

The Debate Over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*

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* Geoffrey Mark Hahneman: *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. xvii, 237. \$55.00). A shorter review of this work appeared in *WTJ* 56 (1994) 437-38.

In 1740 Lodovico Muratori published a list of NT books from a codex contained in the Ambrosian Library at Milan. The text printed was in badly transcribed Latin; most, though not all, later scholars have presumed a Greek original. Though the beginning of the document is missing, it is clear that the author described or listed the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, two (or possibly three) letters of John, one of Jude and the book of Revelation. The omission of the rest of the Catholic Epistles, in particular 1 Peter and James, has sometimes been attributed to copyist error. The fragment also reports that the church accepts the *Wisdom of Solomon* while it is bound to exclude the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Scholars have traditionally assigned the Muratorian Fragment (MF) to the end of the second century or the beginning of the third. As such it has been important as providing the earliest known "canon" list, one that has the same "core" of writings which were later agreed upon by the whole church. Geoffrey Hahneman has now written a forceful book in an effort to dismantle this consensus by showing that "The Muratorian Fragment, if traditionally dated, is an extraordinary anomaly in the development of the Christian Bible on numerous counts" (p. 131), arguing instead for the placement of the MF alongside several fourth-century Eastern catalogues (canons) of the Christian Scriptures. The influence of Hahneman's book is likely to be significant. R. M. Grant, familiar with the book in its dissertation form, has already signified his acceptance of its major conclusion.¹

Before proceeding to examine the argument of the book, it should be noted that Hahneman's study carries with it more than the simple desire to correct a historical misplacement. Hahneman's deliberate aim is to advance the work on canon begun by Albert C. Sundberg, who is said to have shown that the Christian church received from Judaism not a closed OT canon but a "looser collection of sacred writings" (p. 1). According to Sundberg, the process of fixing even an OT canon in the church did not begin until the third century and was not completed until the fourth. It was this struggle to

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define the OT canon which in turn became the major catalyst for the church also to firm up its own collection of authoritative Christian documents. Before this time, an undefined number of writings had indeed been used with religious authority as Scripture, but the church had been content to leave the boundaries of this collection quite undefined and open. The process of NT canon formation then also has to be shifted correspondingly farther down the timeline.

¹ R. M. Grant, *Heresy and Criticism: The Search for Authenticity in Early Christian Literature* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1993) 110

The MF, as traditionally dated, stood in the way of this shift, for it represents a situation far more advanced than the present theory allows for the late second or early third century. Sundberg's own attempt to dislodge the MF, first in a paper at the International Patristics Conference at Oxford in 1965 and more trenchantly in an article printed in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1973, availed little in the scholarly world.² Hahneman now sets out to rehabilitate Sundberg's thesis, to establish "an Eastern provenance and a fourth-century date for the Fragment" and thus to sound again 'Sundberg's call for a revised history of the New Testament canon" (p. 4). We shall first address Hahneman's arguments regarding the Fragment itself, then go on to consider the case he makes for a later and more gradual awakening of the church to the concern for an authoritative, closed list of scriptural books.

Hahneman is correct that if the MF is located in the late second or early third century it is by far the earliest such list of NT documents still preserved (we have two OT lists by about this time, in Melito and Origen). But this we have known for a long time. And there is, a priori, a plausible home to be found for the MF in the fourth century, when many lists or catalogues ("canons") of the books of acknowledged Christian Scripture appear. But this a priori is severely mitigated, as Everett Ferguson has pointed out in an early review,³ by the observation that these fourth-century canons are "bare 'lists'" while the Fragment is full of discursive commentary.⁴ The MF is in fact quite different in character from these lists. Further, the anomalies in the MF do not necessarily point to the fourth century, as we shall see below.

Probably the single greatest difficulty for anyone who would want to redate the Fragment is its statement about the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which it rejects as having been written by the brother of Pius, bishop of Rome (140–155), "most recently in our time"

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(*nuperrime temporibus nostris*). Hahneman recognizes the magnitude of this problem and devotes a whole chapter to its solution. He begins by resuscitating Sundberg's argument that "our time" in the Fragment's statement is here not a reference to the lifetime of the author but is being used to distinguish "apostolic time" and "post-apostolic time" and therefore need not indicate that the fragmentist is writing relatively soon after the *Shepherd*. A similar remark of Irenaeus, that the Apocalypse of John was written "not a very long time ago, but almost in our own generation towards the end of the reign of Domitian" (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3), is explained by Sundberg and Hahneman along these same lines. But Irenaeus does not support them here, as he is pointedly identifying, not separating, his time and the apostle's; both are part of "this present time" and "now." Hahneman, however, does not rest on Sundberg's

² The main refutation was provided by E. Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia patristica* 17.2 (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982) 677-83. Ferguson "sufficiently refuted (not to say demolished)" Sundberg's thesis, according to B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 193; but his rebuttal was "brief and dismissive," according to Hahneman (p. 3). An extensive recent review of the debate between Ferguson and Sundberg can be found in P. Henne, "La datation du canon de Muratori," *RB* 100 (1993) 54-75, who decides in favor of Ferguson and a second-century date. Hahneman's book appeared apparently too late for Henne to take account of it.

³ E. Ferguson, "Review of Geoffrey Mark Hahneman," *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, *JTS* 44 (1993) 696. See also Metzger, *Canon*, 194.

