



Preface to the Third Edition

MUCH HAS COME TO LIGHT THROUGH NEW RESEARCH SINCE THE SECOND EDITION of this volume was published. Many contributions to canon formation have been published, and more information on the primary ancient literature has come to my attention since 1995. Similarly, a few earlier conclusions espoused both by me and others whose work informed mine are no longer tenable. As a result, this third edition is overdue, even though many of the most important conclusions reached in previous editions remain the same. I believe that the conclusions about canon formation have been strengthened considerably with this new edition. It reflects a fresh attempt to understand some of the many perplexing questions related to the origins and canonicity of the Bible. The vast majority of this volume has been completely rewritten, and many new sources consulted. I am hopeful that its readers will appreciate the additional resources that have been brought to bear on the highly complex issues that still elude final resolution.

This volume had its origin in a term paper written while I was a student at Harvard University in 1982. I subsequently expanded the paper into a thesis that was read and approved by Helmut Koester and George MacRae. Interestingly, I did not approach the subject with a thesis in mind that I wanted to prove so much as with a natural curiosity about the truth of canon formation. Most of what I had learned earlier about the origins and stabilization or canonization of the Bible simply did not square with new information I had learned. I became intrigued with the subject when a layperson at a church I pastored asked me some straightforward questions about books that did not make it into our Bible. My inability to answer these questions involved me in a study that took me to Harvard and has involved me in research on the topic for the last twenty-four years.

Since I began this journey of inquiry, I have been guided by a basic premise that has served me well, namely, I have been willing to challenge unsubstantiated claims about the origins of the Bible. I have appreciated Jacob Neusner's dictum that says unambiguously: "What we cannot show,

we do not know.”¹ In what follows, I have been careful not to make assumptions that I could not back from the primary evidence. Too many scholars are willing to accept untested or unsupported conclusions that lead them to make anachronistic statements about what did and did not take place in the time of Jesus. I am not convinced that scholarship advances significantly if we do not force ourselves to root our conclusions in the primary literature of antiquity. We cannot advance our understanding of this or any complex subject with our untested assumptions cluttering the way.

In terms of the OT biblical canon, many new studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls have emerged in the last fifteen years that have helped build a stronger case that the move toward fixing or stabilizing the contents of the Hebrew Bible, the OT, came near the end of the first century C.E. for the Jewish community and much later for the Christians since the Jewish influence on the Christians was largely over after 62 C.E., when the Christians left Jerusalem for Pella on the east side of the Jordan). The canonizing process *began* in the Jewish community, perhaps influenced by other canons of literature established in the famous library of Alexandria, Egypt, and was largely settled for some Jews at the end of the first century, but for the majority of them not until the third and fourth centuries C.E. The process of determining which books are Scripture and belong in the OT canon was roughly completed by the mid-fourth century. In what follows, I strengthen the case that the first followers of Jesus never received from him either the notion of a closed biblical canon or any listing of the books that belonged to it. I continue to argue that the process of canonization was not complete until the fourth and fifth centuries for most of Christendom.

Since the publication of the second edition, I have learned much from James A. Sanders, James VanderKam, Marty Abegg, Peter Flint, J. J. Collins, Julio Treballe Barrera, Florentino García Martínez, Eugene Ulrich, Emanuel Tov, and several others about the scope of the Bible at Qumran during the first century C.E. In terms of the Jewish and Greco-Roman context of early Christianity, I have also benefited significantly from the research of Bruce Chilton, Helmut Koester, Anthony J. Saldarini, E. P. Sanders, Martin Hengel, and my colleague Craig A. Evans.

I am also more familiar now with the rabbinic tradition than I was when I first investigated the origins of the biblical canon. Earlier I was largely dependent upon the work of Emil Shürer, George Foot Moore, Sid Leiman, and others of an earlier generation for knowledge of the Jewish context of early Christianity, but much more is now known in the scholarly community about the context of early Christianity, and this edition reflects some of that newly available research. This new data has a significant bear-

¹This phrase is the subtitle of Neusner’s *Rabbinic Literature and the New Testament*. See also idem, “Mishna in Philosophical Context,” 302–3.

ing on our understanding of the biblical canon and its formation. For example, we are finally beyond the age of speaking about a “normative Judaism” in the first century and we can now focus our attention instead on the common or shared characteristics of the various Judaisms of the first century, of which two—Pharisaic Judaism and Christianity—are the primary survivors.

The significant role that the rabbinic teachers of the second through the fifth centuries played in the final shape of the Hebrew Scriptures was not as clear earlier as it is now. It is finally possible to do electronic searches of the early church fathers, Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, Mishnah, Tosefta, and other Jewish writings, as well as most noncanonical Jewish and Christian writings such as the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings that informed both Judaism and early Christianity in their respective formative stages.

As a result of increased familiarity with these writings, more reliable information is available, and our knowledge of the context of early Christianity and the formative stages of the Bible is greater. Much of what we know in these areas today is due in large measure to the efforts of Jacob Neusner, James Charlesworth, J. K. Elliott, Jack Lightstone, David Kraemer, Louis Feldman, Joseph Fitzmyer, and others who opened some previously closed doors. We are all in their debt.

