

# The books of the Bibles in early Christianity

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A resurgence in the interest in other early Christian literature has brought the issue of the Christian biblical canon(s) to the forefront. Questions in relation to what the literature was, which literature was authoritative, and when did it become authoritative, have all been reopened both on a popular and scholarly level. With this climate, a re-evaluation of primary source information in relation to the various lists was in order. The lists from Origen, Eusebius, the Muratorian Canon, Athanasius, and to a lesser extent Tertullian, were examined. The result was: a nuanced perspective that reflects a three level reading hierarchy that gave precedence to the unquestioned texts, allows for mediated expansion through the questioned texts, and calls for a complete correction of the rejected texts based on the first two levels. Further, although none of the lists are exactly alike, substantial agreement was established between these various lists spanning more than a 150 years. In contrast to Marcion, theological harmony did not appear to be the main consideration in these various lists.

## Introduction

With the publishing of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and the later released movie, popular culture appears to be fascinated with the possibilities of other Christianities. Although Dan Brown's book is obviously fiction, this curious statement before the prologue lends some sort of credibility to the fictional narrative: 'All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate' (Brown 2003:1). A statement then from the fictional scholar, Teabing, has some sort of credibility, where he asserts:

Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned. (Brown 2003:254)

With the anachronistic statement in relation to Christ's human traits, this quotation somehow resonates well with modern western culture.

Elaine Pagels, Bart Ehrman and Karen King, all American scholars of early Christianity, have written books on a semi-popular level exploring a similar thesis in relation to different texts within early Christianity (Pagels 2004; Ehrman 2005a, 2005b; King 2003). John P. Burgess in reviewing this trend states, 'These scholars also represent the spirit of 21st-century America, with its love of diversity, its suspicion of traditional authority and its respect for personal experience' (Burgess 2004:24). This evaluation may of course be valid in relation to these scholars, but maybe the interest amongst those who buy these books is on a more basic and less subversive level. Could it be that people are just simply not aware that there were other books and differing sizes of authoritative collections?

Regardless of the motivations for those who write or buy these books, there seems to be several common assumptions in the modern argument when scholarly and popular positions are conflated. The first assumption is that there were many other books in early Christianity. Secondly, these books at one point were authoritative for Christians before it was decided after several hundred years that only 27 books would be included in the New Testament. Thirdly, these other books represent a broader (less orthodox) view of Jesus. In turn each of these issues will be discussed and evaluated by examining the primary source Christian book lists from circa AD 190 to AD 367, concluding with my own nuanced evaluation of these primary texts and the aforementioned conflated assumptions.

## (Other) books in early Christianity

### Origen and Eusebius

The historical data is quite clear that there were other books in early Christianity. Harry Y. Gamble (1992) states in this regard:

Christianity, in turn, produced a large body of its own literature (letters, gospels, narratives of apostolic acts, apocalypses, church orders, etc.), much of which became authoritative for various Christian groups, and so came to be regarded as scripture alongside Jewish scripture. But Christianity did not for a long time attempt to create a canon. (p. 853)

In support of this statement there are lists that enumerate certain writings that were considered authoritative in varying degrees. Eusebius (ca. 260–340) (Stiewe 2001:927) in 6.25 of his *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Hist. eccl.*), quoting Origen (185–253,254) (Merlan 2001:2160), states, ‘οὐκ ἀγνοητέον δ’ εἶναι τὰς ἐνδιαθήκους βίβλους, ὡς Ἑβραῖοι παραδιδόασιν, δύο καὶ εἴκοσι, ὅσος ἀριθμὸς τῶν παρ’ αὐτοῖς στοιχείων ἐστίν’ and ‘εἰσὶν δὲ αἱ εἴκοσι δύο βιβλίοι καθ’ Ἑβραίους αἰδέ’ (Eusebius 1932:72). In this list the following English equivalents are given: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel (1 and 2 as one book), Kings (1 and 2 as one book), Chronicles (1 and 2 as one book), 1 Esdras and Ezra/Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah (Jeremiah, Lamentations, and the Letter of Jeremiah as one book), Daniel, Ezekiel, Job, and Esther (Eusebius 1932:72). With a further qualifying statement one more book is added, ‘ἔξω δὲ τούτων ἐστὶ τὰ Μακκαβαϊκά’ (Eusebius 1932:74). Still quoting from Origen, Eusebius goes on, ‘ὡς ἐν παραδόσει μαθὼν περὶ τῶν τεσσάρων εὐαγγελίων, ἃ καὶ μόνῃ ἀναντιρρητὰ ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ’ (Eusebius 1932:74). These four are listed as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Eusebius prefaces the further quotation from Origen in relation to the letters of the apostles: ‘Καὶ ἐν τῷ πέμπτῳ δὲ τῶν εἰς τὸ κατὰ Ἰωάννην Ἐξηγητικῶν ὁ αὐτὸς ταῦτα περὶ τῶν ἐπιστολῶν τῶν ἀποστόλων φησὶν’ (Eusebius 1932:74). Paul is the first one mentioned but no number is given only that ‘οὐδὲ πάσαις ἔγραψεν αἷς ἐδίδαξεν ἐκκλησίαις, ἀλλὰ καὶ αἷς ἔγραψεν, ὀλίγους στίχους ἐπέστειλεν’ (Eusebius 1932:74, 76). In relation to Peter it is said, ‘μίαν ἐπιστολὴν ὁμολογουμένην καταέλοιπεν, ἔστω δὲ καὶ δευτέραν· ἀμφιβάλλεται γάρ’ (Eusebius 1932:76). In relation to John it is said, ‘ἔγραψεν δὲ καὶ τὴν Ἀποκάλυψιν ... καταέλοιπεν καὶ ἐπιστολὴν πᾶν ὀλίγων στίχων, ἔστω δὲ καὶ δευτέραν καὶ τρίτην· ἐπεὶ οὐ πάντες φασὶν γνησίους εἶναι ταύτας’ (Eusebius 1932:76). In a somewhat lengthy discussion of the book of Hebrews it is concluded:

