The books of the Bibles in early Christianity

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 it became 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 ἄγγελον τὰς εὐαγγελίων εσσάρων εὐαγγελίων ὡς Πέτρου καὶ Θωμᾶ καὶ Ματθία μὴ ἔνωσαν ἑνώμενον ἀριθμὸν εὐαγγελίων, ὅτι ἐνεχθέν ἔστω δὲ καὶ δυσσεβῆ παραιτητέον κατὰ τὴν Ἀποκάλυψιν Ἰωαννου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀποστόλων πράξεις ἔστω δὲ καὶ δευτέραν· ἀμφιβάλλεται γάρ ὃτι μὴ καθ' Ἑβραίους εὐαγγέλιον’ (Eusebius 1926:256). 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). Still quoting from Origen, Eusebius goes on, ’ὡς ἐν παραδόσει μᾶθα παραθέον περὶ τῶν τεσσάρων εὐαγγελίων, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀντιλεγομένων οἱ ἤδη δ' ἐν τῷ τὸν οὐρανόν ἐκλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ’ (Eusebius 1932:74). These works are only partially listed and described, ’ὡς ἔφην’ (Eusebius 1932:76). In relation to Peter it is said, ὃς μὲν ἀληθὲς θεὸς οἴδεν τὸν Ἀπόστολον Πέτρου καὶ τὸν ἤτοι πάσας ἐπιστολὰς καὶ τὰς ἀποστόλων πράξεις. (Eusebius 1926:258). Paul is the first one mentioned but no number is given only that ’ὡς ἔφην αὐτοῖς’ (Eusebius 1926:258). Still quoting from Origen, Eusebius goes on, ‘οὐ γὰρ εἰκῇ οἱ ἀρχαῖοι ἄνδρες ὡς Παύλου αὐτὴν παραδεδώκασιν. τίς δὲ ὁ γράψας τὸ εὐαγγέλιον καὶ τὰς Πράξεις τῶν ἀποστόλων πράξεις καὶ δυσσεβῆ παραιτητέον κατὰ τὴν Ἀποκάλυψιν Ἰωαννου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀποστόλων πράξεις’ (Eusebius 1926:258). In this list an additional book is added with a detailed description: ‘ὅθεν οὐδ' ἐν νόθοις αὐτὰ κατατακτέον ὅτι ἤδη δ' ἐν τῷ τὸν οὐρανόν ἐκλήσεως κατέλεξαν, ἤδη δ' ἐν τῷ τὸν οὐρανόν ἐκλήσεως κατέλεξαν’ (Eusebius 1926:258). This expands this second category with these books: the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalyptic 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: ’ἡ Ἰουσίαν ἔφην, ἀθετοῦσιν ἤδη δ' ἐγκαθίσταται, μήδε τοῖς ὅσος ὡς ἔφην· ἥν τινες ὡς Πέτρου καὶ Θωμᾶ καὶ Ματθία μὴ ἔνωσαν τὰς ἀποστόλων πράξεις τοῖς ὁμολογουμένοις. ἤδη δ' ἐν τούτοις τινὲς καὶ τὸ καθ' Ἑβραίους εὐαγγέλιον κατέλεξαν, μὴ μάλιστα Ἑβραίως οὐ τὸν Χριστὸν παραδεδέχθη φασὶν. (Eusebius 1926:256).

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: ’Ἑβραίως δ' ἐντάξει γενόμενοις ἀνακεφαλαίωσασθαί τῆς δηλωθείσας τῆς καθ' ἑκάστης διάθεσις γραφῆς’ (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 ἀναλογισμοῖς’ (Eusebius 1926:256). This is even with the previous statement about Revelation where he states, ’ἐκ τούτοις τακτέον, εἶ γε θαυμάζων, τὴν Ἀποκάλυψιν Ἰωαννου’ (Eusebius 1926:256). The next group of books are prefaced with these words: ’τῶν δ' ἀντιλεγομένων, γνωρίσων δ' ὁμολογουμένων τοῖς ὁμολογουμένων’ (Eusebius 1926:256). These books are listed as: James, Jude, and 2 and 3 John. Only 2 and 3 John receive a further description: ’ἐκ τῶν εἰς ἡμᾶς εἰσήγησιν τοῦτον ἴδων καὶ τῶν ἀντιλεγομένων ζήσων’ (Eusebius 1926:256). He also introduces other books that should be understood in this category: 

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).