⁴ Despite Hahneman's attempt to play this down (p. 131).

argument. He urges that since the fragmentist's other comments concerning the *Shepherd* are either untrue or unprovable we must therefore reject also his claim to near contemporaneity. But it remains unclear why this is so. Suppose the fragmentist is wrong in his assertion that the *Shepherd* was written during the episcopate of Pius and suppose that it was written much earlier. He could have been mistaken in the second century as well as in the fourth. And it is hard to imagine why a fourth-century author would deliberately adopt a fictitious, second-century persona just for the purpose of debunking the *Shepherd*.⁵

Hahneman says, "There would be no need to deny so emphatically the apostolicity of Hermas in the Fragment, unless a tradition associating Hermas with an apostle was known. Such a tradition is unknown before Origen and may well have originated with him. If the fragmentist betrays an awareness of that tradition then the Fragment would have to be dated after Origen" (p. 51). But Irenaeus had once cited Hermas as Scripture, probably at least partly on the assumption of the reputed author's identity with Paul's associate mentioned in Rom 16:14 and thus his status as an apostolic co-worker.⁶ Irenaeus' use of the *Shepherd* forms an entirely plausible setting for the Fragment's specification that it should be read but cannot be classed with the Scriptures and read in public worship. Tertullian tells us that the *Shepherd's* standing had at least by the second decade of the third century been considered by several councils, with unanimously negative results. He says in *De pudicitia* 10,

But I would yield my ground to you, if the scripture of 'the Shepherd,' which is the only one which favours adulterers, had deserved to find a place in the Divine canon [*divino instrumento*]; if it had not been habitually judged by every council [*concilio*] of Churches [even of your own] among apocryphal and false [writings].

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That these councils declared Hermas not only to be apocryphal but "false" may indicate an indictment as false prophecy, or the refutation of a claim made for the identity of its author. These ecclesiastical gatherings which deliberated on "canon" at least to the extent of pronouncing against Hermas are suspiciously dismissed by Hahneman: "[Tertullian's] statement that it was rejected by every synod of the churches, even those of the non-Montanists, however, cannot be objectively verified, and might be thought of as an example of his famous rhetoric," and, "Tertullian's reasons for rejecting the *Shepherd* are clearly sectarian and it should not be thought that there was widespread rejection of the work" (p. 63). Tertullian may have been given to flamboyance, but it was hardly his custom to appeal to historical precedents of his own imagination, especially when his appeal entailed an implicit challenge to his opponents to check his sources. It would seem then that the Fragment's reference to the *Shepherd* remains an obstacle which has not been effectively removed by Sundberg or by Hahneman.

Chapter five deals closely with some of the peculiarities of the Fragment which, with varying degrees of probability, Hahneman believes support his conclusion of a late date. The Fragment's peculiarities are numerous, no matter what date is assumed, but that they together point to a fourth-century, Eastern provenance is not so easily shown. The order it gives for the

⁵ See Ferguson, "Review," 692.

⁶ Similar to his linking of Linus, an early bishop of Rome, with the man mentioned by Paul in 2 Tim 4:21 (*Ag. Her.* 3.3.3).

Gospels, for instance, is said to be late and Eastern. Yet it is paralleled once in Irenaeus (*Ag. Her.* 3.1.1). Its mention of "the Acts of all the Apostles" is said to indicate lateness, for, though Acts is certainly known before this time, nobody seems to have a name for it until Tertullian. But Hahneman has missed a reference by name to "the Acts of the Apostles" in Irenaeus (*Ag. Her.* 3.13.3). Hahneman is prepared to accept the explanation of the absence of 1 Peter and James in the MF as accidental (p. 181). This is understandable, for, surprising as their intentional omission might be at the end of the second century, it would be be unthinkable in the fourth.⁷

Hahneman reiterates Sundberg's claim that the Fragment's mention of *Wisdom of Solomon* in a list of NT writings is paralleled only in the fourth century with Eusebius and Epiphanius (pp. 200-205). In reality, neither the MF, nor Eusebius, nor Epiphanius includes *Wisdom* in a list of NT writings. Eusebius, while discussing the books used by Irenaeus, mentions *Wisdom* not as a contender for NT inclusion but simply to show that this disputed book was known to Irenaeus, it being one of Eusebius's intentions to note which ecclesiastical writers used which of the disputed books. The claim that Epiphanius included *Wisdom* and *Sirach* among his NT canon (p. 204, an argument also pioneered by Sundberg) is also misleading. In *Panarion* 76.5 Epiphanius gives a list of NT writings (identical to the present one), then, clearly set off from the rest, he appends also the books

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called *Wisdom*, both of Solomon and of the son of Sirach. Earlier in the same treatise (8.6) Epiphanius had mentioned these two as books disputed by the Jews, "apart from some *other* apocryphal books" (emphasis mine). Writing some years later in *De Mens. et Pond.* 4, Epiphanius again expressly sets these two books among OT apocrypha, used and useful to the church but not classed with the others. The MF's mention of the *Wisdom of Solomon* seemingly in the midst of a catalogue of NT writings would indeed be strange, but William Horbury has recently shown that this is not what the MF does.⁸ Horbury points to a widespread practice in the early church of listing undoubted books first, then listing disputed ones, including both OT and NT antilegomena together. The mention of *Wisdom* in the MF comes at the conclusion of the list of assured NT books and at the head of a list of disputed ones. After listing the four Gospels, Acts, and thirteen epistles of Paul, the writer mentions the church's acceptance of Jude and the letters of John. Then he begins his list of disputed books, of both testaments, namely, *Wisdom*, and the Apocalypses of Peter and John, and *The Shepherd* by Hermas. Of these he says that the first three are accepted by the church, though some will not have the Apocalypse of Peter read in the church, but that Hermas' writing must be rejected as postapostolic. Then he concludes with a brief list of rejected books.

