

Talbot School of Theology

The Canonical Status of the Gospels

A Paper Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Exegesis in the Gospels

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This short paper advances the following premise: students of the New Testament gospels can continue to confidently draw their “official” portraits of Jesus from the four “canonical” gospels. This is because contemporary claims that other gospels deserve equal footing with the canonical¹ gospels lack support. Upon examination, the traditional four gospels retain their status as “canonical” for very good reasons. In celebration of four gospels this paper will introduce some contemporary issues surrounding this topic and then touch on four reasons the traditional view should be upheld.

The significance of the question. Various reasons could be given for the significance of canonicity in the exegetical process, but one issue overshadows them all. Grant, for the sake of argument, that that postmodern challenges (regarding the question of meaning in texts) are not insurmountable, that hermeneutical gaps can be spanned (historical gaps, language gaps, cultural gaps), and that textual criticism can vouch for a reliable transmission process. Despite success in the above tasks, one question could dash all hopes of reconstructing an accurate account of Jesus words and works. Are we even reading the right documents to begin with? Have Christian leaders been like unsuspecting parents whose baby was switched at birth? Are we exegeting the right accounts of Jesus?

William Farmer begins his book on the “pastoral significance” of the synoptic problem with a quote from Helmut Koester. It captures the significance of the issue well.

“One of the most striking features of the gospel of Thomas is its silence on the matter of the death burial and resurrection of Jesus. . . But Thomas is not alone in this silence. The Synoptic Sayings Source (Q) . . . also does not consider Jesus death a part of the Christian message. And it likewise is not interested in stories and reports about the resurrection and subsequent appearance of the risen Lord. The gospel of

¹ Here I use the familiar “canonical gospels” term to refer to Mathew – John and “non-canonical” to refer to writings outside of the traditional New Testament canon.

Thomas and Q challenge the assumption that the early church was unanimous in making Jesus death and resurrection the fulcrum of faith. . . ”²

Our view of the canon has a significant impact on our theology & all exegesis involved. If we suddenly expand the works we are doing exegesis from, the Christian message significantly changes.

The 20th century witnessed the birth of a completely new narrative about the life setting in which the formation of the canon occurred. The “orthodox” storyline of Jesus as Lord from heaven who died on the cross for sin and rose again as savior was not, according to many, the story line of the earliest “versions” of Christianity. Apparently 1500 years of Christian scholars have been exegeting a myth which Roman Christians used to push out earlier valid accounts of Jesus. William Farmer and C.E. Hill point our attention back to this paradigm shift created by Walter Bauer’s 1935 *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity). “Some of the most influential and prolific of the present generation of scholars of early Christianity, including Helmut Koester, Elaine Pagels, James Robinson, and Bart Ehrman assume at least the broad strokes of Bauer’s thesis as the basis of their work.”³ Darrell Bock reminds us that at the heart of Bauer’s thesis lay the familiar mantra that victors re-write history. Bauer wrote,

If we follow such a procedure, and *simply agree* [emphasis mine] with the judgment of the anti-heretical fathers for the post-New Testament period, do we all too quickly become dependent on the vote of but *one* party – that party which perhaps as much through favorable circumstances as by its own merit eventually was thrust into the foreground, and which possibly has at its disposal today the more powerful, and thus the more prevalent voice, only because the chorus of others has been

² William Reuben Farmer, *The Gospel of Jesus: The Pastoral Relevance of the Synoptic Problem* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, ©1994), 3.

³ Charles E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, ©2010), 23

muted? Must not the historian, like the judge, preside over parties and maintain as a primary principle the dictum *audiatur et altera pars* [let the other side be heard]?⁴

Bock follows the quote with the reasonable alternative that perhaps the victors won for a legitimate reason. Were there good reasons the canonical gospels won out?

What we mean by canon affects how we view history. It is no longer sufficient to give a definition of canon by merely mentioning this terms etemological links to the idea of a reed or standard. One must clarify how that standard was used in connection with early Christian literature. Michael Kruger discusses two major views in multiple works of his.⁵ The more popular idea of the church imposing a final rigid list of books upon itself to cope with of historical circumstances (i.e. Marcion) is what he calls the *exclusive* definition of canon. He contrasts this with the *functional* definition where the idea of canon represents the *process* of recognizing a the full corpus of scripture from 2nd through the 4th century. After helpfully discussing strengths and weakness of each view he suggests neither addresses the *ontological* question of what the canon ultimately was. *Why was* the church operating with a functional canon/core and *why did* the church eventually attempt to announce an official list of canonical books? He answers with the suggestion that Christians believed that books were given by God to the church and were thereby distinct from other, even spiritually useful, books. His third definition ties together the prior two in a helpful way and naturally addresses the vital link that apostolic authority played in introducing these works to the church. This point is quite similar to Norman Geisler's suggestion that

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2006), 47.

