



Introduction

I. SOME TOUGH QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

Some years ago while I was conducting a Bible study in a church, a layperson asked me a fairly straightforward question that caught me off guard: Why did some ancient books make it into our Bibles, and others did not? He also asked how important this question is for Christians today. The simple answer to the first question is that the Bible is one of the great resources of the church, without which we would be at a great loss to know who God is, who we are as the people of God, and what the will of God is for us. But what if someone asked us why some books in antiquity were added to our Bible and others were not? Further, what books *should* be in the Bible? When current Bibles do not contain the same books, which collection of books should we be reading?

One might also ask, why do Catholics have a different collection of books in their Bible than do Protestants? Or, why do Greek Orthodox Christians have an even larger number of books in their Bible than do Catholics or Protestants? Why are the OT books of Protestants the same as those of Jews, but they are not in the same order? Who is right and how can we know? Not only is it important to know something about books that “made the cut” and were included in our Bibles, but what about books that were excluded? Who made those decisions and what criteria did they use? Do all of these books reflect the will of God for the church, or would the Christian faith be considerably different if other books were added and others deleted from the Bible?

All of these questions are essentially *canon* questions and they ask about the books that make up the current Bibles in churches. These questions are easier to formulate than to answer; they are, nevertheless, important for religious communities of faith that order their lives and ministries by a collection of sacred writings they call the Bible. To answer these questions, we have to go behind the scenes and learn something of the origins of the Bible, as well as how, when, by whom, and why the writings in it

came to be acknowledged as authoritative Scripture. Answering these questions will not be easy, however, because no surviving documents either in the church or in Judaism offer clear answers to these questions. The available evidence is very sketchy and inferential in nature, and Bible scholars with impeccable academic and ecclesiastical credentials have difficulty agreeing on these matters.

To carry this discussion a step further, most Bible students know that until the invention of the printing press, the church employed scribes to make individual copies of their sacred Scriptures. Until the invention of the printing press no two biblical manuscripts were exactly alike, and yet each manuscript that the scribes produced functioned as Scripture for the communities for which they were copied and preserved. The copiers had differing abilities, and some copies were better than others and some were worse, but each copy functioned as Scripture in the community that authorized or was responsible for their production.

Many mistakes and even deliberate changes were made in the production of these manuscripts, and, as a result, a new craft called “textual criticism” emerged in the church to determine the original wording of the biblical text. Textual critics want to know what the original author of a manuscript wrote, and many have spent their lives trying to decipher and discover as best they can what the original writers put down on parchment or papyrus. Those engaged in this activity often compare thousands of manuscripts, but at the end of the day few claim to have discovered either the original text or even precise criteria for uncovering the original text in the surviving manuscripts.¹ Indeed, some text-critical scholars have abandoned that pursuit as an unattainable goal. Those who study biblical Greek soon learn that the original wording of many passages in the Bible is uncertain, and questions continue to emerge from biblical scholars not only on the meaning of ancient texts, but also on their original wording as well.

The work of text-critical scholars forms the basis for all modern translations of the Bible, and, with the continual discovery of ancient biblical manuscripts that often predate the manuscripts used to translate the King James Bible and other older translations, we must ask which ancient text(s) should be employed in the translation of the Bible. The church has not universally adopted any particular text of the Bible even when text-critical scholars agree on the wording of a particular biblical text. Similarly, of the many translations of the Bible available in the English language and in more

¹Schnabel, “Textual Criticism,” 73–75, observes that because of the many variables in the history of the transmission of the text and the oral history that lies behind much of it many textual critics have given up on finding the original wording of the biblical text, even if that continues to be the underlying goal of some textual critics.

than two thousand other languages,² which translation is appropriate for the church today? Biblical translations are not all the same, so which translation is the best for church use today? Since many Christians hinge their faith on specific words and phrases of the biblical text, this subject continues to be important. We could well ask, what might the churches' beliefs look like and what changes would take place if they all began to use the same Bible with the same text and the same translation? Again, all of these questions highlight the importance of canonical issues facing the church today.

No credible person today seriously believes that the Bible fell out of heaven fully bound in its current state with gilded edges and with a highly precise interpretation from God in it. The human dimension of the origin and production of the Bible, as well as how the divine message is conveyed through human words and ideas, cannot be ignored. Human beings were involved in the origins and production of the Bible, and all of the words and ideas in the Bible are also reflective of human involvement. How the Bible is the word of God and yet comes to us in human form continues to be a mystery to Christians of every generation. This is not only an important part of the church's understanding about the Bible, but also about God's involvement in the human activity of Jesus, whom the church continues to confess as Lord and Christ.

