

Using the *Historia Ecclesiastica* as a guide, what evidence does Eusebius provide for the content of the canon and attitudes to it?

Any discussion of the canon will no doubt be met with great disagreement. On one side scholars of a 'conservative evangelical' theological outlook see the Biblical Canon as 'inerrant and closed,' whilst on the opposite side of the seesaw 'liberal' scholars tend towards critical scepticism, suggesting that implied dating errors and apparent inconsistencies within the texts of the canon render it, at best, simply an incongruent library of sacred texts relating the story of the Gospel, or at worst, a hodgepodge of historical nonsense built upon a possible kernel of plausible truth. Whatever the stance of the reader, however, it is no good simply relying on modern scholarship to settle the discussion (if indeed one believes it can, or will, be settled), but requires in-depth study of those who were involved in the original canon discussions. Their insights are extremely important in assessing the claims of the texts, and are useful in explaining the early church's ideology of the canon. One such figure worthy of assessment is Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea.

To analyse the question posed, it must be divided into two distinct issues. Firstly, it will be important to look at the development of the ideology of a Christian canon up to the time of Eusebius, in such a way as to bring clarity to his given lists of canonical texts. In doing so, this essay will explore the evidence Eusebius gives for the content of the canon including, but not limited to, his own personal understanding of the canonical list. Having done so, a discussion on the texts Eusebius accepted, rejected and allowed to remain disputed will occur. Once this has been undertaken, and an understanding of the potential consequences of his assertions regarding the canon gained, this essay will then assess the second issue: attitudes to the canon as recorded by Eusebius.

In order to assess attitudes to the canon this essay will analyse the modes of granting 'canonicity' Eusebius gives, if any. This will enable a discussion on the ideology of canon as held by Eusebius.

To establish an understanding of the question at hand, however, it will be necessary to introduce the subject of this essay with some details of the Biblical transmission before Eusebius.

The Biblical narratives of the life and work of Christ, commonly called the Gospel, began orally. The Apostles started earnestly preaching and proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah¹ on the day of Pentecost with Peter's sermon, apparently resulting in 3,000 new converts.² From this, the Apostles went throughout the world, as Eusebius relates, bringing that Gospel with them, and establishing groups of believers wherever they went. In time the Apostles moved on to new cities. It was thus only natural that their oral Gospel accounts would eventually be required in writing, so as to ensure the Gospel thence taught was the same formerly taught by these Apostles. It is for this reason that O'Loughlin can assert that, "The book is not the message, but a practical ancillary to the message..."³ Indeed, for the early Christians this was so. Eusebius himself asserts that the Gospel of Mark was written to ensure that the Gospel could be heard more than once:

"So brightly shone the light of true religion on the minds of Peter's hearers that...they resorted to appeals of every kind to induce Mark...to leave them in writing a summary of the instruction they had received by word of mouth."⁴

There grew to be four accepted Gospels⁵ eventually collected by the churches so that each congregation could have a complete set. However, during this early period Paul, also an Apostle by divine appointment on the road to Emmaus,⁶ was planting churches amongst the Gentiles. He wrote numerous epistles to those various churches, commonly called the 'catholic epistles', as well as some traditionally called the 'pastoral epistles.'⁷ Peter, it could be argued, began the process of accepting other documents as Holy Scripture, or sacred writings, in his own epistle, 2 Peter⁸, where he wrote of Paul, "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."⁹

¹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.1.3, taken from *Eusebius: The History of the Church*, (Penguin Classics, London, 1989), translated by G.A. Williamson (1965), p. 35

² Acts of the Apostles, 2:47b, NIV Holy Bible

³ O'Loughlin, Thomas, 'The People of the Book or the Books of the People', *The Reader* 107, 3 (2010), p. 2

⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 2.15.1, p. 91

⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 3.24.2-3

⁶ *Ibid.* 2.1.14

⁷ Modern scholarship greatly contests the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles as Pauline. There is no room for such a discussion in this essay, but it is a point that any assessment of the canon must be aware of. The position of Eusebius on these matters, equally, must be considered and dealt with. It seems from the *Historia Ecclesiastica* that Eusebius accepted Paul's authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

⁸ Although the authorship is debated, even by Eusebius, for the sake of the clarity of this essay, such references will assume the canon as it is known currently can be quoted from in such a manner.

⁹ 2 Peter 3:16b, NIV Holy Bible

Thus the consideration of various texts from the first and second centuries as certainly edifying, and possibly canonical, started. By the time Eusebius burst onto the stage of ecclesiastical history as bishop of Caesarea (314 A.D.), the fledgling church had undergone numerous persecutions, overcome (in part, at least) the sustained heresy of Marcion and had begun to ideologically conquer the Imperial Palace of Rome. Eusebius himself was, so argues McDonald, "...the most influential person of the fourth century in regard to the emergence of a NT biblical canon."¹⁰ As such, it is only fitting that this essay deals with one of his works, the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, or Church History. The aim of his work was to relate and record the entirety of church history from the inception of the church to the time of his writing.

