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# Before the Canon

## *How Early Christians Established Doctrinal Authority before the New Testament Became a Defined Collection*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article asks how Christian communities established doctrinal authority before the New Testament existed as a universally delimited twenty-seven-book collection. It argues that canonical closure was not the precondition for authoritative Christian teaching. From the late first century to the middle of the third, communities appealed to inherited Jewish Scripture, memories attached to apostles, public reading in worship, baptismal and confessional summaries, recognised teachers, episcopal and presbyteral succession, and disciplinary control of the Eucharist and communal boundaries. To analyse these interacting practices, the article distinguishes normative authority—the grounds on which a teaching was presented as binding—from operational authority—the social and institutional means by which such claims were enacted. Close readings of 1 Clement, Ignatius of Antioch, the Didache, Papias, Justin Martyr, the Marcionite controversy, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and the Muratorian Fragment reveal neither a fully uniform ecclesial system nor an unregulated marketplace of ideas. Instead, early Christians inhabited an authority ecology in which texts, memories, confessions, rituals, and offices mutually authorised and constrained one another. The later canon did not create this ecology from nothing. It consolidated, stabilised, and rendered more portable distinctions already being negotiated in preaching, worship, controversy, and communal discipline.

Keywords: early Christianity; New Testament canon; apostolic memory; rule of faith; episcopacy; public reading; Irenaeus; Tertullian; ecclesial authority

## 1. Introduction: Authority before Canonical Closure

The later existence of a recognised New Testament can distort the questions posed to second- and third-century evidence. Once a twenty-seven-book collection appears natural and inevitable, earlier Christians are easily described either as possessing the same canon in an incomplete form or as lacking a stable doctrinal norm altogether. Both descriptions flatten the evidence. A writing could be treated as apostolic, read publicly, copied with other valued texts, used to decide doctrine, or included in a local collection without every church agreeing on a final list. Conversely, the absence of an ecumenically fixed boundary did not mean that communities approached all texts or teachings as equally credible.[1]

[1] On the need to distinguish the authority or use of writings from the later delimitation of a closed list, see Michael J. Kruger, “The Definition of the Term ‘Canon’: Exclusive or Multi-Dimensional?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 63, no. 1 (2012): 1–20; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1–15; and Harry Y. Gamble,

The relevant historical question is therefore not simply, ‘When was the canon closed?’ It is also, ‘How did Christians decide what counted as faithful teaching before closure?’ That question directs attention away from lists alone and towards the practices through which texts acquired force. Public reading, catechesis, Eucharistic assembly, correspondence, chains of named teachers, and the exclusion of rival interpretations all made authority visible. These practices did not merely transmit pre-existing conclusions; they were among the means by which communities learned to recognise, rank, and interpret writings.[2]

This article concentrates on approximately 100–250 CE, a period in which Christian literary production expanded rapidly, Gospel and Pauline collections circulated, and controversies made the criteria of continuity increasingly explicit. By the late second century, substantial agreement existed around a fourfold Gospel and a major Pauline corpus in many churches, while other writings remained disputed, locally received, or excluded. Formal lists are indispensable, but they are late and episodic witnesses to a much longer process.[3]

The argument proceeds through selected case studies rather than attempting a census of every Christian group. Each source is read as a situated intervention: 1 Clement addresses conflict at Corinth; Ignatius advocates unity in communities he encounters from the road to martyrdom; the Didache regulates teachers and local officers; Papias defends remembered provenance; Justin describes worship apologetically; Irenaeus and Tertullian write against rival Christian interpreters; Origen distinguishes inherited proclamation from open inquiry. Polemical and prescriptive texts disclose strategies of authority, not neutral photographs of an entire social world.[4]

The thesis is that early Christian authority was neither purely textual nor simply institutional. Its most durable forms were relational. A text was authoritative as Scripture, apostolic memoir, or ecclesial letter; but its use depended on readers, liturgical settings, rules of interpretation, and communities capable of enforcing consequences. Offices and successions mattered; yet their legitimacy was repeatedly narrated through Scripture, apostolic commission, and received confession. Canon formation belongs inside this reciprocal history. It is better understood as the progressive stabilisation of an existing authority ecology than as the moment authority first appeared.

This approach also clarifies why the familiar contrast between an early ‘open canon’ and a later ‘closed canon’ can mislead. Openness at the edges did not imply indifference at the centre. Communities could treat the four Gospels or Pauline letters as uniquely important while disagreeing about Hebrews, Revelation, the Shepherd, or particular catholic epistles. Recognition was cumulative and multidimensional: a book could be old, apostolic, widely used, doctrinally coherent, and publicly

*The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 11–22.

[2] Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 203–31; Chris Keith, *The Gospel as Manuscript: An Early History of the Jesus Tradition as Material Artifact* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 173–214.

[3] Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xv–xxii, 1–23.

[4] For methodological cautions about moving from polemical and prescriptive sources to social reconstruction, see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–24; Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1–20.

read in varying combinations. The later closed list represents a convergence of these judgments, not their sudden invention.[56]

## 2. Method: Normative Claims and Operational Power

A distinction between normative and operational authority helps clarify the evidence. Normative authority concerns the reasons offered for accepting a teaching: conformity to Israel's Scriptures, origin in the apostles, agreement with the rule of faith, or continuity with public proclamation. Operational authority concerns the capacity to make those reasons effective: who may preside at the Eucharist, admit or exclude teachers, restore ministers, interpret disputed texts, or define the terms of controversy. The distinction is analytical rather than absolute. In practice, normative claims and operational power constantly reinforce one another.[7]

This framework resists two opposite reductions. One reduction treats institutional development as the corruption of an originally free textual religion. The other treats church office as the sufficient explanation of orthodoxy. The sources support neither. Leaders appealed to inherited texts and apostolic memory to justify office, while communities depended on recognised leaders and practices to preserve, interpret, and transmit texts. Early Christians did not choose between 'Scripture' and 'tradition' in the later confessional sense; they contested how scriptural, apostolic, liturgical, and institutional claims belonged together.[8]

Five questions guide each case study. What is claimed as the norm? Through which medium is it transmitted? Who is authorised to interpret it? Which communal practices enact the claim? What rival account is being resisted? These questions also guard against equating circulation with recognition. Knowledge of a work, public reading of it, attribution to an apostle, doctrinal use, inclusion in a collection, and appearance in a canonical list are related but non-identical statuses.[9]

The resulting picture is deliberately asymmetrical. Different cities and genres preserve different configurations of authority. Ignatius's monepiscopal rhetoric should not be projected automatically onto Rome; the Didache's travelling prophets should not be treated as survivals outside a supposedly normal episcopal order; Irenaeus's account of his opponents should not be mistaken for their self-description. The comparison seeks patterned development without converting that pattern into an inevitable or uniform march towards later catholic structures.[10]

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[5] Kruger, "The Definition of the Term 'Canon,'" 1–20; Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 1–15; and Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 11–22.

