

The background of the cover is a classical painting showing a hand holding a quill pen, writing in an open book. The scene is lit from the side, creating strong highlights and deep shadows. The text is overlaid on this image.

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT DEBATE

THE
QUESTION
OF
CANON

MICHAEL J. KRUGER

Challenging the Status Quo
in the New Testament Debate

THE
QUESTION
OF
CANON

MICHAEL J. KRUGER

 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press

P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426

World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com

Email: email@ivpress.com

©2013 by Michael J. Kruger

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, or visit the IVCF website at www.intervarsity.org.

Chapter one of this book was published in a slightly different form as “The Definition of the Term ‘Canon’: Exclusive or Multi-Dimensional?” Tyndale Bulletin 63 (2012): 1-20. Permission to republish courtesy of Tyndale Bulletin.

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

Cover design: Cindy Kiple

Interior design: Beth Hagenberg

Image: Brother Pedro Machado by Francisco de Zurburan at Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid, Spain. Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library

ISBN 978-0-8308-6497-3 (digital)

ISBN 978-0-8308-4031-1 (print)

CONTENTS

Preface	7
Abbreviations	9
Introduction	15
1. THE DEFINITION OF CANON	27
Must We Make a Sharp Distinction Between the Definitions of <i>Canon</i> and <i>Scripture</i> ?	
2. THE ORIGINS OF CANON	47
Was There Really Nothing in Early Christianity That May Have Led to a Canon?	
3. THE WRITING OF CANON	79
Were Early Christians Averse to Written Documents?	
4. THE AUTHORS OF CANON	119
Were the New Testament Authors Unaware of Their Own Authority?	
5. THE DATE OF CANON	155
Were the New Testament Books First Regarded as Scripture at the End of the Second Century?	
Conclusion	204
Bibliography	211
Author Index	249
Subject Index	251
Scripture Index	253
About the Author	257
More Titles from InterVarsity Press	258

PREFACE



For many years now, the topic of the New Testament canon has been the main focus of my research and writing. It is an exciting field of study that probes into questions that have long fascinated scholars and laypeople alike, namely when and how these twenty-seven books came to be regarded as a new scriptural deposit. But the story of the New Testament canon is bigger than just the *when* and the *how*. It is also, and perhaps most fundamentally, about the *why*. Why did Christians have a canon at all? Does the canon exist because of some later decision or action of the second- or third-century church? Or did it arise more naturally from within the early Christian faith itself? Was the canon an extrinsic phenomenon or an intrinsic one? These are the questions this book is designed to address. And these are not micro questions but macro ones. They address foundational and paradigmatic issues about the way we view the canon. They force us to consider the larger framework through which we conduct our research—whether we realized we had such a framework or not.

Of course, we are not the first to ask such questions about why we have a canon. Indeed, for many scholars this question has already been settled. The dominant view today, as we shall see below, is that the New Testament is an extrinsic phenomenon: a later ecclesiastical development imposed on books originally written for another purpose. This is the framework through which much of modern scholarship operates. And it is the goal of this volume to ask whether it is a compelling one. To be sure, it is no easy task challenging the status quo in any academic field. But we should not be afraid to ask tough questions. Likewise, the consensus position should not be afraid for them to be asked.

In any project like this one, there are many people and institutions that deserve thanks. I am grateful for the support of Dan Reid at IVP Academic for his keen interest in this project. It has been a pleasure to work with him and all the folks at InterVarsity Press. Although chapter one below was originally written for this volume, it was published last year (in a slightly different form) in *Tyndale Bulletin* 63 (2012): 1-20, under the title “The Definition of the Term ‘Canon’: Exclusive or Multi-Dimensional?” Thanks to *Tyndale Bulletin* for permission to republish it here. I am grateful for the many colleagues who have given feedback and input to this book, including Larry Hurtado, Paul Foster, Chris Keith and Don Hagner. It is a better volume as a result of their thoughtful comments, though its shortcomings are still my own. My teaching assistants, Alan Gay and Aaron Gray, also deserve a word of thanks. Their tireless attention to detail was a great help to me as this book was edited. Most of all, I would like to thank my wife, Melissa, and my three children, Emma, John and Kate. They are always a joy to my heart when I return home from a long day of writing books such as this one.

ABBREVIATIONS

Apocrypha and Septuagint

Bar	Baruch
1-2 Macc	1-2 Maccabees
Sir	Sirach
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom of Solomon

Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

<i>1 En.</i>	<i>1 Enoch</i>
<i>2 En.</i>	<i>2 Enoch</i>
<i>2 Bar.</i>	<i>2 Baruch</i>
<i>Apoc. Ab.</i>	<i>Apocalypse of Abraham</i>
<i>Jub</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>
<i>T. Mos.</i>	<i>Testament of Moses</i>

Dead Sea Scrolls

1QH ^a	1QHodayot ^a
1QM	1QWar Scroll
1QpHab	1QPesher to Habakkuk
1QS	1QRule of the Community
1QSa	1QRule of the Congregation
1QSB	1QRule of Benedictions
4Q52	4QSamuel ^b
4Q175	4QTestimonia
4Q504	4QWords of the Luminaries ^a
4QMMT ^c	4QHalakhic Letter ^c
11Q13	11QMelchizedek
11QTa	11QTemple ^a
CD	Damascus Document

Tractates in the Mishnah, Tosefta and Talmud

<i>b. Meg.</i>	Babylonian Talmud <i>Megillah</i>
<i>b. Soṭah</i>	Babylonian Talmud <i>Soṭah</i>
<i>m. Kelim</i>	Mishnah <i>Kelim</i>