οὐ γὰρ εἰκὴ οἱ ἀρχαῖοι ἄνδρες ὡς Παῦλον αὐτὴν παραδεδώκασιν. τίς δὲ ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν, τὸ μὲν ἀληθὲς θεὸς οἶδεν, ἢ δὲ εἰς ἡμᾶς φθάσασα ἱστορία ὑπὸ τινῶν μὲν λεγόντων ὅτι Κλήμης, ὁ γενόμενος ἐπίσκοπος Ῥωμαίων, ἔγραψεν τὴν ἐπιστολὴν, ὑπὸ τινῶν δὲ ὅτι Λουκᾶς, ὁ γράψας τὸ εὐαγγέλιον καὶ τὰς Πράξεις. (Eusebius 1932:78)

If Eusebius’s citation of Origen is not overly selective, a particular list of books is found with varying degrees of credibility. Without any doubt are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel (1 and 2 as one book), Kings (1 and 2 as one book), Chronicles (1 and 2 as one book), 1 Esdras and Ezra/Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah (Jeremiah, Lamentations, and the Letter of Jeremiah, as one book) Daniel, Ezekiel, Job, Esther, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, an unspecified number of Paul’s letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation, Hebrews (with a question of authorship), and Acts. Books that are listed but with some level of differentiation are: Maccabees, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John.

Eusebius gives his own discussion in relation to the books of the New Testament in *Hist. eccl.* 3.25. He prefaces his list with this statement: ‘Εὐλογον δ’ ἐν ταῦθα γενομένους ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰς δηλωθείσας τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης γραφάς’ (Eusebius 1926:256). He lists these books after this initial statement as: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Paul’s letters, 1 John, 1 Peter and Revelation (Eusebius 1926:256). These books are summarised with this statement: ‘καὶ ταῦτα μὲν ἐν ὁμολογουμένοις’ (Eusebius 1926:256). This is even with the previous statement about Revelation where he states, ‘ἐπὶ τούτοις τακτέον, εἰ γε φανεῖν, τὴν Ἀποκάλυψιν Ἰωάννου’ (Eusebius 1926:256). The next group of books are prefaced with these words: ‘τῶν δ’ ἀντιλεγόμενων, γνωρίμων δ’ οὖν ὅμως τοῖς πολλοῖς’ (Eusebius 1926:256). These books are listed as: James, Jude, and 2 and 3 John. Only 2 and 3 John receive a further description: ‘εἴτε τοῦ εὐαγγελιστοῦ τυγχάνουσαι εἴτε καὶ ἐτέρου ὁμωνύμου ἐκείνῳ’ (Eusebius 1926:256). He also introduces other books that should be understood in this category:

ἐν τοῖς νόθοις κατατετάχθω καὶ τῶν Παύλου Πράξεων ἢ γραφῆ ὁ τε λεγόμενος Ποιμὴν καὶ ἡ Ἀποκάλυψις Πέτρου καὶ πρὸς τούτοις ἡ φερομένη Βαρναβᾶ ἐπιστολὴ καὶ τῶν ἀποστόλων αἱ λεγόμεναι Διδαχαὶ ἔτι τε, ὡς ἔφην, ἡ Ἰωάννου Ἀποκάλυψις, εἰ φανεῖν ἦν τινες, ὡς ἔφην, ἀθετοῦσιν, ἕτεροι δὲ ἐγκρίνουσιν τοῖς ὁμολογουμένοις. ἤδη δ’ ἐν τούτοις τινὲς καὶ τὸ καθ’ Ἑβραίους εὐαγγέλιον κατέλεξαν, ᾧ μάλιστα Ἑβραίων οἱ τὸν Χριστὸν παραδεξάμενοι χαίρουσιν. (Eusebius 1926:256)

This expands this second category with these books: the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas, the Didache, Revelation, and the Gospel of the Hebrews (Eusebius 1926:256). It is interesting to note why Revelation receives a double listing: ‘ἦν τινες, ὡς ἔφην, ἀθετοῦσιν, ἕτεροι δὲ ἐγκρίνουσιν τοῖς ὁμολογουμένοις’ (Eusebius 1926:256). The purpose for this list is:

διακρίνοντας τὰς τε κατὰ τὴν ἐκκλησιαστικὴν παράδοσιν ἀληθεῖς καὶ ἀπλάστους καὶ ἀνωμολογημένας γραφάς καὶ τὰς ἄλλας παρὰ ταύτας, οὐκ ἐνδιαθήκους μὲν ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀντιλεγόμενας, ὅμως δὲ παρὰ πλείστοις τῶν ἐκκλησιαστικῶν γνωσκομένας, ἵν’ εἰδέναι ἔχομεν αὐτάς τε ταύτας καὶ τὰς ὀνόματι τῶν ἀποστόλων πρὸς τῶν αἰρετικῶν προφερομένας. (Eusebius 1926:256, 258)

