

THE FORMATION OF THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

by Benjamin B. Warfield

Benjamin Warfield's historical examination of how the New Testament canon was formed, arguing that apostolic authority established the collection of sacred writings from the Church's earliest period.

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B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) was the last great theologian of the conservative Presbyterians at Princeton Theological Seminary. His activity as a theologian coincided with the period when higher-critical views of Scripture and evolutionary conceptions of religion were replacing evangelical convictions in most of America's major institutions of higher learning. Warfield distinguished himself as a scholarly defender of Augustinian Calvinism, supernatural Christianity, and the inspiration of the Bible. The following article was originally published in 1892 (the year of C. H. Spurgeon's death) by the American Sunday School Union, Philadelphia, PA. It now appears in his collected writings in the volume *The Inspiration And Authority Of The Bible*, published by The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Philadelphia. In order to obtain a correct understanding of what is called the formation of the Canon of the New Testament, it is necessary to begin by fixing very firmly in our minds one fact which is obvious enough when attention is once called to it. That is, that the Christian church did not require to form for itself the idea of a 'canon,' — or, as we should more commonly call it, of a 'Bible,' — that is, of a collection of books given of God to be the authoritative rule of faith and practice. It inherited this idea from the Jewish church, along with the thing itself, the Jewish Scriptures, or the 'Canon of the Old Testament.' The church did not grow up by natural law: it was founded. And the authoritative teachers sent forth by Christ to found His church, carried with them, as their most precious possession, a body of Divine Scriptures, which they imposed on the church that they founded as its code of law. No reader of the New Testament can need proof of this; on every page of that book is spread the evidence that from the very beginning the Old Testament was as cordially recognized as law by the Christian as by the Jew. The Christian church thus was never without a 'Bible' or a 'canon.' But the Old testament books were not the only ones which the apostles (by Christ's own appointment the authoritative founders of the church) imposed upon the infant churches, as their authoritative rule of faith and practice. No more authority dwelt in the prophets of the old covenant than in themselves, the apostles, who had been 'made sufficient ministers of a new covenant'; for (as one of themselves argued) 'if that which passeth away was with glory, much more that which remaineth is in glory.' Accordingly not only was the gospel they delivered, in their own estimation, itself a Divine revelation, but it was also preached 'in the Holy Ghost' (1 Peter 1:12); not merely the matter of it, but the very words in which it was clothed were 'of the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 2:13). Their own commands were, therefore, of Divine authority (1 Thessalonians 4:2), and their writings were the depository of these commands (2 Thessalonians 2:15). 'If any man obeyeth not our word by this epistle,' says Paul to one church (2 Thessalonians 3:14), 'note that man, that ye have no company with him.' To another he makes it the test of a Spirit-led man to recognize that what he was writing to them was 'the commandments of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 14:37). Inevitably, such writings, making so awful a claim on their acceptance, were received by the infant churches as of a quality equal to that of the old 'Bible'; placed alongside of its older books as an additional part of the one law of God; and read as such in their meetings for worship — a practice which moreover

was required by the apostles (1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16; Revelation 1:3). In the apprehension, therefore, of the earliest churches, the 'Scriptures' were not a closed but an increasing 'canon.' Such they had been from the beginning, as they gradually grew in number from Moses to Malachi; and such they were to continue as long as there should remain among the churches 'men of God who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.'

We say that this immediate placing of new books — given the church under the seal of apostolic authority — among the Scriptures already established as such, was inevitable. It is also historically evinced from the very beginning. Thus the apostle Peter, writing in A.D. 68, speaks of Paul's numerous letters not in contrast with the Scriptures, but as among the Scriptures and in contrast with 'the other Scriptures' (2 Peter 3:16) — that is, of course, those of the Old Testament. In like manner the apostle Paul combines, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the book of Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Luke under the common head of 'Scripture' (1 Timothy 5:18): 'For the Scripture saith, 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn' [Deuteronomy 25:4]; and, 'The laborer is worthy of his hire' (Luke 10:7). The line of such quotations is never broken in Christian literature. Polycarp (c. 12) in A.D. 115 unites the Psalms and Ephesians in exactly similar manner: 'In the sacred books, . . . as it is said in these Scriptures, 'Be ye angry and sin not,' and 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.' So, a few years later, the so-called second letter of Clement, after quoting Isaiah, adds (ii.4): 'And another Scripture, however, says, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' — quoting from Matthew, a book which Barnabas (circa 97-106 A. D.) had already adduced as Scripture. After this such quotations are common.

