Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth *Festal Letter*[*]

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In histories of the formation of the Christian biblical canon, the thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* of Athanasius of Alexandria, written for Easter 367, holds a justifiably prominent place.[1] Not only is this letter the earliest extant Christian document to list precisely the twenty-seven books that eventually formed the generally accepted canon of the New Testament, but Athanasius is also the first Christian author known to have applied the term

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[1]Only a portion of Athanasius's Greek text survives and has been edited by Périclès-Pierre Joannou, *Fonti: Discipline générale antique (IVe–IXe s.)* (2 vols.; Rome: Grottaferrata, 1963) 2. 71–76. Much of the rest of the letter survives in fragments of its Coptic translation published by Louis-Theophile Lefort, *S. Athanase: Lettres festales et pastorales en copte* (CSCO 150; Louvain: Durbecq, 1955) 16–22, 58–62, and by Rene-Georges Coquin, "Les lettres festales d'Athanase (CPG 2102). Un nouveau complément: Le manuscrit IFAO, copte 25," *OLP* 15 (1984) 133–58. Because there is not yet a critical edition that brings together all this evidence, I shall cite the edition in which the passage to which I refer appears. Translations from ancient sources are my own unless otherwise noted; an English translation of the thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* that integrates all the published fragments appears in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 326–32.

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"canonized" (κανονιζόμενα) specifically to the books that made up his Old and New Testaments. Athanasius's canon is explicitly closed: "In these books alone," the bishop declares, "the teaching of piety is proclaimed. 'Let no one add to or subtract from them' (LXX Deut 12:32)."[2] The significance of this document goes beyond these formal and terminological issues, however, for the extant fragments of the letter provide a glimpse into the social and political factors that accompanied the attempted formation of a closed canon of the Bible in one ancient Christian setting. Christianity in fourth-century Egypt was characterized by diverse and conflicting modes of social identity and spiritual formation: study groups led by charismatic teachers, Melitian communities centered around the veneration of martyrs, and the emerging structure of imperial orthodoxy headed by Athanasius all presented themselves as legitimate expressions of Christian piety. Within this complex setting, the formation of a biblical canon with a proper mode of interpretation was an important step in the formation of an official catholic church in Egypt with its parish-centered spirituality.

Most histories of the formation of the Christian biblical canon have concerned themselves not with these social factors, but with lists and criteria.[3] That is, one studies the formation of the New Testament canon by asking where, at what time, and by what criteria early Christians considered certain writings authoritative, included some of these in their canons, and rejected others. Few scholars have studied the social and political implications of the rise and restriction of Christian scriptures in particular ancient contexts.[4] What theological and political effects did canons have in various early Christian communities? What social institutions and modes of authority did canons support and undermine? What were the practical and spiritual goals pursued by leaders who promulgated canons? To be sure, much of what survives from antiquity—the Muratorian fragment, for example—provides little evidence with which to answer such questions, but in many cases it appears that contemporary scholars are motivated primarily by their need to explain why modern Christian Bibles contain only a limited number of books out of the variety of ancient Jewish and Christian literature.

[2]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39, in Joannou, *Fonti*, 2. 75 lines 3–6.

[3]Significant recent surveys include Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987); and Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

[4]Studies of this kind include Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); Elaine H. Pagels, "Visions, Appearances, and Apostolic Authority: Gnostic and Orthodox Traditions," in Barbara Aland, ed., *Gnosis: Festschrift für Hans Jonas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978) 415–30; and Helmut Koester, "Writings and the Spirit: Authority and Politics in Ancient Christianity," *HTR* 84 (1991) 353–72.

Most studies of Athanasius's thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* have also focused on lists and criteria, although the surviving fragments provide rich material for broader social questions.[5] Admittedly, Athanasius's lists are themselves fascinating, for in addition to an Old and New Testament, the bishop itemizes seven books that are not "canonized," but are to be used for the instruction of catechumens: the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobit, the *Didache*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.[6] Moreover, discrepancies and minor oddities emerge when one compares the lists in the Greek and Coptic versions.[7] Athanasius also articulates specific criteria for discerning what is in his canon. The canonical books, which he calls "divine" (θεῖα) or "divinely inspired" (θεόπνευσθα), have been "handed down to our ancestors" by "those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and assistants of the Word" (Luke 1:2)—that is, they originated in apostolic times and have been used continuously since then.[8] Other writings, however useful, are not part of the Bible. These lists and criteria, however intriguing, will not be the focus of this article, but they do clarify that in examining Athanasius's letter one merely studies a single step in canon formation—the restriction of canonical status to certain writings out of a larger set of authoritative literature which is called scripture. In this case, I am not dealing with the equally important process of elevating certain works to the status of scripture.[9] By the categories of the modern study of religion, the *Didache* and other such books were still authoritative and therefore "scripture" for Athanasius, although they were not part of his primary canon; in

[5]Significant studies that make use of the entire text as it is known in Greek and Coptic include Carl Schmidt, "Der Osterfestbrief des Athanasius vom J. 367," in *Nachrichten von der Königl. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, aus dem Jahre 1898* (Göttingen: Horstmann, 1898) 167–203; idem, "Ein neues Fragment des Osterfestbriefes des Athanasius vom Jahre 367," in *Nachrichten von der Königl. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, aus dem Jahre 1901* (Göttingen: Horstmann, 1902) 326–48; Theodor Zahn, *Athanasius und der Bibelkanon* (Erlangen/Leipzig: Deichert, 1901) 1–36; idem, *Grundriss der Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1901) 58–60; Martin Tetz, "Athanasius und die Einheit der Kirche: Zur ökumenischen Bedeutung eines Kirchenvaters," *ZThK* 81 (1984) 205–7; and Alberto Camplani, *Le lettere festali di Atanasio di Alessandria: Studio storico-critico* (Rome: C.I.M., 1989) 275–79.

[6]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39, in Joannou, *Fonti*, 2. 75 line 14–76 line 2.

[7]See the extended discussions of the position of Hebrews and the odd reference to the *Didache* in the Coptic version in Schmidt, "Osterfestbrief," 184–93; idem, "Neues Fragment," 336–40; Zahn, *Athanasius*, 5–13.

[8]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39, in Joannou, *Fonti*, 2. 71 line 13; 72 lines 13–21.

[9]For the distinction between scripture and canon, see William A. Graham, "Scripture," *Encyclopedia of Religion* 13 (1987) 133–45, esp. 142–43; for its application to the development of the Christian Bible, see Albert C. Sundberg, "Canon of the NT," *IDBSup* 136–40; and idem, "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon," *StEv* 4 (1968) 452–61, esp. 453–54.

Athanasius's categories, such instructional books were read (ἀναγινωσκ-όμενα), but not canonized (κανονιζόμενα).[10]

My goal in this article is not to study these categories, but to understand why Athanasius created them in the first place; I shall investigate what sort of Christianity he sought to form and what sorts to undermine. Modern scholars sometimes assume that Athanasius's definition of the canon was aimed at the desert monasteries in particular,[11] but there are no references to ascetics in the known fragments of the letter. Instead, one must place the *Festal Letter* of 367 within Athanasius's career and reconstruct its situation from its own rhetoric. In 366, Athanasius returned from his fifth and, as it turned out, final exile from his see in Alexandria; only seven years later, in 373, he died. Scholars have traditionally assumed—or perhaps hoped—that in the intervening years Athanasius enjoyed relative peace, presiding over a united church in Egypt and watching the Nicene faith grow stronger under the intellectual leadership of the Cappadocian fathers. Unfortunately for Athanasius, this was not the case. Starting with this letter, written in 367, Athanasius wrote a series of Easter letters that dealt with vexing problems of church order: the biblical canon, irregular ordinations and episcopal consecrations, and abuses at martyr tombs. These letters reveal that, even in his declining years, Athanasius still had to work at establishing an Egyptian church with the unity and uniformity that he desired. Throughout these letters Athanasius strikes out at a variety of opponents: persons he calls Arians, Melitians, Jews, and simply heretics, all of whom appear in this letter on the biblical canon. Two groups are especially prominent in Athanasius's rhetoric in the thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*: "teachers," particularly Arians, who according to Athanasius invent their own ideas rather than submit to biblical truth, and Melitians, who according to Athanasius publish false apocryphal books to deceive unsuspecting Christians.

