

The Bible

- 1 The First Christian Writings John W. Rogerson
- 2 The Interpretation of Scripture Frances Young









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Why were some writings accepted as Holy Scripture by the Jewish and Christian faith communities, and why were other books not accorded this status? The history of the formation of the canon of scripture is complicated, and at first sight it has little to do with the beginnings of Christian theology. However, it was precisely as the early Church struggled with the question of which particular books should be regarded as Scripture and why, that it began to "do theology." This was a two-way process. Most of the books familiar to us from our Bibles were recognized to contain an inherent authority. Once this authority was accepted, these writings shaped theology and set the limits within which it could be creatively developed.

In the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 14b, a Jewish tradition dating probably from the late third century CE gives the order of the books of the Hebrew Bible as follows:

The order of the Prophets: Joshua and Judges, Samuel and Kings, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Twelve [a discussion follows about the order of the Twelve minor prophets].

The order of the Writings: Ruth and the book of Psalms, and Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs and Lamentations, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra and Chronicles.

There is no discussion of the order of the Law (i.e. Genesis to Deuteronomy) as this was not a matter of dispute. However, there is some discussion of why Ruth heads the writings.

Canon 47 of the Christian third council of Carthage held in 397 CE (the canons represent decisions made in Carthage on several occasions) lists as divine and canonical scripture:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth; Kings, four books (i.e. Samuel and Kings); Chronicles, two books; Job, the Davidic Psalter; Solomon, five books (i.e. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom,



Ecclesiasticus(!)), Isaiah, Jeremiah (i.e. Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah), Ezekiel, Daniel (i.e. Daniel and additions), Tobit, Judith, Esther (i.e. Greek Esther); Esdras, two books (i.e. Ezra and Nehemiah); Maccabees, two books.

The New Testament: four books of the Gospels; Acts of the Apostles, one book; thirteen epistles of the apostle Paul, and one by him to the Hebrews, two of the apostle Peter, three of the apostle John, one each of the apostles Jude and James; the Apocalypse of John, one book.¹

A comparison of these lists reveals the obvious difference that the Jewish tradition does not mention the New Testament. An examination of the books of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament indicates subtle differences of content and of arrangement. Regarding content, the Christian list is longer, and adds to the Jewish list Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah, additions to Daniel and Esther; and Judith, Tobit and 1 and 2 Maccabees. On the matter of order, the rigid distinction in the Jewish list between Prophets and Writings has been broken down in the Christian list. Ruth, for example, precedes Kings, while Daniel follows Ezekiel. Chronicles, Job, Psalms, and the five books of Solomon follow the books of Kings.

These two traditions, which indicate that the "fixed" order of books of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, with which modern readers are familiar, had not yet been finally reached, come from a time when the Jewish and Christian communities had parted company over the issue of the extent of the Scriptures. This was not simply a matter of the acceptance of the New Testament in the Christian Church. Equally significant were the differences regarding the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Indeed these differences are summed up in the terms Hebrew Bible and Old Testament, because for the Christian Church the books listed in the first part of Canon 47 of the Council of Carthage were *Christian* Scripture, which could only be properly understood in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. How did the Hebrew Bible become Scripture, become the Old Testament for the Christian Church, and how did this shape Christian theology?

It is generally agreed that, by the beginning of the Common Era, Jews (with the exception of the Sadducees) accepted that the following books were sacred Scripture: in the Law, Genesis to Deuteronomy; in the Prophets, Joshua to 2 Kings (minus Ruth), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve "minor prophets". In addition, the book of Psalms was recognised as Scripture. The earliest datable reference to this situation comes in the New Testament in Luke 24:44: "everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Whether these books should be described as "canonical" is a matter of debate. The idea of "canon" can be understood in several different ways, and in using the term in connection with early periods there is always the danger that later theological issues will be read back into the past. It is often preferable to use terms such as "Scripture" or "authoritative texts."

