

# The Date of the Muratorian Fragment: An Inference to the Best Explanation



# The Date of the Muratorian Fragment: An Inference to the Best Explanation

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1. Muratorian fragment. 2. Bible. N.T.—Canon. I. Title.

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For Cora

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## Abbreviations

*ANF*

*Ante-Nicene Fathers*

*EH*

*Ecclesiastical History*

Epiph.

Epiphanius

Euseb.

Eusebius

Jer.

Jerome

Justin

Justin Martyr

*NPNF*

*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*

*PG*

*Patrologia Graeca*

Tert.

Tertullian

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# Introduction

## A Problem

### Statement of the Problem

Three hundred years after its discovery, scholars find themselves unable to identify the more likely of the two hypotheses regarding the date of the Muratorian Fragment, whether it is a late second- to early third-century composition or a fourth-century composition.

### Background of the Problem

In the year 1700, in the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana of Milan, philologist and historian Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750) discovered a manuscript fragment of eighty-five lines identifying and describing several Christian texts.<sup>1</sup> During the two and one-quarter centuries following the publication of this “Muratorian” Fragment, most scholars believed that the author’s reference to these texts constitutes the oldest orthodox catalog of New Testament texts, or canon, in existence, dating it to the late second or early third centuries.<sup>2</sup> In general, they inferred these dates from the Fragmentist’s references to two data:

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<sup>1</sup> In 1740, Muratori published the fragment in the third volume of a six-volume compilation of works entitled *Antiquitates italicæ mediævi*, in *Dissertatio XLIII*. Ludovico Antonio Muratori, ed., *Antiquitates italicæ mediævi: sive dissertationes de moribus, ritibus, religione, regimine, magistratibus, legibus, studiis literarum, artibus, lingua, militia, nummis, principibus, libertate, servitute, foederibus, aliisque faciem & mores italici populi referentibus post declinationem Rom. imp. ad annum usque MD.* (Mediolanum, IT: Ex typographia Societatis palatinæ, 1740), cols. 3:853–54. The document is considered a “fragment” because it appears to be a copy of a text which begins mid-sentence.

<sup>2</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, “The Muratorian Fragment: The State of Research,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 2 (2014): 231, 238–40. Though Marcion’s list may predate the Muratorian Fragment’s list, the church catholic did not consider him to be orthodox. See Tertullian, *Against Marcion* and Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.

## 2 Date of the Muratorian Fragment

First, the Fragmentist states that the *Shepherd of Hermas* was written during his own lifetime and during the bishopric of Pius (ca. 140– ca. 154).<sup>3</sup> This suggests that the Fragmentist lived and wrote during or after this period.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the two heresies mentioned, Marcionism and Montanism (lines 65, 81–5), prevailed during the second century, so their mention indicates a possible composition date in the late second or early third century.<sup>5</sup> While initially only one scholar, Friedrich Zimmermann, disagreed with this hypothesis of a late second- or early third-century date, canon scholar B. F. Westcott, in his *General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, dismissed Zimmermann's protest as unworthy of serious consideration.<sup>6</sup>

However, in the late 1960s and again in the early 1990s, two scholars argued extensively that the Fragment was a composition of the fourth century. First, New Testament scholar Albert C. Sundberg, Jr. cast doubt on the hypothesis of a second-century date by questioning the traditional interpretation of the evidence that led to that conclusion.<sup>7</sup> Instead, he looked to other evidence which he believed pointed less ambiguously toward the fourth century, and he argued for an eastern origin. Though the majority of canon scholars summarily dismissed Sundberg's conclusion, distinguished patristics scholar, Everett Ferguson, furnished a reasoned, extensive response to Sundberg, maintaining that the Fragment's evidence was better explained by the hypothesis that it was a second-century composition.<sup>8</sup> Later, Episcopalian priest, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, joined Sundberg in arguing that the Fragment was a composition of the fourth

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<sup>3</sup> Muratorian Fragment, lines 73–76. From here throughout the paper, references to portions of the Muratorian Fragment will be noted parenthetically in-text. For the chronology of the bishops of Rome and the time of Pius's bishopric see Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 4.11; 5.6, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Schnabel, "The Muratorian Fragment," 240.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Gottlieb Zimmermann, *Dissertatio historico-critica scriptoris incerti de canone librorum sacrorum fragmentum a Muratorio repertum exhibens* (Jena: Göpferdt, 1805), 33–39; Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1896), 216.

<sup>7</sup> Albert C. Sundberg, "Towards a Revised History of the NT Canon," in *Studia Evangelica*, vol. 3, *Papers Presented to the Third International Congress on NT Studies held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1965, Part 1, The NT Scriptures*, ed. Frank Leslie Cross (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968), 452–61; *idem*, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List," *Harvard Theological Review* 66, no. 1 (1973): 1–41.

<sup>8</sup> Everett Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 19, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Oxford, UK: Pergamon, Press, 1982), 677–83.

century, and he also brought several new reasons to the debate.<sup>9</sup> Again, Ferguson weighed in on the issue by reviewing Hahneman's book and questioning several of the latter's assumptions.<sup>10</sup> Professor of New Testament, Joseph Verheyden, responded to Hahneman by highlighting the similarities between the Fragment and other known second-century texts, concluding that the Fragment could not be a fourth-century composition.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, as the twentieth century closed, the question of the Fragment's date, which previously appeared to be settled since its discovery, hung in the balance. Sundberg and Hahneman had challenged the *status quo*, and Ferguson and Verheyden had questioned their assumptions. Both sides agreed on one thing: the debate appeared to be at a standstill. For example, Ferguson acknowledged the real complexity of what appeared to be an otherwise simple problem by highlighting the significant roles the evidence, coupled with one's presuppositions, plays. According to him, "The issue . . . is not clear cut, and the evidence is finely balanced. There needs to be caution exercised, moreover, about the framework in which this material is put."<sup>12</sup> In the wake of Sundberg's and Hahneman's work, canon scholar and fourth-century adherent Lee Martin McDonald conceded that "we cannot insist on" a fourth-century date.<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason that, while on one hand, professor of New Testament and early Christianity, Charles E. Hill believes "the stage is set for important work to be done in this area," on the other hand, professor of religious studies, Harry Y. Gamble, acknowledges that "it is hard to imagine what more could be said on either side."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey M. Hahneman, "The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1987); idem, "More on Redating the Muratorian Fragment," in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 19, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven, BE: Peeters Press, 1989), 359–65; idem, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1992); idem, "The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 668–86.

<sup>10</sup> Everett Ferguson, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Journal of Theological Studies* 44, no. 2 (October 1993): 691–97.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Verheyden, "The Canon Muratori: A Matter of Dispute," in *The Biblical Canons*, edited by J.-M. Auwers and H. J. De Jonge (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 487–556. For example, Verheyden notes that Clement of Alexandria and Origen, like the Fragmentist, knew of a Fourfold Gospel canon.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, review of *The Muratorian Fragment*, 697.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 693.

<sup>14</sup> Charles E. Hill, "The Debate Over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 452; Harry Y. Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Questionis," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 442.