These terms—teachers and Melitians—provide the basis for reconstructing the social conflicts that occasioned Athanasius's proclamation of a canon. First, the rhetoric about teachers indicates how Athanasius's episcopal form of Christianity, situated in the parish church and placing authority in bishops and priests, competed with an academic form of Christianity, situated in the schoolroom and placing authority in charismatic teachers. In this context, the bishop's formation of a certain kind of canon was meant to replace the authority of human teachers and their doctrinal speculations

[10]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39, in Joannou, *Fonti* 2. 75 line 26–76 line 2. Nonetheless, Jean Ruwet was wrong to argue ("Le canon alexandrin des Écritures. Saint Athanase," *Bib* 33 [1952] 1–29) that Athanasius considered such catechetically useful books to be just as inspired as those in his Old and New Testaments.

[11]For example, see Roger Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 304.

with an unchanging record of what was taught by Christ, the sole teacher, which was now read by bishops in a sacramental context. Meanwhile, on a second front, Athanasius's hierarchy of clergy competed with an alternative episcopal hierarchy known as the Melitian church. Here, by excluding certain Christian writings from his canon, Athanasius hoped to reduce the influence of apocalyptic and visionary ideas that supported the Melitian claim to be the true church of the martyrs. Athanasius insisted that only his canon, and by extension his church, enjoyed a direct origin in the earliest Christian communities. I shall argue that Athanasius's disputes with other Egyptian Christians over the biblical canon were not struggles over lists of books alone, but reflected more fundamental conflicts between competing modes of Christian authority, spirituality, and social organization. My aim is to show how canon formation contributed to the establishment of catholic Christianity in Egypt.

Independent Study Circles and the Scriptures

Much of Athanasius's letter is devoted to an attack on the application of the title "teacher" to any human being; only Christ, the bishop argues, is the teacher of human beings. This rhetoric is a symptom of the continuing tension in early Christian Egypt between the hierarchical episcopate that Athanasius headed and the persistence in Alexandria of study circles gathered around charismatic teachers. Athanasius professed to deplore the speculative and original thought of the schoolroom and hoped to curtail such Christian philosophizing by restricting truth to what could be found in his circumscribed canon of books.[12]

The Arian crisis was the most spectacular example of this tension between what scholars have called episcopal and academic Christianities.[13] Two forms of Christian life clashed. On the one hand, the episcopate was centered around the practices of worship and dealt with conflicts juridically as questions of admission to the cult; on the other hand, the school was centered around the personalities of outstanding teachers and dealt with conflicts scholastically as questions of intellectual speculation and debate. Competing hierarchies of priests and teachers developed simultaneously in early Christianity, and their values and social forms influenced one another. Before Constantine began to patronize episcopal Christianity, these two forms of church life could coexist, albeit not always peacefully. During the fourth century, however, in the words of Rowan Williams, "the 'Catho-

[12]Portions of this section repeat material from Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 57–70.

[13]Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1987) 82–91; see Manlio Simonetti, *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 11; Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1975) 141–43.

lic' model of the church [came] to be allied with the idea of a monolithic social unit and the policy of religious coercion."[14] Nowhere was this development more painful than in Alexandria, where the academic model was clearly the more ancient one.

Although the origins of Alexandrian Christianity remain obscure, the first Alexandrian Christians to whom we can point with any clarity are teachers and their students. Glaucias, who flourished around 100 CE, appears in our sources as perhaps a commentator on the Epistles of St. Peter and as the teacher of Basilides, who himself became a prominent Christian philosopher.[15] From here the story of Christianity in Alexandria in the second and third centuries is essentially one of teachers and their competing independent schools: the Gnostics, Valentinus, Pantaenus, Clement, Origen, and so on.[16] Like other Hellenistic philosophers, such Christian teachers would rent their own premises, gather a group of students, and publish learned treatises under their own names.[17] Within these small study circles, Christians advanced spiritually and intellectually under the guidance of their learned teachers.[18] Not until after 189 CE, with the advent of Bishop Demetrius, does the monarchical episcopate appear in Alexandria, and it then appears as an institution hostile to the freewheeling, unmanageable Christian schools. Most likely it was Demetrius who first established a single catechetical school as an official auxiliary of the episcopate. Origen, the school's brilliant leader, however, did not restrict his activities to the basic instruction of converts; instead, he cultivated a smaller circle of students devoted to speculative philosophy and gained international fame and respect through his books and lecture tours. Bishop Demetrius eventually sent Origen to Caesarea Maritima and installed the more pliable Heraclas

[14]Williams, *Arius*, 87.

[15]Bentley Layton, "The Significance of Basilides in Ancient Christian Thought," *Representations* 28 (1989) 135–51.

[16]See Ulrich Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer im zweiten Jahrhundert: Ihre Lehrtätigkeit, ihr Selbstverständnis und ihre Geschichte* (suppl. to *VC* 4; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 40–105.

[17]Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (London: Black, 1969) 194; see also Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.11.11; and *Acta Justini et Septem Sodalium* 3.

[18]Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Lectures on the History of Religions, n.s., 13; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 103–8. On the spirituality of the relationship between teachers and students, see Richard Valantasis, *Spiritual Guides of the Third Century: A Semiotic Study of the Guide-Disciple Relationship in Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, and Gnosticism* (HDR 27; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), although he is pessimistic about reconstructing the actual relationships between real teachers and students in history; and Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 156–61, 186–95.

in his place as head of the catechetical school.[19] Origen and—even more so—Clement represented brilliant incarnations of the Christian teacher.

A complete history of the forms of academic Christianity in Christian Alexandria will not be attempted here, but its basic features can be summarized. Christian study circles tolerated and even encouraged philosophical speculation and diversity of opinion on certain Christian teachings.[20] Drawing on the Middle Platonic doctrine of the seminal Logos, academic Christians sought to discover Christian truth wherever it might manifest itself literarily, including pagan literature, Jewish writings of all kinds, and Christian books that their fellow Christians may have considered suspect. Hence academic Christians resisted the idea of a closed canon.[21] Study groups used allegorical interpretation in order to find their peculiar philosophical ideas within generally accepted Christian scripture and creeds and thereby maintain their dual social commitment to the ordinary church and the schoolroom.[22] Academic Christians made sense of their separate identity within wider Christianity by dividing believers into subgroups based on their progress—or lack thereof—in the intellectual understanding of the scriptures.[23] They then applied to themselves special names that distinguished such advanced students from ordinary Christians—for example, "lovers of wisdom,"[24] "gnostic,"[25] or "spiritual people."[26] Among these "lovers of wisdom" were women, especially ascetic women, who sometimes participated in such study circles on an equal basis with men.[27] Not

[19]Regarding Pantaenus, Clement, and the early history of the catechetical school in Alexandria, see Gustave Bardy, "Aux origines de l'école d'Alexandrie," *RSR* 27 (1937) 65–90; and David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 219–22. Regarding Origen and Demetrius, see Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) 130–46.

