

Canon Muratori Date and Provenance

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ALBERT C. Sundberg, Jr. used the Third International Congress on New Testament Studies at Oxford in 1965 to offer a 'Revised History of the New Testament Canon'.¹ Subsequently he published a major attack on the early date of the *Canon Muratori* in the *Harvard Theological Review*.² The scholarly community can be grateful for his collection of evidence, from which, however, it is possible to draw a conclusion quite different from Sundberg's conclusions. The following examination follows the arguments of the article in the *Harvard Theological Review*.

I wish, first, to make a general observation: Even if the argument for a fourth-century date and eastern (Palestinian or Syrian) provenance for the *Canon Muratori* should be sustained, a major revision of the understanding of the history of the canon would not be required. The evidence for the church having a collection of books (although with the limits not precisely defined) by the end of the second century does not depend on this document and is well established from the writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and others apart from its existence.³ What would be lacking is evidence that someone had attempted to reduce that collection to a list.

I agree that the *Canon Muratori* was not written from Rome (p. 6), but the language about Rome (ll. 74-76) does suggest a place where Rome was important and the situation there well known and thus a place with close connections with Rome. When the author says, 'we receive' (ll. 72, 82), he purports to speak for 'the catholic church', not one community.

Sundberg argues that 'very recently in our own times' (l. 74) in reference to the date of the *Shepherd* of Hermas may be translated 'most recently in our time' (that is in the church's time and not in apostolic time) (p. 11). The author of the *Canon*, therefore, contrasted 'our times' with 'apostolic times' in order to show that the *Shepherd* was late and not authoritative. Sundberg claims this only as a possible interpretation in order to open up the consideration of a later date for the composition

of the work. It must be granted that this may be a correct understanding, but this meaning is still compatible with a second-century as well as with a later date. Even if the possibility is granted, this is not the most natural meaning of the author's statement.

When Irenaeus spoke of the Apocalypse, which was seen 'almost in our own generation', he said something more specific, his own lifetime.⁴ Irenaeus says 'almost'; his point was to bring it near his own lifetime and not to put it in apostolic times, as a contrast between apostolic times and subsequent times would demand. He was not trying to make a point about the lateness of the Apocalypse. If the words 'our times' and 'our generation' are indeed parallel, then the Irenaeus passage argues against Sundberg by unequivocally putting Hermas in the lifetime of the author of the *Canon*. Indeed, that is the natural way to take the fragment: it would normally be understood as 'our generation', not 'our Christian times'. Christians certainly distinguished apostolic from post-apostolic times, but 'our times' was not the usual way to speak of post-apostolic times. Although the author of the *Canon* does not make the charge of heresy, his terminology is parallel to the point Tertullian (and others) repeatedly made that lateness was sufficient basis for rejecting a teaching which purported to be apostolic but was not.⁵

These are preliminary considerations. Sundberg's other arguments are the substantive case, but they are no more conclusive and by-pass serious obstacles to his proposal. In general it may be said that if the *Canon Muratori* was written early, there still is no surprise that it agrees with views found in the fourth century, for there was much continuity. To turn his observations on pages 11f. around: What must be done is to show that the document agrees with views which could only have arisen on the fourth century. Absence of earlier evidence is not conclusive by itself. Although the case is not definitive, the affinities are stronger with the west about 200 than they are with the east about 350.

Arguments from the language employed in the Muratorian Fragment have limited value. Since the *Canon Muratori* is generally recognized to be translated from a Greek original,⁶ considerations based on the Latin can take us back only to the date of the translation. The examples cited by Sundberg from Donaldson (p. 12) are unfortunate for his case. *Disciplina* in the sense of 'rule of life' in the church is common in Tertullian.⁷ The same purpose behind the writing of the pastoral epistles stated by the Muratorian canon ('for the ordering of ecclesiastical discipline' - ll. 62f.) is also expressed by Tertullian (*Adv. Marc.* V.21).⁸ The reference to the bishop's chair (ll. 75f.) finds a counterpart in Irenaeus' conception of the office: 'the chair is the symbol of teaching' (*Demonstration* 2).