Likewise, the church fathers in the second to fourth centuries authoritatively cited many ancient texts that are now identified as apocryphal or pseudepigraphal (both Jewish and Christian). Much of this literature has been known for a long time, but its meaning and influence are better known to us today as a result of R. H. Charles's *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, J. H. Charlesworth's *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, J. K. Elliott's *The Apocryphal New Testament*, and Wilhelm Schneemelcher's *New Testament Apocrypha*.

There is also a better understanding today of the importance of the Septuagint than was previously acknowledged. Both Martin Hengel and Emanuel Tov make clear the importance of this information for understanding the origins and text of the OT. Nevertheless, few Christian scholars appear to appreciate that the first Christian Bible was the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Even in the NT writings themselves, more than 90 percent of the quotations from the OT come from the Greek Bible! That has clear implications for canon formation. Remarkably few seminaries have classes on the LXX, and they prefer instead to focus exclusively on the Hebrew OT for ministry preparation. Septuagint scholars have recently provided fresh translations and critical appraisals of several ancient texts of the LXX and apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature. Without their important contributions, no serious advances can be made in our understanding of the formation of the biblical canon. The more familiar we are with these works, the more obvious it becomes that we have to revisit the important canonical questions that this area of inquiry raises.

A significant change in canonical thinking took place following Albert Sundberg's foundational research in the canons of both Testaments. Since then (the mid-1960s), much more information has come to light that might not have surfaced had Sundberg not spurred the scholarly community into rethinking many of its earlier "assured" conclusions about the origins of the biblical canon. He essentially dismantled the familiar old Alexandrian canon hypothesis that tried to account for the larger Christian canon of OT books adopted and used by the early Christians. Because of Sundberg, that view has now been retired.

While many scholars accepted Sundberg's views on the myth of a so-called Alexandrian canon, many initially rejected his views on the fourth-century dating of the Muratorian Fragment with an eastern provenance. Nevertheless, he rightly challenged the centrality of this Latin text, which was poorly translated from an earlier Greek text. A shift in thinking has taken place, however, and several other scholars have gravitated toward his position and reinforced his basic arguments. Geoffrey Hahneman and Harry Y. Gamble are among the most notable to support Sundberg's basic views. Sundberg saw that the Muratorian Fragment had become central to an indefensible position that dated the NT canon at the end of the second century C.E. No one before Sundberg challenged so forcefully the scholarly consensus in these matters, and for that reason we are all in his debt.

Likewise, scholars like B. M. Metzger, Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, E. J. Epp, J. K. Elliott, and Bart Ehrman have added greatly to our understanding of the importance of textual criticism as an invaluable resource on the canonization of the Bible. They are asking significant questions about the text and translation of the Bible. Textual scholars no longer have as much hope in recovering *the* original text (or the autographs), though that aim is not necessarily abandoned. Instead they are looking more for a history of the textual tradition behind individual books as well as more clarity on the most likely text of the Bible. In the past, biblical scholars frequently ignored text-critical work, but now textual scholars are making their work both more accessible and also more compelling. The results of their research have considerable importance for canon research, as we will see below.

Historically, canon discussions have been concerned almost exclusively with the books that made it into the biblical canon and those that did not. There has not been much interest in the text of those books or even their translation. The early church largely opted for the Greek Bible, with a later attempt to prepare an authoritative biblical translation of the Bible (Jerome's Latin Vulgate), nevertheless historically the church has never agreed on one single textual tradition on which to base all subsequent texts and translations of the Bible. It addressed primarily the question of which *books* belonged and which did not, but not which text or translation was authoritative for the church.

On a related note, why is it that very few manuscripts of the church contain all of the books of the Bible *and no others*? Those manuscripts that

do have all of the books of the Bible often have *more* books in them than we find in the current Bible. Why? There is also a growing awareness of the lack of an authoritative text in the church, namely, which text is canonical and which ones are not? For example, we now know that the concluding verses of Mark's Gospel (16:9–20) are not original to it and that the original ending was probably lost (a majority of scholars today hold this view) or that Mark never finished it,² but what should we conclude about a book whose ending (and perhaps beginning also) might have been lost? Further, which translation(s) of the Bible today should be affirmed and read in the churches? The first two editions of this book did not focus much on these questions, and yet such inquiry is critical to a careful understanding of the biblical canon.

In terms of the NT, the trend in recent years has been away from saying that the NT was pretty well formed by the end of the second century. This is because there is a greater recognition that a lot of canonical activity took place during the second through fourth centuries, and it was largely in the fourth to sixth centuries that significant canon formation activity took place. For example, fewer scholars today think that Marcion constructed the first NT canon (the well-known thesis of Adolf von Harnack) and that the second century church simply corrected him by adding more books to his small collection. The challenges of the second century, including local persecution of Christians and the growth of heresy (Gnosticism, Marcion, and the Montanists), were not responded to by the establishment of a biblical canon in the second century, but rather by setting forth a "canon of faith" (*regula fidei*), namely, a creed that stated what was generally believed to be the true teaching of the church at that time. There was no firmly fixed biblical canon at the end of the second century, but rather several books of the NT—primarily the Gospels and several of Paul's Letters—were beginning to be called "Scripture."

For centuries, early church leaders cited a variety of noncanonical Jewish and Christian texts in an authoritative manner, some of which were initially welcomed by Christians as Scriptures but subsequently rejected. We see evidence of this in the writings of the church fathers and in the surviving biblical manuscripts from the fourth to sixth centuries.