Eusebius wrote between 320 and 342 A.D. He is now best known for his historical works, primarily his biography of Constantine and the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, although his contemporaries noted the value of his theological works, such as endeavouring to create a harmony of the four canonical Gospels, as well as many useful exegeses of the Biblical texts. As for his position in society, he bore the gift of being well thought of by the Emperor, Constantine, giving him great standing amongst his fellow bishops and the wide network of churches. Regarding his theology, theologians will remember him primarily as one who produced many useful exegeses of Scripture, but sided with the eventually defeated theology during the Arian controversy.

As this essay delves into the content of Eusebius' canon, it will be worthwhile briefly assessing the ideology of a canon. The concept of a canon before the birth of Christ was by no means alien to the communities residing in Palestine. McDonald writes that, "*Because of their background in Judaism*, the early Christians were accustomed to recognising the authority of written documents of Scripture..."¹¹ For centuries the Jews had studied and memorised the Law of Moses. In due course other texts were added to these, so that by the great translation by the seventy, there were three divisions of sacred writings: the Law, the Prophets and the Wisdom, although arguably this canon was not 'closed' until after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

¹⁰ McDonald, Lee Martin, *The Biblical Canon Its Origin, Transmission and Authority*, Third Edition, (BakerAcademic, Grand Rapids, 2007), p. 310

¹¹ McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, p. 13 emphasis mine

After the life of Christ had finished, the Apostles spread across the known world proclaiming the Gospel. Eusebius recorded Peter's acceptance of Mark's version of his (Peter's) account of Christ.¹² And so, with Peter's acknowledgement of new and unique sacred texts for this 'New Covenant' community, it is no surprise that,

“Jewish recognition of its own divinely inspired (and therefore authoritative) writings was a model for the church to recognize some of its own literature as authoritative, that is, as prophetic, inspired, and sacred writings that were guidelines for faith and conduct.”¹³

Eusebius himself writes about the heresy of Artemon who corrupted the Scriptures, suggesting that, “Either they do not believe that the inspired Scriptures were spoken by the Holy Spirit – if so, they are unbelievers; or they imagine that they are wiser than He – if so, can they be other than possessed?”¹⁴

Curiously, it seems that the early Christians were not exceptionally interested in making a distinctive canon of Holy Writ, at least in the writings we have, until around the time of Marcion, and even then, presumably, the main reason was to counter this heresy. Note what McDonald says regarding the widespread use of Christian (not distinctively Apostolic) writings, “This does not mean that all other Christian writings were excluded by all the churches...”¹⁵ This makes clear that what concerned the early church was not a closed selection of texts, but rather the orthodoxy of those that they used. In fact Bruce suggests that the desire to define explicitly the accepted canon came about in response to Marcionism, and not any understood necessity of a closed canon: “Marcion's Canon does not mark the first attempt to draw up a Christian list, but it did stimulate the orthodox leaders to define more explicitly the Canon as they acknowledged it.”¹⁶ Clearly, therefore, the idea of a canon was itself slowly being revealed and uncovered. It was not something thought up by the Apostles, but was developing alongside a growing and defensive doctrine of tradition and passion for orthodoxy.

¹² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 2.15.1, p. 91

¹³ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, p.p. 13-14

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 5.28.18, p. 177

¹⁵ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, p. 310

¹⁶ Bruce, F.F., *The Canon of Scripture*, (Inter-Varsity, Nottingham, 1954), p. 21

When reading through Eusebius, it is surprising just how many books now considered canonical he uses in his arguments. It seems that Eusebius had a certain canon in mind when he wrote this work, for he draws heavily on the four Gospel accounts, as well as particular epistles, such as the Pauline epistles and 1 Peter. This clearly demonstrates his acceptance of such works. He holds them to be true, and so is able and willing to use them in the construction and articulation of his arguments.

In his work, Eusebius gives numerous lists of canons, all from different writers, and eventually gives his own opinion. In book three, chapter ten, Eusebius gives the canon of the Old Testament as recorded by Josephus. The list given by Josephus contains twenty two books: “We do not have vast numbers of books, discordant and conflicting, but only twenty-two, containing the record of all time and with reason believed to be divine.”¹⁷ After listing them briefly according to their sections Eusebius then continues quoting Josephus, regarding the Apocryphal texts. “From Artaxerxes to the present day the whole story has been written down, but does not command the same belief as the earlier narrative because there was not an unbroken succession of prophets.”¹⁸ Thus, from the words of Josephus, Eusebius provides evidence that the Jews in the First Century rejected the Apocryphal writings as non-canonical.

