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the New Testament**

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## THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

### INTRODUCTION

The term *canon*, widely used in theological discourse, is a loan-word. It is a transliteration of the classical Greek word κανων, which denoted a straight rod or plumbline, and is related to καννα or κανη both of which meant “reed.”<sup>1</sup> In time, κανων came to be used figuratively of anything that was straight and upright. In particular, it was employed to delineate “a standard, a paradigm, a model,”<sup>2</sup> that by which everything in such fields of human life or endeavour as art, music, and literature must be judged. Undisputed New Testament occurrences of the word are limited to 2 Corinthians 10:13-16 and Galatians 6:16. In the former passage, where occurs thrice, it has the meaning of “boundary” or “sphere [of ministry].” The use of the term in Galatians 6:16 is closer to the basic meaning of κανων, a norm or means of measurement. By the fourth century κανων was being used by Christian authors to designate a list or table as well as regulations issued by various Christian councils and synods, and it could even be applied to a monastic rule

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 289. Particularly helpful in following the development of this term is Metzger’s “History of the Word κανων” (*ibid.*, 289-293). The Greek terms κανων and κανη reveal the derivation of these Greek terms from various Semitic words such as the Hebrew *qaneh* and the Assyrian *qanû*, both of which in turn go back to the Sumerian word for “reed,” GI-NA. See R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1969), 260.

of life.<sup>3</sup> Given these various meanings of the term, it is not surprising that by the middle of the fourth century, κανων also began to be employed as a designation for that list of books considered authoritative by Christian churches.

Athanasius of Alexandria (c.295-373), for example, uses it in this sense in his *Defence of the Nicene Definition* (c.350) when he states that the second-century *Shepherd of Hermas* is definitely “not part of the Canon.”<sup>4</sup> Yet another instance is found in one of the few extant works of the Cappadocian theologian Amphilochius of Iconium (c.340-395). After enumerating the books comprising the Old and New Testaments in his *Iambics for Seleucus* (c.380), Amphilochius states: “This is perhaps the most reliable canon of the divinely inspired Scriptures.”<sup>5</sup> The justly famous thirty-ninth Festal letter of Athanasius, penned for his flock at Easter 367, lists “the canonical” books (βιβλία.. . . τα κανονικα) that can be read in worship services and actually contains the earliest listing of all twenty-seven books of the New Testament.<sup>6</sup>

This relatively late development of the term κανων to designate the Holy Scriptures should not be taken to indicate that the Canon is in flux until that period of time. Nor should the fact that the first list that corresponds entirely to our New Testament is that given by Athanasius in 367 be understood to mean that the concept of the New Testament canon did not truly emerge until that

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 260.

<sup>3</sup> Metzger, “History of the Word  $\Theta\text{Θ}\blacklozenge\blacklozenge$ ” in his *Canon of the New Testament*, 290-292.

<sup>4</sup> *Defence of the Nicene Definition* 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Iambics for Seleucus*, ll.318-319 (tr. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 314). For the Greek original, see Eberhard Oberg, ed., *Amphilochii Iconiensis: Iambi ad Seleucum* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1969), 39.

point in time. Vigorous controversy over the exact limits of the canon can be found throughout the second century. This controversy has prompted some classical liberal scholars like Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) and Hans von Campenhausen to point to the Gnostic author Marcion (*fl.* 140), a wealthy shipowner from the seaport of Sinope in Pontus, as having set the precedent in creating a New Testament canon.<sup>7</sup> Marcion had wanted a pared-down canon consisting of simply the Pauline corpus (minus the Pastoral Epistles) and the Gospel of Luke. He had moreover pruned both of these so as to expunge anything that cited or alluded to the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> This perspective about Marcion as the originator of the Canon, though, is mistaken. As the eminent New Testament scholar Herman N. Ridderbos has maintained, Marcion's reductionism presupposes a collection of canonical texts in addition to the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup>

Right from the very beginning, Christians were a people of the book. The Church was born with a collection of canonical texts: namely, what has come to be called the Old Testament. The Old Testament canon was effectively closed for more than two centuries before the New Testament era, and it provided the early Church with the model of a collection of authoritative books.<sup>10</sup> There is not so much a whisper of any debate about the canonical

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<sup>6</sup> Letter 39.3-5.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Die Briefsammlung des Apostels Paulus* (Leipzig, 1926), 21; Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, tr. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 148. For recent affirmation of this view, see Linda L. Belleville, "Canon of the New Testament" in David S. Dockery, Kenneth A. Mathews, and Robert B. Sloan, eds., *Foundations for Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 381-382.

