



## SOME FIRST IMPRESSIONS ON ANCIENT COLLECTIONS OF CANONS

An inept Roman Catholic apologist today pronounced that the Catholic church decided the contents of the bible, and did so at the Council of Carthage in 397. I can imagine Augustine raising an eyebrow at this, and quelling him where he stood. But it made me realise that actually I have never read the acts of that council. We often hear that the canon was closed at that time. However it is wise, invariably, to look at the primary source.

This evening I attempted to do so. I thought that I would record my first impressions, ignorant though I am, because they seemed interesting of themselves.

In my naivety, I supposed that the Acts were transmitted as a literary text, in various manuscripts of various dates, together with other texts or on their own. What I actually found was a rats' nest.

It seems that all these councils issued canons – rules for ecclesiastical conduct, mainly concerned with what bishop could do what, who could appeal to whom, and so on. But these were often not even recorded. If they were, they might be tidied up later. Often they would be incorporated in later collections.

I quickly discovered that our main source for the canons of Carthage in 397 is in fact a collection of canons from 419, worked up by the 6th century writer Dionysius Exiguus, into which a large chunk of material supposedly from earlier councils was plainly interpolated by the editor. An article from 1961 by F. L. Cross made clear how the intruded chunk simply did not fit.

And what was the council of 419 talking about? Well the African bishops were arguing with some delegates from Rome, who had come equipped with a set of “canons of Nicaea” which said that the bishop of Rome could do this or that. The Africans were suspicious, since their copies of these canons did not contain the relevant sections. So they decided to write to the bishops in the East and get an authentic copy of the Nicene canons. Nor were the Africans wrong: the Roman delegates had a copy interpolated with some material from the much less authoritative council of Serdica.

It's pretty bad to discover that, less than a century after Nicaea, nobody knew for sure what it said. So how can we, today, know what any given council said?

Well, we have editions of the material, such as Mansi. This in turn is based on selections from medieval manuscript copies of collections of canons.

The canons of Nicaea are 20 in number, and all pretty trivial. Nobody really feels bound by them, then or now. They are instructions on points of church discipline, and not divinely inspired in any way.

Indeed this conclusion also comes out of the council of 419, which proceeds to say that it will reaffirm some – some – of the canons of earlier councils. These are not Holy Writ, in capitals. This is ecclesiastical law in the making – internal rules for the church community at a time when it was increasingly rich and influential. If a rule worked, the next council might reaffirm it. If it did not, it would forget it.

This means that the canon which listed the books of the bible was not The Word Of The Lord. It was just a church regulation. Our inept apologist earlier was indeed very wide of the mark.

These collections of canons were mutable things. It was an ever changing thing, as circumstances altered. Copies of canon law might be updated locally.

But there is more. Can you say “forged decretals”? Church law could be a weapon in political struggles, internal or otherwise. People could and did invent such things. How convenient it was, for Pope Zosimus and his unfortunate emissaries, that the copy of the Canons of Nicaea that they had happened to be interpolated.

Of course a great deal of scholarship has gone into addressing these kinds of problems, most of it in the 19th century. On the other hand quite a bit of Catholic vs Protestant rivalry was also going on at the same time. When I learn that many of the authors are Germans, belonging to that very period and definitely combatants in those disputes, it does not fill me with confidence.

The whole thing gives you the heebie-geebies, frankly. Just how reliable is any of this stuff?

The only way to answer that is to educate oneself, and find out. I shall keep reading.

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