Apostolic Fathers

<i>1 Clem.</i>	<i>1 Clement</i>
<i>2 Clem</i>	<i>2 Clement</i>
<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Epistle of Barnabas</i>
<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Herm. Vis.</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas, Vision(s)</i>
<i>Ign. Eph.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Ephesians</i>
<i>Ign. Magn.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Magnesians</i>
<i>Ign. Phld.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Philadelphians</i>
<i>Ign. Pol.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To Polycarp</i>
<i>Ign. Smyrn.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans</i>
<i>Ign. Rom.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Romans</i>
Polycarp	
<i>Phil.</i>	<i>To the Philippians</i>

Greek and Latin Works

Cicero	
<i>Tusc.</i>	<i>Tusculanae disputationes</i>
Clement of Alexandria	
<i>Exc.</i>	<i>Excerpta ex Theodoto (Excerpts from Theodotus)</i>
<i>Strom.</i>	<i>Stromata (Miscellanies)</i>
Eusebius	
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)</i>
Galen	
<i>Temp. Med.</i>	<i>De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis et facultatibus (On the Mixtures and Powers of Simple Drugs)</i>
Irenaeus	
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies)</i>
Jerome	
<i>Epist.</i>	<i>Epistles</i>

Josephus

- Ag. Ap.* *Contra Apionem (Against Apion)*
Ant. *Antiquitates judaicae (Jewish Antiquities)*

Justin

- 1 Apol.* *Apologia i (First Apology)*
Dial. *Dialogus cum Tryphone (Dialogue with Trypho)*

Lucian

- Hist. Conscr.* *(How to Write History)*
Peregr. *de Morte Peregrini (The Death of Peregrinus)*

Martial

- Epigr.* *Epigrammata (Epigrams)*

Minucius Felix

- Oct.* *Octavius*

Origen

- Cels.* *Contra Celsum (Against Celsus)*

Philo

- Contempl. Life* *On the Contemplative Life*

Pliny

- Ep.* *Epistulae*

Quintilian

- Inst. Or.* *Institutio oratoria*

Seneca

- Ep.* *Epistulae Morales*

Tacitus

- Ann.* *Annales*
Hist. *Historiae*

Theophilus of Antioch

- Autol.* *To Autolycus*

Tertullian

- Adv. Jud.* *Adversus Judaios (Against the Jews)*
Marc. *Adversus Marcionem (Against Marcion)*
Prax. *Adversus Praxean (Against Praxeas)*
Pud. *De pudicitia (On Modesty)*

Periodicals, Reference Works and Serials

- ABD* *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (6 vols.;
 New York: Doubleday, 1992)

<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> , ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–)
<i>ASOR</i>	American Schools of Oriental Research
<i>AThR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>ATR</i>	<i>Australasian Theological Review</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>BECNT</i>	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BJA</i>	<i>British Journal of Aesthetics</i>
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
<i>CI</i>	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
<i>CTM</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
<i>CurTM</i>	<i>Currents in Theology and Missions</i>
<i>DBSJ</i>	<i>Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
<i>Exp</i>	<i>Expositor</i>
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>HR</i>	<i>History of Religions</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HvTSt</i>	<i>Hervormde teologiese studies</i>
<i>ICC</i>	International Critical Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>IVPNTC</i>	IVP New Testament Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Periods</i>

<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>NCBC</i>	New Century Bible Commentary
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NIBC</i>	New International Biblical Commentary
<i>NICNT</i>	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NIGTC</i>	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NIVAC</i>	New International Version Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PNTC</i>	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>Presb</i>	<i>Presbyterion</i>
<i>QJS</i>	<i>Quarterly Journal of Speech</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RHA</i>	<i>Revue Hittite et asianique</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte</i>
<i>SBL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SecCent</i>	<i>Second Century</i>
<i>Sem</i>	<i>Semitica</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SNTSMS</i>	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>SPap</i>	<i>Studia papyrologica</i>
<i>SPCK</i>	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976)
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>TNTC</i>	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>

<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZKG	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>
ZST	<i>Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie</i>

INTRODUCTION

*No greater creative act can be mentioned in the whole history
of the Church than the formation of the apostolic collection
and the assigning to it of a position of equal
rank with the Old Testament.*

ADOLF VON HARNACK
History of Dogma, vol. 2



THE STORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON is a bit of a conundrum. Despite the fact that the contours of the New Testament canon were, for the most part, decided by the fourth century, vibrant and vigorous discussions about the authenticity of these books has persisted well into the twenty-first century—nearly seventeen hundred years later. The question of canon simply will not go away. While the actual New Testament canon of the Christian church has been largely unchanged during this time frame,¹ scholars and laypeople alike never seem to tire of discussions about ancient Christian writings and what role they might have played within the infant church.² And the reason for this fascination with the canon is

¹While there has been a wide consensus on these books, there are still modern-day exceptions: e.g., the Syrian Orthodox church still uses a lectionary that presupposes the twenty-two-book canon of the Peshitta.

²More recent studies on canon include: Gerd Theissen, *The New Testament: A Literary History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and*

not hard to find. Previously unknown gospel writings continue to be discovered,³ the authorship and date of New Testament books continue to be challenged,⁴ and the diversity of early Christian “Scriptures” continues to be highlighted.⁵ And rather than satisfying the scholarly appetite for all things canonical, each new discovery or discussion actually seems to increase it. Thus, Kurt Aland was right when he recognized the inevitable centrality of the canon issue: “The question of Canon will make its way to the centre of the theological and ecclesiastical debate . . . [because] the question is one which confronts not only the New Testament scholar, but every Christian theologian.”⁶

Authority of the New Testament Books (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Charles E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Einar Thomassen, ed., *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010); Michael Bird and Michael Pahl, eds., *The Sacred Text* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010); Lee M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007); Lee M. McDonald, *Forgotten Scriptures: The Selection and Rejection of Early Religious Writings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2006); Christopher Seitz, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Craig Bartholomew et al., eds., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006); David R. Nienhuis, *Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007); Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov, eds., *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

³The most recent example is the so-called *Gospel of Jesus's Wife*, which is now regarded by many as a forgery. Before this, it was the *Gospel of Judas* that garnered all the attention; see Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Hanover, PA: National Geographic Society, 2006); James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006); and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). In addition, there continue to be new publications on previously discovered apocryphal gospels: e.g., Mark S. Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Simon Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Paul Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2010).

