

## THE CANON OF THE GOSPELS

MERRILL C. TENNEY, PH.D.

The modern cult of *Formgeschichte* has brought again into sharp relief the entire question of the canon. In its more recent interpretations *Formgeschichte* advocates the view that the Gospels were not the products of individuals who enunciated an authoritative apostolic message concerning the life and works of Jesus, but that they are rather the composite records of traditions slowly accumulated by the Church, and set in a theological framework of the Church's manufacture.

Bultmann, perhaps the most radical advocate of this position, says after analyzing the story of the footwashing in John 13:14 ff.:

This means, in my view, that we can firmly conclude that the formation of the material in the tradition took place in the *Palestinian Church*—and that holds for those with unitary conceptions as well as for other passages.<sup>1</sup>

The principle enunciated by Bultmann in this excerpt is followed consistently through his entire work, and represent a basic assumption of the entire *Formgeschichte* School. Its consequences are obvious. If the Gospels are only the random collection of sayings of Jesus, often inexactly reproduced, or even fabricated and placed in settings which were invented by the primitive church to illustrate or to substantiate its reactions to contemporary problems, the accuracy and authority of the Gospels are dissolved in a fluid tradition. Bultmann assumes that this process could have taken place in the life of the Church between A.D. 30 and 170 without having left any consciousness of its procedure in the memory of the patristic writers—for they seem naively unaware of it. They were, according to his hypothesis, the unconscious creators of Christian truth, not the perpetuators of the message already given.

If this view be correct, there can be no fixed standard of Christian faith. Either it must shift with the changing events of science and philosophy, or else be dependent on a subjective mystical consciousness created by some "encounter" with an indefinable external power. Such a consciousness would vary with each individual unless the eternal power "encountered" each individual in such a way as to produce an identical consciousness in all believers. Such a situation is unlikely at best, and would be almost as miraculous as propositional revelation preserved in written words.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the history of Gospel

1. Bultmann, Rudolf. *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Translated from the Third Edition by John Marsh. New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers. [1963], p. 48.

tradition and its acceptance in the early Christian church. At what time were the Gospels acknowledged to be the standard source of information concerning the life and work of Jesus, and by what process did they attain that acceptance? While a complete sequence of evidence may be unobtainable, a sufficient amount may be available to afford some certainty concerning their reliability.

#### *Procedure*

Since the witnesses in the sub-apostolic age are few and fragmentary, it may be best to begin with those writers who clearly and openly acknowledged the Gospel canon, and then to work backward from them to the more tenuous testimony of earlier years. The scarcity of information concerning the canon prior to the close of the second century may be attributable to several causes: the looseness of ecclesiastical organization, for the early church was a movement rather than an institution; the comparative scarcity of writers within the ranks of the Church; the preoccupation of Christians with accomplishing a mission rather than with recording it; and the frequent persecutions which broke up any settled endeavor and often destroyed the Christian literature. The astonishing feature of early Christian literature is not that it is so scarce, but that it survived at all.

#### *The Canon of the Four Gospels*

There can be no doubt that by the end of the second century the quaternion of Gospels in our Bibles, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, was regarded as complete and canonical. Clement of Alexandria (c.A.D. 200) quoted all four at length in his *Stromateis*, and used the contents to support his arguments against the Gnostics. Clement belonged to the rather sophisticated school of Alexandria which had received some training in philosophy and literature. His quotations are not always accurate, but their wide range in the Gospels suggests that he knew and used them because they were generally accepted by the Church of Alexandria in his day.

His contemporary, Tertullian of Carthage, was insistent on the authority of the four gospels. In his argument with Marcion he asserted that

...the Gospel of Luke which we are defending with all our might has stood its ground from its very first publication... The same authority of the apostolic churches will afford evidence to the other Gospels also, which we possess equally through their means, and according to their usage—I mean the Gospels of John and Matthew—whilst that which Mark published may be affirmed to be Peter's, whose interpreter Mark was.<sup>2</sup>

2. *Adversus Marcionem* IV. V. Quoted in Translation of Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (American Reprint. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951) ANF II, 350.

Tertullian then claims that all four Gospels share equal authority, and that they have been transmitted by the apostolic churches, by which they were used. In the *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* he follows much the same argument, asserting that

the law and the prophets she [the Church] unites in one volume with the writings of the evangelists and apostles, from which she drank in her faith.