Some of us were taught in seminary that the early church received from Jesus a closed biblical canon, our present OT, that was later expanded by the Catholics to include noncanonical (and thereby uninspired) apocryphal writings.³ In regard to the Hebrew Scriptures (or the OT), we were often taught that Jesus, the church's final authority, cited or referred to a closed canon of Hebrew Scriptures and that his authentication of them (he cited verses from the three major parts of the OT: Law, Prophets, and Writings) was the church's mandate for accepting them as authoritative Scripture. In other words, the church simply adopted the canon of Jesus. In regard to the NT writings, many of us were taught that the early church simply *recognized* (as opposed to *determined*) its own inspired NT Scriptures that were believed to be *apostolic*, that is either written by or authorized by an apostle within general proximity to the time of Jesus and the apostles or at least written in the first century. We were further taught that these NT writings were *unified in their teaching* (i.e., they were orthodox),

²According to Metzger, as of 2000, the complete Bible was available in 371 languages, and portions of it were translated into 1,862 other languages and dialects. See his *Bible in Translation*, 9.

³The books that Protestants call "apocryphal" (meaning "hidden" or "unrecognized") are what Roman Catholics call "deuterocanonical," which form a part of the Catholic OT Scriptures. Major doctrine is not built upon the apocryphal writings, but they are valued for edifying reading and provide many historical details that are important for understanding the context of early Christianity. The books that Protestants refer to as "pseudepigraphal" the Roman Catholics frequently call "apocryphal." This literature will be discussed in chapter 5 §V.

and for these reasons they were recognized by the majority of the churches to be inspired by God.

This traditional view has been slowly eroding over the years, largely as a result of several important studies on the formation of the biblical canon, especially those by Adolf von Harnack, Robert M. Grant, Hans von Campenhausen, James A. Sanders, A. C. Sundberg, James Barr, John Barton, and G. M. Hahneman (see bibliography). Their efforts caused many scholars to reexamine the historical data related to the formation of the Christian biblical canon. Until recently most (but not all) introductions to both the OT and NT devoted only a few pages to this discussion, but more recent introductions give more serious attention to the major questions involved in canon and by doing so stimulate further research. Of course, not all discussions on the formation of the Bible are of equal value. Some of them offer few advances in our understanding and often simply repeat unjustified assumptions.⁴

Other important questions are under consideration as well:

1. Why were discussions about the scope of the OT biblical canon still going on in the church well into the fourth through sixth centuries (and even later) if the matter had been largely settled before the time of Jesus?
2. Why did it take the church three hundred to four hundred years to establish its twenty-seven-book NT canon?
3. What precisely is a biblical canon, and how sure are we that such notions flourished in the time before, during, or immediately after the first century C.E.?
4. Do biblical canons exist whenever a NT writer or early church father cites a source from an earlier ancient text? In other words, should a cited text automatically become part of an ancient writer's biblical canon?⁵ More recently, one rabbinic scholar has questioned whether

⁴The most disappointing aspect of Farmer and Farkasfalvy's otherwise excellent work on the canon, *Formation of the New Testament Canon*, is that the authors continue to employ the traditional assumptions of canonical research: (1) if ancient authors cited a NT writing, they must have considered it Scripture; (2) if one author called a text "Scripture," then everyone in that writer's time and provenance did the same; and (3) the compilation of all of the citations, quotations, or allusions to biblical literature by an ancient author constitute that writer's biblical canon. These assumptions should have been laid to rest with the publication of von Campenhausen's *Formation of the Christian Bible*, but they continue to persist as unfounded assumptions of canonical inquiry.

⁵Beckwith, "Formation of the Hebrew Bible," 46, 48–49, suggests this without explicitly stating it when he simply adds the references a writer made to earlier sources and calls that collection of references or citations that writer's biblical canon. Interestingly, however, when he deals with Jude 14's citing of *1 En.* 1:9, he equivocates on this understanding and asks more of Jude than he asks of other NT

the issue of a closed biblical canon was ever discussed among the sages of late antiquity.⁶

5. What sources more accurately reflect the earliest strands of Christian faith? Some scholars today are considering other ancient sources that they believe relate more faithfully the earliest Jesus traditions than those we find in the canonical Gospels. It is not uncommon to hear current discussions about the enlargement of the traditional database for knowledge about the historical Jesus, for example, to include the *Gospel of Thomas*, the “Unknown Gospel” discovered in the Egerton Papyri, and other noncanonical writings.
6. What of the so-called *agrapha*, that is, the sayings of Jesus not found in the canonical Gospels? Some scholars suggest that the *agrapha*, or portions of these sayings at least, ought to be added to the database of reliable information about the historical Jesus. This is not a new proposal, of course, and it continues to surface.⁷ The legitimacy of the question stems from these *agrapha* serving as a scriptural (or authoritative) resource for the Christians who cited them. If we can with some assurance determine which of the more than two hundred sayings are authentic, should those sayings of Jesus be added to the database of information about Jesus, or even to the church’s Scriptures

