

## THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

This address aims at serving as an introduction to the conference theme insofar as it concerns the New Testament.

### 1. *The New Testament Canon from Semler to Childs*

The modern study of the canon of the New Testament has taken a strange course. One of the first theologians to apply critical methods to the study of the biblical canon was Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791), professor of theology at Halle (1753-1791). Among the one hundred and twenty volumes which he produced in his lifetime, most of them utterly unreadable, four constitute his epoch-making *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canons* (Halle, 1771-1775). In this work he argued that, in the light of the new historical insights into the genesis of the books included in the Bible, Holy Scripture cannot be identical with God's Word. At most the Word of God can be said to be contained in Holy Scripture. Several books of the Bible, among them the Apocalypse, had had importance only for their own time, not for the Church of later centuries. Here we see how Semler moves over from a theological to a historical approach to the Bible. He also argued that all canon lists of biblical books drawn up and accepted in the early Church had no more than local or regional validity. As a result, the traditional canon of the New Testament could not claim to be binding for the Church as a whole or for all its members. Consequently, individual Christians are not obliged to accept the entire New Testament as canonical; they are free to look in the New Testament for what they themselves regard as authoritative and, in a way, to select their own canon.

More recently, in 1984, Brevard Springs Childs (°1923), professor at Yale, published his *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*. In this work and in similar works on the Old Testament, Childs tries to integrate the traditional theological concerns of the Church with the findings of critical scholarship. He argues that the proper context for the theological interpretation of biblical books is the canon itself. The canon is not to be regarded as a loose collection from which each document may be set apart and individually interpreted in the light of the historical circumstances in

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which it originated. The normative theological meaning of a given writing is to be determined by appealing to the canonical shape of each text, and to the conceptual relationships configured by the canon between that text and other texts. The canonical meaning, which is not necessarily identical with the historical meaning, is theologically and religiously authoritative.

Between Semler's and Childs' positions there are conspicuous discrepancies. Whereas Semler sought to open up a more historical approach to the books of the Bible, Childs tries to regain a more theological understanding of the Bible by taking seriously the fact that each and every book of the Bible has only come down to us as part of the canon. It must be admitted that, in spite of the considerable differences between Semler's and Childs' hermeneutical views, the two scholars agree to some extent, namely in so far as for both of them the Bible remains the source of theological and Christian truth. Furthermore it should be borne in mind that it is Childs' intention, not to neglect the results of historical exegesis, but to integrate them in his theological exegesis. Yet we may say that the direction canonical studies take in the work of Childs is contrary to that in the work of Semler. Times change, and biblical criticism with them. It might also be argued that the historical study of the Bible to which Semler gave such a strong impetus was bound to elicit, sooner or later, a reaction inspired by theological concerns such as that given by Childs.

When we cast a quick glance at the period that elapsed between Semler and Childs, we cannot but be impressed by the contributions of two giants in the field of research into the New Testament canon: Theodor Zahn (1838-1933) and Adolf Harnack (1851-1930). Zahn, professor at Erlangen and Leipzig, published his fundamental *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* in 1888-1892, and his pioneering *Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* from 1881 to 1929. Zahn held that the New Testament canon came into existence as early as about the end of the first century. He developed this view in opposition to Harnack's claim that the New Testament canon did not take shape until the end of the second century. Harnack, professor at Giessen, Marburg, and Berlin, published his views on the New Testament canon first in his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (first ed. 1886-1889), later in his *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200* of 1889 and in his *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments und die wichtigsten Folgen der neuen Schöpfung* of 1914. Harnack held that not Gnosticism, but Montanism had given the decisive impetus to the formation of the New Testament canon.

The debate between Zahn and Harnack has been analysed and evaluated

by some more recent scholars, among them Bruce Metzger in his *The Canon of the New Testament. Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (1987) and especially John Barton in his *The Spirit and the Letter* (1997). Barton has pointed out that the controversy between Zahn and Harnack originated from the two scholars' fundamentally different ideas of what the nature of the New Testament canon. For Zahn the canon was a product of continued collection, augmentation and growth. Harnack, on the other hand, looked upon the New Testament canon as the result of a process of delimitation and exclusion. Consequently, Zahn's concept of the canon was less strict than Harnack's and Zahn's date for the canon earlier than Harnack's.

