of the Hebrew Bible, used especially in their Greek translation. We need not trouble about the date when the canon of Hebrew scripture was finally closed: the debates at Jamnia towards the end of the first century A. D. were concerned “not so much ... with the acceptance of certain writings into the Canon, but rather with their right to remain there”.² It is plain from the New Testament writings that the main outlines of “the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms” (Luke 24:44) were recognized, and that their contents were vested with unsurpassed authority. This authority was acknowledged by Jesus himself. He differed from the scribes in the interpretation and application of these scriptures, but he and they were agreed on their identity and authority. His subjection to their authority was nowhere more strikingly shown than when, as Mark says, he submitted to his captors in Gethsemane with the words: “Let the scriptures be fulfilled” (Mark 14:49). His example was followed without question by his early followers, as Acts and the New Testament letters make clear. The gospel which the apostles preached was validated, they claimed, by the law and the prophets: it was to Christ and his saving work that the law and the prophets bore witness.

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 8 December 1982.

² A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, i (Copenhagen, 1948), 31.

If Jesus differed from the scribes in the interpretation and application of the scriptures, his followers in the next generations differed even more from the successors of his scribal contemporaries, who took care to exclude renderings and interpretations which seemed to support Christian claims. A body of holy writ which, from Moses to the Chronicler, spoke of Jesus and the new age which he inaugurated was not the body of holy writ from which the weekly synagogue readings were drawn. The words, no doubt, were the same, but the sense was different. The spectacles, we might say, through which the words were read were so unlike in colour and perspective that church and synagogue might as well have been reading two different sets of writings.³ Only with the rise of the scientific approach to biblical study have Jews and Christians—or at least some Jews and some Christians—begun to see eye to eye on the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures.

The first Christian Bible, then, the canon of the primitive church, consisted of the Hebrew scriptures (more particularly in the Septuagint version) as fulfilled by Jesus and interpreted by him and his early followers. It was from those scriptures that the apostles and other Christian preachers of the same period drew the texts for their sermons. Indeed, right on into the third quarter of the second century one is struck by the number of educated men who, on their own testimony, were converted from paganism to Christianity by reading the Old Testament (to use the traditional Christian designation for the Hebrew scriptures). It does not appear that these men had any antecedent conviction of the authority of the Old Testament but, as they read it, it “found” them (in Coleridge’s sense of the word).⁴ When the New Testament writers appeal to the scriptures, it is always the Old Testament that is in view. Only in the very latest books of the New Testament do we find a hint of new, Christian, “scripture”. In 2 Peter 3:16 mention is made of “ignorant and unstable” people who “twist” the letters of Paul “to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures”. Paul’s letters, it appears, have now attained the status of “scripture”. It may be, too, that when 1 Timothy 5:18 quotes “The labourer deserves his wages” (Luke

³ No better example of this diversity of interpretation could be found than Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, set in the period following the Jewish war of A.D. 132-135.

⁴ S. T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (London, 21849), pp. 11, 13.

10:7), alongside “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain” (Deut. 25:4), as something which “the scripture says”, the same status is given to the Gospel of Luke or at least to one of its sources.

But such hints would not necessarily indicate a new corpus of sacred scripture: if Paul’s letters are reckoned along with “the other scriptures” in 2 Peter 3:16, that might in itself imply their addition to the Old Testament writings, perhaps in a kind of appendix, rather than the emergence of a new and distinct canon.

II

Jesus wrote no book: he taught by word of mouth. But some of his followers taught in writing as well as orally. Often, indeed, their writing was a second-best substitute for the spoken word. In Galatians 4:20, for example, Paul wishes that he could be with his friends in Galatia and speak to them directly so that they could hear his tone of voice as well as his actual words but, as he could not visit them just then, a letter had to suffice. The letter to the Hebrews has many of the features of a synagogue homily, based on some of the lessons and perhaps one of the proper psalms prescribed for the season of Pentecost,⁵ and there are hints towards the end that the writer would have preferred to deliver it face to face had he been free to visit the recipients. We in our day may be glad, for our own sakes, that Galatians and Hebrews had to be sent in writing; but their authors were not thinking of us.

On the other hand, there was an occasion when Paul cancelled a planned visit to Corinth and sent a letter to the church in that city instead, because he judged that, in the circumstances, a written communication would be more effective than anything he could say (2 Cor. 1:23-2:4). And no doubt his judgment was right, for his critics in the Corinthian church conceded that, while his bodily presence was weak and his speech of no account, his letters were “weighty and powerful” (2 Cor. 10:10). And some New Testament documents were no doubt designed from the outset to be written compositions, not substitutes for the spoken word. But in the lifetime of the apostles and their colleagues their spoken words and their written words were equally authoritative. For

⁵ Cf. A. E. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 72, 100.

later generations (including our own) the spoken words are lost; the written words alone remain (and by no means all of these), so that we have to be content with fragments of their teaching.

If Jesus wrote no book, what he said was treasured and repeated by those who heard him, and by their hearers in turn. To those who confessed him as Lord his words were at least as authoritative as those of Moses and the prophets. The perpetuation of his words could not be entrusted indefinitely to oral tradition. Sooner or later, and sooner rather than later, they were set down in writing, together with brief records of his works during the short period of his public ministry. So long as some slender contact with the eyewitnesses and their hearers was maintained, there were those, like Papias of Hierapolis, who preferred oral tradition to written records, reckoning (as Papias put it) that what could be got "from the books" (ἐκ τῶν βιβλίων) was not so helpful as what could be derived "from a living and abiding voice".⁶

In the absence of an adequate context, it is uncertain what Papias meant by "the books". He knew of two gospel writings at least,⁷ but when a Christian of his date spoke of "the books" (τὰ βιβλία) he usually referred to the Old Testament. At any rate, it is a good thing that, by Papias's time, a written account of the words and deeds of Jesus was available, for, if we may judge by the surviving fragments of Papias's work, the oral tradition which he was able to gather amounted only to the last scrapings of the barrel.

