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# The Role of the Book of Acts in the Recognition of the New Testament Canon

Peter J. Scaer

Jesus declared himself to be the only access to the Father, and from almost the very beginning, his apostles represented him in an official and public capacity. Christ's ministry, like that of John before him, was baptismal (Mark 1:8), but it was the Twelve who baptized on his behalf (John 4:1–2). Jesus multiplied the loaves, but the Twelve fed the crowds (Matt 14:13–21). The Twelve served as his under-shepherds, driving out demons, healing the people, and proclaiming the kingdom of the heavens in his name (Matt 10:1). The apostles were the gatekeepers, providing access to Jesus (John 12:20–21), while at other times they became barriers (Matt 19:13). People recognized the apostles as being members of Jesus' entourage (Matt 26:69). It was thus a natural progression that after Christ had ascended, early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). From this historical foundation we have the apostolic tradition, the apostolic teaching, and eventually the apostolic Scriptures. The New Testament writings were not dropped down from above on a golden tablet; they rest first in history and in the proclamation of people who orally proclaimed the gospel that they had heard from the mouth of Jesus himself. The Spirit that came down from heaven was the one who inhabited Christ, whose words lodged themselves first in the apostles' memories and then in their manuscripts (John 16:14). In this picture, the Spirit's work of inspiration has a decidedly horizontal trajectory.

## I. Diversity from the Beginning

Yet only the naïve would think that there was ever one Christianity, sociologically defined, or even one set of teachings that reflected the basic beliefs of all those who called themselves Christians. From the very beginning, there were differences, and the lines were, at least to human eyes, blurry. This was true, remarkably, even during the earthly ministry of Jesus. From the Gospel of Mark, we learn that the apostles were not the only ones who proclaimed the kingdom and performed miracles. John, a

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"Son of Thunder," complained to Jesus: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name. We tried to stop him, because he was not following us" (Mark 9:38). To this the Lord replied, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. He who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:39–40). Or as Jesus said elsewhere, "The Spirit blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3:8). Thus, we might conclude that the New Testament church could be defined by two sets of principles: first by the presence of Christ and the apostles, and second by the place where the gospel was proclaimed, in whatever strange or various manner.

While the church could be found with Christ and the apostles, the reality has always been a bit untidy. And even among those who believe, there have always been divisions, some doctrinal, yet others based upon more human factors, such as geography, history, and circumstance.

There were serious disputes that took time to resolve, as was the case with circumcision at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–35). At other times, division was a matter of degree. For instance, Paul describes the church as a building in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, recognizing that some building materials are better than others. Gold, silver, and precious stones are the best; wood may not be as good, but it is certainly better than hay or straw (1 Cor 3:12). Perhaps Apollos' own teaching was compromised by a little hay or straw. We know from Acts that at least for a while, his baptismal theology was somewhat lacking, even as the Corinthians' understanding of the eucharistic bread may have been half-baked, so to speak (Acts 18:24–28). Surely it was in memory of a painful experience that Paul advised Timothy not to be hasty in the laying on of hands (1 Tim 5:22).

But then, within the church there have always been great fissures and deep divides. Jesus spoke about tares among the wheat and wolves in sheep's clothing. Early on, such fringe figures as Simon the Magician and the sons of Sceva appeared (Acts 8:9–25; Acts 19:11–20). Paul warned against those who cause divisions (Rom 16:17), and he himself battled false teachers of various stripes throughout his ministry. For this reason Paul began every epistle with an authoritative claim to apostleship. But such claims hardly protected Paul's authority, which the "super-apostles" claimed to trump (2 Cor 11:5). And, in the end, Paul had only his preaching, which would be accepted by some and rejected by others.

In such a messy world, God's people have always asked whose word could be trusted, and by what criteria. The Bereans tested Paul from the

Scriptures (Acts 17:10–15), and later the Didache offered some more practical tips for distinguishing a false prophet from the genuine article (Didache 11.1–12). In either case, there does not seem to be a magic pill or a silver bullet.

If the communion lines were never perfectly drawn, and there were always divisions along with a good deal of confusion, what might we say about the canon of Scripture? What about the New Testament presented to us by Gideon's International at our hotel bedside?