In doing so, he accepts, but does not here himself deal with, the Old Testament canon. Eusebius allows the thrust of Josephus’ point to rely on the following paragraph, where he explains the respect the Old Testament canon was given by the Jews:

“It is evident from our actions what is our attitude to our own scriptures; for...no one has presumed to add, to take away, or alter anything in them as the ordinances of God...if need be, to die for them gladly.”¹⁹

The point being that the Jewish canon was considered sacred enough to expect death over desecration of the Law.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.10.1, p. 78

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 3.10.4, p. 78

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.10.5, p. 78

Another list given of the Old Testament is that penned by Melito. It was in a letter to Onesimus that Melito included this list for the reason that he, "...wished to learn the precise facts about the ancient books, particularly their number and order."²⁰ It is interesting to note that Eusebius seems little interested in commenting on the Old Testament canon. This may be that he feels these writers do so enough, and that their authority covers what needs to be covered. However, it is more plausible that these texts are not the disputed texts in his mind. As a bishop of the New Testament church, his main concerns were that the authority of the Gospel of Christ was upheld. Westcott has suggested, and is arguably accurate in his assessment that, "Eusebius has left no express judgment on the contents of the Old Testament..."²¹ Now, to be slightly more accurate, Eusebius, "...distinctly separates the Books of Maccabees from the 'Divine Scriptures;' and elsewhere mentions Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom as 'controverted' books."²² In light of Eusebius' position, here assessed by Westcott, it seems correct to say that Eusebius, "...regarded the Apocrypha of the Old Testament in the same light as the books in the New Testament, which were 'controverted and yet familiarly used by many."²³ This would be the main judgement Eusebius gives regarding the Old Testament canon. O'Loughlin agrees: "In this Greek environment, the debates and doubts seem to focus around...the New Testament canon...the canon of the Old Testament seem to be, comparatively, unproblematic."²⁴ And thus this is all that can be said on the Old Testament by way of content. Eusebius did not in any great depth discuss the canon of the Old Testament, except by offering three slightly different lists, two of which have been discussed above, the third by Origin.²⁵

Regarding the New Testament, however, the discussion is much livelier. The accepted books of the New Testament canon, generally, are the same throughout Eusebius' work. Eusebius accepts the four Gospels into his canon: "We must, of course, put first the holy quartet of the gospels..."²⁶ after which he includes the Acts of the Apostles. The list given by Eusebius, however, beyond these five books is instructive. "The next

²⁰ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 4.26.13, p. 135

²¹ Westcott, Brooke Foss, *The Bible in the Church: A Popular Account of the Collection and Reception of the Holy Scriptures In the Christian Churches*, (Macmillan and Co., London, 1986), p. 153

²² *Ibid.*, p. 153

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 153

²⁴ O'Loughlin, Thomas, *Inventing the Apocrypha: The Role of Early Latin Canon Lists*, *Irish Quarterly Review* 74, 53 (2009), p. 57

²⁵ This list can be found in *Hist. eccl.*, 6.25.2, p. 200-201

²⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.1, p. 88

place in the list goes to Paul's epistles, and after them we must recognize the epistle called 1 John; likewise 1 Peter."²⁷

Although Eusebius has not given a list of the epistles of Paul as he accepts them, although none of Paul's are considered disputed. Therefore it can be assumed that Eusebius accepts all thirteen Pauline letters, even if some modern scholars suggest this is an error.

However, he does then go on to give a list of those texts disputed by the church. The meaning of a disputed text is simply that they are known by the church, but not considered by all to be canonical.²⁸ These, "...include the epistles known as James, Jude, and 2 Peter, and those called 2 and 3 John..."²⁹ Of these disputed books, Eusebius acknowledges that the church is divided on their canonicity, but cannot be rejected.

A third category, of spurious books, is then dealt with.³⁰ In this list, Eusebius includes the following, "...the 'Acts' of Paul, the 'Shepherd', and the 'Revelation of Peter'; also the alleged 'Epistle of Barnabas', and the 'Teachings of the Apostles', together with the Revelation of John..."³¹ It is curious to note however, that although the Revelation of John was not fully accepted by the church, Eusebius made a point of also including it in the previous section, with the list of accepted books. As he writes, "To these [the accepted books] may be added, if it is thought proper, the Revelation of John..."³²

It seems that the confusion regarding the Revelation comes from Papias, who although Irenaeus asserted, "...had listened to John and was later a companion of Polycarp..."³³ actually simply, "...learnt the essentials of the faith from their [the Apostle's] former pupils..."³⁴ What Papias said about the Apostles, therefore, is of great importance because of his proximity to their teachings, even if he never sat under John himself.