[6] On the need to distinguish citation, liturgical reading, apostolic attribution, collection, and formal listing, see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 215–31; Keith, *Gospel as Manuscript*, 173–214; Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, xv–xxii.

[7] The language of an 'authority ecology' is used here analytically to name an interdependent configuration of texts, memories, confessions, persons, offices, rituals, and disciplinary practices. It does not imply that every community possessed the same configuration or that these elements carried equal weight in every controversy.

[8] For the concept of mutually reinforcing textual and communal authority, compare Kujanpää, "Scriptural Authority," 125–43; Reed, "ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ," 11–46; and Keith, *Gospel as Manuscript*, 173–214.

[9] On the need to distinguish citation, liturgical reading, apostolic attribution, collection, and formal listing, see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 215–31; Keith, *Gospel as Manuscript*, 173–214; Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, xv–xxii.

[10] For a comparable emphasis on diversity without reducing early Christianity to an unstructured plurality, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 105–41; Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 1–24.

Authority claims are also performative. When a writer calls a teaching apostolic, a Eucharist valid, a succession public, or a book suitable for church reading, the statement does more than describe a status; it attempts to establish and reproduce that status. The historian must therefore distinguish the success of a claim from the claim itself without treating rhetoric as unreal. Prescriptive language is evidence of what an author wanted a community to recognise, the resources available for persuasion, and the resistance that made persuasion necessary.

## 3. 1 Clement: Scripture, Apostolic Commission, and Corporate Admonition

1 Clement intervenes in a conflict in which members of the Corinthian church have removed established presbyters. The letter does not begin with a theory of canon or a claim of Roman jurisdiction. It begins with the moral and scriptural grammar of jealousy, humility, order, and repentance. Israel's Scriptures are not decorative prooftexts: they supply the narrative world in which the Corinthian crisis is redescribed. Exempla from Cain, Moses, David, and prophetic literature transform a local dispute into a test of obedience to God's ordering of the community.[11]

This dense scriptural argument does more than borrow authority from an already authoritative corpus. As Katja Kujanpää argues, the relationship is mutually authorising: the letter presents Scripture as the voice that judges Corinth, while its own ordered exposition positions the Roman senders as competent custodians of that voice. Scriptural interpretation and the legitimation of leadership therefore occur together. The appeal is normative because Scripture supplies the language of divine order; it is operational because the letter seeks the restoration of particular ministers and the reshaping of communal conduct.[12]

Chapters 42–44 articulate the strongest continuity claim. God sends Christ; Christ sends the apostles; the apostles appoint their 'firstfruits' as bishops and deacons; and, anticipating conflict over office, they provide for approved successors. The sequence is theological before it is bureaucratic. Ministerial continuity is grounded in a chain of mission, not merely in longevity. Yet the passage should not be made to prove a later, universally standardised succession system. It is an argument designed to delegitimate the removal of ministers whose appointment and conduct the letter presents as blameless.[13]

Operational authority appears in the remedies the letter proposes. Those who caused division should withdraw for the good of the many; the community should submit to the presbyters; emissaries are sent to carry and explain the letter; and a report of restored peace is requested. The letter expects to be read and obeyed as a Spirit-enabled communication, but it still argues extensively, invokes shared texts, and appeals to the Corinthians' own honour. Rome's intervention combines moral persuasion, scriptural exposition, delegated messengers, and pressure towards a concrete settlement.[14][15]

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[11] Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1 Clem. 1.1–3.4; 42.1–44.6; 47.1–6.

[12] Katja Kujanpää, "Scriptural Authority and Scriptural Argumentation in 1 Clement," *New Testament Studies* 66, no. 1 (2020): 125–43.

[13] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 1 Clem. 42.1–44.6. The sequence moves from God to Christ, from Christ to the apostles, and from the apostles to appointed ministers, with provision for succession after their death.

[14] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 1 Clem. 44.3–6; 47.1–6; 54.1–2; 57.1–2; 59.1–63.4.

[15] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 1 Clem. 59.1–63.4. The letter asks the Corinthians to obey what has been written through the Spirit and requests that the messengers return quickly with news of peace and concord.

The corporate form of the sender matters. The letter speaks from ‘the church of God that sojourns in Rome’ to the church at Corinth rather than presenting the decree of a named Roman bishop. Its authority is translocal and forceful, but ecclesially corporate. This cautions against reading the episode as a simple projection of later papal jurisdiction. The Roman church claims responsibility for a sister community’s peace, yet it makes that claim by extensive argument and delegates its presence through messengers rather than by invoking an already settled office of universal command.[16][17]

1 Clement thus displays an early form of accountable continuity. Apostolic origin matters, but continuity is not self-authenticating. It is attached to recognised appointments, tested character, communal peace, and conformity to the scriptural pattern. Normative and operational authority converge, though they are not identical: the letter can proclaim the norm from Rome, but the Corinthian community must enact restoration locally. The very length and urgency of the appeal imply that authority remained contested rather than mechanically enforceable.[18]

## 4. Ignatius: Monepiscopacy, Eucharist, and Embodied Confession

Ignatius of Antioch writes from a position very different from the corporate voice of 1 Clement. His letters are personal, urgent, and shaped by a journey towards martyrdom. Across the Asian churches, he repeatedly aligns bishop, presbytery, and deacons with a divinely patterned unity. This is often treated as straightforward evidence for the triumph of monepiscopacy. The evidence is stronger and more interesting when read as advocacy: Ignatius is not neutrally reporting an uncontested constitution but urging communities to organise their life around a singular episcopal centre.[19][20]

Smyrnaeans 6–8 shows why ecclesial order cannot be separated from theology. Ignatius’s opponents abstain from Eucharist and prayer because they do not confess the Eucharist as the flesh of Jesus Christ, the flesh that suffered and was raised. The dispute is therefore not merely about office. A docetic account of Christ disrupts the sacramental practice through which the community confesses the incarnation. The authorised Eucharist becomes a doctrinal performance: what the church eats, under whose presidency, and with whom it shares the table jointly display what it believes about Christ.[21]

The celebrated instruction in Smyrnaeans 8 follows directly: the community should follow the bishop, the presbytery, and the deacons; no activity concerning the church should occur apart from the bishop; and only the Eucharist celebrated by the bishop or his authorised delegate is to be regarded as valid. This is monepiscopacy in an operational sense. The bishop does not merely symbolise unity; he controls the public sacramental act that constitutes the visible assembly. Authorisation may be

[16] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 1 Clem. 1.1–3.4; 42.1–44.6; 47.1–6.

[17] Andrew Gregory, “Disturbing Trajectories: 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas and the Development of Early Christianity,” in *Rome in the Bible and the Early Church*, ed. Peter Oakes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 142–66; Kujanpää, “Scriptural Authority,” 125–43.

[18] Gregory, “Disturbing Trajectories,” 142–66; Kujanpää, “Scriptural Authority,” 125–43.

[19] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Ign. Smyrn. 1.1–8.2; Ign. Philad. 3.1–4.1; Ign. Magn. 6.1–7.2; Ign. Trall. 2.1–3.2.