Although it is tempting to understand a radical distinction between the books listed as ‘ὁμολογουμένοις’ and ‘ἀντιλεγόμενοις’, the distinction appears rather to be between these first two lists and those writings ‘τῶν αἰρετικῶν’. These works are only partially listed and described, ‘ὡς Πέτρου καὶ Θωμᾶ καὶ Ματθαῖοι ἢ καὶ τινῶν παρὰ τούτους ἄλλων εὐαγγέλια περιεχοῦσας ἢ ὡς Ἀνδρέου καὶ Ἰωάννου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀποστόλων πράξεις’ (Eusebius 1926:258). The warrant for the title ‘τῶν αἰρετικῶν’ is given with a detailed description:

ὡν οἶδεν οὐδαμῶς ἐν συγγράμματι τῶν κατὰ τὰς διαδοχὰς ἐκκλησιαστικῶν τις ἀνὴρ εἰς μνήμην ἀγαγεῖν ἠξίωσεν, πόρρω δὲ ποῦ καὶ ὁ τῆς φράσεως παρὰ τὸ ἦθος τὸ ἀποστολικὸν ἐναλλάττει χαρακτήρ, ἢ τε γνώμη καὶ ἢ τῶν ἐν αὐτοῖς φερομένων προαίρεσις πλείστον ὅσον τῆς ἀληθοῦς ὀρθοδοξίας ἀπάδουσα, ὅτι δὴ αἰρετικῶν ἀνδρῶν ἀναπλάσματα τυγχάνει, σαφῶς παρίστησιν. (Eusebius 1926:258)

For these reasons this third category of books receives this judgement: ‘ὅθεν οὐδ’ ἐν νόθοις αὐτὰ κατατακτέον, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἄτοπα πάντη καὶ δυσσεβῆ παραιτητέον’ (Eusebius 1926:258).

Like the list from Origen, Eusebius’s own list reflects lists of books with varying degrees of credibility. The first list is

those books which are 'ὁμολογουμένοι': Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Paul's letters, 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation. The second list is those books which are 'ἀντιλεγόμενοι': James, Jude, 2 and 3 John, the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas, the Didache, Revelation, and the Gospel of the Hebrews. The first list appears to represent 'τὰς γραφὰς τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης'. The second list, although disputed, merits being listed with the first list. The third list is the books 'τῶν αἰρετικῶν': the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Matthias, other similar Gospels of the 'Apostles', the Acts of Andrew, the Acts of John, and the Acts of other 'Apostles'. These books were not to be counted even as a part of the disputed or spurious books (the second list) evidently because they failed to demonstrate even disputed character; they were viewed as completely unreliable.

Eusebius gives another discussion in *Hist. eccl.* 3.3. In relation to Peter's writings he states:

Πέτρου μὲν οὖν ἐπιστολὴ μία, ἡ λεγομένη αὐτοῦ προτέρα, ἀνωμολόγηται, ταύτῃ δὲ καὶ οἱ πάλοι πρεσβύτεροι ὡς ἀναμφιλέκτω ἐν τοῖς σφῶν αὐτῶν κατακέρχονται συγγράμμασιν τὴν δὲ περομένην δευτέραν οὐκ ἐνδιάθηκον μὲν εἶναι παρελήφαμεν, ὅμως δὲ πολλοῖς χρήσιμος φανείσα, μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων ἐσπουδάσθη γραφῶν. τὸ γε μὴν τῶν ἐπιεκκλημένων αὐτοῦ Πράξεων καὶ τὸ κατ' αὐτὸν ὠνομασμένον εὐαγγέλιον τὸ τε λεγόμενον αὐτοῦ Κήρυγμα καὶ τὴν καλουμένην Ἀποκάλυψιν οὐδ' ὅλως ἐν καθολικοῖς ἴσμεν παραδεδομένα, ὅτι μήτε ἀρχαίων μήτε μὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς τις ἐκκλησιαστικὸς συγγραφεὺς ταῖς ἐξ αὐτῶν συνεχρήσατο μαρτυρίας. (Eusebius 1926:190, 192)

1 Peter is established as being without any question. 2 Peter is not identified as being undisputed like 1 Peter, but yet has value in being treated with respect, 'μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων ... γραφῶν'. These writings are set in contrast with the Acts of Peter, the Gospel of Peter, the Preaching of Peter, and the Revelation of Peter. Eusebius goes on to say, 'ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν ὀνομαζόμενα Πέτρου, ὧν μόνῃ μίαν γνησίαν ἔγνω ἐπιστολὴν καὶ παρὰ τοῖς πάλοι πρεσβυτέρους ὁμολογουμένην, τοσαῦτα' (Eusebius 1926:192).

Several issues come to the surface when he discusses the writings of Paul:

τοῦ δὲ Παύλου πρόδηλοι καὶ σαφεῖς αἱ δεκάτεσσαρες· ὅτι γε μὴν τινες ἠθετήκασι τὴν πρὸς Ἑβραίους, πρὸς τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἐκκλησίας ὡς μὴ Παύλου οὖσαν αὐτὴν ἀντιλέγεσθαι φήσαντες, οὐ δίκαιον ἀγνοεῖν· καὶ τὰ περὶ ταύτης δὲ τοῖς πρὸ ἡμῶν εἰρημένα κατὰ καιρὸν παραθήσομαι. (Eusebius 1926:192)

Paul's Epistles are emphatically stated as fourteen in number. Presumably these include: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews. Hebrews is listed with this number with a question in relation to whether or not Paul actually authored the text. Bruce M. Metzger in relation to the absence of Hebrews from *Hist. eccl.* 3.25 states, 'Why Eusebius does not mention in his list the Epistle to the Hebrews has been widely discussed; the simplest explanation is that he included it as canonical amongst the Epistles of Paul, which he does not identify one by one' (Metzger 1997:205). This passage in *Hist. eccl.* 3.3 makes this connection explicit. The Acts of Paul are not listed even as a part of the disputed texts.

