

Book Review of: B. F. Westcott: *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*

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Bibliography

Westcott, Brooke F. *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*. 6th ed. New York. MacMillan and Co. 1889.

Biographical Information on B. F. Westcott

Brooke Foss Westcott was born January 12, 1825 in Birmingham, Warwickshire, England.¹ After grade school, Westcott earned his bachelors degree at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1848. Upon completion of his degree, the promising young scholar received an invitation to stay on as teaching fellow at Cambridge the following year and did so.

In 1852, shortly after marrying, Westcott left Cambridge to become master at Harrow School and Residentiary Canon of Peterborough Cathedral. Here, during his seventeen-year tenure, he earned his reputation as a scholar and lecturer in his own right, apart from Cambridge. Furthermore, his deep concern for practical matters of ministry also became evident. This social concern would mark his work throughout his life.

In 1870, Westcott received an invitation to rejoin the Cambridge faculty as Regius Professor of Divinity. Westcott held this title even after leaving to become Bishop of Durham in 1890. During his second stay at Cambridge, he presided over a group seeking to train young ministers in practical matters of ministry. Their main concern was to prepare them for the Ordination council of the Anglican Church, but they sought to do much more than prepare them for a test. It was his opinion that theology without practice was worthless and practice without theology was only good intentions. Therefore, Westcott's group, the Cambridge Clergy Training School, sought to wed the two into a composite whole, giving ministers both the why and the what for a lifetime of ministry.

The contribution Westcott is most well known for is his collaboration with F. J. A. Hort on a critical edition of the Greek New Testament. However, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (hereafter *Canon*) is his next most significant accomplishment. Originally published in 1855, Westcott was a scant 30 years of age. In this work, the scholarly and research foundation for much of his future work is present.

In 1890, Westcott left Cambridge to become Bishop of Durham. While here, he continued to write and be active within the scholarly community, but invested his life

¹ Arthur Westcott, *Life and Letters of Brooke Foss Westcott: Sometime Bishop of Durham*, vol. 1., (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1903), 1-10. This volume was written by Westcott's second eldest son, Arthur, and represents a wealth of information on the person of B. F. Westcott including excerpts from his diary and reflections on his many works.

deeply in the social concerns of his day. Westcott died on July 27, 1901 in Auckland Castle, Durham.

Background and Thesis of *Canon*

This work, a masterpiece of research and sources, ought to be the culmination of a lifetime of research. On the contrary, this text represents the research forming the foundation of lifetime of scholarship and ministry. Originally published in 1855, this classic text went through six editions, each updating the last with further research.²

The thesis for the volume is simple. Westcott states it plainly in the preface. “My object in the present Essay has been to deal with the New Testament as a whole and that on pure historical grounds” (*Canon*, vii). He deals with the New Testament as a composite whole, addressing each as a part of the apostolic heritage (*Canon*, 1). Although not explicitly stated, it appears that this is a response to attempts to subdivide the canon, forming a sub-canon, exalting some books (usually Paul) and excluding others (usually the Apocalypse and some of the Catholic letters). Westcott sought to unify the canon of the New Testament under the heritage of apostolic authority founded on the persecution of the church deeply entrenched in the history of the church and set to demonstrate such in a thoroughgoing manner.

Summary of Contents

Every field of study has a standard by which others measure themselves. Such is the case with Westcott’s *Canon*. This book was considered the standard in the field for many years.³ Its comprehensive scope, detailed investigation and authoritative manner made it indispensable for any New Testament scholar. Two of the main features of the text are the use of original sources and source languages, including the appendices and the expansive nature of Westcott’s research presented in an authoritative fashion.

Several features set Westcott’s work apart from others. When dealing with the fathers or any ancient source, Westcott cites the original text in the original language.

Another quality worth investigation is the concluding appendices. The appendices contain the text of many of the original sources in the original source language whether that is Greek or Latin. Also found in the appendix is a discussion on the meaning and history of the term “ΚΑΝΩΝ” (*Canon*, 504-511), the use of apocryphal writings in the

² Henry Chadwick, *The Vindication of Christianity in Westcott's Thought* The Bishop Westcott Memorial Lecture,, (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), 11. He attributes most of the research for Westcott’s work to Nathaniel Larder and his work *The Credibility of the Gospel History*. One is tempted to ask how Westcott’s work may have been enhanced by the use of the discoveries of the twentieth century.

³ Caspar R. Gregory, *The Canon and Text of the New Testament*, ed. Charles Briggs and Stewart D.F. Salmond, vol. 8 International Theological Library, 33 vols., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 538.. Here, Gregory refers to Westcott’s volume as the best book ever written on the canon”.

early church (*Canon*, 512-520) and an early discussion on the Muratorian Fragment (*Canon*, 521-538)

The structure of the text is divided into three time sections: Part one deals with the history of the Canon of the New Testament to the time of Hegesippus (A. D. 70 -170). Part Two describes the history of the canon of the New Testament from the time of Hegesippus to the Persecution of Diocletian (A. D.170-303). Finally, part three disseminates the history of the Canon of the New Testament from the persecution of Diocletian to the Third Council of Carthage (A. D. 303-397).

