CANON REVISITED

Establishing the Origins and Authority *of the* New Testament Books

MICHAEL J. KRUGER

Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

Cover design: Studio Gearbox
Cover image(s): Photos.com
Interior design and typesetting: Lakeside Design Plus

First printing 2012
Printed in the United States of America

All English translations of the apostolic fathers, unless otherwise noted, are from Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Unless otherwise noted, English translations cited as Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* are from *Ecclesiastical History*. Translated by Kirsopp Lake. Loeb Classical Library. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1926.

English translations cited as Origen, *Princ.* are from *On First Principles*. Translated by G. W. Butterworth. Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1973.

English translations of other church fathers, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1. 1885. Repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-0500-3
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3081-4
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3079-1
Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3080-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kruger, Michael J.
Canon revisited : establishing the origins and authority of the New Testament books / Michael J. Kruger.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4335-0500-3 (hc)
1. Bible. N.T.—Canon. I. Title.
BS2320.K78 2012
225.1'2—dc23

2011050116

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

SH 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction

> No one has come up with a satisfactory solution as to how we determine which books should be in the canon.
>
> Ernest Best

This book is about a very specific problem confronting the Christian faith. It is certainly not a new problem (though there are plenty of those) but is perhaps one of the oldest. For the infant church, it was one of its earliest and most potent challenges. It continued to be a serious point of contention even during the time of the Reformation. And still today it endures as one of the perennial questions faced by any believer in our modern (and postmodern) age. It is what D. F. Strauss has called the "Achilles' heel" of Protestant Christianity.[1] It is what many still consider to be, as Herman Ridderbos has observed, the "hidden, dragging illness of the Church."[2] It is the problem of canon.

The problem of canon (at least as we are using the phrase here) refers to the fundamental question of how we, as Christians, can *know* that we have the right twenty-seven books in our New Testament.[3] Why not twenty-six books? Or twenty-eight? Of course, such a question would not be asked if the New Testament were like most other books, formed (more

[1]D. F. Strauss, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und im Kampfe mit der modernen Wissenschaft*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Osiander, 1840), 1:136. See discussion in G. C. Berkouwer, "The Testimony of the Spirit," in *The Authoritative Word*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 155–81, esp. 156.

[2]Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. C. F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 198.

[3]The Old Testament canon also raises important and interesting questions, but that will not be the focus of this volume. For a helpful overview of the Old Testament canon, see R. T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church, and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

or less) all at the same time, in the same place, by a single author. Instead, within the boundaries of the New Testament we are faced with a rather complex array of different books, authors, geographical settings, theological perspectives, and historical contexts that are all brought together into one unified volume. What do all these books share in common? What was the process by which they were brought together? And why should the results of that process be considered normative for the modern church? Moreover, what are we to make of disputes within the early church over some of these books? What of the abundance of apocryphal literature that has been discovered? And what would we do if we discovered, say, a lost epistle of Paul? When faced with this plethora of questions we are tempted to agree with Ernest Best when he declared, "No matter where we look there are problems and it may therefore be simpler at this stage to cut our losses and simply dispense with the concept of canon."[4]

Despite these problems, these many questions deserve (and require) an answer from biblical Christianity. For, if Christians cannot adequately answer these questions about the canonical boundaries of the New Testament, then on what grounds could they ever appeal to the *content* of the New Testament? Certainly, there can be no New Testament theology if there is no such thing as a New Testament in the first place.[5] Thus, questions about the canon can take on more foundational significance than other types of questions. It is one thing for a person to question the meaning of a given passage (and whether it says what we think it says), or to question whether a particular passage is historically or factually accurate, but it is quite another to question whether that passage belongs in the Bible in the first place. The question of the canon, therefore, is at the very center of how biblical authority is established. Unless a coherent response can be offered to such questions, then Strauss may be all too right—the canon issue could become the single thread that unravels the entire garment of the Christian faith.

Critics of biblical Christianity have long recognized the significance of the canon question and have therefore focused much of their scholarly energies on that very issue. Although it has been more than two centuries since Johann Semler offered one of the earliest attacks on the origin of the New Testament canon, *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon*

[4]Ernest Best, "Scripture, Tradition, and the Canon of the New Testament," *BJRL* 61 (1979): 275.
[5]Ernst Käsemann, "The Problem of a New Testament Theology," *NTS* 19 (1973): 235–45; Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser, eds., *One Scripture or Many?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