[20]Origen *Princ.* 1.praef. 3.

[21]The attitudes of Clement and Origen are well described by R. P. C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954) esp. 127–73.

[22]The Valentinians were particularly noted for this practice; see, for example, *Treatise on the Resurrection*, in Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987) 272–74, 316–24; and Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 177–78.

[23]Origen *Hom. in Gen.* 5, 7, 17; idem, *Comm. in Matt.* 17; and idem, *Comm. in Cant.* pref.

[24]Origen *Princ.* 1.praef. 3.

[25]Clement Alex. *Strom.* passim.

[26]Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 1.6.4 (referring to Valentinian practice).

[27]The Valentinian teacher Ptolemy dedicated a letter to his spiritual sister Flora (Epiphanius *Panarion* 33.3.1). Women attended Origen's classes (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.8.2) and were considered capable of philosophy by Clement (*Paed.* 1.4; *Strom.* 4.8, 19–20); see Brown, *Body and Society*, 122–39, 276–77. For more on this aspect of academic Christianity and its importance in Athanasius's regulation of Christian virgins, see Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 57–75.

every Christian study circle displayed all these characteristics, and indeed in this context Athanasius criticized in particular the openness of study circles to diverse opinions and various Jewish and Christian literature.

Meanwhile, the leader of a study circle, the Christian teacher, displayed several characteristics.[28] The teacher's authority was based not on a continuing office, but on unique, god-given qualities of intellect, morality, and close contact with the divine. Such qualities were manifest in the teacher's reception of visions of the risen Christ or experiences of mystical and intellectual union with the godhead, akin to what was described by Plato in his *Symposium*,[29] and in the teacher's ascetic lifestyle, which students considered worthy of emulation.[30] To bolster his or her claim to authority, the teacher could produce an intellectual pedigree that traced his or her academic tradition through a succession of brilliant teachers back to a founder whom all Christians admired, such as Paul or Jesus himself; this succession was sometimes the conduit for a secret oral tradition.[31] Rival teachers competed with one another often through personal attacks on another's lifestyle and academic pedigree; this kind of polemic is not surprising given the personal nature of the teacher's authority.[32] The teacher's authority could continue after death through the dissemination of philosophical treatises and scriptural commentaries and the publication of idealizing biographies by his or her students.[33] The person of the teacher was the indispensable center of Christian spirituality in the study circles. In the words of Hans von Campenhausen, for academic Christians "there is no effective progress without instruction; and there can be no instruction without a teacher."[34] While Athanasius attacked the person of the teacher, in general, he focused on the use of intellectual pedigrees in particular.

We should pause here to note the central role of Christian scripture in academic Christianity. The Christian teacher displayed his brilliance and guided his students partly through the interpretation of scripture, both the so-called Old Testament in the form of the Septuagint and the emerging New Testament of writings produced by Christians. The second century

[28]von Campenhausen (*Ecclesiastical Authority*, 194–212) provides the classic discussion.

[29]*Zost.* 129.4–12; 130.4–10; *Gos. Truth* 43.1–2; Plato *Symp.* 210A–212A; see also Pagels, "Visions, Appearances," 426–27.

[30]On Origen's asceticism, see Gregory Thaumaturgus *In Origenem oratio panegyrica* 9; Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.3.9–12.

[31]von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority*, 157–60, 201; Pagels, "Visions, Appearances," 426.

[32]Layton, "Significance of Basilides," 135–36.

[33]Ancient biographies of Origen are attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus (*In Origenem oratio panegyrica*) and Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 6).

[34]von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority*, 200, in reference to Clement Alex. *Strom.* 6.57.2.

saw the rise of a Christian intelligentsia that claimed the ability to understand writings that were obscure to most people. Thus, it was precisely academic Christianity that contributed to the elevation of certain Christian works, such as Paul's letters, to the status of scripture by placing them on syllabi for study of Christian philosophy and by claiming that they were obscure, contained hidden meanings, and so had to be interpreted by trained scholars.[35] As mentioned above, however, academic Christians were generally uninterested in the formation of a closed canon, for one who knows how to search properly may find the truth in almost any document. In the case of Origen, for example, one may say that in principle the potential for a closed canon is present, since he evaluates individual writings to determine their authoritative status. In practice, however, for Origen the discovery of canonicity remains a scholarly endeavor and so open to new arguments, revised decisions, and the possibility of revelation in hitherto unrecognized places.[36] Moreover, academic study was not the only activity that occasioned the elevation of Christian writings to scripture during the second and third centuries. Ritual did so as well, for in their assemblies Christians learned what edified the worshipping community by reading from the Septuagint and from Christian literature.[37] Nonetheless, even when the same books were being studied by Christian philosophers as the source of inspired truth and read aloud in Christian assemblies as the source of the shared story of Jesus, these groups developed distinct sets of scripture that reflected different understandings of authority and spiritual formation. I shall return to this idea below, after investigating the conflict between academic and episcopal Christianities and the important role of canon formation in this conflict.

While Clement and Origen embodied the academic Christian tradition in the second and third centuries, Arius most notoriously fulfilled this role in fourth-century Alexandria.[38] Arius was one of several Alexandrian presbyters who lectured on the scriptures and so turned their parish churches into schoolrooms; admirers of different presbyter-teachers formed rival groups, named after their favorite teachers, such as the Colluthians and the Arians.[39] Dressing in ascetic clothing and attracting numerous students, particularly female virgins, Arius successfully filled the old-fashioned role of the Christian religious mentor;[40] according to the *Martyrdom of Saint Peter*, he gave

[35]Koester, "Writings and the Spirit," 371–72; see William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 67–68.

[36]Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine*, 142–43; von Campenhausen, *Formation*, 320–23.

[37]Justin Martyr *Apol.* 1.67; Koester, "Writings and the Spirit," 368–70.

[38]Williams, *Arius*, passim.

[39]Epiphanius *Panarion* 69.2.6.

[40]Ibid., 69.3.1; Williams, *Arius*, 32.

public lectures on scriptural interpretation on Wednesdays and Fridays.[41] Arius opened his book *Thalia* by self-consciously portraying himself as the latest in a long line of sages who were taught by God:

> According to the faith of God's chosen, those with discernment of God,
> His holy children, imparting the truth and open to God's holy spirit,
> These are the things I have learned from the men who partake of wisdom,
> The keen-minded men, instructed by God, and in all respects wise.
> In such men's steps I have walked, advancing in thoughts like theirs,
> A man much spoken of, who suffers all manner of things for God's glory,
> And, learning from God, I am now no stranger to wisdom and knowledge.[42]

Here is an exquisite expression of academic spirituality, a poetic celebration of the academic pedigree that authenticates Arius's own original thought. The Christian's goal is to approach God spiritually and intellectually—which, for the ancients, were impossible to separate—through instruction by "keen-minded men," a process that is equivalent to "learning from God." Arius demonstrated that he was "no stranger to wisdom and knowledge" through his lectures on the scriptures. This is a far cry from the spirituality of Athanasius, who ridiculed Arius's poetic musings as "effeminate."[43]

Arius was not only a teacher; he was also a presbyter and thus suggests that, in the early fourth century, the hierarchical episcopate and the study circles were not clearly distinguished in Alexandria. Rather, the values of academic Christianity permeated the emerging system of parish churches. It was the goal of Athanasius and his predecessor as bishop, Alexander, to eliminate the academic mode of authority and spiritual formation from their parochial system. When Arius's teachings appeared to Alexander to transgress the limits of acceptable diversity, he had the presbyter condemned by a synod of bishops, an expression of the idea that the presbyter's authority,

[41]"Alexander promoted Arius to the dignity of the priesthood. This latter began, under the pretense of scriptural authority, to expound doctrine to the people, having the congregation come to church on Wednesday and Friday so as to hear the Word of God" (*Martyrdom of Saint Peter of Alexandria*). The text can be found in William Telfer, "St. Peter of Alexandria and Arius," *AnBoll* 67 (1949) 130; the translation is by Tim Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria: Bishop and Martyr* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 70.