writers when they cite or quote sacred texts. The very criteria he uses with other texts to establish a canon, namely, citing it in an authoritative manner, is rejected for the NT writers when they cite texts other than the OT literature. Beckwith acknowledges that the later writer of *Barnabas* cited *1 Enoch* as Scripture (*Barn.* 4.3; 16.5), but he claims that this had no effect on Jude’s conclusions about *1 Enoch*. See his *Old Testament Canon*, 401–3, where he claims that Jude is referring to *1 Enoch* and the *Assumption of Moses* only because they were edifying literature but not canonical! VanderKam, in his *Revelation to Canon*, 17–28, observes Beckwith’s inconsistencies in this example and elsewhere and argues cogently that *1 Enoch* was more highly regarded among Jews and Christians than Beckwith is willing to concede. Despite Beckwith’s inconsistency here, such references often provide little evidence for the notion of a biblical canon in the time of Jesus. What evidence do we have that the notion of a fixed biblical canon was even present during these times? There is considerable value in simply delaying the presence of a closed or fixed scriptural canon until we see it clearly discussed in the ancient literature. Was the notion of an *unclosed* biblical canon present, even though the early church did not yet have a term available to describe it?

⁶Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine*, 128–45. See also idem, *Midrash in Context*, 1–22. In the formative years of Judaism, Neusner claims, the notion of Torah was expanded to include the Mishnah, Tosefta, the two Talmuds, and the various *Midrashim*. A canon was constructed by defining Torah in a new way that encompassed all the literature that followed it. It was tied together through exegesis. The notion of a biblical canon, however, is not a *prominent* feature in second-century rabbinic Judaism or even later.

⁷Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 272 n. 11, notes just such a proposal from E. Platzhoff-Lejeune as long ago as 1949.

and used in worship, catechetical studies, and the church's mission?⁸ Early texts circulated in the churches apart from the Gospels, but were eventually added to them, and those early agrapha continue to function scripturally in churches to the present day, for example, Mark 16:9–20.

7. Finally, what about the appropriate canonical text for the church today? Childs asks which text of Scripture should be the focus of authority for the church: the text in its original and earliest form or the later canonical form of the text? The latter admittedly has received many textual additions, some of which were intentional and others accidental. For instance, is the canonical or authoritative text of the church the original form of Philippians or the one that currently exists in our NT?⁹ Does it make a difference if the two parts are separated for both study and preaching? Is the Gospel of John best read as it was written, namely, as a single gospel, or as the *Fourth* Gospel? Is the final form of Isaiah the authoritative base for preaching and teaching or do we look for an earlier 1, 2, and even 3 Isaiah? Should we receive into our biblical canon Mark 16:9–20, John 21, Acts 8:37, and other texts with questionable textual support, even though most scholars agree that they were later additions to the text? In the same line of thinking, should we accept as our Scriptures only the earliest texts available to us today, that is, those that most closely reflect the original hand of the author? We have a clue on how to answer this question from the way that the early church sought to root its theology in the witness from the apostolic community.¹⁰

⁸Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, claims that of the 266 extant agrapha only 18 are likely to be genuine and none of them significantly affects our understanding of Jesus presented in the canonical Gospels. What should be done with such sayings, however, if they are genuine? The agrapha are introduced, listed, and discussed in several works. Stroker, *Extracanonial Sayings of Jesus*, offers the text of these sayings without sufficiently evaluating their contents or attributing authenticity or inauthenticity to them. They have been discussed more recently in detail in Hofius, "Isolated Sayings of Jesus." The agrapha are also conveniently listed and discussed in Charlesworth and Evans, "Jesus in the Agrapha and Apocryphal Gospels," where Evans contends that there is essentially nothing new in the agrapha that should cause concern or that would alter the understanding of Jesus found in the canonical Gospels. See also Hofius, "Unknown Sayings of Jesus."

⁹It is likely that the Letter to the Philippians is a composite of Paul's writings from at least two separate occasions, namely, 1:1–3:1 and 3:2–4:23.

¹⁰Notice, for example, that Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.7 emphasizes both "apostolic style" and "orthodoxy" as criteria for genuineness, and even the Muratorian Fragment lines 73–80 (see chapter 13 §I.D) excluded a work from consideration (*Shepherd of Hermas*) because it did not stem from the time of apostolic community. The rise of NT pseudepigraphy also demonstrates a desire to ground theology in the witness of the apostolic community. The early church anchored its life and

These questions, and others as well, have given rise to the recent interest in the formation of the biblical canon and related issues. Before any new advances can be made in our understanding of the formation of the Bible, however, much more inquiry than has emerged thus far needs to take place. I think that we are on the threshold of new advances in canonical studies that will change our perceptions of the canonical process. As a result, we will probably see more attempts at redefining the biblical canon, even though the current shape of the Christian Bible will probably not change much as a result. Some Christians will probably continue to find clever ways to marginalize those parts of the biblical canon that no longer appear relevant or that offend their sensibilities rather than explore new ways of changing the canon or interpreting it in fresh and more applicable ways!¹¹ On the other hand, it is refreshing to find more references to noncanonical literature in evangelical writings, primarily as reference points to understand the meaning of the biblical text.¹²

What has contributed to the growing interest in the origins and formation of the Bible? In the last fifty years there have been several significant inquiries into the viability of the current biblical canon. With little or no change in the biblical canon for hundreds of years, why is there such vigorous inquiry now into the formation and authority of the Bible, and why are some scholars making recommendations about changing the contents of the Bible? Aland, for example, raises the question of reducing the biblical canon to take out those portions of the Bible that he believes are an embarrassment to the majority of Christians with the

faith in God's activity in Jesus. Those writings believed to be closer in time to Jesus (namely, from the apostles) that also reflected the early tradition about him that was passed on in the church were those writings that survived and became the Bible of the church.