It will be wise to keep Barton's lessons in mind. Both sides of the formation process of the New Testament canon have to be reckoned with: its growth and its delimitation. These two developments took place independently. The growth came first, delimitation and exclusion occurred later. The notion "Scripture" has to be distinguished from the notion "canon". The former is an open collection of authoritative books, a collection with only vague contours; books can still be added to it, or removed from it. A canon however is a closed and exclusive list of books regarded as authoritative. The more strictly one defines "canon", the later the date of its origin. Taking into account Barton's insights, the canon of the New Testament cannot be said to have come into existence until the second half of the fourth century. It is no coincidence that the earliest evidence for the use of the Greek word *kanon* in the sense of "exclusive list of the authoritative books of Holy Scripture" dates from the middle of the fourth century. The earliest attestation occurs in Athanasius' treatise on the resolutions of the Council of Nicea, which dates from about 350.

Moreover, it should be remembered that the fixation of the New Testament canon in Athanasius' 39th Festal Letter of 367 and in the acts of the Synods of Hippo Regius of 393, confirmed by the Synods of Carthage of 397 and 419, was only temporary and provisional. In later sources, canon lists show hardly less variation than before 367. The first really effective measures were the decisions of the Council of Trent of 1545, and the inclusion of canon lists in a series of early confessions of faith drawn up by Protestants. These Protestant confessions include the *Confession de foy* of the French (Reformed) Churches established in Paris in 1559, and the *Confession de foy* or *Confessio Belgica* drawn up in 1561 and adopted by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the sixties and seventies of the sixteenth century.

## 2. *The criterion of orthodoxy*

One of the topics usually considered in discussions of the history of the New Testament canon is the criteria that were applied in determining whether or not early Christian writings were authoritative. It should be noticed in passing that these so-called criteria of canonicity were often used, not to determine *a priori* whether or not a writing was authoritative, but to justify *a posteriori* the high respect in which a writing had already been held for some time past, or the disapproval it had already incurred. At any rate, in assessing and qualifying certain writings as authoritative or objectionable, early Christian authors used a great variety of criteria.

Modern authors on the subject usually try to cluster these numerous criteria into a limited number of dominant criteria of a broader scope, but they differ in the way they do this. Harry Gamble in his *The New Testament Canon. Its Making and Meaning* (1985) distinguished four criteria: apostolicity, catholicity, orthodoxy, and traditional usage. Bruce Metzger in his *The Canon of the New Testament* (1987) mentions only three criteria: orthodoxy, apostolicity, and consensus among the churches. In Metzger's third criterion, continuous acceptance and usage by the Church at large, Gamble's second and fourth criteria, (catholicity and traditional usage) are telescoped. The most thorough, or at least the most extensive and detailed investigation of the criteria for determining canonicity is Karl-Heinz Ohlig's *Die theologische Begründung des neutestamentlichen Kanons in der alten Kirche* of 1972. Ohlig shows that early Christian authors used at least eleven different criteria in determining whether a book had to be recognized as authoritative or to be rejected. His list includes the following criteria: 1. apostolicity, sometimes taken in the narrow meaning of authenticity, but more often in the broader sense of deriving either from an apostle or from a follower of an apostle; apostolic could even mean "in keeping with the pure and right teaching of the apostles"; 2. the age of the document in question; 3. the historical likelihood of its contents (obviously fictitious and fantastic stories are often a ground for rejecting the book in which they occur); 4. orthodoxy; 5. the agreement with the Scriptures of the Old Testament; 6. the edifying nature of the document at issue; 7. its being directed to the Church as a whole (catholicity); 8. clarity and meaningfulness (the contents must not be absurd); 9. spirituality; 10. acceptance by the Church at large; 11. use for public lessons in the Church.

