The Canon Debate:
What It Is and Why It Matters

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Abstract — Contemporary debate over the formation of the biblical canon has highlighted the question of dating. This article argues that the dating issue is subordinate to a prior semantic question: What does “canon” mean? Recent attempts at defining canon reduce to two alternatives, each defined by the relationship that canon bears to “Scripture” — canon is either viewed as exclusive and formal or inclusive and functional. The former way of conceptualizing canon faces problems of anachronism and theoretical rigidity, while the latter encounters difficulty in explaining the historical stabilization of canonical boundaries. The idea of a “core canon” is identified as a means of adjudicating this dilemma and further illuminating the relationship between Scripture, tradition, and authority in Christian theology.

Key Words — canon, Scripture, Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, authority, theology, Judaism, Christianity

If there is one thing everyone already knows about the canon debate, it is that the debate centers on dating: early or late? Certainly, a wide disparity does exist among the dates advanced within various historical reconstructions of canon formation. Did the “canon” of Jewish Scripture begin with the original deuteronomistic law code in 621 B.C. under the reign of Josiah? Or with the Pentateuch in the Persian period, thanks to Ezra? Or did the OT canon not exist until its contents were fully fixed and delimited at the end of the first century A.D. or even later? Was the NT canon largely in place in the second century A.D.? Or was it only in the second half of the fourth century that the NT became completely “closed”?

Each of these views possesses vigorous advocates and fierce opponents. The notion that the canon debate concerns dating cannot therefore be considered incorrect. But in this essay I will argue that the dating dimension of the debate is largely secondary and derivative, arising from a prior semantic disagreement. Then I want to suggest that this disagreement in
turn reveals more fundamental differences in the conceptual presuppositions
held by scholars active in canon-oriented research. I will conclude
that it is at this conceptual level that the most critical work in the canon
debate remains to be done, and that the implications of this work will
bear significantly on several current theological disputes, especially those
regarding the authority of ecclesial tradition in relation to the nature of
Scripture and its interpretation.

My comments will pertain most directly to the formation of the canon
of Jewish Scripture (or the OT) but are, as I will also attempt to show, readily
applicable to the debate about NT canon formation, given an appropriate
adjustment of the details and dates at issue. In fact, one of the striking
aspects of the present canon debate is how similar many of the methodo-
logical questions are with respect to the formation of both scriptural
collections. A pressing question is even whether the two processes—Jewish
and Christian biblical canon formation—should be viewed as historically
separate or shared.

To begin my own analysis of the current debate, I will first offer a brief
sketch of the standard model for dating the canon formation of Jewish
Scripture. Then I will describe that model’s internal inconsistencies in
order to make the case that dating OT canon formation is largely predeter-
mined by how the word canon is defined.1

**Standard Dating**

At the end of the 19th century, a consensus about the Hebrew canon
emerged within a wide variety of academic handbooks and articles, in
which its historical development was linked to its tripartite literary
structure within Jewish tradition: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. In this consen-
sus view, the Torah or Pentateuch had comprised Israel’s original collection
of authoritative Scripture, as promulgated by Ezra shortly after the Baby-
lonian Exile in the mid-5th century B.C. Roughly two centuries later,
the prophetic writings were concluded and joined to the Pentateuch.
Although largely completed by the end of the first century B.C., the Writings
were not absolutely finalized until the end of the 1st century A.D., when
rabbinic meeting in Jamnia (or Yavneh) conducted official debates on the authorita-
tive status of a few of the books (specifically, Ecclesiastes and the Song of
Songs) and closed the canon as a whole (ca. A.D. 90).

Remarkably, some form of this late 19th-century consensus still appears
in most introductory textbooks and secondary resources in use today.2 However, its success has been due in no small measure to strategic

1. This same basic point has been revealingly developed in relation to the NT canon by
and Thomson Learning, 2004), 8.

1895).
4. Ibid., 17.
5. Ibid., 14.
6. The details of his treatment reveal how Ryle encountered problems in trying to
establish a clean three-stage process. For example, Ryle considered Israel’s “first canon”
to have been the Pentateuch alone, even though he also thought an early form of the book of
Deuteronomy had represented this canon’s “first installment” approximately 175 years earlier.
historical-critical scholarship suggested they had already existed in some form and therefore presumably had obtained some degree of authority; otherwise, why would the tradition have retained them?

Ryle’s compromise involved only admitting into evidence those aspects of the literature’s historical development that would suit his thesis of a linear process in three discrete stages and explaining away anything else that did not fit. Thus, the original version of Deuteronomy was semi-canonical, in his view, even though its literary frame was added later. He also thought that the book of Joshua was joined at one point to the evolving Torah-canon but then separated from it into a kind of canonical limbo until its later inclusion (together with the rest of the prophetic writings) in the second “Law and Prophets” canon at the beginning of the 2nd century B.C.E.

Nowhere in this discussion did Ryle say how Deuteronomy could become canonical without the same literary finalization he demanded from the prophetic books before they could be deemed canonical. Nor did he indicate how Joshua could be canonized, de-canonized, and re-canonized. Nor, more fundamentally, did he explain how ancient writings could be known, revered, and transmitted for centuries without acquiring some kind of canonical standing. In other words, Ryle did not adequately defend his insistence that each of the three canonical divisions obtained its own “closure” en bloc and in sequential succession. No clear or consistent reasons were given for the canonization at certain times of some documents but not others. Why, for example, were some apparently extant prophetic writings not granted canonical standing along with Deuteronomy or, later, with the Pentateuch?