More recently Harry Gamble has put us in his debt by showing the relevance of the development and use of the book (or codex) for an understanding of the origins of the Bible.³ He asks whether the development of the codex or book affected the parameters of the biblical canon. As I will attempt to show, the valuable information that Gamble presents has considerable significance for our understanding of the canonization of the Bible.

²See Croy, *Mutilation of Mark's Gospel*, 174–77, for a helpful listing of scholars who hold this position.

³Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*.

It is also encouraging to see in recent years a growing interest in the processes of canonization and a significant amount of literature emerge arguing various positions on the origins and stabilization of the Bible. Because of the increase of research on this topic, some of the views that I expressed in earlier editions are no longer tenable, but others have been strengthened. For these reasons, I am grateful for the opportunity to advance my research on the origins and formation of the Bible to address these issues more carefully.

In the first and second editions of this book, I included a short section on the issue of canonical criticism, namely, the perspective that the believing communities attach to the biblical text. While several scholars suggest that I misunderstood Brevard Childs, others told me that I accurately reflected his position on the issues that I discussed, namely, which biblical text is canonical for the church today.⁴ I argued against Childs's position on the earliest forms of the biblical text, which he appears to have largely rejected in favor of a later canonical text that became the authoritative text of the church. Discussion of this subject is no longer as relevant to what I hope to accomplish in this volume, and my attention is better focused on the biblical text and its historical development rather than on Childs's work. I might say, however, that while I disagree with some of Childs's conclusions, I find myself in substantial agreement with his understanding that the Bible is the church's book and not the academy's. Further, I agree with him that the Bible is best studied and lived out in the context of the community of faith from which it emerged and for whom it was written.

In terms of my responsibility in this project, I am reminded of a quip made by Ralph Martin a few years ago when a copy of his *Word Biblical Commentary* on 2 Corinthians was presented to him: "I have milked many cows to produce this volume, but the butter is all mine!" I could easily say that while I am indebted to many individuals who have been helpful in my understanding of the biblical canon, what you see in the pages that follow is mine—errors, misstatements, and all! Nevertheless, I would be remiss if I failed to mention those whose guidance over the years has helped me formulate questions, investigate matters, and draw conclusions that I may not have been able to draw without their counsel.

In terms of canon studies, I owe much to my mentor and friend, Helmut Koester of Harvard University, for his early guidance in my research on this project and for his continual encouragement over the years as I expanded my contributions to this subject. He graciously agreed to provide the foreword to the first two editions of this volume, and I con-

⁴One of the strongest criticisms of my work came from one of Childs's former doctoral students, Stephen B. Chapman, in some less-than-flattering comments in *Law and the Prophets*, 68–70, 108. I should note, however, that we have subsequently met and had a very good and amicable exchange over our different views on this subject.

tinue to learn from him, not only in terms of his scholarship but also his commitment to the church. I have also been greatly enriched by the many contributions that James A. Sanders has made to this subject. He raised questions that no one else was asking about how both Judaism and the early church got their Bibles, and he has mentored me in more ways than he can imagine. I have grown to appreciate him on two important levels. First, of course, he is an impeccable scholar who has helped me avoid many serious blunders in my own research, and for his help in this regard I am deeply grateful. More than this, however, I have found him to be a gentle spirit with a great deal of the grace that we read about in the Bible, and we have become friends. His grace comes out in his personal demeanor as well as in his preaching, one of his special passions. I was honored a few years ago when he invited me to speak to his students on the formation of the biblical canon. I kept saying to myself that it was strange to have “Mr. Canon” himself introduce me to talk about the canon! I was also privileged to have the opportunity to contribute a chapter to a Festschrift in his honor⁵ and to share the editorial responsibilities with him for *The Canon Debate*. I greatly appreciate his friendship and wise counsel.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the many courtesies extended to me by Hendrickson Publishers. They agreed to publish the second edition of the *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* in 1995, and once again they allow me the opportunity to improve on that earlier work, which this volume represents and replaces. Patrick Alexander and Shirley Decker-Lucke were most helpful in getting the second edition published, and now Shirley Decker-Lucke as chief academic editor for Hendrickson has offered many useful comments on how to improve this volume. I have often said to others that editors were invented by publishers to deal with people like me! I have needed the aid of the folks at Hendrickson, and they have been gracious, professional, and expert in their many comments and suggestions that have made this volume much better than I thought originally possible.

Finally, I offer a special word of appreciation to my wife, Mary, who has been a true friend and companion for more than forty years. She has continually been my greatest source of encouragement and an inspiration in my life's work. Mary has sacrificed more than was fair or could be expected of her to enable me to pursue my career as a minister, educator, and writer. I cannot imagine much good ever happening in my life without her. This edition, as was true of the first, is affectionately and appreciatively dedicated to her.

⁵McDonald, “First Testament.”



Foreword to the First and Second Editions

THE BIBLE OF THE CHRISTIANS' RELIGIOUS TRADITION INCLUDES TWO BOOKS, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The first of these two books has always been a substantial part of the Christian scriptural authority. However, the exact definition of the writings that should be a part of the Old Testament canon never played a decisive role in the discussions about the Christian canon of Holy Scripture and its authority. While the so-called "Old Testament Apocrypha" are an undisputed part of the canon of the Greek church and a smaller corpus of apocryphal writings is included in the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, most Protestant churches have ascribed authority only to a smaller Old Testament canon, corresponding to the Hebrew Bible, from which the Apocrypha are excluded. But these differences are rarely considered to be divisive.