Although it is tempting to understand a radical distinction between the books listed as ’αὐτοίς γεγονότοι’ and ’ἄντελεγομένων’, 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 Ματθία καὶ τῶν ἄλλων παρὰ ταῦτα, τῶν εὐαγγελίων εἶδος κατέλεξαν, ὅτι τῶν αἱρετικῶν ἔστω δὲ καὶ δευτέραν· ἀμφιβάλλεται γάρ ὃτι τοῖς ὁμολογουμένοις εἰ φανείη’ (Eusebius 1926:256). The purpose for this list is: 

Διακρίνοντας τὰς τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἑκκλησιαστικὴν παράδοσιν ἅμαρτους ἀλλάδεστους καὶ ἁμαρτημένους γραφηκά τὰς τὰς ἀπόστολων πράξεις. (Eusebius 1926:258)
those books which are ‘ὁμολογούμενα’: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Paul’s letters, 1 John, 1 Peter, and Revelation. The second list is those books which are ‘ἀντιλεγομένα’: 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 ‘άς γραφές τῆς κανονικῆς διαθήκης’. The second list, although disputed, merits being listed with the first list. The third list is the books ‘τῶν αἱρετικῶν’: 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 ἐπιστόλα μία, ὅτι λεγόμενος αὐτοῦ προτέρα, ἀνωμαλωτά, ταύτη δὲ καὶ οἱ πάλαι πρεσβύτεροι ὡς ἀναφέρεται ἐν τοῖς σφίν αὐτῶν καταγεγραμμένοι συγγράμματοι· τὴν δὲ περιεχόμενην διεύρυναν οὐκ εὐθέως μὲν εἶναι παρελθόνδες, ὡς δὲ πολλὰς χρόνους φανεροῖς, μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων ἐπισκόπησε γραφὴν. τὸ γε μὴν τῶν ἑπικεφαλεμένων αὐτοῦ Πράξεων καὶ τὸ κατ’ αὐτὸν ἀνομολογομένων εὐγεγραμμένον τὸ λεγόμενον αὐτοῖς Φράγμα καὶ τὴν καλωμένην Ἀποκάλυφαν οὐδ’ ὡς ἐν καθολικῶς ἤρθεν παραδεσμένα, ὅτι μὴν ἀγαθῶς μὴν μὴν κἂν ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἐκκλησιαστικοὺς συγγραφέας ταῖς ἐξ αὐτῶν συγγραφέως μαρτυρίαις. (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... γραφὰν’. 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 μὲν οὖν ἐπιστολὴ μία, οὐ δίκαιον ἀγνοεῖν· καὶ τὰ περὶ ταύτης δὲ τοῖς πρὸ ἡμῶν ἀντιλεγομένοι αὐτοῖς καὶ τῶν παλαιτάτων δὲ συγγραφέων κεχρημένους τινὰς αὐτῷ θεωρεῖ τις εἰς αὐτὰ καταλύτα τις (Eusebius 1926:192).

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

τοῦ δὲ Παύλου πρόδρομο καὶ σαφές εἰ δικαίωσαν· ἵνα γε μὴν τινες ἤτετυχαν τὴν πρὸς Ἐφραίμ, πρὸς τὴν Ρωμαίου έξοντος ώς μὴ Παύλου οὐκ ἔκαπτον αὐτὴν αὐτίκα εὐθυγραμμίζοντας, καὶ δικαίως ἀγνοοῦν καὶ τὰ πρὸ ταύτης δὲ τοῖς πρὸ ἡμῶν εἰρημένα κατὰ καρπὸν παραθέσαμεν. (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).

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

τοῦ δὲ Παύλου πρόδρομο καὶ σαφές εἰ δικαίωσαν· ἵνα γε μὴν τινες ἤτετυχαν τὴν πρὸς Ἐφραίμ, πρὸς τὴν Ρωμαίου έξοντος ώς μὴ Παύλου οὐκ ἔκαπτον αὐτὴν αὐτίκα εὐθυγραμμίζοντας, καὶ δικαίως ἀγνοοῦν καὶ τὰ πρὸ ταύτης δὲ τοῖς πρὸ ἡμῶν εἰρημένα κατὰ καρπὸν παραθέσαμεν. (Eusebius 1926:192)

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)

Muratori himself dated this statement from circa AD 196 as his title to this fragment indicates: ‘Fragmentum aceanophilum Cajii, 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 Hermes: ‘Pastorem vero nuperrime temporibus nostris in Urbe Roma Herma conscriptis, 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. 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:

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)