In terminology and method, therefore, Ryle’s approach managed to negotiate skillfully, but at points vaguely, between historical-critical scholarship’s literary reconstructions of the biblical writings and the Wellhausenian approach to the history of Israel. But despite its enduring influence, Ryle’s treatment of the OT canon persistently begged the question of what canonization actually is. As a social-historical process, is canonization public or elitist, functional or formal, implicit or explicit? Or is canon not a process at all? Is canon instead what is officially sanctioned? But then in certain cases may a canon also function authoritatively apart from formal recognition and validation? What does “canon” mean?

Precisely because Ryle’s strategic ambiguities papered over questions such as these, his approach was highly successful; but his very success has also meant that he, more than anyone else, is responsible for the prolonged avoidance of these questions in subsequent scholarship.

**Canonical Semantics and Concepts**

Because the standard view of the canon of Jewish Scripture has inherited the internal inconsistencies of Ryle’s model, the fundamental question of definition must be reexamined prior to any discussion about the dates of canon formation. In awareness of the need for this sort of reexamination, discussions of the etymology and usage of the term canon are increasingly present within major studies and throughout the secondary literature. Unsurprisingly, contemporary scholars do not agree at all about the proper sense of the term. However, two positions predominate.

One position insists on a sharp distinction between canon and Scripture. Beginning with the work of Albert Sundberg and Theodore

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Swanson, scholars in this camp have sought to restrict the meaning of canon to the term’s exclusive sense. On this view, a canon is a normative list of books comprising a particular literary collection, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be removed. Prior to the point at which a list such as this exists, a religious tradition might possess books considered to be holy and to which religious authority is granted in some way, but these books are properly called “Scripture” because the boundaries of the entire collection are still undefined. Because the exclusive sense of canon entails selectivity and conscious decision, scholars with this approach look for evidence of a canon’s formal and universal acceptance by an entire religious community rather than only indications of a canon’s functional authority or ad hoc and local affirmations of its recognition. They stress the anachronism of referring to the existence of a “Bible” in ancient Israel.

The other main semantic position insists on an overlap between Scripture and canon. Associated most closely with both Brevard Childs and James Sanders, this line of argument contends that, historically, the term canon has designated a norm as well as a list, that a canon is likely to function as a norm before being formalized, and that this formalization is better understood as the recognition of an already-authoritative literary collection than as the conferral of authority. It is possible to use the term Scripture to describe a functional but informal canon, these scholars concede, yet the term canon goes farther to establish the normativity of the tradition this collection represents and makes a claim about the continuity of that normative tradition over time. Hence, the concern is not only to distinguish the idea of a normative Scripture from merely “inspirational”

14. Currently, this position is perhaps most forcefully represented by John Barton; see his “Canonical Approaches Ancient and Modern,” in The Biblical Canons (ed. Jean-Marie Auwers and H. J. de Jonge; BETL 163; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), 202. The essay includes bibliographic references to other writings in which he has elaborated his perspective.
16. Eugene Ulrich refers to this component of the process as “reflective judgment” (“Canon,” 22).

writings but also to describe how normative Scripture both generates and influences subsequent tradition. Peter Ackroyd, in an early and influential formulation, put the point like this:

[Canon] begins imperceptibly in the recognition of certain utterances... as representing in reality the word of God, and in the acceptance as binding of such single utterances or groups of utterances.... It is recognized that the requirements of God may be made precise in a particular form which continues to standardize the understanding and presentation of subsequent developments of belief.

Indeed, Ackroyd called this generative, regulative aspect of canon the “canonical principle.” Similarly, for James Sanders, “Canon as function antedates canon as shape.”

Scholars with this second approach therefore emphasize the inclusive sense of canon and tend to take early indications of a work’s authority and influence as evidence suggestive of its canonicity. Even though the boundaries of Israel’s literary collection still may have been porous or open, application of the term canon is justified according to these scholars because the essential contours of the later formalized canon and a certain characteristic dynamic between the community and its Scripture were already palpably in place. Because the inclusive sense of canon builds on notions of function and usage, scholars with this perspective look for evidence of intertextuality within the biblical literature and for extrabiblical allusions to the biblical corpus as telling indications of canonical status. On this view, Israel not only shaped its religious traditions but was shaped by them.

TOWARD A “CORE CANON”

Because different concepts of canon are at home in these two semantic positions, scholars working on canon-related questions often speak past

20. Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 59. Customary usage shows that Childs was correct to worry about this point; the frequent intensification of the term Scripture by use of the modifier “authoritative” indicates that Scripture per se does not necessarily denote authority, let alone normativity. Stephen G. Dempsey nicely uses the example of Josiah ripping his clothes after hearing the words of Scripture read aloud (2 Kg 22:4) as a figure for the kind of normativity that inheres to Israel’s Scripture (and as different in kind from simply an imaginative encounter with literature). See his “From Many Texts to One: The Formation of the Hebrew Bible,” in The World of the Ancient Near East (ed. P. M. Milbradt, D. E. Aune, et al., JSOTSup 37; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 47.
22. Ibid., 15.
each other. How is the underlying issue to be adjudicated? Each of the positions, it turns out, illuminates some of the data better than the other, offering key insights but also presenting further difficulties, which I will now describe in greater detail.