The statement about the *Shepherd* of Hermas by the author of the Muratorian canon is important for determining the date of both, but the date of the *Shepherd* is not a concern here.⁹ The approval which Irenaeus gave to the work and Clement of Alex-

andria's regard for it as inspired (pp. 12f.) could be the very use against which the *Canon Muratori* was protesting, or alternatively the very kind of private use which the author approved (ll. 73-80). At any rate, the attitude toward the *Shepherd* is not anomalous for the time around 200. Tertullian at first accepted the *Shepherd* (*Or.* 16) and then rejected it (*De pud.* 10, 20). Although Tertullian's conversion to Montanism accounts for his change of attitude toward the *Shepherd*, anti-Montanism has little bearing on the attitude of the *Canon Muratori*, for it distinctly approves of Hermas' orthodoxy. Moreover, controversialists do not reject everything their opponents say or accept every position of their allies. There were councils on the provincial level in the later part of the second century, so there is no need to reject out of hand Tertullian's statement that councils of the orthodox rejected the *Shepherd* (*De pud.* 10). That may be the very basis on which *Canon Muratori* says, 'It cannot to the end of time be read publicly in the church to the people' (ll. 77-80).

Eusebius was not the turning point in regard to the *Shepherd's* acceptance in the church. His statements are in a historical context¹⁰; he was reporting a situation which we know goes back at least to the time of Tertullian. The *Canon Muratori* represents the view of those whom Eusebius reports as rejecting (the public reading of?) the *Shepherd* but finding it valuable for elementary instruction. It is notable that the support for the *Shepherd* was mainly in the east (p. 13, n. 39): it was contained in the *Codex Sinaiticus*, and such was Jerome's testimony (p. 14, n. 46). The opposition was mainly in the west (Tertullian, Jerome), and it was in the west where the *Shepherd* was put in the Old Testament apocrypha (p. 15, n. 48).

The position of the Wisdom of Solomon in the *Canon Muratori* is sufficiently anomalous to be problematic for any view. One of Sundberg's stronger points is calling attention to Epiphanius' inclusion of Wisdom in his New Testament and Eusebius' mention of Irenaeus' quotations of the book in discussing his New Testament (pp. 17f.). Although Sundberg claims that the Jamnia list of the Old Testament canon¹¹ was not a live issue in the east until the time of Athanasius, the similarity of that Jewish canon to the one reported by Melito shows it was known in the east (pp. 16f.) from the second century, and the debate between Origen and Julius Africanus in the third century over the apocrypha may reflect such an issue a century before Athanasius.¹² If Eusebius' report (*H.E.* V.8.1-8) on Irenaeus carries any weight and is not accidental in its positioning, then the New Testament canon of the Muratorian fragment has a parallel in the west before 200. Although Wisdom had its greatest popularity in the east, specifically Alexandria¹³, it was known and used in the west quite early — Hebrews 1:3; I Clement 3:4; 7:5; 27:5. Tertullian quotes it as Solomon's (*Praesc.* 7; *Adv. Val.* 2) and so presumably as authoritative, but we cannot tell whether he would have put it in his Old or his New Testament.

Sundberg next devotes much attention to the status of the Apocalypse of John

(pp. 18-26). He concludes that the Apocalypse was on the fringe of the Muratorian canon, because it is joined to the Apocalypse of Peter as the last of the accepted books. This is not persuasive at all. In a list something has to be last, and being last does not imply doubt or lateness of acceptance. The apocalypses are put together (ll. 71-73), and it may have seemed fitting to conclude with them. That some did not want the Apocalypse of Peter read in church (ll. 72, 73) says nothing about the Apocalypse of John. Since the serious questioning of the Apocalypse was in the east, it is important to Sundberg's case to throw doubt on the canonical status of the Apocalypse in the Muratorian fragment. In this he is unsuccessful. That the Apocalypse is on a level with Paul is incontrovertible (ll. 48-50, 55-58). Outside of Gaius of Rome, the western acceptance of the Apocalypse was complete. Of course, not everyone in the east rejected the Apocalypse, so the attitude toward this book is not sufficient by itself to place the *Canon Muratori*, but its treatment of the Apocalypse agrees better with the attitudes of the west than with those of the east. This is pointedly shown in the declaration that writing to seven churches meant speaking to all the churches (ll. 57f.). Tertullian has the same statement (*Adv. Marc.* V.17). All of Sundberg's references to this idea (p. 19, n. 60) are western (after Tertullian, there were Cyprian, Victorinus, and Jerome).