The authority of Jesus was invoked for their teaching by the apostles—a designation which in the New Testament is not always restricted to the twelve. Paul asserts his title to recognition as an apostle on the strength both of his Damascus-road commission and of his subsequent energetic and fruitful activity in preaching the gospel and planting churches,⁸ and he mentions other apostles in addition to the twelve and himself.⁹ Those whose title to apostleship was recognized by fellow-Christians were acknowledged as Christ's agents, speaking by his authority. Their interpretation of the Old Testament writings was therefore as binding as those writings themselves. Would it be true to say that their

⁶ Quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, iii. 39.4.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.* iii. 39.14-16.

⁸ Cf. 1 Cor. 9:1 f.; 2 Cor. 3:1-3; Rom. 15:15-21.

⁹ E.g. Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 15:7; Rom. 16:7.

teaching was as authoritative as that which came from the Lord's own lips? Perhaps a difference was felt, except possibly when a prophet gave voice to an utterance in the Lord's name. Paul can refer to Christ as speaking in him (2 Cor. 13:3), but when answering the Corinthians' detailed questions about marriage and divorce he makes a careful distinction between a ruling given by the Lord in person, which is binding without question, and his own judgment, which his converts may accept or not as they choose (1 Cor. 7:10 f., 12 ff.). A ruling from the Lord is even more binding than an Old Testament commandment. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 ("You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain") to demonstrate that the preacher of the gospel is entitled to get his living by the gospel, but his final argument for this principle is that the Lord himself has so commanded (1 Cor. 9:8-14).

Clement of Rome quotes the words of Jesus as being at least on a level of authority with those of the prophets: "The Holy Spirit says", he states, introducing a conflated quotation from Jeremiah 9:23 f. and 1 Samuel 2:10, and goes on: "especially remembering the words of the Lord Jesus", followed by quotations from the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch speaks of some who refuse to believe anything that is not recorded "in the archives" (ἐν τοῖς ἀρχείοις, presumably the Old Testament scriptures), even if it is affirmed "in the gospel" (ἐν τῷ εὐαγγέλιῳ). When Ignatius replies, "It is written" or "Scripture says" (γέγραπται), they retort, "That is the question under discussion" (πρόκειται)—in other words: "Is the gospel scripture?" Ignatius responds with a rhetorical outburst, in which he affirms that his ultimate authority is Jesus Christ; whatever authority the "archives" (or "charters") have is summed up and perfected in his passion and resurrection—in short, in the Christian faith.¹¹

Further reference to the gospel writings as "scripture" is made in the mid-second-century homily conventionally called 2 Clement. In one place Isaiah 54:1 is quoted and the author goes on: "And another scripture says, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners'" (cf. Matt. 9:13).¹² Later the dominical logion "Whoever has confessed me before men, I will confess him before

¹⁰ 1 Clement 13:1 f.

¹¹ Ignatius, *To the Philadelphians*, 8:2.

¹² 2 Clement 2:1-4.

my Father" (cf. Matt. 10:32) is followed by "And he says also in Isaiah, 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me'" (Isa. 29:13),¹³ while in yet another place it is affirmed that "the books (τὰ βιβλία) and the apostles declare that the church is not a modern phenomenon but has existed from the beginning".¹⁴ The apostles' authority is evidently not less than that of "the books" (the Old Testament writings); their Lord's authority is *a fortiori* on a par at least with that of the law and the prophets. About the same time, or not long afterwards, Hegesippus could report after his journeys that "in every [episcopal] succession and in every city that which the law and the prophets and the Lord preach is faithfully followed".¹⁵

But this ascription of authority, alongside the law and the prophets, to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles does not amount to evidence for a New Testament *canon*. A canon in this sense is a recognized list or catalogue of authoritative writings. Authority precedes canonicity but does not in itself constitute canonicity. There may be some debate about the inclusion or exclusion of a few writings on the fringe of the list, but the fact that inclusion or exclusion is discussed indicates that in principle the list is envisaged as a closed list. Once the list is closed, and known to be closed, a confident answer can be given to the question: "Which are the writings to which ultimate appeal may be made?" The answer is "These, and no others".

It is pointless to complain that oral tradition was replaced in the church by a written collection. C. F. Evans quotes G. Widengren to the effect that "the reduction to writing of an oral tradition is always a sign of loss of nerve" and mentions a reported saying of R. H. Lightfoot "that the writing of the gospels was an early manifestation of the operation of original sin in the church".¹⁶ But, in a society like the Graeco-Roman world of the early Christian centuries where writing was the regular means of preserving and transmitting material worthy of remembrance, the idea of relying on oral tradition for the recording of the deeds and

¹³ 2 Clement 3:2-5.

¹⁴ 2 Clement 14:2.

¹⁵ Quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, iv. 22.3.

¹⁶ C. F. Evans, *Is 'Holy Scripture' Christian?* (London, 1971), p. 36. The Widengren reference is to "Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets", *Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift*, 1948, No. 10, p. 9; Widengren speaks of a "crisis of credit" and acknowledges indebtedness to H. S. Nyberg.

words of Jesus and the apostles would not have generally commended itself (whatever Papias and some others might say).

III

It is denied by none, I think, that Marcion played a crucial part in the formation of the New Testament canon, but many aspects of his work remain obscure and debatable.¹⁷ The main facts are clear. Marcion refused to acknowledge any relation between Jesus and those who went before him. The religion of Israel, documented in the Old Testament, was irrelevant to the completely new teaching brought by Jesus. Indeed, the Father revealed by Jesus was a totally different being from the Creator-God of the Old Testament, and far superior to him. The Old Testament could not be authoritative for the followers of Jesus; for them a new volume of sacred writings was provided. Such was the canon which Marcion promulgated in Rome about A. D. 144. It comprised two parts: the gospel (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) and the apostle's work (τὸ ἀποστολικόν). The main source of our knowledge of it is Tertullian's treatise *Against Marcion*, written some sixty years later. Hostile and vituperative as Tertullian's language is, his factual data seem to be reliable.