¹¹It is amazing what some will do to make an embarrassing text say something different from what is obvious in the text, whether it is about women's roles in the church or home (1 Cor 11:7–10; Eph 5:22–33; 1 Tim 2:9–15), the immediacy of the return of Jesus (1 Thess 4:13–17; Rev 3:20), justification for killing innocent victims in the OT (1 Sam 15:3), praying for the demise of one's enemies (Pss 58, 109, etc.), or early Christianity's apparent acceptance of the practice of slavery (1 Cor 7:21–24; Eph 6:5–9; Col 3:22–4:1).

¹²I am especially impressed in this regard with Arnold's *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* and Evans's *Bible Knowledge Background Commentary*. Both of these works show that evangelical scholarship has acquired a keen interest in the value of noncanonical writings for assisting in our interpretation of the biblical text. An earlier and useful resource on the socio-historical context of the Bible is Keener's *IVP Bible Background Commentary*. Keener makes generous use of noncanonical literature in his commentary, but unfortunately he does not provide adequate references to most of the specific resources that he cites, and it is difficult to inquire further into his research unless one is quite familiar with the ancient sources. Again, however, it is a good sign that conservative scholarship has begun to make use of this literature as a means of understanding the Bible in its historical context.

goal of promoting church unity.¹³ Similarly, Käsemann also asks whether there should be some way to recognize a “canon within the canon”—in essence, a selective use of the Bible and a reduction of the biblical text—in order to alleviate the concern over the diversity within the Bible.¹⁴ Some members of the well-known and often controversial Jesus Seminar promote the notion of both reducing the current biblical canon (eliminating especially Revelation and other apocalyptic literature in the Bible such as Mark 13, Matt 24, etc.) and expanding it to include the *Gospel of Thomas* and the “Unknown Gospel” of the Egerton Papyri.¹⁵ One can well imagine the response of dispensational and Adventist churches to the proposed rejection of the book of Revelation by the Jesus Seminar in their projected Scholars’ Canon!

I agree with Metzger, who contends that although the Bible canon may in principle be changed, in all practicality that can no longer be done.¹⁶ It is complete and finished, but that does not mean that there are no important issues to resolve about the contents of the Bible or its future within the Christian communities. I am aware that any changes in the present Christian Bible will undoubtedly adversely affect many segments of the Christian community and cause more divisions and disputes than may be wise. Although some scholars suggest that changing the shape of the biblical canon was a part of my original aim in writing the two previous editions of this book, that was never my intention, nor did I suggest that noncanonical writings be included or that certain writings of the NT

¹³Aland, *Problem of the New Testament Canon*, 28–33.

¹⁴Käsemann, “Canon of the New Testament.” Dunn, *Living Word*, 141–42, 161–74, also discusses the notion of a canon within the canon, albeit in a different sense, and, after describing four levels of canonical activity or four ways to view the canon, he asks what is the most important level of authority for exegesis and faith. He answers that it is the level of “final composition” (172).

¹⁵Sheler, “Cutting Loose the Holy Canon.” Some members of the Jesus Seminar, under the leading of Karen King of Harvard University, have initiated a “Canon Seminar” that hopes to create what its members call a “Scholars’ Canon.” They hope that they will be able to agree on what books or passages to withdraw from their new Bible and what new material to include. For example, some members want to include the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary* as part of a new biblical canon. See also Perkes, “Scripture Revision Won’t Be a Bible,” who interacts with Robert Funk, founder and director of the Jesus Seminar and its parent organization, the Westar Institute, along with its publishing agency, Polebridge. Interestingly, Milgrom, “Amputated Bible,” notes that the publisher Simon & Schuster eliminated from the Bible what they thought was either boring or irrelevant. Milgrom disagrees with their decisions and tries to show the relevance of those very sections that were eliminated from the Hebrew Scriptures. Several years ago, I was invited both to speak to members of the seminar and to interact with its members on a paper I prepared for them on questions about the origins of the biblical canon. I was well treated by them and appreciated the interaction, but clearly there was little about the subject of canon formation on which all of them could agree.

¹⁶Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 275.

be excluded.¹⁷ It is fair to say, however, that I do think that the church would be well served if it were at least informed by the same literature that informed the earliest Christians, including what we now call the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature. Indeed, some allusions to several examples of that literature can be seen in the NT itself and especially in the early church writings, as we will see below.