⁴For the most updated work on pseudonymity in the New Testament, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Program* (London: SCM, 1990); James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM, 2006); Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶Kurt Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1962), p.

In the midst of all this scholarly attention on the question of canon, serious questions have been raised about the integrity of the New Testament. Most of these questions have centered on the problem of canonical boundaries. How do we know we have the right books? Why these books and not other books? And what about apocryphal books used by other Christian groups? But, in recent years, a new and more foundational question has begun to take center stage (though it is really not new at all). While the validity of the canon's boundaries is still an area of concern, the attention has shifted to the validity of the canon's very *existence*. The question now is, why is there a New Testament at all? If there are no real distinctions between "canonical" books and "apocryphal" books, and if some books were forged by authors pretending to be apostles, then what can account for the emergence of an authoritative canon? The answer, according to some scholars, is not to be found in the first century—there was nothing about earliest Christianity (or the books themselves) that would naturally lead to the development of a canon.⁷ Instead, we are told, the answer is to be found in the later Christian church. The canon was an ecclesiastical product that was designed to meet ecclesiastical needs. Sure, the books themselves were produced at a much earlier point, but the idea of a canon was something that was retroactively imposed upon these books at a later time. Books are not written as canon—they *become* canon.⁸

This idea that the New Testament canon was not a natural development within early Christianity, but a later artificial development that is out of sync with Christianity's original purpose, is, I shall argue, a central framework that dominates much of modern canonical (and biblical) studies.

⁷Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 12. As we shall see below, there are variations of this sort of argument. Some scholars have argued that there was nothing about early Christianity that would have naturally led to the *kind* of canon Christianity ended up with (namely a closed, authoritative canon). See David Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter," *HTR* 87 (1994): pp. 395-419, esp. 408-9.

⁸Eugene Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), p. 35. Cf. Hugo Lundhaug, "Canon and Interpretation: A Cognitive Perspective," in *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, pp. 67-90, at p. 68; and Wilfred C. Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SPCK, 1993), p. 237. For further discussion on this concept, see John Webster, "A Great and Meritorious Act of the Church? The Dogmatic Location of the Canon," in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons*, ed. John Barton and Michael Wolter (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 95-126, at pp. 98-101.

We will call this the *extrinsic* model of canon—the idea that the canon was, to some degree, imposed upon the Christian faith.⁹ Or, as Harnack has argued, the New Testament was something the church was “compelled” to do by the rise of Marcionism.¹⁰ Loren Johns, in his article “Was ‘Canon’ Ever God’s Will?” states the question clearly: “Is canon . . . a function of *Christendom* or of a certain kind of ecclesiastical *power*?”¹¹ For Johns, the answer is clearly the latter. In a similar fashion, Christopher Evans, in his book *Is “Holy Scripture” Christian?* argues that the production of a canon is due to the “worldliness of the church” and the “secularization of Christianity.”¹² Lee McDonald also indicates that the idea of a New Testament canon may be inconsistent with the founding of Christianity: “We must ponder the question of whether the notion of a biblical canon is necessarily Christian. The best available information about the earliest followers of Jesus shows that they did not have such canons as the church presently possesses today, nor did they indicate that their successors should draw them up.”¹³

It is worth noting that this extrinsic model of the canon’s origins was criticized a number of years ago by Brevard Childs (though he used different terminology). Childs described this same view: “It is assumed by many that the formation of a canon is a late, ecclesiastical activity, external to the biblical literature itself, which was subsequently imposed on the

⁹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), I/1:107, makes a very similar statement when he declares, “The Bible constitutes itself the Canon. It is the Canon because it imposed itself upon the Church.” However, the difference is that Barth is referring to something the Scripture itself does, whereas the extrinsic model is referring to what the church (or another ecclesiastical group) does.

¹⁰Adolf von Harnack, *Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of a New Creation* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1925), p. 31.

¹¹Loren L. Johns, “Was ‘Canon’ Ever God’s Will?,” in *Jewish and Christian Scriptures: The Function of “Canonical” and “Non-Canonical” Religious Texts*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Lee M. McDonald (London: T & T Clark, 2010), p. 42 (emphasis his). For more on the canon as a demonstration of power, see Alan K. Bowman and Greg Wolf, eds., *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Gerald L. Bruns, “Canon and Power in the Hebrew Scriptures,” *CI* 10 (1984): 462-80; Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Robert P. Coote and Mary P. Coote, *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

¹²Christopher Evans, *Is “Holy Scripture” Christian?* (London: SCM, 1971), pp. 7 and 34. See also C. F. Evans, “The New Testament in the Making,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 232-83, at p. 235.

