

The New Testament Canon and Apocrypha in the Orthodox Tradition: The Tension between Uniformity and Diversity

Introduction

The discussion of the formation and the contents of the New Testament Canon is very old; more precisely, according to Kurt Aland,¹ it begins at least with the latest writings of the New Testament itself, as passages like 2 Pet 3:15-16; 2 Thess 2:2; Col 4:16 seem to indicate. Contrary to the contents of the Old Testament Canon, which have been a point of differentiation among the Christian Churches, the New Testament Canon list is more or less a well-established consensus.² Despite, however, this apparent general agreement, there are some questions that are still open to academic debate; what were, for example, the events that triggered the process of determining the contents of the New Testament Canon; Marcion and his version of accepted New Testament readings, some other heretic groups (like the Gnostics and the Montanists),³ the existence of a Jewish Canon of the Hebrew Bible or other internal theological reasons independent from or parallel to the external challenges (like for example the delay of the Parousia)? Additionally, the existence of textual variants of the New Testament brings up the question which form of the New Testament text should be regarded as canonical. Moreover, there are some questions with theological implications that are a matter of debate not only among the various Christian Churches but also among members of the same Church. Central questions remain open to discussion, like, for example, the criteria for determining the canonicity of individual books, the question whether the canon is open or closed, the possibility of a canon within the canon or, in other words, the diversity and unity of the canon and, finally, the role that the New Testament canon plays within the Church and

¹ K. Aland, „Das Problem des neutestamentlichen Kanons,“ in E. Käsemann (ed.), *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 134-148, esp. 134.

² An exception, however, seems to be, for example, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church (India) and the Chaldean Syrian Church, which follow the 22-book canon of the original Peshitta. Additionally, the Coptic Bible of the Egyptian and the Ethiopian Church includes a much broader New Testament canon.

³ See B. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 75-274 for an extensive discussion of the historical circumstances that probable led to the formation of the New Testament canon.

its relation to the Church tradition, or, in Bruce Metzger's words the question "whether the canon is a collection of authoritative books or an authoritative collection of books".⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed discussion of the above; the focus will rather be on the Orthodox perspective of the New Testament Canon and the answers that the Orthodox biblical research offers to some of the aforementioned problems. The presentation, thus, is divided into the following sections: (a) a brief overview of the history of the Canon formation up to its final establishment with an emphasis on the development in the Eastern Churches, (b) the norms of canonicity according to the patristic sources, (c) the relation of the Canon to the Church tradition according to Orthodox theology and its function within the Church as well as the ambiguity of its limits. Finally, two examples, namely those of the book of Revelation and of the Protoevangelium of James will be shortly presented; they further illuminate some of the issues that will be discussed.

A short overview of the history of the New Testament canon

The history of the New Testament canon could be divided into seven different phases, each bearing its own weight and exhibiting individual features determined by the historical circumstances and the theological considerations of the Church.⁵ Some parts of this process are rather obscure or are missing and have to be filled in with speculations. Additionally, the particularities of the local communities, as well as the role of prominent ecclesiastical figures in the various phases should be taken into consideration.

(a) In the first phase, which covers the period from Paul up to the early Apostolic Fathers and could also be called the "pre-history of the canon", two are the major "canonical" sources of the early Church, namely the Old Testament and the oral tradition of Jesus' teaching, death, and resurrection.⁶ Both are understood in terms of

⁴ Metzger, *The Canon*, 1.

⁵ I follow here the seven-part division proposed by Aland, „Das Problem," 140-143.

⁶ Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (trans. J.A. Baker; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972), 111-114.

the history of salvation.⁷ In the later part of this phase, it seems that a collection of the Pauline epistles was also known and circulated among the churches⁸ as well as a collection of the four Gospels.⁹ They were read in the gatherings of the community, although their status remains unclear. However, it seems that the oral tradition about Jesus Christ, as well as the authority of the eyewitnesses, took precedence over any written sources in this early phase of the Church.¹⁰

(b) In the second phase, Justin and the later Apostolic Fathers played an important role in establishing the writings of the apostles (Paul included) as an authentic source of Christian teaching and life next to the Old Testament and the dominical sayings.¹¹

(c) The third phase begins around 150 AD. During it, the four gospels as well as the epistles became concrete collections and appeared together. This phase is also closely connected to Marcion's attempt to establish a canon cleansed from any Old Testament references.¹² It is highly debated whether Marcion was the first to conceive the idea of a canon.¹³ The recent research is inclined to accept that informal collections of various

⁷ J. Karavidopoulos, *Εισαγωγή στην Καινή Διαθήκη*, Biblical Library 1, 3rd edition (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2007), 82-85.

⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ep. ad Eph.* X. 7-8: PG 5, 653A; Polycarp of Smyrna, *Ep. ad Phil.* III.3-12: PG 5, 1008B-C.

⁹ See the discussion in Karavidopoulos, *Εισαγωγή*, 91-92.

¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ep. ad Philad.* 8,2.

¹¹ See, for example, Clement of Rome, *1 Cor* 46: PG 1, 305A; 308A; 49: PG 1, 309A-B; Justin, *Dial.* 85: PG 6, 676C; 110: PG 6, 729A-B.

¹² Marcion compiled a list of accepted books consisting of Luke's Gospel and the "apostolikon", i.e. ten Pauline letters (Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians (Laodiceans), Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians; see, Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 1: PG 41, 725C. Cf. also A. von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche*, TU 45, 2nd edition (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1924).

¹³ According to Metzger, *The Canon* 18, J.G. Eichhorn was the first to attribute to Marcion the idea of the canon. The same idea was advocated by H. von Campenhausen, "Marcion et les origines du Canon Néotestamentaire," *RHPR* 46 (1966): 213-226 and id., *The Formation*, 148ff.: "Whatever the facts, the first Christian canon remains his [Marcion's] peculiar and unique creation, one in which neither churchman nor gnostic anticipated him." Campenhausen, actually, sharpened Harnack's (*Marcion*) earlier claim that nowhere before Marcion a canon has been attested in the Christian writings. At the same time, however, Harnack weakened his thesis by accepting the existence of a four-gospel canon before Marcion, see v. Campenhausen, *The Formation*, 149 and n. 6.

New Testament texts¹⁴ or even a concrete canon that Marcion re-worked to fit his own teaching must have existed prior to his list.¹⁵ Nowadays most scholars claim that Marcion's efforts actually accelerated a process that had already begun in the early Church.¹⁶ It seems that a similar role must have been played by the apocryphal texts, especially those of the Gnostics and the Montanists.¹⁷

(d) The fourth phase begins around 200 AD and is influenced by the work of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clemens of Alexandria. By that time the four gospels were established as a group of authoritative writings alongside those of the Apostles (Paul's letters, Acts, Revelation, and some of the Catholic letters).¹⁸ A new feature of this period is the

¹⁴ D.I. Kyrtatas, «Ιστορικοί παράγοντες στη διαμόρφωση του Κανόνα της Καινής Διαθήκης», in *Αγία Γραφή και σύγχρονος άνθρωπος*. FS Karavidopoulos, ed. Chr. Oikonomou et al. (Thessaloniki: Pournaras 2006), 255-270, esp. 265. See, also, Morwenna Ludlow's remark in M. Ludlow, "Criteria of canonicity' and the Early Church," in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons / The Unity of the Scripture and the Diversity of the Canon*, ed. J. Barton & M. Wolter, BZNW 118 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2003), 69-93, esp. 70: "The Church thus did not react to Marcion by *creating* the first canon of the New Testament; it did, perhaps, react to Marcion by *reflecting* for the first time on the nature of Scriptures it was already using". Karavidopoulos, *Εισαγωγή*, 91-92 presents the hypothesis of the existence of a *corpus paulinum* compiled either in Corinth or Ephesus, while he also thinks that the existence of a collection of four gospels is probable. However, he places the creation of the New Testament as a collection of books parallel to the Old Testament sometime in the end of the 2nd c.

¹⁵ V. Ioannidis, *Εισαγωγή εις τήν Καινήν Διαθήκην* (Athens; 1960), 490.

¹⁶ A.M. Ritter, „Zur Kanonbildung in der Alten Kirche,” in id., *Charisma und Caritas. Aufsätze zur Geschichte der alten Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1993), 265-280, esp. 267. S. Agouridis, *Εισαγωγή εις την Καινήν Διαθήκην* (Athens: Gregoris Publ. 1991), 67-68.

¹⁷ M. Fiedrowicz, *Theologie der Kirchenväter: Grundlagen frühchristlicher Glaubensreflexion* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2007), 60. The same is claimed by many Greek Orthodox scholars; see, for example, V. Antoniadis, *Εισαγωγή εις τήν Καινήν Διαθήκην*, vol. 2 of *Ἐγχειρίδιον Εἰσαγωγῆς εις τὰς Ἁγίας Γραφάς* (Athens 1937), 192; P. Mpoumis, *Οἱ κανόνες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας περί τοῦ Κανόνοσ τῆς Ἁγίας Γραφῆς* (Athens, 1986), 19. Of a different opinion is Ioannidis, *Εισαγωγή*, 491.

