

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# CRITERIA OF CANONICITY

### TESTS IN THE APOSTOLIC AGE

The earliest Christians did not trouble themselves about criteria of canonicity; they would not have readily understood the expression.

They accepted the Old Testament scriptures as they had received them: the authority of those scriptures was sufficiently ratified by the teaching and example of the Lord and his apostles. The teaching and example of the Lord and his apostles, whether conveyed by word of mouth or in writing, had axiomatic authority for them.

Criteria of a kind, however, were found to be desirable quite early. When prophets, for example, claimed to speak in the Lord's name, it became necessary to 'discern the spirits' by which they spoke. Some members of the church were given 'the ability to distinguish between spirits' (1 Cor. 12:10). According to Paul, the decisive criterion to apply to prophets is their testimony to Christ: 'no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:3). Somewhat later, John suggests a more specific test: 'every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God' (1 Jn. 4:2). Such tests anticipated the later insistence on orthodoxy as a criterion of canonicity.

Again, when Paul suspected that letters were circulating in his name which were none of his, he gave his friends a simple criterion by which his genuine letters could be recognized: although he regularly dictated his letters to amanuenses, he took the pen himself to write



## THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

the final greetings—sometimes, but not necessarily, accompanied by his actual signature (*cf.* 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; also Philem. 19). Paul's handwriting was evidently so distinctive that it could not be easily forged. This was, of course, a temporary criterion of authenticity. No document containing Paul's handwriting has survived to our day, and even if one had survived, the handwriting would not be recognizable as his at this late date.

## APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

Since Jesus himself left nothing in writing, the most authoritative writings available to the church were those which came from his apostles. Among his apostles none was more active in writing (as well as otherwise) than Paul. There were some in Paul's own day, and a few in later generations, who questioned his right to be called an apostle, but throughout the churches of the Gentiles his apostleship was generally undoubted—invariably so, because a number of those churches would not have existed except for his apostolic ministry.<sup>1</sup> The authority of his authentic letters continued to be acknowledged after his death, not only by the churches to which they were severally addressed but by the churches as a whole. It is not surprising that Paul's letters were among the first, if not absolutely the first, of our New Testament documents to be gathered together and to circulate as a collection.

Letters in antiquity normally began with the writer's name, and so did Paul's letters. But many of the New Testament documents do not contain the writers' names: they are strictly anonymous—to us, completely anonymous. The writer to Theophilus was well enough known to Theophilus,<sup>2</sup> but his name has not been preserved either in the Third Gospel or in Acts; to us, therefore, these two works are anonymous. Traditionally they are ascribed to Luke, but if we wish to examine the validity of this tradition, we have to consider which Luke is meant, and what the probability is of their being the work of that Luke.

Similarly, the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews no doubt were well acquainted with its author (in *that* sense they would not have

## CRITERIA OF CANONICITY

regarded it as an anonymous communication), but since it does not bear his name, his identity was forgotten after a generation or two, and has never been certainly recovered.

From the second century onward, two of the four Gospels were ascribed to apostles—to Matthew and John. Whether Marcion knew of this ascription or not we cannot say, but if he did, that in itself would have deprived them of all Christian authority in his eyes: these two men belonged to the group which, he believed, had corrupted the pure message of Jesus. An eccentric churchman like Gaius of Rome might ascribe the Fourth Gospel to Cerinthus,<sup>3</sup> but the views of eccentric churchmen have never disturbed the general consensus.

It is remarkable, when one comes to think of it, that the four canonical Gospels are anonymous, whereas the 'Gospels' which proliferated in the late second century and afterwards claim to have been written by apostles and other eyewitnesses. Catholic churchmen found it necessary, therefore, to defend the apostolic authenticity of the Gospels which they accepted against the claims of those which they rejected. Hence come the accounts of the origin of the canonical four which appear in the Muratorian list, in the so-called anti-Marcionite prologues, and in Irenaeus. The apostolic authorship of Matthew and John was well established in tradition. But what of Mark and Luke? Their authorship was also well established in tradition, but it was felt desirable to buttress the authority of tradition with arguments which gave those two Gospels a measure of apostolic validation. As early as Papias, Mark is said to have set down in writing Peter's account of the sayings and doings of the Lord, and Peter's apostolic authority was not in doubt.<sup>4</sup> As for Luke's Gospel, its author was early identified with the man whom Paul calls 'Luke, the beloved physician' (Col. 4:14). This meant that he was one of Paul's associates, and something of Paul's apostolic authority rubbed off on him.<sup>5</sup> Some, identifying Luke with the unnamed 'brother' of 2 Corinthians 8:18, whose praise is in the gospel, went so far as to see in these words of Paul a reference to the Gospel of Luke, if they did not indeed go farther still and see a reference to it in Paul's mention of 'my gospel' (Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8).<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, the value of Luke's Gospel can be vindicated with stronger arguments than these; but the fact that these were the

<sup>1</sup> See Paul's argument in 2 Cor. 3:1–3; the existence of the church of Corinth was the only letter of accreditation he needed—at Corinth.