It has often been observed that these criteria were applied with striking inconsistency. For instance, not all writings attributed to an apostle

succeeded in being accepted as canonical, as the fate of the Gospel of Thomas or that of the Gospel of Peter may illustrate. 1 Clement is probably considerably older than such writings as 2 Peter and Jude; yet the latter two were eventually received into the canon, whereas the former was not. It will not do to argue that the author of 1 Clement was not known to be an apostle or an apostle's follower, for the author of the letter to the Hebrews was not known at all which did not prevent this text from being highly esteemed in the eastern Church and, eventually, from being canonized both in the East and the West. Finally, several writings that were included in the list of authoritative books did not meet the criteria applied to justify the recognition of other writings. For instance, it is hard to maintain that such Pauline letters as those to Philemon or to the Galatians are addressed to the Church as a whole. In brief, the so-called criteria of canonicity were used with notable flexibility and irritating inconsistency.

Actually this inconsistency should not surprise us. One has to take into consideration that the growth and delimitation of the New Testament canon was a process of centuries, moreover that this process took place in a space as wide as the Mediterranean world, and that the people involved in this process, both individuals (such as clergymen and scholars) and groups (such as church councils and synods), operated at various social levels and with different intentions and interests. Given these circumstances, the last thing one can expect to observe is that criteria for determining canonicity were applied consistently.

Yet the question must be asked whether the inconsistency with which criteria were used to confirm or deny the authority of early Christian writings, is not partly due to the tendency in our sources (that is, in the authors behind our sources) to prefer the use of seemingly objective criteria (such as age, apostolicity, early and wide acceptance) to one more essential, but also more vulnerable criterion, namely orthodoxy. I think it can be argued that in confirming or rejecting the authority of early Christian writings, ecclesiastical authors tended to adduce other grounds than the one they actually had in mind, namely orthodoxy. In other words, the criterion of orthodoxy played a more important role than is revealed by our sources. In my view, orthodoxy was a fundamental, but often tacit criterion.

To be sure, the criterion of orthodoxy is often used explicitly. Two examples may suffice to illustrate this. Serapion, bishop of Antioch about 200, admonishes the Christian community at Rhossus, a town in his

diocese, to stop reading the Gospel of Peter. He probably means that his addressees should stop using that gospel for the public lessons in their gatherings. The reason Serapion gives to justify his admonition is that the work in question shows traces of a Docetic view of Christ (Eus. *H.E.* VI 12). To quote another example, in his *History of the Church* (ca. 324) Eusebius includes an account of the writings which the churches accepted as sacred and those they did not accept as such (*H.E.* III 25). In this passage, Eusebius distinguishes three categories of books: recognized books, disputed books, and rejected books. According to Eusebius, the third category consists of writings published by heretics. They include the Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Matthias, and others, as well as the Acts of Andrew, John, and other apostles. In an effort to characterize this third category of writings, he observes: "Their ideas and implications are so irreconcilable with true orthodoxy that they stand revealed as the forgeries of heretics". Here we see the criterion of orthodoxy used explicitly.

In other instances, however, the criterion of orthodoxy seems to be used only tacitly. A case in point is a passage on the Gospels in the Muratorian Fragment. This document was usually dated to the last quarter of the second century, until A.C. Sundberg (1973) argued for a fourth-century date. Sundberg's view was endorsed by R.F. Collins (1983), G.M. Hahneman (1988), G.A. Robbins (1992), and J. Barton (1997). In my opinion, however, the arguments for an early date continue to outweigh those for a later date. In particular, the apologetic and polemical tendencies reflected in the document seem to point to a late second-century context rather than a fourth-century situation.

The author of the Muratorian Fragment defends the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John against several possible objections. One problem, among others, is the fact that the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' ministry do not agree. The author tries to play down the seriousness of this problem by stating that "all things in all [the Gospels] are declared by one supreme Spirit: concerning the [Lord's] birth, his passion, his resurrection, his converse with his disciples, and his twofold advent: the first in lowliness, when he was despised, which has taken place, the second glorious with royal power, which is still in the future". The author fails to explain why he singles out for mention the details enumerated. A clue may be found, however, in other passages of the Fragment, in which the author strongly opposes Gnosticism and denounces explicitly the teachings of Valentinus and Basilides. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the author's summary of the four Gospels' contents as an account of Jesus'

birth, passion, resurrection, and conversations with the disciples is meant to evoke the idea that the earthly Jesus' humanity, sufferings, and resurrection in the body were real rather than apparent. Christ was not a divine being who descended from heaven and temporarily assumed someone else's body or a phantasmal human appearance. He was really embodied in human flesh. Similarly, the reference to Christ's second coming seems to allude to the traditional idea that salvation can only be reached on the future Day of Judgement, in contradistinction to the Gnostic idea that salvation is the return of the divine, spiritual spark in man unto God.