## II. Canon: A Personal Reflection

When I began to teach a class on "The Introduction to the New Testament" more frequently, I typically addressed the question of canon historically and developmentally. I first noted that the word "canon" has a place in the New Testament (Gal 6:16) and that it refers to a rule or norm, embodied in a list or catalog.<sup>1</sup> This was an opportunity to discuss the *norma fidei*, that is, the rule of faith, established by Christ and the apostles, against which early Christian teaching was judged and measured. That is to say, when Christ ascended into heaven, the apostles did not. They remained as a group of witnesses who could testify to the life and words of their rabbi and Lord.<sup>2</sup> The apostolic teaching likewise could be verified by the many eyewitnesses who had known both Jesus and the apostles.<sup>3</sup> The apostles were not only groomed as Christ's successors, but they were groomed so publicly. Both Christ and his apostles spoke openly, and, as Paul noted to Agrippa, Christianity did not rise up in a corner (Acts 26:26).

I proceeded to talk about the historical development of the canon, including the place of the Gospels, whose earliest manuscripts are ascribed to the authors, and the general acceptance of most of the Pauline letters.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, I noted the variations that have led to some books being labeled *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*. As a Lutheran, such a distinction was

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<sup>1</sup> See Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 15–22.

<sup>2</sup> For a seminal discussion of Jesus as rabbi and the apostles as his students, see Bo Reicke, *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> For a wide-ranging discussion of the role that eyewitnesses played in the composition and testimony of the gospels, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006).

<sup>4</sup> For a groundbreaking discussion on the early emergence the canonical Gospels, see Graham Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 43, no. 3 (1997): 317–346.

especially helpful in dealing with our namesake's disparagement of the Epistle of James. Still other books, for various reasons, have been categorized as *notha*—spurious—due either to their content or authorship or, from time to time, politics.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it is common to speak about the criteria for canonicity. First of all, for a book to be included in the New Testament, it had to be in some way apostolic, that is, written by an apostle, like Matthew and John, or someone associated with the apostles, such as Mark and Luke.<sup>6</sup> It was not enough to claim divine inspiration if that inspiration did not in some way come from the mouth of the incarnate Christ. At least, this is the way Irenaeus saw things (*Against Heresies* III, 11, 8). Of course, claims to apostolicity, while necessary, were not sufficient, as can be seen in the church's rejection of the *Gospel of Peter*. A second factor was that of usage. In his discussion of canon, for instance, Eusebius continually asks whether and for how long churches had made public use of a particular document.<sup>7</sup> And, of course, heresy played a role in spurring the church toward a clearer definition of canon. When Marcion published his own canon that included only one Gospel (an edited form of Luke), along with ten epistles of Paul, the church was called to respond. Likewise, Irenaeus was compelled to think through this issue especially in his battles against Gnosticism.<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus described the process of discernment in terms of a mosaic or a puzzle. The question with any teaching or writing was whether it fit within what the church knew to be true from the apostles' teaching.<sup>9</sup>

In his work *Canon Revisited*, Michael J. Kruger notes that the canonical books are recognized not only by their apostolic origin and ecclesiastical acceptance, but also by their very content.<sup>10</sup> The Scriptures, in such a view, breathe a kind of divine air. By saying that the Scriptures are "self-authen-

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<sup>5</sup> For a telling discussion of the political factors involved in the canon's history, see David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of apostolicity, see Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 68–69. For a fuller discussion from a theological point of view, see David P. Scaer, *The Apostolic Scriptures* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Richard P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 215–221.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of these matters, see John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 407–408.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.9.4; 1.10.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 125–157.

ticating," we are drawing upon the words of Jesus when he said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Now, admittedly, such reasoning is open to the criticism of being circular, but it has a certain appeal and effectiveness. For instance, if someone is curious as to why the *Gospel of Peter* or the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* did not make it into the canon, there is no reason to pretend that there is a scandal. For most, a simple reading of the document, or at least a guided reading, will suffice. Even without appeal to the Holy Spirit, one might simply ask the question, does a particular document fit within our knowledge of Jesus? And, on a more basic level, we might ask if the document has any basic literary quality.

Perhaps, just for fun, one could call this the "Sesame Street Criterion": place the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* alongside those of Matthew and John, and you, too, are bound to start singing, "One of these is not like the others. One of these just doesn't belong." And indeed, this has been the approach taken by many of our best scholars. Simon Gathercole, for instance, has done a great service to the church by intelligently exposing such inferior works as the *Gospel of Thomas*, which is, upon inspection, derivative and late.<sup>11</sup> The *Gospel of Peter*, which is no doubt interesting historically, appears to portray a Jesus who, rather than dying, is simply taken up into heaven, an idea that invites Christians to respond, "Get thee behind me, *Gospel of Peter*." Or to put it another way, hidden gospels are usually hidden for a reason. And like Leah, they are much more appealing before the veil is lifted.