<sup>2</sup> See Lk. 1:3; Acts 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> See pp. 124f., 308–310.

<sup>5</sup> 'Not an apostle but apostolic', says Tertullian of Luke (*Against Marcion*, 4.2.4).

<sup>6</sup> See pp. 161, 226.



arguments used in its defence in the second and third centuries shows how important some degree of apostolic authorization seemed to be for the books which the church accepted as uniquely authoritative.

The fortunes of the letter to the Hebrews provide a further example of the importance attached to apostolic authority (if not authorship). Those who (like the church of Alexandria) accepted this letter as the work of Paul recognized it without more ado as canonical. If someone with a critical faculty like Origen's realized that, as it stood, this document was not Paul's work, a way round this offered itself: the Greek text indeed was not Paul's (perhaps it was Luke's), but a Hebrew work of Paul lay behind it.<sup>7</sup> (An even better developed critical faculty might have indicated that Hebrews was not written in translation-Greek.) Those who (like well-informed members of the Roman church) knew that the work was not Paul's, esteemed it highly as an edifying document handed down from the early age of the church, but did not accept it as apostolic. When at last, in the fourth century, the church of Rome was persuaded to fall into line with the other churches and recognize Hebrews as canonical, a natural tendency followed to treat it as Pauline also—but Pauline with a qualification. 'I am moved rather by the prestige of the eastern churches', said Augustine, 'to include this epistle too among the canonical writings',<sup>8</sup> but he had reservations about its authorship. Like his older contemporary Jerome, he distinguished between canonicity and apostolic authorship.<sup>9</sup>

Even at an earlier period, apostolic authorship in the direct sense was not insisted on, if some form of apostolic authority could be established. Membership of the holy family apparently carried with it near-apostolic status: Paul indeed seems to include James the Lord's brother among the apostles (Gal. 1:19)—but so far as James was concerned there was the further consideration that to him, as to Paul himself, the Lord had appeared in resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). If therefore the James who names himself as author of the letter addressed 'to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' was identified with the Lord's brother, that was good enough reason for accepting the letter among the apostolic writings. And if 'Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James' was indicated in those words to be another member of the holy family, that was sufficient to tip the balance in favour of

accepting the short letter so superscribed, especially in view of the 'words of heavenly grace' of which (as Origen said) it was full.<sup>10</sup>

The early church knew several works claiming the authority of Peter's name.<sup>11</sup> Among these no difficulty was felt about 1 Peter; its attestation goes back to the first half of the second century, and it was handed down as one of the undisputed books.<sup>12</sup> There was considerable hesitation about 2 Peter, but by the time of Athanasius it was no longer a disputed book in the Alexandrian church or in western Christendom. Its explicit claim to be the work of the apostle Peter was probably felt to be supported by the fact that it contained nothing unworthy of him.

Among the Johannine writings 1 John was always closely associated with the Fourth Gospel: if the Gospel was acknowledged to be apostolic and canonical, so was this epistle, although it was as anonymous as the Gospel. Those who doubted the apostolic authorship of 2 and 3 John<sup>13</sup> and the Apocalypse tended to doubt their canonical status also. The disinclination to accept the Apocalypse was due not mainly to doubts about the identity of the John who wrote it with John the apostle; it was due much more to the antipathy which was widely felt in the Greek world to its millenarianism.<sup>14</sup> Dionysius of Alexandria, who ascribed it on grounds of literary criticism to another John than the apostle and evangelist, acknowledged it to be a genuine work of prophecy.<sup>15</sup>

Two aspects of the apostolic criterion were themselves used as subsidiary criteria—antiquity and orthodoxy.