¹⁸ According to Eusebius of Caesarea, *h.e.* 5.16.3 the first to use the term "New Testament" was the antimontanist Polycrates of Ephesus, around 192. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Elenchus* 3.11,8-9 speaks of the «τετράμορφον εὐαγγέλιον». Note also Kyrtatas's remark, «Ιστορικοί παράγοντες», 266 that Irenaeus's argumentation for four distinct gospels that correlate to the four cardinal directions of the horizon is a clear implication of the ecumenical and unifying significance of the gospels. Irenaeus also knew the Pauline letters, Acts, Revelation, 1 Peter and 1 and 2 John. Clemens of Alexandria acknowledges the four gospels, the fourteen letters of Paul, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John, Jude as authentic (*Stromateis* 3.13.93). The Muratori list that comes from the same period names 23 books (1 and 2 Peter, 3 John, James, and Hebrews are excluded whereas the *Apocalypse of Peter* is added).

decision that the liturgical use of the biblical texts also meant their acknowledgement as canonical texts; hence, non-canonical texts were prohibited to be read in liturgical contexts.¹⁹

(e) In the 3rd c. and the first half of 4th c., which is the fifth phase of the canon process, the debates are focused on the canonicity of the Catholic Epistles as well as that of Hebrews in the West and of Revelation in the East. Origen introduced a new principle along apostolicity, that of the Church consensus (i.e. the unanimous acceptance of a book as canonical by the local communities). He also divided the New Testament writings into two categories: the *ὁμολογούμενα* (those unanimously accepted) and the *ἀμφιβαλλόμενα* (those whose authenticity is doubted) and he named a third category of *ψευδῆ* that should be discarded as unreliable.²⁰ This distinction was further elaborated by Eusebius in ca. 325.²¹ Interestingly, similar types of categorization, although not absolutely identical can be found in various patristic texts even in later times.²² According to Tobias Nicklas's observation, it seems that the authority of a text was determined by the context of its use and was not always identical with its canonical status.²³

(f) The sixth phase is dominated by the synodal discussions of the canon as well as by the issue of canonical lists by important bishops especially in the East, like most prominently by Athanasius of Alexandria, Amphilochius of Iconium, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Gregory of Nazianzus. The accepted books are now called "canonical" and their list

¹⁹ This is the case of the non-canonical *Gospel of Peter*, see Eusebius, *h.e.* 6.12).

²⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *h.e.* 6.25. According to Origen 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, and Jude belonged to the undecided writings.

²¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *h.e.* 3.25. He discerned four categories of books: the unanimously accepted (*ὁμολογούμενα*), the undecided (*ἀντιλεγόμενα*), the false ones (*νόθα*), and the heretical (*αἱρετικά*).

²² See, for example, Athanasius' category of *ἀναγιγνωσκόμενα*, i.e. books, like for example the *Shepherd* of Hermas, that the Fathers appointed to be read in the context of catechesis, *Ep. fest.* 39 (and also *Decr.* 18.3). For further evidence of a third category, that of books useful for the soul, in later texts as well see F. Bovon, "Beyond the Category of the Canonical and the Apocryphal Books, the Presence of a Third Category: the Books Useful for the Soul", *HThR* 105 (2012): 125–137.

²³ Tobias Nicklas, "Christian Apocrypha and the Development of the Christian Canon," *EC* 5 (2014): 220–240, and esp. 226.

“canon”.²⁴ Athanasius’s *Festal Letter* 39, which acknowledged as canonical all 27 books of the New Testament, was also adopted in the West and was later confirmed by the Council of Hippo (393) and of Carthago (397 and 419). The situation, however, remained fluid and ambivalent in the East where various canon lists circulated and were validated by local synods.²⁵ It seems that the eastern Churches were not eager to fix their canon boundaries. This situation is well reflected in the Syriac canon where the *Diatessaron* was included up to 400 and only much later, in the 6th c. was finally replaced by the four individual gospels (in the Western Syrian communities) but at the same time 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation were not accepted as canonical. The Nestorian churches still adopt the canon of the Peshitta where Jude and Revelation are missing.