[20] William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 13–23, 233–40; Allen Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic: A Study of an Early Christian Transformation of Pagan Culture* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 213–60.

[21] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Ign. Smyrn. 6.2–8.2. The connection between docetic Christology, abstention from the Eucharist, and authorised presidency is especially explicit in this sequence.

delegated, which shows that the principle is not the bishop's physical presence at every table but the integration of local celebrations into one recognised communion.[22]

Ignatius's formula 'wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church' should not be detached from this sequence. Christological confession, Eucharistic embodiment, and episcopal oversight form one argument. Normative authority lies in the embodied Christ and the apostolic confession; operational authority lies in the bishop's capacity to authorise assembly and sacrament. The result is not simply institutional coercion. The office is made credible by its claimed participation in a theological pattern, while the pattern becomes socially effective through Eucharistic discipline.

The limits of the evidence remain important. Ignatius does not name a bishop in the letter to Rome, even though bishops dominate his language elsewhere. His repeated imperatives may indicate resistance, competing assemblies, or uneven development. It is therefore safer to describe his letters as an ambitious programme of unity in particular eastern communities than as proof that identical arrangements prevailed everywhere. His own threatened body and anticipated martyrdom further intensify the letters' authority: the witness who urges unity speaks as one about to seal his confession through death.[23][24]

Ignatius's threefold ministry also deserves precision. The bishop is singular, but he is not presented as an isolated religious entrepreneur. Presbyters form a council repeatedly likened to the apostles, and deacons are entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ. The monepiscopal structure is therefore corporate even while hierarchically ordered. Ignatius seeks one altar and one Eucharist, but that unity is enacted through differentiated offices whose cooperation makes the bishop's presidency intelligible.[25][26]

For the history of authority before canonical closure, Ignatius is decisive because he demonstrates how doctrine could be regulated without a completed list of books. The criterion is not a free-standing office, nor a text alone. It is a coordinated configuration: confession of the real incarnation, Eucharistic participation, authorised presidency, presbyteral counsel, diaconal service, and the persuasive force of a martyr-bishop's correspondence.

## 5. The Didache: Testing Charisma and Establishing Local Office

The Didache preserves a less centralised configuration. Chapters 11–15 assume that apostles, prophets, and teachers travel between communities, yet they also provide practical rules by which local believers judge them. A teacher must teach in accordance with the received instruction. An apostle should not remain beyond a short period or request money. A prophet's life must correspond to the Lord's pattern. Charismatic speech is treated seriously, but charisma does not exempt the speaker from durable moral and economic scrutiny.[27]

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[22] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Ign. Philad. 4.1; Ign. Magn. 6.1–7.2; Ign. Trall. 2.1–3.2; Ign. Smyrn. 8.1–2.

[23] On Ignatius's epistolary and martyrial authority, see Allen Brent, "The Enigma of Ignatius of Antioch," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57, no. 3 (2006): 429–56; William R. Schoedel, "If I Suffer … Epistolary Authority in Ignatius of Antioch," *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 2 (1987): 161–78.

[24] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Ign. Rom. salutation–10.3. The absence of a named Roman bishop within a corpus otherwise insistent on bishops cautions against treating Ignatius as a transparent survey of universal arrangements.

[25] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Ign. Smyrn. 1.1–8.2; Ign. Philad. 3.1–4.1; Ign. Magn. 6.1–7.2; Ign. Trall. 2.1–3.2.

[26] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Ign. Philad. 4.1; Ign. Magn. 6.1–7.2; Ign. Trall. 2.1–3.2; Ign. Smyrn. 8.1–2.

[27] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Did. 11.1–15.2.

These tests make authority observable. The Didache does not ask the community to verify a private revelation directly; it asks whether the visitor's teaching, conduct, use of hospitality, and relation to money fit the transmitted way. The criteria combine norm and practice. Fidelity to instruction is normative, while control of lodging, food, gifts, and length of stay gives the local church operational leverage. A claimant who declares divine inspiration may still be refused the resources that allow a travelling ministry to continue.[28][29]

The treatment of prophets is deliberately complex. A prophet speaking 'in the Spirit' should not be casually tested, yet not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet. The community is told to recognise the prophet by conduct, and the genuine prophet may receive firstfruits. This combination protects charismatic authority from cynical domestication while refusing automatic self-authentication. The community's discernment is not an abstract vote over doctrine; it is a sustained reading of life, speech, and economic practice.[30]

Chapter 15 then instructs the community to appoint bishops and deacons who are worthy, humble, truthful, and free from love of money. These local officers 'perform for you the service of prophets and teachers.' The line is not a simple announcement that charisma has been replaced by institution. It suggests functional overlap and developing translation: services associated with itinerant figures can be rendered through locally appointed, accountable ministers. Authority is becoming more settled without being reduced to one office.[31]

The contrast with Ignatius is instructive. The Didache contains no comparable requirement that one bishop authorise every Eucharist. Its local structure is collegial, while itinerant and resident forms coexist. Yet the text is not anarchic. Received teaching, ethical testing, communal appointment, Eucharistic discipline, and material controls form a robust regulatory system. The evidence therefore confirms that structured authority preceded both universal monepiscopacy and canonical closure, while also showing that its institutional forms varied significantly.

The local community is itself an authority-bearing subject. It appoints officers, allocates firstfruits, decides whether a visitor may remain, and evaluates whether conduct matches proclamation. That corporate agency prevents the history of early authority from being told only through famous bishops and theologians. Before decisions were recorded in catalogues or conciliar canons, ordinary assemblies exercised repeated acts of reception: they listened, hosted, paid, dismissed, appointed, and gathered. Such decisions created the social conditions in which some teachings and texts travelled while others lost support.[32][33]

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[28] Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Missionary Strategy of the Didache," *Transformation* 28, no. 2 (2011): 77–92; Jonathan A. Draper, "The Moral Economy of the Didache," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (2011): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i1.907.

[29] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Did. 11.3–12; 12.1–5; 13.1–7.

[30] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Did. 11.7–12; 13.1–7. The text protects prophetic speech from casual scepticism yet subjects prophetic identity to durable tests of conduct and economic behaviour.

[31] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Did. 15.1–2. On the coexistence of charismatic and local offices, see Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 200.

[32] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Did. 11.3–12; 12.1–5; 13.1–7.

[33] Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, Did. 15.1–2. On the coexistence of charismatic and local offices, see Niederwimmer, *Didache*, 200.