<sup>8</sup> For Marcion's canon, see Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 90-99.

<sup>9</sup> *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, tr. H. De Jongste and revised Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1988), 39-40.

<sup>10</sup> R. T. Beckwith, "The Canon of Scripture" in T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press/Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 30.

status of the Old Testament for the earliest Christians. In part, this was because many of them were Jews, for whom it would have been unthinkable to have questioned the authority of the Old Testament as divine revelation.

More significantly, their Lord and Master, Jesus of Nazareth “regularly appealed to the Hebrew Scriptures to validate his mission, his words and his actions.”<sup>11</sup> Consider, for instance, one of the earliest scenes of his public ministry, that found in Luke 4:16-21. After Jesus had been handed the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth, he read from Isaiah 61:1-2 and announced that this text was being fulfilled before their very eyes, for he was the one of whom the text spoke. This appeal to and emphasis on Scripture is characteristic of Jesus throughout his public and private ministry right up to the time when he appeared in resurrection to his disciples. Read, for instance, Luke 24:25-27, 44-48. In the latter text Jesus refers to the traditional three-fold division of the Old Testament:

- “law of Moses,” i.e., the Pentateuch;
- “the prophets,” i.e., Joshua-2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the minor prophets;
- “psalms,” which consisted of eleven books—Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>12</sup> On the fact that the Old Testament of Jesus’ day ended with 2 Chronicles, see Luke 11:50-51. Zechariah was not the last prophet chronologically. But he was the last prophet canonically, since 2 Chronicles

Jesus' Jewish opponents often disagreed with Jesus' interpretation of Scriptures. But there is never a hint of disagreement between our Lord and his opponents regarding the books that made up those Scriptures. "When in debate with Jewish theologians Jesus and the apostles appealed to 'the Scriptures', they appealed to an authority which was equally acknowledged by their opponents."<sup>13</sup>

But why did the early Christians come to add another book of writings to the Old Testament and come to regard them as Holy Scripture and ultimately as canonical as the Old Testament? *In nuce* the answer may be found in one word: authority. Ultimately, they discerned in these books the authoritative voice of God and the authority of their Lord Jesus.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the church did not create the canon. She recognized what God had constituted.<sup>15</sup>

### THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST'S WORDS

By the first century, Jews regularly thought of all of the Old Testament authors as prophets.<sup>16</sup> Prophecy, though, had ceased in the inter-testamental period, as a variety of texts ranging from 1 Maccabees to the writings of Josephus and the rabbinical literature bear witness. With John the Baptist, however, this long prophetic silence was broken (see, for example, Matthew

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was the final book in the Old Testament. See Bruce K. Waltke, "How We Got the Old Testament", *Crux*, 30, No.4 (December 1994), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, *Canon*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Theo Donner, "Some thoughts on the history of the New Testament canon", *Themelios* 7, No.3 (April, 1982),

<sup>15</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. "The New Testament as Canon" in Harvie M. Conn, ed., *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 171.

<sup>16</sup> For this paragraph, I am indebted to Beckwith, "Canon of Scripture", 30.

11:9; Acts 2:18; 11:27-28; 13:1). Written prophecy also was revived (note especially Revelation 1:3; 10:11; 22:6, 9-10, 18-19). Of course, the greatest Christian prophet of all—and more than a prophet—was Jesus himself, the expected prophet-like Moses (see, for example, Mark 6:4; Luke 13:33; 24:19; Acts 3:22-23, 7:37).