(g) Whereas the churches in the West seem to have reached a consensus by the end of the 6th century and the issue of the canon closed definitely with the Council of Trent in 1546, the situation did not change dramatically in the East. Interestingly, the Council of Trullo in 692 ratified various existing canon lists which do not agree with each other.²⁶ This is a sign of the fluidity in the eastern Christianity that has already been mentioned and which has deeper theological implications as it will be demonstrated later. The decision of the patriarchal council of Jerusalem in 1672 to ratify the canon list of the 27 books should be regarded within this general context of polyphony and fluidity in the Orthodox Church regarding the Biblical Canon.

²⁴ For example, Athanasius in his *Decr.* 18.3 refers to the *Shepherd* of Hermas as “μη δὲν ἐκ τοῦ κανόνος” and in his *Ep. fest.* 39 he describes those books included in his canon list as “κανονιζόμενα”. Some years earlier the 59th canon of the Synod of Laodicea determined that only the “κανονικὰ τῆς καινῆς καὶ παλαιᾶς διαθήκης” should be read in the Church.

²⁵ For example the 60th canon of the Synod of Laodicea (second half of the 4th c.) accepted all New Testament books as canonical except for the book of Revelation. For the text and a commentary on this canon see Mpoumis, *Oi κανόνες*, 90-104. The canon of Gregory of Nazianzus did not also include Revelation, Mpoumis, *op.cit.*, 160-174. Amphilochius of Iconium listed all 27 books, but expressed his doubts for 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation, Mpoumis, *op.cit.*, 175-196. Finally, Cyril of Jerusalem did not also include Revelation among the canonical books of the New Testament, *Catech.* 4.36.

²⁶ The Council ratified the 85th Apostolic Canon, the 60th Canon of the Council of Laodicea, the 24th and 32nd canons of the Council of Carthago, Athanasius’s list, that of Gregory and finally that of Amphilochius. As it has already been mentioned there is no agreement among them regarding the books of both the Old and New Testament canon.

The norms of canonicity

The process of canonization of the books in the New Testament canon that was briefly sketched previously raises a number of issues that are of particular theological significance and have been dealt with in many different ways. It mainly poses the question of the relation between the Church and its canon as well as that of the reasons that led the Church to the acknowledgment of particular books as canonical. The term “criteria” that is often used in this context in order to describe the principles presumably applied in the process of selection is here avoided. It seems to presuppose that the Church itself possessed some kind of pre-established standards determining what a canonical book should be like, thus, separating the Church from its canon and ignoring the element of mutuality. This could not, though, mean that the local churches accepted the canon passively; the cases of the *Gospel of Peter*, for example, of the Pastoral Epistles or of Revelation, make it clear that the Church did make a decision in some cases about what had to stay in the canon and what should be rejected. The balance between “the Church’s passive reception *and* its active creation of the canon” needs to be kept.²⁷ In this sense the twofold typology proposed by Kendall W. Folkert regarding the canon seems to reflect this form of mutuality.²⁸ The term “criteria”, however, rather alludes to a mechanistic and intellectual procedure and ignores the complexity of the canonization in the ancient Church. Thus, the more fluid terms of “norms of canonicity” and “reasons” are preferred here.²⁹ They conform to the impression gained by the study of the sparse patristic references to the features that a canonical book should display; it seems that the Church Fathers applied all criteria or principles unsystematically and

²⁷ M. Ludlow, “Criteria,” 71.

²⁸ K. W. Folkert, “The ‘Canons’ of Scripture,” in Miriam Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) 170-177 and esp. 173: “Canon I denotes normative texts, oral or written, that are present in a tradition principally by the force of a vector or vectors. Canon II refers to normative texts that are more independently and distinctively present within a tradition, that is, as pieces of literature more or less as such are currently thought of, and which themselves function as vectors.”

²⁹ The term “norms of canonicity” was coined by R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 213.

inconsistently.³⁰ This apparent discrepancy, however, derives from the very nature of the New Testament texts. They are actually the interpretation of Jesus' presence in this world and of his salvific actions by the eyewitnesses and by the members of the early Christian community and not a documentary report of his life.³¹ The Church recognizes, therefore, in these Scriptures the authentic record of its own life and experience as this is moulded through the appropriation of Jesus' teaching, passion and resurrection.³² One should not forget the prominence of the oral tradition, especially in the earlier stages of the canonization process as well as the fact that the name of an apostle could not act *per se* as a criterion of authenticity.³³

Admittedly, the first and foremost –though not exclusive– reason for recognizing a book as canonical was its *antiquity and its authentic authorship*. However, the apostolicity of a book was not merely understood as the direct production of a scripture by an apostle but also as reflecting the tradition related to a particular apostle.³⁴ Similarly, the antiquity of a book should be paired with historical accuracy and the sense of apostolicity mentioned before.³⁵ The rejection of a wide range of books ascribed to prominent apostles (e.g. to Peter, Paul or John) is a clear indication that apostolicity would not suffice in many cases in order to establish the canonicity of a book.³⁶

³⁰ H. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 71.