¹³McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, p. 426.

writings.”¹⁴ In similar language, he says this model views the canon as “simply a post-apostolic development undertaken by the early catholic church which could be sharply separated from the formation of the New Testament literature.”¹⁵ Childs refers to this as a “modern consensus” which has led to “the almost universal rejection of a traditionally earlier dating for the first stage of the New Testament’s canonization during the first half of the second century.”¹⁶

If the New Testament canon was a later ecclesiastical creation, as the extrinsic model suggests, then what were the specific circumstances that led Christians to do such a thing? As can be imagined, the answers to this question vary widely. David Dungan, in his book *Constantine’s Bible*, pins the origins of the canon on the influence of Greek philosophy and its emphasis on possessing a list of genuine writings that contain true doctrine.¹⁷ According to Dungan, this influence culminated when the pagan emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and then “powerfully intruded” into the affairs of the church and determined the canon through “coercive enforcement.”¹⁸ Koester takes a different route, arguing along with Harnack that “the impelling force for the formation of the canon” was the second-century heretic Marcion.¹⁹ Thus, in an attempt to counter Marcion, the “New Testament canon of Holy Scripture . . . was thus essentially *created* by

¹⁴Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1984), p. 21.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible*, pp. 32-53.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁹Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 8. The idea that Marcion was responsible for the origins of the New Testament canon can be found most notably in Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium von fremden Gott* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1924); Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972); and John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942). However, Marcion’s role in the formation of the canon has been minimized in recent years: e.g., John Barton, “Marcion Revisited,” in *Canon Debate*, pp. 341-54; John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 35-62; Franz Stuhlhofer, *Der Gebrauch Der Bibel Von Jesus Bis Euseb: Eine Statistische Untersuchung Zur Kanongeschichte* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1988), pp. 73-75; David L. Balás, “Marcion Revisited: A ‘Post-Harnack’ Perspective,” in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and the Early Church Fathers*, ed. W. Eugene March (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980), pp. 95-107; and Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 126.

Irenaeus.”²⁰ Elaine Pagels follows a similar path as Koester and lays the origins of the canon at the feet of Irenaeus.²¹ Regardless of the specific *raison d'être* given to the canon, a dominant position in critical scholarship today is that the idea of canon is not a natural and original part of the early Christian faith.

Now, it should be noted from the outset that there is much that is correct in the extrinsic model. Indeed, these scholars are correct to observe that a New Testament was not an instantaneous development within early Christianity—it took time for this collection to be developed and shaped. And, they are correct to remind us that the entire process took several centuries to complete, and the church played an influential role in this process (as did heretics like Marcion).²² However, are we really to think that “*nothing* dictated that there should be a NT”²³ prior to these later ecclesiastical actions? Was there nothing about earliest Christianity that might have given rise to such a collection? Was the idea of new Scriptures entirely foreign to the early followers of Jesus? It is the purpose of this volume to suggest otherwise. Our goal is not to deny the truth of the extrinsic model in its entirety, but to offer a well-intended corrective to its assessment and interpretation of some of the historical evidence. Paradigms always need adjustments and refinement, and this volume hopes to take a helpful step forward in that direction. This brief study, therefore, is not designed to offer the final word on the very complex subject of canon, but to reopen dialogue on a number of key topics where the dialogue, at least in appearance, seems to be closed. Thus, the format of this book will be unique. Rather than being yet another introduction to canon, it will focus narrowly upon five tenets of the extrinsic model. Each chapter will focus on one of these tenets, offering an assessment and response.

²⁰Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 10 (emphasis mine). There are other versions of this hypothesis; some suggest the canon was created to counteract the flood of apocryphal literature in the second century. See Kenneth L. Carroll, “The Earliest New Testament,” *BJRL* 38 (1955): 45-57.

²¹Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 114-42.

²²For a study that emphasizes the role of the church in the development of the canon, see Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

²³Gamble, *New Testament Canon*, p. 12 (emphasis mine).

By responding to the major tenets of the extrinsic model, this volume will effectively be offering an alternative approach—what we might call an *intrinsic* model. This model suggests that the idea of canon is not something imposed from the outside but develops more organically from within the early Christian religion itself. The earliest Christian communities had certain characteristics and also held a number of theological beliefs that, especially when taken in tandem, would have made a new collection of sacred books (what we could call a “canon”²⁴) a more natural development. As Everett Ferguson put it, “A canon of New Testament writings placed alongside the scriptures of Judaism resulted primarily from the *internal dynamics of the Christian faith*.”²⁵ Childs argues in a similar fashion when he says:

Canon consciousness thus arose at the inception of the Christian church and lies deep within the New Testament literature itself. There is an organic continuity in the historical process of the development of an established canon of sacred writings from the earliest stages of the New Testament to the final canonical stabilization of its scope.²⁶

In other words, we shall argue that the makeup of first-century Christianity created a favorable environment for the growth of a new written revelational deposit. And when we look at the historical evidence of how this new written deposit developed—particularly the early date by which many of these books were received and the self-awareness of the New Testament authors—it is quite consistent with what we would expect if the intrinsic model were true. If that is the case, then we can agree with Childs that we should not make an overly sharp division between the early and late stages of the canon.

At this point, two clarifications are in order. First, as noted above, it is important to remember that the intrinsic model does not reject all the claims of the extrinsic model. The two models should not be unnecessarily polarized. Indeed, we can agree that the canon was a long, drawn-out process that was

²⁴Obviously, we are using the functional definition for “canon” here. For further discussions of definition, see chapter one.

²⁵Everett Ferguson, “Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon,” in *Canon Debate*, pp. 295–320, at p. 295.

²⁶Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, p. 21.

not finalized until the fourth century or later—and the extrinsic model rightly recognizes this point. The canon did not pop into existence overnight. However, the intrinsic model is not denying this lengthy canonical process. Rather, it is simply arguing that the idea of a canon, and the beginning of the canonical process, cannot be laid solely at the feet of later ecclesiastical figures (or groups) who sought to solidify their power. There is something about the canon that seems more innate to the early Christian movement. Second, it is important to recognize that both the extrinsic and intrinsic models are *historical* models that do not require a commitment to any particular theological perspective.²⁷ One might be inclined to think of the extrinsic model as a historical model and the intrinsic model as the theological model—as if the latter required a belief in something like inspiration. But that is not the case. The intrinsic model has theological aspects to be sure (as we shall see below²⁸), but it is essentially making a historical argument, namely that the canon developed early and naturally out of the Christian religion. One need not believe in inspiration to hold such a position.