If, at the beginning of the Common Era, most Jews accepted that the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms were sacred Scripture, there was less agreement among them about according this status to other books. Of books written in Hebrew, there were debates among the Rabbis of the early second century CE as to whether the Song of Songs "defiled the hands", that is, possessed a degree of holiness that



required users to wash their hands after handling the scrolls on which they were written. There were also books that were regarded as Scripture by the Greekspeaking Jewish communities, especially that in Alexandria. These included the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Tobit, Judith, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. It has sometimes been customary to speak of these books as belonging to an "Alexandrian canon," but such a designation obscures the fact that these books were also known and valued by Jewish communities other than those who read the Bible in Greek. What is important for the present essay is the fact that, for the writers of the New Testament, the "Scriptures" were the Bible in Greek, the translation known as the Septuagint (so named because it was believed to have been made by 70 or 72 translators), which had been begun in the third century BCE.² The Greek Bible had come to include books such as the Wisdom of Solomon, and although the Jewish community ultimately never accepted them as sacred Scripture, they were regarded as such by the early Church, as in Canon 47 of the third council of Carthage. Of less importance than the precise extent of Scripture was the issue of the meaning of the Scriptures, which issue must now be addressed.

If we imagine a late first-century, Greek-speaking city in the Roman Empire which contained both a Jewish and a Christian community, it is likely that they will have read the same Bible, bearing in mind that the Bible was a collection of scrolls and not yet a book or codex. However, they will have read this Bible in radically different ways, the crucial difference being that the Christian community will have understood it in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, will have believed that the coming of Jesus was foretold in the Scriptures and that this coming had somehow "fulfilled" them. Further, the Christian community will have used the Scriptures to articulate Christian doctrine, or theology. Examples of this will now be given from the New Testament.

The Letter to the Hebrews begins with the statement that the God who spoke of old through the prophets has spoken in the latter days through a Son (i.e. Jesus). The writer then goes on to claim that this Son was the means by which God created the world, that he reflects the glory of God, and that he bears the stamp of the divine nature (Hebr. 1:2-3). There then follows a series of quotations from the Bible to prove that the name granted to the Son following his sacrificial death and exaltation is more excellent than that of the angels. Of these quotations, that from Psalm 102:25–7 is especially striking, as it interprets as an address to the Son what is in the psalm an address to God. This use of the psalm enables the claim to be made that the Son (Jesus) is the creator of the universe.

Thou Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning, And the heavens are the work of thy hands; They will perish, but thou remainest; They will all grow old like a garment, Like a mantle thou will roll them up, And they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end. [Hebr. 1:10-12]

Another informative example comes in Hebrews 2:6-8, where the author quotes

from Psalm 8:5-7 (Greek numbering). The normal English translation of the Hebrew



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of verse 6 (verse 5 in English) is "Thou hast made him little less than God," the reference being to humankind. The Greek Bible translated the word for "God" as "angels" in accordance with Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew word for God in various passages of the Bible. The Hebrew for "little" was rendered in the Greek by a word that could mean both "slightly" and "temporarily." The writer of Hebrews fastened on the meaning "temporarily" and was thus able to understand the quotation not in terms of humankind, but in terms of Christ. As quoted in Hebrews 2:7–8 the passage reads

Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honour, putting everything in subjection under his feet.

In this interpretation the psalm describes the temporary subordination of Jesus to the angels in his Incarnation and passion, as the prelude to his exaltation and the promise that all things will be put in subjection under his feet. Throughout the letter to the Hebrews we see a Christian writer "doing theology" by interpreting the Bible, that is, the Bible in Greek.