In fact, the very idea of a "hidden" gospel has recently been challenged and should probably be put to bed. Thanks to the work of Richard Bauckham, we can dispel the notion that any, or at least many, of the New Testament books were somehow esoteric or known only to a few communities. In his work *The Gospel for All Christians*, Richard Bauckham demonstrates that the early church was a closely knit and widely networked community. Not only the apostles but also Christians like Priscilla and Aquilla traveled extensively, bringing with them not only the apostles' greetings, but their own writings as well. New Testament Gospels and epistles were early and widely distributed everywhere throughout the

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<sup>11</sup> See Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary*, (Boston: Brill, 2014), and especially Simon Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Roman empire, with its excellent transportation over the Mediterranean Sea and upon the famed Roman roads.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the issue of canon never seemed all that pressing. Eusebius reported in his *Church History* that the basic contours of the New Testament canon were pretty well agreed on by all, and that included the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter, and perhaps Revelation. The epistles of James, Jude, 2 Peter, and the latter two of John, though labeled *antilegomena* (“disputed”), were nonetheless approved by many. It has been my thought all along that the disputed books were no less scripture than the others, but that a matter of full consensus was simply hard to come by. The idea of continuing to categorize some of the scriptural books as *antilegomena* is fine, historically speaking. And, we might add, if we are speaking about the church historically, the *homologoumena-antilegomena* distinction continues, with some saying that documents like the pastoral epistles are not apostolic. But if that means prioritizing Paul over Peter, John, or James, then it can appear as if Lutherans are stacking the deck—declaring trump after the cards have already been dealt. I can understand the tendency of many to set aside Revelation as “disputed,” but that move is nonetheless regrettable.<sup>13</sup> And though we may sympathize with Luther’s struggles with James, I doubt whether any among us think that he was correct. The fact that it all fell into place as it did, without great fissure, is miracle enough for me. And yet, if this or that book is challenged, that seems less of a threat than an opportunity to read more thoroughly. Second Peter, for instance, is widely disparaged, but its brilliance has been shown in commentaries by Richard Bauckham and Jerome Neyrey.<sup>14</sup> To put it another way, the documents, like Jesus himself, are always on trial, and every claim against them leads the church deeper into the study of them.

Perhaps I was too complacent or too naïve. For many of my fellow graduate students at Notre Dame, questions regarding canon were a much bigger issue. And they usually had less to do with finding a foundation of

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 50–53, 60–65.

<sup>13</sup> For a sparkling defense of Revelation’s pedigree, see Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 273. The book’s canonicity was affirmed by Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Theological doubts, which arose in the East, especially in response to chiliastic teaching, thereafter tended to dissipate.

<sup>14</sup> See especially Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 50 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983) and Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 37C (New York: Doubleday, 1993).



faith than with stretching the limits of the acceptable. Those pushing to expand or obliterate the canonical boundaries were not merely theological romantics who had fallen in love with the *Shepherd of Hermas* or the *Epistle of Barnabas*. Instead, they were hoping against hope to include something like the *Gospel of Thomas*. Such a document could throw a monkey wrench into the whole enterprise and relativize the other documents, as well as what is now commonly called the “Great Tradition.”<sup>15</sup> The *Gospel of Thomas* was especially appealing, as it consisted simply of words of wisdom, a kind of “Q Document” for the more deeply spiritual, who could then find a Christ of wisdom apart from such embarrassments as the virgin birth, the resurrection, the physicality of incarnation, or the blood of redemption.

### III. Bart Ehrman: An Agnostic Augustine

Lately, questions of both text and canon have taken on a sensationistic air, in no small part due to Bart Ehrman, who may well have become the “Court Theologian of Skepticism,” and whose popular pope may well be Bill Maher. And, as every adult convert seems to have a conversion story, Bart Ehrman has his own deconversion story—his kind of anti-Confessions—on the road to agnosticism. At a 2009 Symposium in St. Louis, Jeffrey Kloha observed, “I am more and more convinced that all theology is biography.”<sup>16</sup> If we take the example of Ehrman, we concede Kloha’s point.