Marcion's gospel was a shorter edition of our gospel of Luke. His *apostolikon* comprised letters of Paul only. In his eyes Paul was the only faithful apostle of Jesus; the Jerusalem apostles corrupted their Master's pure teaching with an admixture of Jewish elements. Marcion understood the letter to the Galatians to voice criticism of the Jerusalem apostles, by whose supporters the attempt was made to win Paul's converts in Galatia over to a judaistic perversion of Christianity. Marcion may have preferred the gospel of Luke to the other gospels because Luke was a companion of Paul and a Gentile to boot. But the received text of Luke's gospel and of Paul's letters had been corrupted and therefore required emendation. The received text included quotations from the Old Testament and other passages ascribing

¹⁷ Since A. von Harnack's *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Leipzig, 1921, ²1924) and its supplement *Neue Studien zu Marcion* (Leipzig, 1923), important monographs have been R. S. Wilson, *Marcion: A Study of a Second-Century Heretic* (London, 1932); J. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament* (Chicago, 1942); E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and his Influence* (London, 1948).

religious authority to Moses and the prophets of Israel. Any such passages were *ex hypothesi* intrusions, since Jesus' good news was independent of, and in many ways opposed to, the teaching of Moses and the prophets.

Jesus' complete independence of any human or earthly antecedents, in Marcion's belief, is illustrated by the way in which his gospel opens: "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Jesus came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee".¹⁸ The first two chapters of our Third Gospel are lacking—not surprisingly, since they provide Jesus with earthly antecedents by relating the birth of his forerunner John, followed by Jesus' own parentage and nativity. It is conceivable that Marcion's *Vorlage* did lack these two chapters, but Marcion's gospel cannot be equated *simpliciter* with any Proto-Luke identifiable by the methods of Synoptic criticism.¹⁹ The opening words of his gospel text bear unmistakable marks of his own presuppositions. "In the fifteenth year of Tiberius" is taken from Luke 3:1, "Jesus came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee" from Luke 4:31. The intervening material was uncongenial to Marcion: the ministry of John, the genealogy of Jesus traced back to Adam, the temptation narrative with Jesus' threefold appeal to Deuteronomy, his preaching at Nazareth where he claims to fulfil the oracle of Isaiah 61:1 and adduces lessons bearing on his ministry from Old Testament histories. But more than that: in beginning his gospel as he does Marcion implies a new interpretation of the statement that "Jesus came down to Capernaum"—not down from the higher ground overlooking the lake of Galilee but down from heaven, *senkrecht von oben*. This interpretation not only excluded earthly antecedents for Jesus: it excluded his birth. Marcion was disgusted at the idea of childbirth and all that it implied (for himself and members of his schismatic church celibacy was obligatory). That Jesus should

¹⁸ Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.*, iv. 7.1.

¹⁹ P. L. Couchoud argued that the canonical Luke was an expansion of Marcion's gospel, and indeed that all the Synoptic Gospels were later than Marcion's canon ("Is Marcion's Gospel one of the Synoptics?", *Hibbert Journal*, xxxiv [1935-36], 265-277; see also A. Loisy's rebuttal, "Marcion's Gospel: A Reply," in the same volume, 378-387). J. Knox leant to a modification of this theory, envisaging the canonical Luke-Acts as a reaction to Marcion's εὐαγγέλιον-ἀποστολικόν compilation (*Marcion and the New Testament*, pp. 106-167; "Acts and the Pauline Letter Corpus" in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn [Nashville/New York, 1966], pp. 279-287).

have entered human life by way of childbirth was unthinkable: he entered it by a descent from heaven as supernatural as was his later ascension. Despite Marcion's oddities, psychological as well as theological, there is something quite engaging about him. Much may be forgiven to a man who was so devoted to Paul. He certainly understood Paul better than Tertullian did, even if in his very understanding of him he misunderstood him;²⁰ and his lyrical celebration of the gospel of free grace should awaken an echo in every evangelical heart.²¹

Marcion's *apostolikon* comprised ten letters of Paul: the three "Pastoral" letters are absent. The interesting and complicated study of Marcion's text of the ten letters, and of its possible influence on their textual tradition in the church, is not our present concern. The letter which we call "Ephesians" was inscribed in Marcion's canon "To the Laodiceans"—an intelligent inference, no doubt, from Colossians 4:16, if his text of Ephesians lacked the phrase "in Ephesus" (ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) in the prescript.²²

The order of the Pauline letters in Marcion's canon was as follows: Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, "Laodiceans", Colossians, Philippians, Philemon. The first place is given to Galatians because its anti-judaizing polemic struck the keynote of the whole collection (in Marcion's understanding). The remaining letters appear in descending order of length, the two letters to the Corinthians being reckoned together as one and the two to the Thessalonians likewise.

Marcion or one of his followers provided the letters with individual prologues. Although the Marcionite emphasis of these prologues is plain to the discerning eye, they contain nothing that would be positively repugnant to catholic orthodoxy, and they are reproduced in many Latin manuscripts of the Pauline letters. In due course they were supplemented by catholic additions, including a new prologue for Ephesians and new prologues for 2 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians (since the original Corinthian

²⁰ Cf. A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, E. T., i (London, 1894), p. 89.

²¹ His *Antitheses*, according to Harnack, opened with the exclamation: "O wealth of riches! Ecstasy, power and astonishment! There can be nothing to say about it, or to imagine about it; neither can it be compared to anything!" Cf. Harnack, *Marcion*, pp. 354* f.; F. C. Burkitt, "The Exordium of Marcion's *Antitheses*", *JTS*, xxx (1929), pp. 279 f.

²² The phrase is lacking in P⁴⁶ and the principal witnesses to the Alexandrian text.

and Thessalonian prologues covered two letters each). Alexander Souter, in an appendix to his *Text and Canon of the New Testament*, reproduces the prologues in the order in which they would have appeared in a Marcionite *Apostolikon*, adding, "Thus, and thus only, are they intelligible".²³

Recently, however, doubt has been cast on their Marcionite origin by Jürgen Regul in an important monograph supplementary to the Beuron edition of the *Vetus Latina*.²⁴ He has indeed made some dents in the case presented by de Bruyne, Corsen and Harnack, according to whom these prologues, despite their Marcionite origin, were taken over by the catholic church before the end of the second century.²⁵ It is more probable that they were so taken over at a time when their Marcionite origin had been forgotten. But as for their origin, the conclusion of F. C. Burkitt cannot well be gainsaid: "They are the work of one who was as much obsessed by the opposition of Paulinism to Judaizing Christianity as was Baur himself".²⁶ He drew attention to the astonishing statement in the prologue to Romans, that the Christians of Rome, "overtaken by false apostles, had been brought ... into the law and the prophets".²⁷ Whatever might be said of the law, such a representation of the prophets would not have been found in the early church outside the Marcionite school.