David Meade provides a helpful way of describing the differences between the intrinsic and extrinsic models. Using different terminology, he refers to each model as the “push” and the “pull” respectively:

A central question that arises out of the morass of controversy is the question of the direction from which the canonical process of the New Testament proceeds. In other words, is the formation of the New Testament “pushed” from elements inherent within itself or its Jewish origins or is it “pulled” into being by forces of the church and society largely external to the texts themselves?²⁹

²⁷John C. Peckham, “The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity,” *TrinJ* 28 (2007): 229-49, contrasts two models, which he calls the “community” model and the “intrinsic” model. Although the terminology is similar to what we are using here, Peckham’s two models are very different because he is addressing the question of where the *authority* of the canon comes from—whether from the community or from the canon itself. In contrast, this volume is not using the term “intrinsic” to speak of the authority of the canon but is using it to speak of the *historical development* of the canon.

²⁸When we deal with the definition of *canon* in chapter one, we shall argue that the ontological definition is a legitimate option and should not be disallowed simply because it is theological. However, one does not need to hold the ontological definition of canon in order to affirm the intrinsic model. The latter can exist without the former.

²⁹David G. Meade, “Ancient Near Eastern Apocalypticism and the Origins of the New Testament Canon of Scripture,” in *The Bible as a Human Witness: Hearing the Word of God Through Historically Dissimilar Traditions*, ed. Randall Heskett and Brian Irwin (London: T & T Clark, 2010), pp. 302-21, at p. 304.

Of course, the answer is that the canon is, to some extent, the result of *both* push and pull. But, the purpose of this volume is to argue that the extrinsic model (the “pull”) has unduly dominated modern canonical studies and needs to be corrected by a recovery and new appreciation of the intrinsic model (the “push”). When it comes to explaining the formation of the New Testament, we cannot ignore the “elements inherent within itself or its Jewish origins” that gave it birth.

With the basic contours of these two models in mind, let us now turn to the five major tenets of the extrinsic model that this book will address. As we do so, it is important that we are clear about the limitations we face when expressing the tenets of any particular model. Models, by definition, are generalized descriptions and therefore subject to exceptions. Thus, by listing these five tenets we are not suggesting that everyone in the extrinsic camp would hold all of them without exception, nor are we suggesting that they exhaustively capture the beliefs of the extrinsic camp. Rather we are simply making a general observation that these five tenets are often (though not always) found together among those who see the canon as a later ecclesiastical development, and therefore they warrant our attention here. In addition to this, we must be careful to avoid another misconception, namely that merely addressing these five tenets would somehow prove the intrinsic model. To be clear, the goal of this volume is not to prove the intrinsic model—our purpose here is not nearly so ambitious. But if we can show that these five tenets are problematic (and that is the goal of this volume), then that would raise serious questions about the viability of the extrinsic model and at least pave the way for a reconsideration of the intrinsic model. Here are the five tenets:

- Tenet one: *We must make a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon.* Central to the extrinsic model is the insistence that the term *canon* can only be used after the church has acted to create a final, closed list of books. To use only this definition gives the impression that the canon is a late ecclesiastical creation. We shall argue in chapter one that this definition is correct as far as it goes, but that we should not rule out other definitions that bring more balance to our understanding of canon.
- Tenet two: *There was nothing in earliest Christianity that might have led*

to a canon. While the extrinsic model insists that the idea of a canon was nowhere in the mind of the earliest Christians, chapter two will suggest that there was a matrix of theological beliefs held by early Christians that gives us good reason to think that a canon might have developed quite naturally.

- Tenet three: *Early Christians were averse to written documents.* A core tenet of the extrinsic model is that the whole idea of canon had to be a later ecclesiastical development because the earliest Christians were illiterate and uninterested in books. On the contrary, we shall argue in chapter three that while most Christians were illiterate (as were most people in the world at this time), they were characterized by a robust textuality—the knowledge, use and appreciation of written texts.
- Tenet four: *The New Testament authors were unaware of their own authority.* A frequent claim of those in the extrinsic camp is that the authors of the New Testament did not conceive of themselves as producing authoritative texts—they were merely producing occasional documents that were only *later* regarded as Scripture. Indeed, such a claim is critical for establishing the canon as an artificial ecclesiastical creation. However, in response, we shall argue in chapter four that the New Testament writers actually do provide substantial indications that they understood their message as authoritative, and often do so quite plainly.
- Tenet five: *The New Testament books were first regarded as Scripture at the end of the second century.* If the extrinsic model were true, we would expect that it would have taken a while for the New Testament writings to attain a scriptural status. And many advocates of the extrinsic model argue that the end of the second century was when this status was first acquired—most fundamentally due to the influence of Irenaeus. Although this date is often used, it is subject to serious question. In chapter five, we will examine the state of the canon in the second century and will argue that many of these writings were regarded as Scripture at a much earlier point.

Now that we have an overview of the questions that lay before us, we can begin to see that they have significant implications for the field of canonical studies. We are not dealing here with the standard questions about canon—

for example, how do we know these are the right books?—but instead we are dealing with more foundational and more fundamental questions about where the canon comes from. The issue is not so much which books, but whether Christianity should even be defined by books. For that reason, we have an opportunity here to consider (or reconsider) the macro direction we might take in the field of canonical studies. While much of modern scholarship is committed to the extrinsic model—and the five tenets to which it holds—we must remain open to the possibility that it may be in need of some modification. And we should not be surprised if it turns out that it does. The field of biblical studies, just like other fields, is sometimes in need of a paradigm shift. It is these shifts that allow the discipline to move forward in productive ways. So let us turn our attention now to the following chapters and explore that possibility.