⁵ Michael Kruger, "The Definition of the Term 'canon': Exclusive or Multi-Dimensional?," *Tyndale Bulliten* 63, no. 1 (2012): 1-20.

when it came to Old Testament canon, “propheticity” was the ontological element that lay at the core of the acceptance of those books into the canon.⁶

How then do we adjudicate between these two views? Was the canon the result of Bauer’s “winner takes all” re-writing of history after Constantinian Christianity saddled Rome? Were early gospel accounts belonging to diverse Christianities (including gnostic versions) run out of town by an official four volume set approved by 4th century orthodoxy? Or was a canonical awareness already present with the church from the earliest days because of something at the very core of their tradition and scriptures (written or oral)? The following survey of four reasons attempts to answer this question.

1. A meager list of competitors. According to C.E. Hill, some scholars give readers the impression that there were scads of diverse gospels littering the early church. Especially in a place like Egypt, where Gnosticism was supposed to have flourished, we would expect to find evidence for this. Yet when we peer back into the second century and count up all of the non-canonical gospels that we know of (which could possibly have existed in the 2nd century) we only find eight reasonable options⁷. There just aren’t that many competitors.⁸ More importantly, what light can be shed on their usage by the number of copies that have actually been found in Egypt?

When looking at the *earliest* surviving papyri (from Egypt where the climate was dry) we have 13 manuscript attestations for three of the four canonical gospels (**Matthew:** P⁶⁴, P⁷⁷, P¹⁰³, P¹⁰⁴, **Mark:** --, **Luke:** P⁴, P⁵, **John:** P⁵², P⁶⁶, P⁷⁵, P⁹⁰, P¹⁰⁸, P¹⁰⁹). By contrast there

⁶ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume*, condensed. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2011), 389.

⁷ Gospel of the Ebionites (c.125?), Gospel of the Egyptians (c.125?), Gospel of the Hebrews (c.125?) Gospel of the Nazoreans (c.125?), Gospel of Thomas (c.140?), Gospel of Peter (c.150?), ‘Unkown Gospel’ [P. Egerton 2] (c.150?) Gospel of Judas (c.170?), and the Infancy Gospel of James (c.170?) Hill suggests the Infancy Gospel of James really doesn’t belong in this list due to its difference in Genre.

⁸ Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels*, 8.

are 2 and at most 5 attestations to non-canonical gospels in surviving papyri (**Egerton Gospel**: P.Egerton 2 + P. Koln 255, **Gospel of Peter**: P.Oxy. 4009, P.Oxy 2949, **Gospel of Thomas**: P.Oxy I, P.Oxy 655).⁹ So hard evidence *implies* the canonical gospels outnumbered alternatives (by a ration of 4:1) in an area where Gnostic Christianity was supposed to have flourished.

2. Talk of of four official gospels appears early and often. It is no secret that the vast bulk of earliest papyri were lost to decomposition. Perhaps the early church's use of other gospels does not match the finds of the papyri in Egypt? It is extremely precarious to attempt to guess what gospel usage looked like around the second century Mediterranean world based on a meager handful of papyri from Egypt. What other evidence is available?

Returning to Hill, we learn that "many scholars suggest that the four gospels were essentially "chosen" for the church sometime in the fourth century."¹⁰ One reason more scholars do not echo this opinion is that Irenaeus, as early as AD180 is a voice crying in the wilderness in support of four gospels; no more and no less. He speak as if four gospels was the norm for the church already by his day and gives multiple reasons why (See. *Against Heresies* 3.11.8). In response to this, many scholars wish to isolate Irenaus as an odd figure who fabricated this concept and was the lone voice in his position until the 4th century.

This is absolutely not the case. A long line of eminent early church fathers voice the same familiarity and awareness of four official gospels from the date of Irenaeus writing on through the 4th century. Hippolytus of Rome (c.202) Tertullian of Carthage (c.207-212), Origen (c.226 and 240), Dionysius of Alexandria (c.251), Cyprian of Carthage (c.256), Victorinus of Pettau (c.304), Eusebius retelling the story of Marinus of Caesarea (c.260),

⁹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

Euplus of Catania (c.303) all directly mention four gospels or give evidence of the gospels as fourfold. Bottom line, talk of four gospels as if this were the norm comes early and often. By way of contrast, they do not speak of five or six gospels.