Although the biblical canon has received periodic scholarly attention over the last one hundred years or so,¹⁸ the current interest in its formation seems out of proportion to the attention it received earlier. Recent scholarly research has challenged some of the most widely held views on the origins and formation of the Bible, including the following: (1) the Hebrew Scriptures reached their canonical acceptance among the Jews in a three-stage development beginning around 400 B.C.E. for the Pentateuch, around 200 B.C.E. for the Prophets, and around 90–100 C.E. for the Writings; (2) the early Christians received from Jesus a closed or fixed collection of OT Scriptures; (3) most of the collection of NT Scriptures was fixed by the end of the second century C.E.; and (4) evidence of the latter is provided by a late-second-century canonical list called the Muratorian Fragment. All of these views are well-known assumptions and others have been significantly questioned in recent years, and there is currently no scholarly consensus on any of them. It is widely acknowledged that scholarly conclusions on these matters are changing.

In what follows, I will address these and many other questions about the origins, stabilization, and authority of the Bible. This story begins with an ancient community's belief that God is interested in the human condition and has acted in significant saving or redemptive ways that have affected humanity's present and will influence humanity's future. That belief also acknowledges that God revealed the correct interpretation of that activity to prophets who not only spoke this message, but also wrote down that story of God's activity. What they wrote has become known as the sacred Scriptures for both Jews and Christians.

This story is at the heart of biblical faith and also lies at the root of the origins of Scripture. As we will see below, it influenced the limits that were placed on the scope of both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The NT, for example, tells the story that gave rise to its production, namely, the story about what God has done in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of

¹⁷See, for example, Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 53 and n. 1.

¹⁸Much of this interest began with the research of H. E. Ryle, Alexander Souter, Heinrich H. Graetz, Moses Stuart, Edward Reuss, Theodore Zahn, and Caspar R. Gregory and has been carried on more recently by Kurt Aland, Hans von Campenhausen, James A. Sanders, Brevard Childs, Harry Gamble, Robert Grant, Bruce M. Metzger, Sid Leiman, Albert Sundberg, F. F. Bruce, Roger Beckwith, E. Earle Ellis, John Barton, J. Trebelle Barrera, Eugene Ulrich, and James VanderKam. See bibliography for a list of works by these scholars.

Jesus, which has great significance for those who trust in him. This story gave identity to a “new Israel” and gave rise to the call to be faithful witnesses of Jesus the Christ. This story was first shared orally, but within some thirty years began to be written down, shared widely among Christians, and used in Christian proclamation and apologies throughout the Greco-Roman world. What was written down initially was not transcribed in formal or literary writings, but was transmitted rather on ancient notepads, sometimes using shortcuts or abbreviations. In time, more formal literary transmissions of the same biblical story began to use these same literary structures. As we will see, the transmission of the biblical story in writing is also a part of the larger puzzle that we call the canonization of the Scriptures.

II. AN ADAPTABLE BIBLE

Sanders contends that the Jews were able to adapt their authoritative Scriptures to new and changing circumstances, and the very adaptability of those Scriptures allowed them to continue to serve as authoritative texts within the Jewish community.¹⁹ Over many centuries of use, the biblical writings proved to be adaptable to the changing life of the believing community, and that is undoubtedly the reason why our current Bible continues to function as it does in churches, namely, the books within it continue to be relevant to the church’s needs. The ancient collections of sacred writings changed generally by expansion, but occasionally by reduction, as, for example, when the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Letter of Barnabas* eventually dropped out of canonical lists. As the Jewish community developed, a time came when they recognized more than the Law of Moses as their sacred Scriptures, that is, they included the Prophets, a group of writings that at one time likely contained a larger number of books than those that were finally accepted into that division of the HB. For example, Job, Psalms, and Daniel were initially placed among the Prophets before they found their current place in the third part of the HB, the Writings.

From the church’s beginning, early Christians accepted the words of and about Jesus as their final norm for faith and conduct. As the church developed, however, it became obvious that the written Gospels and soon thereafter the Letters of Paul benefited the ongoing life of the Christian community. Many other writings were also added to this growing collection, but when some writings that had been included in the sacred collections ceased to be relevant to the religious needs of the Christian community, they also ceased being “canonical” to that community. The neglect of those texts led to their disappearance in the church (e.g., the *Shep-*

¹⁹J. A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story*, 9–39, especially 23–30.

berd of Hermas, 1 Clement, and Eldad and Modad). Some writings were firmly established as a part of the NT Scriptures in the early church, while others were set aside from neglect and, later when a fixed collection was established, were not included. And some writings firmly entrenched as a part of the church's Scriptures became no longer relevant to the church's needs and were radically reinterpreted for the church. Paul, for example, "decanonized" much of the OT's emphasis on the law, especially its focus on clean and unclean foods or ritualistic cleansings, because such things were deemed no longer relevant to Christian faith.²⁰ Dunn makes the point that the OT can never function as canon for Christians in the same way that it does for the Jews. For the Christian, the NT always functions to some extent as *the* canon within the biblical canon.²¹