What needs emphasis at present about these facts is that they obviously are not evidences of a gradually-heightening estimate of the New Testament books, originally received on a lower level and just beginning to be tentatively accounted Scripture; they are conclusive evidences rather of the estimation of the New Testament books from the very beginning as Scripture, and of their attachment as Scripture to the other Scriptures already in hand. The early Christians did not, then, first form a rival 'canon' of 'new books' which came gradually to be accounted as of equal divinity and authority with the 'old books'; they received new book after new book from the apostolical circle, as equally 'Scripture' with the old books, and added them one by one to the collection of old books as additional Scriptures, until at length the new books thus added were numerous enough to be looked upon as another section of the Scriptures. The earliest name given to this new section of Scripture was framed on the model of the name by which what we know as the Old Testament was then known. Just as it was called 'The Law and the Prophets and the Psalms' (or 'the Hagiographa' — 'Holy Writings'), or more briefly 'The Law and the Prophets,' or even more briefly still 'The Law'; so the enlarged Bible was called 'The Law and the Prophets, with the Gospels and the Apostles' (so Clement of Alexandria, 'Strom.' vi. 11, 88; Tertullian, 'De Præs. Hær.' 36), or most briefly 'The Law and the Gospel' (so Claudius Apolinarius, Irenæus); while the new books apart were called 'The Gospel and the Apostles,' or most briefly of all 'The Gospel.' This earliest name for the new Bible, with all that it involves as to its relation to the old and briefer Bible, is traceable as far back as Ignatius (A.D. 115), who makes use of it repeatedly (e.g., 'ad Philad.' 5; 'ad Smyrn.' 7). In one passage he gives us a hint of the controversies which the enlarged Bible of the Christians aroused among the Judaizers ('ad Philad.' 6). 'When I heard some saying,' he writes, "Unless I find it in the Old [Books]; his cross and death and resurrection, and the faith which is by him, the undefiled Old [Books] — by which I wish, by your prayers, to be justified.

The priests indeed are good, but the High Priest better,' etc. Here Ignatius appeals to the 'Gospel' as Scripture, and the Judaizers object, receiving from him the answer in effect which Augustine afterward formulated in the well-known saying that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is first made clear in the New. What we need now to observe, however, is that to Ignatius the New Testament was not a different book from the Old testament, but part of the one body of Scripture with it; an accretion, so to speak, which had grown upon it. This is the testimony of all the early witnesses — even those which speak for the distinctively Jewish-Christian church. For example, that curious Jewish-Christian writing, 'The Testaments of the XII Patriarchs' (Benj. 11), tells us, under the cover of an ex post facto prophecy, that the 'work and word' of Paul, i.e., confessedly the book of Acts and Paul's Epistles, 'shall be written in the Holy Books,' i.e., as is understood by all, made a part of the existent Bible. So even in the Talmud, in a scene intended to ridicule a 'bishop' of the first century, he is represented as finding Galatians by 'sinking himself deeper' into the same 'Book' which contained the Law of Moses ('Babl. Shabbath,' 116 a and b). The details cannot be entered into here. Let it suffice to say that, from the evidence of the fragments which alone have been preserved to us of the Christian writings of that very early time, it appears that from the beginning of the second century (and that is from the end of the apostolic age) a collection (Ignatius, II Clement) of 'New Books' (Ignatius), called the 'Gospel and Apostles' (Ignatius, Marcion), was already part of the 'Oracles' of God (Polycarp, Papias, II Clement), or 'Scriptures' (I Timothy, II Peter, Barnabas, Polycarp, II Clement), or the 'Holy Books' or 'Bible' (Testt. XII. Patt.). The number of books included in this added body of New Books, at the opening of the second century, cannot be satisfactorily determined by the evidence of these fragments alone. The section of it called the 'Gospel' included Gospels written by the apostles and their companions' (Justin), which beyond legitimate question were our four Gospels now received. The section called 'The Apostles' contained the book of Acts (The Testt. XII. Patt.) and epistles of Paul, John, Peter, and James. The evidence from various quarters is indeed enough to show that the collection in general use contained all the books which we at present receive, with the possible exceptions of Jude, II and III John and Philemon. And it is more natural to suppose that failure of very early evidence for these brief booklets is due to their insignificant size rather than to their non-acceptance.