²⁷ Ibid. 3.25.2, p. 88

²⁸ Ibid., 3.25.2 and 3.25.6

²⁹ Ibid. 3.25.3, p. 88-89

³⁰ Fascinatingly, of the two translations of Eusebius consulted thus far, this third category is not acknowledged by one. The Penguin-published translation by G. A. Williamson includes this section of 'Spurious books', whereas the LIMOVIA.NET-published version (whose translator is not given) simply has three categories: accepted, disputed and rejected. Presumably this disharmony is due to the complexity of Eusebius' language at this point, as his sentence structure and phraseology lack precise clarity. Nevertheless, it seems that the translation by Williamson is closer to Eusebius' intent, even if Eusebius did not clearly articulate himself.

³¹ Ibid., 3.25.4, p. 89

³² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.25.2, p. 88

³³ Ibid., 3.39.1, p.101

³⁴ Ibid., 3.39.2, p. 102

Thus it is intriguing that Eusebius uses the list of the presbyters given by Papias to suggest that John the Apostle did not write the Revelation of John, but that another John did so. “Here it should be observed that he twice includes the name of John,”³⁵ meaning that there are two distinct persons called John: one is an Apostle, and one is not. “He thus confirms the truth of the story that two men in Asia had the same name...”³⁶ In Eusebius’ own words, “This is highly significant, for it is likely that the second – if we cannot accept the first – saw the Revelation that bears the name of John.”³⁷ It seems that this distinction, whether the Apostle wrote or gave sanction to the text, is the cause for the text being disputed. Eusebius, by including it with the list of accepted texts, seems to be implying that he accepts it. This, of course, makes sense in light of his understanding of what Apostolicity actually meant, which shall be discussed further on.

By the end of his work though, Eusebius has dealt in greater detail with the difficult position of Revelation. He writes, quoting Dionysius, “Some of our predecessors rejected the book and pulled it entirely to pieces...pronouncing it unintelligible and illogical and the title false.”³⁸ So far, Dionysius accepted, the content had been traditionally torn apart and the title (i.e. the author – the Revelation *of John*) also disregarded. However Dionysius continues, “But I myself would never dare to reject the book, *of which many good Christians have a very high opinion...*”³⁹ He finishes this quotation by relaying Dionysius’ preference for faith rather than confident rejection, “I do not measure and judge these things by my own reason, but put more reliance on faith...”⁴⁰ In the rest of this section, Eusebius records Dionysius’ belief that the author of the Revelation was different to the Gospel and 1 John based on the literary features found in the text. “From the ideas too, and from the words used and the way they are put together, we shall readily conclude that this writer was different from the other.”⁴¹

Nevertheless, Eusebius ends the overall discussion by quoting Dionysius’ intent, which was *not* to undermine the text, and thereby reduce the Revelation of John from ‘disputed’ to ‘rejected’ but was, “...solely

³⁵ Ibid., 3.39.5, p. 102

³⁶ Ibid., 3.39.6, p. 102

³⁷ Ibid., 3.39.6, p. 102

³⁸ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 7.25.3, p. 240

³⁹ Ibid., 7.25.4, p.p. 240-241 emphasis mine

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.25.4, p. 241

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.25.17, p. 242

to prove the dissimilarity between these books.”⁴² As a case study, this analysis seems to suggest that a book having been disputed can still be accepted as canonical in due course, and particularly even if the author is not explicitly an Apostle. This was because of the tradition by the wider church to accept it as such.⁴³

A further example could be the book of Hebrews. Eusebius at this point placed it in the disputed texts, “Moreover, some have found a place in the list for the ‘Gospel of Hebrews’, a book which has a special appeal for those Hebrews who have accepted Christ,”⁴⁴ but later, quoting Clement’s list of accepted texts, a similar discussion is recorded where the authorship allows it to be a book accepted as canonical. “The Epistle to the Hebrews he attributes to Paul, but says that it was written for Hebrews in their own language, and then accurately translated by Luke and published for Greek readers.”⁴⁵ Thus, through this idea Clement overcame the hurdle previously associated with arguing for Paul’s authorship: that it was too dissimilar to his other writings linguistically. “Hence, in the Greek version of this epistle we find the same stylistic colour as in the Acts.”⁴⁶ In both instances it is curious to see that the issue of authorship played a significant part in assessing the authenticity of the work.