### ANTIQUITY

If a writing was the work of an apostle or of someone closely associated with an apostle, it must belong to the apostolic age. Writings of later date, whatever their merit, could not be included among the apostolic or canonical books. The compiler of the Muratorian list had a high regard for the *Shepherd of Hermas*; he recognized it evidently as a

<sup>7</sup> See pp. 192f.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Epistle* 129.3; cf. *On the Decrets and Remission of Sins*, 1.50.

<sup>9</sup> See pp. 226f., 232.

<sup>10</sup> See pp. 193f.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the canonical epistles of Peter there are the *Gospel, Acts, Apocalypse, Judgment and Preaching of Peter*, the *Epistle of Peter to James* (in the pseudo-Clementine literature), and the *Epistle of Peter to Philip* (one of the Nag Hammadi treatises).

<sup>12</sup> This statement is not affected by its omission from the Muratorian list, which is a problem on any dating of the list.

<sup>13</sup> See pp. 193, 220.

<sup>14</sup> As with Eusebius (see p. 199).

<sup>15</sup> See pp. 195f.



## THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

genuine work of prophecy. However, it had appeared too late to be included among the canonical prophets, and equally it had appeared too late to be included among the apostolic writings, for it was written only the day before yesterday, so to speak.<sup>16</sup>

This argument could have been employed more freely than it was in settling problems of authenticity, at a time when so many works were appearing which claimed to have been written by apostles and their associates. But perhaps most of the churchmen who concerned themselves with this problem lacked the information or the expertise to appeal confidently to the evidence for dating such documents: they preferred to judge them by their theology.

## ORTHODOXY

In other words, they had recourse to the criterion of orthodoxy. By 'orthodoxy' they meant the apostolic faith—the faith set forth in the undoubted apostolic writings and maintained in the churches which had been founded by apostles. This appeal to the testimony of the churches of apostolic foundation was developed specially by Irenaeus.<sup>17</sup> Whatever differences of emphasis may be discerned by modern students within the *corpus* of New Testament writings, these are irrelevant to the issues which confronted churchmen of the second and third centuries. They had to defend the apostolic teaching, summed up in the rule of faith,<sup>18</sup> against the docetic and gnostic presentations which were so attractive to many in the climate of opinion at that time. When previously unknown Gospels or Acts began to circulate under the authority of apostolic names, the most important question to ask about any one of them was: What does it teach about the person and work of Christ? Does it maintain the apostolic witness to him as the historical Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, divinely exalted as Lord over all?

A good example of the application of this test is provided by the case of Bishop Serapion and the *Gospel of Peter*. When Serapion found that this document was being read in the church of Rhossus, he was not greatly disturbed; he certainly did not examine its style and vocabulary (as Dionysius of Alexandria might have done) to see if its claim to be the work of Peter or a product of the apostolic age was well founded or not. But when he discovered that its account of the Lord's death was

## CRITERIA OF CANONICITY

tinged with docetism (it implies that he did not really suffer), then he decided that he ought to pay the church of Rhossus a pastoral visit to make sure that it had not been led astray by this heterodox teaching.<sup>19</sup>

Other 'Petrine' literature circulating among the churches was equally unauthentic, but since it did not inculcate heresy, it caused no great concern. The Muratorian compiler, for example, seems to draw upon the *Acts of Peter* (which gave an account of the apostle's Roman ministry and execution)<sup>20</sup> and he expressly includes the *Apocalypse of Peter* in his list (although he concedes that some refused to let it be read in church).<sup>21</sup> But in due course the non-apostolic character of these works became sufficiently evident to ensure that they did not find a permanent place in the New Testament canon.

It is doubtful if any book would have found a place in the canon if it had been *known* to be pseudonymous. The *Acts of Paul*, one of the earliest exercises in Christian novel-writing, dating from shortly after the middle of the second century, was orthodox enough, and indeed quite edifying (especially to those who believed that celibacy was a superior state of life to matrimony). It was not pseudonymous, for its author was known; but it was fictitious, and unworthy of the great apostle for love of whom it was said to have been written; the author was therefore deposed from his office as presbyter in one of the churches of Asia.<sup>22</sup> Anyone who was known to have composed a work explicitly in the name of an apostle would have met with even greater disapproval.

## CATHOLICITY

A work which enjoyed only local recognition was not likely to be acknowledged as part of the canon of the catholic church. On the other hand, a work which was acknowledged by the greater part of the catholic church would probably receive universal recognition sooner or later. We have seen how the Roman church ultimately consented to receive Hebrews as canonical so as not to be out of step with the rest of orthodox Christendom.<sup>23</sup>

It might have been argued that the letters of Paul were too local and

<sup>16</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.12.3 (see pp. 200f.). <sup>20</sup> See p. 163.