Bart Ehrman became a Christian as a teenager and proceeded to study at the Moody Bible Institute and then at Wheaton, finally earning a PhD at Princeton University under Bruce Metzger, the leading light of textual criticism. His early orientation was decidedly fundamentalist. Ehrman’s first great stumbling block came when he read Luke’s account of Jesus’ prayer on the Mount of Olives in Luke 22 and discovered that verses 43–44, which describe the appearance of an angel and Jesus’ sweat appearing as drops of blood, may not actually have been in the original manuscript. Ehrman writes, “For me, though, this [the loss of the original manuscripts of the New Testament] was a compelling problem. It was the words of scripture themselves that God had inspired. Surely we have to know what those words were if we want to know how he had communicated to us.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I refer now to the welcomed ecumenical movement embodied in such projects as The Ancient Christian Commentary Series, as well as the magazine *Touchstone*.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Kloha, “The Authority of the Scriptures,” presented at the 2010 symposium at Concordia Seminary on “The Scriptures: Formative or Formality?”

<sup>17</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 4.

This led Ehrman to say, “The Bible began to appear to me as a very human book. . . . This was a human book from beginning to end.”<sup>18</sup> This was, for Ehrman, the end of inerrancy and with it innocence and confidence.

Having written my dissertation on the passion account in the Gospel of Luke, I was well aware of Ehrman’s work in textual criticism. The kinds of differences that he supposedly found shocking I found delightful. For what it is worth, I think the story of the angels fits in well with Luke’s presentation.<sup>19</sup> It just happens to be the case that one Gospel is not like the other, neither in its style nor its message, and that is a good thing. We should never be too quick to harmonize. And as for the textual question, I think Ehrman’s mind, like that of his early fundamentalist teachers, is perhaps too brittle. I myself am open to any author—even a scriptural author—offering more than one edition to his books, as is common today. Even if we discounted suspect passages, the overall effect on our theology would be minimal. Be that as it may, it seems to me that when Ehrman comes across discrepancies for which he can find no answer, he too easily assumes that there is no answer and passes judgment on the text and its author.

Ehrman has taken this basic insight—that the Scriptures are human—to what he thinks is its logical conclusion: if there cannot be certainty about every passage of the New Testament, how can we be sure about any of it? And thus Ehrman began his career of deconstruction in such books as *How Jesus Became God*,<sup>20</sup> *Lost Christianities*,<sup>21</sup> and *Forged*.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, Ehrman served up leftovers and popularized questions. If Ehrman’s work results in people actually reading the New Testament, some good may result from bad scholarship.

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<sup>18</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of Luke 22, see Jerome Neyrey, “The Absence of Jesus’ Emotions: The Lukan Redaction of Lk 22:39–46,” *Biblica* 61, no. 2 (1980): 153–171. Also, Peter J. Scaer, *The Lukan Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 98–102.

<sup>20</sup> Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Know* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

#### IV. The Miracle of the New Testament

Though it is one thing to debate the canonical status of the scriptural books, it is quite another to marvel at the way our Scriptures hold together from a Christian perspective. True diversity has as little to do with so-called hidden gospels as it does with the very fact and composition of the New Testament as it stands today. Compared with the monolithic nature of the Koran, the New Testament is a genuine wonder of openness. The New Testament has eight or nine authors and a series of flawed men, whose tales of grace weave a marvelous story. We ought not shrink from this story, but trumpet it. The New Testament song is not a solo, but a choir piece, sung by various, unlikely voices. The more time I have spent with the New Testament, the more I have come to appreciate its internal structure and growth. The process of canonicity, if we may call it that, came early and can be found in the documents themselves. We know, for example, that there is a certain amount of cross-referencing, with Peter referring to Paul, and Paul to Peter (Gal 2:1-14; 2 Pet 3:15). But at its most basic level, the idea of new scriptures begins with Matthew and finds a kind of canonical fulfillment in Luke.

##### *Matthew: The Fulfillment of Revelation and Scripture*

In a remarkable presidential address at the Society for Biblical Literature, D. Moody Smith asked the question: When did the Gospels become scripture?<sup>23</sup> In it Smith argued that both Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels with the express intent of writing Scripture.<sup>24</sup>

Matthew, not to be subtle, claimed to be writing a new Genesis and the fulfillment of the story of Abraham and David (Matt 1:1). What followed is a genealogy—a decidedly Old Testament form. As Davies and Allison note, Matthew thought of his Gospel as “the continuation of the biblical history—also perhaps that he conceived of his work as belonging to the same literary category as the scriptural cycles treating of Old Testament

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<sup>23</sup> I share the opinion of Brevard Childs, who sees an integral relationship between Scripture and canon, which, as he puts it, “distorts the basic theological dynamic of the canonical process by regarding it as a late ecclesiastical valorization.” Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1994; first printing 1984), 238.

