

New Light on the Origins of the New Testament

F.F. Bruce

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This is a brief summary of Prof. Bruce's lecture given to the Victoria Institute on 2nd February, 1974. The full text with over 60 bibliographical footnotes will be published in due course in the Proceedings of the 25th anniversary meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (of USA). It is to be edited by R. N. Longenecker and published by Zondervan of Grand Rapids.

Our subject matter is the origin of the NT as a collection of books acknowledged as Holy Scripture, a development which belongs to the second century AD, an era about which unfortunately much less is known than about the first or subsequent centuries.

It is evident that the early Christians had a canon from the start, the canon of the OT, and that the apostles derived from our Lord the key as to how that canon was to be interpreted. Pagans were often exposed to this tradition and, finding it convincing, a surprising number of them became Christian as a direct result of reading the OT in the Greek.¹

Some have argued that the later reduction of the early Christian oral tradition to writing was a symptom of loss of nerve.² But the Græco-Roman world of the day relied heavily on written sources: oral tradition did not generally enjoy a prestige above that of the written word. Papias, it is true, took a different view and from his youth collected as many verbal traditions as he could about Christ and the earlier generation of disciples. But by his time the stream of early tradition had run almost dry and the 'books' available to him contained much more valuable and reliable material than he was able to learn from what he called the "living and abiding voice".³

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There seems little doubt that the four-fold gospel of our canon was compiled in the early part of the second century not long after the publication of the gospels separately, but whether this was done in Ephesus, Alexandria, Rome or elsewhere we simply do not know. There are different emphases to be found here and it would seem that different local preferences were transcended by inclusion of all the four records. Matthew's gospel contains various strands (e.g. in the attitude to the Gentiles, 8: 11; 10: 5; 28: 19) and the catholicity of its outlook may have given it pride of place.

Though in the earlier part of the century there are a number of hints that the gospels were known as a combined whole, direct evidence of this is not forthcoming till the time of Tatian, 170 AD. Like so many today, Tatian had undertaken to combine the four gospels into a single harmonious narrative. Not long afterwards we find Irenæus comparing the four-fold gospel with the four winds of heaven and the four quarters of the earth, showing that by then the four gospels were regarded as canonical.

¹ Eg., Justin, *Dialogue*, 8, 1; Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, 29; Theophilus, *To Autolytus* i, 14.

² R. H. Lightfoot is reported to have said that "the writing of the gospels was an early manifestation of the operation of original sin in the church" (C. F. Evans, *Is 'Holy Scripture' Christian?* 1971, pp. 6f.).

³ Papias, quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* iii, 39, 3.

With regard to the Pauline letters, Günther Zuntz has produced good reasons for supposing that they were collected in Alexandria about 100 AD,⁴ though smaller collections may have circulated locally even earlier. It is known that Paul's letters often circulated to churches other than those to which they were first addressed (cf. 2 Peter 3: 15f). In Alexandria, though not at Rome until the fourth century, the Epistle to the Hebrews was accepted as Pauline.

If by *canon* we mean a closed set of books, so that it is known precisely which books are included and which not, then Marcion (c. 140 AD) must be credited as the compiler of the first NT canon. This included the Gospel of Luke (with slight modifications) and ten letters of Paul, the Pastoral epistles being excluded. But if Marcion produced the first actual canon, the idea of a canon was certainly in the air at the time and Marcion's action forced the Christian church to consider the matter seriously. The canon, as we have noted, was more or less fixed by the last quarter of the second century, though it is true that its outer

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limits did remain fluid for another two centuries or more. By the end of the second century or earlier it was agreed that further additions were not admissible. Though giving full credit to Marcion, it is an exaggeration to claim, as does one scholar,⁵ that "the idea and the reality of a Christian Bible were the work of Marcion".

Gnostic texts discovered near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt around 1945 make it probable that Marcion made his choices from a group of documents which had already attained something like canonical recognition. The most important of the texts is the Coptic *Gospel of Truth* which appears to be a meditation on the authentic gospel, written in Rome about 140-145 AD by Valentinus and before the development of typically Gnostic dogmas.⁶ Tertullian says of Valentinus that he "seems to use the whole Testament" while Marcion uses "a knife instead of a pen".⁷

Scholars are convinced that at the very least the writer of the *Gospel of Truth* was acquainted with Luke or Matthew, John, Hebrews, the Apocalypse and some of the letters of Paul; others have seen less certain allusions to the remaining Gospels, Acts, 1 John and 1 Peter. It would certainly seem as if the author knew the books of the NT though he need not necessarily have regarded them as canonical.