Another text not written by Peter or Paul is mentioned beyond this text with this rational:

ἐπεὶ δ' ὁ αὐτὸς ἀπόστολος ἐν ταῖς ἐπὶ τέλει προσηρσεῖν τῆς πρὸς Ῥωμαίους μνήμην πεποιήται μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ Ἑρμᾶ, οὐ φασιν ὑπάρχειν τὸ τοῦ Ποιμένους Βιβλίον, ἰστέον ὡς καὶ τοῦτο πρὸς μὲν τινῶν ἀντιλελεκται, δι' οὓς οὐκ ἂν ἐν ὁμολογουμένοις τεθεῖη, ὑφ' ἑτέρων δὲ ἀναγκαϊότατον οἷς μάλιστα δεῖ στοιχειώσεως εἰσαγωγικῆς, κέκριται· ὅθεν ἤδη καὶ ἐν ἐκκλησίαις ἴσμεν αὐτὸ δεδημοσιευμένον, καὶ τῶν παλαιάτων δὲ συγγραφέων κεχρημένους τινὰς αὐτῶ κατεῖληθα. (Eusebius 1926:192, 194)

To summarise this quotation, the Shepherd of Hermas, although rejected by some, is listed because of Hermas's name being mentioned at the end of Romans, its widespread use in the churches, and its quotation by ancient authors.

This passage in *Hist. eccl.* 3.3, like *Hist. eccl.* 3.25, appears to divide the texts into three different categories. In the first category are those texts in which there is no question in relation to their character: 1 Peter, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews. The second category includes the Shepherd of Hermas which is questionable but still seen as valuable. The third category includes those books that are seen as completely questionable: the Acts of Peter, the Gospel of Peter, the Preaching of Peter, the Revelation of Peter, and the Acts of Paul.

Eusebius's different lists make several key issues clear. Eusebius was aware of many books that were present within the larger Christian community. Amongst these books, certain ones were unquestioned in relation to their authenticity and value: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel (1 and 2 as one book), Kings (1 and 2 as one book), Chronicles (1 and 2 as one book), 1 Esdras and Ezra/Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah (Jeremiah, Lamentations, and the Letter of Jeremiah, as one book), Daniel, Ezekiel, Job, Esther, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews (with a qualified statement), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation (with a qualified statement).

Another group of writings was questioned but still seen as valuable. However, this list appears to be internally inconsistent between the different passages. In *Hist. eccl.* 6.25 these books are Maccabees, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. In *Hist. eccl.* 3.25 this second category of books is: James, Jude, 2 and 3 John, the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas, the Didache, Revelation (with a qualified statement), and the Gospel of the Hebrews. In *Hist. eccl.* 3.3 there is only the Shepherd of Hermas.

The final group of writings is seen as totally unreliable. In *Hist. eccl.* 3.25 these books are the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Matthias, other similar Gospels of the 'Apostles', the Acts of Andrew, the Acts of John, and the Acts of other 'Apostles'. In *Hist. eccl.* 3.3 these books are the Acts of Peter, the Gospel of Peter, the Preaching of Peter, the Revelation of Peter, and the Acts of Paul. What is clear is that

there is some cross listing between these last two categories and further that this last category is not exhaustive.

## Muratorian Canon

Albert Sundberg (1973) states succinctly in relation to the Muratorian Canon:

As everyone knows, Canon Muratori is a list of New Testament books that was found by Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750) in the Ambrosian Library at Milan, and is contained in a codex dating from the eighth or possibly the seventh century, which belonged originally to Columban's Monastery at Bobbio. The list of New Testament books is part of this codex, which also contains a collection of tracts and creeds that appeared between the second and fifth centuries and that seem to have been collected and transcribed in the eighth (or seventh) century. (p. 1)

Muratorian himself dated this statement from circa AD 196 as his title to this fragment indicates: 'Fragmentum acephalum Caji, ut videtur, Romani Presbyteri, qui circiter Annum Christi 196 floruit, de Canone sacrarum Scripturarum' (Muratori 1844:1). Support is derived for this position through the discussion in relation to the Shepherd of Hermas: 'Pastorem vero nuperrime temporibus nostris in Urbe Roma Herma conscripsit, sedente Cathedra Urbis Romae Ecclesiae Pio Episcopo fratre ejus' (Muratori 1844:2). Sundberg argues that this list comes from the same general time period as Eusebius's and Athanasius's lists as is indicated by the title to his article: 'Canon Muratori: A Fourth Century List' (Sundberg 1973:1). He supports this thesis in large part by his discussion in relation to the Book of Revelation:

But both appear to stem from the same milieu of discussion about the canonicity of the Apocalypse of John. And this question of its status finds no *sitz im leben* in the church until subsequent to Dionysius, and then only in the east. (Sundberg 1973:26)

However, there is ample evidence from the dispute with Marcion that at least some, though they were considered heretics, questioned the Book of Revelation at a much earlier time. Eilert Herms (2007) simply presupposes the date and purpose of the fragment as:

... am Ende des zweiten Jahrhunderts ein gegen solche Verengungen und Erweiterungen gerichteter gesamtkirchlicher Konsens über den Kreis der im Zentrum der gemeinschaftlichen Weitergabepaxis der Kirche, als im Gottesdienst, zu lesenden und auszulegenden Schriften erreicht ist. (p. 86)