<sup>24</sup> D. Moody Smith, “When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000): 3–20.

figures.”<sup>25</sup> By including in his Gospel five discourses, Matthew turned Jesus into a new and better Moses, whose final word fulfilled and even trumped that which had come before it.<sup>26</sup> Jesus is not only the end of the Abrahamic genealogy, but the end of all genealogies, replacing the fatherhood of Abraham with that of God himself and replacing David’s kingship with his own.

On the basis of this interpretation, I could easily imagine a canon, or a Bible that included all the books of the Old Testament, concluding with Matthew as its climax and fulfillment. What better way to end the Scriptures than with an appeal to the Great Commission, as the God of Israel brings his message of salvation to all nations? This certainly would have been much neater and less confusing for the church. Yet it is through Luke that the song of the church goes on.

*Luke-Acts: The Canonical Linchpin*

Luke, likewise, wrote his document as Scripture. After a decidedly Hellenistic beginning, he took us back to the temple, filling his narrative with a cast of Old Testament figures, like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna. Furthermore, he does Matthew’s Abrahamic genealogy one better by including a genealogy that goes all the way back to Adam.<sup>27</sup> His septuagintal writing style in and of itself stands as a claim to scriptural authenticity.<sup>28</sup>

But Luke’s writing did more than Matthew’s, at least canonically. Matthew wrote as a capstone to the Old Testament—its culmination. Luke, on the other hand, showed the organic unity between the Old Testament and the New. Matthew added his own book to the Old Testament canon, while Luke ensured that the Old Testament canon would be forever included in the New.

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<sup>25</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, International Critical Commentary Series, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T&Y Clark, 1988–1997), 1:423–424.

<sup>26</sup> For further reading, see Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> See D. Moody Smith, “When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?,” 8–9. See also Marshal D. Johnson, *The Purpose of Biblical Genealogies*, 2nd ed., Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> For the relationship between Luke’s style and the Septuagint, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 113–122.

Even more, Luke extended the canonical boundaries to include within it not only Christ, but the apostolic generation and the apostolic history. In his narrative he told the story of every major character who would become (at that point, had already become) a New Testament author, and he linked them together in such a way as to show that they were all indeed “of one accord.” Perhaps this is a greater accomplishment than we might realize. First of all, no matter how orthodox a group might be, and no matter how harmonious the community, there are bound to be rivalries. Certainly this was the case during Jesus’ earthly ministry and remained so during the early church: Peter versus John, Peter versus Paul, and Paul versus James, for example. Secondly, almost every New Testament author had a suspect past. Paul was a persecutor who did not know the earthly Jesus. Peter was a denier, and Mark appears to have started out badly. James and Jude may have thought that their brother Jesus was crazy. Matthew’s occupation made him a charter member of the despised. John was hot-headed and ambitious, a “Son of Thunder.” What Luke does, though, is relate how these unlikely and diverse authors were in one accord, playing their parts as partners in the New Testament story and common guarantors of Jesus’ teaching.

Luke offers, if you will, a blurb, or short biography, on every New Testament writer. He took the time to note their faults, but also explained their actions in the kindest ways. And, then, on a greater level, he showed how their lives fit into a greater narrative that was the New Testament church. Luke is the great diplomat and ecumenist of the Great Tradition—the evangelist of the Eighth Commandment. And along the way, he also set aside a couple of characters whose preaching was not to be trusted or at least relied upon. When it comes to dating the New Testament documents, things can get quite tricky, but upon reading Luke, one might say that Luke-Acts serves as a table of contents for the new Christian Scriptures.

#### *Luke’s New Testament Flows from the Old*

The first thing Luke does is link the New Testament to the Old. Matthew, in a sense, saw his Gospel as the culmination and fulfillment of the Old Testament. But, given that Christ fulfilled the Old Testament, it would have been tempting to demote the Old Testament and to turn it into an unnecessary prologue. Consider, for instance, Jesus’ refrain in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard it said, but now I say to you.” (Matt 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). One could conclude, on the basis of these words, that the Old Testament, having been fulfilled, was no longer valid.