#### 4 *Date of the Muratorian Fragment*

Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century another argument for a fourth-century date surfaced. In an article entitled “The Muratorian Fragment as Roman Fake,” biblical scholar Clare K. Rothschild argued that the Fragment is a fictional piece, written in the fourth century in an attempt to link the standards of canonicity back to the second century by pretending to have been written then.<sup>15</sup> According to her, this forgery “betrays itself through anachronisms . . . clichés, and mistakes.”<sup>16</sup> Like Sundberg and Hahneman, Rothschild favored the fourth-century theory but for altogether different reasons. Rothschild also cited several earlier scholars who seem to have come close to drawing similar conclusions.<sup>17</sup> First, in 1845, around the one hundredth anniversary of Muratori’s publication of the Fragment, philologist and theologian H. W. J. Thiersch insinuated that the Fragment was a hoax; a production of the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Westcott noticed that the Fragment appeared to constitute a compendium of several different sections, possibly written by more than one unknown person and edited together by the Fragmentist, yet Westcott still favored a second-century date.<sup>19</sup> Also, Rothschild cited Robert M. Grant in his review of Hahneman’s book, acknowledging that, though the Fragment dates itself to the second century, it can only be a work of the fourth.<sup>20</sup> Thus, with two separate conclusions having been reached about the Fragment’s date, each apparently carrying arguably equal weight, yet stemming from a variety of presuppositions, disparate evidence, and dissimilar reasons, Rothschild acknowledges that “today scholarship has reached an impasse.”<sup>21</sup>

#### Significance of the Problem

The problem of whether the Muratorian Fragment is a late second- to early third-century or fourth-century composition warrants consideration because the elimination of one of the hypotheses will contribute to the resolution of other critical problems surrounding the document. For example, scholars still have not reached a consensus on who authored the Fragment. The list of possibilities manifests remarkable diversity, including the names of Papias,

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<sup>15</sup> Clare K. Rothschild, “The Muratorian Fragment and Roman Fake,” *Novum Testamentum* 60, no. 1 (2018): 55–82.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 60n13, 62, 79n122.

<sup>18</sup> H. W. J. Thiersch, *Versuch zur Herstellung des historischen Standpunkts für die Kritik der neutestamentlichen Schriften* (Erlangen, DE: Carl Heyder, 1845), 384–87, which contain endnote 7 for Ch. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Westcott, *A General Survey*, 223.

<sup>20</sup> Rothschild, “The Muratorian Fragment,” 79n122; Robert M. Grant, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Church History* 64, no. 4 (December 1995): 639.

<sup>21</sup> Rothschild, “The Muratorian Fragment,” 58.

Irenæus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Clement of Alexandria among others.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, because of the recently suggested possibility that the Fragment is a fourth-century composition, the list of possible authors has now expanded to include the Cappadocian Fathers, Athanasius, Eusebius, Lactantius, and Hilary. Solving the problem of the Fragment's date would establish a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*.

In other words, for example, if the Fragment proved to be a fourth-century composition, no author who died prior to ca. 300 could possibly have written it. The finding with regard to date thus narrows the pool of authors to a more manageable number of "more-likely" names. Scholars could then further narrow the list by comparing the possible authors with the Fragment's internal evidence to determine which authors are more likely to have written it. If, on the other hand, for example, the Fragment proved to be a second-century composition, Tertullian, while a possible author, might prove to be an unlikely author given the Fragment's apparent censure of Montanism.

Moreover, knowing the likely author leads to the resolutions of other questions, such as: in what language was the Fragment probably originally written, Latin or Greek? What is its provenance? What was its destination (if any)? What was the situation the author sought to address? The possible answers to each of these questions could be further narrowed by filtering them through the Fragment's internal evidence. While this process does not necessarily lead to certainty based on indisputable evidence, it does result in higher likelihood based on a preponderance of circumstantial evidence.

Furthermore, and finally, the answers to these questions lead to the solutions of problems of arguably greater import. If one could reasonably determine the most likely author, original language, provenance, destination, and situation, one might also be able to infer conclusions regarding the author's theology, including his theological method (theological sources, epistemology). In turn, understanding the theology driving the Fragment's composition leads to a greater comprehension of the factors driving the development of other supposed New Testament canonical lists (or *not* driving them, as the case may be). Also, the theology driving and controlling the compilation of these lists has remarkable implications for the historical development of ancient Christian theology as well as for the more momentous issue of what most scholars consider to be orthodox theology's interaction with heterodoxy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For a list of some of the possible authors and the scholars who suggest them see Schnabel, "The Muratorian Fragment," 240.

<sup>23</sup> The traditional view of the very nature of early Christian theology has at times been challenged and reaffirmed by scholars. For examples see Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen, 1934) and Andreas J.

In the final analysis, answering the question of the Fragment's date may ultimately shed light on the residual effects of ancient orthodox theology's interaction with heterodoxy upon the twenty-first century, effects possibly having a direct correlation with the authority that Christianity ascribes to the texts which it currently includes in the New Testament. Coming to an understanding of which of these texts are the "right" ones is critical, for it is primarily from the New Testament that Christianity claims to derive its theology. As D. F. Strauss recognized, the problem of the New Testament canon may very well be Christian theology's Achilles's heel.<sup>24</sup> This significance is not lost on scholars. For example, McDonald acknowledges that knowing whether or not the Fragment is a second- or fourth-century composition has a direct bearing on our understanding of "the concerns and criteria of the church . . . in establishing its canon of Scriptures."<sup>25</sup> For this reason, an understandably substantial corpus of literature related to this problem of the Fragment's date has emerged.

### Review of the Related Literature

Muratorian's hypothesis that the Fragment was written in 196 initially encountered some disagreement, but the vast majority of these disputations revolved around the late second or early third centuries as the period of composition. Every scholar seemed to have his particular year of preference, whether it be 170, or 196, or 220, or others. Nevertheless, for the most part, Muratorian's hypothesis offered a good explanation for the evidence. That being said, the question is: how did the issue of the Fragment's date become such a controversy, expanding the possibilities from a sixty-year period (from ca. 160–220) to a 215-year period (from ca. 160–392)?<sup>26</sup> The following review of the related literature answers this question by tracing the manner in which scholars have tried to explain the available evidence.<sup>27</sup>

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Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> D. F. Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1840), 1:136.

<sup>25</sup> McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 694.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Canon Muratorianus: The Earliest Catalogue of the Books of the New Testament* (Oxford: Cambridge, 1867), 64; Schnabel, "The Muratorian Fragment," 240; Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment*, 216.

<sup>27</sup> In addition to the literature treated in this review, other secondary literature on the Fragment's date which may be of interest to the reader includes Adolf von Harnack, "Das Muratorische Fragment," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 3 (1878): 595–99; J. B. Dunelm, "The Muratorian Fragment," *The Academy* 36, no. 907 (September 21, 1889): 186–88; Johannes Leipoldt, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons: Erster Teil, Die Entstehung* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1907), 1.34–35n3; Johann Peter

Muratorī, as its discoverer, was the first to suggest a date for his Fragment, and he argued that it was a second-century work. He did this by linking the Fragment's reference to the Cataphrygians with a controversy in which Roman priest Caius played a role by debating one Proclus, "who contended for the Phrygian heresy."<sup>28</sup> According to Photios of Constantinople, a Caius flourished around 196, and Muratorī credited this Caius as the Fragment's author, supposing that he had written it that year.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Muratorī reinforced his hypothesis with what he called "a stronger argument," namely the Fragmentist's claims that the *Shepherd of Hermas* was written "very recently in our time" and that Hermas was a