In contrast, the question of the exact extent of the New Testament canon has often been hotly debated among Christians. In recent decades, this issue has taken on new dimensions through the discovery of an increasing number of ancient Christian gospels, epistles, and books of revelation under apostolic names such as Peter, Thomas, Philip, and even Mary. At the same time, critical scholarship has questioned the "apostolic" authorship of writings of the New Testament canon itself. Matthew and John may not be the authors of the Gospels transmitted under their names, the apostle Paul was not the author of all the letters of the Pauline corpus, and both Epistles of Peter were probably written half a century after Peter's death. Should we, therefore, revise the canon of the New Testament? Should we exclude the Second Epistle of Peter? Should we include the newly discovered *Gospel of Thomas*?

It is understandable that many Christians are disturbed by critical questions regarding the authority of writings of the New Testament canon, while others are excited about the discovery of new and hitherto unknown gospels, which claim to have been written by apostles. But what is happening to canonical authority, when there are apostolic writings outside of the

canon and when the apostolic authorship of writings of the New Testament is questioned? The New Testament no longer seems to be the one and only collection of inspired writings from the hands of genuine apostles and disciples of Jesus. Its authority as Holy Scripture appears to be seriously questioned.

If there is an answer to this question, it will not come through abstract theological controversy but only through a reconsideration of the history that once created the canon of the New Testament. What did the Christians who established the canon mean when they spoke of “scripture,” “inspiration,” “tradition,” and “apostolic authorship”? Why were these twenty-seven writings included and others excluded? How did these writings function in nourishing and building Christian communities, and why were other writings found lacking? What were the competing forces in the formation of the early Christian churches, and what roles did various writings claiming “apostolicity” play in these controversies?

Early Christianity appears to have been much less united and much more diversified than we have thought. The writings of the New Testament were not necessarily the only early Christian apostolic witnesses. Rather, from the beginning they had to compete with other books, produced by other followers of Jesus who were later considered to be heretics. The collection of the twenty-seven writings now comprising the New Testament canon was a long and arduous process, extending over many centuries. In order to understand this process, several generations of scholars have done most of the groundwork, have investigated the Greek and Latin sources from early Christian times, have tested, approved, and rejected various hypotheses, and have thus come to a much better understanding of the process. The literature on this topic is immense, often very technical and learned, and not always easily understood. But it is also very exciting, and it has opened up a much better understanding of the story of the formation of the canon. Holy books do not fall from heaven; rather, they are created in the historical experiences of religious communities. Scholars have learned much about this in an intense international debate.

But this story must also be told so that everyone can be informed by a better understanding of the developments that took place in the early centuries of the Christian communities. It is an exciting and enriching story, filled with the experiences and thoughts of Christian believers from the time of the apostles to the consolidation of the church three centuries later. The story must be told in terms easily comprehended by every reader, the interested layperson as well as the student in a theological school. The story must be told in such a way that everyone in the divided Christian churches of our day may share it and learn from it, evangelical Christians as well as those of a more liberal persuasion. The story must be told without apology and without zeal so that all may enter into the discourse with the history that created the foundations through which all Christians belong to

the one church universal and are bound to the same God whose word and witness are preserved in the book we call the New Testament.

I have spent countless hours with the author of this book, and I have been deeply impressed by his scholarship, his learning, his faith, and his commitment to Christian education. This book, the result of many years of research, has accomplished what few have ever achieved: telling a difficult story well. There are no shortcuts, no facile solutions, no easy reconciliations of problems. All the materials are there. All the relevant texts are quoted and interpreted. Everyone is treated fairly and judiciously. All scholarly hypotheses are presented and discussed. All that is required of the reader is the same fairness and the same patience that are evident in the author's effort of presenting both the ancient sources and the modern scholarly debate.

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Preface to the Second Edition

THE RESPONSE TO THE FIRST EDITION OF THIS BOOK WAS IN GENERAL QUITE positive, and it seems to have stimulated several thoughtful responses that I have tried to keep in mind in writing the second edition. Several reviewers have, in fact, encouraged me to write the second edition with the hope that it will be an improved guide through the highly complex question of the formation of the biblical canon.

Several mistakes, omissions, and weaknesses of argument in the first edition have come to my attention through the reviewers, and I am pleased that they have taken the time to inform me of these. My friend, Everett Kalin, whose competence in the area of canonical studies is well-known, has graciously taken the time to list some of the “bloopers” of the first edition and also to make other suggestions for improving the second. I appreciate his significant correspondence on the matter, and I am deeply grateful for his and others’ observations and recommendations, which I have tried to incorporate. The most important changes include the following corrections and additions.

First, some significant works had eluded me in the first edition. These were brought to my attention, especially with regard to my treatment of the OT canon, and I have reflected on most of them in this revision and have noted them in the expanded select bibliography. It seems impossible these days to include everything in a bibliography and especially in a discussion, but I think that the most important works have been cited.

Second, I did not reproduce many canonical lists in the first edition because they are found in so many easily accessible places, but I have included a few more significant ones in the second edition. I agree that many students will not have the time to look them up elsewhere and some laypersons do not have access to a theological library where they can find these “lists.” I have received the kind permission to use some of these from collections published elsewhere. Also, in a couple of instances, and especially in the case of the more important Muratorian Fragment, I have replaced Hennecke’s translation with Metzger’s more recent and smoother translation. He has made better sense out of some very clumsy Latin

phrases in the Muratorian Fragment than I was able to. I have also improved on a few awkward translations from the church fathers that were in the first edition.