The place of *Wisdom* in the fragment would then imply not that *Wisdom* was connected with or even included in the New Testament, but that, like the Revelations of John and of Peter, and (to a lesser degree) the *Shepherd* of Hermas, it was considered an acceptable book not certainly included in the canonical number. This explanation...is in full agreement with a known status accorded to *Wisdom*—that of a leading antilegomenon, commonly put first in lists of the 'outside' or 'ecclesiastical' books from the Old and New Testaments.⁹

⁷ Henne, "La datation," 72.

⁸ William Horbury, "The *Wisdom of Solomon* in the Muratorian Fragment," *JTS* NS 45 (1994) 149-59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

Thus according to Horbury the inclusion of *Wisdom* in the MF is not evidence for a fourth-century date.¹⁰

Hahneman claims that the Fragment's use (line 84) of the Latin *catafrygum*, an obvious transliteration of *katafruga* (or *kata Fruga*), a nickname for the Montanists, is indicative of a fourth-century date (pp. 211-12). This is because the designation in Greek does not occur elsewhere until Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catech.* 16.8), and the Latin transliteration is not extant until the late fourth century. But, as P. Henne points

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out, "toute étude lexicographique est périlleuse puisqu'elle a pour seul champ d'application la période de traduction, et pas celle de la rédaction originale."¹¹ That is, a late-fourth century Latin translator could easily have substituted *catafrygum*, the term of his day, for an original "Phrygians." Even so, we probably do have two examples of the Greek *kata Fruga* used for the Montanists from near the beginning of the third century. Ps. Tertullian's *Contra haereses*, a document originally written in Greek in the early to middle third century, but surviving only in a Latin translation, refers to *qui dicuntur secundum Phrygas* (7.21). Hahneman concludes it is unlikely that such represents an original Greek *kata Fruga*, "because similar Greek phrases in the same paragraph were simply transliterated into Latin, namely 'kata Proclum' and 'kata Aeschinen'" (p. 212). What he does not tell us is that in the same paragraph we also have both the transliterated *kata Aeschinen* and the translated *secundum Aeschinen*, both presumably from a Greek *kata*. Thus *secundum* instead of a transliterated *kata* with *Phrygas* is no evidence against an assumed original *kata*. Paired as it is here with *secundum Aeschinen*, what else would *secundum* have translated? Further, Hahneman has not considered an important piece of evidence from Epiphanius's *Panarion*. Since the researches of Lipsius (1865) and Voigt (1891) scholars have recognized that in *Pan.* 48 Epiphanius is citing a late-second or early-third-century (probably Asian) source.¹² We find this writer too already using the phrase *kata Fruga* for the Montanists (48.12.4).

We go on to Hahneman's treatment of the formation of the canon, given in support of the need to redate the MF. Hahneman accepts as a starting point Sundberg's thesis that there was no closed canon of Jewish Scriptures in Jesus' or the apostles' day. Beckwith's *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*¹³ is listed in the bibliography but unfortunately has exercised absolutely no influence on the author. Instead, Sundberg's argument is allowed to sail on as though uncontested. But if the major conclusions of Beckwith's book are accepted—such as, that "the Jewish canon, in all probability, reached its final form in the time of Judas Maccabaeus, about 164 BC, and did so for all schools of thought alike"¹⁴—much of the wind is taken from Sundberg's (and hence Hahneman's) sails.

¹⁰ Ibid., 159: "This evidence weighs against the claim that ecclesiastical definition of an Old Testament canon first begins in the fourth century, and that we would hardly expect the similar New Testament definition seen in the fragment to precede it." Cf. also Henne: Ce livre était souvent placé après les livres néotestamentaires, comme en annexe des deux Testaments. Cette hésitation peut avoir débuté au II^e siècle, comme elle est attestée au IV^e ("La datation," 60).

¹¹ Henne, "La datation," 63-64.

¹² See R. E. Heine, ed., *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia* (Macon, Ga.: Macon University Press, 1989) x, 28-51.

¹³ R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

¹⁴ Ibid., 406.

It would appear incumbent upon those who might want to take Hahneman's position to formulate a response to Beckwith.

On coming to consider the evidence for the reception of the NT documents one should like to expect, if not a detailed treatment of the use of NT writings in the early church, at least accurate and balanced summaries. One will find neither here. The conclusions are largely second-hand and consistently skeptical. A few examples will

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convey the tone of the work and the way evidence is evaluated by the author.

The linguistic agreements between the Pastorals and Polycarp (c. 135) suggest no more than that they both stand in the same ecclesiastical and cultural tradition [p. 117].

H. Koester has shown that the citations of gospel traditions among the Apostolic Fathers are more likely to be drawn from oral tradition than to be free quotations from written gospels, to which no explicit appeals are made [p. 95].