<sup>21</sup> See p. 164. According to the church historian Sozomen (writing between 439 and 450), the *Apocalypse of Peter* was read in his day on Good Friday in some Palestinian churches (*Hist. Eccl.* 7.19).

<sup>22</sup> See p. 163, 202. <sup>23</sup> See p. 221, 258.

<sup>16</sup> See p. 166.

<sup>17</sup> See pp. 171f.

<sup>18</sup> See p. 150.



## THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

occasional in character to be accepted as universally and permanently authoritative.<sup>24</sup> The issues to which he addressed himself in the letters to the Galatians and the Corinthians, for example, were of temporary urgency in the churches to which those letters were sent. How could their inclusion among the scriptures of the catholic church be justified? The earliest answer given to this question was one which was evidently found satisfactory at the time, although to us it seems curiously far-fetched. It was this: Paul wrote letters to seven churches, and in view of the symbolic significance of the number seven, that means that he wrote for the church universal.<sup>25</sup> The same conception of seven as the number of perfection was applied to the seven churches addressed in the Apocalypse. Indeed, the compiler of the Muratorian list preposterously regards John as setting the precedent in this regard which Paul followed: in both sets of letters, what was written to seven was spoken to all. Even Paul's letters to individuals have an ecumenical reference, says the Muratorian compiler: 'they have been hallowed for the honour of the catholic church in the regulation of ecclesiastical discipline.'<sup>26</sup>

Each individual document that was ultimately acknowledged as canonical started off with local acceptance — the various epistles in the places to which they were sent, the Apocalypse in the seven churches of Asia, even the Gospels and Acts in the constituencies for which they were first designed. But their attainment of canonical status was the result of their gaining more widespread recognition than they initially enjoyed.

## TRADITIONAL USE

Catholicity has been classically defined in the fifth-century 'Vincentian canon' as 'what has been believed everywhere, always, by all'.<sup>27</sup> What has always been believed (or practised) is the most potent factor in the maintenance of tradition. Suggested innovations have regularly been resisted with the argument 'But this is what we have always been taught' or 'what we have always done'. It was so in the

## CRITERIA OF CANONICITY

early Christian centuries with the recognition of certain books as holy scripture, and it is still so (whether this is consciously realized or not). The reading of 'memoirs of the apostles' in church along with the Old Testament writings (to which Justin Martyr bears witness)<sup>28</sup> became an established practice which made it easy to accord to those 'memoirs' the same formal status as that accorded from the church's earliest days to the law and the prophets. If any church leader came along in the third or fourth century with a previously unknown book, recommending it as genuinely apostolic, he would have found great difficulty in gaining acceptance for it: his fellow-Christians would simply have said, 'But no one has ever heard of it!' (We may think, for example, of the widespread hesitation in accepting 2 Peter.)<sup>29</sup> Or, even if the book had been known for some generations, but had never been treated as holy scripture, it would have been very difficult to win recognition for it as such.

When William Whiston, in the eighteenth century, argued that the *Apostolic Constitutions* should be venerated among the New Testament writings, few if any took him seriously.<sup>30</sup> For one thing, Whiston's eccentricities were well known; for another thing, better judges than he had discerned its fourth-century date. But, even if Whiston had been a model of judicious sobriety, and even if strong reasons could have been adduced for dating the *Apostolic Constitutions* in the first century, there would have been no possibility of the work's being added to the canon: the tradition of all the churches would have been too strong.

## INSPIRATION

For many centuries inspiration and canonicity have been closely bound up together in Christian thinking: books were included in the canon, it is believed, because they were inspired; a book is known to be inspired because it is in the canon.

How far was this so in the early church? One distinguished student of the early history of the canon has said that 'apostolicity was the

<sup>24</sup> See N. A. Dahl, 'The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church', in *Neotestamentica et Patristica*, ed. W. C. van Unnik = NovTSup 6 (Leiden, 1962), pp. 261–271.

<sup>25</sup> See pp. 164, 184.

<sup>26</sup> See pp. 160, 164.

<sup>27</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* (Notebook), 2.3: *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*.

<sup>28</sup> See pp. 126f.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.3.1: 'But the so-called second epistle [of Peter] we have not received as canonical ("incanonical"); nevertheless it has appeared useful to many, and has been studied with the other scriptures.'