Third, and more importantly, several reviewers were disappointed that I had treated so briefly the highly complex development of the OT canon (Hebrew Bible). I had included the one brief chapter on the formation of the OT canon in order to make it a more useful tool for beginning students and also for the sake of completeness. It was not intended for scholars, but rather to summarize for students and laypersons some of the recent developments in the formation of the OT of the early Christian church. Several colleagues have encouraged me to treat more equitably the complex issues related to the formation of the Hebrew biblical canon (the OT), and I have tried to be more responsive.

I have further aimed at supplying for the reader the most important ancient sources that are employed in drawing conclusions about the formation of the OT canon. With this I have also strengthened, I believe, the case for a late development of the notion of a closed or fixed OT canon. I do not believe that Jesus was born with a “closed biblical canon in his hands” as so many have argued. I have used Jacob Neusner’s well-known and reasonable dictum—“what you can’t show, you don’t know!”—to reinforce some of my conclusions at this point. It is difficult to find a wide acceptance of a fixed Hebrew biblical canon of twenty-two or twenty-four books among the adherents of Judaism before the end of the second century C.E. at the earliest. And even if there is some agreement, this does not necessarily mean that a biblical canon of twenty-two or twenty-four books was universally adopted by all Jews either in Palestine or in the Dispersion.

Most scholars examine the same ancient sources and secondary literature but come to significantly different conclusions about their meaning that often have more to do with the value judgments we all bring to our sources than with a fair assessment of the data itself. E. Earle Ellis, for instance, has made an important contribution to the study of the origins of the Hebrew Bible, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity* (1992), that has helpful critical notations. His knowledge of the field is impressive, and he has helped me to look more carefully at a number of issues, not to mention sources, but we disagree significantly on whether the OT canon was fixed before the time of Jesus. I simply do not see from the evidence he has mustered that the matter was completely settled or even discussed before the first century C.E..

In that same regard, F. F. Bruce’s excellent work, *The Canon of Scripture* (1988) has also informed many of my comments, but he was not very helpful with respect to my conclusions about the time of the formation of the Christian biblical canon. In terms of the NT canon, I am deeply indebted to the very capable work of Bruce M. Metzger, though again I cannot follow his conclusions on the dating of the Muratorian Fragment or the context of its origins. I am only sorry that his and Bruce’s work did not appear

earlier so I could have made use of their scholarship in my first edition and saved considerable time in my own research! Roger Beckwith's monumental work, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (1985), draws similar conclusions as those found in Ellis' and Bruce's work, with the exception that he seems to have an axe to grind, which has led him to conclusions beyond those that are called for by his very extensive homework. A case in point is his dealing with the exceptions to his proposals, especially the pseudepigraphal book *1 Enoch* appealed to in Jude 14. That example will be discussed in more detail below.

As I began rewriting the section on the OT canon I realized that I would have to get more into the nitty gritty problem of the formation of the Hebrew biblical canon *for Judaism* before I could draw any conclusions about the church's OT canon. Some of the notable sources from Judaism were previously unknown to me. There are many Jewish sources that could and perhaps should have been included, but this would have expanded this book beyond what seems reasonable. I have, therefore, dealt with a number of issues in summary form once again with the hope that the reviewer will understand that the book is primarily intended for the student and not for the more technical and critical scholarly community. In regard to the formation of Judaism and its various canons of authority, I have relied quite heavily on the work of Jacob Neusner. I have also spent time re-working through Sid V. Leiman's foundational work on the Hebrew biblical canon, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (1976), along with the many primary sources he cites. We are all in his debt for this significant contribution, but, as Jack Lightstone has ably shown (see chs. 3 and 4), Leiman's work is not without its awkward assumptions about what was true in first-century Judaism. Geoffrey Hahneman's formidable dissertation on the date and provenance of the Muratorian Fragment, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (1992), should be the foundational work for all subsequent studies on this important source for NT canonical research. His helpful discussion of the OT formation supports Albert Sundberg's conclusions.

I believe my new work on the OT canon has strengthened the case I presented in the first edition: the formation of the Hebrew biblical canon was a long and slow process in both Judaism and the early church, culminating in the second through the fifth centuries and becoming more focused for the Christian community in the fourth through the sixth centuries. I deeply appreciate those who encouraged me to make the book more complete by adding the focus on the OT canon. I hope the additional comments will prove valuable.

Fourth, several of the reviewers appreciated the many questions that I put at the end of the book, but they were disappointed that I did not take the time to answer them. The reason for that has to do in part with the incomplete state of the research on the biblical canon. I do not believe that firm conclusions about the formation of the biblical canon or its expansion

or contraction can be drawn at the moment. The canon did not emerge overnight, and any changes in our views about it ought to be tempered with caution, not to mention a practical hesitation for those whose constituencies follow closely their innovative notions! Moreover, to answer the questions based on the scarce available evidence would surely have limited the audience for the book and taken away some of the challenge for the student.