[42]Athanasius *Orationes contra Arianos* 1.5; translated in Williams, *Arius*, 85.

[43]Athanasius *Orationes contra Arianos* 1.5. As Schmidt stated ("Neues Fragment," 344), "The spirit of scientific inquiry belonging to Origen and his school is completely foreign to him [Athanasius]" (my translation). On the masculinization of orthodoxy and feminization of heresy in Athanasius, see Virginia Burrus, "The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, Epiphanius, and Jerome," *HTR* 84 (1991) 235–39.

unlike that of the teacher, did not come from his education and brilliance, but was granted by the bishop. The episcopate valued not advance in wisdom and knowledge, but unity and harmony, which were seen to be the commands of scripture. Most likely it was the young Athanasius, serving as Alexander's secretary, who expressed this catholic sensibility in Alexander's circular letter on Arius: "There is one body of the universal (καθολική) church, and a command is given to us in the sacred scriptures to preserve the bond of unity and peace."[44] The notion of sacred scriptures went hand in hand with the episcopate's attempt to curtail academic activity in the name of unity and peace.

Athanasius, after succeeding Alexander as bishop in 328, made explicit the opposition between a closed biblical canon and the activity of human teachers. In his twenty-fourth *Festal Letter*, written in 352, he contrasted "the words of the saints" and "the fancies of human invention." Only the saints—meaning the authors of the New Testament books—handed down what they had heard from the incarnate Word of God "without alteration." Hence, "of these [saints] the Word wants us to be disciples, and they should be our teachers, and it is necessary for us to obey only them."[45] Here Athanasius portrays Christian doctrine as the unchanging record of what was taught by the incarnate Word and found solely in Athanasius's canon. The only legitimate teachers are the authors of the canonical books, and thus the ideas of contemporary teachers are merely "fancies" created by human beings. Fifteen years later, in the thirty-ninth letter, Athanasius even more narrowly circumscribed the legitimate use of the title "teacher" by stating that only Christ himself was to be the teacher of Christians: "The name of Wisdom suits him because it is he alone who is the true teacher. For who is to be trusted to teach human beings about the Father except he who exists always in his bosom?"[46] Jesus, Athanasius pointed out, commanded that Christians call no one else "teacher" (Matt 23:8–10). Confronted with New Testament passages that clearly refer to persons other than Jesus as "teacher" (1 Tim 2:7; Eph 4:11; Jas 3:1), Athanasius suggested that such people were called teachers only honorifically; in reality, they were merely disciples, mouthpieces who passed on what the Word of God had told them:

> For the words that the disciples proclaim do not belong to them; rather, they heard them from the Savior. Therefore, even if it is Paul who is teaching, it is Christ who is speaking in him. And even if he says that

[44]Alexander Alex. *Epistula encyclica* 2. On Athanasius's authorship of this letter, see G. Christopher Stead, "Athanasius' Earliest Written Work," *JTS*, n.s., 39 (1988) 76–91.

[45]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 2.7 [Syriac]; the twenty-fourth *Festal Letter* was mistakenly transmitted as the second.

[46]Ibid., 39 [Coptic], in Coquin, "Les lettres festales," 1r.*a*19–29.

> the Lord has appointed teachers in the churches (1 Cor 12:28), it is he [the Lord] who first teaches them and sends them out. For the nature of everyone who is part of creation is to be taught, but our Lord and Demiurge is by nature a teacher. For he was not taught by another person how to be a teacher, but all human beings, even if they are called "teacher," were first disciples. Moreover, every [human being] is instructed since the Savior supplies them with the knowledge of the Spirit, so that they might be God's students. But our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, being the Word of the Father, was not instructed by anyone else. Rightly he alone is the Teacher.[47]

This is an attack on those who use academic pedigrees to legitimate their authority, a strategy that Arius employed in the *Thalia*. Christ, said Athanasius, has no need to produce such a pedigree, being himself Word and Wisdom.

By making this claim, Athanasius hoped to replace the authority of human teachers with the authority of Christ, as mediated through the biblical canon. The disciples, the bishop said, simply wrote what Christ the teacher told them in the scriptures, which therefore included every doctrine human beings need to know.[48] Athanasius declared that the canon, unlike teachers who traced their predecessors back to the source of Christian truth, recorded Truth's speech directly, without mediation or development. This unchanging canon made the intellectual originality of the schoolroom appear suicidal. Heretical teachers, by daring to be innovative, had "abandoned the spring of life"—that is, Athanasius's canon—and thus "remained dead in their unbelief by being bound by their evil thoughts, just as the Egyptians were bound by their own axles."[49] In this way Athanasius sought to render independent Christian academic activity illegitimate by making the title of teacher, when applied to a human being, cause for suspicion and distrust, as well as by claiming that original human thought was really entrapping, deadly mud. In turn, Athanasius, who was manifestly teaching and inventing new ideas, had to deny what he was doing and say that he was himself no teacher, but merely a conduit for an unchanging tradition. "For I have not written these things as if I were teaching," he stated, "for I have not attained such a rank. . . . I have thus informed you of everything that I heard from my father"—his episcopal predecessor, Alexander.[50] Even when claiming not to be a teacher and attacking the use of academic pedigrees, Athanasius acted like a teacher by referring to his own academic succes-

[47]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 16 lines 17–31.

[48]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], Coquin, "Les lettres festales," 6v.*a*25–*b*29.

[49]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 17 lines 8–9, 21–24; this uses the Septuagint version of Exod 14:25.

[50]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 21 lines 11–12, 14–15.

sion in the person of Alexander. These strategies of personal attacks on teachers and professed condemnation of original thought were staples of Christian school polemics which dated back to Justin Martyr.[51] In the second century, Irenaeus employed a similar strategy of using academic succession to bolster the authority of bishops but of reserving the title "teacher," and its connotations of suspicious originality, for his opponents.[52] In his *Festal Letter* on the canon, Athanasius used the rhetoric of anti-intellectualism to render his Arian opponents suspect and his own teaching activity invisible.

In this campaign, Athanasius stressed that the Word of God, unlike human beings, had no need to learn anything. The Word was by nature a teacher; human beings were by nature students. This assertion criticized not only the school tradition's great esteem for the teacher, but also the Arians' alleged depiction of the Word of God as one who advanced in knowledge and virtue and therefore could serve as a model for Christians making their own spiritual progress.[53] As Athanasius depicted the matter, the Arian Word learned how to create through "instruction" (διδασκαλία) from God the Father, who was the Word's "teacher" (διδάσκαλος).[54] In the spirituality of academic Christianity, the Christian teacher's classroom, filled with students eager to progress in wisdom and virtue by patterning themselves after their mentor, found its heavenly analogue in the Word's education at the feet of the Father.[55] Like the charismatic teacher, the Word was a model for Christians to imitate. This spirituality was well adapted to what Peter Brown has called late antiquity's "civilization of *paideia*," at the heart of which was "intensive male bonding" between teacher and pupil.[56] In some of Alexandria's Christian study circles, this scholastic "male bonding" was projected onto the deity itself, and on earth it was replicated in the study of scripture under the inspired teacher. Athanasius would have none of this; by nature the Word was the only true teacher; human beings, in contrast, were by nature merely "God's students," taught by the Word alone through his mouthpieces, the scriptures and the bishops. Athanasius, delineating between Creator and created, limited the term "teacher" to the former and the term "student" to the latter. The study of scripture should not be an

[51]Layton, "Significance of Basilides," 135–36.