³¹ M. Konstantinou, «Η χρήση και η ερμηνεία της Παλαιάς Διαθήκης εν Χριστώ και εις την Εκκλησία», in *Τερουργεῖν τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον. Ἡ Ἁγία Γραφή στὴν Ὀρθόδοξη Λατρεία*. (Proceedings of the 5th Greek Liturgical Symposium; Pastoral Library 10; Athens, 2004), 103.

³² P. Vassiliadis, «Αιρέσεις και θεολογικές τάσεις στον αρχέγονο Χριστιανισμό», *Deltion Biblikon Meleton* 5 (1977-1978): 114-116.

³³ See, for example, Origen's discussion of the concept of "gospel" in his *Commentary on John* 1.18 where he endorses the idea that the apostles are defined as such because they wrote the gospels and not that the gospels were regarded as such because they were the works of the apostles.

³⁴ See, for example, Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 3.10.5; 3.14.1. This also leaves room for the pseudonymity, a common phenomenon in the ancient world, and could offer an answer to those conservative Orthodox circles that regard pseudonymity, canonicity and authenticity as mutually incompatible, see the discussion by Karavidopoulos, *Εισαγωγή*, 341 and id., «Το πρόβλημα της ψευδεπιγραφίας», *Deltion Biblikon Meleton* 5 (1977-1978): 178-188.

³⁵ See Tertullian's argument in *Adv. Marc.* 4.5.

³⁶ This is made clear, for example, in the statement of the *Apostolic Constitutions* 6,16: "you are not to attend to the names of the apostles, but to the nature of the things, and their settled opinions." On the

Another type of reason, a kind of “internal apostolicity”,³⁷ was introduced, namely, that of the compliance of a text to the *orthodoxy* or to the *rule of faith (regula fidei)*,³⁸ because this faith was understood as the summation of the original apostolic teaching. Conversely, a teaching can be regarded as apostolic if it conforms to the faith of the church community.³⁹ This norm of canonicity does not, however, seem to have acted as a restrictive power that suppressed plurality. The diversity of the canonical books seems to point to a different direction. Although it was applied in the cases of doubtful books and in order to exclude rather than to include,⁴⁰ the rule of faith seems to have been an all-embracing notion containing the whole Christian doctrine and tradition summarized in Irenaeus’ words as “the confession of the unity of God the Creator with God the Saviour, Jesus Christ.”⁴¹ This confession, however, can express itself in various forms and due to its flexibility it functioned more as a hermeneutical principle than as a list of creeds. In this sense it never suppressed the main feature and presupposition of the canon and its scriptures, namely, their diversity and polyphony.⁴²

A third norm of canonicity also played an important and sometimes decisive role in determining the status of doubtful scriptures (like James, 2 Peter, or the *Gospel* and the *Apocalypse of Peter*) especially from the beginning of the 3rd c. onwards. It is that of *catholicity* (i.e. of universal acknowledgement of the importance of a book) and of the *use* (in the liturgy or catechesis) of a scripture by the Church.⁴³ It is more a *de facto* reason of canonicity and as such it seems to have been handled with caution and was

other hand, there is a growing tendency in the ancient Church to attribute anonymous books to certain authors.

³⁷ Ritter, „Kanonbildung,” 268.

³⁸ Eusebius of Caesaria, h.e. 6.12.2-6.

³⁹ Ritter, „Kanonbildung,” 268-269.

⁴⁰ Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 70.

⁴¹ Ludlow, “Criteria,” 87; J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans 1950), 76; A. Moustakis, *Χρήσις, έννοια και περιεχόμενο των όρων «Κανών πίστewς» και «Κανών αληθείας» στη γραμματεία των τριών πρώτων αιώνων* (Athens 2002), 36. Most prominently, this is expressed in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.10.1; 2.27.2.

⁴² N. Matsoukas, *Δογματική και συμβολική θεολογία*, Vol. 1 (Thessaloniki: Pournaras 1985), 186.

