

## Foreword

The Bible of the Christians' religious tradition includes two books, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The first of these two books has always been a substantial part of the Christian scriptural authority. However, the exact definition of the writings that should be a part of the Old Testament canon never played a decisive role in the discussions about the Christian canon of Holy Scripture and its authority. While the so-called "Old Testament Apocrypha" are an undisputed part of the canon of the Greek church and a smaller corpus of apocryphal writings is included in the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, most Protestant churches have ascribed authority only to a smaller Old Testament canon, corresponding to the Hebrew Bible, from which the Apocrypha are excluded. But these differences are rarely considered to be divisive.

In contrast, the question of the exact extent of the New Testament canon has often been hotly debated among Christians. In recent decades, this issue has taken on new dimensions through the discovery of an increasing number of ancient Christian gospels, epistles, and books of revelation under apostolic names such as Peter, Thomas, Philip, and even Mary. At the same time, critical scholarship has questioned the "apostolic" authorship of writings of the New Testament canon itself. Matthew and John may not be the authors of the Gospels transmitted under their names, the apostle Paul was not the author of all the letters of the Pauline corpus, and both Epistles of Peter were probably written half a century after Peter's death. Should we, therefore, revise the canon of the New Testament? Should we exclude the Second Epistle of Peter? Should we include the newly discovered *Gospel of Thomas*?

It is understandable that many Christians are disturbed by critical questions regarding the authority of writings of the New Testament canon, while others are excited about the discovery of new and hitherto unknown gospels, which claim to have been written by apostles. But

what is happening to canonical authority, when there are apostolic writings outside of the canon and when the apostolic authorship of writings of the New Testament is questioned? The New Testament no longer seems to be the one and only collection of inspired writings from the hands of genuine apostles and disciples of Jesus. Its authority as Holy Scripture appears to be seriously questioned.

If there is an answer to this question, it will not come through abstract theological controversy but only through a reconsideration of the history that once created the canon of the New Testament. What did the Christians who established the canon mean when they spoke of "scripture," "inspiration," "tradition," and "apostolic authorship"? Why were these twenty-seven writings included and others excluded? How did these writings function in nourishing and building Christian communities, and why were other writings found lacking? What were the competing forces in the formation of the early Christian churches, and what roles did various writings claiming "apostolicity" play in these controversies?

Early Christianity appears to have been much less united and much more diversified than we have thought. The writings of the New Testament were not necessarily the only early Christian apostolic witnesses. Rather, from the beginning they had to compete with other books, produced by other followers of Jesus who were later considered to be heretics. The collection of the twenty-seven writings now comprising the New Testament canon was a long and arduous process, extending over many centuries. In order to understand this process, several generations of scholars have done most of the groundwork, have investigated the Greek and Latin sources from early Christian times, have tested, approved, and rejected various hypotheses, and have thus come to a much better understanding of the process. The literature on this topic is immense, often very technical and learned, and not always easily understood. But it is also very exciting, and it has opened up a much better understanding of the story of the formation of the canon. Holy books do not fall from heaven; rather, they are created in the historical experiences of religious communities. Scholars have learned much about this in an intense international debate.

But this story must also be told so that everyone can be informed by a better understanding of the developments that took place in the early centuries of the Christian communities. It is an exciting and enriching story, filled with the experiences and thoughts of Christian believers from the time of the apostles to the consolidation of the church three centuries later. The story must be told in terms easily comprehended by every reader, the interested layperson as well as the student in a theological school. The story must be told in such a way that everyone in the divided Christian churches of our day may share it and learn from it, evangelical Christians as well as those of a more liberal persuasion. The

story must be told without apology and without zeal so that all may enter into the discourse with the history that created the foundations through which all Christians belong to the one church universal and are bound to the same God whose word and witness are preserved in the book we call the New Testament.

I have spent countless hours with the author of this book, and I have been deeply impressed by his scholarship, his learning, his faith, and his commitment to Christian education. This book, the result of many years of research, has accomplished what few have ever achieved: telling a difficult story well. There are no shortcuts, no facile solutions, no easy reconciliations of problems. All the materials are there. All the relevant texts are quoted and interpreted. Everyone is treated fairly and judiciously. All scholarly hypotheses are presented and discussed. All that is required of the reader is the same fairness and the same patience that are evident in the author's effort of presenting both the ancient sources and the modern scholarly debate.

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