In this damaged text, the first book found is described as 'Tertio Evangelii Librum secundo Lucan' (Muratori 1844:1). The second is described as 'Quarti Evangeliorum Joannis ex discipulis' (Muratori 1844:1). Further in relation to John it is said, 'Quid ergo mirum, si Joannes tam constanter singula etiam in Epistolis suis proferat dicens in semetipso: Quae vidimus oculis nostris, et auribus audivimus, et manus nostrae palpaverunt, haec scripsimus' (Muratori 1844:2). Another book is listed as 'Acta autem omnium Apostolorum sub uno libro scripta sunt Lucas optime Theophile comprehendit' (Muratori 1844:2). So far, this list includes Luke, John, 1 John and Acts. With the use of the terms 'tertio' and 'quarti' before the Gospels of Luke and John respectively, one would

assume that the Gospels of Matthew and Mark preceded these two texts. Metzger (1997) states:

Although the beginning of the list is fragmentary, one can be virtually certain that the Gospel according to Matthew was named first, and that the first line preserved in the Fragment refers to Mark. (p. 195)

In a longer quotation Paul's writings are discussed in detail:

Epistole autem Pauli, quae, a quo loco, vel qua ex causa directe sint, voluntatibus intelligere, ipse declarant. Primum omnium Corinthiis schisma haeresis inerdicens, deinceps Callactis circumcisionem. Romanis autem ordine Scripturarum, sed et principium earum esse Christum intimans, prolixius scripsit, de quibus singulis necesse est a nobis disputari, cum ipse Beatus Apostolus Paulus sequens praedecessoris sui Johannis ordinem, nonnisi nominatim septem Ecclesiis scribat ordine tali. Ad Corinthios prima, ad Ephesios secunda, ad Philippenses tertia, ad Colossenses quarta, ad Galatas quinta, ad Tessalonicenses sexta, ad Romanos septima. Verum Corinthiis, et Tessalonicensibus licet pro correctione iteretur, una tamen per omnem orbem terrae Ecclesia diffusa esse denoscitur. Et Joannes enim in Apocalypsi licet septem Ecclesiis scribat, tamen omnibus dicit. Verum ad Philemonem una, et ad Titum una, et ad Timotheum duas pro affectu et dilectione, in honore tamen Ecclesiae Catholicae, in ordinatione Ecclesasticae disciplinae sanctificatae sunt. Fertur enim ad Laudecenses, alia ad Alexandrinos Pauli nomine fictae ad haerese Marcionis; et alia plura, quae in Catholicam Ecclesiam recipi non potest. Fel enim cum melle misceri non congruit. (Muratori 1844:2)

This list from Paul includes: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The discussion also lists John as the author of Revelation. Two further texts are mentioned as 'fictae ad haerese Marcionis', namely letters to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians. The statement close to the end of this passage, 'et alia plura, quae in Catholicam Ecclesiam recipi non potest', also indicates that there were many other writings viewed similarly to these last two.

The discussion continues, distinguishing between different types of writing:

Epistola sane Judae, et superscripti Joannis duas in Catholica habentur. Et Sapientia ab amicis Salomonis in honorem ipsius scripta. Apocalypsis etiam Joannis, et Petri, tantum recipimus, quam quidam ex nostris legi in Ecclesia nolunt. (Muratori 1844:2)

Jude, 1 and 2 John, and the Wisdom of Solomon are listed as 'habentur'. The Apocalypse of John (Revelation) and the Apocalypse of Peter are listed as 'recipimus' but qualified by the statement 'quam quidam ex nostris legi in Ecclesia nolunt'.

The Shepherd of Hermas receives a fair bit of discussion as well:

Pastorem vero nuperrime temporibus nostris in Urbe Roma Herma conscripsit, sedente cathedra Urbis Romae Ecclesiae Pio Episcopo fratre ejus. Et ideo legi eum quidem oportet, se publicare vero in Ecclesia Populo, neque inter Prophetas completum numero, neque inter apostolos in finem temporum potest. (Muratori 1844:2)

Somehow it receives a verdict on the one hand that 'et ideo legi eum quidem oportet' and on the other 'se publicare uero in ecclesia populo' because it is 'neque inter Prophetas' and 'neque inter apostolos'. It should be read but not published amongst the Prophets or Apostles.

The fragment closes with this verdict: 'Arsinoi autem, seu Valentini, vel Mitiadis nihil in totum recipimus, qui etiam Novum Psalmorum Librum Marcioni concriserunt una cum Basilide Assianum Catafrygum constitutorem' (Muratori 1844:2). This increases the list of writings to those of: Arsinoes, Valentinus, Metiades, and a different book of Psalms from Marcion.

Like Eusebius, there are different categories for these writings. Those listed with no reservation are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts. The list from Paul includes Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 1 John, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Another list gives books that should be read but some think not in the church: the Apocalypse of John (Revelation), the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Shepherd of Hermas. A final group is known of but should not be accepted: letters to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians, and the writings of Arsinoes, Valentinus, Metiades, and a different book of Psalms.