⁴³ See, for example, the argumentation regarding the liturgical use in the Muratorian fragment 62-63 (for the case of Philemon, Titus, and Timothy); 72 (for the case of the *Apocalypse of Peter*); 77-80 (for the case of Hermas’ *Shepherd*, that it is suggested that it should not be read publicly in the Church).

often moderated by the discussion of what would be the *proper* use of a biblical text,⁴⁴ due to the fact that the catholicity and orthodoxy did not always overlap, especially in the earlier stages of the canon formation.⁴⁵ In these cases the conformity to the faith and to the proclamation of the Church was prioritized.⁴⁶ According to Morwenna Ludlow a certain hierarchy of different forms of use can be discerned in the discussions regarding canonicity in the ancient Church: ancient use, contemporary use, citation by authoritative Christian writers in the context of doctrinal disputes, liturgical use, and catechetical use.⁴⁷ It seems, though, that writers like Tertullian, Irenaeus or Origen treated the argument of usage rather cautiously. However, as the time proceeded and the boundaries of the orthodoxy became clearer the catholic use of a text seems to have gained in importance as a reason for canonicity.⁴⁸

The relation of the Church tradition to the Canon according to the Orthodox theology

It seems that the overarching norm of canonicity has been that of the rule of faith, which, however, includes the whole Christian tradition and acts as a hermeneutical framework of its scripture.⁴⁹ Paradoxically, however, there is an interconnectedness between the Canon and the tradition, since the patristic sources sometimes stated that the Scripture is the record of the rule of faith. This can be explained historically by the fact that the Christian tradition –the rule of faith- was originally oral and was later transformed into authoritative texts. Consequently, the first fundament was the

⁴⁴ Ludlow, “Criteria,” 81.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the distinction made by Rufinus, *Symb.* 38 regarding the *Shepherd* of Hermas and *Didache*. Rufinus claims that particular books should be regarded as “ecclesiastical”, they can, namely, be read in the churches but should not be consulted for doctrinal issues, like those that fall under the category of the “canonical” ones.

⁴⁶ Origen apud Eusebius, *h.e.* 6.25.12. Fiedrowicz, *Theologie der Kirchenväter*, 63.

⁴⁷ Ludlow, “Criteria,” 80.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* 2.25. In this case, though, it is possible to trace different nuances in the content of the concept of catholicity; Augustine, for example, lays emphasis on the contemporary use by the churches, whereas Eusebius is more interested in the ancient catholic use. Similarly, earlier writers, like for example Irenaeus or Tertullian seem to identify catholicity and apostolicity, e.g. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.10.1; Tertullian, *Praescr.* 15.

⁴⁹ S. Agouridis, «Ο ‘Κανών της πίστεως’ ως ερμηνευτική αρχή χθες και σήμερα», *Deltion Biblikon Meleton* 18 (1999): 78-86.

experience of the Church and the books of the Scripture were composed in order to comment and interpret events and ways of life in the Christian community. In the Orthodox perspective the Scriptures and the rule of faith cannot be regarded as two different authorities, where the former dictates and regulates the latter. Both are mutually related and are forms of the Church tradition.⁵⁰ Thus, none of them can be regarded as more important or superior to the other, but they equally express the Christian tradition in its variety of forms (like preaching, liturgy, catechesis, pastoral care, organization etc).⁵¹ In Gamble's words "by a fruitful synergy, scripture helped to mold the tradition of faith, and the tradition of faith helped to shape the canon of scripture."⁵²

As a result the canon cannot function as an external point of reference that defines and regulates the Church. Their relationship is a complex combination of receiving and creating. It seems, as Morwenna Ludlow rightly observes, that both active and passive factors influenced the formation of the canon in a way that is sometimes difficult to discern.⁵³ The canon reflects the theological interpretation of the Christ event by the Church and at the same time provides the hermeneutical context, within which the gospel tradition should be understood.⁵⁴ On the other hand, it is the Church that establishes the canon and not the other way round. It is also clear that the canon is closely related to the identity of the Church and provides the basis upon which the teaching, ethics, and liturgical life of the Church are constructed.⁵⁵ This latter remark can also explain the warning, articulated in some patristic texts, not to add or to take away anything from the canon.⁵⁶ It should be regarded as a clear wish of the Church to

⁵⁰ Matsoukas, *Δογματική*, 183-186. Chr. Voulgaris, *Εισαγωγή εις τήν Καινή Διαθήκη* (vol. 2; Athens 2003), 1196.

