FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE FOURFOLD GOSPEL CANON

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In order to understand the history and importance of the fourfold gospel canon, one needs to see its creation within the context of the history of the formation of the NT canon as a whole. A convenient survey of this development is given in The Formation of the New Testament Canon.1 This survey shows that the fourfold gospel canon was created to meet certain needs of the church in the mid-second century.

The canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were all composed at an earlier period, namely during the second half of the first century. The latest of the four, the Gospel according to John, was probably composed around AD 90, about the same time that an effort was being made in the same part of the world to collect and publish a corpus of Paul’s letters. A Christian reformer also from Asia Minor named Marcion took this Pauline collection and edited it for his own purposes. He did likewise with the Gospel of Luke. Marcion’s reforms functioned to separate the Christian church from its scriptural roots in Judaism.

Marcion’s gospel and his edited form of the Pauline corpus provided his church with an attractive, streamlined, and updated scriptural basis for its mission. Although Marcion’s reforms were rejected by the church at large and specifically by the elders of the church in Rome where Marcion had made a bid to gain influence, Marcionite churches grew in number and flourished long after his death. Thus, the popularity of Marcion’s gospel, for which Marcion made special claims of reliability, was one of the factors that eventually influenced the church in deciding which of the existing gospels would be authorized for use by the faithful.

The process of deciding which gospels were to be included in the church’s fourfold gospel canon was not, as some would suggest, the result of some well-thought-out plan made by a centralized ecclesiastical authority. We may take the case of the Gospel of Peter as an example of how the selective process actually worked. This relatively short gospel

was being used in some churches in Asia Minor when, late in the second century, a bishop named Serapion got wind of its troublesome character and took steps to inform the churches which were using it that not everything in it was in accordance with the "true teaching of the Savior" (Eusebius Hist. eccl. 6.12.3–6). The standard by which "true teaching" was established of course, was that set by gospels that were known to have been "handed down" from the period of the apostles. It is thus clear that an increasingly important factor leading to the formation of the fourfold gospel canon was the ever increasing number of new gospels. The adherents of these new gospels could always claim that their gospels were better suited than others to serve particular interests of certain Christian communities. In the case of the Gospel of Peter, Bishop Serapion identified its authors as "docetae," that is, Christians who were charged with claiming that Jesus only "seemed" to do some of the things to which the earlier gospels witnessed. For example, Jesus as he hung on the cross "felt no pain" according to the Gospel of Peter. Thus though he may have seemed to suffer by crucifixion, he did not suffer as we would have suffered in his place, and his suffering and death would consequently have had no redeeming effect.

In ways such as this, bishops, who in their leadership roles were in an ecclesial and thus a financial position to provide churches reliable copies of those gospels that had been handed down, were able to assist the faithful in culling out later gospels that departed from the "true teaching of the Savior" that had been handed down from the time of the apostles, that is, that formative sixty-odd-year period of time following the death and resurrection of Jesus until the last of the church’s four gospels and some of the later letters were written. It should be noted that, in the case of the Gospel of Peter, what was decisive was not whether its composition was attributed to an apostle, but whether what it taught was in accord with the "true teaching of the Savior." Since the Gospel of Peter was not in accord with this teaching, it could not be accepted and used as an authentic work of someone sent by the Savior, no matter that the name of someone sent by the Savior was attached to it.

Which were the gospels that had been faithfully handed down from the time of the apostles? For an answer to this question we turn to the school of Justin Martyr and to the work of his student Tatian, who combined the texts of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, into the text of a single gospel. This came to be known as Tatian’s Diatessaron because it was one gospel through four.