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Kirsch, "Muratorian Canon," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. C. G. Herbermann et al. (London: Caxton, 1911), 10:642; Carl Erbes, "Die Zeit des Muratorischen Fragments," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 35 (1914): 331–62; B. H. Streeter, *The Primitive Church* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 205; Nils Dahl, "Welche Ordnung der Paulusbriefe wird vom muratorischen Kanon vorausgesetzt?," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 52 (1961): 39–53; Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 242–62; Jerome D. Quinn, "P46, The Pauline Canon?," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (July 1974): 379–85; Werner Georg Kümmel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 17th ed. (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1975), 434–35; Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 10n14; William F. Farmer and Denis M. Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the NT Canon: An Ecumenical Approach* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 60; Brevard S. Childs, *The NT as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 238; Denis M. Farkasfalvy, "The Ecclesial Setting of Pseudepigraphy in Second Peter and its Role in the Formation of the Canon," *The Second Century* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1985–1986): 29n50; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1987), 191n3; Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM, 1990), 243; Wilhelm Schneemelcher, "General Introduction," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, *Gospels and Related Writings*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 28, 72; Gregory A. Robbins, "Muratorian Fragment," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:929; Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 213–20; John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997) 10; John Barton, "Marcion Revisited," in *The Canon Debate*, 559–84; Theo K. Heckel, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 339–45; and Charles F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the NT* (London: Continuum, 2002), 260n; Edmon Gallagher and John Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 175–83.

<sup>28</sup> Muratorī, *Antiquitates italicæ mediævi*, col. 3:851; Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History*. 6.20.3, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF)*, 14 vols., (1890–1900; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 2:1:268.

<sup>29</sup> Muratorī, *Antiquitates italicæ mediævi*, col. 3:851.

contemporary of Pius.<sup>30</sup> These statements appear to establish a date in the second century.

However, in his *Dissertatio historico-critica scriptoris*, theologian Friedrich Gottlieb Zimmermann declared that he was not convinced that the Fragmentist's statement about Hermas and Pius was best explained by a second-century date because he doubted the veracity of the Fragmentist's claim that Hermas and Pius were brothers; a claim that he posited had never been verified. In addition, while Zimmermann agreed that Caius flourished around 196, he was not so quick to form a connection between the Fragmentist's Cataphrygian heresy and Caius's debate with Proclus. The link is not necessary as it is likely, in Zimmermann's opinion, that many would have agreed with Caius against the Cataphrygians, and the Fragmentist may simply have been one of them. Furthermore, and contrary to Muratori's hypothesis, Zimmermann concluded that the Fragmentist did not live before the fourth century because the Fragmentist's treatment of Christian texts (i.e. his approval of some and his rejection of others) betrayed, in his opinion, a fourth-century theological context.<sup>31</sup>

Other scholars' positions did not fall so neatly on one side of the line or the other. In *Einleitung in die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, Johann Leonhard Hug disagreed with both Muratori and Zimmermann. He believed the Fragment to be an early third-century work, though he made no mention of the supposed relationship between Hermas and Pius, nor did he point back to Zimmermann's doubts about it.<sup>32</sup> Siding with Muratori, Karl August Credner (*Zur Geschichte des Kanons*) believed both Zimmermann's fourth-century date and Hug's third-century date to be impossibilities due to the evidence which, in his view, betrayed a Fragmentist who clearly placed himself in the second century. Credner maintained that the document was composed around 170, or "possibly a few decades later."<sup>33</sup> He cited the Fragmentist's mention of Hermas and Pius as evidence of this.<sup>34</sup>

Because of these disagreements, in his *Critical History of Christian Literature and Doctrine*, classics scholar James Donaldson understood that "we must content ourselves with an approximation to a date."<sup>35</sup> He

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<sup>30</sup> Muratori, *Antiquitates italicae mediævi*, col. 3:852; the Latin for "very recently in our times" in the Latin is "nuperrime temporibus nostris."

<sup>31</sup> Zimmermann, *Dissertatio historico-critica scriptoris*, 33–34, 36–39.

<sup>32</sup> Johann Leonhard Hug, *Einleitung in die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1847), 1:105–8.

<sup>33</sup> Karl August Credner, *Zur Geschichte des Kanons* (Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1847), 84.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> James Donaldson, *A Critical History of Christian Literature and Doctrine: From the Death of the Apostles to the Nicene Council*, vol. 3, *The Apologists (Continued)* (London, Macmillan, 1866), 212.

contented himself with the early third century. He preferred an approximation because he, like Zimmermann, did not believe the Fragmentist's reference to Hermas and Pius was well explained by the second-century hypothesis. The Fragment's mutilated condition, apparent omissions, the author's poor use of Latin, and the possibility of interpolations all detracted from any confidence one may have in establishing a date based on internal evidence. In addition, *nuperrime temporibus nostris* may not mean during the author's lifetime, but instead may have been the author's way of drawing a distinction between the times of the apostles and his own. Also, the expression "sitting in the seat of the church of the city of Rome" indicated a context more in line with that of Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200–258) than with Tertullian (ca. 155–220), leading Donaldson to date the Fragment in the early third century.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Donaldson denied the historicity of the person of Hermas, but he cited no reason for this departure from the hitherto held consensus that the putative author of *Shepherd* existed.

However, biblical scholar, textual critic, and theologian, Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (*Canon Muratorianus*), like Muratori and Credner, argued that the Fragment is as early as 160 due to the author's statement that Hermas had written his *Shepherd* "very recently in our time" while Pius was "sitting."<sup>37</sup> Tregelles did not believe that more than twenty years passed between the composition of *Shepherd* and the Fragment.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, though theologian George Salmon ("Muratorian Fragment" in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*) did not consider the statement about Hermas and Pius to be conclusive, he determined that the Fragment was a late second- or early third-century composition. He argued that the Fragment was written during the bishopric of Zephyrinus (ca. 199–ca. 217). First, and in accord with Donaldson, Salmon believed the expression *temporibus nostris* did not necessitate a date within the speaker's lifetime, and Salmon cited Irenæus and Eusebius as having used similar expressions regarding events which clearly took place before their lifetimes. This possibility would allow for a case in which the Fragmentist may have been contrasting "our time" against the time of the apostles and not referring literally to a point in time during his own life. Against Tregelles, Salmon maintained that even if the Fragmentist wrote fifty or sixty years after the death of Pius, he could conceivably have used such an expression. Also against Tregelles, but in agreement with Donaldson, Salmon believed the Fragmentist's language, in

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<sup>36</sup> Donaldson believes the Fragment to be of a North African provenance thus his reference to these two particular Fathers. The Latin for "sitting in the seat of the church of the city of Rome" is "sedente cathedra urbis romae ecclesiae."

<sup>37</sup> "Sitting" is "sedente" in the Latin here.