[52]Virginia Burrus, "Hierarchalization and Genderization of Leadership in the Writings of Irenaeus," *StPatr* 21 (1989) 43–45.

[53]Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism—A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

[54]Athanasius *Orationes contra Arianos* 2.28; see also 1.37.

[55]See Gregg and Groh, *Early Arianism*, 163–64.

[56]Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," in John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues* (Comparative Studies in Religion and Society 2; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 4.

exercise in progressively divinizing contemplation, but only a moral training for catechumens. As Athanasius stated in his *Festal Letter*, catechumens should be taught only those biblical passages that "will teach them to hate sin and to abandon idol-worship."[57] A Christian's spiritual life should not be a textually based education similar to that of the Word, but a parish-centered reception of the Word's divinizing power through the sacraments. Athanasius, then, was not simply asserting canonical authority in an intellectual battle over Arian theology; rather, he was articulating a mode of biblical authority appropriate to a catholic spirituality. A canon suited this spirituality; and thus, although Athanasius and other bishops had few coercive means at their disposal to enforce their closed canons, nonetheless a uniform canon slowly prevailed in the ancient churches.

In fact, one should speak not of Athanasius imposing a canon on a Christianity previously lacking one, nor even of him trying to close a canon that had hitherto been open, but rather of a bishop promoting a certain type of biblical canon, one appropriate to the episcopal form of Christianity. Modern discussions of the biblical canon in Christian history usually assume that there is only one possible kind of canon, a closed canon of the type that Athanasius promulgated, and so describe the early centuries as a relentless progress toward that seemingly inevitable *telos*. Within religious traditions in general and within Christianity in particular, however, one finds canons that differ not only in their contents but also in their fundamental character.[58] There are, for example, canons that do not possess their own independent authority, but are the result of a more basic religious activity, apart from which they would not exist and cannot be understood. The lectionary of a liturgical church is an example of this type of canon; for, although it is authoritative, it is a function of ritual and has its authority only insofar as it enables worship. A second type of canon indeed possesses its own authoritative status and serves to legitimate other religious activities, such as preaching. One thinks of the canon of many contemporary Protestant churches, where an oversized Bible placed on a lectern appears to authorize the sermon of the preacher. Here scriptural canons are classified not by their contents, which may be nearly identical, but by their

[57]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 62 lines 3–8.

[58]I am dependent here, for both the general concepts and the specific examples, on Kendall W. Folkert, "The 'Canons' of Scripture," in Miriam Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) 170–79. Folkert divides scripture into "two general forms": "Canon I denotes normative texts, oral or written, that are present in a tradition principally by the force of a vector or vectors. Canon II refers to normative texts that are more independently and distinctively present within a tradition, that is, as pieces of literature more or less as such are currently thought of, and which themselves function as vectors" (p. 173).

functions within religious communities, especially their relations to modes of authority and spiritual formation.

From this perspective, Athanasius's conflict with academic Christians over the biblical canon must not be construed as Athanasius's attempt to close a canon that the teachers would prefer to leave open, but as a conflict between two competing and distinct canon types. Like the lectionaries of today or the ritual-based canons of the early centuries, the Bible of academic Christianity was not an independent authority, but the function of a more basic religious activity—Christian philosophical instruction and spiritual guidance. The Christian scriptures formed the answer to the question of which books one ought to study in an effort to contemplate God. As such, the contents of the academic canon were somewhat indeterminate, although a core set of writings—namely, the four gospels and the letters of Paul—could be found nearly everywhere.[59] The boundaries of the academic canon could shift with the theologian's quest for truth; a "disputed" work like the *Gospel of the Hebrews* might be acceptable since some Christians "rejoice" in its contents.[60] In contrast, Athanasius offered a canon which, by means of its authoritative status, preceded and grounded any other religious activities. Ritual, instruction, and political organization in the Christian community were legitimate to the extent that they were based on the set canon of scriptures. The boundaries of the episcopal canon were fixed, and Christian instruction was a function of this canon, rather than the reverse:

> Even if a useful word is found in them [the rejected books], it is still not good to trust them. . . . Let us command ourselves not to proclaim anything in them nor to speak anything in them with those who want to be instructed, even if there is a good word in them, as I have said. For what do the spiritual scriptures lack that we should seek after these empty voices of unknown people?. . . If we seek the faith, it is possible for us to discover it through them [the scriptures].[61]

Bishop Athanasius's rejection of preaching and teaching based on extracanonical writings even if some or all of their contents are useful and good is the major distinction between the canons of episcopal and academic Christianities. A remnant of the academic canon, however, remained even

[59]This indeterminate nature of the academic canon's contents may lead some to argue that it cannot be called a canon, which must by definition be closed. This definition itself assumes a canon of only one type—the Christian Protestant canon—and so obscures other kinds of scriptural collections in religions past and present. On the difficulty of understanding Jain scriptures from a "Canon II" perspective, see Folkert, "'Canons' of Scripture," 175–76.

[60]Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.5.

[61]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 21 lines 1–2; Coquin, "Les lettres festales," 6r.*b*25–6v.*a*8, 25–29.

in Athanasius's program in the form of a list of seven Christian writings that were not canonical but were useful for the instruction of converts. This awkward alliance of canons of quite different types could not last, however, and Athanasius's third testament disappeared rapidly.[62]

In any case, Athanasius's polemic against "teachers" finds its proper context in his effort to reduce the influence of study circles in Christian Alexandria and consolidate Christian life around the hierarchical episcopate. The definition of a closed canon and the accompanying condemnation of original thought were means by which Athanasius hoped to achieve these social and political goals.

"Apocryphal" Books and the Martyr Cult

Athanasius did not accuse "teachers" of publishing apocryphal books, however, but the Melitians, whose conflict with the Athanasian episcopate was far different from that of the Alexandrian study circles. While academic Christians claimed to discover spiritual truth through intellectual research under the guidance of inspired teachers, the Melitians possessed an episcopal organization that paralleled that of Athanasius, but which placed a high value on continuity with the pre-Constantinian church of the martyrs. Among Melitian and other Christian groups, the use of apocryphal books that connected martyrdom with visionary powers supported the ideology of a prophetic martyr cult based in Upper Egyptian parishes. Here Athanasius's promulgation of a closed canon of publicly known books was meant to eliminate any scriptural support for practices surrounding the martyr cult.