(1771–1775), the question is still hotly contested in the modern day.[6] Kurt Aland, in his well-known work *The Problem of the New Testament Canon*, declared that the "question of Canon will make its ways to the centre of the theological and ecclesiastical debate" because "the question is one which confronts not only the New Testament scholar, but every Christian theologian."[7] Indeed, Aland has been proved right as modern scholars have continued to press their critique of the biblical canon, offering new challenges and proposals, and keeping the canon question at the center of much of modern biblical scholarship. Willi Marxsen argued that the church made mistakes when it originally chose the canon, and therefore it is "subject to revision"; and when it comes to Hebrews and 2 Peter, "we should remove both writings from the canon."[8] David Dungan has suggested that advances in biblical scholarship will "precipitate a massive series of changes regarding the shape and content of the Bible which should rival for creativity the Reformation period, if not the second through fifth centuries."[9] Robert Funk agrees that developments in modern scholarship have "opened the door to a reconsideration of what ancient documents the Christian Scriptures ought to contain"; and he adds, "It will be a great tragedy if we do not seize the opportunity to revamp and revise."[10] Bart Ehrman joins his voice to this chorus of modern criticisms of the canon and declares it to be an "invention" of the dominant Christian factions of early Christianity designed to suppress (or oppress) other factions of the church with different theological convictions.[11]

This continued interest in (and critique of) the New Testament canon can be attributed to several factors. First, modern critical scholarship has continued to raise doubt about the authorship and date of numerous New Testament books, attributing many of them to later, pseudonymous

[6]For a more thorough survey of the history of publications on the canon, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 11–36.

[7]Kurt Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London: Mowbray, 1962), 31. Aland offers his own critique of canon, suggesting that the church should be willing to reduce its canon in order to eliminate the embarrassing books that all agree are not genuinely canonical (2 Peter, Revelation, etc.).

[8]Willi Marxsen, *The New Testament as the Church's Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 19, 25.

[9]David Dungan, "The New Testament Canon in Recent Study," *Int* 29 (1975): 339.

[10]Robert W. Funk, "The Once and Future New Testament," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 555. Funk goes on to suggest that we need a "new New Testament, indeed, a new Bible" (ibid.). For more on Funk and the Jesus Seminar's attempt to modify the existing canon, see Jeffrey Sheler, "Cutting Loose the Holy Canon: A Controversial Re-Examination of the Bible," *U.S. News & World Report* 15, no. 18 (1993): 75.

[11]Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 229–46.

authors.[12] Not only are the traditional authors of the canonical Gospels rejected, but the Pauline letters of Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles are deemed to be inauthentic, along with books like 2 Peter, Jude, and others.[13] Of course, if a New Testament book were to be exposed as a later forgery, then the inevitable question would arise about whether it has a legitimate claim on canonical status. Second, the last century and a half have been filled with sensational discoveries of apocryphal materials that have raised new questions about which books should be included in the canon. Most notable are the discoveries of apocryphal gospels such as the *Gospel of Peter*,[14] P.Oxy. 840,[15] the Nag Hammadi codices (including the *Gospel of Thomas*),[16] P.Egerton 2,[17] the *Secret Gospel of Mark*,[18] and most recently, the *Gospel of Judas*.[19] Such discoveries have spurred all

[12]For an example of modern critical approaches to pseudonymity, see David Meade, *Pseudepigrapha and Canon* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), and, most recently, Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011). For an evangelical perspective, see D. A. Carson, "Pseudonymity and Pseudepigraphy," in *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 856–64; Thomas D. Lea, "Pseudonymity and the New Testament," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 535–59; and, to some extent, Bruce M. Metzger, "Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha," *JBL* 91 (1972): 3–24.

[13]For general discussions see Robert A. Spivey and D. Moody Smith, *Anatomy of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); and Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[14]M. G. Mara, *Évangile de Pierre: Introduction, text critique, traduction, commentaire, et index* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973); H. B. Swete, *The Akhmîm Fragment of the Apocryphal Gospel of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1893); Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas, *Das Petrusevangelium und die Petrusapokalypse* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004); and most recently Paul Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

[15]See Michael J. Kruger, *The Gospel of the Savior: An Analysis of P.Oxy. 840 and Its Place in the Gospel Traditions of Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). A survey of prior literature on P.Oxy. 840 can be found in the introduction, 1–16.

[16]Robert M. Grant, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960); J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Oxyrhynchus Logoi of Jesus and the Coptic Gospel According to Thomas," *TS* 20 (1959): 505–60; Roderick Dunkerley, "Oxyrhynchus Gospel Fragments," *HTR* 23 (1930): 30–35; and C. Taylor, "The Oxyrhynchus and Other Agrapha," *JTS* 7 (1906): 546–62.

[17]G. Mayeda, *Das Leben-Jesu-Fragment Papyrus Egerton 2 und seine Stellung in der urchristlichen Literaturgeschichte* (Bern: Paul Haupt, 1946); Jon B. Daniels, "The Egerton Gospel: Its Place in Early Christianity" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1990); C. H. Dodd, "A New Gospel," *BJRL* 20 (1936): 56–92; and H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat, *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1935).