The Apocalypse of Peter was better known in the east, so the case for an eastern origin of the *Canon Muratori* is helped by its reference to this work. Nevertheless, the work was known in the west, and its attestation in general is so meagre that it does not afford a strong argument one way or the other. Eusebius is supposed to provide the closest parallel (pp. 28f.) to the situation reflected in the *Canon Muratori*, yet he comes down on the negative side of this question whereas the *Canon* comes down on the positive side.

The lack of other lists of the New Testament writings before the fourth century is the strongest argument against an earlier date for the *Canon Muratori*. Nevertheless, that remains an argument from silence. Something had to be first, and this may be it. There is no inherent reason why a list could not have been drawn up around 200. As noted above, the evidence for the concept of a collection of New Testament books by the end of the second century is quite firm. There is no reason why someone should not have undertaken to summarize the situation in list form. Sundberg sees Eusebius as the critical figure (pp. 34f.), and he may have had some influence on the flurry of lists which began to appear in the fourth century, if he was not simply reflecting a general concern. But it should be noted that Eusebius essentially repeats the views which he attributes to Origen. There seems to be no great development in the situation on the canon from c. 200 until the fourth century; the only difference is that Eusebius sought to reduce Origen's data to list form. If Eusebius is the closest parallel to the *Canon Muratori*, that circumstance itself would throw us back to the time of Origen for the contents and attitudes of the

Canon Muratori. And so we once more confront the matter of a list as the only thing which distinguishes the *Canon Muratori* from the situation at the beginning of the third century. Each person must decide how much of a novelty a list was¹⁴ and how much weight to put on the absence of lists before the fourth century.

Not only are the arguments for a fourth-century eastern setting so tenuous as to fail to carry conviction, but other considerations point strongly to an earlier western setting. The major consideration arguing for a western provenance is the absence of Hebrews from the canon. Sundberg's discussion of the preservation of eastern lists in western manuscripts (pp. 38-41) is a clever by-pass of the problem for his theory posed by the fact that the west early rejected Hebrews whereas the east (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, etc.) accepted it.¹⁵ The theory that the list originated in the east and was copied in the west in order to resist pressure to include Hebrews in the New Testament still does not account for the silence on Hebrews in an eastern list; indeed the later the date the more problematical the very silence becomes. Is there anything comparable in an eastern list of the fourth century?

It may have been observed how many parallels have already been noted between the *Canon Muratori* and early western authors. Several incidental features fit the second century and the west. The heresies mentioned are those of the second century: Marcion, Gnostics (Basilides and Valentinus), and Montanists (*ll.* 63-67, 81-85). The name Cataphrygians for the Montanists is first attested in Pseudo-Tertullian, *Haereses* 7 (21). Its introduction here may be due to the Latin translator. The earliest Greek sources employ 'Phrygians'.¹⁶ 'Kataphrygians' appears first in surviving Greek sources in Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catecheses* XVI.8). The composition of summaries of the apostolic message (*ll.* 20-25) — canon of truth or rule of faith — was characteristic of the second century.¹⁷ The two advents, the first in humility and the second in royal power (*ll.* 24f.), is a feature of the second century.¹⁸ Varying but similar accounts of the occasion for the writing of the Fourth Gospel (*ll.* 9f.) arose in the second century, perhaps in response to the challenge from the Alogi.¹⁹

The classification of the two categories of reading in the church as 'prophets' and 'apostles' has its counterpart in Justin's account of a Christian assembly in Rome (*Apol.* I, 67). The association of Luke with Paul was commonly expanded to include a connection of the Gospel of Luke with Paul's authority (*ll.* 3-6).²⁰ The reference to a Marcionite 'Epistle to the Laodiceans' (*l.* 64), if a mistake for the Marcionite Ephesians (Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* V.17), is an argument for an early date, since later this usage would more readily be known. If the author mistook it for the Latin Epistle to the Laodiceans²¹, then there is another argument for a western origin of the *Canon Muratori*, although the Latin Laodiceans is usually given a much later date.²²

There is much that remains unclear and little that is conclusive, but the evidence

is such that in the present state of knowledge there is little to support and much to call into question regarding Sundberg's proposed revision in dating the *Canon Muratori*.