⁵¹ G. Florovsky, «Η Λειτουργία της Παραδόσεως εις την Αρχαίαν Εκκλησίαν» in id., *Αγία Γραφή, Εκκλησία, Παράδοσις* (trans. D. Tsamis; Thessaloniki: Pournaras 1991), 100-127.

⁵² Gamble, *New Testament Canon*, 69.

⁵³ Ludlow, "Criteria," 93.

⁵⁴ Voulgaris, *Εισαγωγή*, 1189-1190.

⁵⁵ J. Panagopoulos, *Εισαγωγή στην Καινή Διαθήκη* (Athens, 1994), 31-32.

⁵⁶ Didache 4,13; Ps-Barnabas, 19,11; Irenaeus of Lyon, *haer.* 4,33,8; Eusebius of Caesarea, *h.e.* 5,16,3; Athanasius of Alexandria, *ep. Fest.* 39; Basilus of Caesarea, *fid.* 1

avoid opening again the canon issue or revising the theological presuppositions that led to its establishment, stressing thus the continuity in Church life.⁵⁷

However, this latter aspect of the relation between the canon and the Church has been overstressed by the most conservative wing of the Greek Orthodox biblical scholarship. According to the representatives of this tendency the canon is an ultimate and somehow transcendent pre-existent authority, since the Church itself does not decide for the books included in it. On the contrary, “the Church only accepts what is transmitted to it. The only criterion is the historical data and not the critical investigation. The canonical books were in the canon from the very beginning; they were not approved in advance in order to become part of the canon”.⁵⁸

Hence, this perception of the canon is closely related to the concept of the literal inspiration and the infallibility of the canonical books in all respects. According to it the Scriptures contain the exact and unchangeable word of God because the Holy Spirit composed them using their human writers as media.⁵⁹ Although such ideas do not express the current Greek Orthodox biblical scholarship, since they ignore both the patristic tradition regarding the reasons of canonicity that were discussed earlier as well as the historical data, they bring up in a radical and blunt way, first, the limits and function of the canon within the Church and, second, its relation to the scriptural inspiration. More elegantly stated, they pose the question whether the canon should be regarded as closed or open. Whereas the abovementioned patristic evidence makes it clear that no changes can be made to the established canon of the Church, at the same time it does not regard inspiration as an exclusive feature of the canonical scriptures.⁶⁰ Moreover, and despite the fact that the books of the canon are authentic and authoritative voices playing a normative role in the life of the community members, the limits of the canon cannot coincide with the limits of the inspiration or those of the authentic life of the church. In other words, not all inspired scriptures are also canonical. Moreover, it seems that authority and canonicity do not necessarily overlap but the

⁵⁷ Fiedrowicz, *Theologie der Kirchenväter*, 61.

⁵⁸ S. Sakkos, *Εισαγωγή εις την Καινήν Διαθήκην* (2nd edition; Thessaloniki 1984), 33.

⁵⁹ Sakkos, *Εισαγωγή*, 15.

⁶⁰ Fiedrowicz, *Theologie der Kirchenväter*, 62.

former can also exist without the latter. The canon, therefore, should not be understood as the finite formulation of the content of the gospel message but as an *indicative* and *concrete* setting of the boundaries of the Church teaching and experience against every kind of doubt and falsification⁶¹ and as the wide and flexible interpretative framework that allows the members of the community to express varied opinions and thrive in diversity and polyphony, bearing the multiple fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Two examples

Despite, therefore, the fact that the canon remains closed from a historical point of view, it is actually open from the theological perspective and its limits cannot be permanently defined. This openness can also explain the ambiguity and fluidity that it demonstrates in the Orthodox Church, which was made evident earlier in this presentation. The case of the Book of Revelation is a good example for this. In the greatest part of the formation process, the last book of the New Testament remained off the canon in the limbo of the spurious and doubtful New Testament writings because of serious doubts regarding its apostolicity, and it managed to obtain a place in the canon only at the very last stage of this process.⁶² Moreover, the Council of Trullo (Quinisext) ratified two different kinds of canons regarding the status of Revelation; one that accepted the Book of Revelation and some others that did not include it or expressed doubts regarding its canonicity.⁶³ It seems, therefore, that its acceptance as a canonical book was “a de facto situation rather than by synodal decision”.⁶⁴ Additionally, Revelation was not included in

⁶¹ Matsoukas, *Δογματική*, 182, n.1. Voulgaris, *Εισαγωγή*, 1193. See, for example, David Brakke’s remark that Athanasius did not want to close the canon in his 39th festal letter but rather to promote a canon different from that preferred by academic Christian teachers in Alexandria of the 4th c., D. Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter,” *HThR* 87 (1994): 395-419, and esp. 408-409. In this sense, however, his fixed list was closely related to a proper interpretation of the Scriptures and it reflects the ecclesiastical struggles in Egypt of this period, op.cit. 416-417.