Evidently Tertullian placed the Gospels [Evangelists] on the same plane as the Old Testament, and looked upon them as the fountain of faith.<sup>3</sup>

The testimony of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in Gaul, an emigrant from Ephesus who had lived also in Rome, is even earlier than that of Clement and Tertullian. About the year 180 he wrote a treatise, *Against Heresies*, in which he advocated a novel theory concerning the Gospels:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in their number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered through all the world, and the "pillar and ground" of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life, it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying man afresh.<sup>4</sup>

Irenaeus' argument for believing that there should be only four gospels is invalid, but the context of this quotation shows that the authority of the Gospels was being debated in his day, and that he defended vigorously their canonical status. In another part of the same work he stated explicitly

... that these Gospels alone are true and reliable, and neither an increase nor diminution of the aforesaid number I have proved by so many arguments.<sup>5</sup>

Like Clement and Tertullian, he quoted copiously from the canonical gospels as authoritative.

One other authority contemporaneous with Irenaeus may be cited, the Muratorian Canon. The document was first published in 1740 by Muratori, who found it in a 7th or 8th century MS. in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, where he had formerly been a librarian. It originated in the Irish monastery of Bobbio. It was probably taken from a book in which earlier works had been copied, for the text is older than the manuscript itself. Since it alludes to the bishopric of Pius at Rome as "recently in our own times," it cannot be much later than A.D. 170. Probably it is a Latin translation of a Greek original. Although the manuscript is fragmentary, beginning with a broken text of which the first

3. *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* xxxvi.

4. Irenaeus *Against Heresies* IV, xi, 8. ANF I. p. 428.

5. *Op. cit.* III. XI. 9.

part has been lost, it must have contained references to all the Gospels. The surviving section commences with the allusion to Luke's Gospel as the third and John's as the fourth, which allows for Matthew and Mark, and it describes the origin of Luke and John. Obviously it presupposes the use of the four gospels in the Church, and assumes their authority.

A witness to a still earlier acceptance of the Four Gospels is Tatian, whose *Diatessaron*, or Harmony of the Four, had a wide vogue among the churches of Syria and the Euphrates Valley. Composed somewhere between A.D. 150 and 170 it included portions of all four Gospels, interwoven into a single narrative. While no complete manuscript of the original Greek or Syriac is extant today, there is ample evidence for the existence of such a document. If Tatian were able to gain wide support for its use, the previous existence and authority of its component Gospels must be acknowledged.

#### *Earlier Evidence*

The authoritative collection of the gospels can thus be traced back well toward the middle of the second century. Beyond this point the attestation of a fourfold canon is scanty, though sporadic quotations generally support it.

Justin Martyr (c.A.D. 148), in his First Apology described the worship of the Christians as follows:

And on this day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. . . .<sup>6</sup>

In the preceding section Justin defended the "memoirs of the apostles" as "the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels,"<sup>7</sup> and then quoted Luke 22:19. Justin must have known more than one Gospel, and his statement that the "memoirs" were read along with the prophets in the meetings of the church indicates that they were considered to be part of the sacred Scriptures. Probably he was acquainted with all four, for he quotes unmistakably from each of the Synoptics, and uses some phrases which seem to allude to Johannine usage.<sup>8</sup>

The testimony of Papias, preserved largely in quotations by Eusebius of Caesarea (c.A.D. 350), dates back to the first third of the second century. His treatise in five volumes on *Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord* disappeared during the Middle Ages, and only the merest fragments of it remain. Apparently it contained a collection of traditions concerning Christ based on the reminiscences which Papias had heard from contemporaries of the apostles. He seems to have been much more interested in oral traditions than in the written word, though he utilized both. Eusebius quotes him as follows:

6. *Apology I* LXVII.

7. *Op. cit.* LXVI.

8. *Op. cit.* LXI; See *Dialogue with Trypho* XCI.

And I shall not hesitate to append to the interpretations all that I ever learned well from the presbyters and remember well, for of their truth I am confident. For unlike most I did not rejoice in them who say much, but in them who teach the truth, nor in them who recount the commandments of others, but in them who repeated those given to the faith by the Lord and derived from the truth itself; but if ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the word of the presbyters, what Andrew, or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, had said, and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice.<sup>9</sup>

Although this excerpt from the work of Papias is tantalizingly brief and out of context, it is pertinent to the question of the canon. It implies that Papias must have been born prior to the decease of at least two of our Lord's disciples, though the majority of them had died before he came to years of understanding. He avers that he learned by inquiry what most of them had said, but that two were probably living during his early manhood. His language does not indicate exactly whether he ever met John and Aristion personally, but he did have adequate witness of their discourses.

