

Book Review

The Role of the Rule of Faith in the Formation of the New Testament Canon According to Eusebius of Caesarea, by Jonathan J. Armstrong, Lewiston, New York & Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 2014. 298 pages.

Reviewed by Dr. Roland Cap Ehlke

At the time his book was published, Dr. Jonathan J. Armstrong was teaching Bible and theology at Moody Bible Institute—Spokane. (According to *Christianity Today* on-line [November 7, 2017], Moody “decided to shut down its Spokane campus.” See also the article by Julie Roys in this issue of the *Global Journal*.) Armstrong received his PhD in historical theology from Fordham University. *The Role of the Rule of Faith in the Formation of the New Testament Canon According to Eusebius of Caesarea* is based on his doctoral dissertation.

The Role of the Rule of Faith is divided into five chapters. This review will give a synopsis of the contents of each chapter before offering a brief critique of Armstrong’s project.

Synopsis of *The Role of the Rule of Faith*

Chapter 1, “Canon and Creed in the Ante-Nicene Period: The Critical Reappraisal of the Formation of the New Testament Canon,” begins with the note that “[t]he history of the formation the New Testament canon was a mystery even to Eusebius . . . the one individual in antiquity with the resources to investigate” such a weighty project (p. 1).

Armstrong proceeds to examine nineteenth and twentieth century critiques of Eusebius’s historiography—à la Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860), Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), Walter Bauer (1877-1960), Hans von Campenhausen (1903-1989)—critiques that sought to reconstruct ancient church history after finding “no evidence for a canon . . . in the writings if the Apostolic Fathers” (p. 41).

Rather, it was the heretic Marcion (c. 85-c. 160) who came to be considered “the primary inspiration behind the formation of the orthodox canon of the New Testament” (p. 45). This is the “basic argument” (p. 45) Armstrong addresses and to

which he responds. His monograph argues that the *regula fidei* shaped the content of the canon, and he sets out to show the historical development of that principle.

Chapter 2, “The Rule of Faith as a Criterion of Apostolicity: Irenaeus’s Influence in Eusebius’s Account of the Formation of the New Testament Canon,” discusses how Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340), “the father of church history” (a title conferred by F. C. Baur), drew upon Irenaeus, “the first orthodox author to advocate a canon of Christian Scripture” (p. 56).

For Irenaeus, the chief criterion of canonicity was apostolicity. Eusebius saw the age of the apostles as ending with the Apostle John during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98-117). It was also at this time that the grandchildren of Jesus’ brother Jude died. It was not, asserts Eusebius, until the end of the Apostolic Age that heresy arose, with Gnosticism being, in his opinion, “the first noteworthy heretical controversy” (p. 220).

Armstrong discusses three key figures from this period and their relationship to the issue of canonicity: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Justin Martyr. He concludes that “it is probable that Irenaeus received his concept of the *regula fidei* from the Apostolic Fathers” (p. 109).

Chapter 3, “The Rule of Faith as a Criterion of Catholicity: Origen’s Influence in Eusebius’s Account of the Formation of the New Testament Canon,” compares and contrasts Origen’s conclusions with those of Eusebius. While Irenaeus (130-202) lived just after the Apostolic Age, Origen (184-253) came slightly after that.

Origen has often been considered a key figure in the discussion of canonicity, “in recent decades, however, several scholars have raised serious questions concerning Origen’s consciousness of the canon” (p. 125). Nevertheless, Armstrong concludes, “Eusebius acquired from Origen the comprehension that the rule of faith reflected catholicity and therefore could serve as a criterion of canonicity” (p. 126).

Although Origen used different Greek terms than did Eusebius, he (albeit only on one occasion) classified the Scriptures into three categories as Eusebius would later do. Origen spoke of “genuine” (*γνήσιος*), “spurious” (*νόθος*), and a “mixture” (*μικτός*), while Eusebius categorized the books as “recognized” (*ὁμολογούμενος*),

“disputed” (*ἀντιλεγόμενος*), and “spurious” (*νόθος*) (pp. 136-37). Armstrong discusses the areas where Eusebius and Origen agreed as to the various books. As he notes toward the end of his study, Armstrong feels that Origen’s tripartite classification “inspired Eusebius’s” (p. 223). Moving beyond Irenaeus, for whom “the canon encompasses only the fourfold Gospel” (though his writings use almost every New Testament book), Origen “would affirm . . . every book in the New Testament except the Apocalypse” (pp. 185-86), a position close to that of Eusebius.

Chapter 4, “The Genesis of the New Testament Commentary and Formation of the New Testament Canon,” offers insights into the development of New Testament commentaries and their relationship to the canon. Here Armstrong takes up the advent of the New Testament commentary, noting that “the first commentary on a New Testament book may be awarded to a Gnostic heretic: Heracleon” (p. 201) toward the end of the second century, while the earliest orthodox commentary “can confidently be ascribed to the anti-Gnostic polemicist, Hippolytus of Rome [170-235]” (p. 205). It remained for the prodigious scholar Origen to develop his *Commentaries on the New Testament*, with the help of more than seven short-hand writers, as many copyists, and “girls trained in penmanship” (p. 206)

After tracing the history of early commentaries, Armstrong concludes that it runs parallel to the development of the canon, and he ends up identifying Origen “as the founder of the New Testament canon” (p. 218).