THE DEFINITION OF CANON

Must We Make a Sharp Distinction Between the Definitions of Canon and Scripture?

*Once a distinction is made between scripture and canon,
the idea of a New Testament canon does not appear
applicable until the fourth century.*

GEOFFREY M. HAHNEMAN
*The Muratorian Fragment and
the Development of the Canon*



BREVARD CHILDS ONCE DECLARED, “Much of the present confusion over the problem of canon turns on the failure to reach an agreement regarding the terminology.”¹ Although Childs made this statement in 1979, it could just as easily been written in our current day. As scholars continue to probe into the origins and development of the biblical canon, debates and disagreements about canonical semantics have not abated.² What exactly

¹Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 51.

²Some recent studies on the definition of canon include: John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 1-34; Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 71-110; idem, “How the Biblical Canon Began: Working Models and Open Questions,” in Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Strousma, eds., *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond* (Leiden: E. J. Brill,

do we mean by the term *canon*?³ Does it refer to books that were widely used by early Christians? Does it refer to books that function as Scripture? Or does it refer only to books that are included in a final, closed list? While these discussions over the definition of canon will certainly continue, and no universal agreement appears to be forthcoming, something does seem to have changed since Childs's original observation. The definition of canon as a final, closed list of books has begun to emerge as the more dominant one—at least in some circles. In particular, advocates of an “extrinsic” model of canon are typically committed to this particular definition and insist that all scholars must adopt it, lest the entire field become plagued by confusion and anachronism.⁴

2003), pp. 29-51; John Webster, “A Great and Meritorious Act of the Church? The Dogmatic Location of the Canon,” in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons*, ed. John Barton and Michael Wolter (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 95-126; Eugene Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), pp. 21-35; idem, “Qumran and the Canon of the Old Testament,” in *The Biblical Canons*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), pp. 57-80; Jonathan Z. Smith, “Canons, Catalogues, and Classics,” in *Canonization and Decanonization*, pp. 295-311; Kendall W. Folkert, “The ‘Canons’ of ‘Scripture,’” in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Miriam Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 170-79; James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), pp. 91-98; Gerald T. Sheppard, “Canon,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 1987), 3:62-69; John C. Peckham, “The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canoncity,” *TrinJ* 28 (2007): 229-49; John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 85-197.

³Our concern throughout this chapter is not the word *canon* itself (κανών, borrowed from the Hebrew כְּנִיָּה), but the *concept* of canon. Put differently, we are asking what sociohistorical or theological phenomenon is referred to when we use the word *canon*, not the etymology or history of the term. This is unfortunate, because considering only the term itself can bring confusion rather than clarity. For example, Geoffrey M. Hahneman, in “The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon,” in *Canon Debate*, p. 406, has attempted to argue for a late date for the canon by appealing to the fact that the term *canon* (in either Greek or Latin) was not used to refer to a list of Christian Scriptures until the fourth century or later. However, there is no reason to think the appearance of the term itself is decisive—it is the concept behind the term that must be clarified and considered. Although others do not go to the extreme of Hahneman, there seems to be a fascination with the etymology of the term: e.g., Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), pp. 289-93; Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 15-18; and Ulrich, “Notion and Definition of Canon,” pp. 21-35. In fact, Alexander Souter, in *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1954), declares, “The word ‘Canon’ has had a history unsurpassed in interest, perhaps, by any other word in the Greek language” (p. 141).

⁴On this point, see Ulrich, “Notion and Definition of Canon,” p. 34; and Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 49-51. Once again, it should be noted that not all scholars in the extrinsic camp necessarily adopt this definition, nor do all scholars outside the

Such claims are difficult to resist—after all, no one wants to plunge canonical studies into disarray. Moreover, there is certainly something attractive about having a single, unified definition of canon on which we can all agree (and build upon). Nevertheless, we must ask whether this “consensus” position, and the attitude with which it is held, is justified. Does this single definition adequately capture the complexities and nuances of the concept of canon? And are we required to adopt only this definition to the exclusion of all others?

THE EXCLUSIVE DEFINITION OF CANON

The definition of canon as a fixed, final and closed list of books—what might be called the *exclusive* definition⁵—was put forth originally by A. C. Sundberg in 1968.⁶ Sundberg drew a sharp distinction between the terms *Scripture* and *canon* and, on this basis, argued that we cannot speak of the idea of canon until at least the fourth century or later. Although Scripture would have existed prior to this time period, Sundberg argues that we must reserve the term canon until the end of the entire process. It would be anachronistic to use the term canon to speak of any second- or third-century historical realities. Thus, simply marshaling evidence of a book’s scriptural status in the early church—as is so often done in canonical studies—is not enough to consider it canonical. The book must be part of a list from which nothing can be added or taken away.

Sundberg’s exclusive definition of canon was initially supported by a

extrinsic camp reject it. The point of this chapter is that this definition is a *general* tenet of the extrinsic model and therefore warrants our careful examination.

⁵Chapman, “How the Biblical Canon Began,” pp. 34–35, uses the term “extrinsic” instead of “exclusive.” The former term is also used in Smith, “Canons, Catalogues, and Classics,” p. 297. But Chapman does use the latter term in Stephen B. Chapman, “The Canon Debate: What It Is and Why It Matters” (presented at SBL, San Diego, 2007).