It is indeed a tricky business to try to determine when similar language truly denotes use of another source, especially if not attributed. To illustrate, let us take the last quotation itself. How does one explain the similar wording found in Harry Y. Gamble's book on the NT canon: "It has been shown that the citations of gospel-type traditions among the Apostolic Fathers are much more likely to have been drawn from the ongoing stream of oral tradition than to be free quotations from written gospels, to which no explicit appeals are made"¹⁵ Possibly both authors came to nearly identical summaries of Koester's book independently. But curiosity compounds when one sees that at least thirteen full sentences and parts of many others from pp. 18, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 33, 34 of Gamble's book also appear verbatim or nearly so in chap. 3 of Hahneman's book, without attribution. As just one example, we may adduce the following (italicized letters signify the divergences):

He seems at numerous points to have relied on oral tradition, or *on* a compilation of sayings of Jesus, or perhaps on gospels not known *to us*, or variously on all of these. Evidently Justin did not invest any exclusive authority in the Gospels which ultimately became canonical. [Gamble, 29]

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Does this show that Hahneman borrowed from Gamble? To conclude so might be rash; after all, "no explicit appeals are made." And, even though Gamble's book appeared first and is listed in Hahneman's bibliography, it is just possible that it was Gamble who borrowed from Hahneman. Perhaps the material originated in a lecture or seminar given years earlier by Hahneman at which Gamble may have been in attendance. Alternatively, as Hahneman says

¹⁵ Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 27; the statement is followed by a reference to H. Koester's *Synoptisch Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* [TU 65; Berlin: Akademie, 1957]).

of Polycarp and the Pastorals, verbal agreements in our modern authors may "suggest no more than that they both stand in the same ecclesiastical and cultural tradition." Hahneman and Gamble then may be heirs of oral, history-of-the-canon

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tradition, in this case a tradition which must have come complete with suggestions for footnotes.¹⁶ Or, are they both indebted to a common written source, a now lost "Ur-Kanonsgeschichtebuch," which circulated through both authors' respective scholar-communities in the early 1980s? Perhaps less likely, but a viable critical possibility nonetheless, is that Gamble and Hahneman are in reality the same person (cf. the theory that Polycarp wrote the Pastorals). So, here, just as in the case of apparent use of NT writings in the Apostolic Fathers and others, actual dependence must not be hastily claimed until all the probabilities are carefully weighed. But when they are, actual dependence, in both our ancient and modern instances, is still perhaps the best conclusion.

Arguing against the existence of a fourfold Gospel canon at the end of the second century, Hahneman says, "The Gospel of John is certainly a surprising member of any orthodox gospel canon at the end of the second century" (p. 101). Why is this? Because of its early and widespread use by gnostic Christians such as Basilides, Heracleon, and Ptolemaeus, the Encratite Tatian, the heretic Montanists, not to mention the scathing criticism of it by Gaius of Rome at the beginning of the third century. And those detractors dubbed by Epiphanius the "Alogi"—either Gaius of Rome and his ilk or perhaps those already known to Irenaeus by about 180—"may not have been a heretical group rejecting the long-accepted Gospel of John, but rather an orthodox element protesting against the introduction into the Church's usage of a gospel which heretics had long used" (p. 102). Surely, then, Hahneman has greatly understated the case. For by Hahneman's own admission John's Gospel "from the beginning of the third century...has been generally accepted in the churches." The reader can only marvel at how this renegade Gospel could have been catapulted into universal approbation in so short a time. What power on earth could have wrested it from its gnostic origins and first use, its fresh and still reeking Montanist contaminations, the bold and searching criticism it suffered at the hands of seemingly loyal churchmen in Rome and perhaps in Asia, and delivered it safely into the waiting bosom of an expressly anti-gnostic and anti-Montanist church? Surely not the allegorical defense of the gospel's fourfold nature by Irenaeus, which Hahneman tells us is "tortured" and suggestive of innovation (p. 101)! Alas, the only thing John's Gospel had going for it, according to Hahneman, was its fortuitous linkage with the Apostle John forged by Irenaeus, a tradition which, Hahneman and many others today would hasten to add, "is probably based upon a confusion of persons by him" (p. 102). No, on this presentation of the evidence, the acceptance of John's Gospel virtually overnight in all regions of the church by the beginning of the third century simply has no causal basis in

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history. It would appear to require just the sort of supernatural energy, and a generous outpouring of it, which many writers seem anxious to exclude from the process of Scripture and canon formation! If this conclusion causes discomfort, perhaps it will stimulate a reconsideration of the evidence. The way in which the Fourth Gospel was able to overcome such dreadful odds will be much better accounted for if it is appreciated what a widespread

¹⁶ Compare Hahneman, p. 101, the materials surrounding notes 61 and 63, and Gamble, p. 33, the materials surrounding notes 27 and 28.

conviction of apostolic origin (not only Irenaeus, but at least the author of the *Epistula Apostolorum*, Polycrates, Theophilus, Clement of Alexandria, and Hippolytus by the start of the third century), what a strong and deeply embedded sanction in ecclesiastical usage (Celsus, in the 160s or 170s, already knows the Christian fourfold Gospel and polemicizes against John),¹⁷ and what a sense of agreement with the (nongnostic, by the way) rule of faith must have attended this writing through its tempestuous first century and a half.

Concerning the four Gospels it is said, "The existence of gospel harmonies at the end of the second century suggests that the Fourfold Gospel canon was not yet established" (p. 98). If this is so, then a fourfold Gospel canon is not yet established today. The author repeatedly interprets the use of noncanonical Gospel traditions by a church writer as evidence against a closed, fourfold canon.¹⁸ This might have some weight if the authors in question were not Clement and Origen, who explicitly state their reception of only the four (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.5; 6.25.4).¹⁹

As to the Pauline corpus, we read that the continued production even into the fourth century of pseudonymous Pauline works "suggests that there was no established Pauline canon, and that the Pauline collection remained open through the third and into the fourth century" (pp. 110-11). This remarkable statement takes no account whatever of the circumstances of composition of the "Pauline" apocrypha, the ecclesial standing of the authors, their intended audience and purpose, the reasons for choosing the name of Paul rather than one's own name, etc. There is, for instance, no evidence at all that the author of the *Acts of Paul* ever intended his work to be considered Scripture with the same authority as Paul's letters. What Tertullian says in *De baptismo* 17 would seem to assure us of the contrary. An open Pauline corpus is not the witness of the manuscript tradition, according to David Trobisch, who has devoted much study to the question.²⁰ The only

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variable he finds in the number and identity of the letters has to do with the book of Hebrews, which he believes was not in the original edition of thirteen letters but was added later to it. Despite some arguable conjectures, Trobisch's work is important as it suggests that a collection of at least some of Paul's letters was published by the author himself.²¹

¹⁷ See M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989) 6, 142 n. 23.