Luke, though, actively encouraged the continued reading of the Old Testament and proclaimed it as an active and present witness to Christ. On Luke's Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah speak about the Jesus' Exodus, which is in fact his death and resurrection (Luke 9:28-36). In the story of "The Rich Man and Lazarus," Abraham himself endorses Moses and the prophets as present witnesses to Christ (Luke 16:19-21). There is no disjuncture between the past, present, and future. Luke would have us know that the New Testament flows out of the Old and that the Old flows into the New, even as Luke's cup of Passover is followed by the bread of the new Passover, which is in turn followed by the cup of the New Testament.<sup>29</sup>

Though Matthew sees Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, Luke does Matthew one better by emphasizing that the church, Christ's body, is likewise the fulfillment of the Old Testament. If Jesus's death and resurrection are the culmination of the Old Testament, his earthly ministry is only the beginning of his work. So, Luke begins the book of Acts telling Theophilus and all lovers of God that in his first book he told of all that Jesus had begun to do and teach. Luke would have us know that Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection were a matter of divine necessity in accordance with the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). So also, the apostolic and baptismal mission was seen as a matter of divine necessity, in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:47-49). For good reason Peter stood at Pentecost with an understanding that his own sermon was in fulfillment of the prophet Joel, and that the New Testament church has been foretold by the prophets. The church itself is a continuation of Israel's story, as the apostles participated in the true and transformed Feast of Pentecost.<sup>30</sup>

### *Luke and Paul*

Perhaps Luke's greatest canonical contribution was to demonstrate how Paul, and therefore his epistles, could be considered authoritative. According to one view, summarized by Brevard Childs, "[T]he canonization of the book of Acts was crucial in providing a historical link between the Gospels and the epistles, and thus served to assure the catho-

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<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the Lord's Supper as the new Passover, see Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1389-1390.

<sup>30</sup> For Luke, salvation history is a matter of continuity, not disjuncture. See Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), xlv-xlvi.

licity of Paul within the Church.”<sup>31</sup> As we reflect on the situation, this was no small task. The twelve apostles had a claim to authority that was more easily verified. The Twelve publicly represented Jesus during his earthly ministry, as could be attested to by many witnesses. But Paul, a persecutor of the church, could claim no such connection with the earthly Jesus, save an extraordinary encounter of the road to Damascus. Luke therefore went to great pains to demonstrate how Paul could and must be included within the apostolic story.

As with every one of his characters, Luke laid bare the dark side, noting his subjects’ faults. Luke did not sugarcoat Paul’s role in the death of Stephen or his zealotry in persecution of and breathing murderous threats on the early Christians.<sup>32</sup> Luke went on, however, to explain how Paul became an apostle and could be trusted as a result. For good reason, Luke told the story of Paul’s conversion three times (Acts 9:3–19; 22:6–21; 26:12–18). The retelling of this story underlined the veracity of Paul’s claim. Ananias, a trusted figure, had his own vision attesting to Paul’s commission to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). But even more, Luke would have us know that Paul can be trusted because of his willingness to suffer for Christ’s name (Acts 9:16). Indeed, Luke described Paul’s arrest and imprisonment in ways similar to that of Christ. Paul fulfilled Jesus’ words that the apostles would be led away to “kings and governors because of my name” (Luke 21:12–13).<sup>33</sup>

Luke, however, did more. As some have noted, the Paul of Acts appears different than the Paul of the epistles. This is for good reason. Luke was intent on the evidence that demonstrated that Paul was no strange or idiosyncratic teacher, but that his ministry carried on the very ministry of the known apostles. Luke accomplished this through the use of literary parallelism. Everything Paul did has a precedent in the ministry of Peter. Thus, Paul healed a cripple (Acts 14:8–11), as did Peter (Acts 3:1–10). Paul raised Eutychus (Acts 20:7–12), even as Peter raised Tabitha (Acts 9:36–43). Paul was miraculously freed from prison (Acts 16:25–37), as was Peter

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<sup>31</sup> Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 237–238.

<sup>32</sup> For a helpful exposition on Paul’s persecution, especially its ongoing nature, see Darrel L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 317–320.

<sup>33</sup> See Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, Vol. 2: *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 290–291.

(Acts 12:6–17). And as Paul’s handkerchiefs and aprons had the power of healing (Acts 19:11), so also did Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:12–16).<sup>34</sup>

Even more, Paul’s Gentile ministry was anticipated by Peter, who also had a vision that propelled him to bring his mission to the Gentiles (Acts 10:9–16). Even as Paul became a minister to the uncircumcised, so also did Peter (Acts 11:1–18). The literary connection between the two apostles came to a climax when Peter introduced Paul at the Council of Jerusalem, a public event, at which the whole church was represented by the apostles and elders.