⁶Albert C. Sundberg, “Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon,” *Studia Evangelica* 4 (1968): 452–61; idem, “The Making of the New Testament Canon,” in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), pp. 1216–24. Of course, Sundberg is not the first scholar to propose a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon. Its roots can be traced to W. Staerk, “Der Schrift- und Kanonbegriff der jüdischen Bibel,” *ZST* 6 (1929): 101–19; Gustav Hölscher, *Kanonisch und Apocryph. Ein Kapitel aus der Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Kanons* (Naumburg: Lippert, 1905); and arguably back to Semler’s original critique of canon, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon* (Halle, 1771–1775). See discussion in Iain Provan, “Canons to the Left of Him: Brevard Childs, His Critics, and the Future of Old Testament Theology,” *SJT* 50 (1997): 9–11; and Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*, p. 34.

number of key scholars such as D. H. Kelsey,⁷ James Barr⁸ and Harry Gamble,⁹ and, in more recent years, has continued to gather adherents. John Barton, while rightly recognizing that multiple definitions of canon have some validity,¹⁰ still seems to prefer the exclusive definition: “Much clarity could be gained if we agreed to distinguish sharply between these two concepts [of Scripture and canon].”¹¹ Geoffrey Hahneman has been a vigorous advocate of the exclusive definition, declaring, “Once a distinction is made between scripture and canon, the idea of a New Testament canon does not appear applicable until the fourth century.”¹² Lee McDonald has consistently promoted Sundberg’s definition in his many writings over the last twenty years and is no doubt one of the reasons for its recent popularity.¹³ Eugene Ulrich is quite forceful in his approach, arguing that unless scholars accept the exclusive definition, discussions will be “confusing and counterproductive.”¹⁴ Likewise, the recent work of Craig Allert insists on the “necessity of proper distinction between the terms ‘Scripture’ and ‘canon.’”¹⁵ Even this brief survey of scholars (and more could be added¹⁶)

⁷David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 104-5.

⁸James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), p. 120.

⁹Gamble, *New Testament Canon*, pp. 18-19. Elsewhere, Gamble nuances his view further and acknowledges that other definitions have some validity: e.g., Harry Y. Gamble, “The Canon of the New Testament,” in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Eldon J. Epp and George MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), pp. 201-43; idem, “The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis,” in *Canon Debate*, pp. 267-94.

¹⁰Barton, *Spirit and the Letter*, pp. 1-34.

¹¹John Barton, “Canonical Approaches Ancient and Modern,” in *Biblical Canons*, p. 202; see also idem, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel After the Exile* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1985), pp. 55-82.

¹²Geoffrey M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), pp. 129-30.

¹³Lee M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), pp. 38-69; idem, *Forgotten Scriptures: The Selection and Rejection of Early Religious Writings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), pp. 11-33. As a whole, McDonald is more balanced in the way he holds Sundberg’s definition, recognizing that other definitions have some validity.

¹⁴Ulrich, “Notion and Definition of Canon,” pp. 21-35.

¹⁵Allert, *High View of Scripture?*, p. 51 (emphasis mine).

¹⁶E.g., George Aichele, “Canon, Ideology, and the Emergence of an Imperial Church,” in *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, ed. Einar Thomassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), pp. 45-65; Julio Treballe-Barrera, “Origins of a Tripartite Old Testament Canon,” in *Canon Debate*, pp. 128-45; David L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2006), pp. 1-10; H. J. de Jonge, “The New Testament Canon,” in *Biblical Canons*, pp. 309-19; and John C. Poirier, “Scripture and Canon,” in *The Sacred Text*, ed. Michael Bird and Michael Pahl (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), pp. 83-98.

suggests that David Nienhuis was correct when he observed that “Sundberg’s position has enjoyed widespread acceptance.”¹⁷

But is the widespread acceptance of this position justified? We begin our analysis by noting that there are many positives to this position that ought to be acknowledged. For one, the exclusive definition of canon rightly captures the reality of the canon’s “fluid” edges prior to the fourth century. It took some time for the boundaries of the canon to solidify, and the exclusive definition accommodates this historical fact by using different terms for different stages. Moreover, this definition helps remind us of the important role played by the church in the recognition and reception of the canon. By restricting the term *canon* to only the final stage when the church has decisively responded, the exclusive definition keeps church and canon from being unduly divorced from one another—the two concepts go hand in hand. However, there are a number of concerns about this definition that need to be explored.

First, it is difficult to believe that the sharp Scripture-canon distinction drawn by modern advocates of the exclusive definition would have been so readily shared by their historical counterparts in the second century. Would early Christians have regarded “Scripture” as fluid and open-ended and only “canon” as limited and restricted? If they were able to say that certain books in their library were Scripture, then that implies they would have been able to say that other books in their library were *not* Scripture. But, if they are able to say which books are (and are not) Scripture, then how is that materially different than saying which books are in (or not in) a canon? Thus, it seems some degree of limitation and exclusion is already implied in the term *Scripture*. As Iain Provan observes, “The question I am asking is whether the idea of scripture does not itself imply the idea of limitation, of canon, even if it is not yet conceived that the limits have been reached. I believe that it does so imply.”¹⁸ If so, then the necessity of a strict demarcation between Scripture and canon largely disappears.

Second, while the exclusive definition insists the term *canon* cannot be used until the New Testament collection has been officially “closed,”

¹⁷David R. Nienhuis, *Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 235.

¹⁸Provan, “Canons to the Left of Him,” pp. 9-10.

significant ambiguity remains on what, exactly, constitutes this closing. If it is absolute uniformity of practice, across all of Christendom, then, on those terms, there was still not a canon even in the fourth century. Indeed, on those terms we *still* do not have a canon even today.¹⁹ If the closing of the canon refers to a formal, official act of the early church, then we are hard pressed to find such an act before the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.²⁰ The fact of the matter is that when we look into the history of the canon we realize that there was never a time when the boundaries of the New Testament were closed in the way the exclusive definition would require. Stephen Chapman comments on this problem: “Rather than being a minor problem, this inconsistency casts significant doubt upon the appropriateness of the entire approach. Why should scholars adopt as the correct usage of the term ‘canon’ a meaning that does not correspond fully to any historical reality?”²¹ Ironically, then, the exclusive definition is as guilty of anachronism as any of the views that it critiques.