Although some members of the Westar Institute's Jesus Seminar have decided to open the question of the continuing viability of the current biblical canon, most scholars, for practical considerations (safety?) and/or because the evidence does not yet warrant such a move, have wisely chosen not to draw such conclusions at this time. There appears to be no doubt, however, that in the future many will question the continuing viability of the current biblical canon. Such dialog is almost in vogue now. For some of us, however, the matter has to do with whether what is offered as candidate for future inclusion could in fact improve our current picture of Jesus. Would, for example, the inclusion of the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Thomas* in our biblical canons be an advantage or disadvantage? Do they significantly add to our understanding of who Jesus was, what he did, and what he asked from his followers? I can only surmise what the church's response might be from the responses that I have received from women in my classes when they read for the first time (or second and third!) the closing comments of the *Gospel of Thomas*.¹ What would the members of the congregation do with that passage if it were read in a church worship service on a Sunday morning! Are many of the comments attributed to Jesus in both of those works actually worthy of the Jesus we have grown accustomed to? I, for one, have serious doubts.

Nevertheless, with the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and especially with the recent publication of the previously guarded Qumran material, there are a number of canonical questions as well as historical and theological issues that need to be addressed and debated among the scholars before we can draw final conclusions about some of the questions I raise in the book. If we add to that the recent interest in the Nag Hammadi documents from early Gnostic Christianity and the several (some 266) "agrapha," or isolated sayings of Jesus that circulated in the writings of the church fathers, the apocryphal NT writings, and in some of the biblical manuscripts of the early church, then we have a lot of work to do before we can draw final and responsible conclusions on the viability of changing our current biblical canon.

¹The passage in question reads:

Simon Peter said to them, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven." (*Gos. Thom.* 114, NHLE)

In regard to the OT, it has become clear that there was no normative Judaism that defined for all Jews the scope of their Bibles. That notion is a product of later rabbinic Judaism.

I will be surprised if there are not several attempts to change the biblical canon in the next few years or even to downplay the significance of the current biblical canon. There may also be more attempts to define the “canon within the canon” for the twentieth-century church as we reflect on the books that made it into the Bible and those that did not. I do not yet see in the extracanonical sources currently available, however, anything that warrants inclusion or serious consideration as a “data base” of authority for the church today (one of the meanings of “canon” that we will explore presently). I am, rather, more of the opinion that these other extracanonical sources should at the least inform our understanding of the growth, development, and theology of early Christianity. Indeed, since we know that much of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature did inform, and in some cases support, the theology of some of the writers of the NT literature, and since we have traditionally and rightly called upon the model of Jesus and the apostolic community for guidance in such matters, I think that we would be well-served to allow the extracanonical sources to inform our theological inquiry as well. This is a far cry, however, from saying that we should include them into our biblical canon.

Further, although I have questioned the viability of certain works like Ecclesiastes, Esther, Job, Song of Songs, 2 Peter, and others in our biblical canon, I am not doing anything here that was not done in the early church and in Judaism, as I will show. Why should the church of today have less freedom in evaluating the Scriptures that inform its beliefs and practices than did the churches of the fourth to the sixth centuries? Each of the noncanonical writings has a theological statement to make if understood in a “diachronic” fashion, that is, within the collection of theological works in which they are currently found, and from within the theological perspective of the developing believing communities that included such works in their sacred collections. I incorporate these writings in the current discussion, not in support of canonical inclusion, but to aid serious inquiry, knowing that they informed a significant part of early Christianity. I acknowledge that they do not represent the core of what the biblical canon is all about and that they are generally more on the *fringe* or marginal side of the “mainstream” of the biblical literature. Is it yet permissible to reflect on these matters and their significance in the churches where we serve and in the theological schools where we teach?

Fifth, I have moved the comments about canonical criticism to the *end* of the book. I believe that several of the points that Childs and Sanders make about the interpretation of the biblical text “canonically” are important, but I want at the same time to distance myself from Childs’ position on accepting as canon the final “frozen” form of the biblical text. Childs’ enterprise is far more encompassing than what can be deduced from my brief

observations. I have restricted myself to those issues that I think are most important for our discussion of the formation of the biblical canon, namely, which text is canonical or authoritative for the church.

Sixth, as a result of the comments and conclusions of the first edition, my own theological perspective was questioned by a few. Therefore, I thought that I should share a little of my “theological baggage” with those who have such questions. I have come from a very narrow conservative theological background that is still very important to me. I use the name “evangelical” freely and with full conviction in regard to my views. I believe in the Gospel, the Good News of God in Christ, which, when shared with love and conviction, continues to draw men and women into a new and wonderful relationship with God. I delight in leading men and women to a new understanding of their relationship with God through the message of and about Jesus the Christ. I have seen many persons changed and given the hope and peace of God through the sharing of that simple and yet profound message of Christ. There is Good News to share in the story of Jesus! I refuse, however, to equate the raising of probing questions in the church with a denial of the faith. We do not advance our cause as evangelicals by refusing to question.

The following study reflects what I believe are reasonable conclusions about the matter of the biblical canon drawn from an examination of the ancient sources. The focus in both editions of this book has been predominantly historical with the knowledge that historical issues can also raise a lot of theological questions. I have not hesitated to question well-accepted positions such as the traditional dating of the Muratorian Fragment and the view that the NT canonical process was essentially finished at the end of the second century. Above all, I have tried to do careful inquiry without foregone conclusions. The success of that attempt will, of course, be measured by the reviewers.

Seventh, several students have asked me to add indexes to make the book more of a resource for them. I did not think that the length of the first edition warranted indexes, but they have been added to this edition. I hope they are useful.