Hebrews concentrates particularly on the person and status of Christ. Another theological issue of importance in the New Testament period was that of the admission to the Christian Church of non-Jews, or Gentiles. This was a situation that was foreseen in the Bible, as read by the first Christians. In Romans 15:9–12 passages from the psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah are quoted in order to prove that the Gentiles were destined to "glorify God for his mercy". The Hebrew of one of the passages, Isaiah 11:10, says that the root of Jesse will be a sign or ensign of, or to, the peoples, and that the nations will seek him. The Greek Bible uses one word for the two Hebrew words rendered as "peoples" and "nations," a word that can be understood in Greek to mean "Gentiles." There are two other differences. The Greek Bible, which Romans 15:12 follows, has "to rule" instead of "sign" or "ensign," and "hope" instead of "seek." Romans 15:12 cites Isaiah 11:10 as follows:

The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles hope.

How the differences between the Hebrew and the Greek came about is less important than the fact that the Greek Bible provided evidence for the early Church that the root of Jesse (i.e. Christ) would become the hope and ruler of the Gentiles.

The Greek Bible also played a part in shaping the New Testament passion narrative. The importance of Psalm 22 was secured by the tradition that Jesus had quoted its opening verses on the cross (Matt. 27:46). The Greek Bible contained a version of verse 16 (Psalm 21:17 in the Greek numbering and 22:17 in the Hebrew) that strikingly confirmed the crucifixion. The Hebrew is usually described as corrupt and is variously translated: "My hands and my feet have shrivelled" is given by the New Revised Standard Version. The Greek has "they pierced my hands and feet." Although this verse is not explicitly quoted in the New Testament, it is implied in the tradition

about the risen Christ showing his hands and his feet to the disciples (Luke 24:39; John 20:24–7). Other verses from the psalms that are alluded to in the passion narrative include Psalm 22:18 (English numbering): "they divide my garments among them . . ." (see Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34 and explicitly John 19:24). John refers the word from the Cross "I thirst" (John 19:28) to Psalm 69:21 (English numbering) "for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." The reference to this passage is also implicit in the other three gospels.

For the Church in the New Testament period the Greek Bible was authoritative because it was believed to foretell the Incarnation, the sacrificial death, and the exaltation of Christ. It also contained material that dealt with the question of the admission of the Gentiles, and which enabled a high Christology to be expressed, as in the letter to the Hebrews. But there are also one or two surprises. The letter of Jude contains an explicit reference to Enoch 1:9 in verses 14–15, although the quotation does not correspond exactly to any surviving edition of Enoch. Enoch was certainly regarded as Scripture by several early Christian writers and is so regarded today by the Ethiopic Church.³ Jude also alludes to The Assumption of Moses in verse 9, where it speaks of the archangel Michael contending with the devil for the body of Moses. In what has survived of this text, which was probably written in Hebrew around the beginning of the Common Era, the incident alluded to in Jude 9 does not appear, but several early Christian writers understood Jude 9 to be referring to The Assumption of Moses.⁴

The implication that in some early Christian circles Enoch and The Assumption of Moses were regarded as Scripture is an important reminder that it is not appropriate to use the word "canon" in this connection. While there was agreement among Jews and Christians that the Law, Prophets, and Psalms were authoritative, and while these books formed the backbone of what would later be called a canon, there was still a certain amount of freedom of view about which books were authoritative, that is, contained divine revelation. And it must not be forgotten that the way in which the Jewish and Christian communities interpreted the books that were regarded as authoritative was significantly different.

When we move from the New Testament to the so-called Apostolic Fathers, we find that the Scriptures (the Bible in Greek) are used not only to affirm Christian doctrine but to emphasize differences between Jews and Christians. The *Letter of Barnabas*,⁵ a work composed around 130CE, is best known for its allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, of which the most famous is probably that in *Barnabas* 9.8 in which the figure of 318 trained men used by Abraham to rescue Lot in Genesis 14:14 is seen to refer to Jesus and the cross. Less fanciful is the use made of the Bible by *Barnabas* to argue that the prophets had condemned the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem temple, and that neither these sacrifices nor fasting were ways of attaining salvation. Long quotations, from Isaiah 1:11–13 against sacrifices, and Isaiah 58:4–10 against fasting, appear in *Barnabas* 2.5 and 3.1–4. Indeed, there are quotations from well over a hundred passages from the Old Testament in *Barnabas*, including one possibly from Enoch 91:13 at Barnabas 16:6.