⁶² For a discussion of the problem see Karavidopoulos, *Εισαγωγή*, 96-97. 100.

⁶³ Cf. n. 22.

⁶⁴ Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, “Banned from the Lectionary: Excluding the Apocalypse of John from the Orthodox New Testament Canon,” in *The Canon of the Bible and the Apocrypha in the Churches of the East*, ed. Vahan S. Hovhannessian, Bible in the Christian Orthodox Tradition 2 (New York et al.: Peter Lang, 2012), 51-62, esp. 60.

the lectionary of the Orthodox Church, which was established approximately in the 5th c. The norm of *use* cannot, therefore, be applied in its case. However, the book was accepted by the consensus of the members of the community, which comprise the living body of the Church.⁶⁵

On the other side of the spectrum, various texts that remained outside the canon continued to play an important role in the liturgical cycle of the Church and also in the theological discourse. Such is the case of the so-called *Protoevangelium of James* that inspired the Mariological iconographic and liturgical cycle and became a point of reference for many Church fathers in the later Byzantine period.⁶⁶ It is also an example of this fluidity since it was never acknowledged as a canonical or an inspired text while at the same time it was abundantly used by the Church communities. It was never regarded as ancient and apostolic and although it was not publicly used in the liturgy it subtly remained present in it. Its ambivalence exemplifies the fact that the relation of the scriptures to the life and the tradition of the Church are much more complicated than it is usually accepted.

These two examples demonstrate among others the complexity of the issue of canonicity and of text authority in the ancient text, a complexity that is often lost in modern schematic reconstructions of the process of canonization. It seems that in some cases texts, like that of the Revelation, acquired the status of a canonical book through an extraordinary procedure and despite their being treated with suspicion by authoritative Church figures or by parts of the Christian tradition. In some other cases authoritative but non-canonical texts determined the inclusion or exclusion of texts in the canon, as it is the case of the *Doctrine of Addai*.⁶⁷ Moreover, non-canonical texts retained an authoritative role in Church life not only by being used for catechetical purposes but also by being extensively cited in homilies and by contributing to the formation of the

⁶⁵ As Scarvelis-Constantinou, "Banned from the Lectionary," 61: "...if a book is never read in Church, can it truly be considered canonical? In fact, a book is canonical if it *may* be read in Church; nothing requires that it *must* be read in Church."

⁶⁶ J. Karavidopoulos, *Απόκρυφα Ευαγγέλια*, vol.1 of *Απόκρυφα χριστιανικά κείμενα*, Biblical Library 13 (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2001), 52-54.

⁶⁷ Nicklas, "Christian Apocrypha," 234-235.

liturgical and hagiographical tradition. It cannot, therefore, be attained that the canonization procedure was a one-way development but there seems to have been different simultaneous branches of this development. Despite our modern conception of a fixed and unanimously accepted canon the data collected from ancient sources points to the direction of fluidity and diversity.⁶⁸

Conclusions

In conclusion, three main points should be stressed:

- (a) The formation of the canon is a complex process dictated not only by external but also by internal factors and retains an ambiguity and fluidity in the Eastern Churches
- (b) The discussion of the norms of canonicity highlighted the mutual dependence of the rule of faith –i.e. the Christian tradition as a whole- and the canon
- (c) This particular form of relation gave space to diversity but also guaranteed the unity of the canon. At the same time, it kept its limits fluid allowing some kind of openness. This openness has implications that go far beyond those that refer to the New Testament canon and its limits and also reach various other aspects of the current Orthodox biblical scholarship (like for example exegetical methods, the place of the Apocrypha, inspiration, or the Orthodox-Jewish dialogue).

⁶⁸ For example, the canon list proposed by Athanasius in his 39th festal letter was the one eventually prevailed. It is not, however, known how big the impact of his letter might have been in Egypt or other parts of the Christian world. Two codices coming from Egypt and dated in the same century, codex Vaticanus and Alexandrinus, contain collections of books slightly different from the list introduced by Athanasius.