Eighth, I want to say that my interest in this topic began, not in the academic setting at Harvard as was supposed by some, but rather in the setting of a rural community church, the First Baptist Church of Fremont, Nebraska, which I was privileged to pastor some years ago. During a Bible study at the church, several informed laypersons asked me probing questions about the books that did and did not get into the biblical canon. I wanted to answer their questions as well and as honestly as I could. Fortunately, I have served in churches that have allowed me the freedom to do that.

The *canonical authority* of the biblical message will be discovered not in the academy, but in its loving and humble proclamation in the communities where people live. The biblical canon, which has never garnered full agreement in the church, is not the focus of Christian faith. The focus is the

Christ who brings life and peace to those who have found a way to make the message of the biblical canon adaptable and renewable in ever changing circumstances.

In preparation for the publication of the second edition, my special thanks are in order for Patrick Alexander, the editorial director for Hendrickson Publishers, who graciously extended to me the opportunity to make important revisions and expansions for this edition. I also want to thank Rex Matthews, senior academic editor of Abingdon, who was most instrumental in the publication of the first edition and also of the second. I want to thank Helmut Koester again for his fine comments in the Foreword. I am also deeply indebted to James Sanders, whose own work on the biblical canon and the many canonical issues has informed my work throughout. In this edition he has offered several helpful suggestions and pointed me toward sources that had escaped my attention. The willingness of both Helmut Koester and James Sanders to share their favorable responses about the book on its cover and to use it with their students is both an encouragement to me and a great honor. Both scholars have added considerably to the credibility of the conclusions drawn in the book, though I am under no false illusion that they share in or agree with all of the conclusions I have made. This again speaks of their stature and generosity.

Finally, the greatest joy in this project has come from those parishioners, colleagues in ministry, and students who have said that they have read, understood, and appreciated what I have written. It was for the inquisitive minds in the church that this project was started in the first place. The churches that I have served over the years have kindly provided me with large enough pastoral and administrative staffs to allow me time to write. Those churches have also been very patient with me when I could not always be there for them, when the requirements for research and writing demanded more of my time than seemed fair to them. All pastors should have such understanding and forgiving congregations! It is to them that this second edition is affectionately dedicated.



Preface to the First Edition

INTEREST IN THE FORMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN BIBLICAL CANON OF SCRIPTURES has been growing over the last few years. Whatever the causes, several important new questions have been raised about the normative status of the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments. Numerous articles, essays, and books on this subject have appeared in the last few years, which are challenging many of the traditional views about the biblical canon. Likewise, the growing interest in ancient nonbiblical religious literature, both “orthodox” and “heretical,” has led many scholars to raise some very perplexing questions about what is referred to as “canonical criteria”—that is, the factors that led the church to recognize the biblical literature and no other as sacred and authoritative. How do we know that these biblical books and no others are inspired and authoritative for the church? What were the criteria that the early church used to distinguish its sacred literature from the other ancient Christian literature? Why did it take the church so long (centuries in fact) to recognize its canon of normative Scriptures? Finally, why are a growing number of scholars asking whether the notion of a biblical canon is in fact Christian?

Although I will address these and other questions in the following study, my primary concern in this book is to provide a helpful guide to the origins of the Christian biblical canon for students, pastors, and informed laypersons who want to explore the often elusive historical processes of how we got our Bible.

Many of the standard introductions to OT and NT literature offer but a few pages of information on the origin of the Christian biblical canon and frequently only repeat older and no longer tenable positions. On the other hand, some authors refer their readers to some of the more technical works on the subject, such as Hans von Campenhausen’s masterful, but highly technical (and consequently often neglected), opus on the canon. That work and a few others like it were written especially for the advanced scholar, and, unfortunately, not many students will take the time to work through it. For that reason, I have sought to provide a more readable and not too technical historical guide to the origins of the biblical canon as well

as offer some understanding of the major issues involved in canonical research today. Although a number of Greek and Latin words are found in this book, all of them have been translated for the reader, using at times my own translations but most often some of the better known standard translations with a few of my own “modernizations” of those texts. Most of the canonical studies with which I am familiar have either presented ancient material in the original languages (which has great merit for critical scholarship, but not for most students in college or seminary) or worse, have only listed references to it in footnotes, which most readers would not have access to unless they were close to a theological library. As one who has taught for several years, I know the struggles professors have in trying to motivate their students to look up ancient references even when such resources are available in libraries! With that in mind, I have tended to add more of these primary sources in the body of the text so that the reader can see some of the context in which the more popular quotations are found. I have often been frustrated by writers who have included in their work only one or two lines of a crucial ancient text, a practice that allows the passage to be understood in more than one way. The sometimes lengthy quotations given here will, I hope, prove more helpful than burdensome to the reader. Also, numerous notes are provided throughout the book, especially for the reader who is interested in a more critical perspective and/or in knowing the sources that have informed my conclusions.

The book begins with a brief look at the recent focus on “canon criticism” and the problem of the Bible as canon. The essential study of the origins of the biblical canon, however, begins in chapter 2 with an understanding of the notion of “Scripture” and its place in a religious community. It becomes clear that though there is an important overlap in meaning, one must distinguish between the notion of “Scripture” and that of “canon.” From there the focus is on the emergence of the notion of Scripture and canon as they relate to both the OT and the NT.