Part One is the most thorough of the three and foundation to the balance of the book. While focusing on the history of the New Testament canon from A. D. 70-170, it is subdivided into several sections: (1) the age of the Apostolic fathers, (2) the age of the Greek apologists, (3) the early versions and (4) the early heretics.

Westcott addresses the church fathers, several of them extensively. His knowledge and familiarity with the fathers make this section an astute feature of *Canon*. Clement of Rome (*Canon*, 22-28)⁴, Ignatius (*Canon*, 28-37) and Polycarp (*Canon*, 36-40) are adduced by Westcott demonstrating how each made use of authoritative books in their own teachings and writings. For Westcott, the role of the apostolic fathers is the most crucial due to their eyewitness nature. Westcott contends that their recognition of certain books as authoritative at the earliest stage must be given paramount importance. Statistically speaking, Westcott spends more time on the fathers, both Apostolic and the later church fathers, than any other single feature.

The role of the apologists, most especially Justin Martyr (*Canon*, 96-179), is also of acute importance in the role of canon development. In defending the faith against the attacks from without and within, their use of certain books and rejection of others must be considered crucial information in light of their close connection to the apostolic tradition. Westcott also details the information regarding certain writings such as *Shepherd of Hermas* (*Canon*, 193-204) and the *Second Epistle of Clement* (*Canon*, 179ff). Although these texts are not a part of the canon, they provide information on various elements in catholicity.

The early versions and early lists, including the Peshitta, the Old Latin and the Muratorian Fragment, provide information about what was included as well as what was excluded. This information, while instructional regarding the early church, is secondary in nature to the information provided by the Fathers. However, these writings provide insight into what books were received where and which books were used and which were rejected. Thus follows one of the climacteric ideas for Westcott: the idea of canon is implied rather than expressed.

Also included in part One is a discussion regarding the early heretics. He notes the importance of their testimony despite the decidedly slanted view. Westcott leaves few stones unturned in this discussion, analyzing many from Simon Magus to The Ophites and the Ebionites to the Marcosians, Valentinus and his school and, of course Marcion. The acknowledged role of the heretics in canon development is undisputed by all. However, the significance of that role is not as certain. Westcott does not ascribe to the heretics the place of primacy in forcing a canon as some do. Their role, while

⁴ Westcott begins here, connecting Clement with the Apostle Paul as his companion. Cf. *Canon*, 22, 327.

unquestioned, is not as significant as that of the Apostolic Fathers. Furthermore, their writings were not as influential as the role of persecution in assigning authority to books (cf. *Canon*, 326).⁵

Part Two, the history of the canon of the New Testament from the time of Hegesippus to the Persecution of Diocletian (AD 170-303), is comprised of three chapters. They are: (1) The canon of the acknowledged books (2) the testimony of the church to the disputed books and (3) the testimony of the heretical and apocryphal writings.

At the close of the second century, a significant change is seen in “character and position of the church” (*Canon*, 336). Due to the death of many of those who had first hand witnesses to the Apostles, it became necessary to establish a standard. However, this process was dynamic, not static, implied, but not necessarily expressed since it was not necessary as long as there were men who had been first hand witnesses to the Apostles. This slow and painstaking process took place over centuries and through the work of many men. Westcott discusses many of these men and their contributions specifically. For example, the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons (*Canon*, 337-341), a hearer of Polycarp, represents the books in use in the western church. As for the Eastern church the writings of Clement of Alexandria represent their authoritative books (*Canon*, 342-344). Tertullian represents the African churches (*Canon*, 344-345). This triumvirate of witnesses play a keenly significant role in Westcott’s thought as they are generally regarded as recipients of the early traditions regarding authoritative books for their region. Thus, what they receive as well as what they reject provides a foundation for a broad understanding of the early canon, especially where these three overlap. Also of significant note in this section is the discussion regarding this same triumvirate plus Origen and their understanding of the disputed books (as recorded by Eusebius. Cf. *Canon*, 351-396).

The third chapter in this section disseminates the testimony of the heretical and apocryphal books to the New Testament. Beginning with Montanism and Manichaeism, this brief chapter traces the use of orthodox books within unorthodox circles. In summary, Westcott held that these groups “did good service in the cause of Christian Scripture” (*Canon*, 397), but their contribution was insufficient since they sought to either reconstruct or “restore” Christianity (*Canon*, 400).

Part three is considerably more brief than the first two. It is comprised of three chapters: (1) The age of Diocletian (2) The Age of Councils and (3) The sixteenth century.

The persecution of Diocletian (AD 303-311) was “directed in part against the Christian Scripture” (*Canon*, 411). After a time of respite, the renewed persecution determined which books were worth risking one’s life to keep. However, it seems clear Westcott asserts, that there must have been some standard of certainty before the outbreak of this persecution. Thus, an *a priori* decision on a canon must have been present in order to know which books to protect (*Canon*, 411-413). The account of these

⁵ Westcott specifically cites his belief that Marcion had the first established canon, but states that the concept of canon as gathered authoritative books was already in place. Thus, while he may have been the first to designate authority to a specific set of books, the concept was already firmly incorporated.

books is that which is known to Eusebius and his threefold classification. Thus, the canon shifts from an implied or understood canon to a more expressed one.