REFERENCES

1. *Studia Evangelica* 4 (1968) 452-461.
2. 'Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List', *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973) 1-41. Page numbers in the text refer to this article.
3. Hans Von Campenhausen, *Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia, 1972).
4. ἐπὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας γενεᾶς - Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* V.30.3 (=Eusebius, *H.E.* V.8.6); the same in I Clement 5. Eusebius, *H.E.* III.32.8 confirms the meaning 'lifetime'; the Anonymous Anti-Montanist in *H.E.* V.16.22 uses 'in our times' to mean lifetime.
5. *Praesc.* 30f.; *Adv. Marc.* IV.5.
6. Exceptions are A. Harnack, 'Ueber den Verfasser und den literarischen Charakter des Muratorischen Fragments', *Z.N.T.W.* 24 (1925) 1f. and A. Ehrhardt, 'The Gospels in the Muratorian Fragment', *The Framework of the New Testament Stories* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964) 11f. If the original was Latin, the provenance is already determined; but I accept a Greek original. If the date is late, then the document originated in the east; but if it was early, Greek was possible in either the east or west.
7. *Praesc.* 36; 44; *Or.* passim; cf. *Virg. vel.* 16.
8. This description of the Pastorals seems characteristic of the west - T. Zahn, *Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons*, II.1 (Erlangen, 1890) 77 cites Ambrosiaster and the prologues in *Codex Amiatinus*.
9. A late document, even polemically inspired, could contain correct information about Hermas, and an early writing could be mistaken. The solution to the problem of dating posed by the *Shepherd* seems to be that it is a composite of material over the career of the prophet Hermas or that it was compiled from material over a period of time. Multiple authorship is advocated by S. Giet, *Hermas et les pasteurs* (Paris, 1963) and W. Coleborne, 'The Shepherd of Hermas. A Case for Multiple Authorship and Some Implications', *Studia Patristica* 10 (1970) 65-70; but it is rejected by R. Joly, 'Hermas et le pasteur', *Vigiliae Christianae* 21 (1967) 201-218.
10. *H.E.* III.3.6f.; III.25.4; V.8.7.
11. If there was such a thing - see Jack Lewis, 'What Do We Mean by Jabneh?' *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32 (1964) 125-132.
12. Julius Africanus, *Ep. ad O.* 1 affirms, 'All the books of the Old Testament have been translated from Hebrew into Greek'. Origen, *Ep. ad Af.* 1-5 defends what was in the Greek but not in the Hebrew; cf. 13 on Tobit and Judith not used by the Jews.
13. R.M. Grant, 'The Book of Wisdom at Alexandria: Reflections on the History of the Canon and Theology', *Studia Patristica* 7 (1966) 462-472.
14. Marcion's 'canon' probably was not a list but a collection of documents.
15. Cf. B.F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (London, 1875) 367f., 376, 380.
16. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* IV.3; VII.17; Hippolytus, *Ref.* X.25; Anonymous in Eusebius, *H.E.* V.16.22. 'Cataphrygians' in Latin derives from an earlier Greek phrase, 'the heresy according to the Phrygians'.
17. Ignatius, *Trall.* 9; Justin, *Apol.* I, 31.7; Aristides, *Apol.* 2 (Syriac); Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.10; Hippolytus, *C. Noet.* 1; *Trad. Apos.* xxi; Tertullian, *Praesc.* 13; *Virg. vel.* 1; *Adv. Prax.* 2. Cf. A. Ehrhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 25 for the comment that this passage follows the Roman *regula fidei*.
18. Justin, *Dial.* 32-33; 52; 110-111; cf. Tertullian, *Apol.* 21; *Adv. Iud.* 14.
19. Clement of Alexandria in Eusebius, *H.E.* VI.14; the Anti-Marcionite Gospel Prologues; cf. Victorinus, *Comm. in Apoc.* 11:1; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 9; *Praef. Comm. in Mt.* •

20. Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* IV.5; cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.1.1; 14:1; 10.1; Ambrosiaster on Col. 4:4; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 7; John Chrysostom on 2 Tim. 4:11.

21. As Zahn thought, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-88.

22. It survives only in Latin and derivative western vernaculars. The earliest unambiguous external attestation is Ps.-Augustine, *De divinis scripturis* (5th or 6th century), and the earliest manuscript is 6th century. But the work could have been composed from the second to fourth century — E.Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. II (London, 1965) 128-131.

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