Papias, then, probably flourished and wrote his works about A.D. 130. His language indicates that written sources of the life of Christ were available, for he says that he preferred the spoken to the written word. Furthermore, Eusebius, in quoting other fragments of Papias' work:

And the Presbyter [John] used to say this, 'Mark became Peter's interpreter, and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said and done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, had followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded, but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, as that Mark did nothing wrong in this, writing down single points as he remembered them. . . . This is related by Papias about Mark; and about Matthew this was said, 'Matthew collected the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each interpreted them as best he could.'<sup>10</sup>

We may conclude therefore that Papias was acquainted with the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, though his allusion to Matthew is somewhat ambiguous. Eusebius does not reproduce any statements of Papias

9. Eusebius. *Historia Ecclesiae* III. 39, 3-4. See *Eusebius in Loeb Library Translation* by Kirsopp Lake. Vol. I. London: William Heinemann, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1926. Pp. 290-297.
10. *Op. cit.* III. XXXIX. 15-16.

concerning Luke and John, but the sporadic character of his (Eusebius') references proves nothing by silence. Papias may well have mentioned these Gospels in the original work from which Eusebius made his citations.

By the quotations and allusions occurring in these authors the use of the Gospels can be traced back well into the middle of the second century. What was their status in the shadowy period between the destruction of Jerusalem and the emergence of these writers who seemed familiar with them?

#### *The Apostolic Fathers*

The apostolic fathers, beginning with Clement of Rome (A.D. 95), and continuing down to Papias and Justin Martyr offered no specific testimony concerning the canonicity of the Gospels. There are, however, occasional allusions to the words of Jesus that imply familiarity with the Gospel traditions recorded in the Synoptics.

Clement of Rome quotes the utterance of Jesus:

Be ye merciful that ye may obtain mercy; forgive, that it may be forgiven unto you; as ye do, it shall be done unto you; as ye judge, so shall ye be judged; as ye are kind, so shall kindness be shown unto you; as ye do, it shall be done unto you; as neness be shown unto you; with what measure ye mete, with the same it shall be measured unto you.<sup>11</sup>

The quotation resembles strongly Matthew 7:2 and Luke 6:36-38, but is not an exact quotation of either. It could be the reproduction of another collection of Jesus' sayings, or it might be a general summary of several passages as Clement remembered them.

A second passage is more specific:

Remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, how he said, 'Woe to the man [by whom offenses come]! It were better for him that he had never been born, than that he should cast a stumbling-block before one of my elect. Yea, it were better for him that a millstone should be hung about [his neck] and he should be sunk in the depths of the sea, than that he should cast a stumbling block before one of my little ones.'

Again it is impossible to tell whether this is a quotation from Matthew 18:6, or Mark 9:42, or Luke 7:2, for all three contain substantially the same words. It is most like Matthew, for the text of Matthew 26:24 and 18:6 seem to be combined.

Neither of these two reproductions of the words of Jesus is sufficiently like any one of the Synoptics to warrant the assertion that Clement was attempting to quote it *verbatim*. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that the Gospel tradition in some fixed form was known in Rome by A.D. 95, and that it must have been widely publicized in the Roman Empire.

11. I Clement XIV. ANF I. 17.

Ignatius, who was martyred in the reign of Trajan (A.D. 98-117), shows traces of a knowledge of the Fourth Gospel. He spoke of "the Eternal Word,"<sup>12</sup> "the Word of God,"<sup>13</sup> and there are a few other more obscure allusions that point in the same direction. Westcott, in his *Canon of the New Testament*, cites a dozen such instances.<sup>14</sup>

Polycarp, a contemporary of Ignatius, does not quote the Gospels by name in his epistles, though his appeals to the teaching of the Lord seemingly presuppose a knowledge of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>15</sup>

C. Taylor argues that the Shepherd of Hermas (A.D. 140) contains direct witness to the canonicity of the Four Gospels,<sup>16</sup> as the symbolism of the four feet of the chair on which the woman [the Church] was seated [Vision III]. The argument seems strained and tenuous, and not a major contribution to the consideration of this question.