The issue in all of the above questions, of course, has to do with the viability and integrity of our current biblical canon. Can there be a theological integrity to our Bibles in light of all of the recent historical inquiry into its origins and formation? Carr asks a similar question that stems from his examination of the history of use of the Song of Songs. After observing the lack of knowledge on how that book was produced, its author's original intent, and the variety of interpretations of the book, Carr rather pessimistically concludes: "For these reasons the Song of Songs is merely a clear example of the extent to which the triumph of a critical approach can divest a text of its canonical function!"²² Does it follow that a critical analysis of the literature that makes up our Bible will lead to its decanonization? While Carr shows how a careful understanding of the origins of a text may cause doubts about its continued use in a manner foreign to its original intent, it does not necessarily follow that this is true for all of the sacred texts that comprise the Bible.

Because of their background in Judaism, the early Christians were accustomed to recognizing the authority of written documents as Scripture—that is, the Christians believed that the revelation and will of God were located in a deposit of written materials that served both the cultic and moral needs of the community of faith. The earliest Christian community did not doubt the notion of authority residing in what was later called the OT, even though many Christians questioned the normative status of the law in those Scriptures in the first and second centuries (Heb 8:5–8a). Jewish recognition of its own divinely inspired (and therefore authoritative) writings was a model for the church to recognize some of its own literature as authoritative, that is, as prophetic, inspired, and sacred writings that

²⁰Dunn, *Living Word*, 156, uses the term *decanonize*, and it appears in the title of an important volume on the origins and function of biblical canons: Kooij and Toorn's *Canonization and Decanonization*. It is also used among literary critics as well; see for example, Guillory, "Canon," 246.

²¹Dunn, *Living Word*, 156.

²²Carr, "Song of Songs as a Microcosm," 186.

were guidelines for faith and conduct. This happened especially when it became clear to many Christians that parts of the OT, especially its legal codes and rites, were no longer relevant to their developing communities. The specific factors that led to this recognition, however, are somewhat obscure due to the lack of clear historical references that make the transition from written text to Scripture more understandable. This change in the church's understanding of the continuing relevance of the law is recognizable in the NT, however, in the writings of Paul (Rom 4–8; Gal 3–4). And in the second century, Justin Martyr was the first teacher in the church after Paul to make the case for Christians not abiding by some laws of Moses, namely, the purification and other ceremonial laws.

III. EMERGENCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW TESTAMENT

The terms *Old Testament* and *New Testament*²³ were not originally identical to the OT and NT canons, but focused more on the notion of the “new covenant” referred to in both the OT (Jer 31:31; cf. Ezek 37:26) and

²³I do not care much for the terms *Hebrew Bible*, *Hebrew Scriptures*, or *Hebrew biblical canon* because they all send the wrong message; there is nothing particularly special or divine about the Hebrew language. Nevertheless, they are familiar terms, and I use them throughout this book simply because they communicate to the reader that we are talking about the Scriptures of the Jews that the early Christians also acknowledged as sacred Scripture. There is nothing special, however, about the Scriptures existing in Hebrew as opposed to Aramaic or Greek or any other language. While I occasionally use these terms so not to offend and to make sure that the reader understands what I am trying to say, I find myself more and more in favor of using what James A. Sanders calls “First Testament” and “Second Testament” when we are in conversation with the Jewish community or when biblical scholars try to be respectful of the religious diversity of the various communities of faith that acknowledge the biblical literature as sacred Scripture. Not only is “Hebrew Bible” imprecise since portions of the OT Scriptures are in Aramaic, for the most part, early Christians and many Jews made use of the Greek translation of these Scriptures (often referred to as the Septuagint (LXX), even though this term originally applied only to the Pentateuch). While in a mixed theological community of Jews and Christians, the terms *First Testament* for the OT and *Second Testament* for the NT may be preferable to other terms since the reference to *Old Testament* suggests something passé or outdated. In antiquity *old* was a mark of authenticity and high value. In Western culture today, *old* seems equivalent to “out of touch,” “out of date,” or even “irrelevant.” That was never the understanding of those who first heard and used these terms to designate the two parts of the Christian Bible. Had the early Christians viewed the OT writings that way, they would not have kept them in their Bibles. Perhaps in time something like the designations *First Testament* and *Second Testament* will obtain in the church and synagogue when the two are in dialogue. I believe that their use will provide more opportunity for free and respectful dialogue between Jewish and Christian scholars. If using more neutral designations enables a greater dialogue and promotes mutual respect, then