It is crucial to remember that the Melitian schism had its origins in the persecutions that Christians suffered in the first decade of the fourth century, the so-called Great Persecution.[63] In 304, Bishop Peter of Alexandria and other bishops retreated into hiding to avoid arrest, and so Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis in Upper Egypt attempted to carry on church business by ordaining priests and installing bishops in Alexandria and other sees. Peter and the other hiding bishops denounced what they considered an illegitimate intervention into their spheres of authority. Peter briefly returned to Alexandria in 305 and excommunicated Melitius, but he was forced to flee again in 306 and was martyred in 311. By the time of the Council of Nicea, sponsored by the emperor Constantine in 325, long after Peter's death, there were two competing Christian churches in Egypt, a Petrine one and a Melitian one, each with its own hierarchy of bishops and priests. The

[62]See Zahn, *Grundriss*, 60; idem, *Athanasius*, 26–29; see esp. 28–29 regarding the fact that even Athanasius's scriptural citations in his other works make no use of this distinction.

[63]Leslie W. Barnard, "Athanasius and the Meletian Schism in Egypt," *JEA* 59 (1973) 181–89; Williams, *Arius*, 32–41; and Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria*, 15–40.

rivalry between the two parties was exacerbated by differences over how Christians who lapsed during the persecutions should be treated, with the Melitians arguing for a period of penance longer than that advocated by the Petrines. Indeed, the Melitians considered themselves to be the true continuation of the pre-Constantinian church of the martyrs.[64] The Council of Nicea recognized the Petrine hierarchy, then headed by Bishop Alexander, as the legitimate Christian church in Egypt, and it adopted a policy of gradual integration of Melitian bishops and priests into the Petrine hierarchy. The ordinations of Melitian clergy were recognized, but Melitius himself was commanded to enter retirement. This policy was accepted with little enthusiasm by the parties in Egypt, and thus conflict between the two groups endured through the episcopate of Athanasius. The Melitian movement appears to have been strongest in Upper Egypt, for it included elements of protest against Hellenistic Alexandria and its allegedly lax policies in church discipline. Nonetheless, the schism was primarily a conflict between competing episcopal organizations and thus was fought not with theological treatises, but with tactics appropriate to political struggles: the use of physical violence to intimidate opponents, the channeling of church funds in beneficial directions, and the installation of allied bishops and priests in areas controlled by the other party whenever possible.[65] Moreover, in many cases, it is difficult for the historian to distinguish between Melitian and orthodox persons and groups, and it is likely that many Egyptian Christians themselves did not make this distinction.

According to Athanasius, it was the Melitians in particular who promoted the use of apocryphal books among Egyptian Christians, and there is some plausibility to this claim.[66] To be sure, Athanasius tended in his later *Festal Letters* to stigmatize what he considered unacceptable practices in Christian churches, whether affiliated with him or not, by labeling them Melitian or Arian.[67] Nonetheless, Athanasius earlier in his career condemned the Melitians' use of a wider range of Christian literature than he thought

[64]W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (New York: New York University Press, 1967) 396–98.

[65]Regarding violence and church funds, see Barnard, "Athanasius and the Meletian Schism"; Timothy D. Barnes, "The Career of Athanasius," *StPatr* 21 (1987) 393–96; idem, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1993) 25–33. Regarding bishops and priests, see Athanasius *Epistula ad Dracontium*; idem, *Epistulae festales* 40 [Coptic]; and Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 100–102.

[66]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 21 lines 12–14. Zahn denied (*Athanasius*, 14) that either the Melitians or the Arians were the "heretics" whom Athanasius charged with promoting apocryphal books, but he wrote before Schmidt ("Neues Fragment") published for the first time the fragment in which Athanasius specifically names the Melitians as boasting about their apocrypha.

[67]Camplani, *Lettere festali*, 271–72.

acceptable; in his *History of the Arians*, written in 356, the bishop charged that the Melitians do not "know. . . what scriptures we Christians have."[68] A decade later, in his *Festal Letter* of 367, Athanasius was more specific in his charges: "I heard that the heretics, particularly the wretched Melitians, were boasting about the books that they call 'apocryphal'"; they had recently composed these books by "mixing one or two inspired texts" with their own "evil teachings" and then "publishing them as if they were ancient."[69] Moreover, Athanasius names specific examples of such literature: books associated with Enoch, Moses, and Isaiah, perhaps meaning at least a portion of the Enoch literature—he does speak of multiple books that "belong to Enoch"—the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, and the *Testament of Moses*.[70] Athanasius denies that any of these biblical figures could have composed an apocryphal book; Enoch because "no Scripture existed before Moses," and Moses and Isaiah because each referred to the public, generally available character of his teachings (Deut 4:26; 30:19; Isa 45:19).[71] Other sources from shortly after Athanasius's career associate the Melitians with noncanonical books: one of the Pseudo-Athanasian *Canons* prohibits the singing of "the writings of Melitius" in church and repeats Athanasius's quotation of Septuagint Deut 12:32 ("Let no one add to or subtract from them"). The Coptic monastic leader Shenute (ca. 350–466) quotes Athanasius's condemnation of the "wretched Melitians" in his sermon against apocryphal books.[72] The Melitian use of apocrypha was a theme of orthodox polemics throughout the fourth and fifth centuries.

Athanasius was aware of one objection to his condemnation of such apocrypha: they are sometimes cited as scripture by authors of the New

[68]Athanasius *Historia Arianorum* 78.1.

[69]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39, in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 21 lines 12–14; Coquin, "Les lettres festales," 6r.*b*11–21, in Joannou, *Fonti*, 2. 76 lines 3–8.

[70]Of these, the identification of the *Ascension of Isaiah* seems the most secure (see the discussion of 1 Cor 2:9 below, p. 413) and that of the Moses literature the least secure (see David Frankfurter, "The Legacy of the Jewish Apocalypse in Early Christian Sects: Regional Trajectories," in James Vanderkam and William Adler, eds., *The Jewish Apocalypses in Christian Tradition* [Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming]; see also Camplani, *Lettere festali*, 277). Evidence for the circulation of the *Ascension of Isaiah* in fourth-century Egypt includes fragments of its text in Coptic (Louis-Theophile Lefort, "Fragments d'apocryphes en copte-achmimique," *Mus* 52 [1939] 1–10; Pierre Lacau, "Fragments de l'Ascension d'Isaie en copte," *Mus* 59 [1946] 453–67); a quotation of it by Ammonas, the monastic disciple of Antony the Great (*Letter* 10, in *The Letters of Ammonas: Successor of Saint Antony* [trans. Derwas J. Chitty; Fairacres Publications 72; Oxford: S.L.G, 1979] 12); and its reported use by Hieracas, the Christian ascetic teacher (Epiphanius *Panarion* 67.3.4).

[71]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 20 lines 3–21.

[72]Pseudo-Athanasius *Canones* 12, in *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria* (ed. and trans. Wilhelm Riedel and W. E. Crum; London/Oxford: Williams & Norgate, 1904) 24; Tito Orlandi, "A Catechesis Against Apocryphal Texts by Shenute and the Gnostic Texts of Nag Hammadi," *HTR* 75 (1982) 88–89; see also Camplani, *Lettere festali*, 275–76.

Testament; for example, Jude 14–15 refers to *1 Enoch* 1.9.[73] Athanasius replied that it is sometimes difficult to determine which passage from the Septuagint is quoted by a New Testament writer when it is introduced only with "it is written." Athanasius admitted that Paul's citation in 1 Cor 2:9 ("What no eye has seen") cannot be found in this exact formulation in Athanasius's Old Testament, but if the quotation is to be found in an apocryphal book, "as the heretics say," then, Athanasius claimed, "those who invented these books have secretly stolen from the words of Paul and written it at a later time."[74] This reference is significant, for two versions of the *Ascension of Isaiah* contain the saying found in 1 Cor 2:9, and Jerome knew an *Ascension of Isaiah* that contained it.[75] Thus, the Christians of Athanasius's context probably cited 1 Cor 2:9 in support of their use of this Isaiah apocryphon. In the extant fragments Athanasius does not mention Jude 14–15, but presumably he would have considered its appearance in *1 Enoch* 1.9 to be a similar instance of plagiarizing fraud.