Another perspective to look at regarding the content of the canon is to see what books Eusebius grants authority, although not canonicity. Such titles were used, for example, to combat heresy;

“After adducing many other arguments to refute their blasphemous falsehood, the writer continues: ‘This suggestion might perhaps have been credible if in the first place Holy Scripture had not presented a very different picture; and there are also works by Christian writers...written to defend the truth against both pagan criticism and current heresies – I mean works by Justin, Miltiades, Tatian, Clement, and many more.’”⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid., 7.25.27, p. 243

⁴³ O’Loughlin states that a similar process is recorded by Jerome regarding the book of Jude: “...by virtue of its age and its use in the churches it has gained authority, and so I now reckon to be ‘among the scriptures...’” O’Loughlin, Thomas, *Jerome’s De Viris Illustribus and Latin Perceptions of the New Testament’s Canon*, in J.E. Rutherford and D. Woods, eds., *The Mystery of Christ in the Fathers of the Church: Essays in Honour of D. Vincent Twomey*, SVD, (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2012), p.p. 55-65

⁴⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.25.5, p. 88

⁴⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 6.14.2, p. 192

⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.14.2, p. 192

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.28.2-4, p.p. 175-176

That such books were employed thus is perhaps no real concern to the ideology of canon, as no inspiration was claimed for them, but it does show the church's willingness to present such extra-canonical texts to add weight to the texts considered canonical.

Thus far, this essay has demonstrated that Eusebius held some texts to be commonly accepted, and was by no means keeping his canon closed, but allowed some books to be considered disputed. However, he also speaks fiercely of those books firmly rejected. Before he comments on those that were rejected, he makes a distinction between rejection and those being disputed. His purpose is in,

“...distinguishing those writings which according to the tradition of the Church are true, genuine, and recognized, from those in a different category, not canonical but disputed, yet familiar with most church men; for we must not confuse these with the writings published by heretics under the name of the apostles...”⁴⁸

The reason he gives for rejection is that, “...none of these [rejected writings] has any churchman of any generation ever seen fit to refer in his writings.”⁴⁹ Thus, his condemnation is vitriolic, as he writes of these books, “It follows that so far from being classed even among Spurious Books, they must be thrown out as impious and beyond the pale.”⁵⁰

What are these rejected books? Eusebius helpfully lists these: “...[the] Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Matthias, and several other besides these, or Acts of Andrew, John and other apostles.”⁵¹ These books are rejected, not simply because the authorship is disputed, but because the content is not in line with traditional, accepted orthodoxy:

“Again, nothing could be farther from apostolic usage than the type of phraseology employed, while the ideas and implications of their contents are so irreconcilable with true orthodoxy that they stand revealed as the forgeries of heretics.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.25.6, p. 89

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.25.6, p. 89

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.25.6, p. 89

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.25.6, p. 89

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.25.6, p. 89

The implications of this are vast. If, as Eusebius suggests, they are considered ‘un-canonizable’, in so far as they are not theologically compatible with the canon as revealed to that point, then what *is* the deciding criteria for the canon? Is it, as was the case for the book of Hebrews, Apostolic authorship? Or is it, in the case of the Revelation of John, general ecclesiastical acceptance? Or, in the case of those books that were rejected, a requirement that the contents of the text be considered orthodox teaching? If it is ecclesiastical acceptance, then surely the canon can never be fixed or closed, for the needs and views of the church may change. If it is the second, then the issue of Apostolicity is vital for all New Testament canonical texts. If it is the third, then one must assume that someone, somewhere has been, or is yet to be, the arbiter in the discussion. But who? And by what authority could that person decide?

Thus, it finally befalls this essay to briefly consider the evidence Eusebius provides for the *authority* of the canonical texts.

Throughout the *Historia Ecclesiastica* Eusebius speaks of the Apostles as those who wrote the books accepted in the canon. He makes frequent reference to the idea that the Gospel has been received from tradition, and thus is considered a true and holy account. “In any case the gospel record is true.”⁵³ Likewise, the documents for church life, when received by Apostolic tradition, should be adhered to. Ignatius, on the way to his death, encouraged the believers to, “...hold fast to the apostolic tradition, which...he thought it necessary for safety’s sake to set down clearly in writing.”⁵⁴ Clearly the link to an Apostle is a vital component for canonicity, according to Eusebius. Modern evangelical, Tim Ward, is even more blatant in his deference to this position:

“...this teaching [John 16:12-15] from Christ provides warrant from within the Gospels for the early church’s practice of making ‘apostolicity’ (whether in authorship or source) a vital external criterion in the recognition of certain writings as Scripture and others as not.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 1.7.15, p. 22

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.36.4, p. 98

⁵⁵ Ward, Tim, *Words of Life Scripture as the living and active word of God*, (IVP, Nottingham, 2009), p. 46

Evidently, then, the necessity for an Apostolic link (if not an actual Apostolic author – which is granted for example, in the case of Mark penning Peter’s Gospel) is a key link still required in the chain of the modern canon.