### Athanasius's 39th Paschal Letter

David Brakke (1994) summarises the significance of this document well:

In histories of the formation of the Christian biblical canon, the thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* of Athanasius of Alexandria, written for Easter 367, holds a justifiably prominent place. Not only is this letter the earliest extant Christian document to list precisely the twenty-seven books that eventually formed the generally accepted canon of the New Testament, but Athanasius is also the first Christian author known to have applied the term 'canonized' (κανονιζόμενα) specifically to the books that made up his Old and New Testaments. (pp. 395–396)

The stated purpose of the letters is in opposition to the heretics:

Ἄλλ' ἐπειδὴ περὶ μὲν τῶν αἰρετικῶν ἐμνήσθημεν, ὡς νεκρῶν· περὶ δὲ ἡμῶν ὡς ἐχόντων πρὸς σωτηρίαν τὰς θείας γραφάς· καὶ φοβοῦμαι μήπως, ὡς ἔγραψεν Κορινθίους Παῦλος, ὀλίγοι τῶν ἀκραίων ἀπὸ τῆς ἀπλότητος καὶ τῆς ἀγιότητος πλανηθῶσιν, ἀπὸ τῆς πανουργίας τινῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ λοιπὸν ἐντυγχάνειν ἑτέρους ἀρξάνται, τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀποκρύφους, ἀπατάμενοι τῇ ὁμοθυμίᾳ τῶν ἀληθῶν βιβλίων. (Athanasius 1844:7)

He claims that he is adopting the same attitude as that of 'τοῦ εὐαγγελιστοῦ Λουκά' and is decidedly against those who mix 'τὰ λεγόμενα ἀπόκρυφα' with 'τῆ θεοπνεύστῃ γραφῇ' (Athanasius 1844:7). In relation to the list that follows he claims: 'ἔδοξεν κάμιοι προτραπέντι παρὰ γνησίων ἀδελφῶν, καὶ μαθόντι, ἄνωθεν ἐξῆς ἐκθέσθαι τὰ κανονιζόμενα καὶ παραδοθέντα πιστευθέντα τε θεία εἶναι βιβλία' (Athanasius 1844:8). In distinction to this statement from Athanasius, Brakke (1994) argues the following about this list:

In any case, Athanasius's polemic against 'teachers' finds its proper context in his effort to reduce the influence of study

circles in Christian Alexandria and consolidate Christian life around the hierarchical episcopate. (p. 410)

If analogy is to play a role in the assessment of Athanasius's list, this argument, at least in part, finds its weakness in the observation that all of the lists considered thus far span from different time periods, and at least one of them comes from an earlier very influential teacher from Alexandria, namely Origen.

Athanasius prefaces the first portion of his list stating, 'ἔτι τοίνυν τῆς μὲν παλαιᾶς διαθήκης βιβλία τῷ ἀριθμῷ τὰ πάντα εἰκοσιδύο· τοσαῦτα γὰρ, ὡς ἤκουσα, καὶ τὰ στοιχεῖα τὰ παρ' Ἑβραίοις εἶναι παραδέδονται' (Athanasius 1844:8). His list of 'τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης' includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–4 Kings (1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings), Chronicles (1–2), 1 Esdras and Ezra/Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job, the Twelve, Isaiah, Jeremiah (Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations and the Letter of Jeremiah), Ezekiel, and Daniel (Athanasius 1844:8).

He prefaces the second portion of the list saying, 'τὰ δὲ τῆς καινῆς πάλιν οὐκ ὀκνητέον εἰπεῖν' (Athanasius 1844:8). His list of 'τῆς καινῆς' includes Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude, Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Revelation (Athanasius 1844:8–9).

He concludes this two part list with a summary statement:

ταῦτα πηγαὶ τοῦ σωτηρίου, ὥστε τὸν διψῶντα ἐμφορεῖσθαι τῶν ἐν τούτοις λογίων· ἐν τούτοις μόνοις τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας διδασκαλεῖον εὐαγγελίζεται. μηδεὶς τούτοις ἐπιβαλλέτω· μὴ δὲ τούτων ἀφαιρέσθω τι. περὶ δὲ τούτων ὁ κύριος Σαδδουκαῖος μὲν ἐδυσώπει, λέγων· πλανᾶσθε μὴ εἰδότες τὰς γραφάς. τοῖς δὲ Ἰουδαίοις παρήγει· ἐρευνᾶτε τὰς γραφάς· ὅτι αὐταὶ εἰσι αἱ μαρτυροῦσαι περὶ ἐμοῦ. (Athanasius 1844:9)

After this strong statement, yet another list of books is introduced:

Ἄλλ' ἕνεκά γε πλείονος ἀκριβείας προσθήμη καὶ τοῦτο γράφων ἀναγκαίως ὡς ὅτι ἐστὶν καὶ ἕτερα βιβλία τούτων ἔξωθεν· οὐ κανονιζόμενα μὲν τετυπωμένα δὲ παρὰ τῶν πατέρων ἀναγινώσκεσθαι τοῖς ἄρτι προσερχομένοις καὶ βουλομένοις κατηχεῖσθαι τὸν τῆς εὐσεβείας λόγον. (Athanasius 1844:9)

These books that are 'οὐ κανονιζόμενα' but yet should 'ἀναγινώσκεσθαι' are: the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas (Athanasius 1844:9). The relationship of these three lists is reinforced and contrasted with a fourth category of books: 'Καὶ ὁμως ἀγαπητοὶ, κάκεινων κανονιζόμενων καὶ τούτων ἀναγινωσκομένων οὐδαμοῦ τῶν ἀποκρύφων μνήμη' (Athanasius 1844:9). The first two lists are books that are 'κανονιζόμενα', the third list gives those books that should 'ἀναγινώσκεσθαι', whilst a fourth group is made up of 'τῶν ἀποκρύφων'. This fourth category is described in distinction to these first three lists: 'ἀλλὰ αἰρετικῶν ἐστὶν ἐπίνοια, γραφόντων μὲν ὅτε θέλουσιν αὐτὰ· χαριζομένων δὲ καὶ προστιθέντων αὐτοῖς χρόνους· ἴν' ὡς παλαιὰ προφέροντες, πρόφασιν ἔχωσιν ἀπατᾶν ἐκ τούτου τοὺς ἀκραίους' (Athanasius 1844:9).