At first sight Jesus appeared to be a rabbi and was often addressed as such (John 3:2). But his contemporaries soon noticed that his teaching was not like that of the rabbis, for he taught as “one who had authority” (Matthew 7:28-29). There were also Jesus’ own claims regarding his teaching:

- Matthew 24:35: Heaven and earth—the most durable things of time—will pass away, but Jesus’ words—the eternal truth of God—will never pass away.<sup>17</sup>
- Then, in the Sermon on the Mount there are a number of statements introduced by “But I say to you...” (see, for example, Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28). The Old Testament prophets often introduced their writings with “Thus says the Lord.” Jesus, by contrast, simply says “I say.” To a Jewish audience, the implication of this phrase was quite clear: he was either speaking as God or else he was blaspheming.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Inter Varsity Press, 1972), 47.

<sup>18</sup> Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 47.

- Matthew 7:24-26: Here Christ affirms that a man's eternal destiny is governed by the attitude he takes to his words.<sup>19</sup>
- The final words of the Risen Lord that are recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 unequivocally emphasize the authority of Jesus' commands which are to be taught to all new disciples.<sup>20</sup>

The authoritative status of the writings that we call the Gospels is thus rooted in the fact that they record the words and deeds of Jesus, the prophet-like Moses and more than a prophet.

Other writings of the New Testament also show the importance placed on Jesus' words and deeds. A particularly clear example is found in Paul's first letter to Timothy: 1 Timothy 5:18. Paul places side by side an Old Testament verse from Deuteronomy 25 and a statement from the mouth of Jesus (see Luke 10:7) and introduces simply with the phrase "the Scripture says." Even if it is the case that the Apostle is not quoting from the written gospel of Luke—and there is every possibility that he might be since Luke was one of his closest companions—it certainly means that he is placing a saying of the Lord Jesus on the same level as Old Testament Scripture.<sup>21</sup>

Now, Jesus imparts this unique authority with regard to the giving of fresh revelation from God to his Apostles. Look, for example, at John 14:26 and 16:13. This promise of *remembrance* and *guidance into new truth* surely finds

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<sup>19</sup> Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Donner, "Some thoughts", 24

its primary fulfillment in the New Testament canon.<sup>22</sup> And as first-generation witnesses of what God did in Christ the Apostles, along with the New Testament prophets, possess a unique place that was not shared by any other generation. Consider in this regard Ephesians 2:20. The Apostles and the New Testament prophets<sup>23</sup> are a critical part of the temple/dwelling place that God, as a master builder, is constructing. Along with Christ they form its foundation and set the shape and tone for the entire building. And because they are part of the foundation, which is only laid once, their witness has what Richard Gaffin calls “a once-for-all historicity.”<sup>24</sup> Their witness and teaching, in other words, is normative for the church.<sup>25</sup> Written texts emanating from their hands thus possess an authority qualitatively different from other Christian writings—a fact noted, for instance, by authors immediately after the Apostolic era.<sup>26</sup>

### THE AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

Recent studies in the Jewish background to the New Testament figure of the Apostle have located it in the Jewish institution of the *šalīah* (from *šalah*, to send). The *šalīah* was a person commissioned by another to act on his behalf as his authoritative representative. The extent of the *šalīah*'s authority is well seen in the statement from the Talmud that “a man's *šalīah* is the same as himself.”<sup>27</sup> With this in mind, let us look at the writings of one of these

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<sup>22</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14-17* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 149-150.

<sup>23</sup> On the identification of the “prophets” as New Testament prophets, see Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids/ Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co./Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 214-216.

<sup>24</sup> “New Testament as Canon”, 174-175.

<sup>25</sup> O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 216, 233-234.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Ignatius of Antioch (*fl.* 107) in his *Letter to the Romans* 4.3. See Bruce’s comments on this passage: *Canon*, 266-267, and those of Frank Thielman, “The New Testament Canon: Its Basis for Authority”, *The Westminster Theological Journal*, 45 (1983), 404.

<sup>27</sup> Gaffin, “New Testament as Canon”, 172-173.