The age of the councils, initiated through the work of Constantine, set the standard for generations to follow. The most significant of these, the third council of Carthage, set the books which are presently known as the New Testament through means of apostolic heritage and usage evidenced by survival of the persecutions. Westcott continues his study as he traces the history of the New Testament canon through the various councils and by means of various church leaders through the centuries. This examination is as thorough as any found.

The closing chapter, the New Testament in the sixteenth century, considers the canon in use by the Reformers, such as Luther and Zwingli, Calvin and the Arminian school. In keeping with the rest of the book, Westcott takes on this chapter of canon development and church history with the same thorough research found throughout the book.

In his summary, Westcott asserts that the most significant aspects in the formation of the canon are an apostolic foundation, both in authorship and in heritage, and persecution. Orthodoxy of the book is also crucial, but subsidiary to the other two. Thus, while the heretics and their thought had a definite role in the formation of the canon, Westcott does not give them the privilege of having founded the notion of canon or having forced the hand of the orthodox church into establishing a canon. Instead, an implied undercurrent of authority was ascribed to books in the early church. Because of this undercurrent, certain books became established through use, through heritage and through the fires of persecution. The process of canonization, therefore, took place over the first four centuries. The establishment of a “fixed” canon by Eusebius, and the councils was only recognition of that which was already *de facto* in place. They were simply agreeing. Through the course of history, some books eventually rose to prominence. But, Westcott remarks, there was no “canon within the canon”. Thus, that which has been received in this present day can be trusted fully as the inspired and completed word of the Lord.

List of Published Reviews

After researching journals contemporary to the publication of Westcott’s *Canon*, it was discerned that reviews such as modern scholarship understands were not done. However, this should not be interpreted to mean there were no responses to Westcott’s work.

Perhaps the most well known response to Westcott is Walter B. Cassels *Supernatural Religion An Inquiry into the Reality of Divine Revelation*.⁶ In this work, Cassels seeks to disprove and disparage each of the points made by Westcott. However, he did so in a quite poor fashion with scholarly mistakes abounding. J. B. Lightfoot, a student of Westcott, responded strongly to Cassels.⁷ Debunking each of Cassels points, Lightfoot

⁶ Walter B. Cassels, *Supernatural Religion: An Inquiry into the Reality of Divine Revelation*, vol. 1, (New York: D. M. Bennett, 1889). This document was originally published anonymously.

⁷ J. B. Lightfoot, *Essays on the Work Entitled Supernatural Religion*, (London: Macmillan, 1889).

presses the veracity and validity of Westcott's research. Of no little interest is the response Westcott writes to Cassel's work in the preface of the fourth edition.

A. Souter refers to Westcott's work in his work on canon. He praises it as standing the text of criticism for "two generations" as the "standard English authority."⁸ Likewise, Metzger refers to Westcott's volume as one of the "most important nineteenth century contributions" as a "comprehensive" treatment of the issue of canon.⁹ Moreover, no text on the subject would be complete without it with many following the pattern established by Westcott.¹⁰

An Evaluation of *Canon*

Critiquing a classic is a difficult task. However, in examining Westcott's work, there is room for improvement. For example, it would have been significantly beneficial to have the discussion regarding the background and meaning of the term "KANQN" as an introduction to the text rather than in the appendix. Such information, at least for a new reader, is invaluable.

As might be expected, the language of *Canon* is archaic. Written a century and half ago, the English language has evolved. Thus, while the language is dated, the message and logic remain solid.

It is unfortunate that the research data with which Westcott had to work was limited. In 1855, Sinaiticus had only recently been discovered and not yet fully utilized. In examining the earlier editions in light of the last one, this area was difficult. In light of the Westcott and Hort textual theory and its heavy reliance upon Sinaiticus, some areas of emphasis may have been more pronounced.

Westcott's apparent high view of scripture made this a pleasure to read as opposed to others who would seek to throw conservatism to the wind in the name of scholarly research.

In conclusion, while *Canon* may be somewhat dated in its language and its research, the principles and theory are solid. It is among the most fundamental texts in the field of canon. Stretching the lifetime of one of the most famous scholars in modern scholarship, this classic is well written, well planned and diligently edited.

⁸ Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* Studies in Theology,, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 25.

⁹ Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 20, 21.

¹⁰ Cf. F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*,, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988). L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995); Metzger, *Canon*; Souter, *Canon*; Folke Olofsson, *Christus Redemptor Et Consummator: A Study in the Theology of B. F. Westcott* Studia Doctrinae Christianae Upsaliensia,, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1979). Olofsson's work attempts to systematize Westcott's thought into a cohesive whole, a fascinating and entertaining piece written from a sympathetic perspective.

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