The First Letter of Clement of Rome,⁶ written about 96 CE, does not make such extensive use of the Old Testament as *Barnabas*, but there are nonetheless significant quotations. Formal confession of sins is commended on the grounds of Isaiah





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1:16–20 in 1 Clement 8.4. In chapter 53 Clement refers to the story of the Golden Calf made during the sojourn of Moses upon Mount Sinai, to the divine anger that this provoked and the intercession that Moses made for the sparing of the people (1 Clement 53.1–4 referring to Exodus 32:7, 10, 31; Deuteronomy 9:12–13).

So far, attention has been drawn only to quotations from Old Testament books later usually regarded as protocanonical, as opposed to the deuterocanonical books of the so-called Apocrypha. However given that early Christian writers used the Greek Bible as Scripture, it is not surprising that references to what were later called deuterocanonical or apocryphal books are to be found. The clearest reference is in *1 Clement* 55.5, where the story of Judith is mentioned, and how God delivered Holofernes into the hands of a woman. *1 Clement* 3.4 cites Wisdom 2:24: "death came into the world" and *1 Clement* 7.5 cites Wisdom 12:10: "he gave them a place (or opportunity – Greek *topos*) of repentance." Other references to "apocryphal" books are found in the *Didachê* (c.100 CE) 4:8, which quotes Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 4:5: "do not reject the supplication of the afflicted", while it has been maintained that the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (martyred before 117 CE) show the influence of 4 Maccabees.⁷

Writing in 397CE, Augustine of Hippo indicated that there were still some differences of opinion in the churches about the exact extent of the canon, and advised readers to prefer only those books that were received by all the Catholic churches. In the case of books not received by all of the churches, a rule to be followed was to prefer books that were received either by the greater number of churches, or by the churches of greatest authority. Augustine's comments on the books of the canon, which follow, are worth quoting at length given some of their observations, which vary from the position of modern scholarship:

Now the whole canon of Scripture on which we say this judgement is to be exercised, is contained in the following books: - Five books of Moses, that is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; one book of Joshua the son of Nun; one of Judges; one short book called Ruth, which seems rather to belong to the beginning of Kings; next, four books of Kings, and two of Chronicles - these last not following one another, but running parallel, so to speak, and going over the same ground. The books now mentioned are history, which contains a connected narrative of the times, and follows the order of the events. There are other books which seem to follow no regular order, and are connected neither with the order of the preceding books nor with one another, such as Job, and Tobias, and Esther, and Judith, and the two books of Maccabees, and the two of Ezra, which last look more like a sequel to the continuous regular history which terminates with the books of Kings and Chronicles. Next are the Prophets, in which there is one book of the Psalms of David; and three books of Solomon, viz., Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. For two books, one called Wisdom and the other Ecclesiasticus, are ascribed to Solomon from a certain resemblance of style, but the most likely opinion is that they were written by Jesus the son of Sirach. Still they are to be reckoned among the prophetical books, since they have attained recognition as being authoritative. The remainder are the books which are strictly called the Prophets: twelve separate books of the prophets which are connected with one another, and having never been disjoined, are reckoned as one book; the names of these prophets are as follows: - Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi; then there are the four





greater prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel. The authority of the Old Testament is contained within the limits of these forty-four books.⁹

Several observations are in order. First, if Augustine is listing the books in the order in which they were arranged in copies known to him, the two books of Ezra (i.e. Ezra and Nehemiah) did not follow Chronicles, as they do in modern Bibles. Secondly, it is noteworthy that books such as the psalms and the writings ascribed to Solomon are described as prophets. This is perhaps because the psalms, in particular, were believed to foretell Christ's suffering and exaltation. In his *Retractiones*, written in 427 CE, Augustine revised his opinion that Wisdom had been written by Jesus ben Sirach, and noted that the Apostle (Paul) used the term "Old Testament" to refer only to the law given to Moses at Sinai.¹⁰