## 6. Papias: Living Voice, Named Memory, and Gospel Provenance

Papias survives principally through Eusebius, who quotes the preface to the five-book *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*. Papias describes asking what Andrew, Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, John, Matthew, and other disciples had said, and what Aristion and John the Elder were saying. His famous preference for the 'living and abiding voice' over information from books is sometimes read as resistance to textual authority. That conclusion is too simple. Papias writes books, evaluates reports, and transmits accounts of written Gospels. His concern is not orality instead of text, but provenance.[34]

Named memory allows Papias to connect claims to persons located near the apostolic generation. The 'living voice' is valuable because it can be traced, questioned, and situated in a chain of transmission. Written accounts also require such placement. Mark is authorised through his relation to Peter: he wrote accurately what he remembered, although not in order. Matthew is associated with the compilation of the sayings in a Hebrew manner, which each interpreted as best he could. Whatever historical conclusions one draws from these notices, their authority logic is clear: the credibility of a Gospel is argued through remembered apostolic attachment and responsible transmission.[35][36]

Papias thus occupies the junction of memory and manuscript. Apostolic memory is not a vague atmosphere surrounding a text; it operates as a claim about origin, custodianship, and fidelity. Written Gospel traditions become more credible when attached to named witnesses, while oral reports are preserved and stabilised through writing. Authority is generated by their interaction rather than by a linear replacement of speech with book.

His preference for living speech also reflects an ancient environment in which books did not automatically carry the transparency later print culture can suggest. A written work could lack context, invite uncertain attribution, or circulate without a trusted interpreter. Personal inquiry promised opportunities to test the chain, compare reports, and ask follow-up questions. Papias's method is not modern historiography, but it is a deliberate epistemology: proximity and accountable transmission are used to rank testimony.[37][38]

The mediation of Eusebius requires caution. Eusebius selects the fragments, distinguishes two Johns, and disparages Papias's intellectual capacity and millenarian interpretation. The surviving Papias is therefore already embedded in a fourth-century argument about authorship, orthodoxy, and the value of earlier testimony. This does not render the fragments useless; it means that Eusebius's framing belongs to the transmission history and must be analysed alongside the quoted material.[39]

For pre-canonical authority, Papias shows how claims about apostolic proximity could evaluate emerging writings before a universally fixed list existed. The question was not only whether a

[34] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3–16, trans. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library 153 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 291–99.

[35] Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 12–38, 202–39; Jaap Mansfeld, "Papias on Tradition," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 49, no. 2 (1995): 140–53.

[36] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3–4, 14–16. Papias differentiates what he learned from followers of the presbyters, what Aristion and John the Elder were saying, and what he reports about Mark and Matthew.

[37] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3–16, 291–99.

[38] Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 12–38, 202–39; Mansfeld, "Papias on Tradition," 140–53.

[39] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.1–2, 11–13. Eusebius preserves Papias while also judging him a man of limited intelligence and criticising his millenarianism; this framing is part of the evidence and not a neutral container.

community possessed a Gospel, but why this Gospel's account deserved trust. Provenance, memory, named transmitters, and perceived accuracy functioned as criteria of recognition.

In modern terms, Papias supplies something like authoritative metadata: names, relationships, modes of transmission, and explanations of literary form. Mark's lack of strict order can be defended because his relation to Peter guarantees faithful recollection; Matthew's linguistic or compositional form is explained by a tradition of interpretation. These notices do not eliminate historical uncertainty, but they show that early readers were already asking questions later central to canonical judgment—who stands behind a text, how it was transmitted, and whether its form corresponds to apostolic testimony.[40]

## 7. Justin Martyr: Public Reading, Exhortation, and Liturgical Recognition

Justin's First Apology offers the clearest mid-second-century description of Christian public reading. On the day called Sunday, those in town and countryside gather; the 'memoirs of the apostles' or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time permits; the presiding person then exhorts the assembly to imitate the good things heard. Prayer, Eucharistic thanksgiving, distribution, and almsgiving follow. The sequence locates textual authority within a complete act of worship rather than presenting reading as an isolated intellectual exercise.[41][42]

Public reading is operational recognition. The selected writing receives communal time, an authorised reader, interpretive exposition, and a place alongside prophetic Scripture. Its words move from manuscript to assembly and from hearing to ethical exhortation. Justin does not provide a catalogue, and his description cannot establish that every congregation read the same memoirs. It does, however, show that apostolic narratives could function liturgically as texts through which communal identity and conduct were formed.[43]

The relation between the memoirs and the prophets is especially important. Justin's apologetic theology reads Jesus through prophetic fulfilment; the two corpora are heard in one interpretive economy. The memoirs do not displace Israel's Scriptures. Their authority is displayed through the claim that they narrate the fulfilment and embodiment of the prophetic word. Normative authority therefore lies in a coordinated scriptural story, while the president's exhortation and the assembly's ritual response give that story operational force.

Justin's evidence should not be pressed into a later canonical model. His Gospel citations often combine or harmonise synoptic material, and scholars debate the precise textual forms available to him. Yet by Irenaeus's generation the fourfold Gospel is explicit, and Justin's practice belongs to the trajectory by which multiple apostolic memoirs were publicly read and collectively recognised.

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[40] Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 12–38, 202–39; Mansfeld, "Papias on Tradition," 140–53.

[41] Justin Martyr, *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard, Ancient Christian Writers 56 (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 1 Apol. 65–67; see also 1 Apol. 66.3 for the designation of the apostolic memoirs as "Gospels."

[42] Justin, 1 Apol. 67.3–7. The sequence is reading, exhortation, common prayer, Eucharistic action, distribution, and collection for those in need.

[43] Keith, *Gospel as Manuscript*, 173–214; Valeriy A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 147–81.

Liturgical use is not identical to formal canonisation, but it is one of the practices by which writings become difficult to dislodge.[44]

The presiding person's exhortation does not make the reading arbitrary. The order of worship places interpretation after a text has been heard by the whole assembly, and the ethical aim is imitation of the 'good things' read. The interpreter is publicly accountable to a shared auditory event. Although Justin does not describe mechanisms of appeal or correction, the sequence implies that teaching authority operates within the memory of the gathered community rather than through private possession of books.[45]

Justin therefore adds a crucial dimension to the authority ecology: repetition before an audience. A writing may claim apostolic origin, but recurrent public reading makes it part of the community's remembered language. The president interprets, yet the text also constrains the exhortation because the assembly has heard it. Authority is neither lodged solely in the manuscript nor exhausted by the office of the interpreter; it emerges in their ordered encounter.

## 8. Marcion and the Contest over Apostolic Inheritance

The Marcionite controversy demonstrates that a bounded collection of Christian writings did not by itself settle doctrinal authority. Marcion was remembered as teaching a God distinct from the Creator and as using a Gospel associated by his opponents with Luke together with a collection of Pauline letters. The reconstruction depends heavily on hostile witnesses, and Justin's earliest surviving references focus on Marcion's theology rather than presenting a detailed account of his textual programme.[46]

Later polemicists describe Marcion as cutting, mutilating, or corrupting writings that already belonged to the church. Such language is not a neutral bibliographical report. It asserts that the contested texts possess an integrity defined by the apostolic proclamation and the Creator's economy of salvation. Irenaeus's charge that Marcion hands down only a 'fragment of the Gospel' depends on Irenaeus's conviction that the one gospel proclaimed by all apostles is expressed in a fourfold written form. Textual completeness and theological continuity are argued together.[47][48]

Marcion's significance is therefore not that he single-handedly invented the idea of a Christian canon. His collection exposes the insufficiency of counting books without asking how they are read. A Gospel and Pauline corpus can be sharply bounded yet interpreted through a rule that separates Christ from Israel's God. Conversely, Marcion's opponents do not answer only by adding books. They defend a narrative coherence linking creation, prophecy, incarnation, apostolic preaching, and church proclamation.