A look at the table of contents will quickly show that the OT does not receive equal treatment with the NT in the discussions. This is certainly not because the development of the OT canon is easier to understand or that there is less controversy with it, but because many of the issues and arguments related to the study of the NT canon are equally applicable to the OT. I should also hasten to add that I am less knowledgeable in the OT than in the NT, and it is best that I do not extend myself further than the scope of my competence. In terms of the purpose of this study—to provide a readable text for students who wish to examine the formation of the Christian biblical canon—the chapter on the OT canon, though brief, has been added for the sake of completeness and is, therefore, more general both in detail and in scope. It is hoped, however, that it will offer very important information, which will help the student’s understanding of how we arrived at our present Christian OT canon of Scriptures.

It is unfortunate that the recent publication of Bruce M. Metzger's significant new work *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1987) arrived in the States only as I was about to send the final form of this manuscript to Abingdon Press. Although I have made several references to Metzger's work, I did not have adequate time to review it completely. I have noticed that several of our conclusions are different, but I am impressed with the wealth of information as well as the helpful approach to the NT canon provided by Metzger.

This book is in part the product of a long theological pilgrimage that began years ago in a fairly narrow conservative context. Many individuals have been pivotal in the transitions of my pilgrimage, and it is only fitting that a few of their names be mentioned here. I have learned significantly from each of them, not only in the classroom but also by the way each has tried in his own way to make faith and thought compatible and, indeed, complimentary. None of them is alike either in personality or in theological persuasion, but all have played important roles in my personal development and in the theological stance I have taken in the following pages. Each has been for me a gifted professor and a friend in my time of need. They include James Rosscup, whose biblical scholarship has always been beautifully combined with his love for Christ, his humility, and a strong dedication to Christian service. The late George Eldon Ladd, whose sometimes painfully honest inquiry into biblical literature was paralleled by his challenging his students to be prophetic witnesses in the church, was the most instrumental person in challenging me to pursue my interest in theological education and in showing me that it was indeed a ministry. Hugh Anderson, my "doctor father," shared with me an invaluable historical-critical perspective as well as a genuine sense of responsible Christian mission and charity toward those who differ in theological stance. Douglas A. Templeton graciously offered many of his insightful observations about history, faith and the resurrection as well as generous amounts of his time not only as my tutor but also as my friend. Finally, I must mention Helmut Koester, whose example of dedicated scholarship, as well as his love for the church and its students of theology, is one from which I have personally profited greatly. His prophetic-like concern for truth both in his classes and in his writings has been a most significant challenge to me, and his many kindnesses both during and after my studies at Harvard have been especially meaningful. I am deeply grateful to God for all of these individuals, and I offer my heartfelt thanks for their time, patience, understanding, and guidance extended to me in my theological pilgrimage.

In terms of this book, I owe special thanks again to Professor Helmut Koester of the Harvard Divinity School for his guidance and encouragement throughout the various stages of my research on the biblical canon. There is no adequate way to express to him my sincere appreciation for all of his help. I would also like to offer my gratitude for the late Professor George MacRae, also of the Harvard Divinity School, for his many insight-

ful suggestions, relevant observations that I had over-looked, and words of encouragement regarding the publication of this book. He and Helmut Koester were the original readers of my thesis on the canon, out of which this book has developed. Brian Daley of the Weston School of Theology was also encouraging to me in the initial stages of my research on this project and offered a number of helpful suggestions and corrections, which I have tried to incorporate.

I would be remiss if I did not mention several other persons by name who have given me their encouragement and practical help in bringing this manuscript to publication. My long time friend Craig Evans, whose many calls and letters of encouragement kept me from leaving this book in manuscript form on the top of a shelf, has drawn to my attention some important concerns that I have tried to address in the manuscript. My thanks are also in order to James A. Sanders, who not only expressed his pleasure with this work but also graciously took time out of a busy trip to the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley to discuss with me the Christian biblical canon. He brought to my attention a number of significant essays and articles on the canon that I had overlooked, and I have sincerely appreciated his advice. In terms of practical help and astute observations, I must also mention Dr. Rex Matthews of Abingdon Press, whose numerous suggestions have not only improved the quality of this book but have also saved me some embarrassment! He has been most helpful and encouraging. Charles Hotchkiss, a computer engineer, a good friend, and a faithful member of the church I pastor was the first to introduce me to the world of computers and donated his valuable time putting this manuscript on the computer, which made its revising infinitely easier. He also found a number of mistakes and inconsistencies. His was a labor of love for which I am deeply grateful. Finally, I want to say how much I have appreciated the invaluable typing and editorial assistance of my wife, Mary, whose love, patience, and understanding have been constant throughout the years of our marriage. Without her ministry in *word and deed* this book could not have been written. She has been an outstanding companion and source of strength during my career, and it is to her that this book is affectionately dedicated.

I approach the publication of this book in the spirit and equal fear of Rufinus (ca. 401–404 C.E.) who introduced his *Expositio Symboli* with the words, “I am neither much inclined nor am I well-equipped for writing . . . for I know well the danger of exposing my poor talents to the criticism of the many.” The following study is offered, however, in the hope that it will add to our understanding not only of the origins of the Bible but also of the authority and role of the Scriptures in the church. At the very least, I sincerely hope that this book will promote an honest inquiry into how the church got its Bible and what the implications of that inquiry might be for the church today.