IV

Marcion's canon is the first list of New Testament books of which we have explicit knowledge. But was it actually the first such list to be compiled?

²³ A. Souter, *Text and Canon of the New Testament* (London, 1954), pp. 188-191.

²⁴ J. Regul, *Die antimarcionitischen Evangelienprologe* (Freiburg, 1909), pp. 13, 85, 88-94.

²⁵ D. de Bruyne, "Prologues bibliques d'origine marcionite". *Revue Bénédictine*, xxiv (1907), 1-16; P. Corsen, "Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte des Römerbriefes", *ZNW*, x (1909), 1-45, 97-102, especially 37-39; A. Harnack, "Der marcionitische Ursprung der ältesten Vulgata-Prologe zu den Paulusbriefen", *ZNW*, xxiv (1925), 204-218; for more recent discussions see K. T. Schäfer, "Marius Victorinus und die marcionitischen Prologe zu den Paulusbriefen", *Revue Bénédictine*, lxxx (1970), 7-16; N. A. Dahl, "The Origin of the Earliest prologues to the Pauline Letters", *Semeia*, xii (1978), 233-277.

²⁶ *The Gospel History and its Transmission* (London, 1907), p. 354.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 354 f.

Tertullian, in a well-known comparison between Marcion and his contemporary Valentinus, says that "Valentinus seems to use the entire *instrumentum*"²⁸—meaning the whole New Testament. He adds that Valentinus, nevertheless, did as much violence to it by misinterpretation as Marcion did by mutilation. Be that as it may, his words ("Valentinus integro instrumento uti uidetur") have been confirmed to a large extent by the study of Valentinian treatises in a Coptic translation among the documents discovered near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt about 1945. One of these, the *Gospel of Truth*, which may well be the work of Valentinus himself,²⁹ confirms the natural inference from Tertullian's words—that Valentinus acknowledged substantially the same range of New Testament writings as he himself did.

The *Gospel of Truth* alludes to Matthew and Luke (possibly with Acts), the Johannine gospel and epistles, the Pauline letters (except the Pastorals), Hebrews and Revelation. Hans von Campenhausen, indeed, urges caution: he finds that the allusions are not so clear as has often been alleged, and that some scholars who have claimed more for them than he is prepared to allow (among whom W. C. van Unnik³⁰ is mentioned by name) have done so "with great dogmatism".³¹ I think the charge of dogmatism is unfounded (especially where Professor van Unnik is concerned), but the call for caution is timely. Even so, the allusions and echoes, none of which is introduced as a formal quotation, point to the wide and familiar acquaintance which the author had with many of our New Testament documents.

The impression is given, moreover, that these documents are vested with authority in the author's eyes. Allegorical interpretation, such as we have in the *Gospel of Truth*, implies authority and, indeed, some degree of sacrosanctity in the texts so inter-

²⁸ *De praescriptione haereticorum* 38.7.

²⁹ So G. Quispel, "The Jung Codex and its Significance", and W. C. van Unnik, "The 'Gospel of Truth' and the New Testament", in *The Jung Codex*, ed. F. L. Cross (London, 1955), pp. 50, 90-100. A translation of the *Gospel of Truth* is conveniently accessible in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. M. Robinson (Leiden, 1977), pp. 37-49.

³⁰ With special reference to van Unnik's discussion in "The 'Gospel of Truth' and the New Testament", pp. 107-129. Cf. his *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings*, E. T. (London, 1960), pp. 58-68.

³¹ H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, E. T. (London, 1972), p. 140, n. 171.

preted, whether the lessons derived by allegorization are acceptable or not.

Another Valentinian treatise from Nag Hammadi is the *Epistle to Rheginus on Resurrection*, which resembles the *Gospel of Truth* in that it antedates the developed Valentinian system. It presents an interpretation of Paul's doctrine of resurrection and immortality in 1 Corinthians 15, although scarcely an interpretation of which Paul would have approved.³² To its author Paul is "the apostle"; his words are authoritative. Echoes are discernible in the treatise of other Pauline letters—Romans, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians—and the author shows acquaintance with the Synoptic and Johannine gospel traditions.

Neither in the *Gospel of Truth* nor in the *Epistle to Rheginus* is there any mention of a New Testament collection as such. There is indeed in the *Gospel of Truth* a fascinating account of what is called "the living book of the living", the "testament" (διαθήκη) of Jesus which he appears to have both fastened to his cross (cf. Col. 2:14) and received from the Father (cf. Rev. 5:7). But this is a spiritual book, written in the Father's thought before the world's foundation and now revealed in the hearts of those who accept the divine knowledge.³³ It is quite likely that the author or authors of the two treatises had some conception of a category of early Christian writings which commanded distinctive authority, but knowledge of a formal collection of such writings cannot be assumed in the absence of evidence.

V

By the time of Valentinus and Marcion, however, collections of some documents which were in due course to be given canonical status were already taking shape—notably the fourfold gospel and the *corpus Paulinum*.

(a) *The fourfold gospel*. Before the term "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον) came to be given to any single one of the four gospels (or to one of the many other works modelled on them), it means (1) the good

³² In saying that "the Saviour swallowed up death" and that "we suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him" (*The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 51), the author seems to adapt Pauline language to the very kind of "over-realized eschatology" which the apostle deplored in the Corinthian church.

³³ Cf. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 39.

news of the kingdom of God preached by Jesus; (2) the good news about Jesus preached by his followers after the first Easter and Pentecost; (3) the written record of the good news current in a particular locality; (4) the fourfold gospel.

When Ignatius writes about "the gospel", it is a debatable point whether he uses the word in the third or fourth of these senses.³⁴ If he uses it in the third sense (of the gospel current in his locality), it can scarcely have been other than the gospel of Matthew.