Chapter 5, “The Rule of Faith as a Criterion of Catholicity: Historical Summary and Theological Reflection,” wraps up the study. After reviewing the history from Irenaeus to Origen and then to Eusebius, Armstrong takes up the significance of the formation of the New Testament canon. He concludes that “Eusebius portrays the *regula fidei* as a criterion of canonicity, encompassing the subcriteria of both apostolicity [Irenaeus] and catholicity [Origen]” (p. 227) and asserts that “[a]ccording to Eusebius, the rule of faith antedated Marcion and served as the principle criterion of canonicity” (p. 228). In other words, Eusebius’s record of the formation of the canon is “accurate in outline” (p. 232).

It was, as Armstrong mentions, slightly after Eusebius that Athanasius (c. 296-373), at the time of the Arian controversy, “penned the first list of the twenty-seven books now considered to be canonical” (p. 233). Athanasius did so. Armstrong reminds us that the issue again came to the fore during the Reformation, and that now today it remains a “Protestant problem,” since to accept the canon is “to accept the authority of the church” (p. 235).

Armstrong summarizes his position on the canon as “theologically closed but historically open” (p. 240). That is, the *regula fidei* is closed, while the discussion of inclusion of which books are included remains theoretically open: “the centuries that have elapsed [since the Apostolic Age] have reduced the probability of discovering new documents that meet the dual requirements of apostolicity and catholicity to an unimaginably small margin” (p. 241).

Critique of *The Role of the Rule of Faith*

Before getting into the critique itself, a few words about the formatting or presentation of the publication are in order. *The Role of the Rule of Faith in the Formation of the New Testament Canon According to Eusebius of Caesarea* is published by The Edwin Mellen Press, which according to its website is “a non-subsidy academic publisher of books in the humanities and social sciences. Our sole criterion for publication is that a manuscript makes a contribution to scholarship.” *The Role of the Rule of Faith* meets that criterion. Given its extensive text, Greek font *passim*, and numerous footnotes, there are relatively few typos (one unfortunately in the title on the cover). In a number of places, there are two unnecessarily blank pages between pages of type (e.g., between pages 41 and 42, 231 and 232, etc.); this adds up to a total of 32 blank sheets within the text of the book. We trust that future printings will eliminate this uninviting feature of the publication.

Now to the critique itself: As the synopsis above demonstrates, Armstrong leads readers through the history of the formation of the canon from the Apostolic Age until Eusebius and somewhat beyond. I had coincidentally been reading Paul L. Maier’s fine edition of *Eusebius: The Church History*, and Armstrong’s *The Role of*

the Role of Faith helped me become reacquainted in more detail with Irenaeus, Origen, and other figures from that epoch of church history. His study is scholarly, thought-provoking, and well documented. (The book includes a foreword by Everett Ferguson of Abilene Christian University; 460 footnotes, often with much supplemental material; a bibliography of 95 primary sources and 345 secondary sources; an index).

It is especially with the last chapter, however, that one might find Armstrong's discussion lacking. Along with summarizing and concluding material in the final chapter, he presents subjects beyond the scope of his discussion up to this point. In particular, in raising the "Protestant problem," and asserting that it "demands a reappraisal of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*" (p. 238), he introduces an issue that the book has not covered and to which he gives but passing attention.

In a footnote, Armstrong refers to Bruce Metzger's *The Canon of the New Testament* and quotes from Archibald Alexander's *The Canon of the Old and New Testaments Ascertained*: "But the truth is, that every one of these books was of authority, as far as known, from the moment of its publication; and its right to a place in the Canon is not derived from the sanction of any church, or Council, but from the fact, that it was written by inspiration" (p. 237). In the same footnote, Armstrong says Alexander "acknowledges apostolic authorship as the proper criterion for determining canonicity."

Regrettably, Armstrong fails to discuss the relationship between apostolicity and divine inspiration, a relationship established by Jesus with his promise of the sending of the Holy Spirit to his disciples: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26, English Standard Version).

To relegate such a pillar of the Reformation and of Christian faith to a few remarks in a footnote is disconcerting, especially after just raising the issue of the "Protestant problem" and just a few pages before closing his tome with the assertion that "the formation of the canon stands as the most significant landmark in church history, for it represents the establishment of a written and perduring version of the

tradition of the apostles” (p. 242). “Most significant landmark”? What about the very inspiration and the salvific message of that canon?

The fact that Armstrong skirts the issue of the inspiration and self-authentication of Scriptures—not to mention their verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and authority—is disturbing. What of the contents of Holy Writ, in particular the New Testament—such as, prophecy fulfilled in the crucified and risen Savior? After a fine scholarly overview of canonical history (218 pages of text), the final all-too-brief chapter (23 pages of text) is a letdown. Nevertheless, this book is well worth reading for two reasons: (1) its presentation of developments within the church from the Apostolic Age to Eusebius, (2) as segue to further studies in patristics and the subject of the formulation of the canon.