Apostles, Paul, the last apostle chosen (1 Corinthians 15:8-9). Each of the Apostle Paul's letters carries his apostolic authority. Even if he does not express it openly, it is always there in the background.<sup>28</sup> Consider the following examples:

- 1 Corinthians 14:37-38: This text comes at the end of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. The "what" of verse 37 thus refers to the entire preceding discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14. As Wayne Grudem notes: "Paul's purpose is to conclude the discussion and at the same time to bar the way for any prophet at Corinth to propound new rules which would contradict those given by Paul."<sup>29</sup> In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul has instituted a number of new rules for worship in the Corinthian church and has claimed for them authoritative status. To safeguard these rules, the Apostle issues a severe penalty for the individual who ignores them (in verse 38): "if anyone ignores this, he himself will be ignored."<sup>30</sup> In other words, the person who refused to acknowledge Paul's divine authority will himself not be recognized by the Lord.<sup>31</sup> To refuse to hear Christ's Apostles is a refusal to hear Christ Himself and can only incur his displeasure.
- 1 Corinthians 7:12, 25: There have been scholars who have felt that Paul, because he had no saying of the Lord to give him authority, is acknowledging in verse 12 that he is not "inspired" or cannot speak

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<sup>28</sup> F. F. Bruce, "New Light on the Origins of the New Testament Canon" in R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney, eds., *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 10

<sup>29</sup> *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), 51.

<sup>30</sup> *Pace* the rendering of this verse in the KJV: "if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant."

authoritatively at this point. A comparison with verse 25 makes it clear that such is not the case at all. In this latter verse Paul is *not* saying “I don’t know what the Lord thinks about this matter, but I will give you my thoughts for whatever they are worth.” Rather, Paul, since he is one whom the Lord Jesus trusts—he is an Apostle—can speak with the authority of God in an area in which he makes it clear that Jesus did not speak. In other words, Paul gives what would have been Jesus’ actual words if he had spoken to the issue at hand.<sup>32</sup>

- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2: Apostolic teaching is not to be treated indifferently. It is to be accepted because it is the tradition of Christ, by whose authority the apostles deliver it. In other words, the apostolic tradition does not derive from the apostles themselves. It is “the commandment of the Lord” and as such is to be obeyed.<sup>33</sup>
- Paul’s command to read his letters publicly in the context presumably of worship (see 1 Thessalonians 5:27; Colossians 4:16) also speaks of their authoritative status. For what was read publicly in the synagogue, the seed-bed of Christian worship, were the Scriptures.

It is not surprising in view of these texts from Paul’s letters that we find Peter calling Paul’s letters “Scripture” (2 Peter 3:15-16). It was possible, and may

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<sup>31</sup> Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 52.

<sup>32</sup> James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective. A study in role relationships and authority* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 133-135.

<sup>33</sup> F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1982), 79.

indeed be probable, that Peter received Paul's letters within a few months of their being written. We should not imagine that one apostle remained in ignorance regarding the activities of other apostles.

This passage from 2 Peter also clearly indicates that the Pauline letters had begun to circulate as a collected corpus among other churches than those to which they were originally addressed. David Trobisch has persuasively argued that the Apostle Paul in fact supervised the first collection of his letters.<sup>34</sup> Be this as it may, such a collection was certainly in circulation before Paul's death, as 2 Peter bears witness.

### THE ANTILEGOMENA

By the second century there was general agreement to accept as Scripture the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline corpus, 1 Peter and 1 John. The apostolicity and public lection of these writings were certainly major factors in their ready acceptance. The other seven books—Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation—are the so-called “Antilegomena,” those books whose canonicity was disputed at one point or another in the first four centuries of the church's history. It seems likely that all of these seven books were accepted as Scripture from an early period in at least some area of the church, even when that acceptance is not recorded. The alternative to this is to suppose that, in the last third of the fourth century when Athanasius wrote his 39<sup>th</sup> Festal Letter and the Synod of Hippo (393) and the Third Synod of Carthage (397) ratified the canonicity of the twenty-seven books of

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<sup>34</sup> *Paul's Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). I would personally affirm the rectitude of this key aspect of Trobisch's argument without accepting all of his views about the Pauline corpus.

the New Testament, some of the Antilegomena suddenly went from being canonical nowhere to being canonical everywhere, which, as R. T. Beckwith points out, is quite implausible.<sup>35</sup>