Again, the lists of books are separated into different categories. The books that are 'κανονιζόμενα' and are made

up of 'τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης' and 'τῆς καινῆς': Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–4 Kings (1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings), Chronicles (1–2), 1 Esdras and Ezra/Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job, the Twelve, Isaiah, Jeremiah (Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations, and the Letter of Jeremiah), Ezekiel, Daniel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude, Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Revelation. The books that are 'οὐ κανονιζόμενα' but yet should 'ἀναγινώσκεσθαι' are: the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas. The books that stand outside both of these categories are of 'τῶν ἀποκρύφων' and 'αἰρετικῶν'.

### Tertullian

Tertullian (ca. 160–220) (Wlosok 2001:3018), though not listing all the texts, does at least give clues in relation to which texts were viewed as authoritative in relation to the confrontation with Marcion. In *Ad Adversus* 4.2.2 he states:

Denique nobis fidem ex apostolis Ioannes et Matthaëus insinuant, ex apostolicis Lucas et Marcus instaurant, isdem regulis exors, quantum ad unicum deum attinet creatorem et Christum eius, natum ex virgine, supplementum legis et prophetarum. (Tertullian 1971:262)

This is in distinction to Marcion's supposed position in 4.1.1 that:

cognominatum et ad separationem legis et evangelii coactum, qua duos deos dividens, proinde diversos, alterum alterius instrumenti, vel, quod magis usui est dicere, testamenti, ut exinde evangelio quoque secundum *Antitheses* credendo patrocinaretur. (Tertullian 1971:257)

This other Gospel is identified by Tertullian in 4.5.2 as 'id evangelium Lucae ab initio editionis suae stare quod cum maxime tuemur, Marcionis vero plerisque nec notum, nullis autem notum ut non eadem damnatum' (Tertullian 1971:270).<sup>1</sup> Just before this statement another group of writings was given in 4.5.1–2:

In summa, si constat id verius quod prius, id prius quod et ab initio, id ab initio quod ab apostolis, pariter utique constabit id esse ab apostolis traditum quod apud ecclesias apostolorum fuerit sacrosanctum. Videamus quod lac a Paul Corinthii hauserint, ad quam regulam Galatae sint recorrecti, quid legant Philippenses, Thessalonicensis, Ephesii, quid etiam. Romani de proximo sonent, quibus evangelium et Petrus et Paulus sanguine

1. Dieter T. Roth (2008:513–527) argues against what he views as the incorrect impression from scholarly debate in Germany in the 1800s over the relation between Marcion's Gospel and Luke. In his opening paragraph he states, 'Thus, the incorrect impression has arisen that recent advocates of the position that Luke was the product of a significant redactional revision after the time of Marcion are renewing a supposed consensus that resulted from the intense discussion of the issue in Germany 150 years ago' (p. 513). Just before his conclusion, he gives this evaluation: 'Unfortunately, once again, several inaccuracies are present. First, the type of redactional activity seen in Marcion's Gospel and Luke (subsequent to Marcion) – if it may even accurately be described as such – posited by Ritschl and Volkmar is of a nature vastly different from that set forth by Hilgenfeld, whose view is rather far from Baur's. Secondly, even if one wished to argue that redactional activity of some sort was identified by all four scholars, Ritschl and Volkmar certainly did not conclude that both texts reworked a common original. Finally, not only was there therefore no agreed-upon position or compromise, but 'it is bewildering that Klinghardt references Ritschl as a proponent of the "original text more closely resembling Marcion's Gospel" position and Volkmar for the "original text more closely resembling Luke" position, when both clearly had concluded that Luke, apart from a very few original readings preserved by Marcion, had been edited by Marcion' (Roth 2008:526).

quoque suo signatum reliquerunt. Habemus et Ioannis alumnas ecclesias. Nam etsi Apocalypsin eius Marcion respuit, ordo tamen episcoporum ad originem recens in Ioannem stabit auctorem. (Tertullian 1971:268, 270)

The books set in opposition to Marcion's books are: the Law, the Prophets, the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), Paul's letters (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Thessalonians), John's Letters, and Revelation. Tertullian claims that Marcion has a different version of Luke and some of Paul's letters.

## Authoritative books in early Christianity

What is obvious from these different lists is that there was a large body of literature that was circulating within early Christianity. This body of literature contained writings from a variety of recognised time periods, books inherited from the pre-Christian era, from the Apostolic-Era, and from the post-Apostolic Era. The lists from Origen, Eusebius, the Muratorian Canon and Athanasius distinguish between categories of books rather than just giving one definitive list. These lists move from books that are unquestioned, to those that are questioned, to those that are completely questioned, that is rejected. The books that are seen of value are not simply those in the first category of 'unquestioned' but those in the first two categories, 'unquestioned' and 'questioned'. The books that are 'rejected' are not rejected because there was *some* question in relation to *an* aspect of authorship, distribution, or teaching, but instead because they were dubious on all accounts, otherwise they would have been retained with the books that were questioned in relation to one aspect. What is developed is less an 'exclusive list' as a sort of reading hierarchy, where unquestioned books are appropriate for complete use within every aspect of the church, where questioned books are appropriate for personal reading but not as a part of the public gathering of the church, and finally, where completely questioned books are to be rejected as imposters.