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[44] Charles E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 109–44; Graham N. Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 43, no. 3 (1997): 317–46.

[45] Justin, 1 Apol. 67.3–7.

[46] Justin, 1 Apol. 26.5, 58.1; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, rev. Thomas P. Halton, ed. Michael Slusser, Selections from the Fathers of the Church 3 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 35.6. Justin identifies Marcion chiefly through his teaching about another God rather than by offering a detailed catalogue of Marcion's books.

[47] Judith M. Lieu, "Marcion and the Corruption of Paul's Gospel," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/Journal of Ancient Christianity* 21, no. 1 (2017): 121–43, https://doi.org/10.1515/zac-2017-0008; Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 183–87, 233–74.

[48] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, Book 1, trans. Dominic J. Unger, rev. John J. Dillon, Ancient Christian Writers 55 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 1.10.1–3; 1.27.2–4.

The dispute also reveals the limits of later retrospective labels. ‘Marcion’s canon’ and ‘the catholic canon’ can suggest two finished lists facing one another. The second-century conflict was more dynamic. Questions of textual form, titles, apostolic authorship, the relation of Paul to the Jerusalem apostles, and the unity of the two Testaments were negotiated simultaneously. Judith Lieu’s work rightly warns that both ancient polemics and modern reconstructions organise fragmentary evidence into narratives serving later questions.[49]

Paul’s authority is a particular fault line. A collection of Pauline letters could support Marcion’s contrast between gospel and law, while Irenaeus and Tertullian worked to place Paul inside the concord of the apostles and the Creator’s economy. The controversy was therefore not over whether Paul was apostolic but over which narrative controlled the meaning of his apostleship. Authority attached to a named apostle still required an account of his relation to other apostles, to Israel’s Scriptures, and to the remembered teaching of Jesus.[50][51]

Marcion thus clarifies the difference between possession and right interpretation. His opponents could not refute him simply by citing texts he also claimed. They had to establish a prior account of apostolic inheritance capable of determining which textual form and which reading belonged to the gospel. This problem sets the stage for Irenaeus and Tertullian.

The controversy also demonstrates that textual restriction can be an instrument of theological innovation as well as conservation. A small, internally coherent corpus may sharpen a theological system by excluding countervailing witnesses. A broader collection may preserve tensions that demand a more complex rule of reading. The catholic response to Marcion was therefore not simply maximalist—more books against fewer—but integrative: the Creator and Redeemer, prophets and apostles, Jesus tradition and Pauline mission had to be held within one historical economy.[52]

## 9. Irenaeus: Rule of Truth, Public Tradition, and the Fourfold Gospel

Irenaeus offers the most integrated late-second-century account of authority. In *Against the Heresies* 1.10, the church dispersed throughout the world is said to have received one faith concerning the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, incarnation, passion, resurrection, and judgment. Languages differ, but the content remains one. This ‘rule of truth’ is not yet a conciliar creed recited in a single fixed wording. It is a narrative and doctrinal grammar by which diverse scriptural passages are assembled into a coherent confession.[53][54]

The rule answers a hermeneutical problem. Irenaeus’s opponents can quote Christian writings, but he accuses them of rearranging the elements into a false image. The issue is not access to textual data; it is the pattern governing their relation. The rule of truth functions as a syntax of Scripture, identifying the Creator with the Father of Jesus Christ and binding creation, prophecy, incarnation,

[49] Lieu, “Marcion and the Corruption of Paul’s Gospel,” 121–43; Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 183–87, 233–74.

[50] Lieu, “Marcion and the Corruption of Paul’s Gospel,” 121–43; Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 183–87, 233–74.

[51] Annette Yoshiko Reed, “ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ: Orality, Textuality, and the Christian Truth in Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 56, no. 1 (2002): 11–46.

[52] Lieu, “Marcion and the Corruption of Paul’s Gospel,” 121–43; Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 183–87, 233–74.

[53] Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.10.1–3; 1.27.2–4.

[54] Tomas Bokedal, “The Rule of Faith: Tracing Its Origins,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (2013): 233–55.

and redemption into one economy. Normative authority lies in this apostolic coherence rather than in isolated prooftexts.

Book 3 makes the public character of that coherence central. The apostles first preached the gospel and later handed it down in Scriptures. When opponents appeal to secret traditions or claim that the truth cannot be found in writings without hidden interpretation, Irenaeus points to the tradition publicly manifested in churches and to the succession of their overseers. Succession is not offered as naked institutional power. It is evidentiary: named communities and teachers provide a visible chain against claims of esoteric transmission.[55][56]

The appeal to Rome in 3.3 has often dominated interpretation, but Irenaeus's broader argument involves many apostolic churches, their public teaching, and their agreement. He even imagines communities among 'barbarians' who possess the apostolic faith without written documents, having received it in their hearts. This is not a dismissal of Scripture. It shows that the rule is a publicly transmissible confession that can govern scriptural understanding and communal identity even where books are scarce.[57]

Irenaeus's defence of four Gospels in 3.11.8 displays a further stage of boundary formation. His symbolic arguments from the four winds, zones, living creatures, and covenantal forms do not independently prove why there must be four. Their historical importance lies elsewhere: the fourfold Gospel already functions as a received object whose number requires theological defence against reduction or multiplication. The boundary is explicit, but it remains embedded in the wider unity of apostolic preaching, rule of truth, and ecclesial witness.[58]

Normative and operational authority are therefore inseparable in Irenaeus. Scripture and rule provide the doctrinal measure; succession, public churches, and common confession identify the communities authorised to teach it; polemic and discipline exclude rival constructions. Yet the configuration remains reciprocal. Bishops do not create the apostolic message at will, because their legitimacy consists in preserving it. Texts do not interpret themselves, because their unity is contested. The church is presented as custodian, witness, and embodied reader.[59]

This reciprocity explains why Irenaeus can be simultaneously scriptural and ecclesiological without treating one category as a substitute for the other. The rule of truth is abstracted from the apostolic proclamation and displayed through Scripture; the churches testify that the same rule is public and continuous; the succession of teachers gives that testimony a historical form. Each element is vulnerable without the others. A succession that abandons the rule is not apostolic, a private rule

[55] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, Book 3, trans. and annot. Dominic J. Unger, with an introduction and further revisions by Irenaeus M. C. Steenberg, Ancient Christian Writers 64 (New York: Newman Press, 2012), 3.1.1–2; 3.2.1–2; 3.3.1–4; 3.4.1–2; 3.11.8–9.