Numerous second- and third-century authors clearly considered Hebrews and Revelation as Scripture.<sup>36</sup> For example, Melito of Sardis (*fl.* 170) wrote a commentary on Revelation, which, although no longer extant, indicates his high view of the text. Two of the leading authors of the second century, Justin Martyr (*c.* 100-*c.* 165) and Irenaeus (*c.* 130-*c.* 202), cite verses from Revelation as Scripture. Clement of Rome (*fl.* 96), Irenaeus, and Tertullian (*fl.* 190-215) also accept Hebrews as Scripture. And there appears to be a fair degree of support in the second century for Jude and 2 John. Both are listed in the Muratorian Canon, for example. 3 John, though, does not appear to have been at all well known. Dionysius of Alexandria (d. *c.* 264) knows of 3 John, but he is very tentative about its authority. By the time we come to the fourth century, confidence about 3 John's apostolic authority is increasing. The so-called "Cheltenham List," for instance, includes 3 John. James and 2 Peter, though rather better known, also encountered problems being regarded as canonical. The earliest quotation from James is not until the third century, although both Origen (*c.* 185-254) and Eusebius of Caesarea (*c.* 260-339) accept James as part of the canon.

Each of these seven books seems to have presented specific problems. There were serious reservations about the apostolic authorship of five of the seven

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<sup>35</sup> "Canon of Scripture", 31.

<sup>36</sup> For the following paragraphs, I found Beckwith, "Canon of Scripture", 31 and Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations. The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 129-148 to be very helpful.

Antilegomena (2 Peter and Revelation were excluded). Hebrews was anonymous and stylistically quite different from the rest of the Pauline epistles. Stylistic differences between 2 Peter and 1 Peter and Revelation from the other writings of John occasioned doubts about their authenticity. The author of 2 and 3 John called himself “the elder.” Another major problem with Revelation was that the Montanists claimed its support. It is noteworthy that they also claimed the support of the Gospel of John, which caused some opponents of the Montanists to attack it, but John was so well established that these criticisms all but came to nothing. Yet a third problem with the Book of Revelation had to do with Revelation 20 and the use of that passage by a number of second-century authors to support a literal thousand-year reign. With the dominance of an amillennial perspective after the time of Origen, especially among Greek-speaking Christians, the eschatology of Revelation was perceived as something of a problem and the book became suspect. Then Jude quoted the book of *I Enoch*. The problem with James is not clearly recorded, but Beckwith supposes that it may well have related to the teaching given on justification in James 2, and the seeming difference between James and Paul on this issue.

In the long run the church did not find these problems insurmountable. Hebrews is probably by someone within the Pauline circle (cp. Hebrews 13:23), though not by Paul himself. As such it has clear links to an Apostle. The stylistic differences between 1 and 2 Peter could be due to Peter’s use of different amanuenses (cp. 1 Peter 5:12), and those between Revelation and the other Johannine literature due to John having no help with his Greek when in exile on Patmos. The use of “the elder” does not exclude the possibility that the author of the Johannine letters was an apostle (cf. I Pet.

5:1). Revelation does not really give support to Montanism. Jude does not really recognize I *Enoch* as Scripture. And James does not disagree with Paul on justification.

### A CLOSED CANON

Is the canon of the New Testament open or closed? Is it possible for the Church to add ancient books to the canon, as, for example, William Whiston (1667-1752), the Arian successor of Isaac Newton as Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, desired to do with the introduction of the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*<sup>37</sup>—or fresh “revelation,” as, for example, in the case of the Qur’an or the Book of Mormon?

A first response to the suggestion that the canon can be enlarged is to recognize that the New Testament is far more than an anthology of inspirational literature. It is, in the words of Bruce Metzger, “a collection of writings that bear witness to what God has wrought through the life and work, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through the founding of the Church by his Spirit.”<sup>38</sup> Those events are past history, and the witness to them must be contemporaneous with the events. Moreover, the written witness to these events has been foundational for the church (see Ephesians 2:20) and the foundation cannot be relaid. “In short, the canon cannot be remade—for the simple reason that history cannot be remade.”<sup>39</sup>

An ideal disciple is like “a plastered cistern that loses not a drop”

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<sup>37</sup> Bruce, *Canon*, 250-251.

<sup>38</sup> Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 271.

<sup>39</sup> Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 275.

*(Pirke Aboth 2.10)*