<sup>38</sup> Tregelles, *Canon Muratorianus*, 64.

his assertion that the *Shepherd of Hermas* was written with Pius “sitting on the seat of the church of the city Rome,” indicated a date after the time of Pius and Hermas. According to Salmon, the date of composition was so removed from their time that the writer probably had no recollection of the struggle for the bishopric of Rome that had taken place during the second century.<sup>39</sup> However, Salmon provided no evidence for such a contested See of Rome. Regardless, Salmon concluded that the Fragment was written at some time between Tertullian’s *Prayer* and his *Modesty* due to Tertullian’s change in position on the authority of *Shepherd*.<sup>40</sup> While at one point, Tertullian cited *Shepherd* as normative, at another he called it “that apocryphal ‘*Shepherd*’ of adulterers.”<sup>41</sup> Between these writings, said Salmon, apparently both the Catholic church and the Montanists came to look askance at *Shepherd*, and Salmon believed this was why the Fragmentist was against its public reading with the prophets and the apostles (lines 73–80). Salmon believed that the Fragment possibly represented the church’s official step in censuring *Shepherd*.<sup>42</sup>

Salmon was the last of the nineteenth-century scholars to cast a skeptical eye on a literal interpretation of the internal evidence offered by the Fragmentist regarding the date of the work. Until Sundberg in the 1960s, the rest considered the statement regarding Hermas and Pius in a literal sense and as best explained by either a second or third century Fragment. For example, the New Testament canon scholar Theodor Zahn, in *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* and his article “Muratorian Canon” in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, did not doubt that the Fragmentist lived during the time of Pius as claimed. However, Zahn thought it likely that he had only been a child during the bishop’s reign and that he penned the Fragment after Pius; the work being “a writing of about 200–210.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, Zahn shunned the notion of a fifth-century, or even a fourth-century Fragment because it was his opinion that the question regarding the public reading of the *Shepherd of Hermas* was

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<sup>39</sup> George Salmon, “Muratorian Fragment,” in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines: Being a Continuation of “The Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 1,”* vol. 3., ed. William Smith and Henry Wace (London: Murray, 1882), 1002.

<sup>40</sup> Salmon, “Muratorian Fragment,” 1002–3.

<sup>41</sup> Tert., *Prayer* 16; idem, *Modesty* 19, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF)*, 10 vols., (1885–1887; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 4:97.

<sup>42</sup> George Salmon, “Muratorian Fragment,” 1003.

<sup>43</sup> Theodor Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, vol. 1, *Das Neue Testament vor Origenes* (Erlangen, DE: Deichert, 1888–1889), 340, 438; idem, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, s.v. “Muratorian Canon,” (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914).

limited to the time around 200.<sup>44</sup> Also, Westcott was under the impression that the mention of Hermas and Pius in the Fragment offered support for a second-century date, and he corroborated this internal evidence by citing a Latin, anti-Marcionite poem which made the same statement and was attributed to Pius himself.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Westcott had no doubt that the Fragment came from the second century, and he considered the author's statement regarding *Shepherd's* having been written during his and Pius's time as "perfectly clear, definite, and consistent with its contents, and there can be no reason either to question its accuracy or to interpret it loosely."<sup>46</sup> Likewise, patrologist Johannes Quasten took the Fragmentist's statement about Hermas and Pius at face value and concluded that it was written sometime between the death of Pius (ca. 155) and the end of the second century.<sup>47</sup>

However, in the middle of the twentieth century, the hypothesis that the Fragment is a second- or third-century composition faced perhaps its greatest challenge. In 1957, at Harvard University, Albert Sundberg authored his dissertation arguing that the Old Testament canon was not fixed until the fourth century and that the church, prior to that time, had received and recognized only a loose list of putatively authoritative Jewish scriptures.<sup>48</sup> For this reason, Sundberg believed that the history of the New Testament canon stood in need of revision and that the Muratorian Fragment represented the work of a fourth-century author, thus resurrecting the Zimmermann thesis. Sundberg initially presented this theory about the New Testament canon in 1965, at the Third International Congress of New Testament Studies held at Oxford, in the form of an essay entitled "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon." Later, Sundberg turned this essay into his landmark article "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List."

In making his case for a fourth-century Fragment, Sundberg first dismantled scholars' confidence that the statement regarding Hermas and Pius was necessarily explained by the second-century hypothesis by casting doubt on their translation of the phrase *nuperrime temporibus nostris*. While, as some claimed, the term *nuperrime* should be translated "very recently," Sundberg showed that it could just as viably mean "most recently."<sup>49</sup> Sundberg contended that, in this way, the Fragmentist was comparing the

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<sup>44</sup> Zahn, "Muratorian Canon," 54.

<sup>45</sup> Westcott, *A General Survey*, 199.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 215n1.

<sup>47</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, *The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1950), 208.

<sup>48</sup> Albert Carl Sundberg Jr., "The Old Testament of the Early Church (A Study in Canon)" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1957).

<sup>49</sup> Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," 8.

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*Shepherd of Hermas*'s composition with the previously mentioned texts. In other words, the Fragmentist was stating that, of all these texts, *Shepherd* was written last or most recently, not necessarily that it was written during his own lifetime.

Moreover, inasmuch as some scholars had translated the expression *temporibus nostris* to mean "in our lifetime," Sundberg insisted that it may also indicate a broader period of time after the apostles, and therefore could be more general in nature and include any time, both within or subsequent to the second and third centuries.<sup>50</sup> The church fathers made a sharp distinction between themselves and the apostles.<sup>51</sup> For example, church historian Hegesippus (ca. 110–180) contrasted the time of the apostles with his own by declaring that during the apostles' time the church "was not yet corrupted by vain discourses."<sup>52</sup> Later, in the fourth century, Eusebius also drew a line between the "apostolic age" and subsequent times.<sup>53</sup> More significantly, Irenæus (ca. 115–202) used language almost identical to that of the Fragmentist (except in Greek) when characterizing the Apocalypse as having been written "almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign."<sup>54</sup> For Irenæus to have considered Domitian's time (ca. 81–96) as his own, when about nineteen years had passed between Domitian's death and his own birth, he had to have been "utilizing the tradition which differentiates between apostolic and subsequent time."<sup>55</sup>

In short, Sundberg did not find a solution to the problem of the Fragment's date in the reference to Hermas and Pius due to a perceived ambiguity in the language. Given this doubt, yet acknowledging the possibility that the expression *nuperrime temporibus nostris* may still mean what it had traditionally come to mean to most scholars, Sundberg next set out to offer a positive conclusion for the date. Sundberg transitioned from this negative argument to his positive one by making it clear that the language of Canon Muratori could be understood as making its case against the *Shepherd of Hermas* without any reference to the lifetime of the author of the list. The translation that states "but Hermas wrote the *Shepherd* most recently, in our time (i.e., in post-apostolic times), in the city of Rome, while his brother Pius was the bishop occupying the episcopal chair of the church of the city of Rome," is not the only possible translation of the text, though it is a viable alternative to the traditional dogmatic interpretation of the

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<sup>50</sup> Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 13; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 3.9.

<sup>52</sup> Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 4.22.4 (NPNF 2:1:199).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.31.6 (NPNF 2:1:163).

<sup>54</sup> Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," 9–10; Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8.6 (NPNF 2:1:222; PG 20:449), "ἄλλα σχεδόν ἐπὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας γενεάς, πρὸς τῷ τέλει τῆς Δομετιανῶν ἀρχῆς."