It is to be borne in mind, however, that the extent of the collection may have — and indeed is historically shown actually to have — varied in different localities. The Bible was circulated only in hand-copies, slowly and painfully made; and an incomplete copy, obtained say at Ephesus in A.D. 68, would be likely to remain for many years the Bible of the church to which it was conveyed; and might indeed become the parent of other copies, incomplete like itself, and thus the means of providing a whole district with incomplete Bibles. Thus, when we inquire after the history of the New Testament Canon we need to distinguish such questions as these: (1) When was the New Testament Canon completed? (2) When did any one church acquire a completed canon? (3) When did the completed canon — the complete Bible — obtain universal circulation and acceptance? (4) On what ground and evidence did the churches with incomplete Bibles accept the remaining books when they were made known to them? The Canon of the New Testament was completed when the last authoritative book was given to any church by the apostles, and that was when John wrote the Apocalypse, about A.D. 98. Whether the church of Ephesus, however, had a completed Canon when it received the Apocalypse, or not, would depend on whether there was any epistle, say that of Jude, which had not yet reached it with authenticating proof of its

apostolicity. There is room for historical investigation here. Certainly the whole Canon was not universally received by the churches till somewhat later. The Latin church of the second and third centuries did not quite know what to do with the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Syrian churches for some centuries may have lacked the lesser of the Catholic Epistles and Revelation. But from the time of Irenæus down, the church at large had the whole Canon as we now possess it. And though a section of the church may not yet have been satisfied of the apostolicity of a certain book or of certain books; and though afterwards doubts may have arisen in sections of the church as to the apostolicity of certain books (as e.g. of Revelation): yet in no case was it more than a respectable minority of the church which was slow in receiving, or which came afterward to doubt, the credentials of any of the books that then as now constituted the Canon of the New Testament accepted by the church at large. And in every case the principle on which a book was accepted, or doubts against it laid aside, was the historical tradition of apostolicity.

Let it, however, be clearly understood that it was not exactly apostolic authorship which in the estimation of the earliest churches, constituted a book a portion of the 'canon.' Apostolic authorship was, indeed, early confounded with canonicity. It was doubt as to the apostolic authorship of Hebrews, in the West, and of James and Jude, apparently, which underlay the slowness of the inclusion of these books in the 'canon' of certain churches. But from the beginning it was not so. The principle of canonicity was not apostolic authorship, but imposition by the apostles as 'law.' Hence Tertullian's name for the 'canon' is 'instrumentum'; and he speaks of the Old and New Instrument as we would of the Old and New Testament. That the apostles so imposed the Old Testament on the churches which they founded — as their 'Instrument,' or 'Law,' or 'Canon' — can be denied by none. And in imposing new books on the same churches, by the same apostolical authority, they did not confine themselves to books of their own composition. It is the Gospel according to Luke, a man who was not an apostle, which Paul parallels in 1 Timothy 5:18 with Deuteronomy as equally 'Scripture' with it, in the first extant quotation of a New Testament book as Scripture. The Gospels which constituted the first division of the New Books, — of 'The Gospel and the Apostles,' — Justin tells us, were 'written by the apostles and their companions.' The authority of the apostles, as by Divine appointment founders of the church, was embodied in whatever books they imposed on the church as law, not merely in those they themselves had written. The early churches, in short, received, as we receive, into their New Testament all the books historically evinced to them as given by the apostles to the churches as their code of law; and we must not mistake the historical evidences of the slow circulation and authentication of these books over the widely-extended church, for evidence of slowness of 'canonization' of books by the authority or the taste of the church itself.

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