Thus, in every way, Luke homogenized Paul, smoothed out the rough edges, and dressed him up to look like Peter, especially as a fulfillment of Christ’s own trials. This is not a matter of fabrication or falsification but is Luke at his churchly best, showing how all the members of the body work together in one accord towards a common good. The one imprisoned in Rome carried on the ministry of the child born in the days of Caesar Augustus. And his writings can be trusted even by us today.

### V. Luke’s Witness to the Emerging Fourfold Gospel

While Luke’s defense of Paul is well known, Luke played a similar, albeit more limited, role in presenting and defending other would-be New Testament authors. In fact, Luke paved the way for a fourfold Gospel, introducing us to each of the authors and placing them squarely within the tradition and story of Christ’s church. And for each evangelist, Luke offered a backstory and a defense of their place within the church.

For good reason, Luke tipped his hat to Matthew. Literarily, he placed his own Gospel as an “Exodus” to Matthew’s “Genesis.” And if Matthew’s reputation as a tax collector was scandalous, Luke tackled the issue head-on (Luke 5:27–32). The major players among the apostles were Peter, James, and John, who formed a kind of apostolic triumvirate. And Luke tellingly recorded Christ’s individual call of only one other apostle: Matthew. By telling of Levi’s conversion, as Arthur Just notes, “Luke acknowledges his predecessor.”<sup>35</sup> If it was scandalous that Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners, how much more so that he called

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<sup>34</sup> This is the same kind of literary patterning that Luke used with Jesus and John the Baptist. See Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 313–314.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary Series (St. Louis: Concordia, 1996), 242.



one to be an evangelist? Yet, just as Luke vouched for Paul, he did the same for Matthew.

Likewise, Luke told the story of John Mark, whose own pedigree was dubious. Mark was evidently well-known to the apostles, who met at the home of his mother in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36). Yet Mark's own false start was widely known to the church. He first joined the missionary team of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25) and journeyed with them to Cyprus (Acts 13:5). Yet, when Paul and Barnabas arrived at Perga in Pamphylia, he mysteriously left them and went home to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). When Paul and Barnabas readied themselves for their second missionary journey, Paul refused to take along Mark, since he had abandoned them previously in Pamphylia. As Luke described the situation, there was a "sharp disagreement" (Acts 15:39). Barnabas, however, would not be dissuaded and took Mark with him to Cyprus. The question might have arisen: who made the right decision? Could Mark, who was never again mentioned in Acts, be redeemed? We do know from Colossians that Mark came back into Paul's good graces (Col 4:10), as well as into his association with Peter (1 Pet 5:13). And, it seems, the Book of Acts anticipates Mark's redemption through Barnabas. Indeed, the figure of Barnabas is significant, for there is nothing negative to be said about him. Barnabas, an early missionary, is given the laudatory title, "Son of Encouragement," whose generous spirit can be seen when he laid the proceeds from his field at the feet of the apostles (Acts 4:36). We then meet Barnabas as the one who stood up for Paul and spoke on his behalf to the other apostles (Acts 9:26–30). The indication seems to be that even as Barnabas was right to stand up for Paul, so also he was right when he stood up for Mark. Mark's place in the church was thus made possible, or at least explained.

Finally, Luke goes to great pains to show that the apostle John belonged rightly within the church. And indeed, this might be a fact that is taken too easily for granted. We see within the Gospels themselves a tension between the Sons of Thunder and Peter. The mother of the sons of Zebedee approached Jesus, petitioning him that her sons might sit at his right and left hand in his kingdom. Their associates understood, "And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers" (Matt 20:24; also, Mark 10:41). Given that Peter, James, and John served as a kind of triumvirate, with Peter always in the place of primacy (Matt 10:2), the request of James and John was all the more brazen—a power play against Peter's purported leadership.