[56] Geoffrey Chang, "'The Pillar and Ground of Truth': Irenaeus' Use of Ecclesiology Against the Heresies," *Perichoresis* 21, no. 2 (2023): 4–20, https://doi.org/10.2478/perc-2023-0013.

[57] Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.4.1–2. His reference to peoples who assent to the apostolic tradition without written documents is not an argument against Scripture; it is an argument that the public pattern of faith is not reducible to private textual ingenuity.

[58] Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.11.8. The famous argument from the four zones and four winds is theological and symbolic; its historical value lies in showing that a fourfold Gospel already functioned for Irenaeus as a boundary to be defended.

[59] Reed, "ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ," 11–46.

detached from public churches is suspect, and a reading that fragments the scriptural economy fails the confession by which the church recognises the text.[606162]

## 10. Tertullian: Praescriptio and the Juridical Right to Interpret

Tertullian sharpens the Irenaean strategy by giving it a juridical form. *De praescriptione haereticorum* does not begin by refuting every heretical reading verse by verse. It raises a prior objection—a *praescriptio*—to the admissibility of the dispute. In Roman legal rhetoric, a preliminary plea could prevent a case from proceeding to its merits by challenging standing, procedure, possession, or entitlement. Tertullian adapts this logic to ask not first what a disputed text means, but who has the right to litigate from it.[6364]

The move is explicit in chapters 15–19. Scriptural controversy with skilled opponents, Tertullian argues, unsettles hearers and produces no certain victory because the parties disagree over the texts, their integrity, and their interpretation. He therefore shifts the question: to whom was the rule of faith entrusted, through whom, and in which communities is it publicly preserved? The inquiry into meaning is preceded by an inquiry into title.[65]

Chapters 20–21 narrate the title. Christ sends apostles; apostles found churches; later churches derive from and remain in communion with those apostolic churches; shared faith establishes a common origin. In chapter 32, claimants are challenged to display the succession of their bishops from an apostle or an apostolic associate. Chapter 36 directs readers to apostolic churches where the memory of apostolic teaching remains public. Chapter 37 turns the argument into a claim of possession: heretics are asked who they are, when they arrived, and by what right they approach Scriptures that are not theirs.[66]

This is more than an appeal to an institutional pedigree. The *praescriptio* binds three elements together. First, the rule of faith states the doctrinal content: one Creator, Christ's incarnation, passion, resurrection, the Spirit, resurrection of the flesh, and judgment. Second, apostolic churches provide a public genealogy rather than a secret chain. Third, communion and discipline make the genealogy operational by distinguishing those who belong to the shared confession from those who do not.[67]

Tertullian's strategy should not be caricatured as an admission that Scripture cannot support his theology. He engages Scripture extensively in the same treatise and throughout his anti-Marcionite writings. Geoffrey Dunn has shown that his exegetical principles respond rhetorically to the

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[60] Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.1.1–2; 3.2.1–2; 3.3.1–4; 3.4.1–2; 3.11.8–9.

[61] Bokedal, "The Rule of Faith," 233–55.

[62] Chang, "'The Pillar and Ground of Truth,'" 4–20.

[63] Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* 13, 15–21, 32, 36–37, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. Peter Holmes (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), 249–65.

[64] Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis in *De praescriptione haereticorum*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, no. 2 (2006): 141–55; J. Stirnimann, *Die Praescriptio Tertullians im Lichte des römischen Rechtes und der Theologie*, Paradosis 3 (Fribourg: Paulusverlag, 1949).

[65] Tertullian, *Prescription* 15–21. In chapter 19 he argues that a scriptural contest with heretics produces either no victory or an uncertain one; chapters 20–21 shift the dispute to apostolic mission, churches, and the identity of the faith they share.

[66] Tertullian, *Prescription* 32, 36–37. Chapter 32 demands that claimants produce the roll of bishops leading back to an apostolic founder; chapter 37 asks by what right heretics approach Scriptures that belong to those who possess the apostolic inheritance.

[67] Tertullian, *Prescription* 13.1–6; 21.1–7. The rule of faith provides the doctrinal content, while apostolic churches provide a public genealogy and communion through which that content is claimed and policed.

controversy at hand. The preliminary objection is strategic: because the parties dispute the text's boundaries and interpretive rule, Tertullian refuses to concede that the controversy can be settled as though both sides possessed identical standing.[68]

The concept of *praescriptio* makes operational authority unusually visible. Control over public teaching, communion, and recognised succession determines who may speak as an authorised interpreter. Yet Tertullian also places a limit on institutional power: the churches possess the Scriptures only because they are claimed as heirs of the apostolic rule. The legal metaphor converts apostolic continuity into a question of custody and title, not discretionary ownership.

The legal-rhetorical force of *praescriptio* also rests on temporal priority. Tertullian repeatedly contrasts the earlier apostolic deposit with later innovation: truth precedes falsification, and legitimate heirs can identify the estate before intruders arrive. This chronology is polemical rather than self-proving, but it gives institutional memory a forensic function. Dates, founders, registers of bishops, and communion among churches become exhibits in a case about continuity.[69][70]

For the history of canon, this argument is crucial. A collection becomes authoritative not only by containing apostolic books but by being located within a public community of reading. Conversely, the community justifies its interpretive claim by presenting those writings and its rule of faith as an inheritance rather than an innovation. Tertullian's juridical rhetoric therefore articulates the reciprocal structure of canon, creed, and church more explicitly than any earlier witness.

## 11. Origen: Rule of Faith and Differentiated Inquiry

Origen represents a further differentiation of authority. In the preface to *On First Principles*, he begins with the ecclesiastical proclamation transmitted from the apostles and preserved in the churches. He lists teachings clearly handed down—concerning the one God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, rational creatures, judgment, resurrection, and Scripture—while distinguishing questions on which the apostolic preaching did not define the manner, causes, or detailed explanation.[71]

This distinction creates an authorised space for inquiry. The rule of faith sets boundaries; scholarly reasoning explores what remains unresolved. Origen does not oppose tradition to intellectual freedom. He claims that the apostles intentionally delivered certain truths plainly while leaving their rational connections to those capable of disciplined investigation. Normative authority is therefore layered: some teachings bind the church's confession, while other matters invite hypotheses evaluated by scriptural coherence and theological reason.[72][73]

The operational form of this authority differs from Ignatius's eucharistic centralisation or Tertullian's juridical exclusion. Origen's authority is pedagogical and exegetical. It is exercised

[68] Dunn, "Tertullian's Scriptural Exegesis," 141–55. Tertullian's refusal of a preliminary scriptural contest is strategic rather than a general abandonment of biblical argument, as his other anti-heretical works demonstrate.

[69] Tertullian, *Prescription* 15–21.

[70] Tertullian, *Prescription* 32, 36–37.

[71] Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. John Behr, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pref. 1–10.

[72] Samuel Fernández, "Origen's Theological System in *On First Principles*: A Reconsideration of Its Nature, Rationale, and Outline," *Modern Theology* 38, no. 2 (2022): 220–46, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12760.