¹⁸ As does Gamble, p. 34.

¹⁹ At least by Origen's time, if not well before, there was a concern to give the limitation of the number of the Gospels apostolic authority. Origen says in his homilies on Luke: "But the Church of God has preferred only the four. There is a report noted down in writing that John collected the written gospels in his own lifetime in the reign of Nero, and approved of and recognised those of which the deceit of the devil had not taken possession; but refused and rejected those which he perceived were not truthful" (cited from W Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* [2 vols.; rev. ed.; Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1991] 1.46).

²⁰ David Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), which is a popular summary of his *Die Entstehung der Paulusbriefsammlung: Studien zu den Anfängen christlicher Publizistik* (NTOA 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989). On the disputed witness of the remains of P⁴⁶, compare Hahneman, pp. 115-116, with Trobisch, *Letter Collection*, 13-17, 22.

²¹ Gerd Theissen, in the foreword to the English translation of Trobisch's book, states the significance of his conclusion: "With the publication of this letter collection Paul basically gave birth to the concept of a Christian canon" (p. vii).

Hahneman echoes the observation of Sundberg, now supported by Gamble and others, that the presence of authoritative Scriptures in the early church does not necessarily imply a closed canon, or even the concept of canon. Ferguson would bring some needed clarity to this discussion by insisting that

Between 'scripture' and 'closed canon' another stage needs to be inserted, 'open canon'. 'Scripture' implies 'canon', and 'canon' implies 'closed canon', but they are not the same. When the scripture principle is accepted, there will be a concern to identify which writings are authoritative....There is the stage, at least theoretically, when one acknowledges certain writings but does not rule out that there might be others not yet brought to one's attention or still under consideration. This intermediate stage of 'open canon' may be reflected in the Muratorian Fragment.²²

But even this does not disclose all the possibilities. "Scripture" implies at least an open canon, or could imply a closed canon without needing to imply unanimous agreement. An author may believe in a closed canon but be personally unsure of its extent, or he may himself be confident of its extent but his verdict may not be validated by all of his contemporaries. It is the latter which seems to characterize several writers by at least the second half of the second century. There are Christians who say there is only one mode of baptism. In a purely descriptive sense they are simply wrong, for more than one mode is practiced by Christians. But from a dogmatic perspective, hypothetically at least, they may be right. At any rate they may still believe they are right, no matter how many "false" baptisms are performed. A similar situation seems to be reflected when Origen and Eusebius report on "disputed" books like Revelation, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, etc. If "not all say that these are genuine" (i.e., 2 and 3 John, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.10), then a substantial number do—and they may be right. There may have been at a given time a great deal of agreement, but not unanimity; widespread use of and confidence in a book, but unsettled disputes in some quarters. A case in point is Origen's treatment of Hebrews. He knew it

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was disputed, but this made no difference in his own regard for and use of the book. If it is not Paul's, its thoughts "are admirable, and not inferior to the acknowledged writings of the apostle, to this also everyone will consent as true who has given attention to reading the apostle." Origen proceeded to write homilies on Hebrews (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.11–14).

Hahneman proposes that we may see the development of a concept of canon in three stages, reflected first in comments on individual books as Scripture, then manifested in collections of groups of books (such as a fourfold Gospel collection), and finally in the production of catalogues or canons, authoritative lists of recognized books. It is not until the last stage, begun allegedly in the early fourth century by Eusebius, that we may properly speak of a concern for a canon, or a closed list of NT Scriptures (pp. 136, 140, 171, etc.). On writers cited by Eusebius, Hahneman says, "The remarks of the earlier authors themselves reflect only the concept of Scripture," not, that is, "an interest in the Canon" (p. 136). "Not until the fourth century did the churches appear to define and restrict that New Testament collection" (p. 129). "An interest in the Canon", then, and attempts to "define and restrict" the NT

²² Ferguson, "Review," 693.

collection, are what we must look for before the fourth century. Here are a few places where they may be found.

To begin in the early third century, there are the councils mentioned by Tertullian (on which see the comments above). Again it must be stressed that, whatever other functions these councils may have performed, they deliberated on the NT canon at least to the extent of rejecting Hermas "as apocryphal and false." In passing, it might be suggested that more attention be paid to Tertullian's own title for the literary collection of Christian Scripture, the *instrumentum*, a Latin legal term used for "deeds" or other official documents, which he preferred to the designation which was more popular at that time, *testamentum*. On a view such as Hahneman's we might certainly expect appeals to *instrumenta*, for they were, after all, individual documents. There is no evidence that single codices containing the whole collection (anyone's collection) of the Christian Scriptures had yet been produced. But Tertullian uses the singular, as if he is thinking of one book, or one body of books.²³ Is this not most naturally read as indicating the conception of a closed set of documents?