But what about church acceptance? Again, here Eusebius is quite clear that a mark for authenticity is demonstrated by church acceptance. One example of this is that when a doctrine is not explicitly set out by the Apostles in their writings, the matter can be decided upon by a church council. Eusebius records that the Asian churches wished to celebrate the Paschal festival on a day no other church accepted. Eusebius relates that, “...synods and conferences of bishops were convened, and without a dissentient voice, drew up a decree of the Church...there were others...all these laid down one single rule – the rule already stated.”⁵⁶ It should be noted, however, that the Asian bishops did disagree, and, noticeably, they used their own interpretation of the Apostolic tradition to *institute* the breaking of the fast on that date! This, evidently, was a classic standoff. Both dioceses claimed Apostolic tradition, and both were using that claim to defend their position.

How was this seemingly insurmountable problem overcome, and unity maintained? By appealing to the *unbroken Apostolic tradition*. “The Palestinian bishops of whom I spoke a little while ago...composed a lengthy review of the tradition about the Easter festival which had come down to them *without a break from the Apostles*...”⁵⁷ The ecclesiological mandate for decision, therefore, is only that which can be truly attributed to the Apostolic tradition. Instead of any disharmony between these two components of canonicity, they are actually intrinsically linked. The Apostolic authority is manifested in the faithful churches through the tradition encapsulated by their texts. **And this can be easily seen when Eusebius quotes Irenaeus, saying, “The church at Ephesus was founded by Paul, and John remained there till Trajan’s time; so she is a true witness of what the Apostles taught.”**⁵⁸

Which introduces the idea of orthodoxy, the last of the three criterion. Now, this is the easiest to harmonize with the previous two, for if one is a genuine document with Apostolic authority, and the churches are in agreement with that, then that *is* orthodox doctrine. Granted there may be difficulty when there appears

⁵⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 5.23.2, p. 171

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.25.1, p. 174 – emphasis mine

⁵⁸ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.23.4, p. 83

to be no textual warrant or discussion on a point, but as has just been shown, the church acts to maintain the Apostolic *tradition*, and so what the *faithful* church holds to be true, and can assert from Apostolic tradition if not from Apostolic texts, is indeed true. Conversely, of course, it follows that what cannot be held as Apostolic in tradition or textual reference, the church cannot maintain as orthodox, thereby rejecting the document entirely. As an example from Eusebius demonstrates;

“They [some of Clement’s writings] contain alleged dialogues with Peter and Apion, but there is no mention whatever of them by early writers, nor do they preserve in its purity the stamp of Apostolic orthodoxy.”⁵⁹

Finally, therefore, it is clear that what Eusebius considered authoritative tools to incorporate a text into the canon are all three regulations:

“In these pages I have set down all the facts that have come to my knowledge regarding the apostles and the apostolic period; the sacred writings they have left us [Apostolic]; the books which though disputed are nevertheless constantly used in very many churches [ecclesiological acceptance]; those that are unmistakably spurious and foreign to apostolic orthodoxy [orthodoxy required].”⁶⁰

So far this essay has given a treatment of what Eusebius considered canonical by way of actual texts accepted, disputed, spurious and rejected, as well as then looking at the authorities he would accept for a text to allow it to be considered canonical.

The second part of the question now being addressed is to discern from Eusebius the various attitudes to the canon. As we come to do so it will be helpful to list the books that he himself has considered canonical:

“We must, of course, put first the holy quartet of the gospels, followed by the Acts of the Apostles. The next place in the list goes to Paul’s epistles and after them we must

⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.38.5, p. 101

⁶⁰ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.31.6, p. 94

recognize the epistle called 1 John; likewise 1 Peter. To these may be added, if it is thought proper, The Revelation of John...these are classed as the recognized books.”⁶¹

The total number of canonical books (20, and if Revelation is counted, 21), therefore, according to Eusebius’ list is somewhat as held today. Even if one allowed the disputed books, that would only take us to twenty six. The Gospel of Hebrews, therefore, was not in the canonical list as set out by Eusebius. Nor were the books now called the Apocrypha.

So what are the attitudes to the canon as presented by Eusebius? In response to this half of the question, it will be useful to first assess how Eusebius writes of the Scriptures before then looking at how he records other attitudes to the canon. Then this essay will consider the aspects of how a book can become part of the canon, according to Eusebius, although this has been touched on briefly above.

Firstly, therefore, the question must be asked, ‘How does Eusebius write of the Scriptures in his work?’ Throughout the work it is apparent that Eusebius grants special distinction to the books he classes as ‘Scripture.’ Some of the titles and describing words for these texts are pointedly ‘religious’ and speak of the respect he personally grants the authority of the texts. Such titles are as follows: ‘Holy Scripture’⁶²; quoting Philo, ‘...but laws and inspired oracles spoken by prophets...’⁶³; again quoting Philo, ‘...sacred scriptures...’⁶⁴; ‘...Holy Scripture...’⁶⁵; ‘...Divine Scripture...’⁶⁶ and ‘Holy Writ...’⁶⁷. The purpose in relating these titles found throughout the work is to demonstrate that Eusebius himself held the works of scripture in exceptionally high esteem. As he explains about them, and as reason for his high view of the works deemed scripture to have been, “...spoken by the Holy Spirit...”⁶⁸ Eusebius believed that the books of the canon, called by him ‘Divine Scripture’ were communicated to the author by the Holy Spirit, and thus were the very words of God Himself, given to man.