<sup>30</sup> See p. 250.



principal token of canonicity for the west, inspiration for the east — not indeed in a mutually exclusive sense, since in the west apostolicity to a certain extent includes inspiration, while in the east apostolicity was an attendant feature of inspiration. In Origen's view, for example, 'the crucial point . . . is not apostolicity but inspiration'.<sup>31</sup>

By inspiration in this sense is meant that operation of the Holy Spirit by which the prophets of Israel were enabled to utter the word of God. The vocabulary was theirs; the message was his. Only to certain individuals, and only occasionally to them, was this enablement granted. But in the New Testament age the situation was different.

On one occasion, when Moses was told that two men were prophesying who had not received any public commission to do so, he replied, 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!' (Num. 11:29). The New Testament records the answer to Moses' prayer, telling how, on the first Christian Pentecost, God initiated the fulfilment of his promise to pour out his Spirit 'on all flesh' (Joel 2:28, quoted in Acts 2:17). All members of the new community of believers in Jesus received the Spirit: 'any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ', says Paul, 'does not belong to him' (Rom. 8:9). This did not mean that all of them received the specific gift of prophecy: the gift of prophecy — of declaring the mind of God in the power of the Spirit — was but one of several gifts of the Spirit distributed among members of the church.<sup>32</sup>

Only one of the New Testament writers expressly bases the authority of what he says on prophetic inspiration. The Apocalypse is called 'the book of this prophecy' (e.g., Rev. 22:19); the author implies that his words are inspired by the same Spirit of prophecy as spoke through the prophets of earlier days: it is in their succession that he stands (Rev. 22:9). 'The testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy' (Rev. 19:10); the prophets of old bore witness to Jesus in advance, and the same witness is still borne, in the power of the same Spirit, not only by a prophet like John but by all the faithful confessors who overcome the enemy 'by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony' (Rev. 12:11). The readers of the seven letters at the outset of the book are expected to hear in them 'what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev. 2:7, etc.). Whether the seer of Patmos was the son of Zebedee or

not, his appeal throughout the Apocalypse is not to apostolic authority but to prophetic inspiration.

It is plain that at the beginning of the Christian era the inspiration of the prophetic oracles of the Old Testament was believed to extend to the Old Testament scriptures as a whole. The writer to the Hebrews sees the Holy Spirit as the primary author not only of the warning of Psalm 95:7–11, 'Today, when you hear his voice . . .' (Heb. 3:7–11), but also of the structure and ritual of the Mosaic tabernacle (Heb. 9:8). Timothy is reminded, with regard to the sacred writings which he has known from childhood, that 'all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for a variety of purposes' (2 Tim. 3:15–17). When the New Testament writings were later included with the Old Testament as part of 'all scripture', it was natural to conclude that they too were 'inspired by God'. That they were (and are) so inspired is not to be denied, but most of the New Testament writers do not base their authority on divine inspiration.

Paul, for example, claims to have 'the mind of Christ'; his gospel preaching, he says, was attended by 'demonstration of the Spirit' (which was the secret of its effectiveness), and his instruction was imparted 'in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit' (1 Cor. 2:14–16).<sup>33</sup> But when he needs to assert his authority — authority 'for building up and not for tearing down' (2 Cor. 13:10) — he rests it on the apostolic commission which he had received from the exalted Lord. In his exercise of this authority, he told the Corinthian Christians, they would find the proof which they demanded 'that Christ is speaking in me' (2 Cor. 13:3).

John the evangelist implies, by his report of the Lord's promises regarding the Paraclete in the upper-room discourses, that he himself in his witness experiences the Spirit's guidance 'into all the truth' as he brings to the disciples' remembrance what the Lord had said and makes its meaning plain (Jn 14:26; 16:12–15). Luke, for his part, claims no more than to give a reliable account in his twofold work, based on eyewitness testimony and on his own participation in the course of the events which he narrates (Lk. 1:1–4). The patristic idea that his Gospel owes something to the apostolic authority of Paul is

<sup>31</sup> Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, 'Prinzipien der Sammlung und Ausschließung bei der Bildung des Kanons', *ZTK* 61 (1964), pp. 415f. For Origen see p. 195 above.

<sup>32</sup> See 1 Cor. 12:4, 7–11.