<sup>55</sup> Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," 10.

passage. Thus, the argument that the author of the fragment must have been born before the death of Pius is inconclusive, and the phrase “*nuperrime temporibus nostris*” understood as contrasted with the times of the prophets and of the apostles is another viable meaning of the passage.<sup>56</sup>

In seeking a date, Sundberg found what he believed to be stronger evidence for a date elsewhere in the Fragment. According to him, the Fragmentist’s treatment of several of the texts listed betray a fourth-century context in the East rather than any context in the West. First, Sundberg considered the Fragmentist’s treatment of the *Shepherd of Hermas* to be more consistent with Eusebius’s (303) and Athanasius’s (367) than with the Fathers of the second and third centuries.<sup>57</sup> Second, no parallels to the way the Fragmentist handled the *Wisdom of Solomon* explicitly presented themselves prior to Eusebius, Epiphanius (ca. 310–403), and Athanasius.<sup>58</sup> *Wisdom*’s usefulness in the church did not become an issue until the fourth century, which is consistent with the Fragmentist’s inclusion thereof. Finally, the Fragment’s apparent equivocal treatment of the Apocalypse (i.e. John’s) and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, by placing them last in the list, appears to match the way Eusebius treated the same; a development which did not manifest until late, and then only in the East. Based on these observations, Sundberg concluded that “it has become increasingly clear that there are several salient features of Canon Muratori that have no place in the early western church but find their earliest parallels in the eastern church during the late third and fourth centuries.”<sup>59</sup> Therefore, if the Fragment is a second-century composition, it constitutes an “anomaly.”<sup>60</sup> Based on this conclusion, Sundberg later went on to downplay the Fragment’s role in the overall history of the New Testament canon.<sup>61</sup> Sundberg’s theory initially faced mixed reception during the 1970s. Yale New Testament professor Nils A. Dahl thought Sundberg “proved” his case, but New Testament scholar John A. T. Robinson believed Sundberg’s argument to be “questionable at

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<sup>56</sup> Sundberg, “Canon Muratori,” 11.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–15; Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.4; Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.

<sup>58</sup> Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8.1–8; Epiphanius, *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.1.8.6.4. Sundberg maintains that Melito’s Old Testament does not contain the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and that after him, no eastern Father included it in the Old Testament but tended to place it in the New Testament, a practice which is apparently consistent with that of the Fragmentist. Sundberg, “The Old Testament,” 220n69.

<sup>59</sup> Sundberg, “Canon Muratori,” 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>61</sup> Albert C. Sundberg, Jr., “The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration,” *Interpretation* 29, no. 4 (October 1975): 362.

many points.”<sup>62</sup> Almost a decade after Sundberg published his findings in his “Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance,” Everett Ferguson responded to Sundberg point-by-point.

Regardless of Sundberg’s minimizing of the traditional view of *nuperrime temporibus nostris*, Ferguson asserted that interpreting it as “in our lifetime” is “the most natural meaning of the author’s statement.”<sup>63</sup> Also, contra Sundberg, Ferguson argued that Irenæus’s expression ἄλλα σχεδόν ἐπὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας γενεάς means “almost to the present generation” [emphases added].<sup>64</sup> Irenæus was illustrating how close to his time the Apocalypse was written, not distinguishing between apostolic times and post-apostolic times. If, as Sundberg claimed, Irenæus was using the same type of language as the Fragmentist, then the former’s ἡμετέρας γενεάς is equivalent to the latter’s *temporibus nostris*, and this argues against Sundberg; it puts the *Shepherd of Hermas* within the lifetime (or generation) of the Fragmentist. Ferguson agreed with Sundberg that the Fathers had made a distinction between their own times and those of the apostles, but he held that this was not the way they did it. Moreover, Ferguson found that the Fragmentist’s highlighting the lateness of a text to demonstrate its lack of authority finds a parallel in Tertullian.<sup>65</sup> To Ferguson, it seemed that not all in the Fragment was post-second-century.

Ferguson further charged Sundberg with the need to show that features in the Fragment could *only* have existed during the fourth century and not before. Because it is unlikely the text was originally written in Latin, linguistic analysis can only reliably determine the context of its translation. Ferguson did not believe the original was Latin but highlighted the fact that, if it was, it could only have a western provenance. However, if it was originally written in Greek, as Sundberg and most scholars held, it could have an early provenance in either the East *or* the West. Notwithstanding this possibility, for the sake of argument Ferguson cited two lexical features in the Fragment which had affinities in the second century. The Fragmentist’s use of *disciplina* (line 63) sounds like Tertullian’s “rules” and “discipline” for the church, and the Fragmentist’s reference to the bishop’s chair found a parallel in Irenæus’s mention of the “chair” as the “symbol of teaching.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Nils A. Dahl, “The Origin of the Earliest Prologues to the Pauline Letters,” *Semeia* 12 (1978): 237; John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 319n41.

<sup>63</sup> Ferguson, “Canon Muratori,” 678.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* Ferguson supports this use by citing others: *1 Clement* 5, Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 3.32.8, 5.8.6, 5.26.22.

<sup>65</sup> Tert., *Prescription against Heretics* 30; *idem*, *Against Marcion* 4.5

<sup>66</sup> Ferguson, “Canon Muratori,” 678; Tert., *Prescription against Heretics* 36, 44 (*ANF* 3:261, 265) and *idem*, *The Veiling of Virgins* 16 (*ANF* 4:36–37); Irenæus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 2.

Ferguson also rejected Sundberg's notion that the Fragmentist's attitude toward the *Shepherd of Hermas* was a uniquely fourth-century one. According to Ferguson, the Fragmentist may have been attempting to counter a second- or third-century wholesale approval for *Shepherd* similar to the perceived approval found in Irenæus and Clement of Alexandria.<sup>67</sup> In addition, he saw Tertullian's eventual reluctance toward *Shepherd* as a parallel to the Fragment's proscription against its being authoritatively and publicly read.<sup>68</sup> It is not impossible that both the Montanist Tertullian and the church catholic found fault with *Shepherd*, though for different reasons and to varying extents. Unlike Sundberg, Ferguson did not see a turning point regarding *Shepherd* in Eusebius, but rather a report of a condition that had existed since around the time of Tertullian, a text which "has been disputed by some, and on their account cannot be placed among the acknowledged books; while by others it is considered quite indispensable, especially to those who need instruction in the elements of the faith. Hence, as we know, it has been publicly read in churches."<sup>69</sup>

Though Sundberg claimed that the *Wisdom of Solomon* was not explicitly listed among the New Testament texts until Eusebius, Ferguson highlighted the fact that Eusebius's mention was in the context of describing Irenæus's New Testament; Sundberg seemed to brush over this fact.<sup>70</sup> According to Eusebius, Irenæus quoted *Wisdom* as Scripture.<sup>71</sup> Thus, as Ferguson noticed, "the New Testament canon of the Muratorian fragment has a parallel . . . before 200."<sup>72</sup>

Finally, Ferguson deemed Sundberg's statements regarding the Apocalypse and the *Apocalypse of Peter* uncertain. First, the Fragmentist's placement of the Apocalypse toward the end of the list did not necessarily mean it was on the "fringe" of acceptance, as Sundberg asserted.<sup>73</sup> Something had to come last, and since the *Apocalypse of Peter* was not permitted to be publically read by some, and the fact that both books were eschatological in character, placing them together at the end seems only natural. Also, not all in the East had doubts about the Apocalypse, and as Sundberg himself conceded, the Fragmentist's attitude toward it was more positive than that of Eusebius.<sup>74</sup> In addition, Ferguson did not see a

<sup>67</sup> Ferguson, "Canon Muratori," 679; Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," 12–13; Irenæus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.2; Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8.7; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.17, 29; 2.1, 9, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Tert., *Modesty*. 10, 20.

<sup>69</sup> Ferguson, "Canon Muratori," 679; Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.6 (NPNF 2.1.135).

<sup>70</sup> Ferguson, "Canon Muratori," 679.

<sup>71</sup> Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8.1, 8 (NPNF 2.1.222, 223).

<sup>72</sup> Ferguson, "Canon Muratori," 679.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 680.