⁶¹ Ibid., 3.25.1-2, p. 88

⁶² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 1.10.2, p. 26.

⁶³ Ibid., 2.17.9, p. 51

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.17.20, p. 53

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.28.13, p. 177

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.28.15, p. 177

⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.28.18, p. 177

⁶⁸ Ibid., 5.28.18, p. 177-8

Having established that Eusebius believed the scriptures to be divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is then important to point out that the many groups branded 'heretical' by the early church did so by twisting the message of the Gospel, as given by the Apostles. Consider the Ebionites, who, "...held that the epistles of the Apostle ought to be rejected altogether, calling him a renegade from the Law; and using only the 'Gospel of the Hebrews' they treated the rest with scant respect."⁶⁹ By rejecting Paul they rejected his claims of Apostleship and therefore ignored his writings, otherwise considered part of the sacred scripture. In doing so, however, they also were willing to treat the rest with 'scant respect'. The Ebionite attitude to the canon was simply such that they basically disregarded it entirely.

Or consider Cerinthus, who, according to Eusebius, held no more respect for the sacred nature of Scripture than to forge his own, yet claiming Apostolic authorship: "Then there is Cerinthus, who by revelation purporting to have been written by a great apostle presents us with tales of wonder falsely alleged to have been shown to him by angels."⁷⁰ Clearly, then, even as early as the Ebionite and Cerninthian heresies, the attitude to an 'orthodox' canon, if one can claim there to have been one at that time, was not universally held as closed, or even as unalterable. The orthodox fellowship of churches may well have done so, but fringe movements were able to malign and rewrite the canonical texts to their own ends, as they saw fit, creating new splinter churches holding a different and, considered by most to be, false Gospel.

Perhaps, however, the archetypal example of disregard for the divine scriptures came from Marcion. His heresy proved the greatest challenge to the fledgling church, in places tearing the congregations apart. Foster suggests that, "Some of Marcion's beliefs especially that of jettisoning the Jewish scripture) continued to appear superficially attractive to certain Christian groups down through the centuries."⁷¹ Eusebius writes thus of the Marcionite sect,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 3.27.4, p. 91

⁷⁰ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.28.2, p. 91

⁷¹ Foster, Paul, '*Marcion: His Life, Works, Beliefs and Impact*', *The Expository Times* 121 (6), (2010), p. 280

“They make use of the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospels, interpreting in their own peculiar fashion the ideas contained in Holy Writ, but they ridicule Paul the Apostle, setting aside his epistles, and reject even the Acts of the Apostles.”⁷²

This sect had such a differing attitude to the Apostolicity of Paul, and thus the ‘inspiration’ and ‘usefulness’ of his writings, that they ridiculed him.

The reason this type of editing was so harshly dealt with by Eusebius is because these documents taught a different view of the Gospel, or even a completely different Gospel, to the one that he held to be true. And this, therefore, was untenable with the orthodox Gospel to which he devoted his life. Remember how he spoke regarding the documents that were completely rejected as being, “...beyond the pale.”⁷³ If those were known to be forgeries, and were to be cast aside, what worse fate was to be given over to those that distinctly and deliberately misrepresented the Apostolic Gospel? Any attempt to add to the Gospel (or indeed to take from it) was considered nothing less than satanic! Consider Apolinarius’ response to the heresy of Montanus: “By some art, or rather by methodical use of malign artifice, the devil contrived the ruin of the disobedient, and was most undeservedly honoured by them.”⁷⁴ And what was it that Montanus was doing? “He raved, and began to chatter and talk nonsense, prophesying in a way that conflicted with the practice of the Church handed down...from the beginning.”⁷⁵ What, in effect, had Montanus and his followers done? They had rejected the Apostolic tradition, now encapsulated and contained in the works they had left behind, the ‘holy scriptures’, that Eusebius continually speaks of and quotes. In doing so, the Montanists were accused of blaspheming the Holy Spirit and indeed being under the sway of the devil himself. The effect upon the Phrygian church was felt keenly:

“They were taught by this arrogant spirit to denigrate the entire Catholic Church throughout the world.”⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid., 4.29.5, p. 136

⁷³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.25.7, p. 88

⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.16.9, p. 161

⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.16.7, p. 161

⁷⁶ Ibid., 5.16.9, p. 161

Therefore it is clear that Eusebius presents the attitude to the canon as varied and mixed throughout the early church period. This is now known to be true, insofar as a canon didn't exist as a closed library until the start of the fourth century.