If this reading of the Muratorian Fragment is correct, the authority of the four Gospels is vindicated here on the ground that they present a traditional Christology distinct from that of Gnosticism. The standard by which the Fragment assesses the four Gospels, is the criterion of orthodoxy. But this criterion is not mentioned explicitly; it is used tacitly.

In about 210, Gaius, a presbyter at Rome, rejected the Gospel of John, ostensibly because the differences between it and the synoptic Gospels proved that John's Gospel was unreliable (Hippolytus apud Dionysius Bar Salibi, *Comm. Apoc.*, CSCO Syr. CI 1-2). In reality, however, Gaius rejected John because he (Gaius) was strongly opposed to Montanism. Since the Gospel of John was one of the books on which the Montanists based their claims, Gaius questioned the authority of the book, not by calling it downright heretical, but by claiming that it was historically unreliable. The criterion of historical trustworthiness thus takes the place of that of orthodoxy.

Another instance of the tacit application of the criterion of orthodoxy occurs in a Catechetical Lecture delivered by Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, in about 350 (IV 36). Cyril states that one should accept "four Gospels only, for the other ones have inscriptions with false indication of the author and are harmful". The criteria applied here are those of authenticity and the edifying nature of the writing at issue, but what Cyril really means to say appears from the sentence with which he follows the one just quoted. There he disqualifies a Gospel of Thomas because it is a work produced by Manichaeans that destroys the souls of the simple-minded. The reason which Cyril alleges for dismissing other Gospels than the four generally accepted, is that they are inauthentic and harmful. The underlying and hidden reason, however, is that their contents are heretical.

A fourth-century Commentary on the Catholic Epistles, attributed (probably correctly) to Didymus the Blind, designates 2 Peter as not

belonging to the New Testament, in spite of its being used in public lessons in the churches (PG 39, cc. 1773-1774). The reason Didymus gives for excluding 2 Peter from the canon is that it is a forgery (*falsata*). Thus the criterion by which 2 Peter is assessed seems to be that of authenticity. The reason adduced, however, is not Didymus' real reason. His real reason for rejecting 2 Peter is that the eschatological scenario of 2 Pet 3,12-13 contradicts the one taught by Jesus in Lk 17,26. Whereas according to Jesus the transition from the present world to the world to come will be a more or less smooth and gradual change, 2 Pet 3,13 describes this transition as an abrupt, brief and total crisis, an extremely violent and incisive event, involving the conflagration of all things and the coming into being of an entirely new heaven and an entirely new earth. Didymus' criticism of 2 Peter thus concerned its eschatology, which he considered unorthodox, and not primarily the authorship of the letter. Yet in the way Didymus presents the matter, the criterion of authenticity takes the place of that of orthodoxy.

The examples mentioned show that the criterion of orthodoxy, that is, the test whether the contents of a writing agreed with the traditional teaching of the Church, played a more important part than our sources suggest at first sight. Whatever argument ecclesiastical authors adduce for dismissing a book, their hidden motive may always have been their tendency to fend off heresy. For, as Ohlig says (p. 170), the criterion of orthodoxy "ist nicht nur wichtiger als andere Kriterien, sondern deren letzter Sinn; er entscheidet nicht nur über die Kanonizität einer Schrift, sondern auch z.B. über ihre Apostolizität". Indeed apostolicity often means orthodoxy, especially when it does not denote apostolic authenticity but agreement with apostolic teaching. In the final analysis it was mostly the criterion of orthodoxy that decided a writing's fate.