The canon of the New Testament, or how the writings that are called the New Testament were accepted as authoritative, can be dealt with more briefly. There are three lines of approach to the problem: the use of New Testament texts by early Christian writers; official lists of canonical books; and the evidence of manuscripts. The first category is made difficult by the fact that early writers, such as those discussed with reference to the Old Testament, often seem to allude to New Testament texts, but do not quote them in such a way that it is possible to conclude with absolute certainty that they regard these texts as Scripture. The evidence is surveyed exhaustively by Metzger, 11 and of the so-called Apostolic Fathers (e.g. 1 Clement, Barnabas, the Didachê) he concludes that while there is no idea of a duty to quote exactly from books that are regarded as canonical, there is a sense that certain books that would later appear in the New Testament possess authority, even if this is not embodied in a theory of canonicity.¹² It is not until the end of the second century CE that anything like a sense of an authoritative canon can be found. Metzger writes of Clement of Alexandria (c.150–215) that he regarded the four Gospels, 14 letters of Paul (including Hebrews) and Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation as authoritative Scripture. 13

The evidence of manuscripts is that in the third century, books that would later appear in the New Testament were being collected together. The Chester Beatty papyrus **P** 45 contains the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, while **P** 4, which may have contained Matthew, Luke, and another gospel, dates from no later than 200ce. The Chester Beatty papyrus **P** 46 dating around 200ce contains portions of the Pauline letters (Romans to 1 Thessalonians) including Hebrews. Such collections indicate the workings of what might be called a "canonical process." As Elliott puts it: "There are no manuscripts that contain say Matthew, Luke and [the Gospel of] Peter, or John, Mark and [the Gospel of] Thomas. Only the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were considered as scriptural and then as canonical."

Elliott regards the adoption of the codex (i.e. pages bound together at one end, as in a modern book) by the Church as an important factor in the canonical process. While the adoption of the codex did not in itself create authoritative books, decisions about which books should be bound together obviously concentrated minds upon the question of what to include and what not to include. In this connection it is interesting that the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus included the *Letter of Barnabas*





and part of The Shepherd of Hermas, while the fifth-century Codex Alexandrinus contains 1 and 2 Clement. These facts are reminders that, at these dates, the canon of the New Testament was still uncertain round the edges. The users of Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus must have regarded these extra books as equally authoritative as the other writings with which they were bound up.¹⁶

The earliest list defining which books belong to the New Testament is usually held to be the Muratorian Canon (named after its discoverer, L. A. Muratori). Thought to have been written in Rome in the latter part of the second century, it mentions, as books accepted universally, the four Gospels, Acts, 13 letters of Paul, the letter of Jude, two (or, perhaps, three) letters of John, the Wisdom of Solomon(!), and Revelation. The Apocalypse of Peter is mentioned as a disputed book, while The Shepherd of Hermas is commended for private study, although it is not regarded as authoritative.¹⁷

It has often been suggested that the Church was encouraged to formulate a canon of the New Testament in order to counteract the minimalizing activity of Marcion on the one hand, and the maximalizing activity of Gnostics on the other. Marcion (c.85-c.160), who originated from Sinope on the Black Sea, and who was condemned as a heretic in 144CE, went on to found his own church. He rejected the Old Testament because he believed its God to be inferior to the God proclaimed by Jesus, and he favoured a New Testament that apparently consisted of Luke's gospel and the following Pauline letters: Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon.¹⁸ According to Harnack, Marcion placed Galatians first because it was the Magna Carta of his faith. The other books followed in order of length, beginning with the longest. Gnostic forms of Christianity as represented by Basilides of Alexandria (active during the reigns of Hadrian (117–38) and Antoninus Pius (138–61)), Valentinus (active in Rome and the West c.140-c.165) and the Nag Hammadi library discovered in Egypt in 1945, supplemented apostolic Christianity with esoteric teachings contained in writings such as The Gospel of Truth. Attempts by the Church to establish a canon of the New Testament can therefore partly be seen as a need to acknowledge more books than Marcion did, and to exclude additional Gnostic-type writings.