Others have noted a possible rivalry between Peter and John in the Gospel of John. Throughout the Gospel of John, Peter's role is down-

played. John's is the only Gospel to note that Jesus called Andrew first, and that Peter only came later, through Andrew. Peter's great confession, a high point in each of the synoptics, is omitted in John, replaced by confessions by Nathanael (John 1:49), Martha (John 11:27), and Thomas (John 20:28). If the tradition is right, John portrayed himself as the beloved disciple, who rested his head in the Lord's bosom and stood by the cross where he received Jesus' mother as his own (John 19:26). Twice, John has told us, he arrived at the tomb "first" and underlined the fact that he actually "believed" (John 20:8). Concerning this evidence, David Dungan writes, "there is a long-standing riddle in the field of Gospel studies: Why did it take so long for the Gospel of John to become accepted and used in Rome as well as in Asia Minor, the place where most scholars agree that it was written?"<sup>36</sup> Dungan adds, "We have discovered a deep and pervasive pattern of antagonism between John and Peter (more precisely John towards Peter), their respective followers, and the Gospels later given in their names."<sup>37</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with Dungan's assessment, Luke would have his readers know that Peter and John were partners, in full communion. In the story of Peter's calling, Luke emphasized the fact that James and John were his colleagues. Luke is the only evangelist who related how the Lord instructed Peter and John to prepare the Passover together (Luke 22:8). And in the Book of Acts, Luke repeatedly placed John by Peter's side (Acts 3:6, 11-26; 4:8-17). Whatever divisions there may have been, John was clearly part of the New Testament story, in communion and partnership with Peter.

### *James and Jude: Brothers*

We know from the Gospels that Jesus had both sisters and brothers, and that the names of his brothers were James, Joses, Simon, and Jude (Matt 13:55-56; Mark 6:3). We also know that there was some friction between Jesus and his family. When Mary and his brothers came to Jesus and called on him, Jesus replied curtly, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He added, "For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33-35). The Gospel of Mark numbers the twelve apostles and immediately follows the list with a description of his earthly family: "Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to

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<sup>36</sup> David Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, 25.

seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3:20-21). The Gospel of John underlines the divisions between Jesus and his brothers. In chapter seven, Jesus' brothers seem to challenge him to do miracles publicly, to which John adds, "For not even his brothers believed in him" (John 7:5).

How then could we conclude that after Jesus' resurrection his brothers could be trusted as reliable sources? Luke did so in his description of the early church's foundation in Acts 1. In this chapter, not only did Luke name the eleven remaining apostles and tell the story of Matthias' inclusion, but he also included in his story a mention of Jesus' earthly family. Thus, "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and his brothers*" (Acts 1:14; emphasis added). For Luke, the family of Jesus was, in some way, foundational for the church, indicating that members of Christ's family would become major players in the church as well. In addition, Mary's role here was not insignificant, for the Mary who was present at Christ's birth, by the power of the Holy Spirit, stands in testimony to James and Jude and to the entirety of the church, now born in the Spirit of Pentecost.

The second question is one of doctrine. As we know, our own Martin Luther had problems with the Epistle of James, especially over the supposed discrepancy between James and Paul concerning their teachings on faith and good works. But we know that even in the New Testament era there was an underlying tension between Paul and Jerusalem. Paul tells us in Galatians that he received the right hand of fellowship from James, Peter, and John (Gal 2:9). Yet we also know that his dispute with Peter occurred when "certain men came from James" (Gal 2:12). There could not help but be some tension between Paul, the apostle of uncircumcision, and James of Jerusalem. Certainly, there was a cultural divide and a divide in practice, if not also in doctrine. But, Luke did his best to show that Paul and James were in fact partners in the Gospel, and that James wholeheartedly endorsed Paul's ministry. This can be seen by the role that James played at the Council of Jerusalem, where he blessed Paul's ministry (Acts 15:13-21). Even more, Luke showed how James proved helpful to Paul. In Jerusalem, there was no small amount of consternation over the fact that Paul taught "all the Jews who were among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to their customs" (Acts 21:21). James' solution was that Paul should take a temporary Nazarite vow, purifying himself and presenting an offering for himself at the temple. This was no small thing. It would have been very easy to

imagine a Christianity associated with James and another Christianity associated with Paul, but Luke paved the way for understanding how these two distinct figures also worked and acted in one accord, so that even their respective writings could inhabit what would become the New Testament.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Admittedly, this study does not pretend to offer a solution to the problem of canon, if there is indeed a solution. We Christians, however, do need to speak positively in this area. Acknowledging the messy history of its formation is hardly a matter of shame. Yet, at the same time, we need to let people know that the pieces were in place from the beginning. Nothing in the early church happened in a corner—neither the ministry of Jesus nor of his apostles. There were many witnesses to it all, both on the inside and out. And even more, these writings were well-known, as were their authors. The manuscripts were never hidden away in a closet, but they were read regularly in the church. Though the story of the New Testament church is messy but cohesive, its very diversity attests to its authenticity.