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

Epistole autem Pauli, quae, a quu loco, vel qua ex causa directe sint, voluntatibus intelligere, ipse declarant. Primum omnium Corinthii schisma haeresis inercicem, deinceps Callactis circumsecutionem. Romanam autem ordine Scripturarum, sed et principium earum esse Christum intimans, prolixius scrispis, de quibus singulis necesse est a nobis disputari, cum ipse Beatius Apostolus Paulus sequens praedecessoris sui Johannis ordinem, nonnisi nominatum septem Ecclesias scribat ordine tali. Ad Corinthios prima, ad Ephesios secunda, ad Philippenses tertia, ad Colossenses quarta, ad Galatas quinta, ad Tesselonicenses sexta, ad Romanes septima. Verum Corinthiens, et Tesselonicenses libet pro correctione iteretur, una tamen per omnem ordem terrae Ecclesiae diffusa esse denocit. Et Joannes enim in Apocalypsi licet septem Ecclesias scribat, tamen omnem dicit. Verum ad Philoemenum una, et ad Titun uma, et ad Timotheum duas pro affectu et dilectione, in honore tamen Ecclesiae Catholicae, in ordinatione Ecclesiasticae disciplinae sanctificatae sunt. Fertur enim ad Laudecenses, alia ad Alexandrinos Pauli nomine fictae ad haeresem Marcionis; et alia plura, quae in Catholicae Ecclesiam recipi non potest. Fel enim cum melle miscri non congruent. (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 haeresem Marcionis’, namely letters to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians. The statement close to the end of this passage, ‘et alia plura, quae in Catholicae 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:


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 Ecclesiae nolunt’.

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

Pastorem vero nuperrime temporibus nostris in Urbe Roma Herma conscriptis, 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 Marcionis concipserunt una cum Basilide Assiamnum Catafrylum 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:

Ἀλλ’ ἐποίησεν περὶ μὲν τῶν ἀκριβῶν ἐμμύθησεν, ως νεκρῶν· περὶ δὲ ἡμῶν ὡς ἔγραψεν ἀποκρύφων μνήμην ἐμφανίζω, ἐκ τούτων τῶν ἀκριβῶν ἐμμύθησεν, ἐκ τῆς ἑωθίνης τοῦ ἁγίου γενέσεως ἐμφανίζω. (Athanasius 1844:7)

He claims that he is adopting the same attitude as that of ‘τούς εὐαγγελιστοὺς Λουκᾶς’ and is decidedly against those who mix ‘ἀπὸ τῆς πανουργίας τινῶν ἀνθρώπων’ following this statement.

Athanasius prefaces the first portion of his list stating, ‘ἐκ τῶν τῆς μὲν παλαιᾶς διαθήκης βιβλία τὰ ἁγία τὰ πάντα εἰκοσιδύο· τοσαῦτα ὡς σχολάσεως τοῦ παλαιοῦ κανονισθέντων’ (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 concludes this two part list with a summary statement: Ταῦτα πηγαί τοῦ σωματικῷ ποιστηθεῖσι τῶν ἐν τούτοις λέγων ὡς ἔγραψεν ἀποκρύφων μνήμην ἐμφανίζω, ἐκ τῆς ἑωθίνης τοῦ ἁγίου γενέσεως ἐμφανίζω. (Athanasius 1844:9)

After this strong statement, yet another list of books is introduced: Αὐτὸν ἔκει γε πλεῖστος ἀκριβείας προστίθημη καὶ τοῦτο γράφων ἀναγκαίως ὡς ἔγραψεν. (Athanasius 1844:9)

These books that are ‘οὐ κανονιζόμενα’ but yet should ‘ἀναγνωσθήσεται’ include: 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 ὅμως ἄγαπητοί κρίνονται καὶ τούτοις ἀναγνωσθήσεται καὶ ἀναγνωσθήσεται καὶ τὸν κύριον ἀφηρικήθησαν. (Athanasius 1844:9)

Again, the lists of books are separated into different categories. The books that are ‘κανονιζόμενα’ and are made
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 among the apostolic church, and finally, where completely questioned books are to be rejected as imposters.

**Tertullian**

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

> Denique nobis fidem ex apostolis Ioannes et Matthaeus insinuant, ex apostolis Lucus et Marcus instaurant, idem regulis exoni, 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:

> cognominatun et ad separationem legis et evangelii coactum, qua duos deos divinent, proinde diversos, alterum alterius intrumenti, vel, quod magis usu est dicere, testamenti, ut exinde evangelio quoque secundum Antithesis creando 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). 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 et ab initio quod ab apostolis, pariter utique constat id esse ab apostolis traditum quod apud ecclesias apostolorum fuerit sacrosanctum. Videamus quod lac paul Corinthii hausserint, ad quem regulam Galatae sint rectificati, quid legant Philippenses, Thessalonicenses, Ephesi, quid etiam. Romani de proximo somnet, quibus evangelium et Petrus et Paulus sanguine patrocinaretur. (Tertullian 1971:268, 270)
in the 'ὀμολογουμένοις'. 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 'ὀμολογουμένων'. 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 texts that speak about 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 Kerygmaton Petrov:

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 fidelis’ (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 Unverschämtheit des neutestamentlichen Kanons her is 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.
Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References


