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The Canon Debate

"Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question," by Lee M. McDonald in *The Canon Debate*, Lee M. McDonald and James Sanders, eds. (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2002). See also Everett Kalin, "The Inspired Community: A Glance at Canon History," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 [1971] 541-49, especially these two pages, 436-37.

"through the Holy Spirit" (*gegrammenois dia tou hagiou pneumatos*).⁷* Ignatius likewise expressed awareness of his own inspiration when he commented:

I spoke with a great voice—with God's own voice.... But some suspected me of saying this because I had previous knowledge of the division of some persons: but he in whom I am bound is my witness that I had no knowledge of this from any human being, *but the Spirit was preaching and saying this (to depneuma eKeryssen legon fade)*.⁷⁹

There are in fact many examples of noncanonical authors who either claimed, or were acknowledged by others, to have been filled or inspired by the Spirit in their speaking or writing.⁸⁰ The point here is that the scriptures were not the only ancient writings that were believed to be inspired by God. Generally speaking, in the early church the common word for "inspiration" (*theopneustos*, see 2 Tim 3:16) was used not only in reference to the scriptures (Old Testament or New Testament), but also of individuals who spoke or wrote the truth of God. Everett Kalin, for example, observes that Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-95), when describing Basil's (330-79) commentary on the creation story, claimed that the work

⁷³*Princ.*, Preface 8, ANF. Bruce (*Canon*, 267-68) has noted that Irenaeus was the first Christian writer to allegorize the New Testament writings because he was among the first to treat the New Testament as unreservedly inspired. Thereafter Origen and others felt free to allegorize the scriptures *because* they were considered inspired of God.

⁷⁴*Princ.*, Preface 8, ANF.

⁷⁵*Aufo*. 2.22, ANF.

⁷⁶*Autol*. 2.9, ANF. This passage also clarifies what Theophilus means by inspiration and perhaps how it was understood by his and other communities.

⁷⁷*1 Clem.* 47.3, LCL.

⁷⁸*1 Clem.* 63.2, LCL.

⁷⁹*Ign. Phil.* 7:1b-2, LCL, italics added.

⁸⁰A number of other examples are listed in Albert C. Sundberg, "The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration," *///* 29 (October, 1975): 4:365ff. Everrett K. Kalin gives an even longer list in "The Inspired Community: A Glance at Canon History," (*TA*/42 (1971):541-49).

was inspired and that his words even surpassed those of Moses in terms of beauty, complexity, and form. He said that it was an "exposition given by inspiration of God . . . [admired] no less than the words composed by Moses himself."⁸¹ Kalin also notes that the famous epitaph of Abercius from about the fourth century was called an "inspired inscription" (*theopneuston epigramma*), and that a synodical epistle of the council of Ephesus (ca 433), describing the council's condemnation of Nestorius (d. ca. 451), was termed "their inspired judgment" (or "decision") (*tes auton theopneustou kriseos*).^{*2}

From these and many other examples, we see that the ancient church did not limit inspiration to the scriptures, or even to literature alone. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr argues that "the prophetic gifts remain with us even to the present time. And hence you ought to understand that [the gifts] formerly among your nation [the Jewish nation] have been transferred to us."⁸³ Even in writings which dealt with the Montanist controversy⁸⁴ in the latter third of the second century, Kalin could find no evidence that - the early church confined inspiration to an already past apostolic age, or even to a collection of sacred writings.⁸⁵ The traditional assumption that the early Christians believed that the canonical writings were inspired is highly questionable. The rabbinic notion that "when the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, died, the holy Spirit ceased out of Israel"⁸⁶ was simply not shared by the church.⁸⁷ From his own investigation of the church fathers up to 400 C.E., Kalin failed to turn up one example where an orthodox but "noncanonical writing was ever called uninspired; such a designation was reserved for heretical authors. He concludes: "if the Scriptures were the *only* writings the church fathers considered inspired, one would expect them to say so, at least once in a while."⁸⁸ He adds that in the early church inspiration applied not only to all scripture, but also to the living Christian community, as it bore "living witness of Jesus Christ." Only heresy was considered to be non-inspired, because it

was contrary to this witness.⁸⁹ Campenhausen agrees,

⁸¹ *Apologia hexaemeron*, PG 44.61, but also in the wider context of 44.61-64, cited by Everett R. Kalin in his unpublished Harvard thesis, "Argument from Inspiration in the Canonization of the New Testament," (1967), 170. The translation of this text is from Metzger, *Canon*, 256.

⁸² *Vita Abercii* 76. The writing was apparently penned by Abercius Marcellus himself, who was bishop of Hieropolis in Phrygia of Asia minor in the late second century. He died ca. 200 C.E. Kalin

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" gives several other examples of the ancient use of the term "inspired" (*theopneustos*) to show that it was not exclusively used of scriptures. See Kalin, "The Inspired Community," 169-73.⁸³ *Dial.* 82, ANF. See other illustrations of this in *Dial.* 87-88.

⁸⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.14-19 is especially helpful on the background to this controversy.⁸⁵ Kalin, "The Inspired Community," 543. He concluded from his study of Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, and other ancient fathers that only the work of the false prophets mentioned in the Old Testament, the heathen oracles and philosophy were non-inspired. See also Kalin, "Argument from Inspiration," 163, 168.

⁸⁷ See Joseph Blenkinsopp's contribution in this volume, where he discusses this issue in rabbinic Judaism and cites as examples of the belief that "The Holy Spirit (meaning the spirit of prophecy) departed from Israel after the destruction of Solomon's temple (*b. tt.lliit.* 12a; *b. Yomti 21b*; *b. Sota* 48a) or after the death of the last biblical prophets (*/. Yoma* 9b *b. Sanh.* 11 a) "(p. 54 n. 3 above). See also his "Prophecy and Priesthood in Josephus," *JJS* 101 (1974): 245-55, and J. A. Sanders, "Spinning the Bible," *UK* (June 1998): 22-29, 44-45, for a similar perspective.

⁸⁸ Kalin, "The Inspired Community," 544-45.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 547.