

Book Review:
The Date of the Muratorian Fragment
By John F. Lingelbach

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Abstract: *This book seeks to put an end to the debate concerning the date of production of the Muratorian Fragment by applying the second phase of the Inference to the Best Explanation method. The author presents extensive research on the debates, a clear methodology, and his own conclusions on the subject. This is a book mainly about New Testament canons and church authority, but also church history and historiography.*

Keywords: Muratorian Fragment, Early Church History, New Testament Canon, Inference to the Best Explanation, Historiography

John Lingelbach’s work is a comprehensive study on the date of composition of the Muratorian Fragment. The author presents the reader with a scholarly work, which exposes the debates around two hypotheses: The first places the Fragment’s production in the late second to early third century (Early Hypothesis), and the second places it in the fourth century (Late Hypothesis).¹

The Muratorian Fragment was discovered and first published in the eighteenth century by Ludovico Antonio Muratori. It was found in a fragmentary state, missing the beginning “and probably the end.”² The piece includes a portion of what is believed to be the Gospel of Mark, the Gospels of Luke and John, the Acts of the Apostles, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Shepherd of Hermas. It bears no indication of authorship or place of composition and, since its finding, was generally accepted to be a late second or early third century product. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that, based on Albert Sunberg’s claims that the Fragment was composed in the fourth century, the date was subject to debate. Although many scholars

¹ As per the definitions proposed by Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 22.

² Schnabel, *The Muratorian Fragment*, 231.

maintained that the evidence suggests a second century composition, Sundberg was joined by Geoffrey Hahneman, who “brought several new reasons to the debate,”³ and Clare Rothschild, who “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.”⁴ Knowing the date of composition of the Fragment is important since it “narrows the list of possible authors and thus lends to the ultimate desired outcome: that of understanding the early church’s New Testament canon and theological authority.”⁵

Lingelbach’s work has a clear purpose: through the application of phase two of an Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) method, the author intends to put an end to the debate. He states that scholars have, so far, engaged in abductive reasoning while attempting to determine the date, but they have not weighed all the evidence to decide which is best. If the author’s purpose seems ambitious, his extensive research, detailed analysis of the Fragment, and weighing of the hypotheses are efficient in persuading the reader. In addition to this exhaustive research, Lingelbach succeeds in engaging the reader through the organization of his book: clear presentation of the research question, delimitations, and methodology. Moreover, each chapter begins with a brief review of what was exposed in the previous chapter and an introduction of what is to follow, as well as finishes with a summary of the discussion that provides a much-needed structure for such a long and detailed debate.

The first three chapters offer “a general overview of the Fragment and some of its problems, a list of the evidence which scholars cite while attempting to determine the date of its composition, and a description of each of the two hypotheses.”⁶ Chapter One, entitled “The Muratorian Fragment,” describes the codex where the Fragment was found and the Fragment itself; it also recounts the history of its discovery. The same chapter also offers an account of the Fragment’s contents and an overview on the questions of authorship, provenance, and language, all important elements for the debate. Lingelbach clearly states that such problems are dealt with in relation to the date question and that he has no intention to settle any of them. The chapter also provides a transcription of the original Latin text, a “restored” version, and an English translation (by Bruce Metzger). These appear as appendices at the end of the book. Additionally, Lingelbach writes about the intentions of the Fragmentist,

³ Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 3.

⁴ Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 4.

⁵ Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 39.

⁶ Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 97.

who “appears primarily interested in demonstrating [the Gospels] historical value,” and in emphasizing the Epistles’ universal applicability.⁷

Chapters Two (“A Date: The Evidence”) and Three (“A Date: The Hypotheses”) are extensive exposés of historiography and the different source critics. Lingelbach presents and analyzes all the evidence of the Fragment: the accepted and rejected texts, their order of presentation, possible context of production, and a discussion on the possibility of determining the date through the expressions found in the Fragment.

Having introduced the reader to the Fragment, debates, and arguments, Lingelbach, in Chapter Four, meticulously weighs the hypotheses based on the five Harman-McCullagh criteria of *plausibility*, *explanatory scope*, *explanatory power*, *credibility*, and *simplicity*. This method has not been applied before, according to the author: “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.’”⁸ Finally, in Chapter Five (“Chronological Fiction Argument”), he records and refutes the possibility that “writing in the fourth century, [the Fragmentist] deliberately made his manuscript appear to have been written early.”⁹

The Date of the Muratorian Fragment is an important contribution to the history of the church, canon, and authority. It places itself in the intersection between historiography, source criticism, patristics, and history of the New Testament. It is a must-read for academics, as well as members of the general public interested in the history and developments of early Christianity.

⁷ Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 37.

⁸ Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 24.

⁹ Lingelbach, *The Date of the Muratorian Fragment*, 122.

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Lucy Bajjani is currently a lecturer at the Lebanese American University and has a PhD from the University of São Paulo. Bajjani specializes in the relationship between Eastern Romans, Carolingians, and the papacy through their debates on holy images. Her main areas of research are church history, the iconoclastic struggles of the eight century, and the history of religions.

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