It has become customary to note that though there are lists, none of these lists are *exactly* the same. This is of course true, each of these lists are *somewhat* different from each other. However, the more striking observation in the present milieu is how similar these lists are. The list of books from the 'Hebrews' is only different in regard to one list that excludes Esther (but includes it with the other books to be read) and has the Twelve (instead?). Roger Beckwith (1985) notes in relation to the absence of the Twelve from Origen's list:

The omission of the Minor Prophets, whether due to Origen himself or to Eusebius, through whom we receive the list, must be accidental, since their canonicity was never disputed, and Origen both appeals to their authority in his extant writings and wrote a commentary on them, now lost'. (p. 186)

For the 'Apostolic' literature, all of the Gospels are the same, Paul's Epistles are the same (with a question of authorship with regard to Hebrews), and 1 Peter and 1 John are the same. To use Eusebius's term all of these books are found

in the 'ὁμολογούμενοι'. Another striking feature in the present milieu is the second list of books, books that were questioned in some regard but were yet acceptable for some type of use by Christians. Although these lists are not similar, they do contain the books of James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Revelation, and the Wisdom of Solomon, that were all listed in at least one of the lists of the 'ὁμολογούμενων'. Further, these lists represent a fairly broad age span with the Muratorian Canon coming from the end of the 2nd century AD, Origen's list coming from the mid 3rd century AD, Eusebius's list from the first part of the 4th century AD, and Athanasius's from AD 367. The argument with Marcion and these lists, with multiple 'levels' of reading, also highlight at least some level of broadening in relation to the canon.

However, one must note that the lists are different and reflect a different canon than Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Bibles. This difference is both hermeneutical as well as substantial. The hermeneutical difference is that some books were considered to be more authoritative than others. This is to say that not all texts have the same status within the life of the church. The unquestioned texts are appropriate for use in every aspect of the church. The questioned texts are for personal reading but not for general use within the church. The rejected books are of no value to the church, whether corporately or personally. This hierarchy of reading gives precedence to the unquestioned texts, allows for mediated expansion through the questioned texts, and calls for a complete correction of the rejected texts based on the first two levels. Substantially this calls for an actual personal examination of texts that in Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant circles have all but been forgotten. This hierarchy is then not so much between Old and New Testaments and Apocrypha as between these three levels of texts, where the Old and New Testaments as listed in these texts stand on equal unquestioned footing, with the other levels being subject to this category.

This is a radically different position than Marcion's as represented by Tertullian where almost all of the unquestioned books from these lists are rejected. This rejection is not based on historical grounds, like these lists, but is hermeneutical. The texts that speak about the God of law are rejected and the ones that speak of the God of gospel are accepted, and at this, one, the Gospel of Luke, is edited from this hermeneutical perspective. This highlights a significant difference between these lists and Marcion's list. Marcion retains books solely based on their harmony in relation to his view of God; the other lists retain books based on their historicity, whether from the Hebrew tradition or apostolic tradition. Robert R. Hann (1977) summarises another harmonistic perspective from the 2nd century AD from the Ebionites found in the so-called *Kerygmata Petrou*:

Among the false passages which the Ebionites believed to have been added to the law are those which portray God in such anthropomorphic terms as experiencing envy, lying, hardening human hearts, or sharing authority with others. Sacrificial worship had not been commanded by God, but was a practice to which the Hebrews were accustomed since their sojourn in Egypt. (p. 236)

He states further that:

Among the teachings which they reject are the abandonment of the Torah by the Gentile church, its conception that Jesus is divine, its identification of Paul as an apostle, and, perhaps, its doctrine of the trinity. (p. 237)

Though the hermeneutic is different from Marcion's and leads to almost the exact opposite collection of books, the principle appears to be the same; books are accepted or rejected based primarily on harmonistic grounds. Martin Ebner in relation to Marcion states, 'Markions Schriften entsprechen inhaltlich also durchaus der *regula fidei*' (Ebner 2008:47).

In the lists discussed, harmony was not the primary consideration but used as a secondary criteria to examine questioned texts; books were rejected only if they failed on historical and then harmonistic accounts. It should be noted further that this harmony was not in relation to other authors in the apostolic tradition but the author to whom the text was connected. This last point is supported by the wide perspectives represented within New Testament literature. Christiane Tietz (2007) makes a similar point whilst arguing for wide diversity in the church:

Die Vielgestaltigkeit der Kirche nimmt konkrete Form an in der Mannigfaltigkeit der Konfessionen, die sich alle auf den neutestamentlichen Kanon berufen. Von der Veilstimmigkeit des neutestamentlichen Kanons her ist dazu zu sagen: Keine Konfession hat das Recht zu behaupten, sie allein vertrete die christliche Wahrheit. (p. 102)

## Conclusion

The search through these early lists has confirmed a wide variety of literature that was circulating within early Christianity. Lists that were examined gave judgements in relation to these various books and letters over the period of about 170 years, from circa AD 196 to 367. These lists reveal a varied level of authority, those texts that were unquestioned, those texts that were questioned, and those texts that were rejected. The first level of texts was appropriate for complete use within the church. The second level of texts was appropriate for personal reading but not for public use in the church. The third level of texts was rejected. These lists were based first on historical considerations and second harmonistic considerations were used to evaluate texts that were questioned based on historical considerations. Texts were not rejected because they failed on one account, but rather because they failed on multiple accounts. As was stated in the previous section, 'This hierarchy of reading gives precedence to the unquestioned texts, allows for mediated expansion through the questioned texts, and calls for a complete correction of the rejected texts based on the first two levels. Substantially this calls for an actual personal examination of texts that in Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant circles have all but been forgotten'. This all is in contrast to Marcion's view where harmonistic considerations were of utmost importance. Each of these considerations gives a nuanced evaluation in relation to the present popular and scholarly milieu.

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