<sup>33</sup> Compare his semi-ironical remark, 'I think that I have the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 7:40). But when he charges discerning Christians at Corinth to acknowledge that what he writes 'is a command of the Lord' (1 Cor. 14:37), this is an exercise of apostolic authority.



quite unfounded.<sup>34</sup> As for Mark, the tradition that his record is based (in part at least) on the preaching of Peter may have a foundation in fact,<sup>35</sup> but no appeal is made to Peter's authority in the course of the record. Neither is any appeal made to divine inspiration.

If the writings of Mark and Luke are to be judged canonical', said N. B. Stonehouse, 'it must be because these evangelists were controlled by the Spirit of the Lord in such a manner that their writings, and not merely the apostolic message which they set forth, are divine. In other words, it is Mark's inspiration (which, to be sure, is not to be isolated from his historical qualifications), and not Peter's inspiration, which provides the finally indispensable ground for the acceptance of that work as canonical.'<sup>36</sup> On this he is said, again, that the divine inspiration of the Gospels of Mark and Luke is not to be denied, but these works were accepted, first as authoritative and then as canonical scripture, because they were recognized to be trustworthy witnesses to the saving events.

Clement of Rome acknowledges that Paul wrote 'with true inspiration'.<sup>37</sup> But he makes similar claims for his own letter. 'You will give us joy and gladness', he tells the Corinthians as he draws to a conclusion, 'if you are obedient to the things which we have written through the Holy Spirit.'<sup>38</sup> He is far from putting himself on a level with 'the blessed Paul the apostle',<sup>39</sup> but he and Paul had received the same Spirit. The high authority which he recognizes in Paul is his apostolic authority.

Similarly Ignatius claims to speak and write by the Spirit: he,

<sup>34</sup> See pp. 161, 257.

<sup>35</sup> Internal evidence in support of this tradition was presented in C. H. Turner, 'Marcian Usage', *JTS* 25 (1923-24), pp. 377-386; 26 (1924-25), pp. 12-20, 145-156, 225-240; 27 (1925-26), pp. 58-62; 28 (1926-27), pp. 9-30, 349-362; 29 (1927-28), pp. 275-289, 346-361; and in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. C. Gore (London, 1928), Part II, pp. 42-122; see also T. W. Manson, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles* (Manchester, 1962), pp. 28-45.

<sup>36</sup> N. B. Stonehouse, 'The Authority of the New Testament', in *The Infallible Word*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and P. Woolley (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Clem. 47.3.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Clem. 63.2; cf. 59.1, where he describes the contents of his letter as 'words spoken by Christ through us'. The freedom with which the idea of inspiration was used by some of the church fathers is well illustrated by a letter from Augustine to Jerome, in which Jerome's biblical interpretation is said to be carried through 'not only by the gift but at the dictation of the Holy Spirit' (Augustine, *Epistle* 82.2 = Jerome, *Epistle* 116.2). See p. 281 below with nn. 36, 37.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Clem. 47.1.

indeed, had the gift of (occasional) prophecy. 'It is not according to the flesh that I write to you', he tells the Roman church, 'but according to the mind of God.'<sup>40</sup> But, as bishop of another church, he has no thought of imposing his authority on the Romans, as he might have done on the Christians of Antioch. 'I do not command you like Peter and Paul', he says: 'they were apostles, I am a convict.'<sup>41</sup> Peter and Paul were also convicts at the end of their time in Rome, it might have been said; but the point is that, even as convicts in the eyes of Roman law, they were apostles in the eyes of the Roman church, and as such entitled to exercise the authority which the Lord had entrusted to them.

When the Muratorian list makes Paul follow the precedent of John in writing to seven churches, it may imply further that the precedent of John's Apocalypse, as a prophetic writing, validated the acceptance of Paul's letters as also prophetic. This has been argued in a well-known essay by Krister Stendahl.<sup>42</sup>

To those who argued that the apostles and evangelists spoke before they possessed 'perfect knowledge' (so that their works required gnostic amplification and interpretation) Irenaeus replied that they wrote after Pentecost: the power of the Holy Spirit with which they were invested then imparted the 'perfect knowledge' necessary for the execution of their commission.<sup>43</sup> The evangelists were the antitype of Ezekiel's four living creatures, animated by the same Spirit.<sup>44</sup>

Irenaeus in some degree, and Origen to a much greater extent, show their belief in the divine inspiration of the New Testament (as well as of the Old Testament) by their allegorical treatment of it. According to R. P. C. Hanson, 'Irenaeus is the first writer to allegorize the New Testament', and he feels free to do so 'because he is among the first writers to treat the New Testament unreservedly as inspired Scripture'.<sup>45</sup> Origen allegorizes both Testaments alike as liberally as his fellow-Alexandrian Philo allegorized the Old Testament two centuries earlier. This means that, instead of reading out of the inspired text what is actually there, he often reads into it what is not

<sup>40</sup> Ignatius, *To the Romans*, 8.3. <sup>41</sup> *To the Romans*, 4.3.