The question is often raised as to whether the Church regarded books as authoritative because they were declared to be canonical, or whether they were declared to be canonical because the Church recognized their authority. The answer surely is that both statements are true. Initially, books were regarded as authoritative because their intrinsic value was recognized. In the case of the Old Testament this was because the Greek Bible could be interpreted as bearing witness to the Incarnation, suffering, and exaltation of Jesus, the divine Son through whom all things had been created, and whom all nations would acknowledge. In the case of the New Testament writings, the Gospels contained the teachings of Jesus, while the letters contained the authoritative interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' suffering and exaltation. The recognition of the intrinsic value of these writings led to their being collected together, a process no doubt affected by the need to exclude the teachings of Marcion and the Gnostics, and later assisted by the adoption of the codex, and the need for decisions about which books should be bound up together. The official lists defining the canon never achieved universal acceptance. However, they were

sufficiently in agreement to establish norms that then conferred the status of Scripture upon certain writings, and guaranteed their authority. Yet even within the canon as defined, texts such as Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, the Gospels, and Romans have attracted the lion's share of attention from interpreters down the ages because of their content, and every church, if it is honest, will admit that it operates in practice with a "canon within the canon," that is, that it concentrates on some books more than others. This is a reminder that theology has always been shaped by certain books of the Bible. Study of the earliest stages of the "canonical process" affords valuable insights into the way in which the recognition that certain texts contained divine revelation affected and shaped the way in which the earliest Christian theologians "did theology."

Notes

- E. J. Jonkers (ed.), Acta et symbola conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt (Textus minores XIX), Leiden, 1954, p. 136. An English version is also found in Metzger, 1987, p. 315.
- 2 See especially Müller, 1996; Hans Hübner, "Vetus Testamentum und Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum. Die Frage nach dem Kanon des Alten Testaments aus neutestamentlicher Sicht" in P. D. Hanson et al. (eds.), Zum Problem des biblischen Kanons (Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie 3 (1988), pp. 147–62.
- 3 See Kelly, 1969, p. 277.
- 4 Ibid., p. 265.
- 5 Klaus Wengst, Didache (Apostellehre), Barnabasbrief, Zweiter Klemensbrief, Schrift an Diognet, Schriften des Urchristentums, zweiter Teil (Darmstadt, 1984), pp. 103–202.
- 6 Joseph H. Fischer, *Die Apostolischen Väter*, Schriften des Urchristentums, erster Teil (Darmstadt, 1993), pp. 1–107.
- 7 Fischer, Apostolischen Väter, p. 123.

- 8 Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* II, viii, 12, CCSL, vol. XXXII, pp. 38–9, ET *On Christian Doctrine* (The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 1st ser., vol. II), p. 538.
- 9 Augustine, De doctrina Christiana II, viii, 13, CCSL, vol. XXXII, pp. 39–40, ET pp. 538–9.
- Augustine, Retractiones II, iv, 2–3, CCSL, vol. LVII, p. 93.
- 11 Metzger, 1987.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 72-3.
- 13 Ibid., p. 135.
- 14 K. Elliott, "Manuscripts, the Codex and the Canon", Journal for the Study of the New Testament 63 (1996), p. 107.
- 15 Ibid., p. 107.
- 16 Ibid., p. 111.
- 17 See Metzger, 1987, pp. 191-9.
- 18 See A. von Harnack, Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott, Darmstadt (repr. 1996), p. 168*.

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