[73] Origen, *On First Principles*, pref. 3–10. Origen distinguishes what ecclesiastical proclamation teaches clearly from questions on which the apostles left the grounds or manner for disciplined investigation by later teachers.

through schools, preaching, commentary, textual comparison, and the formation of readers able to distinguish literal, moral, and spiritual senses. Learned expertise does not displace ecclesial proclamation; it serves within and sometimes strains against its boundaries.[74]

Origen's reported judgments about New Testament writings also reveal graded recognition. Eusebius preserves his comments on the four Gospels, Pauline letters, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and the Johannine letters, distinguishing what is acknowledged from what is disputed or uncertain in authorship. These categories are not yet a universally imposed list. They show a scholar comparing ecclesial reception, textual evidence, and inherited report.[75]

The uncertainty surrounding Hebrews is especially revealing. Origen can affirm the thoughts as Pauline while acknowledging uncertainty about the writer who committed them to language. The judgment separates theological substance, apostolic association, literary authorship, and ecclesial use. Such distinctions show that recognition was capable of nuance: a work could carry high authority without every question of composition being resolved. Canonical reception did not require the erasure of critical inquiry.[76]

The scholar's authority is nevertheless conditional. Origen's hypotheses claim plausibility, not the right to overturn what the church proclaims clearly. This creates an important distinction between dogmatic boundary and theological explanation. The same community can confess a doctrine as received while permitting debate about its mechanism, rationale, or implications. Authority therefore becomes differentiated not only by office but by level of claim: confession, interpretation, and speculation do not carry identical weight.[77][78]

Origen therefore complicates any account in which authority moves simply from charisma to office to canon. By the early third century, ecclesial authority includes specialised textual labour. The rule of faith constrains interpretation, but the interpretation of Scripture also requires linguistic, philosophical, and critical competence. The authority ecology has expanded: bishops and presbyters remain important, yet the scholar-teacher becomes a distinct mediator between inherited confession and disputed meaning.

## 12. The Muratorian Fragment: Public Reading and the Work of Lists

The Muratorian Fragment is often treated as the earliest surviving New Testament canon list, traditionally dated to the late second century. Its damaged opening begins with Luke as the third Gospel and John as the fourth, continues through Acts and Pauline letters, and comments on writings accepted, disputed, or rejected. Whatever its precise date, the fragment is valuable because it performs boundary work explicitly rather than leaving recognition to be inferred from citation.[79]

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[74] Albert C. Outler, "Origen and the *Regulae Fidei*," *Church History* 8, no. 3 (1939): 212–21.

[75] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.3–14. The passage preserves Origen's judgments on acknowledged and disputed writings while also transmitting Eusebius's own fourth-century interests.

[76] Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.3–14.

[77] Origen, *On First Principles*, pref. 1–10.

[78] Origen, *On First Principles*, pref. 3–10. Origen distinguishes what ecclesiastical proclamation teaches clearly from questions on which the apostles left the grounds or manner for disciplined investigation by later teachers.

[79] For the text and translation of the Muratorian Fragment, see Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 173–83; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 305–7.

The fragment's categories are functional as well as literary. Certain forged letters are rejected because they promote Marcionite teaching. The Apocalypse of Peter is accepted by some but not allowed by others to be read in church. The Shepherd of Hermas may be read privately, yet not publicly to the people because it was written recently, after the apostolic age. Public ecclesial reading, apostolic antiquity, doctrinal compatibility, and perceived authorship jointly determine status.[80]

Dating remains contested. Geoffrey Hahneman revived the proposal that the fragment belongs to the fourth century, arguing that its features fit later catalogue traditions. Everett Ferguson and Charles Hill, among others, have defended an earlier setting. The dispute materially affects the fragment's use: a late-second-century date would make it an unusually early list; a fourth-century date would make it retrospective evidence for how an earlier history was narrated.[81][82]

The article's argument does not require the dating question to be settled. On either chronology, the fragment demonstrates that list-making translates prior practices into explicit boundaries. It ranks writings according to criteria already visible in earlier witnesses: apostolic connection, doctrinal rule, liturgical use, catholic reception, and temporal proximity. The list does not create these criteria; it gathers and applies them.

The fragment also warns against treating the word 'canon' as a single event. A book may be edifying but excluded from public reading; accepted by some but resisted by others; apostolic in attribution yet disputed in locality. The path to a closed collection consists of these differentiations becoming more widely shared, more explicitly recorded, and more institutionally reproducible.

A list is therefore not merely a mirror of reception; it is a technology of governance. It reduces a complex history of local use to portable categories that can be copied, compared, and applied elsewhere. By naming what may be read publicly, privately, or not at all, the fragment converts accumulated judgments into an administrative memory. The same operation becomes more visible in fourth-century episcopal letters and synodical lists, where boundaries can circulate beyond the communities in which particular books first gained authority.[83][84]

## 13. Synthesis: An Authority Ecology before the Closed Canon

The selected witnesses do not yield one institutional blueprint. They reveal recurring components arranged differently according to place and controversy. 1 Clement combines scriptural exempla, apostolic commission, ministerial continuity, and corporate admonition. Ignatius joins incarnational confession, Eucharistic practice, and episcopal authorisation. The Didache subjects charisma to ethical and economic tests while appointing local officers. Papias attaches Gospel credibility to named memory. Justin locates apostolic memoirs in public worship. Irenaeus and Tertullian integrate rule,

[80] Muratorian Fragment, lines 73–80, in Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 178–81. The Shepherd may be read privately but not publicly to the people in church, because it was composed recently and after the apostolic period.

[81] Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1–15, 214–20.

[82] Everett Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica* 17, no. 2 (1982): 677–83; Charles E. Hill, "The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (1995): 437–52.

[83] Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, xv–xxii, 1–23.

[84] For the text and translation of the Muratorian Fragment, see Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 173–83; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 305–7.

Scripture, succession, and discipline. Origen differentiates inherited proclamation from authorised inquiry. The Muratorian Fragment renders multiple statuses in a list.[85]

Five conclusions follow. First, early Christians possessed authoritative Scripture before they possessed a universally delimited New Testament. Israel's Scriptures remained foundational, while apostolic writings gained authority through provenance, use, and perceived theological coherence. The emergence of Christian Scripture is therefore not adequately described as a movement from no books to a book; it is a reconfiguration of an inherited scriptural world around Christ and apostolic witness.[86]

Second, apostolicity functioned as more than a claim about authorship. It could refer to remembered preaching, a chain of teachers, the founding of churches, the content of a rule of faith, or the origin of a text. These senses could reinforce one another but also compete. Papias authorises Mark through Peter; 1 Clement authorises ministers through apostolic appointment; Irenaeus authorises public tradition through apostolic churches; Tertullian turns that inheritance into standing and title.

Third, publicness repeatedly marks legitimate authority. 1 Clement is carried and read; Justin's memoirs are proclaimed in assembly; Irenaeus contrasts public ecclesial teaching with secret tradition; Tertullian appeals to churches that can display their succession; the Muratorian Fragment distinguishes private edification from public ecclesial reading. Publicness does not guarantee truth, but it operates as an anti-esoteric criterion: authoritative teaching should be inspectable in shared texts, confessions, communities, and practices.