Eusebius tells us that Clement of Alexandria, in his now lost *Hypotyposes*, "has given concise explanations of all the Canonical Scriptures, not passing over even the disputed writings, I mean the Epistle of Jude and the remaining Catholic Epistles, and the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Apocalypse known as Peter's. And as for the Epistle to the Hebrews ..." (6.14.1-2). Eusebius's terminology is important. He does not merely say that Clement used "testimonies" from the canonical Scriptures, as he did in his *Stromateis*

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(6.13.4, 6). He states that Clement gave explanations or comments (*dihgñsei*) on all of them, all in the same work, as if it were his intention in that treatise to survey all of these books. This certainly seems to reflect a concern for the contents of the covenantal Scripture and forms a fitting parallel to what we find, on a smaller scale, in the MF. Eusebius is surely using his own conception of the canonical writings, and in his stating that Clement wrote on all of them there is an indication that all the documents considered assuredly canonical by Eusebius were thus included and commented on by Clement. Besides these, Clement also remarked upon those writings which Eusebius considers disputed (Jude, the rest of the Catholic letters, *Barnabas*, *Apoc. Pet.*); whether Clement regarded them as disputed in his day, we cannot say.²⁴

²³ *Adv. Marc.* 4.2; *Adv. Prax.* 15, 20; *De pudic.* 1; the plural is used in *Adv. Marc.* 4.1 where he speaks of the two testaments. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity, 1988) 181 n. 6, points out that Tertullian "also uses, with regard to the Old or New Testament collection, *armarium* ('bookcase') and *paratura* (equipment)."

²⁴ In 3.32 Eusebius had said, "of the Acts bearing his [Peter's] name, and the gospel named according to him and Preaching called his and the so-called Revelation, we have no knowledge at all in Catholic tradition, for no orthodox writer of the ancient time or of our own has used their testimonies." From this we would well conclude that whatever Clement said about the *Apoc. Pet.* he did not give the impression that it was to be treated as Scripture. Hahneman (p. 207) thinks Eusebius is exaggerating here, in light of what he says later in 6.14.1. If the Clementine material translated and preserved by Cassiodorus (sixth cent.) under the title *Adumbrationes* is indeed from Clement's eight books of the *Hypotyposes*, as is usually supposed, then we may be sure that he regarded at least 1 Peter, Jude, 1 and 2 John as part of the Christian Scriptures. We also know that Clement regarded Revelation as written by the apostle John.

The objections brought against the Johannine literature in the second century already imply no little concern about "canon" questions. What we know of Gaius of Rome (the only identifiable representative of the opponents of the Johannine literature) confirms this. Eusebius says Gaius "mentions" (μνημονεύει) only thirteen epistles of Paul and does not accept Hebrews. What does this signify? Eusebius can hardly mean that in Gaius' single treatise against Proclus one could find testimonies from all thirteen (even Philemon?) but not from Hebrews. What Eusebius means is that somewhere in the treatise Gaius gave an enumeration (Eusebius uses the word *sunarizmhsa*) of the genuine or received epistles of St. Paul which included the thirteen but either omitted or rejected Hebrews. Thus he should be regarded as possessing and specifying for others a thirteen-letter collection of Paul's writings. This concern with the number of authoritative new-covenant Scriptures was certainly germane to the controversy with Montanism in which Gaius was engaged.²⁵ Eusebius says in another place that Gaius was exercised with Proclus and the Montanists for their "recklessness and audacity...in composing new Scriptures" (6.20.3). But why should this have particularly bothered him if, as Hahneman

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implies, the canon was still open to augmentation at this time? It looks very much like Gaius believed there was a "closed canon"; his canon was simply narrower than that of the rest of the church. In another quotation preserved by Eusebius, Gaius criticizes Cerinthus for being "an enemy of the Scriptures of God" (3.28.2). All of this harmonizes well with the summaries of Gaius' argument still extant in Dionysius Bar Salibi's commentary on Revelation,²⁶ which show that Gaius tried to discredit the book of Revelation by pitting it against what is "written" in the Synoptic Gospels and the writings of Paul.²⁷

Writing ca. 196, the anonymous anti-Montanist cited by Eusebius says he had long resisted the request to write against the Montanists "not through lack of ability to refute falsehood and bear witness to the truth, but from fear and extreme caution, lest I might seem to some to be adding a new article or clause to the word of the New Covenant of the Gospel [*episuggrafein [epidiatassesqai tw/ th" tou' euaggelion kainh" diaqhkh" loqwl]*, to which no one who has purposed to live according to the simple Gospel may add, from which no one may take away" (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.3). This writer certainly seems to conceive of the new covenant as represented by a "closed" literary corpus, not subject to expansion or diminution. Van Unnik originally read his statement this way²⁸ but later made a retraction, stating that "this list is not yet water-tight, because there could be a chance that his own book would be reckoned with it. Had a fixed canon existed already by that time, later well-known difficulties about certain books would have been impossible."²⁹ Surely this takes far too little regard for the rhetoric. The anonymous author says, "lest I might seem *to some* to

²⁵ Gamble's comment, "In fact, arguments about scripture and arguments from scripture played a remarkably small role in the whole [Montanist] conflict" (*New Testament Canon*, 64) is quite wide of the mark. See, e.g., R. Heine, "The Role of the Gospel of John in the Montanist Controversy," *The Second Century* 6 (1987-88) 1-19.

²⁶ I. Sedlacek, *Dionysius bar Salibi in Apocalypsim, Actus et Epistulas Catholicas* (CSCO, Scriptores Syri 2.101; 1909, text; 1910 Latin version).

²⁷ 2 Timothy, incidentally, is explicitly cited, adding independent weight to Eusebius testimony that Gaius recognized all thirteen Pauline epistles.