3. The New Testament writers spoke in a way that produced canonical thinking in the early church. The early attestation to a fourfold rather than a 6 fold or 15 fold set of gospels fits hand in glove with the fact that the New Testament authors spoke in a way that assumed a unique authority. Kruger concludes his chapter on this topic by contradicting the claim of some scholars that the New Testament authors only wrote occasional letters and had no self-awareness they might be writing something official. “In contrast to such claims this chapter has argued that there are a number of instances where the New Testament authors are quite aware of their own authority. Indeed they expressly understood their writings to be *apostolic* in nature – that is they were consciously passing down the authoritative apostolic message.”¹¹ While the epistles of Paul are much clearer than the gospels in this regard, Richard Bauckham demonstrates how the use of *inclusio* in Mark¹², Luke, and John show their eagerness to prove the identity of certain eyewitnesses who were present the entire time of Jesus ministry thus giving credibility to the gospels and the story of Jesus. ¹³ The key point here is apostolicity (chosen men seeing to it that Jesus divine message was passed on to the world) flows naturally from the apostles Jewish scriptural heritage. Authority in scripture based on the prophetic status of authors was not new to them. Equivalent “thus sayeth the Lord” concepts are found in the NT and give

¹¹ Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 153.

¹² Peter is placed as the first and last disciple in Mark’s gospel (assuming the shorter ending) and he shows up the most prominently throughout the entire gospel.

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 132-84.

natural rise to Krugers *ontological* idea of an internal canon existing before the ink was dry. It makes no sense to suggest the idea of canon (that certain texts were scriptural and from God whereas others were not) was a foreign concept only to be imposed at some 4th century council to push out other texts.

4. The Fathers were aware of other books and were troubled by their contents. A significant part of the case for the canonicity of the canonical gospels comes from the glaring differences between these and their non-canonical alternatives; differences that early church fathers knew of and in sometimes argued against. N.T. Wright points out a few of these differences in his little booklet *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus*.¹⁴ While the gospels of the new testament had narrative story line, a climax, and appropriately placed teachings of Jesus, many non-canonical gospels were simply collections of sayings. More importantly, the god of gnostic texts is demiurge at the bottom of a chain of emanations from the Supreme Being. This god was incompetent and made a mistake by creating the physical world. This stands in stark, if not blasphemous contrast to the basic monotheism of the Hebrew scriptures of the early church who created the earth in an act of perfect creative goodness. This contrast reminds us of the classic line in evangelical books on the canon; the three-fold test used by the Fathers. “Was a book written by an apostle or an associate (apostolicity)? Did it conform to the teachings of other books known to be by apostles (orthodoxy)? Was it accepted early and by a majority of the churches (catholicity)?”¹⁵

¹⁴ N T. Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus: Have We Missed the Truth About Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 63-86.

¹⁵ J Ed Komoszewski, M James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Misdemean Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, ©2006), 26.

Conclusion. Many other points could be brought to bear on the question of why the four traditional gospels were seen as authoritative scripture for the church (i.e. canonical) while others were not. The pattern of gnostic gospels primarily in smaller manuscript forms associated with private use and larger manuscripts for public reading containing only canonical gospels is one example.¹⁶ None the less length requirements force me to stop here. The point of the paper has been that canon is a legitimate question in the overall exegetical enterprise. If it cannot be confidently answered, everything else is jeopardized. Second, defining the idea of canon solely in terms of a *functional vs exclusive* dichotomy is less helpful than uniting these two with Kruger's point on what it was *ontologically* about books being from God that drove *both* the growth of the canon and the official listing of its boundaries in the 4th century. I then made the point that rather than seeing evidence for a variety of gospels in use throughout the early church, physical evidence supports a different picture. There appears to have been a very limited number of optional gospels whose use was clearly less than the canonical gospels (in an area where Gnosticism flourished). The testimony of early Christians fills the silence gap created by a lack of surviving early papyri. Two centuries of fathers speak consistently about four gospels. This fits hand in glove with the fact that the New Testament writers handed off documents exuding the marks of scriptural authority. It makes sense that the earliest Christians would naturally have thought in terms of canon (i.e. scriptural books vs non-scriptural books). There is no evidence that the canonical concept was imposed from without for the first time in the 4th century due to the emergence of heresy. Finally, if the nature of the New Testament documents would have (positively) planted seeds of canonical thinking in the

¹⁶ Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels*, 27.

minds of church fathers, the drastic difference between these and later gnostic gospels would have (negatively) reinforced that concept. It is not as if what we know as canonical gospels were easily confused (i.e. genre, theology) with non-canonical works. The case for the traditional gospels remains, for this writer, a firm one in the overall exegetical process.

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