Fourth, ritual and discipline are not secondary applications of doctrine. They are mechanisms of doctrinal formation. Ignatius's Eucharist performs the confession of Christ's real flesh. The Didache's hospitality rules distinguish genuine from exploitative ministry. Justin's reading and exhortation embed texts in weekly memory. Exclusion from communion or refusal of public reading gives theological judgments social force. Operational authority is therefore not merely what happens after a norm is known; it is one way the norm becomes knowable and durable.

Fifth, institutions and texts mutually constrain one another. Offices could enforce interpretations, but their legitimacy was narrated through apostolic commission and fidelity to Scripture. Texts could challenge leaders, but their communal force depended on recognised settings of reading and interpretation. This reciprocity explains why early Christian controversies so often involve books, bishops, rituals, and confessions at once.[87]

The distinction between normative and operational authority also prevents a triumphalist reading. Strong prescriptive language may reveal fragility rather than settled consensus. Ignatius's insistence on one bishop may answer competing assemblies. Tertullian's denial of heretical standing may respond to opponents capable of persuasive scriptural argument. Irenaeus's symbolic defence of four Gospels signals that reduction and multiplication were live possibilities. Authority becomes most visible where it is challenged.

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[85] The language of an 'authority ecology' is used here analytically to name an interdependent configuration of texts, memories, confessions, persons, offices, rituals, and disciplinary practices. It does not imply that every community possessed the same configuration or that these elements carried equal weight in every controversy.

[86] Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 251–76; Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 319–68; Kruger, *Question of Canon*, 27–58.

[87] Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 231–44; Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 109–44; Kruger, "Definition of the Term 'Canon,'" 1–20.

The case studies also reveal a movement from episodic adjudication towards reproducible procedure. Corinth's crisis prompts a letter; itinerant prophets are judged visit by visit; Papias gathers memories through personal inquiry. By Irenaeus and Tertullian, the criteria have become more portable: a rule of truth, public successions, apostolic churches, and recognised corpora can be invoked across controversies. Origen adds graded scholarly judgments, while canon lists compress these procedures into explicit categories. This is development without inevitability: the tools become more systematic because disputes repeatedly expose the cost of leaving criteria implicit.

The authority ecology also depended on material and communicative infrastructure. Letters had to be carried, copied, and read; memories required named intermediaries; collections depended on codices, archives, and networks of exchange. Such media did not determine theology, but they conditioned which claims could travel and endure. A local practice became translocal only when embodied in reproducible forms: a letter from Rome, Ignatian correspondence, Gospel codices, a succession list, a rule that could be memorised, or a catalogue that could be copied. Material transmission therefore belongs inside, not outside, the history of authority. It helps explain why public reading, provenance, and institutional custody repeatedly converge: credibility was inseparable from the means by which a witness could be retrieved, compared, and repeated.[88][89]

Geography likewise qualified every claim to catholicity. The sources move through Rome, Corinth, Antioch, Asia Minor, Syria, Gaul, Carthage, Alexandria, and Caesarea, yet no surviving author surveys this world neutrally. 'Universal' agreement is typically asserted from a network of particular churches, travellers, teachers, and books. The expanding network did not eliminate local difference; it created mechanisms for comparing local claims. Correspondence, hospitality, pilgrimage, episcopal communion, and the circulation of codices made disagreement visible across distance. The canon's eventual portability was thus social before it was merely bibliographical: communities learned to ask whether a text, confession, or teacher could be recognised beyond one locality without severing continuity with apostolic origins.[90][91]

Canon formation can therefore be described as consolidation. Recurring practices of citation, public reading, collection, attribution, doctrinal testing, and institutional custody gradually produced more stable boundaries. Fourth-century lists and codices are decisive evidence for a delimited canon, but they do not mark the birth of Christian doctrinal authority. They codify an earlier history in which communities had already learned to rank texts, identify apostolic continuity, and police interpretive boundaries.[92]

## 14. Conclusion

Before the New Testament became a universally defined collection, Christian communities established doctrinal authority through an interdependent set of textual, confessional, liturgical,

[88] Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 203–31; Keith, *Gospel as Manuscript*, 173–214.

[89] On the need to distinguish citation, liturgical reading, apostolic attribution, collection, and formal listing, see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 215–31; Keith, *Gospel as Manuscript*, 173–214; Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, xv–xxii.

[90] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 105–41; Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 1–24.

[91] Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 231–44; Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 109–44; Kruger, "Definition of the Term 'Canon,'" 1–20.

[92] Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 251–76; Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 1–23. Fourth-century lists and codices remain decisive evidence for delimitation, but their importance should not erase the earlier history of authoritative use and contested recognition.

mnemonic, and institutional practices. They inherited Jewish Scripture, preserved and evaluated apostolic memories, read emerging Christian writings in worship, tested teachers by conduct and confession, appealed to rules of faith, and developed offices capable of maintaining communion and discipline.

No single element was sufficient. Scripture required interpretation; succession required a message worth succeeding to; confession required public embodiment; office required apostolic justification; memory required transmission; lists required prior habits of recognition. The most successful claims to continuity joined several of these elements and made them mutually accountable.

This account avoids two anachronisms. It does not imagine a complete twenty-seven-book canon operating everywhere from the beginning. Nor does it imagine that authority first appeared when institutions imposed a list on otherwise fluid communities. The evidence points instead to structured contest. Rival Christians appealed to apostles and writings, but they organised those appeals through different narratives, collections, rituals, and communities.

The formation of the canon belongs within that contest. Canonical closure stabilised distinctions that had been developed through reading, worship, controversy, and discipline. It made a particular apostolic textual inheritance more explicit and portable across time and geography. The canon was therefore not the point of origin of Christian doctrinal authority. It was one of its most consequential historical achievements.

Formal closure nevertheless changed the character of contest. A delimited collection did not end interpretation or institutional conflict, but it narrowed the documentary field within which catholic argument ordinarily proceeded. It enabled distant churches to appeal to a more reproducible corpus, strengthened the distinction between ecclesial reading and private edification, and furnished later councils and theologians with a more stable textual archive. Closure was therefore neither everything nor nothing: it was a decisive reconfiguration of an authority ecology whose principal components had emerged earlier.[93]

[93] Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 251–76; Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 1–23.

This conclusion has a historiographical consequence. The canon should not be narrated only as the winning list produced by institutional power, nor only as a self-evident collection recognised without conflict. Its formation involved genuine theological judgment, social power, inherited practice, material circulation, and contested memory. Holding these dimensions together does not weaken the significance of the canon. It explains why its emergence could command enduring allegiance: the collection crystallised an already lived claim that the apostolic gospel was textually witnessed, publicly confessed, ecclesially transmitted, and open to disciplined interpretation.[94]

[94] Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 231–44; Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 109–44; Kruger, "Definition of the Term 'Canon,'" 1–20.

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