²⁸ W. C. van Unnik, "De la règle mhte prosqehai mhte ajfel e dans lhistoire du canon," *VC* 3 (1949) 1-36.

²⁹ "H kainh\ diaqh\ A Problem in the Early History of the Canon," *Studia patristica* 4 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961) 212-27, at p. 218.

be adding ..."—as if he anticipated someone using against him an argument he and others had been deploying (and Gaius shortly, see *Hist. eccl.* 6.20.3 cited above) against the Montanists. It is of course true that the "later well-known difficulties" expose him as naïve. This fact notwithstanding, his view is definite, and he writes as if he believes it is the common view on the subject among Catholics. Therefore, while we know of no final list of authoritative, new-covenant books that had been agreed upon at this time, this does not mean that churches and church leaders did not believe there was one.

A. F. Walls points out that Dionysius of Corinth, writing probably no later than about 170, "almost apologizes for publishing his letters, declaring that he does so at the request of 'the brethren', and making it clear that they are to be distinguished from the

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dominical Scriptures" (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 4.23.12).³⁰ Again, it is true that other Christian literary productions of the period demonstrate less restraint. Yet such a protective stance on the part of church leaders about the publication of anything which might be misunderstood as staking claim to the kind of authority that was commonly attributed to a received apostolic writing is plainly evident,³¹ though its documentation is often ignored by recent writers on the history of the canon. Moreover, Dionysius's designation "dominical Scriptures" (τῶν κυριακῶν...γραφῶν) is itself probably to be regarded as specifying a definite body of NT writings.³² That "the Scriptures of the Lord" is a designation of a NT collection³³ is further supported by a quotation recorded just earlier by Eusebius from Dionysius's contemporary, Hegesippus. Hegesippus had come to Rome from the East during the time of bishop Anicetus (155-166) and on his way had spent some time in Corinth, where he may have met Dionysius. Hegesippus (writing ca. 170-180) testified that on his journey he had found the same doctrine among all the churches, "in each city things are as the law preaches, and the prophets and the Lord" (*Hist. eccl.* 4.22.3). Here ὁ κύριος seems to stand for a known set of writings, on a par with "law" and "prophets".³⁴ "The Lord's Scriptures," or "the Lord" as a category of writings honored alongside the law and the prophets, are therefore forms of reference to authoritative Christian writings known at least by the 160s or 170s.

The contents and limits of this collection are not specified by either writer, at least in what is preserved by Eusebius. But we do know that Hegesippus had more than a passing interest in the identity of the authentic NT Scriptures. Eusebius reports that he discussed "the so-called

³⁰ A. F. Walls, "The Montanist Catholic Epistle and Its New Testament Prototype," *SE* 3/2.437-446, at p. 445.

³¹ See also in this regard Apollonius of Ephesus, who complains about the Montanist Themiso, who "dared, in imitation of the apostle, to compose an epistle general, to instruct those whose faith was better than his" (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.18.5).

³² Writing in the same letter to bishop Soter (166-175) he also makes mention of "the Lord's day" (τῆς ἡμέρας κυριακῆς ἀγίας ἡμέρας κυριακῆς), where "Lord" obviously refers to Jesus.

³³ Bruce allows that "they might conceivably be the Old Testament writings, especially those passages which were used as testimonies concerning Christ" (*Canon*, 123).

³⁴ The Syrian translation of Clement's two letters to virgins (early third century according to J. Quasten, *Patrology* [3 vols.; 1951; repr. Westminster, MD: Newman, 1984] 1.58) also preserves this classification: "The Law and the Prophets and the Lord Jesus Christ." See B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (6th ed.; 1889; repr. Grand Rapids, 1980) 186-87. Hippolytus employs a threefold classification: "the prophets, the Lord, and the apostles" (*Commentary on Daniel* 4.49). Clement speaks similarly of the prophets, the Gospel, and the blessed apostles (*Strom.* 7.16). Irenaeus on one occasion reduces "the entire Scriptures" to the two categories prophets and Gospels (*Ag. Her.* 2.27.2).

Apocrypha" and "relates that some of them were fabricated by certain heretics in his own time" (*Hist. eccl.* 4.22.9). About the same time (180s) Serapion of Antioch too rejected books as inauthentic and not attested by tradition (*Hist. eccl.*

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6.12.3-6). He is quoted as writing, "for our part, brethren, we receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ, but the writings which falsely bear their names we reject, as men of experience, knowing that such were not handed down to us."³⁵ The activity of these last two writers corresponds well with that of the MF, which rejects the *Shepherd* for being written "almost in our time" and other writings which were from known heretical sources.

This is enough to show that it is quite wrong to contend that there was no concern for marking out or keeping inviolate the contents of the new covenant Scriptures in the second century, or to claim that there was no generally accepted core canon at least by the end of that century. In fact, at many points it looks as though the orthodox church at this time was if anything overconfident in its assumption of unanimity. Several writers (Dionysius of Corinth, Irenaeus, the Anonymous anti-Montanist cited by Eusebius) seem to manifest an assurance about the contents of the new-covenant Scriptures which, it may have come as a bit of an embarrassment to find out, was not justified by the facts. An agreement was assumed which was not really there. With scholars like Clement and Origen, even with the MF, we begin to have open admission that there is disagreement among the faithful about some of the church's books. Hahneman's contention that "the decisive period of New Testament canonical history" is properly located in the fourth century may be true only if by decisive period we mean the period in which church could finally claim (virtually) unanimous agreement on those writings which surrounded the "core," and that from then the canon was settled or fixed. With or without the MF, there is ample evidence that the church was operating with a conception of a closed canon at least by the latter half of the second century. For writers of that generation like Irenaeus and Serapion to speak of the NT writings as that which was "passed on" to them from the previous generation (Irenaeus, *Ag. Her.* 3.1.1; Serapion, *Hist. eccl.* 6.12.3-6) shows that