In contrast to what is often alleged, anachronism is the major danger confronting those who argue for an exclusive sense of canon, and on two counts. First, as has been shown, the narrow definition of canon relies on an absolute distinction between canon and Scripture, but in this distinction, Scripture is left vague and ill-defined: authoritative but not yet normative, religious but not yet orthodox, inspired but not yet “closed.” Rarely asked, in fact, is whether the distinction between canon and Scripture does full justice to the historical phenomenon of Scripture, especially in light of recent comparative work on that topic.27

For example, in his illuminating article on Scripture in the Encyclopedia of Religion, William Graham notes that the term is one of “considerable ambiguity and complexity.”28 In the course of his discussion, he mentions a number of prominent identifying features of Scripture—one of which is holiness or authority but others of which include power, unicity, inspiration, and eternity. Moreover, some canonical texts share certain of these features and yet are not “overly religious” texts, while many religious traditions further understand their Scriptures to possess internal gradations or levels of authority.29 For all these reasons, to reduce the rich penumbra of connotations surrounding Scripture only to its exercise of authority is at best imprecise and at worst simply misleading.30 To characterize Scripture exclusively as a matter of authority has more to do with modern associations and anxieties than with historical reconstruction.31

32. See, e.g., Barton agrees that anachronistic terminology is a problem, but more for those who would date canon early than for those who would date canon late (Writings, 178–79). His position is the one more frequently encountered in the literature; here, I am consciously turning the tables a bit.


30. Barton’s recent broadening of the criteria for Scripture is exemplary and suggestive for future work ("Canons,“ 210–19).

31. E.g., Barr (Scriptures, 50) worries that the term Scripture may be just as anachronistic as canon.

Then there is the second count against an exclusive definition of canon. Scholars who maintain that canon only properly refers to a situation in which a scriptural collection has obtained absolute literary boundaries are inevitably forced to concede at some later point in their argument that the biblical canon has never actually been absolutely “closed” at all.32 Rather than being a minor problem, this central inconsistency casts significant doubt on the appropriateness of the entire approach. For why should scholars adopt as the correct usage of the term canon a meaning that does not correspond fully to any historical reality?33 Scholars who sponsor the exclusive definition of canon thus find themselves caught in a never-ending mode of deferral and chronological postponement in attempting to answer a falsely framed question: When did the canon finally meet with universal approval and total consistency?

Because the inconvenient answer is: never. A pair of examples will help to clarify the point. Lee McDonald rejects the idea of canonical status for the books of the Former Prophets before the second century B.C., but not because he thinks that a form of these books did not exist until then or because they were not already authoritative in some way.34 Instead, McDonald, Canon, 77–78. More specifically, McDonald argues that, although these books existed in a literary form, they were not yet considered to be as authoritative as the books of the Pentateuch. This argument is somewhat curious, because he has taken pains to distinguish canon (at least in its full sense) precisely from authority (pp. 55–58). Nevertheless, he notes that the prophetic books are not mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah, and he refers to the argument of Philip R. Davies, Scribes and Schools (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 104, that the Greek historian Hecateus of Abdera (ca. 300 B.C.) exhibits familiarity with the Law but no awareness of the Prophets. However, because Hecateus’s work is highly fragmentary and known principally through the paraphrase of later authors, offering judgments about what he did not know or did not find to be authoritative makes for a very unsatisfactory argument indeed. Following Sanders, McDonald is more open to the possibility that the Former Prophets gained scriptural authority earlier than the Latter Prophets. Still, McDonald finds the absence of any reference to prophetic Scripture at the end of Malachi to be conspicuous, especially in contrast to the reference to the law of Moses.
McDonald rejects the idea of their canonicity because of his exclusive definition of what canon means.\textsuperscript{35} Change the definition, however, and he no longer has a basis from which to argue for his position.

Similarly, a central problem for the thesis that the canon of Jewish Scripture was "closed" by the rabbis meeting in Yavneh ca. 90 A.D. consists in the fact that rabbinic discussions regarding the canonical status of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs continued for several more centuries.\textsuperscript{36} Scholars favoring an exclusive definition of canon\textsuperscript{37} have used this fact to argue that the canon was still not yet fully closed at the end of the 1st century. But there were even later debates involving other books,\textsuperscript{38} and one finally looks in vain for anything like an official closure of the biblical canon throughout the entirety of Jewish history.\textsuperscript{39} So what if the idea of full "closure" is in fact illusory—in effect, an ideological imposition on what was in reality a different sort of historical phenomenon?