Certainly Athanasius's claims that the Melitians or other contemporary heretics themselves composed books such as the *Ascension of Isaiah* are to be dismissed, but it is plausible that Melitians and other Egyptian Christians did in fact use such literature as scripture. I have already described the persistence of such charges against Melitians in orthodox sources. In addition, Athanasius did not introduce the term apocrypha to stigmatize these books; rather, his opponents used the term in a positive manner and thus forced Athanasius to deny that it had any validity. The Melitians, Athanasius asserts, "boast" of their apocryphal books; thus, the bishop must deny that Christian tradition knows any "mention (μνήμη) of the apocryphal books" and must argue instead that the category of apocrypha is "an invention (ἐπίνοια) of the heretics" calculated to "deceive the simple folk."[76] He then must explain why Enoch, Moses, and Isaiah could not have written any apocryphal books. This strategy is quite different from one that assumes a negative meaning for the term apocryphal. Tertullian, for example, condemns the *Shepherd of Hermas* by labeling it apocryphal, a term that he

[73]Zahn in particular criticizes Athanasius (*Athanasius*, 14, 17) for not mentioning the quotation of *Enoch* in Jude as well as the many citations of apocryphal books by earlier church fathers; Zahn did not know the Coptic fragment in which Athanasius dealt with this objection.

[74]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 60 line 6–62 line 2.

[75]*Mart. Isa.* 11.34; Jerome *Comm. in Isa.* 17 on Isa 64:4. See Michael E. Stone and John Strugnell, *The Books of Elijah, Parts 1–2* (SBLTT 18; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979) 41–73, esp. 68–71. Origen had attributed the quotation to an *Apocalypse of Elijah* (*Comm. in Matt.* 5.29 on Matt 27:9), but it is not found in the extant work of this title; see David Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt: The Apocalypse of Elijah and Early Egyptian Christianity* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 46–49.

[76]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 21 lines 12–14; Joannou, *Fonti*, 2. 76 lines 2–8.

uses in opposition to "generally received among the churches," and Irenaeus can use the term apocryphal as self-evidently equivalent to "spurious."[77] In the case of Athanasius, although the term apocryphal certainly is the opposite of "generally received among the churches," the opponents of Athanasius consider this esoteric quality to be a positive one. This is similar to the followers of Prodicus, whom Clement reports to "boast" of having "apocryphal books" of the legendary Zoroaster, or to the Gnostics, who must have thought that the title *Apocryphon of John* gave their mythic narrative a valued esoteric form of authority.[78] So too these fourth-century Egyptians legitimated their teachings by basing them not on scriptures available to Christians in general and read in any Christian assembly, but rather on books that contained hidden or secret—"apocryphal"—revelations and were therefore superior.

Moreover, the contents of the books to which Athanasius most likely referred would have supported Melitian claims that the true church is the church of the martyrs and that God continues to speak specifically through the martyrs. At this time, according to the letters following Athanasius' thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*, Melitian Christians were vigorously promoting the cult of the martyrs, even setting up oracles at martyr tombs.[79] Persons possessed by demons were brought to martyr tombs, where the demons were exorcised. Athanasius had little problem with this, but during these exorcisms, some possessed persons were able to prophesy. Either the demon in the person, under the compulsion of the dead martyr, would predict the future and answer the questions of gathered spectators, or the dead martyr himself or herself would speak through the possessed person.[80] Moreover, Christians were exhuming the bodies of martyrs and, in Athanasius's words, removing them "from the cemeteries of the catholic church" in order to set up martyr cults for profit.[81] Such practices could have found their scriptural basis in such works as those criticized by Athanasius in his *Festal Letter*: the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*, for example, closely links Isaiah's visionary powers with his martyrdom at the hands of Manasseh, who "did not remember" what Isaiah saw in his tour of the heavens.[82]

[77]Tertullian *Pud.* 10.6; Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 1.20.1.

[78]Clement Alex. *Strom.* 1.15.69.9; on the secrecy of Hermetic books, see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 157–58.

[79]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 41–42 [Coptic]. On the pre-Constantinian roots of the martyr cult in Egypt, see David Frankfurter, "The Cult of the Martyrs in Egypt Before Constantine: The Evidence of the Coptic *Apocalypse of Elijah*," *VC* 48 (1994) 25–47.

[80]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 42 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 65 lines 3–15.

[81]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 41 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 26 lines 9–10; 62 line 23–63 line 5.

[82]*Mart. Isa.* 11.36–43.

Similarly, the *Testament of Moses* includes a vivid description of the persecution of the faithful; the Levite Taxo's exhortation to martyrdom is followed by an eschatological hymn that one could interpret as being recited by the martyr Taxo as much as by the dying Moses.[83] Presumably these fourth-century Christians whom Athanasius condemned, especially Melitians, argued that in the manner of these biblical heroes, the Christian martyrs received revelations about the end of time and perhaps less weighty matters. Such revelations were still available at those parishes where the corpses of martyrs were preserved, honored, and consulted.

Here was an attractive means of access to spiritual truth and power, so attractive, Athanasius tells us, that Christians in the Nile Valley were affiliating with martyr-oriented parishes and taking their monetary offerings with them. Athanasius labelled this "crookedness" and self-serving "greed."[84] Similarly, he accused those who promoted apocryphal books of Enoch and the others as doing so in order to "receive compliments" and "be considered great people."[85] Athanasius himself, in promoting a biblical canon that excised Christian literature supporting the Melitian combination of martyrs and visions, hoped to eliminate the desire of Christians to consult the oracles at martyr shrines sponsored by Melitian churches. The canon of the martyr-oriented Christians assumed the persistence of divine revelations in the present, while Athanasius's canon presupposed the finality of the revelation in the Word of God's incarnation.

The rhetoric about Melitians and apocryphal books, then, indicates that Athanasius's promulgation of a closed canon was part of a conflict over proper forms of Christian divination, "the endeavor to obtain information about things future or otherwise removed from ordinary perception, by consulting informants other than human."[86] Among the characteristics of divination are that it takes place according to socially constructed rules and procedures and that the diviner claims not to speak for himself or herself but to function merely as "a medium, or mediator, of an external voice (god, spirit, ancestor, etc.)."[87] Thus, the martyr enthusiasts developed a system of divination focused on the corpses of martyrs, in which a possessed person delivered supernatural information as the mouthpiece for

[83]*T. Mos.* 8–10.

[84]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 41 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 26 lines 11, 18.

[85]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 20 lines 31–33.

[86]H. J. Rose, "Divination (Introductory and Primitive)," *ERE* 4 (1911) 775. On divination in ancient Greece and Rome, see Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) 229–305.

[87]J. Samuel Preus ("Secularizing Divination: Spiritual Biography and the Invention of the Novel," *JAAR* 59 [1991] 444–45) draws on numerous anthropological studies.

demons or martyrs. Writings such as the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* grounded this practice in biblical authority. Athanasius, in contrast, offered a set of books that excluded such visionary writings and which itself functioned as a means of divination, for it was the medium of the voice of Christ. He belittled the oracles received at martyr shrines as mediating mere "words from earth," while one should seek "the Word of God who speaks from heaven."[88] Athanasius suggested that Christians could obtain access to this Word if they would "call upon Christ," who would respond "in a dream or by speaking in their heart."[89] As we saw above, Athanasius's biblical canon also mediated the voice of the Word directly and thus represented a means of divination superior to the oracles at martyr shrines.