<sup>42</sup> K. Stendahl, 'The Apocalypse of John and the Epistles of Paul in the Muratorian Fragment', in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (New York, 1962), pp. 239-245.

<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

<sup>44</sup> *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8 (see p. 175 with n. 29).

<sup>45</sup> R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Exegete* (London, 1959), pp. 112f.



## THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

there. With Origen, as with Philo, this allegorizing treatment was based on the conviction that the text under consideration was inspired word for word: only such an inspired text had a deeper meaning of a kind that allegorization alone could bring out.<sup>46</sup>

But at this stage inspiration is no longer a criterion of canonicity: it is a corollary of canonicity. It was not until the red ribbon of the self-evident had been tied around the twenty-seven books of the New Testament that "inspiration" could serve theologians as an answer to the question: Why are these books different from all other books?<sup>47</sup>

## OTHER ISSUES

There were other, more practical, corollaries of canonicity. As we have seen, it was helpful for church officials in times of persecution to distinguish between those books which might, as a last resort, be handed over to the police and those which must be preserved, if need be, at the cost of life itself.<sup>48</sup>

Then there was the question of those books which might properly be read in church. Those which were recognizably vested with the authority of the Lord and the apostles were prescribed for public reading; but in some churches at least other works were read which, although they lacked apostolic authority, were orthodox and edifying. Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, wrote to the bishop of Rome about AD 170 to express the thanks of his church for a letter and a gift which had been received from the Roman church. 'Today', he says, 'we observed the Lord's holy day, and we read out your letter, which we shall keep and read from time to time for our admonition, as we do also with the letter formerly written to us through Clement.'<sup>49</sup> So, between seventy and eighty years after it was sent, 1 Clement continued to be read at services of the Corinthian church. Neither it nor the more recent letter from Rome carried anything like the authority of the letters which the Corinthian church had received from Paul; but they were helpful for the building up of Christian faith and life.<sup>50</sup>

## CRITERIA OF CANONICITY

An issue of high importance for theologians in the church was the distinguishing of those books which might be used for settling doctrinal questions from those which were generally edifying. Only those books which carried apostolic authority (together with the Old Testament writings as interpreted in the New) were to be appealed to either for the establishing of truths to be 'most surely believed' in the church or for deciding disputed points in controversies with heretics. In such controversies it was naturally most satisfactory if appeal was made to those writings which both sides acknowledged in common. Tertullian in a legalistic mood might deny the right of heretics to appeal to the holy scriptures,<sup>51</sup> but when he himself engaged in controversy with them, it was on those scriptures that he based his arguments (he could do no other) and he expected his opponents to follow his arguments and admit their force. If the heretics refused to acknowledge the books to which orthodox churchmen appealed, or if they appealed to writings of their own, their error in these respects too had to be exposed; but the unique authority of the canonical writings must be preserved inviolable.

also what he and Jerome say about the use of the Old Testament Apocrypha (pp. 79, 91 ff.), and the permission given by the Third Council of Carthage to read the accounts of martyrdoms on the appropriate saints' days (p. 233).

<sup>51</sup> *On the Prescription of Heretics* (see p. 151). Tertullian felt at times that there was no point in appealing to scripture when dealing with those whose allegorical interpretation was always able to extract from scripture the meaning they desired to find, in defiance of its plain sense. But the language of legal injunction was not the wisest course to adopt with them.

<sup>46</sup> See Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, pp. 187–209. Cf. pp. 73, 195 above.

<sup>47</sup> K. Stendahl, 'The Apocalypse of John and the Epistles of Paul...', p. 243. See also P. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia, 1980); A. C. Sundberg, Jr., 'The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration', *Interpretation* 29 (1975), p. 352–371.

<sup>48</sup> See pp. 216f. <sup>49</sup> In Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.23.11.

<sup>50</sup> Compare Athanasius's commendation of the *Didache* and the *Shepherd* (p. 209).