This last question also exposes how the rhetoric of canonical "closure" is tied to the exclusive definition of canon and how this kind of language conceals as much as it communicates. "Closure" terminology implies the conscious, official decision of an entire community. But was there ever a socio-historical mechanism for deliberations of this sort within Judaism? Is it not necessary to consider that canons may stabilize in ways not necessarily best described as "closure"?\textsuperscript{40} As Barton himself has noted, "The status of the books that form the Old Testament was established by use rather than by decree."\textsuperscript{41} In the end, the persistent tendency to use "closure" terminology probably reflects a Christian bias, patterned on the tradition of later church councils.\textsuperscript{42}

Early Judaism does not appear to have made an official declaration as to the precise contents of its Scripture.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, the production of both the Mishnah and the Talmud later expanded Judaism's "functional" canon, resulting in a fundamentally changed hermeneutical situation.\textsuperscript{44} For Christianity, the eventual addition of the NT writings involved a similar enlargement of the scriptural canon. Remarkably, however, neither faith tradition submitted Israel's ancient Scripture to a thoroughgoing revision but instead added new material, in different ways, onto the old. This broad-scale absence of revision again implies the recognition of some type of canonical authority, an authority reinforced rather than diminished by these patterns of canonical growth.

As for Christianity, Harry Gamble has rightly noted that "the first official and binding announcement of the church on the content of Christian scripture was not made until the sixteenth century by the Council of Trent."\textsuperscript{45} Local councils did affirm versions of the canon within the early church, the first of which was the Council of Laodicea in A.D. 360. However, no ecumenical council ruled on the scope and order of the biblical canon until Trent. Gamble goes on to draw from this fact the intriguing conclusion that the decision thus has no authority for either Protestant traditions or Eastern Orthodox communions and that the scriptural canon of worldwide Christianity remains a "largely informal consensus."\textsuperscript{46} As a result, the biblical canon has never been "closed" within global Christianity.

\textsuperscript{41} Barton, "Canons," 211. Cf. Graham, "Scripture," 8202: "In most cases, it is not the fiat of a council or individual religious authority seeking to forge a canon in order to delimit orthodoxy, but rather the usage of the majority that determines any canon of sacred and authoritative scripture."


\textsuperscript{43} Bara'at Batra 14b-15a is often cited in this connection, but that particular rabbinic witness is more about the order of books within the received scriptural collection than their delimitation or "canonization"; the passage also relates its information as traditional teaching rather than a formal decision. For further analysis, see E. Earle Ellis, The Old Testament in Early Christianity (WUNT 54; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 12-13.


\textsuperscript{45} Gamble, "Christianity," 44.

\textsuperscript{46} Gamble, "Christianity," 45.
either—not in the manner that an exclusive definition of the term canon requires.47

The reductio ad absurdum in which proponents of the exclusive definition find themselves is illustrated in a work by John Rogerson, who holds, consistent with the approach, that continuing differences about the precise contents of the canon within contemporary Christianity preclude speaking of a canon at all, but only of “canons.”48 In this fashion, the logical conclusion to which advocates of the exclusive definition eventually come is that the thing they are seeking to describe has in fact never truly existed.49 To my mind, the best way to cut this particular Gordian knot is with an application of Occam’s razor—namely, to define canon according to a corresponding historical reality from the outset so that in the end it will not be necessary to deny the basis of the definition.

By contrast, the central problem for the position sponsoring an inclusive definition of canon is its inability to offer a compelling explanation for the way in which the canon eventually was subject to further delimitation and a hardening of boundaries. One way to avoid the problems of the exclusive approach is to adopt the kind of stance found in the work of Sid Leiman and Roger Beckwith, in which canonical status is inferred largely by any indication of religious authority on the part of a biblical text.50 Yet a move such as this obscures the difference between what might be called

47. Cf. Avery R. Dulles, “The Authority of Scripture: A Catholic Perspective,” in Greenspan, ed., Scripture, 18–19, affirming the same point even within Roman Catholicism: “the canon has never been defined in an exclusive sense” (i.e., within Catholic doctrine).

48. John Rogerson, An Introduction to the Bible (London: Penguin, 1999), 131–32. This stance also leads him to reject the term “Bible”: there is not so much a thing as the Bible, but rather, Bibles in various shapes and forms” (141). Even Sanders, who helped pioneer the broader understanding of canon, is capable of suddenly retreating into this mode, arbitrarily insisting on the necessity of an exclusive definition. See his “The Issue of Closure,” in The Canon Debate (ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 254. Graham notes instead that from a comparative perspective the “fixation” of a canon has “rarely meant that one definitive documentary text is universally recognized or that variant texts disappear” (Scripture, 899).

49. There is thus not a little irony in a historical-critical scholar like Ulrich arguing for the exclusive definition of canon based on theological tradition rather than on the characteristics of canon as a historical phenomenon. Cf. the logic of his conclusion in “Notion,” 54: “The canon of Scripture, in the sense that that term has been used in the history of Christian theology and within Judaism...is the definitive, closed list of the books that constitute the authentic contents of Scripture.”