Thus, Athanasius's thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* exemplifies Jonathan Z. Smith's cross-cultural principle that the primary social context of the religious canon is divination.[90] The procedures of divination clarify the relationship between canonical books and their interpreter: just as the Ndembu diviner discerns the truth in all situations by shaking only twenty-four fixed objects in a basket and reading them, so too the Christian exegete must divine God's word for every situation by reading a fixed set of writings. As a closed list, a canon requires interpreters, persons trained and authorized to carry out the "exegetical totalization" required by such textual limitation.[91] Athanasius indeed established a fixed set of books and believed the orthodox bishop to be the authorized diviner of those books. He presented his predecessor Bishop Alexander as a learned expositor of the Bible—"and the Gospels were in his hand, for he was a long-time lover of reading"—and himself as the faithful transmitter of episcopal tradition.[92] Thus he also told the monks of Caesarea to submit to the teaching of their bishop, Basil, who, like all orthodox episcopal interpreters, read scripture in terms of its "scope" (σκοπός), which Athanasius understood to be a narrative summary of the preincarnate and incarnate existence of God the Word.[93] Since the church was the locus of the salvation achieved by the Word, the proper

[88]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 42 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 66 lines 7–25.

[89]Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 42 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 66 lines 3–7.

[90]Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in idem, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 36–52, esp. 50.

[91]Ibid., 50–51.

[92]Athanasius *Epistula ad virgines* [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 91 lines 5–12; Athanasius *Epistulae festales* 39 [Coptic], in Lefort, *S. Athanase*, 21 lines 11–15. On the authenticity of the *Letter to Virgins* preserved in Coptic, see David Brakke, "The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana," *Or* 63 (1994) 17–56, esp. 19–25.

[93]Athanasius *Epistula ad Palladium*; James D. Ernest, "Athanasius of Alexandria: The Scope of Scripture in Polemical and Pastoral Context," *VC* 47 (1993) 341–62.

meaning of scripture would always be "churchly" (ἐκκλησιαστικός) and "reverent" (εὐσεβής).[94] Thus, Athanasius's promulgation of a closed canon was an attempt at social formation and control; it regulated divination and access to truth by restricting the books to be read (only these and no others), establishing an authoritative diviner (the orthodox bishop), and articulating a standard of interpretation (the church's doctrine of the incarnate Word). It was Athanasius's goal to set up an alternative mode of divination to that offered by his Melitian opponents, one that depended not on the charismatic authority of martyrdom, but on the limited yet totalizing function of a biblical canon and its orthodox episcopal reader.

The Canons of the Teacher, Martyr, and Bishop

Athanasius's attempt to establish a closed canon of Christian scriptures in fourth-century Egypt was not merely a battle over book lists; it was even more a conflict among authoritative persons and the social institutions and practices that surrounded them, which included scripture. Scripture is itself essentially a social phenomenon, the creation not of literature but of communities that grant authority to certain works of literature and to certain persons.[95] The teacher is an example of one such authoritative person in ancient Christianity. Schools or study circles that valued philosophical diversity, individual progress in knowledge and discipline, and the personal bonding between teacher and student developed around the teacher, and the teacher's canon of scriptures was a flexible one, serving as both the function and tool of the gifted Christian's pursuit of truth and wisdom. Another such figure was the martyr, whose suffering and faithful endurance won for him or her a particular share of the Holy Spirit and special revelations. In Athanasius's time the martyr was present to other Christians primarily in his or her corpse; cultic communities devoted to the example of the martyr's endurance and to continuing revelations through the martyr's spirit developed around the martyr's corpse. The martyr's canon reflected these values, for it included works that recounted the spectacular visions of biblical martyrs and legitimated the reception of spiritual truth in the martyr cult. Yet another authoritative Christian person was the bishop; parish churches dispensed the divinizing power of the Word of God in preaching and the sacraments and demonstrated the social power of the bishop through charity and other patronage. The bishop's canon was a definite set of books which were read in public worship and expounded by the bishop. Its uniform character demonstrated unity with Christians of the past and of dif-

[94]Athanasius *Orationes contra Arianos* 1.44; idem, *De decretis Nicaenae synodi* 13; Ernest, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 347–48.

[95]Graham, "Scripture," 134; idem, *Beyond the Written Word*, 5–6.

ferent regions in the present.[96] While the canons of the teacher and martyr were in a sense dependent on the prior authority of the charismatic person, Athanasius denied this was the case for his canon by claiming that he was transmitting decisions made long ago by the apostles and preserved by the intervening generations. In fact, however, the authority of the bishop, as guarantor of the tradition, legitimized the closed canon.

Considered in terms of a conflict among social groups and their competing types of canons, the success of Athanasius's program appears less clear than it might otherwise. To be sure, it was Athanasius's list of the books of the New Testament that eventually prevailed in worldwide Christianity, although it would be difficult to attribute this development to Athanasius's *Festal Letter* alone. The evidence from fourth-century Egypt is mixed. Theodore, the Pachomian leader, read Athanasius's letter to his monks, but what effect it had we cannot say.[97] It is possible that the burial of a hoard of manuscripts of diverse Christian writings across the Nile from Nag Hammadi indicates pressure to conform to Athanasian orthodoxy, but this is mere speculation. Meanwhile, two codices of the Bible that possibly—but not certainly—originated in fourth-century Alexandria feature New Testaments larger than Athanasius's: Codex Sinaiticus places *Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and possibly other works after Revelation; in Codex Alexandrinus, *1 Clement* and part of *2 Clement* follow Revelation.[98] Didymus the Blind, the head of the catechetical school until his death in 398, used a canon that included the *Shepherd*, the *Didache*, *Barnabas*, and *1 Clement*; his attitude toward scripture, moreover, was reminiscent of that of Origen.[99] The example of Didymus indicates the persistence of academic Christianity and its distinctive type of biblical canon after Athanasius. Twentieth-century scholarly debates over the status of the canon, provoked by the discovery of previously lost early Christian writings, may be seen as a contemporary manifestation of the ancient tension between episcopal and academic Christianities. Moreover, Athanasius's campaign against the martyr cult was ineffective: its persistent rise and elaboration in Christian Egypt and elsewhere are well known features of early medieval Christianity. Rather than

[96]Tetz, "Athanasius und die Einheit," 205–7.

[97]*Life of Pachomius* 189 [Bohairic Coptic], in Armand Veilleux, trans., *Pachomian Koinonia* (3 vols.; Cistercian Studies 45–47; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980) 1. 230–32; Louis-Theophile Lefort, "Théodore de Tabennese et la lettre de S. Athanase sur le canon de la Bible," *Mus* 29 (1910) 205–16.

[98]Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 165–70.

[99]Bart D. Ehrman, "The New Testament Canon of Didymus the Blind," *VC* 37 (1983) 1–21.

being replaced, these alternative forms of Christianity survived in ways that at various times cohered and conflicted with the hierarchical episcopate and its closed canon of scriptures. Thus, Athanasius's *Festal Letter*, far from being the decisive climax, was merely a signal moment in an ongoing process of Christian self-definition. To speak of the history of the formation of the single Christian biblical canon may oversimplify the development and interaction of diverse forms of early Christian piety, which carried with them unique practices of scriptural collection and interpretation—that is, different kinds of canons.