<sup>74</sup> Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," 26.

convincing argument in Sundberg's understanding that *Apocalypse of Peter* was only known in the East and that the Fragmentist's treatment of it found a parallel in Eusebius; Eusebius was more negative while the Fragmentist more positive.<sup>75</sup> This positivity may also account for why Clement of Alexandria offered "in the *Hypotyposes* [now lost] abridged accounts of all canonical Scripture, not omitting the disputed books, — I [i.e. Eusebius] refer to Jude and the other Catholic Epistles, and Barnabas and the so-called *Apocalypse of Peter*," a fact known to Sundberg.<sup>76</sup>

To summarize the Sundberg/Ferguson debate at this point, Sundberg cast doubt on scholars' interpretation of the author's statement that Pius lived during his lifetime. Sundberg sought to replace this doubt with confidence in another indication of the Fragment's date by arguing that evidence for a fourth-century date could be found in the Fragmentist's attitude toward the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, the *Apocalypse*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. However, Ferguson, in turn, cast doubt on Sundberg's interpretation of these statements. Ferguson went on to argue for the second century in the West. He cited the Fragmentist's silence on the epistle to the Hebrews (a likelihood greater in the West rather than in the East); his treatment of the heresies; his emphasis on the "rule of faith;" his language when referring to the two advents of Christ; his description of the Fourth Gospel; and his classification of the "prophets and the apostles" as all proving consistent with a second-century milieu.<sup>77</sup> While the Fragment furnished evidence of its date, Sundberg and Ferguson interpreted that evidence differently, and the two hypotheses persisted.

Nevertheless, for the remainder of the 1980s most scholars dismissed Sundberg's arguments as unpersuasive. The exception to this trend was New Testament exegete Raymond Collins, who opined that Sundberg's consisted of a "careful analysis" and that Sundberg succeeded at showing the Fragment to be of the fourth century.<sup>78</sup> While Harry T. Gamble initially found Sundberg's argument "interesting" but "not convincing," he later changed his view and stated his belief in a fourth-century Fragment.<sup>79</sup> Had the Fragmentist written "nuper" instead of "nuperrime," or even simply "temporibus nostris," F. F. Bruce would have inclined towards Sundberg, yet Bruce held to a second-century date, though he credited Sundberg with

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<sup>75</sup> Ferguson, "Canon Muratori," 680.

<sup>76</sup> Euseb., *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.1 (NPNF 2.1.261); Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," 28.

<sup>77</sup> Ferguson, "Canon Muratori," 681.

<sup>78</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 35.

<sup>79</sup> Harry T. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 32n25; idem, "Canon. NT," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:856.

making an impressive case.<sup>80</sup> However, from the late 1980s into the early 1990s, Sundberg's hypothesis would garner support and expansion through the work of Geoffrey M. Hahneman.

In 1987, Hahneman presented a paper to the Tenth International Conference on Patristic Studies at Oxford in which he expressed his agreement with Sundberg that the Fragment is a fourth-century composition.<sup>81</sup> Hahneman cast doubt on the interpretations of the evidence pointing to a second-century date by questioning the veracity of statements by the Fragmentist regarding Hermas, Pius, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In 1992, Hahneman published his 1989 D.Phil. thesis, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, in which, like Sundberg, he dismissed the likelihood that the Fragment is a second-century work and made an argument that any dependence on *nuperrime temporibus nostris* should be set aside as featuring too many difficulties to lead to a reliable conclusion.<sup>82</sup> He then proceeded to argue for a fourth-century date via three avenues. First, he attempted to demonstrate that the Fragmentist's mention of "Miltiades" betrays a dependence on Eusebius; thus the earliest possible date for the Fragment would be 303. Second, he sought to show that Jerome looked to the Fragment as a source, putting its latest possible date at 392. Third, Hahneman saw three similarities between the Fragment and the *Refutation of All Heresies* of Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 377): Epiphanius's inclusion of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, his mention of the supposed Marcionite *Epistle to the Laodiceans*, and the presence of the Apocalypse.

Hahneman's summation of and supplement to Sundberg's work met with credence from several scholars. For example, while conceding that Hahneman's monograph had "weak spots and some special pleading," J. K. Elliott believed it made a "credible case," and Lee McDonald believed both Sundberg and Hahneman "carry the day."<sup>83</sup> So convinced by Hahneman was Robert M. Grant that he declared "the Sundberg-Hahneman theory is eminently convincing, and the Muratorian fragment . . . should be permanently removed from the second century."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> F. F. Bruce, "Some Thoughts on the Beginning of the New Testament Canon," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65, no. 2 (1983): 56–57; idem, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grover, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 158, 158n2.

<sup>81</sup> Hahneman, "More on Redating," 359–65.

<sup>82</sup> Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment*, 35–73.

<sup>83</sup> John K. Elliott, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (July 1994): 299; McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 694.

<sup>84</sup> Robert M. Grant, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Church History* 64, no. 4 (December 1995): 639.

However, other scholars did not find Hahneman persuasive and launched arguments against his case.<sup>85</sup> First, Ferguson contended that Hahneman failed to show proof that the evidence can only be explained by a fourth-century date, and he highlighted inconsistencies in the way Hahneman treats portions of the Fragment. Much of Ferguson's contention with Hahneman centers on the way the latter defines "canon" and other notions. For example, whereas Hahneman views parallels in the fourth century as "canon forming," Ferguson considers them to be "canon settling."<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Ferguson questioned many of Hahneman's presuppositions regarding the idea of "canon," as these presuppositions appear to steer his interpretation of the evidence and his reasoning. Also, whereas Sundberg found his primary dissenter in Ferguson, professor of New Testament Joseph Verheyden offered his rebuttal of Hahneman's argument in an essay presented in July, 2001, to the Fiftieth Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense, which was published two years later in *The Biblical Canons*. Verheyden opined that, though there was "no 'hard' evidence for the traditional dating . . . there is an abundance of 'circumstantial evidence.'"<sup>87</sup> He flatly rejected the suggestion that the Fragment was from the fourth century. He still considered the information given regarding Hermas and Pius to be integral to the question of date, and he believed the similarities between the Fragment and other second-century works could not be ignored. For him, a second-century date best explained the apparent problems.

In addition to Ferguson's and Verheyden's responses in the wake of Hahnemann, other scholars disagreed with Hahneman's argument.<sup>88</sup> In his review of Hahnemann's book, professor of New Testament and early Christianity Charles E. Hill acknowledged that whereas Hahneman

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<sup>85</sup> In 1993 Philippe Henne published an article reviewing both Sundberg's and Ferguson's arguments (not Hahneman's) and sided with Ferguson due to what he considers to be the "new" arguments of the latter. Philippe Henne, "La Datation du 'Canon' de Muratori," *Revue Biblique* 100, no. 1 (1993): 54–75.

<sup>86</sup> Everett Ferguson, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Journal of Theological Studies* 44, no. 2 (October 1993): 695.

<sup>87</sup> Verheyden, "The Canon Muratori," 556.