50. Sid Z. Leiman, The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture (TCAAS 47; Hamden, CT: Arden, 1976); Beckwith, Canon. For their own problematic attempts at broad definition, see Leiman, Canonization, 14; Beckwith, Canon, 65. This insufficiently controlled process of inference occurs despite Beckwith’s stated intention to avoid it; see his “Formation of the Hebrew Bible,” in Milik ed. Martin Jan Mulder; CRINT 2:1; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 45. For criticism of Beckwith on these grounds, see Albert C. Sundberg Jr., “Reexamining the Formation of the Old Testament Canon,” Int 42 (1988): 78–82.

a “soft” canon, whose contents are still subject to variation, and a “hard” canon, one that has stabilized completely. And is this difference not worth preserving, at least at certain points in the discussion? There is, after all, a meaningful distinction between “Scripture” and “commentary” (or “midrash”) still to be acknowledged and explained.51

For example, Leiman and Beckwith both advocate a mid-second-century date (c.e.) for the stabilization of the canon of Jewish Scripture but fail to offer a satisfactory account of how this canon could have existed without closing off further debate regarding the canonical status of disputed books or without having a greater impact on the pluriform textual situation evident from the Dead Sea Scrolls. This explanatory failure in turn reveals why some Qumran scholars have been among the foremost critics of an inclusive approach to canon, favoring instead an exclusive definition of the term.52

Surely proponents of an exclusive definition are right to insist that an important nuance of canon is lost if one simply uses Scripture and canon interchangeably. Even Childs conceded that this nuance could be meaningfully preserved alongside the broader usage of the term he himself helped to popularize.53 In fact, Childs later significantly distanced himself from his earlier use of canon as a technical term, referring to it in his Biblical Theology as a “cipher”—in other words, a term more important for how it preserves certain interpretive possibilities within the debate than for any special content.54 Thus, the inclusive view of canon threatens to result in usage of the term that is inconsistent, confusing, or ultimately inconsequential. For the inclusive position the problem is then not anachronism but rather neglecting to make compelling sense of all the available data, failing in particular to offer a persuasive account of the conclusion to the canonical process.

In sum, current usage of the term canon threatens to imply either that the reality of the canon is nonexistent or that the term is effectively devoid

of genuine content. This semantic dilemma provides a strong indication that something is quite wrong in the way the entire issue has come to be framed. Effectively lost in the shuffle is the historical reality of the canon and how it can best be articulated.

However, a telling difference can also be increasingly observed between the theoretical positions of scholars in both camps and their actual use of terminology. It turns out that, in practice, much more agreement exists than is ordinarily perceived, even by those taking part in the debate themselves. Many scholars, even those on different sides of the debate about defining the term *canon*, in fact, employ language of a "core canon" (and similar related expressions) to describe the textual situation within Judaism already in the 2nd century b.c.e. Surprisingly, scholars like James Barr, John Barton, and John Collins, who are known to favor a more exclusive definition of the term *canon*, all still refer to something like a "core canon" of Law and the Prophets at this relatively early point in time, as do many others. From the other side of the debate, Beckwith can use related expressions and admits the absence of absolute boundaries to the canon in the same period. In this way, the historical status of the canon is not really in dispute; instead the debate turns on how best to describe it and how to assign significance to the terms of the description. How important was it that, by roughly the turn of the millennium, the Jewish biblical canon, although not absolutely closed, had long been established and authoritative? How noteworthy was it that the long-established canon only later achieved firm, if not actually absolute, boundaries? And what precisely changed when the one hermeneutical situation shifted to the other? Questions such as these parallel those regarding the status of the NT canon in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.

**Scripture and Tradition**

Moreover, if the existence of an OT "core canon" is to be located in history prior to the time of Jesus and the NT writings, then the recent move to separate the history of canon formation into distinct Jewish and Christian processes must be decisively qualified. This move has partly gained force precisely because of a worrisome tendency on the part of some scholars to pay insufficient attention to OT canon formation. In several recent treatments, wide-ranging conclusions regarding the nature of canon are drawn on the basis of a reconstructed history of NT canon formation, while the pre-existence of Jewish Scripture is ignored or minimized. Thus, Frederick Norris offers the following judgment:

Church and scripture do not represent the two parts of a chicken-egg argument. We need not establish which is first nor live in agony because we cannot find the answer. They have existed in close intertwining with each other. Giving proper attention to either church or New Testament [f] means that both must be taken seriously in conjunction with each other.

Here, Norris not only allows the NT to stand for all of Christian Scripture; he also fails to credit the authority that the NT itself locates in Jewish Scripture.

A recent book by Craig Allert exhibits the same tendency, a problem evident even in its title: *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible*.

59. Thus, e.g., Gamble, "New Testament," 271, finds "broad use" and "high authority" for the Gospels, the letters of Paul, and John by the end of the 2nd century A.D., but ongoing variability with regard to other NT writings into the 4th century.

60. E.g., McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 186–89.


62. Earlier in the same article, Norris exhibits a similar narrowing: "It is always too much to say that the New Testament is a construction of the church. But the canon [...] does not appear outside the church; it emerges within it" ("Canon," 17–18). Norris's point is that the NT canon developed simultaneously with the early church's creeds and ecclesiastical organization; therefore, Scripture and tradition should be considered as parallel and mutually supporting authorities. But this formulation overlooks that Jewish Scripture preceded the church.
and the Formation of the New Testament Canon. Allert argues deftly against the excesses of a certain kind of evangelical approach that wants to date the canon early in order to provide historical support for a one-sided account of scriptural authority. Like Norris, Allert’s goal is to cast a vision of Scripture and tradition as reciprocal authorities, both for the early church and for contemporary evangelical theology. Yet by assuming the now-fashionable distinction between Scripture and canon proposed by Sundberg and popularized by McDonald, and by limiting his focus to the NT, Allert omits the significance of Jewish Scripture as well:

This book is about how a historical understanding of the formation of the New Testament canon should inform an evangelical doctrine of Scripture. Briefly stated, this is because the content of the biblical canon, as we know it today, was not a particularly early feature of ancient Christianity: the Bible was not always “there” in early Christianity. Yet, the church still continued to function in its absence.64

To be sure, the “Bible” did not exist fully formed in the days of the early church, but Jewish Scripture constituted a preexistent authority for ancient Christianity, an authority that was in no way mitigated by the fact that its boundaries were not yet firmly set.65 The definition of Scripture as “authoritative” literature without hard boundaries should support that conclusion, but, as Allert’s example illustrates, the distinction between Scripture and canon has in practice been used to reduce the authority of Scripture, both for the early church and for the church of today. Thus, McDonald writes of the contemporary church’s “inappropriate loyalties,” one of which is, for him, the bibliolatry of some conservative Protestant theologians.66


64. Ibid., 12. Note how Allert reaches a negative conclusion about the prominence of the entire Bible in the early church based on his reconstruction of NT canon formation. Yet was there ever a time in which the church functioned apart from Israel’s Scripture?

65. Allert has no difficulty in referring to the developing NT as “a core collection of authoritative writings in the second century” (ibid., 70; p. 107), thereby approximating the language of those who refer to a “core canon” of OT writings in the 2nd century B.C. But Allert neglects to explore the hermeneutical significance of a “core” OT collection having preceded the early church. His conflation of the NT with the entire Bible is particularly evident on p. 145, where he sweepingly concludes: “The Christian faith did not grow in response to a book, but as a response to God’s interaction with the community of faith.” By contrast, I want to insist that the Christian faith did in fact “grow in response to Jewish Scripture—not exclusively but still decisively and essentially.”

66. McDonald, Canon, 428-29. This agenda is acknowledged more openly in previous editions of McDonald’s book: see, e.g., his footnote in The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon (2nd ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 357, about “those Christians who continue to place the Bible first in their creeds instead of God,” which does not appear in the third edition.

My present point is not to take issue with McDonald’s judgment in this matter—or similarly with Allert’s challenge to proponents of inerrancy—but rather to note that the theological anxiety driving their presentations of canon history has to do with the perceived excesses of those on their theological right. This anxiety suggests a pressing need for greater exploration of the “other side” to the canon question and, ultimately, a more balanced presentation.67 Would the historical idea of a “core canon” of Jewish Scripture existing in the pre-Christian era contribute to greater balance in the ongoing effort to adjudicate between Scripture and tradition as authorities within Christian theology? I believe so, and in two helpful respects.

First, the historical characterization of a “core canon” lends support to the traditional position within Christian doctrine that the church did not create the canon. So, for example, at Vatican I, the following position was adopted in the second chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (1870):

These books the church holds to be sacred and canonical not because she subsequently approved them by her authority after they had been composed by unaided human skill, nor simply because they contain revelation without error, but because, being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and were as such committed to the church.68

The point at issue here is the givenness of Scripture for the church as a divinely appointed norm. This perspective, most often mistakenly attributed exclusively to orthodox Protestant theology, is in fact also a deeply held Catholic conviction. Joseph Lienhard has put the point even more directly: “No Catholic would want to say that the authority of the Bible derives simply from the decree of a council. Trent recognized the Bible; it did not create it. The Bible is in the Church, but not from the Church, and the Church is subject to God’s Word.”69 In this view, the church does not make Scripture canonical, nor does it bestow inspired status on biblical books.

67. So, e.g., in Allert’s very first footnote, he simply assumes the narrow definition of canon rather than investigating semantic debate about the term (High View, 9). The consistency of this starting point is marred, however, by his later concession, “Generally speaking, a canon is anything that functions as a standard or norm. Even though we have here predominantly been using the word with reference to a list of texts, its initial use had nothing to do with texts, and this was the case also in Christianity” (ibid., 78). If so, then this point undercuts Allert’s whole presentation. His lingering uncertainty regarding the term also augurs subsequently in his qualified acceptance of the possibility of an “open canon” (ibid., 107).


For Catholics and Protestants, this doctrinal point expresses the theological limit to the scope of the church’s creative contribution to the canon.

On the other hand, and secondly, Allert, Norris, and others have been entirely correct to see that the history of biblical canon formation calls for a reappraisal of tradition within Protestant theology. Not only did the church play a large role in determining the contours of the Christian biblical canon but the canon itself is anything but a historical artifact untouched by religious identity and decision. In fact, given that the various religious streams within early Christianity knew a variety of scriptural books, some of which later became canonical and some of which did not, the decision by contemporary NT scholars to work only with the 27 books of the later canon, or by contemporary OT scholars to concern themselves with the narrower Hebrew Bible or the wider septuagintal canon, needs to be recognized as more than a purely historical decision.