It has often been pointed out that the popularization of the codex form of book among Christians of that period made it practicable to include all four gospel writings in one book. The nearly simultaneous popularization of the codex and publication of the fourfold gospel may have been coincidental; on the other hand, one of the two may have had some influence on the other. The fragment of John 18 in the Rylands collection, P⁵² (c. A. D. 130), came from a codex, but it is naturally impossible to say whether it was a codex of the fourth gospel only or of the fourfold gospel. The manuscript P⁷⁵ in the Bodmer collection (early 3rd century), now containing material from Luke 3:18 to John 15:8, was probably, when complete, a codex of the fourfold gospel rather than a codex of Luke and John only. The earliest surviving codex which still contains portions of all four gospels is P⁴⁵ in the Chester Beatty collection (early 3rd century); it contains Acts as well as the fourfold gospel—an exceptional collocation, for in the textual history of the New Testament Acts was more often included in a codex with the catholic epistles.

We cannot determine the scope of the "memoirs (ἀπομνημονεύματα) of the apostles" which, according to Justin, were read in church services along with the "compositions (συγγράμματα) of the prophets",³⁵ except that they were, or included, gospels of a

³⁴ E.g. in the quotation mentioned on p. 41 above. Cf. *To the Smyrnaeans* 5:1, where Ignatius speaks of docetists who have been persuaded "neither by the prophecies nor by the law of Moses, nor by the gospel even until now"; 7:2, where the best defence against false teaching is "to pay heed to the prophets and especially to the gospel, in which the passion has been revealed to us and the resurrection has been accomplished". The εὐαγγέλιον referred to in the *Didache* seems to be the gospel of Matthew (e.g. in *Did.* 8:2, where the Matthaean recension of the Lord's Prayer is prescribed for regular use, "as the Lord commanded in his gospel").

³⁵ *First Apology* 67.3. In 66.3 he introduces the eucharistic words of institution by saying, "The apostles, in the memoirs (ἐν τοῖς ... ἀπομνημονεύμασιν) which they made, which are called gospels (ἃ καλεῖται εὐαγγέλια), have

kind. We are on firmer ground with his disciple Tatian. About A.D. 170 Tatian unstitched the component parts of the four records and rearranged them so as to present one continuous narrative, the fourth gospel providing the framework into which the contents of the others were fitted. Whatever traces of other gospel writings may be detected in Tatian's *Diatessaron*, they are negligible compared with the text of the fourfold gospel from which his compilation has derived its name.

But where or by whom the four records were first brought together into one collection we do not know.

(b) *The corpus Paulinum*. Neither do we know where or by whom the first edition of the *corpus Paulinum* was produced.³⁶ Harnack suggested Corinth as the place; in our day he is followed by Walter Schmithals.³⁷ E. J. Goodspeed, J. Knox and C. L. Mitton prefer Ephesus: this preference is bound up in part with a particular view of the origin of Ephesians.³⁸ The claims of Alexandria have been put forward by G. Zuntz,³⁹ with arguments which are in many ways attractive, but for the fact that Alexandria seems to have been marginal to the sphere of Pauline Christianity. The editorial care evidently devoted to the preparation of the *corpus* was certainly in line with the traditions of Alexandrian scholarship.

The oldest surviving copy of the *corpus Paulinum* is the Chester Beatty manuscript P⁴⁶ (c. A.D. 200). Of this codex 86 folios are extant out of an original 104. It evidently did not include the three

delivered this commandment to us". R. G. Heard, in an examination of Justin's use of ἀπομνημόνευμα and the verb ἀπομνημονεύω, concludes that he took over Papias's phraseology. Justin's reference to the ἀπομνημονεύματα of Peter (*Dialogue*, 106.3) may be based, he suggests, on Papias's well-known account of the origin of the gospel of Mark (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, iii. 39.1), who is said to have written down ὅσα ἐμνημόνευσεν, "all that he [Peter] mentioned" ("The ἀπομνημονεύματα in Papias, Justin and Irenaeus", *NTS*, i [1954-55], 122-129).

³⁶ P. L. Couchoud, indeed, thought that the first edition of the *corpus Paulinum*, like the first edition of Luke's gospel, was produced by Marcion ("La première édition de S. Paul", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, lxxxiii [1926], 242-263).

³⁷ A. Harnack, *Die Briefsammlung des Apostels Paulus* (Leipzig, 1926), pp. 8 f.; W. Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics*, E. T. (Nashville/New York, 1972), p. 263.

³⁸ E. J. Goodspeed, *The Meaning of Ephesians* (Chicago, 1933); J. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament*, pp. 174 f.; C. L. Mitton, *The Formation of the Pauline Corpus of Letters* (London, 1955), pp. 45-49.

³⁹ G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles* (London, 1954), p. 278.

Pastorals, but it did include Hebrews, which comes second in its sequence of letters, between Romans and 1 Corinthians. (The principle of arrangement was probably descending order of length: although 1 Corinthians is longer than Hebrews, it may have been placed after it to prevent its separation from 2 Corinthians.)⁴⁰

P⁴⁶, like P⁴⁵ and the rest of the Chester Beatty biblical papyri, seems to have been part of the Bible of a Greek-speaking country church in Egypt. A Pauline codex of the same date emanating from Rome would not, we may be sure, have included Hebrews. (The Roman church did not recognize Hebrews as canonical until the fourth century.) Marcion's *apostolikon* was most probably the edited form of an existing Pauline *corpus* which he knew; it contained, as has been indicated, neither the Pastorals nor Hebrews. And the most natural inference from such evidence as we have suggests that the original edition of the *corpus Paulinum* contained ten letters only.

Before the definitive production of this first edition, a beginning had already been made with gathering Paul's letters together. By the end of the first century some churches had a number of his letters in their libraries. Clement of Rome had access to a copy of 1 Corinthians, and it has been surmised that the letter which he sent in the name of the Roman church to the church of Corinth stimulated the latter church to collect *disiecta membra* of Pauline correspondence extant in its archives (or in its *genizah*, maybe, if a Christian church can be supposed to have possessed such a room).

Apart from the considerable importance of the original *corpus Paulinum* for the prehistory of the New Testament canon, its importance for the history of the New Testament text is greater still, for (with only minor exceptions) the textual tradition of Paul's letters stems from that original *corpus* rather than from the separate letters which antedate the *corpus*.