<sup>88</sup> Beside those elaborated on here, these "others" include the following: Bruce M. Metzger, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 7 (1994): 192–94; Lionel R. Wickham, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994): 418–19; J. Neville Birdsall, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46 (1995): 128–30; Martin Parmentier, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Bijdragen* 56 (1995): 82–83; Graham N. Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 43, no. 3 (July 1997): 317–46.

supported Sundberg's case with further examples of parallels of the Fragment in the fourth century, he expressed reservation for a wholesale two-century displacement of the Fragment's date.<sup>89</sup> As promised, a year later, Hill published a longer article detailing his reasons for siding against Hahneman's case. Hill believed Hahneman's agenda (i.e. a reconsideration of the date of the formalization of the Old Testament canon) drove his analysis and that the traditional, early explanation did the most justice to the evidence.<sup>90</sup> In their consideration of Hahneman's case, New Testament scholars Michael W. Holmes and Robert F. Hull questioned the manner in which Hahneman handled the evidence. Holmes believed that Hahneman tended to push the ambivalent evidence in his direction and that he could have been more convincing had he treated the evidence more "evenhandedly."<sup>91</sup> Hull perceived a weakness in the way that, in his view, so much was dependent upon Sundberg's and Hahneman's view of "canon" as a concept. This pre-conception informed the dating to the extent that Hahneman too greatly minimized the opposing position.<sup>92</sup>

At the time of this writing, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, scholarship seems to favor a nuanced early date. Theologian Peter Balla proposes that a second-century date "can be maintained" despite the respected efforts of both Sundberg and Hahneman.<sup>93</sup> Jonathan J. Armstrong contends that the author is Victorinus of Pettau (ca. 250–303) due to parallels in Victorinus's work and in the Fragment, thus he places it in the late third-century, though he still agrees with Hahneman regarding the unlikelihood of the Hermas-Pius connection.<sup>94</sup> Finally, theologian Christophe Guignard believes that Verheyden has soundly refuted

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<sup>89</sup> Charles E. Hill, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 438.

<sup>90</sup> Hill, "The Debate Over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," 437, 452.

<sup>91</sup> Michael W. Holmes, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (July 1994): 595.

<sup>92</sup> Robert F. Hull, review of *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon*, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 90–91.

<sup>93</sup> Peter Balla, "Evidence for an Early Christian Canon (Second and Third Century)," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 627.

<sup>94</sup> Jonathan J. Armstrong, "Victorinus of Pettau as the Author of Canon Muratori," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62, no. 1 (2008): 1, 18, 19n56; Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment*, 52.

Hahneman, and “one can therefore consider that the older consensus (i.e. on an earlier date) has now been widely restored.”<sup>95</sup>

Nevertheless, since Schnabel’s 2014 “State of Research” on the Muratorian Fragment, a new voice has emerged, or perhaps the echo of some old voices. In her “The Muratorian Fragment as Roman Fake,” Clare K. Rothschild has resurrected the nineteenth-century theory that the Fragment is a hoax. Rothschild argues that the Fragmentist intentionally misrepresented himself as a second-century author.<sup>96</sup> She seeks to reconcile features of both the second- and fourth-century arguments. Rothschild looks to both external and internal evidence, concluding that the Fragment is indeed a fourth-century composition. In this way, her position falls in line with that of Sundberg and Hahneman. In short, with Rothschild, yet another fourth-century conclusion has been reached, simply by incorporating different evidence and approaching the problem with new presuppositions.

In any case, Rothschild’s hopes of offering a “conciliating position” notwithstanding, the problem of the impasse remains.<sup>97</sup> The very nature of her argument means that the Fragmentist essentially “planted” evidence. Therefore, any evidence in the Fragment is suspect, yet Rothschild must show two things: First, she must show evidence that the Fragmentist did this. Second, she must show that the Fragment is from the fourth century. Unless she does these two things, exhaustively considering all the other arguments to date, the evidence points away from any conclusive interpretation of the text to an even greater degree.

In summary, the history of Fragment research is a history of scholars’ attempts to explain why the evidence points either to a late second- to early third-century composition, on one hand, or to a fourth-century composition, on the other. Upon examination of this history, several methodological issues manifest themselves. First, the scholars bring different presuppositions to the inquiry. For example, Sundberg comes espousing a differentiation between “scripture” and “canon,” while others may not necessarily make this distinction.<sup>98</sup> Second, different evidence is considered to greater or lesser degrees over the years. For example, none seem to consider the issue of idiolect until Donaldson’s link between the Fragmentist’s expression regarding the Roman See and a particular ecclesiastical milieu (for Donaldson this milieu shares similarities with that

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<sup>95</sup> Christophe Guignard, “The Original Language of the Muratorian Fragment,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (October 2015): 598.

<sup>96</sup> Rothschild, “The Muratorian Fragment,” 55–82.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59, 59n9. Christophe Guignard has recently responded to Rothschild in an article where he disagrees with Rothschild’s conclusion. See Christophe Guignard, “The Muratorian Fragment as a Late Antique Fake? An Answer to C. K. Rothschild,” *Revue Des Sciences Religieuses* 93, no. 1/2 (2019): 73–90.

<sup>98</sup> Sundberg, “Canon Muratori,” 35.

of Cyprian). However, more recently, this tendency to favor some evidence over other evidence has been identified; for example, Holmes observes that Hahneman seems to “cherry pick,” preferring evidence which supports his position over evidence which does not.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the scholars interpret the evidence differently. For example, whereas adherents to the second-century hypothesis translate *nuperrime* as “very recently,” Sundberg argues that a possible translation may be “most recently.”<sup>100</sup> Again, for some *temporibus nostris* is understood as “during our lifetime,” yet for others, “during the post-apostolic age.”<sup>101</sup> Given, these various approaches and interpretations, it is no wonder that neither hypothesis has yet to manifest itself as the best explanation of the evidence for the Fragment’s date.

## The Present Study

### Purpose of the Study

In light of the lingering problem of the Muratorian Fragment’s date and significance, this present study seeks to break the impasse. What makes this study unique in its contribution to both theology and apologetics is the fact that it marks the first time the rigorous application of an objective methodology, known as “inference to the best explanation” (or IBE), has been applied to the problem of the Fragment’s date. Significantly, the study’s findings may have remarkable implications for Bibliology, and the demonstration of its methodology may serve as a template for the resolution of apologetic problems.

### The Research Question

The study strives to answer the following question: Which of the two hypotheses regarding the date of the Muratorian Fragment is more likely—that it is a late second- to early third-century composition or that it is a fourth-century composition?

### Delimitations

This study limited its inquiry to the consideration of evidence that has bearing on the date of the Fragment’s composition. It treats questions of authorship, provenance, and language to the extent that these issues have bearing on the primary problem under consideration, that of date.

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<sup>99</sup> Holmes, review of *The Muratorian Fragment*, 595.

<sup>100</sup> Sundberg, “Canon Muratori,” 8.

<sup>101</sup> Salmon, “Muratorian Fragment,” 1002.

## Definitions

For the sake of brevity, when referring to the hypothesis that the Fragment is a late second- to early third-century composition and to the hypothesis that it is a fourth-century composition, the study uses the terms “Early Hypothesis” and “Late Hypothesis” respectively.

## Methodology

*The Nexus: Problem, Purpose, and Plan*

Inasmuch as Muratorian Fragment scholars formulated hypotheses (e.g. that the Fragment is a second-century composition) which explained the evidence (e.g. the statement that the *Shepherd of Hermas* was written “very recently in our times”), they engaged in abductive reasoning; that is, they exhibited “a preference for . . . one hypothesis over others which would equally explain the facts.”<sup>102</sup> This process has come to be known as drawing an “inference to the best explanation,” hereafter referred to as IBE.<sup>103</sup> According to epistemologist Gilbert Harman, this type of inference takes place every time a person infers the veracity of a hypothesis from that hypothesis’s ability to explain the evidence.<sup>104</sup> Scholars interested in determining the Fragment’s date have been engaged in this type of reasoning for almost three hundred years, and they have formulated two possible hypotheses, or explanations, but which one is the *best*?