As Allert comments, “There is a tacit acceptance of the institution of the historical ecclesiastical community when we accept its canon.” Thus, the reappraisal of tradition generated by attention to the historical process of canon formation ultimately challenges the separation between history and tradition adopted by some scholars in their very approach to the topic. To deal adequately with the hermeneutical force of the biblical canon, Protestant scholars will have to accept the fact of the canon as, in part, a doctrinal position in line with ecclesiastical tradition and teaching. This acceptance will require a theological approach to Scripture and tradition in which both are viewed as complementary, interlocking authorities.

This conclusion suggests that Protestants and Catholics should in principle be able to agree on the givenness of Scripture for the church, even as they acknowledge a reciprocal dynamic between Scripture and tradition. The crucial thing is to maintain Scripture’s capacity (in practice and not only in theory) to challenge and reform church tradition, even as scriptural interpretation is understood and pursued more ecclesiastically. The existence of Jewish Scripture prior to the birth of the church crucially illuminates the hermeneutical givenness of Scripture. This historical sequence in turn underscores the givenness of Judaism for Christianity and discloses even more starkly the deep and persistent link between Christian devaluation of the OT canon and anti-Semitism.

Further Work

In order to address the deeper questions relating to canon formation, two further issues will require greater attention. These are areas needing intensified study if the canon debate is to leave behind its present impasse and make appreciable progress.

A Better Definition of Canon

Gamble has described canon not on the basis of authority or delimitation but as a means of both religious self-definition and the textualization of tradition. This description is more fruitful than those of the past because it moves beyond the notions of authority and closure in order to explore other phenomenological dimensions to a scriptural canon.

Yet to frame canon solely in terms of the textualization of tradition still slighted its collective, intertextual dimension: canon as what Gerald Sheppard once referred to as “intertext.” Sheppard helpfully redescribed the OT canon as the result of a literary process in which “editors in the late stages of the formation of biblical books registered their assumptions that these books belong together.” Jewish Scripture may not have been absolutely “closed,” but it was not therefore merely an “amorphous pool” or even an “anthology.” Missing in these proposals is the literary interrelatedness found among the various writings contained within the biblical corpus. For this reason, I have proposed in the past that “Scripture” may at times be more appropriate as a term for discrete holy writings and canon better employed in reference to a collection of sacred works. The difference has

70. Ibid., 72.
71. Allert, High View, 78.
73. For a similar balancing of Catholic and Protestant emphases, with greater attention to Scripture’s Christological authorization, see Paul C. McGladdery, Invitation to Dogmatic Theology (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 45.
74. Anders Gerdma, Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism (Studies in Jewish History and Culture 20; Leiden: Brill, 2009).
75. Gamble, “Christianity,” 46–47. As an indication of growing interest in this topic, see also Joachim Schaper, ed., Die Textualisierung der Religion (IAT 62; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). Gamble, however, also maintains the same problematic depreciation of Jewish Scripture exposed above: “the faith of the earliest Christians was evoked by and focused on a person, Jesus of Nazareth, and he was apprehended by the primitive Christian communities not first of all in texts but in missionary preaching, oral tradition, and charismatic experience. Only secondarily were the sacred writings of Judaism called into service and their function was to confirm and defend the Christian message” (p. 37). But were not the “earliest Christians” in fact Jewish? Gamble’s reconstruction seems to assume that the church began among Gentiles.
77. Thus, Barton, Oracle, 57.
78. Thus, Ulrich, Bible, 60; cf. Dempster, “Texts,” 21.
79. Leonid (Canonichy, 66–72) makes an intriguing case for the entire process of OT canon formation as characteristically “cumulative” rather than “exclusive.”
80. Chapman, Line, 106–10. In English, “Scripture” can be singular (“a scripture”), plural (“the scriptures”) or collectively plural (“Holy Scripture”). The intertextual nature of canon is also in line with Childs’s primary use of the term; cf. his “Reclaiming,” 10, for further development of this idea.
to do with a canon’s intertextuality. This intertextual nature of canon as a collection in turn helps to explain how there can be recognizable theological content to a diverse but not fully delimited literature within a particular religious community.

Moreover, canon as “intertext” points to the existence of a conception of Jewish Scripture prior to complete stabilization. This root conception increasingly shaped later additions and editorial changes to the biblical literature itself. The process is evident already at Qumran, where a relatively high view of the authority of Israel’s scriptural tradition existed simultaneously with a pluriform textual situation and unclear canonical boundaries. In this way, the situation at Qumran can be interpreted as confirming the “core canon” model. What the NT later recognizes as “the Law and the Prophets” is thus not simply a fluid assortment of free-floating traditions but a body of written texts with a discernible theological purpose, even if the precise boundaries to that body of texts were still subject to variation. The NT’s recognition of preexistent normative books remains of lasting significance for Christian faith and practice.

Human Agency

Another central issue has to do with the nature of power, which is often invoked in the canon debate but also rarely defined. Canons are about “power,” yes, but what kind of power? Brute force or aesthetic idealization?

82. For details, see Ulrich, “Quarum.”
83. Cf. idem, Scrolls, 59: “We have [prior to the first century A.D.], well documented by practice, the concept of authoritative sacred books that are to be preserved very faithfully.” Cf. VanderKam, Revelation, 23; idem, The Dead Sea Scrolls Today (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 142.
84. Childs, Introduction, 99: “The fundamental theological issue at stake is not the extent of the canon, which has remained in flux within Christianity, but the claim for a normative body of tradition contained in a set of books.”