It must be acknowledged that the canon we now have in our Bibles today is such because of the work of Eusebius. He was the first historian and theologian who dealt with this matter in great depth. Such an acknowledgement, however, would be difficult to realize based on the length of discussion McDonald gives to Eusebius in his book.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, if the theological historian simply looks at the historical development of the canon, they cannot overlook the importance of Eusebius, because he laid down the arguments for and against many New Testament books, supplied later generations with rationale for determining which books were historically considered canonical and thus could be considered responsible for the widespread disregard for other texts and canons that he himself felt were unacceptable and non-canonical.

Whether one accepts the role of the Holy Spirit or not in the revelation of the canon through the first four centuries of the church will matter a great deal in how they deal with Eusebius. If the evangelical accepts the role of the Holy Spirit, he will no doubt see Eusebius as a key component of God in this process.⁷⁸ Bruce, for example, says, "Divine authority comes first: canonicity follows authority and is dependent upon it."⁷⁹ This view is expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith,⁸⁰ the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy⁸¹ and the 39 Articles of the Anglican Church⁸², for example. If someone does not allow for the Holy Spirit, Eusebius eventually becomes a meddling arbiter who began the process whereby many ancient and historically useful texts have been lost to future scholars.

Nevertheless, no matter the prejudices regarding Eusebius one may bring to the discussion, it is impossible to ignore the fact that in large part he acted as a catalyst, bringing the debate to the forefront of the

⁷⁷ In this book, the section on Eusebius fills three pages of the text. His introduction to the topic of the canon alone fills sixteen pages.

⁷⁸ O'Loughlin says this about the evangelical position when canonicity is disputed today: "...any attack on the divine act of revelation must be countered as an attack on the divine act of revelation itself, for in these works we have...the works of the Holy Spirit...one is committed to the defence of the books...the list...indeed of access to divine truth." O'Loughlin, *Inventing the Apocrypha*, p.p. 54-55

⁷⁹ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 19

⁸⁰ The Westminster Confession of Faith, Article 1 <

http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html> accessed on 25/11/2013 at 21:43

⁸¹ Henry, Carl F.H., *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4 (Word books, Waco, Tx., 1979), p.p. 211-219

⁸² 39 Articles of Religion, number 6, < <http://www.britainexpress.com/History/tudor/39articles-text.htm>> accessed on 25/11/2013 at 21:46

ecclesiastical elite of his day, and began the process of closing the canon. This may not have been his view or intention, but it is nonetheless evident that this is what happened, and is a key reason why we have the Bible we do today. His influence, therefore, on the canon we have today is unparalleled.

In conclusion therefore, this essay has endeavoured to demonstrate that the *Historia Ecclesiastica* has recorded a wide ranging and varied list of New Testament canonical texts. Eusebius includes a number of lists of the New Testament which demonstrate various levels of progressive acceptance of some texts alongside sustained and critical rejection of other texts. By doing so, he has given a fair, if biased, history of the general acceptance of the need for a canon to maintain the Apostolic Gospel the church had then inherited, including a potted recollection of debates and heresies that actually served as a catalyst in the process of canonization as well as presenting the need for criteria by which to choose what books constituted worthy of being considered canonical. These criteria, it was found, were firstly a link to an Apostle, either by direct authorship or by close association; an ecclesiastical tradition of accepting that work as Apostolic and that the text maintained orthodoxy with the rest of the accepted Apostolic tradition.

As to the attitudes of the canon, this essay found that whilst there were many opponents to the canonical Gospel, such as the Ebionites, Marcionism and the Montanists, the process of consolidating the canonical texts was well under way. Despite some confusion and disagreements regarding a small number of books (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, the Revelation of John and the Gospel of the Hebrews), Eusebius makes clear that there were arguments for them that would eventually become the assumed reasoning for allowing those texts to be added to the twenty-strong collection already accepted. This essay also proved that the books unable to demonstrate Apostolicity, church acceptance and/or orthodoxy were eventually shunned from the canon (although not from general reading encouraged as edifying) on that basis.

Thus this essay has endeavoured to prove that the evidence Eusebius gives for the contents of the canon include numerous lists from earlier centuries, many writers arguing for orthodoxy against heresy by appealing to the Apostolic tradition eventually solidified in texts, and then that those texts were maintained as being worthy using the criteria provided. As to the attitudes towards the canon, this essay has proven that they were wide and varied, but that the process of canonization was ongoing, even throughout Eusebius' own time as

Bishop. And no doubt this very work was extremely instrumental in the final decisions taken in the 390's when the canon was finally considered closed by Augustine.

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