The preceding observations and considerations lead me to a bold conclusion. It is true that the rise of the New Testament canon was a process guided by ideological, theological, especially christological motives. It should also be admitted that, unfortunately, several very early writings seem to have been lost; for instance, Q, the "previous letter" of Paul (1 Cor 5,9) and his "painful letter" (2 Cor 2,4). Moreover, we do not know what will yet turn up from the deserts of Egypt or Judea. But, as we have seen, there was a strong tendency in early Christianity to accept and preserve writings whose contents were in agreement with the teaching of earlier generations, and to dismiss writings that did *not* meet this criterion of orthodoxy. What this orthodoxy implied is indicated, among other



sources, by the Muratorian Fragment: the recognition of the real humanity of Jesus Christ, and the expectation of his second coming. In other words: no redemption without incarnation and eschatological judgement. The list of books corresponding to this "orthodoxy" in the Muratorian Fragment is identical with the New Testament canon of twenty-seven writings advocated by Athanasius and, except that the Muratorian list lacks Hebrews and four Catholic epistles, and includes the Apocalypse of Peter (though marked as disputed) and Wisdom of Salomon. Roughly speaking, the theological outlook of the Muratorian Fragment corresponds to that of Paul and the four evangelists. Now the crucial question is of course whether those who happened to be in a position to control the acceptance and preservation of Christian writings and traditions during the period from 30 to 70 (that is, from Jesus to Paul and the synoptics), were led by the same interest in "orthodoxy" as we saw leading churchmen were in the second and later centuries. If this question can be answered in the affirmative, it follows that the New Testament books vindicated by the Muratorian Fragment, recognized (as *endiathekoî*) by Eusebius, and propagated as canonical by Athanasius and Augustine, form the best foundation for reconstructing the outlines of Jesus' ministry and teaching. In that case Jesus was an apocalyptic who preached that the Kingdom of God was imminent, and his followers believed that they could be saved through participation in his death and resurrection.

I realize that I mentioned a condition ("If ...") and a "question". New research is needed to answer the question and to fulfil the condition, and this is not the time to undertake this research. Yet I suspect that Johannes Leipoldt will turn out to have been right when he wrote, now almost a century ago: "Die Erkenntnis, dass unser Neues Testament wirklich die besten Quellen zur Geschichte Jesu enthält, ist die wertvollste Erkenntnis, die wir aus der älteren Kanongeschichte entnehmen" (*Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, 2 vols, Leipzig, 1907-1908; I, p. 269).

### 3. A preview of this Colloquium

Finally, let me give you a taste of what is in store for us this week. The fact that this is the fiftieth Colloquium Biblicum seemed to be an ideal occasion to bring together students of both the Old and the New Testament (as used to be the case from 1949 to 1954 and, by way of exception, in 1974). The occasion also called for an opening lecture that would deal with both parts of the Bible. We had the good fortune to find Thomas Söding of Wuppertal willing to deliver the opening address on "The Canon of the

Old and New Testament”.

Several main papers will treat the way in which certain early Christian writings, or collections of writings, were received into the canon. Andreas Lindemann of Bethel will enter into the question of when Paul's letters began to be collected and to form a body of authoritative writings alongside the gospels. Jens Schröter of Berlin will examine the process that led to the canonization of the Acts of the Apostles. Concentrating on the Johannine literature, Jean Zumstein will argue that a claim to Scriptural authority is already inherent in John's Gospel and letters themselves. When these writings were gradually recognized as Scripture, this was the recognition of what they themselves already claimed to be.

Two further papers will deal especially with the development of the New Testament canon in the second century. Graham Stanton of Cambridge will focus on Justin Martyr's use of the gospels and other Jesus traditions, both written and oral. Finally, Jos Verheyden of Leuven will reconsider several problems with which any interpreter of the Muratorian Fragment is confronted, *inter alia* the date of this document. I wish all speakers success in presenting their papers and express the hope that the papers, seminars, discussions, and personal contacts of this Colloquium, more properly *Biblicum* than in most other years, may be stimulating and productive.

Before turning to work, however, we shall have the privilege of relishing Professor Frans Neirynck's festive address in celebration of this fiftieth anniversary of the Colloquium Biblicum. Frans Neirynck is one of the main driving forces behind the Colloquium Biblicum for many years now. Nobody is in a better position to mark this jubilee with some suitable words than he is.

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