When the three Pastorals were included in the Pauline collection is uncertain: in the absence of specific evidence it may be thought likely that they were added as part of the canonizing activity of the anti-Marcionite reaction, at the same time as the Acts of the Apostles. But, as P⁴⁶ shows, in some places the Pauline collection

⁴⁰ Cf. C. P. Anderson, "The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Pauline Letter Collection", *HTR*, lix (1966), 429-438.

continued to be copied without the Pastorals, even when (as in Egypt) the collection was amplified by the inclusion of Hebrews.⁴¹

The gospel collection was authoritative because it preserved the words of Jesus, than whom the church knew no higher authority. The Pauline collection was authoritative because it preserved the teaching of Paul, whose authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ was acknowledged (except by those groups which refused to recognize his commission) as second only to the Lord's. But it will prevent confusion if we do not speak of these two collections as "canons". Canonicity implies more than authority: it implies inclusion in a list from which documents not bearing comparable authority are consciously excluded. When such a list has been established, then the question of a book's canonicity is simply posed: is it included in this list or not?

The bringing together of these two early Christian collections into a canon proper was facilitated by another document which linked the one to the other. This was the Acts of the Apostles, which had been severed from its natural companion, the third gospel, when that gospel was incorporated in the fourfold collection. Acts had thereafter to make its own way in the Christian world, and before long it had an important part to play.

VI

That Marcion's restricted canon should stimulate the catholic church leaders to say more explicitly what they believed the true canon of holy scripture to be is what we might have expected. Their reaction to it is scantily documented, but the main outlines of their reply are not in doubt. They said, in effect, "We acknowledge the books of the Old Testament, which Marcion repudiates, because, rightly understood, they bear eloquent witness to Christ, the gospel and the church, and Christ and his apostles appealed to their authority. Alongside these, we acknowledge the books of the New Testament—not in the mutilated form published by Marcion but in their entirety. That is to say, we acknowledge not one book of the gospel only, but four; not ten

⁴¹ There is no means of knowing how many "letters of Paul, a just man" were included in the chest which housed the library of the Scillitan church in A. D. 180 (*Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, appendix to *Texts and Studies* i.2, ed. J. A. Robinson [Cambridge, 1891], p. 114).

letters of Paul only, but thirteen; not letters of Paul alone, but other apostolic letters in addition to his. We acknowledge also the Acts of the Apostles".

Indeed, it was at this time that the Acts of the Apostles came into its own, showing itself to be, as Harnack insisted, the pivot book of the New Testament⁴² or, to use another metaphor, the hinge linking the gospels and the epistles. Not only was it the sequel to the gospel story; it also provided independent evidence for the validity both of Paul's commission and of that of the Jerusalem apostles. Acts was a truly catholic book, the keystone of a truly catholic canon—to use yet another, and (I think) a particularly apt, metaphor. Marcionism was exclusively Pauline, and some who maintained the tradition of the early Jerusalem church upheld the supremacy of James the Just,⁴³ but the catholic canon made room for both extremes and for other varieties as well. Ernst Käsemann can write of the New Testament canon as bearing witness to the *disunity*, not the unity, of the church of apostolic days;⁴⁴ more properly, it bears witness to the more comprehensive unity which transcends and brings together the earlier disunities.

One line of documentation of the catholic reaction to Marcion's canon has been recognized for half a century in the so-called "anti-Marcionite" prologues to the gospels. These are prologues appearing in some thirty-eight Latin codices (dated between the fifth and tenth centuries) before the gospels of Mark, Luke and John. They had been known for long when they were isolated from other gospel prologues in 1928 by D. de Bruyne, who identified them as the survivors of an original set of four prologues and dated them between Papias and Irenaeus.⁴⁵ He regarded them

⁴² Cf. A. Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament*, E. T. (London, 1925), pp. 53, 64-68.

⁴³ Cf. the viewpoint of the Clementine *Recognitions* and *Homilies*.

⁴⁴ E. Käsemann, "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church" in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, E. T. (London, 1964), pp. 95-107; cf. the reply of H. Küng, "'Early Catholicism' in the New Testament as a Problem in Controversial Theology", in *The Living Church*, E. T. (London, 1963), pp. 233-293. It may be added that the catholicity of the canon carries problems with it, when its varying emphases are not discerned. This is the point of Harnack's remark that canonization "works like whitewash; it hides the original colours and obliterates all the contours" (*The Origin of the New Testament*, p. 141).

⁴⁵ D. de Bruyne, "Les plus anciens prologues latins des Évangiles", *Revue*

as composed to defend the catholic fourfold gospel against Marcion's truncated εὐαγγέλιον. If they belonged, as he believed, to an anti-Marcionite edition of the four gospels published in Rome between A. D. 160 and 180, then presumably they originally included a prologue to Matthew. Of this, however, there is no trace. Moreover, the prologue to Mark is mutilated: only its last thirty words survive, and they begin in the middle of a sentence. It was easy to conclude that the existing copies of these prologues were ultimately derived from a defective copy of the set, which had lost not only the Matthaean prologue but also the opening part of the Marcan prologue. If an anti-Marcionite note was struck in the Marcan prologue, it must have come in the part that is lost; for nothing remains but the two statements that Mark was called "stumpfingered" (κολοβοδάκτυλος)⁴⁶ "because his fingers were short in proportion to his other bodily dimensions" and that, as Peter's interpreter, he wrote down his gospel "after Peter's departure ... in the parts of Italy".

The prologues to Luke and John have definite anti-Marcionite emphases, however. That to Luke includes a defence of the accounts of the birth and ministry of John the Baptist (present in the catholic edition of Luke but absent from Marcion's edition) as integral to the gospel story. That to John affirms that Marcion was repudiated as a heretic by John (or, more probably, by Papias, described as "John's dear disciple") when he brought him letters from the brethren in Pontus.

The Greek original of the Lucan prologue has survived independently, in two codices of the tenth and eleventh centuries respectively; it was first printed in 1749. It may indeed have been part of a longer document, covering other books than the third gospel, for it ends with a brief statement of the authorship of Acts and of the Johannine apocalypse and gospel.