the NT (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24) and the “first” or “old covenant” (Heb 9:1). “Old Testament” as a reference to the Scriptures of the Jews and of the earliest church is a thoroughly Christian invention and is found in neither Jewish or Christian Scriptures—or in the rabbinic writings of the second century C.E. and later. The origins of these terms may be rooted in Paul’s writings when he speaks of those Jews who “hear the reading of the old covenant” but cannot grasp its meaning (2 Cor 3:14). He clarifies that this is in regard to the reading of “Moses” (3:15). The NT writings do not use the term *New Testament* (or *covenant*) in reference to its writings, but rather in regard to the new covenant or agreement between God and his people that has roots in Jer 31:31–34 (see 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; also Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). The Jewish notion of covenant (Heb. *berit*) may reflect an early use of the term to denote a sacred book, as in Exod 24:7: “He [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people” (see also 2 Kgs 23:2, 21). The “book of the covenant” (Heb. *sefer haberit*) may be an extension of God’s written law. Early on, Jeremiah used the terms *torah* (“law”) and *covenant* interchangeably (Jer 31:31–32; cf. 2 Kgs 22:8, 10; 23:2, 21). Later, Sir 24:23 used “book of the covenant” (Gk. = *biblos diathēkēs*) to speak of the Torah (Gk. *nomos*) or law of Moses. This practice is also found later in 1 Macc 1:56–57: “The books of the law that they [the Seleucids] found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Anyone found possessing the book of the covenant, or anyone who adhered to the law, was condemned to death by decree of the king [Antiochus Epiphanes].”

Because the terms *law* and *covenant* were often interchanged well before the time of Jesus, it is not difficult to understand how “old” and “new” covenant were eventually applied to the Christian Scriptures. The terms *Old Testament* and *New Testament* were introduced in the second century C.E. to refer to these two bodies of literature, but they were not *regularly* used in the church for a body of sacred Scriptures until the fourth century C.E. To distinguish the Jewish writings that we *now* call the OT from the more recent Christian Scriptures, the designations *Old Testament* and *New Testament* first began to appear in the writings of Irenaeus (ca. 170–180), but it is not certain that he invented these categories.

Inasmuch, then, as in both Testaments there is the same righteousness of God [displayed] when God takes vengeance, in the one case indeed typically, temporarily, and more moderately; but in the other, really, enduringly, and more rigidly. . . .

we have paid a small price that will have a good return for both communities of faith. I will, however, for the sake of clarity continue to use both “Hebrew Bible” for the Scriptures of Judaism and “Old Testament” and “New Testament” for the Scriptures of the church, despite the differences in the order and content of books with the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox collections.

For as, in the New Testament, that faith of men [to be placed] in God has been increased, receiving in addition [to what was already revealed] the Son of God, that man too might be a partaker of God. (*Haer.* 4.28.1–2, *ANF*)

At roughly the same time, Melito of Sardis speaks of “the books of the old covenant [testament]” [*ta tēs palaias diathēkēs biblia*] in a quotation preserved by Eusebius around 325–30 (*Hist. eccl.* 4.26.14). We do not know if Melito was the first to use these terms, but he is the first to identify specific books that comprise this “Old Testament” (see the full quotation in chapter 8 §IV.A.1). We also find similar references in Clement of Alexandria (ca. 170; *Strom.* 15.5.85). Later, Tertullian (ca. 200) similarly writes:

If I fail in resolving this article (of our faith) by passages which may admit of dispute out of the Old Testament, I will take out of the New Testament a confirmation of our view, that you may not straightway attribute to the Father every possible (relation and condition) which I ascribe to the Son. (*Prax.* 15, *ANF*)

Around 220 C.E. in Alexandria, Origen, criticizing the gnostics, wrote:

It appears to me, therefore, to be necessary that one who is able to represent in a genuine manner the doctrine of the Church, and to refute those dealers in knowledge, falsely so-called, should take his stand against historical fictions, and oppose to them the true and lofty evangelical message in which the agreement of the doctrines, found both in the *so-called* Old Testament and in the *so-called* New, appears so plainly and fully. (*Commentary on John* 5.4, *ANF*, emphasis added; see also 10.28 and *Princ.* 4.11)

Origen’s use of “so-called” suggests a lack of familiarity of these terms to his readers. Likewise, Eusebius, while describing Josephus’s canon of Scripture, writes, “In the first of these he gives the number of the canonical scriptures of the *so-called* Old Testament, and showed as follows which are undisputed among the Hebrews as belonging to ancient tradition” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.9.5, LCL, emphasis added). Later, however, while speaking of the NT he says, “At this point it seems reasonable to summarize the writings of the New Testament which have been quoted” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.1, LCL). From this, I conclude that these terms originated in the second century but were not generally used in the churches until the fourth century.