This leads us to the third, and arguably the most foundational, problem for this definition. Inherent to the exclusive definition is an insistence that the fourth century represents such a profoundly different stage in the development of the New Testament that it warrants a decisive change in terminology. Indeed, Dungan refers to the stage of Scripture and the stage of canon as “very different.”²² But was the canon so very different in the fourth century? While a broader degree of consensus was no doubt achieved by this point, the core books of the New Testament—the four Gospels and the majority of Paul’s epistles—had already been recognized and received for centuries. Whatever supposedly happened in the fourth century neither al-

¹⁹E.g., as noted in the introduction, the modern-day lectionary of the Syrian Orthodox Church still operates on the twenty-two-book canon of the Peshitta. For further discussion see Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, pp. 218-28.

²⁰Harry Y. Gamble, “Christianity: Scripture and Canon,” in *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Frederick M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), pp. 46-47. Gamble argues that church councils such as Laodicea (in 360) were local, not ecumenical, and therefore had no binding authority. Lee M. McDonald, “The Integrity of the Biblical Canon in Light of Its Historical Development,” *BBR* 6 (1996): 131-32, agrees: “There was never a time when the church as a whole concluded that these writings and no others could help the church carry out its mission in the world.”

²¹Chapman, “Canon Debate,” p. 14.

²²Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible*, p. 133.

tered the status of these books nor increased their authority.²³ It is precisely at this point that the limitations of the exclusive definition become clear. The abrupt change in terminology gives the impression that these books bore some lesser status prior to this point; it communicates that Christians *only* had Scripture and not a canon. Or, as one scholar put it, prior to the fourth century Christians only had a “boundless, living mass of heterogeneous” texts.²⁴ At best this is obscurant, and at worst misleading. Moreover, it feeds the notion that the canon was somehow the result of “a great and meritorious act of the church.”²⁵ And this is why this definition is a core tenet of the extrinsic model—it implies there was no (and could be no) canon until the church officially acted. Stephen Dempster highlights this problem: “Reserving the terminology ‘canon’ for only the final collection of books obscures the continuity that exists at earlier times. To accept such a limiting definition might suggest that the canon did not have a history, only to be created *ex nihilo*, the result of a [church] council.”²⁶

An example of this third issue can be seen clearly in the recent work of Craig Allert. The stated goal of his volume is to “emphasize the centrality of the church in the formation of the New Testament.”²⁷ It is no surprise, then, that he is such a strong advocate of Sundberg’s definition of canon because, as he acknowledges, “Sundberg’s work has had the effect of pushing the decisive period, that of formal canonization, into the fourth and fifth centuries.”²⁸ Such a late date for canon allows Allert to raise the profile of the church—it was there from the beginning, whereas the canon only arrives late on the scene. He declares, “The Bible was not always ‘there’ in early Christianity. Yet the church still continued to function in its absence.”²⁹ While Allert is right to remind us of the important role of the church, this whole approach to the development of the canon raises some concerns. If the core books of the New Testament were functioning as authoritative Scripture by the middle of the second century, then is it really helpful to

²³Barton, *Spirit and the Letter*, pp. 18-19. We will explore this issue further in chapter five.

²⁴Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible*, pp. 132-33.

²⁵Webster, “Dogmatic Location of the Canon,” pp. 96-97.

²⁶Stephen G. Dempster, “Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left: Finding a Resolution in the Canon Debate,” *JETS* 52 (2009): 51.

²⁷Allert, *High View of Scripture?*, p. 67.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 12.

claim that early Christians did not have a “Bible”? This sort of language seems to bring more confusion than clarity. Although it may prevent one kind of misperception (that the canon was neat and tidy in the second century), it ends up promulgating what is arguably a bigger one (that early Christians had little interest in a New Testament until the fourth century).

With these concerns on the table (and more could be added), one might get the impression that this critique has been offered to challenge the overall legitimacy of the exclusive definition. However, that is not the intent here. If the above concerns are addressed, then the exclusive definition still has an important role to play. After all, the exclusive definition is correct that the boundaries of the canon were not solidified until the fourth century—and, in this sense, we did not have a “canon” until that time. The exclusive definition just needs to acknowledge that this is a general consensus and not an official act of “closing” with airtight boundaries that somehow increased the authority of these books.³⁰ Thus, the main point of this critique is not to do away with the exclusive definition entirely but to challenge those advocates of the exclusive view who claim that it is the *only* legitimate perspective on canon. Given the limitations and weaknesses of the exclusive definition we have observed, we should be hesitant to think it completely exhausts the meaning of the term. If we are to fully appreciate the depth and complexity of *canon*, we must also let other definitions have a voice.

THE FUNCTIONAL DEFINITION OF CANON

Although the exclusive definition of canon may be the dominant one at the current time (or at least the one that has enjoyed increasing popularity), it is not the only option on the table. Childs has played a central role in promoting an alternative definition, arguing, in contrast to Sundberg, that the term *canon* need not be restricted to a final, closed list but can “encompass the entire process by which the formation of the church’s sacred writings took place.”³¹ If a collection of books functions as a religious norm, regardless of whether that collection is open or closed, then Childs is comfortable

³⁰By “general consensus” I mean that the vast majority of the church was in agreement about the boundaries of the canon, even though there may have been pockets of the church that still had differing views.

³¹Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1984), p. 25.