In a stimulating article, one Dutch literary scholar has called attention to the way in which Arthur Brooke’s rhymed novella, “The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet” (1662) never achieved canonical status, while Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” (1593/4) did. That outcome begs an explanation, because both texts were close in “production (time/place), in their theme and subject matter.” The author of the article, Willie van Peer, shows how Brooke’s version of the story is the more ideological, with a heavily moralizing manner. “A rather boring piece of propaganda, anti-erotic and anti-utopian in style and spirit” is van Peer’s judgment.

By contrast, Shakespeare’s play rings the changes on “nonconformity.” In his version of the story, “authenticity (of feelings, of will, of responsibility for the other) overrides conformity to transient social conventions.” For van Peer, this particular example falsifies the claim… that the canon is made up of only works that are in the interests of those in power. If indeed the dominant groups in society did select texts to be included in the canon because of their upholding, legitimizing and furthering the ideology of these very same groups, then Brooke’s work should have been in the canon, not Shakespeare’s.

Shakespeare’s play is subversive toward the interests of the socially powerful, but his is the one that has entered the canon of classics.

Of course, the biblical canon is the product of an ancient society far removed from the literary world of Elizabethan London. Yet the basic point is instructive. Rather than simply invoking “power” in discussions of canon formation, one must take the further step of asking what kind of power appears to be at work, recognizing that sometimes power takes the form of self-conviction and self-submission to human ideals rather than crude imposition. A historical reconstruction of biblical canon formation can continue to insist that power dynamics have given rise to the canon, but it will have to offer a much more sophisticated notion of what “power” means and how this power functions in relation to works of literature, not to mention religious Scripture. This judgment is not a claim that intrinsic aspects of works of literature solely or even primarily determine what
becomes "canonical." It is rather to question the understanding of canon as rigidly determined by social coercion. Perhaps history can sometimes be imposed, but it is more usually negotiated in a highly complicated nexus of interlocking social relationships, influential figures, ambiguous acts, and enduring institutions.

At issue then, ultimately, in the description of canons and how they work is an accurate assessment of human nature. Did the biblical scribes really only "write what their patrons told them to"? Or is it not possible that the radical ideals of Israel were preserved in writing despite the interests of the powerful?

92. For a critique of van Peer's argument, see Kanavillil Rajagopalan, "Aesthetics vs. Ideology: The Case of Formation," British Journal of Aesthetics 37 (1997): 75–84. Rajagopalan's attempt to construe the political imposition of a canon as more unconscious than overt registers an important point yet fails as a criticism of van Peer because (i) many literary (as well as biblical) critics do in fact maintain that canonical imposition is an intentional and overt act; (ii) Rajagopalan wrongly blames van Peer for holding this facile view rather than those against whom van Peer is arguing; (iii) Rajagopalan himself finds it difficult to conceive of canon formation as a "well-calculated and behind-the-curtains manipulative political action orchestrated by the powers that be," thereby actually agreeing with van Peer; (iv) van Peer does not argue for "aesthetics as the only key to an understanding of canon formation," as Rajagopalan incorrectly claims, but rather against using a political reason as the determining factor in explaining canon formation; (v) Rajagopalan misunderstands van Peer to argue that "Romeo and Juliet" itself is apolitical and only interested in aesthetics, which view he then criticizes, whereas in fact van Peer characterizes "Romeo and Juliet" as nonconformist and politically subversive.

93. For possible examples, see Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). However, even these examples suggest the need for a more nuanced reconstruction of events than simple imposition.

94. Thus, Davies, Scribes, 107.

95. See further Herbert Schneidau, Sacred Discontent (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), and J. P. M. Walsh, The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition (OBT 21; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). I wish to thank Sameer Yadav for his assistance in preparing this essay for publication.

**Athens and Jerusalem Once More:**

**What the Turn to Virtue Means for Theological Exegesis**

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**Abstract** — This essay aims to explore the concept of interpretive virtue and to elucidate its significance for contemporary exegetes. Although several recent works have referenced the importance of the virtues in renuvbing biblical interpretation, a concise account of the options, benefits, and challenges associated with such a move remains elusive. To sketch this account, this essay explores virtue epistemology as an analogous (but not identical) trend in a sister discipline. Two models of virtue epistemology—the first from Linda Zagzebski, and the second from Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood—offer several insights that should inform appropriations of virtue ethics in biblical interpretation. While there are surely important differences between epistemology and exegesis, Roberts and Wood in particular demonstrate the great potential that lies in a virtues approach to biblical interpretation that aims at improving the intellectual life by forming habits conducive to the acquisition of various interpretive goods. Though this approach is unlikely to provide a way of adjudicating interpretive disputes, it can significantly enrich our understanding of biblical exegesis by delineating its goals more clearly while also helping teachers to train students more effectively. While this reorientation must not be overhyped—virtue theory does not offer a complete picture of what makes good biblical interpretation—it holds significant promise. Finally, the essay addresses three common objections to virtue theory: that it represents a poor fit with the biblical witness, that it yields no substantial contribution to hermeneutics, and that it ineluctably results in problematic forms of relativism.

**Key Words** — virtue, epistemology, disposition, wisdom

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