Following after the *Gospel of Truth* in the Jung Codex there is the *Epistle to Rheginus on Resurrection*⁸ which appears to be by a different author. It offers an interpretation of Paul's doctrine of resurrection and immortality (1 Corinthians 15). Paul is spoken of as an apostle and his words are taken as authoritative. In addition to 1 Corinthians there are echoes of Romans, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, while from the gospels the transfiguration narrative is referred to and Johannine language is used in telling how "the Lord... existed in flesh and revealed himself as Son of God".

⁴ G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles*, 1953, p. 271.

⁵ H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, 1972, p. 148.

⁶ F. L. Cross (Ed.), *The Jung Codex*, 1955.

⁷ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 38.

⁸ See esp. M. L. Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginus*, 1969.

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Finally we may raise the question of the reasons for including particular books in the canon and ask, whether, today, we ought to defend our position with arguments different from those on which decisions were originally based, and if so what arguments we should use.

In ancient times apostolic authorship was the principal argument. There were some exceptions. The gospels of Mark and Luke were accepted because of their authors' close association with the apostles, something of the authority of Peter and Paul rubbing off on to these two gospels. But it is worth remembering that the four gospels and Acts, constituting well over half the NT, are actually anonymous.

What of the canon today? Its place in the church is hardly affected by individual opinions, opinions of Christian groups, critical findings as to dates and authorship of documents or even a man's personal awareness of the self-authenticating character of Scripture. The canon is a heritage from the past, to be passed on unimpaired to our successors. If it is to be theologically validated we should appeal, perhaps, to the inward witness of the Spirit in the Christian community from the first generation onwards.

DISCUSSION

Mr. O. Angood. Can Professor Bruce say anything about the authenticity or otherwise of the engraved plate discovered 1280 AD in Aquilla in the Kingdom of Naples? It is described in a book called *Great Thoughts* (1888, p. 464) and purports to give the details written in Hebrew of the charges made against Jesus and of Pilate's judicial sentence.

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Reply: I think we may be quite certain that this inscription belongs to the category of mediæval apocrypha.

R. E. D. Clark. R. Govett and later D. M. Panton, both of Norwich (Panton, *Our Seat of Authority*, c. 1920) connected the canon with the miraculous gifts of the spirit spoken of by Paul in 1 Corinthians. Imagine, so the argument went, a group of early Christians, some of them still in possession of these gifts, before the close of the first century. In addition to the exercise of the gifts there was, as the NT makes clear, straightforward Christian teaching in the assembly. Often a speaker would appeal to some Scripture in the OT canon and sometimes, especially later, to something written by Paul, Peter, James, etc. But suppose one with the gifts of prophecy (i.e. direct speaking on behalf of God under the Spirit's inspiration) were present and found himself listening to an exhortation based on a text which purported falsely to be by, say, Paul. If we take the gifts seriously, must we not suppose that the assembly would have been warned by the prophet that the words quoted were not derived from an inspired source and were not authoritative?

In this way, over the years, assemblages of documents, tacitly accepted by prophets and congregations as authentic and authoritative, would have come into existence. No formal canon is implied but by a process of exclusion the contents of the canon would have been assembled so that after the gifts had been withdrawn, the later church, by comparing notes between what was accepted by the various churches, would have found itself able to define the canon.

This view, which seems fully compatible with what Professor Bruce has said, has always appealed to me. Would the lecturer care to comment?

Reply: The situation envisaged by the writers whom Dr. Clark mentions is certainly quite conceivable. In fact, prophetic activity in the churches may have played a more prominent part in the pre-canonical stage of the New Testament tradition than is commonly realized. One of the papers in the volume in which the full report of my paper will appear is devoted to one aspect of this subject ("Christian prophecy, gospel criticism and us", by G. F. Hawthorne). But I am not aware of any evidence that the spiritual gifts played a part in the delimitation of the canon, either in the first century or in the second. In the New Testament more importance is attached to the authority of apostolic witness than to prophetic inspiration. Prophetic utterances themselves required to be checked, and they were checked not so much by the activity of those gifted with the discernment of spirits as by their agreement or disagreement with the apostolic witness to Christ, "that which was from the beginning" (1 John 1: 1-4; 2: 24; 4: 1-6; cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 3). The prophetic ministry continued into the second century, into the age of canon-making, but there is no indication that it controlled decisions about canonical recognition. On the contrary, the process of canon-making received a considerable impetus from the necessity of controlling prophetic utterances, especially after the rise of the Montanist movement.

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