The Rylands Fragment of John P 52, a piece of a papyrus leaf not more than 2½ inches square, containing on both sides a few words from the text of John 18, was found among some bits of papyri in the Rylands collection. According to palaeographical criteria it belongs to the first third of the second century, and formed part of a codex rather than a roll. The existence of a codex of John in an obscure Egyptian village as early as A.D. 125 argues for the early date and canonicity of the Fourth Gospel, for it would hardly have been copied and read at that time unless it had already been circulated elsewhere in the church.

The allusions of the sub-apostolic writings to the words of Jesus indicate that both oral and written tradition were widely current in the late first and early second centuries. Can the material which the early church regarded as authoritative be traced back still further?

Paul's concern for the paradisis that embodied verbally the truth that he taught appears in several of his letters. In I Corinthians 11:23 and 15:1-8 he employs the phrase, "I have received of the Lord..." It may seem that he had inherited directly from the utterances of Jesus Himself and from the first public declarations concerning Him the facts of His passion and resurrection which constituted the heart of his message. In Galatians he affirmed that he did not receive it from man, neither was he taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:12). In I Thessalonians 5:2-7 his allusion to the coming of Christ as a thief in the night bears an unmistakable resemblance to Matthew 24:43, Luke 12:39, 40, 45. The identity of metaphor and similarity of language indicate that Paul was familiar with the sayings of Jesus, whether or not he always chose to quote them *verbatim*. The witness of

12. *Magnesians* VIII.

13. *Romans* VII.

14. B. F. Westcott: *The Canon of the New Testament*. Second Edition. London and Cambridge, Macmillan & Co., 1866. Pp. 32.

15. *Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* II, VI, VII, XII. Apparent references to Matt. 6:13, 26:41, 42.

16. C. Taylor: *The Witness of Hermas to the Four Gospels*. London: C. J. Clay & Sons, 1892.

the epistles mentioned above dates between A.D. 45 and 55, or less than a generation from Jesus' own lifetime.

Had Paul deliberately rejected or falsified the tradition, there would have been a large number of people who could have corrected him. The curious lack of allusion to Gospel documents in his Epistles may be attributed to any one of several reasons: (1) the fact that none of the Gospels had been published at the time when these epistles were written; or (2) the fact that he took for granted general knowledge of the biography of Jesus, so that only allusions were necessary; or (3) because he used some Gospel or Gospels as a source of information without recognizing the author. In any case, he seems to have known and to have considered authoritative the teaching which they contained.

#### *Evaluation of the Witnesses*

Thus the testimony of antiquity certifies that the Four Gospels were accepted by the Church as authentic and authoritative records of the life and work of the historical Jesus by the year 200. In the great metropolitan centers of Alexandria, Carthage, Ephesus, Rome, and in the province of Gaul they were recognized by various writers as the source of the Church's knowledge of Christ.

They attained this status by usage and general acknowledgment rather than by arbitrary ecclesiastical decision; the great councils which made pronouncements on the canon came almost two centuries later.

The canon was not therefore an artificial creation, but was the result of a separation of the genuine from the spurious by a settling process, through which the apocryphal Gospels were discarded and the most ancient documents retained.

The process of transition is illustrated by the reported utterances of Papias. From the inception of the church in the first century some writings had been available concurrently with the oral tradition of the apostles and those who had known them. Papias obviously preferred the living voice to written works; but he did not say that the written sources were inaccurate. He acknowledged their existence, and admitted that their content was similar to the oral tradition which he enjoyed hearing. Quite probably the apostolic fathers such as Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp may have quoted the words of Jesus from memory; but if they did so, they only confirmed the essential content of the written records insofar as their quotations coincided with those records. If, on the other hand, they were referring to written documents, they show that early in the second century the Gospels or writings agreeing with them in substance were used by the Church in its worship or teaching.

Canonicity therefore was decided by usage and by common acknowledgment rather than by formal vote. The defense of the Gospels and their fuller usage appears at the end of the second century, when the opposition of Gnosticism and the creation of a spurious canon like that of Marcion evoked a united protest from the leaders of the church.

Wheaton Graduate School of Theology  
Wheaton, Illinois