The (incomplete) Marcan prologue and the Johannine prologue are extant in Latin only, but the Latin is plainly translated from a Greek original. Indeed, the Johannine prologue exhibits some

Bénédictine, xl (1928), 193-214. They were printed under the heading "The Oldest Anti-Marcionite Gospel Prologues" in the Huck-Lietzmann-Cross *Synopsis of the First Three Gospels* (Tübingen, 1935), pp. VII f. Their text is reproduced and helpfully discussed by W. F. Howard, "The Anti-Marcionite Prologues to the Gospels", *Expository Times*, xlvii (1935-36), 534-538.

⁴⁶ An epithet—indeed, a "permanent" epithet—also applied to Mark (but with no attempt at explanation) in Hippolytus, *Haer.*, vii.30.

corruptions which can be explained only on the supposition that they had crept into the (now lost) Greek text before it was translated.

De Bruyne's argument found the wider acceptance in that it was quickly endorsed by Harnack.⁴⁷ Doubt was cast on some aspects of it by a number of scholars, however, including M.-J. Lagrange and B. W. Bacon.⁴⁸ The whole subject was reopened and subjected to thorough scrutiny in 1969 by Jürgen Regul in the monograph already referred to.⁴⁹ He examines in detail the manuscript tradition of the prologues and their relation to relevant patristic literature in the early Christian centuries, and concludes (a) that they were independent one of another and did not belong to a single set of prologues, and (b) that they should be dated not in the later part of the second century but, at the earliest, in the fourth century.

In the light of Regul's study, one can no longer look confidently to these prologues as a product of the anti-Marcionite reaction in the third quarter of the second century. Each of them must be evaluated in its own right. Let it simply be observed here that there are (as has been said) anti-Marcionite emphases in both the Lucan and the Johannine prologues, and that the Johannine prologue, in my opinion, may still be regarded as dependent on Papias—but not, perhaps, on Papias alone.

VII

Whatever may be said about de Bruyne's view of the Roman origin of the prologues which have just been discussed, there is an undoubtedly Roman document which is directly relevant for the history of the canon and (as I believe) for the history of the canon in the late second century. This is the Latin list of books of the New Testament commonly called the Muratorian Canon, after the

⁴⁷ A. Harnack, "Die ältesten Evangelien-Prologe und die Bildung des Neuen Testaments", *Sitzungsbericht der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Klasse (Berlin, 1928), Heft 24.

⁴⁸ M.-J. Lagrange, *Revue Biblique*, xxxviii (1929), 115-121 (review of de Bruyne's article); B. W. Bacon, "The Anti-Marcionite Prologue to John", *JBL*, xlix (1930), 43-54; cf. R. G. Heard, "The Old Gospel Prologues", *JTS*, n.s. vi (1955), 1-16.

⁴⁹ J. Regul, *Die antimarcionitischen Evangelienprologe*.

antiquarian Cardinal Lodovico Antonio Muratori, who first published it in 1740.⁵⁰

The text of the document has suffered at the hands of a copyist whose knowledge of Latin left much to be desired. It has often been suggested that the Latin is a translation from Greek.⁵¹ To my mind, the most convincing argument for regarding the Latin text as original was put forward by Arnold Ehrhardt, the first scholar known to me who made sense of the statement that Paul took Luke along with him "quasi ut iuris studiosum". As a Roman provincial governor had a legal expert ("iuris studiosus") on his staff who issued documents "in the name" or "in accordance with the opinion" of his superior, so Paul (it is claimed) attached Luke to himself and Luke issued his writings under his own name but in accordance with Paul's opinion ("nomine suo ex opinione").⁵² Luke's writings, that is to say, are endowed with apostolic authority although they do not appear under Paul's name. (It took a former professor of Roman law to recognize this technical terminology.)⁵³

Ehrhardt thought that the list might have been compiled by one of the first Latin-speaking bishops of Rome, at the end of the second century—Victor or Zephyrinus. The identity of the author must remain uncertain, but the date suggested is highly probable. A strong argument for a fourth-century date was presented some years ago by A. C. Sundberg,⁵⁴ but he did not succeed in

⁵⁰ From a Bobbio manuscript of the 7th/8th century, now in the Ambrosian Library, Milan. A convenient edition of the text (along with the Monarchian gospel prologues) was published as No. 1 in H. Lietzmann's *Kleine Texte* (Berlin, 21933).

⁵¹ E.g. by S. P. Tregelles, *Canon Muratorianus: The Earliest Catalogue of the Books of The New Testament* (Oxford, 1867), p. 4, following Muratori himself (who supposed it to be the work of the Roman presbyter Gaius); also by J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, I. *S. Clement of Rome*, II (London, 21890), pp. 405-13 (in Greek *verse*, and by Hippolytus).

⁵² A. Ehrhardt, "The Gospels in the Muratorian Fragment" (1953) in *The Framework of the New Testament Stories* (Manchester, 1964), pp. 11-36 (especially pp. 16-18). He mentions (with reservations) Harnack's argument for regarding the Latin as original: "Über den Verfasser und den literarischen Charakter des Muratorischen Fragments", *ZNW*, xxiv (1925), 1-16.

⁵³ Even so good a Latinist as A. Souter missed the point here: he (tentatively) adopted E. S. Buchanan's emendation of "ut iuris" to "adiutorem" (*Text and Canon of the New Testament*, pp. 191, 193).

⁵⁴ A. C. Sundberg, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List", *HTR*, lxxvi (1973), 1-41.

disposing satisfactorily of the natural sense of the words "nuperime temporibus nostris", referring to the composition of the *Shepherd* of Hermas. He took them to mean, rather generally, "in our own post-apostolic times" as contrasted with the age of the prophets and apostles. Had the compiler simply said "nuper", or even "temporibus nostris", this interpretation might be allowed; but the superlative "nuperrime" coupled with "temporibus nostris" ("very recently, in our own times") emphasizes the recent date of the *Shepherd* in relation to the compiler's date to a point which makes the end of the second century more probable for the latter than the fourth century.