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they did not conceive the question the way Hahneman does. No matter how many new "Gospels" or imitation apostolic epistles continued to appear, there was no chance of any of them making their way into the body of the church's Scriptures. Apart from the occasional

³⁵ Given this statement by Serapion, it is surprising that Hahneman (p. 100) labors to give the impression that Petrine pseudepigrapha such as *Gosp. Pet.* held the same place as the canonical Gospels in Syria at this time. Before coming to Rhossus, Serapion had never even seen the work in question and, as he later admits, at the time of his visit somewhat carelessly ("without going through it") assented to its reading among them. This is hardly to be taken as implying that their "reading" of it was in worship or as Scripture. Gamble reads the "fascinating report" about Serapion similarly: "In the community of Rhossus, which lay in Serapion's jurisdiction, the *Gospel of Peter* was in use, and Serapion expressed no reservation about this. But when it was eventually brought to his attention that this Gospel might contain heterodox ideas, Serapion banned its further use. The incident illustrates that a four-Gospel collection had not become normative in the east" (*New Testament Canon*, 35). Once again, it seems to be assumed that as soon as someone receives a set of documents as canonical or normative, he or she must swear off reading anything else forever. Actually, Serapion never did ban the *Gosp. Pet.* from being read. After studying the works of the Docetists who apparently used this Gospel and giving the pseudepigraphon a careful reading, he simply wrote to the Rhossians a list of objectionable passages which were capable of misleading. Gamble's summary of the incident should be compared to the words of Serapion himself quoted above.

rearguard efforts necessitated by controversialists such as Gaius of Rome, the question that rises to face the church by the end of the second century has mostly to do with minor variations that may have existed in the traditional collections held in the archives of individual apostolic churches. That we do not have more "lists" surviving from this period³⁶ and that it took more than 150 more years for the church to arrive at unanimity on the disputed books has to be attributed to other factors. For one thing, the church at this time lacked the means to draw itself together and unite officially beyond local councils about this or any other matter. Thus, as in questions such as belief in the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, sacramental traditions, etc., standard usages did not exist without individual and regional eccentricities.³⁷

There is no question that Hahneman has beefed up Sundberg's case for a later date and an Eastern origin for the Muratorian Fragment. Still, we are bound to judge that the case is unconvincing and that the traditional dating does far better justice to the evidence. Along with the present reviewer, Ferguson and Horbury have already pointed to some of the major weaknesses of the proposal. Thus, despite early endorsement from R. M. Grant,³⁸ the theory certainly cannot be said to have carried the day. Though the thesis of Sundberg and Hahneman may be flawed and at many points tendentious, they have turned over old embers which now are certain to glow again. As we note an interest in canon questions being raised from other quarters (notably by some who would like to see the Gospel of Thomas included in future editions of the NT), it would seem that the stage is set for important work to be done in this area.

³⁶ From about AD 240 we have a virtual list in Origen's *Homilies on Joshua* 7.1. See Metzger, *Canon*, 139-40. This list is identical with the present canon, with the apparent omission of John's Revelation (the MSS are divided). From elsewhere we know that Origen did receive that book.

³⁷ "In the 4th century the tendency towards unification grew stronger in every sphere of the Church's life (liturgy, organisation, Church order, etc.). The canon also was affected by this" (Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* 1.31).

³⁸ A largely favorable review has also appeared from J. K. Elliott in *NovT* 36 (1994) 297-99.

The Muratorian Fragment reveals that most of the New Testament books were already recognized and accepted in the first part of the second century (A.D. 170) by the early church. This would have been shortly after the apostle John died. The Muratorian Fragment was written about A.D. 150-170 since Polycarp (A.D. 69-155) refers to the Fragment himself.[1] The Fragment is important since it recognizes most of the books of the New Testament and mentions their authors. Here is a partial quote from the Fragment. For a full quote visit [The Muratorian Fragment](#). The third book of the gospel: according to...[^] [The Canon of Scripture](#) by Norman L. Geisler & William E. Nex. [A General Introduction to the Bible](#) by Norman L. Geisler & William E. Nex. [Suggested Links](#) An English translation of the Muratorian Canon (or Muratorian Fragment), which is a list of Scriptural books from the 2nd century, with comments.[^] There's nothing about the books chosen in this canon that makes it unlikely to be 2nd century. You can get a similar canon by picking quotes out of Irenaeus or Clement of Alexandria, whose writings both belong to the late 2nd century. Every canonical list through the Council of Nicea (AD 325) can be found at [Quotes About the Scriptures](#). This translation of the Muratorian Canon was originally from the Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume V. I've updated it to modern English, as is my habit on this site. Are you enjoying this site? We have several books with great reviews from readers. The Muratorian Fragment, traditionally dated at the end of the second century, is by far the earliest known list of books of the New Testament. It is therefore an important milestone in understanding the formation of the Christian canon of scriptures. The traditional date of the fragment, however, was questioned in 1973 by Albert C. Sundberg, Jr, in an article of the [Harvard Theological Review](#) that has since been generally ignored or dismissed. In this book, Hahneman re-examines the traditional dating of the fragment in a complete and extensive study that concurs with Sundberg's findings.