Harman understood that, at times, while applying IBE, multiple hypotheses manifest, and these naturally compete for preference. For this reason, Professor of History and Philosophy of Science, Peter Lipton sees IBE as a two stage process: The first stage consists of hypothesis generation. From 1740 to 2018, Fragment scholars have been in this stage. Stage Two

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<sup>102</sup> Douglas Walton, *Abductive Reasoning* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), xiii; Justus Buchler, ed., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings* (London: Routledge, 2014), 151. Logician Charles Sanders Peirce coined the term “abductive reasoning,” or “retroduction.”

<sup>103</sup> “The inference to the best explanation’ corresponds approximately to what others have called ‘abduction,’ ‘the method of hypothesis,’ ‘hypothetic inference,’ ‘the method of elimination,’ ‘eliminative induction,’ and ‘theoretical inference.’” Gilbert Harman, “The Inference to the Best Explanation,” *Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (January 1965): 88–89. Others who have further developed IBE include P. Thagard, “The Best Explanation: Criteria for Theory Choice,” *Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 2 (February 1978): 76–92; T. Day and H. Kincaid, “Putting Inference to the Best Explanation in its Place,” *Synthese* 98, no. 2 (February 1994): 271–95; E. Barnes, “Inference to the Loveliest Explanation,” *Synthese* 103, no. 2 (May 1995): 251–77; and S. Psillos, “Simply the Best: A Case for Abduction,” in *Computational Logic: Logic Programming and Beyond*, ed. A. C. Kakas and F. Sadri (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2002), 605–26.

<sup>104</sup> Harman, “The Inference to the Best Explanation,” 89.

“is the process of selection from among those live candidates.”<sup>105</sup> Harman laid the groundwork for this selection process by alluding to several criteria that scholars could bring to bear in choosing one hypothesis over the others. Thus, according to him, “there is, of course, a problem about how one is to judge that one hypothesis is sufficiently better than another hypothesis. Presumably such a judgment will be based on considerations such as which hypothesis is simpler, which is more plausible, which explains more, which is less ad hoc, and so forth.”<sup>106</sup>

### *The Harman-McCullagh Criteria*

Where Harman and Lipton left off, history philosopher C. Behan McCullagh took over. In justifying descriptions of the past, which is the task of history, McCullagh saw a use for IBE in cases where there is no evidence to provide strong direct support for a particular hypothesis about the kind of information an historian wants to discover, and so the historian has to draw upon very general knowledge to arrive at plausible hypotheses about its origin. As the name of this form of inference suggests, it proceeds by judging which of the plausible hypotheses provides the best explanation of what is known about the creation of the evidence in question.<sup>107</sup>

Moreover, like Harman, McCullagh knew that, at times, two hypotheses manifest. He suggested that in cases where scholars are “unable to exclude all but one of the possible explanations of their evidence, . . . they have to weigh up the comparative merits of each.”<sup>108</sup>

At this point, McCullagh built upon Harman’s criteria and described the process by which one weighs the merits of competing hypotheses. Among competing hypotheses, the one that meets these criteria to a greater degree than the others possesses a greater likelihood of being the correct hypothesis. The criteria which preferred hypotheses more satisfactorily meet are the standards of *plausibility*, *explanatory scope*, *explanatory power*, *credibility*, and *simplicity*.<sup>109</sup> First, hypotheses that demonstrate *plausibility* are those which are implied by the evidence, such that, in McCullagh’s words, “it [the hypothesis in question] could well have been.”<sup>110</sup> Second, the amount of evidence explained by a hypothesis constitutes the hypothesis’ *explanatory scope*; the greater the amount of

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<sup>105</sup> Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 149.

<sup>106</sup> Harman, “The Inference to the Best Explanation,” 89.

<sup>107</sup> C. Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History: Putting Postmodernism in Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2004), 49.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>109</sup> McCullagh, *The Logic of History*, 51–52.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

evidence explained, the greater the hypothesis' explanatory scope. Third, hypotheses that explain the evidence to a greater degree of likelihood possess *explanatory power*. Fourth, there should not exist any evidence which implies the hypothesis to be unlikely, nor should there be any existing evidence which a hypothesis cannot explain; hypotheses which meet this standard exhibit *credibility*.<sup>111</sup> Fifth and finally, superior hypotheses demonstrate *simplicity*. They require no unsubstantiated assumptions in order to stand, and when challenged, they do not resort to such assumptions. If a hypothesis does, it makes itself susceptible to Ockham's razor.<sup>112</sup> McCullagh explains simplicity best when he observes that a preferred hypothesis does "not include ad hoc components, designed simply to accommodate data which appear to disconfirm it."<sup>113</sup> To date, no scholar has weighed the merits of the two hypotheses regarding the Fragment's date in a deliberately and rigorously conducted "Lipton Stage Two scenario." This suggests that scholarship may profit from this present study, one which weighs the hypotheses through the application of the Harman-McCullagh criteria.

The question of the date of the Muratorian Fragment's composition is historical in nature, and scholars have employed historical methods to gather evidence, form hypotheses, and challenge one another. This present study, also historical in nature, supplements their work and builds upon it because it implements IBE Stage Two by considering the evidence they have gathered and by evaluating the hypotheses they have formed through the application of the Harman-McCullagh criteria. In this way it identifies the more likely of the two hypotheses regarding the date of the Fragment. Because they describe events that cannot be repeated, historical descriptions lack certainty. They can only be said to be *likely* true, *possibly* true, or *impossible*. These are what McCullagh calls the "degrees of credibility," and this study makes use of this concept when evaluating the likelihood of the veracity of the descriptions treated within.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> McCullagh, *The Logic of History*, 52. This is McCullagh's insistence that acceptable theories are "not disconfirmed by other reasonable beliefs," this author has labeled it "credibility" as it is a type of implementation of the law of non-contradiction in probabilistic statements.

<sup>112</sup> The principle of Ockham's razor "says that a theory that postulates fewer entities, processes, or causes is better than a theory that postulates more, so long as the simpler theory is compatible with what we observe." Elliot Sober, *Ockham's Razors: A User's Manual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>113</sup> McCullagh, *The Logic of History*, 52.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

### Preview of the Findings

The study found that, by making an inference to the best explanation, the Early Hypothesis is preferred. This methodology consisted of weighing the two hypotheses against the five criteria: *plausibility, explanatory scope, explanatory power, credibility, and simplicity*. The Early Hypothesis surpasses the Late Hypothesis in every category. Through implementing the methodology of inference to the best explanation, it appears more likely the Muratorian Fragment was written during the second or third centuries than that it was written during the fourth century.

### Summary

The problem of the Muratorian Fragment's date has vexed scholars since its discovery in 1700. While the majority of scholars believe the Fragment was composed in the late second or early third century, some have recently made the case that it represents a work of the fourth century and reflects a more evolved understanding of which texts should make up the Christian New Testament canon. Resolving the problem of the Fragment's date is important because of the implications for understanding the theology of ancient Christianity, which ultimately drives contemporary theology. This present study, in seeking to determine the more likely date of the Fragment, implements an epistemological methodology known as "Inference to the Best Explanation" (IBE), a methodology often used to resolve historical problems. The hypothesis which best meets these criteria is the preferred hypothesis. To that end, the next chapter offers a description of the Fragment's background.

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