The Muratorian list includes the gospels (it is mutilated at the beginning and has lost its account of Matthew and all but the last six words of its account of Mark, but Luke and John are described as the third and fourth gospels), Acts, the thirteen letters of Paul, Jude, at least two letters of John,⁵⁵ Wisdom⁵⁶ (surprisingly) and the apocalypses of John and Peter. The only surprising omission in a Roman list is 1 Peter.⁵⁷

Some miscellaneous information is given about the origin and contents of certain books—information which is almost worthless for the study of those books in themselves, but valuable for the light it sheds on what was thought about them at the time when the list was compiled.

Ehrhardt has an interesting discussion of the Muratorian account of the gospel of John, especially with regard (*a*) to its insistence that all the canonical gospels bear witness to the same faith, which is summarized in a sequence paralleled in the Roman creed (although influences from Asia Minor can be detected in the strong emphasis on the Second Advent), and (*b*) to its insistence on the eyewitness character of John's record. This eyewitness

⁵⁵ The two letters of John listed on lines 68 f. may be 2 and 3 John, since 1 John has been quoted on lines 28-31 in reference to the gospel of John.

⁵⁶ Wisdom, "written by Solomon's friends in his honour" (lines 69 f.); it is unnecessary to discern an original mention of Philo here (on the supposition of a corrupted Greek *Vorlage*).

⁵⁷ Theodor von Zahn emended the text so as to include 1 Peter and exclude the apocalypse of Peter; he suggested that some words (italicized as follows) had fallen out: "... John's apocalypse and Peter's *one epistle*. There is also another *epistle of Peter*, which some of our people refuse to have read in church" (*Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, ii [Erlangen/Leipzig, 1890], p. 142). He restored the allegedly missing words in Greek, which he believed to have been the original language.

character is linked with the claim made in 1 John 1:1-3, quoted in the form: "What we have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears and our hands have handled, these things we have written to you". Ehrhardt contrasted with this quotation (paralleled in the second-century *Epistle of the Apostles*) the gnostic use made of the words quoted from an uncertain source in 1 Corinthians 2:9 (and later ascribed to Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Peter*):⁵⁸ "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived ..." These last words may even have been pressed into service as a gnostic initiation formula. The Muratorian compiler was firmly anti-gnostic.

The list refers to Acts as "the Acts of all the apostles". This may be the product of exaggerated anti-Marcionite emphasis, but it might (as I have heard Dr. Ehrhardt suggest) be intended to insist that *all* the apostolic Acts are comprised in one book ("sub uno libro") and not in several, like the five books of apocryphal Acts which appeared shortly after the middle of the second century. To one of these five—the *Acts of Peter*—there may be an allusion when the compiler explains that the canonical book does not relate Peter's martyrdom or Paul's departure for Spain because Luke recorded only what took place in his own presence—an inept explanation (for Luke implies that he was an eyewitness of only a few of the incidents recorded in Acts). The two events mentioned—Peter's martyrdom and Paul's departure for Spain—are described in the *Acts of Peter*;⁵⁹ Roman Christians would naturally be interested in both.

Paul, it is pointed out, wrote to seven churches (symbolizing the whole worldwide church), following the precedent of John, who "in his apocalypse, while writing to seven churches, yet speaks to all". This placing Paul after John the seer is preposterous, but it may indicate that for the Muratorian compiler prophetic inspiration was the primary criterion of canonicity; even apostolic authorship took second place to it. The implications of this were worked out twenty years ago by Krister Stendahl.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Gospel of Thomas*, 17; *Acts of Peter*, 39.

⁵⁹ *Acts of Peter*, 1-3; 36-41.

⁶⁰ K. Stendahl, "The Apocalypse of John and the Epistles of Paul in the Muratorian Fragment", in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto A. Piper*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (New York, 1962), pp. 239-245.

In a study of criteria of canonicity in the early church, Dr. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer concluded that "apostolicity was the principal token of canonicity for the west, inspiration for the east"—not, indeed, in a mutually exclusive sense, since "in the west apostolicity to a certain extent includes inspiration, while in the east apostolicity was an attendant feature of inspiration".⁶¹ But here in a Roman document (admittedly reflecting Anatolian influences) prophetic inspiration ranks as the principal token. The *Shepherd of Hermas*, which was read with appreciation in the Roman church, had to be excluded from the canon because, while its quality of inspiration might have entitled it to a place among the prophets, the canon of the prophets was closed by the time of its composition, and it could not claim a place among the apostolic writings. If second-century prophecy were admitted to the canon, there would be too many strange claimants for inclusion.

At the end of the Muratorian list the writings of the Montanists (the "Cataphrygians") are rejected, together with those of the Marcionites and Valentinians. It was not only, and perhaps not mainly, the *writings* of the Montanists that were found objectionable. Their insistence that the age of the Spirit had superseded the age of the Son, and that the gift of prophecy, far from having been withdrawn from the church, was now being exercised in greater vigour than ever, presented a challenge to the catholic view of the faith as something "once for all delivered".⁶² If Paul and John insisted in the first century that it was necessary to "test the prophets"⁶³ and make sure that their utterances were consistent with the gospel as they themselves had received and delivered it, such testing was all the more necessary a century later. The Montanist challenge from one direction, like the Marcionite and gnostic challenges from other directions, made it necessary for the limits of holy scripture to be defined. Holy scripture, properly defined, would provide a check on uncontrolled prophecy.

The Muratorian list reflects the attempts made in the Roman church towards the end of the second century to meet the

⁶¹ E. Flesseman-van Leer, "Prinzipien der Sammlung und Ausscheidung bei der Bildung des Kanons", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, lxvi (1964), p. 416.

⁶² Jude 3.

⁶³ 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 John 4:1-3.

challenges, and especially the Montanist challenge,⁶⁴ offered to the catholic understanding of the faith. The list may be rather later in date than Irenaeus's work *Against Heresies*, but it was Irenaeus who laid down the main lines along which the catholic defence would henceforth be conducted.

⁶⁴ Harnack maintained that it was in opposition to the Montanist position "that the leaders of the Church first thought out and developed the idea of a covenant established and finally sealed in the manifestation of Christ and in the work of His Apostles, so that they were able to consistently reject *every* work which did not belong to this primitive epoch" (*The Origin of the New Testament*, p. 35).