In any case, what comprised the collections of Scriptures so designated by these terms were not the same among all churches (see appendixes B–D). In canon 59 of the Synod of Laodicea (ca. 360 C.E.), for instance, we read, “[It is decreed] that private psalms should not be read in the church, *neither uncanonized books, but only the canonical [books] of the New and Old Testament* [*oude akononista biblia, alla mona ta kanonika tēs kainēs kai palais*].”²⁴ It is interesting that here the NT is listed before the Old and

²⁴Theron, *Evidence of Tradition*, 125, emphasis added.

there is acknowledgment that other books were being read in the churches! This kind of ordering of the biblical books led to the criticism by some Jews that since the Christians had abandoned the law, it was no longer a priority in their Bibles. Schwarz, for instance, writes concerning the order and collections of books in the Christian OT:

This generic grouping fails to keep the Torah in a class by itself and identifies prophecy as the climax of the Bible. These two features may account for the acceptance of this division [i.e., “historical books” that include Genesis through Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esther] in the Christian world, since Christianity abrogated Torah law and saw its own gospel as the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies.²⁵

For Christians, the God of the OT was indeed the God of the NT, and the continuity between these two Testaments was only occasionally questioned in the church. When that happened, as in the case of Marcion in the second century who abandoned the OT and even spoke against it, the church quickly condemned his attempt to sever its relations with its inherited past in the Jewish Scriptures.

We should note in passing that what the Christians call the OT the Jews commonly refer to as Tanak. This term is an acronym made up of the first letters of the words *Torah* (Law), *Nebiim* (Prophets), and *Ketubim* (Writings). Since the Middle Ages, the term has been regularly used by Jews to refer to their sacred Scriptures. They also make frequent use of the Hebrew term *Mikra* (“that which is read aloud”), which emphasizes the importance of the Scriptures of the Jews not only being written down, but also passed on orally both in the synagogue and in the study house. Christians use the more familiar term *Bible* (derived from Gk. *biblos*, “book”) to designate their sacred Scriptures. They also call these writings “Holy Scriptures” (Latin *biblia sacra*), which is similar to the Hebrew *kitvei haqodesh* (“holy books”). The Latin and Hebrew terms suggest that Christians have Scriptures (plural) rather than a single book called the Bible. In Christian Bibles, the OT ends with the Prophets rather than the Writings, as in the HB.

Rabbinic Jews (second to the sixth centuries C.E.) not only adopted a fixed collection of Scriptures, but also a fixed text because of their methods of interpretation (known as “midrash”) in which special laws and teachings were derived from the textual details of their biblical books. A fixed text aided in interpretation and application. Later, vowel points and musical notations were added to the text to preserve its textual authenticity, and this gave way to the production of the Masoretic Text (MT) of the HB, the standard text appealed to by both Jews and Christians today. Christians apparently had no interest in a fixed text and did not attempt to produce one until much later in church history.

²⁵Schwartz, “Bible,” 121.

IV. PROCESS(ES) OF CANONIZATION

An examination of the origins and development of the Bible for both Judaism and Christianity is essentially about the processes of canonization that led to the stabilizing of fixed collections of writings that undergird the core beliefs and religious practices of Jewish and Christian communities of faith. The corollary to canon formation is the belief that the writings that make up those collections have their origin in God, that is, that they are inspired by God and are consequently sacred and authoritative for worship and contain instruction in core beliefs, mission activity, and religious conduct. As we will observe in the next chapter, while the definition of a biblical canon has more to do with the end of a process, that is, with a fixed list of sacred Scriptures, the authority attributed to those writings was recognized much earlier, when they were in a fluid state of development and more adaptable or open to change to meet the emerging needs of the religious community. Many factors played a role in the complex history of the formation of the Bible, including the origin of the notion of sacred literature itself, the processes that led to the recognition of that literature, and the final fixing of a closed collection of sacred literature.

As we will see presently, there is little agreement among scholars on *when* this canonical activity began and especially when it ended. The problem is made more difficult by there being no discussion of the origins, development, and eventual recognition of the Bible in antiquity. By all appearances, canonization was an unconscious process throughout most of its development. Most of the ancient sources on this subject are tenuous and are generally drawn from an investigation of the collection of ancient sources. There is no evidence from the time of Jesus or before that either the Jews or the followers of Jesus were even remotely interested in the notion of a closed collection of sacred Scriptures, and this is what makes any investigation of such notions in the time of Jesus so challenging.

Our first focus in what follows will deal first with the difficult issue of defining the terms *Scripture* and *canon* (part 1). It is often surprising to students to find out that there is little agreement on the meaning of these important terms and that scholars often use them inconsistently, an accusation noted of this present writer that probably has merit!²⁶ After a careful investigation of these two important terms, we will examine the origins and development of the OT Scriptures as a tripartite collection of sacred books among the Jews and then focus on the Christian collection of OT Scriptures (part 2). We will then examine the origin and stabilization

²⁶Ulrich, "Notion and Definition of Canon," brings my own inconsistency in this matter to my attention, and hopefully this will be corrected in this edition.

of the NT Scriptures and the various influences that led to their inclusion in the Christian Bible (part 3). This book concludes with several useful appendixes for those who want to “dig deeper.” Many of the most relevant ancient sources are conveniently listed there to facilitate research on canon formation.