[18]Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973). Many now believe that *Secret Mark* was a hoax; e.g., Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005). See my review of Carlson, in *JETS* 49 (2006): 422–24.

[19]Herbert Krosney, *The Lost Gospel: The Quest for the Gospel of Judas Iscariot* (Hanover, PA: National Geographic Society, 2006); James M. Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and His Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006); and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot: A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

sorts of publications with provocative titles that raise questions about the state of the canon; for example, *The Five Gospels*, *Lost Scriptures*, and *Forgotten Scriptures*.[20] Third, the continued influence of Walter Bauer's book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) has kept the canonical issue open.[21] Bauer argued that early Christianity was originally very diverse and varied, with no clear orthodox or heretical camp. What would later be called "orthodoxy" was simply the beliefs of the one group that had triumphed over all the others. Thus, the books of the New Testament canon are simply the books of the "winners" of the early church power struggles, but do not necessarily represent "original" Christianity and should not be considered normative for Christians. The resurgence of interest in Bauer's thesis—and the subsequent interest in canon—is due in no small part to the degree to which it fits with postmodern worldviews that argue that there is no "right" or "wrong" version of any religious system.[22] Thus, according to Bauer, apocryphal books have just as much validity as any other Christian books.

It is these types of challenges that have led to the epistemological crisis faced by so many Christians today. If the early church was a theological quagmire, if apocryphal books are as valid as so-called canonical books, and if scholars are convinced the New Testament is filled with forgeries,

[20]Robert W. Funk, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (New York: Polebridge, 1993); Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Lee McDonald, *Forgotten Scriptures: The Selection and Rejection of Early Religious Writings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

[21]German title, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934). Bauer's thesis has been recently promoted on a number of fronts, including Helmut Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," *HTR* 73 (1980): 105–30; and Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 159–257. For a survey of its reception, see Daniel J. Harrington, "The Reception of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* During the Last Decade," *HTR* 77 (1980): 289–98. Of course, Bauer has been challenged over the years: see H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth: A Study in the Relations Between Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church* (London: Mowbray, 1954); Thomas Robinson, *The Bauer Thesis Examined: The Geography of Heresy in the Early Christian Church* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1989); James McCue, "Orthodoxy and Heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians," *VC* 33 (1979): 118–130; and I. Howard Marshall, "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earlier Christianity," *Them* 2 (1976): 5–14. For a more recent critique of Bauer, see A. J. Köstenberger and M. J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Modern Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

[22]Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM, 1990), draws heavily on Bauer's thesis and sounds quite postmodern when he argues that terms like *heresy* and *orthodoxy* should not be used because they reflect "discrimination" and "dogmatic prejudice" in favor of the canonical Gospels (xxx). Similarly, Ehrman, in *Lost Christianities*, shows his postmodern inclinations when he repeatedly chides orthodox Christianity (or "proto-orthodox," as he calls it) for being too "intolerant" of other religious systems (254–57). For a more thorough discussion (and critique) of postmodernity and its effects on Christianity, see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

then on what possible basis can Christians have confidence that they have the right twenty-seven books? How can Christians ever *know* such a thing? It is here that we come to the precise question this book is designed to answer. This volume is concerned with the narrow question of whether Christians have a rational basis (i.e., intellectually sufficient grounds) for affirming that only these twenty-seven books rightfully belong in the New Testament canon. Or, put differently, is the Christian belief in the canon *justified* (or warranted)?[23] Of course, critics of biblical Christianity have roundly argued that Christians have no rational basis for holding such a belief about the canon. Christians can believe such a thing if they want to, it is argued, but it is irrational and intellectually unjustifiable. It must be taken on "blind faith."

Now this sort of objection to the canon—which this volume is concerned to address—should be carefully distinguished from other sorts of objections to the canon. For instance, one might offer what is called a *de facto* objection.[24] This objection argues that the Christian belief in the canon is intellectually unacceptable on the grounds that it is a *false* belief. *De facto* objections are quite common in modern canonical studies and have taken a variety of forms: for example, these books cannot be from God because they contradict each other, or because they are forgeries, or because they are merely the choice of the "winners" of early theological battles. Regardless of the specific form of the *de facto* objection, the overall claim is the same—the Christian belief in the canon should be rejected because it isn't true. In contrast, this book is addressing what might be called the *de jure* objection to the Christian belief in the canon. This objection has similarities to the *de facto* objection but is different in some important ways. The *de jure* objection argues not so much that Christian belief in the canon is false, but that Christians have no rational basis for thinking they could ever know such a thing in the first place. Given the chaos of early Christianity and the various disagreements over books—not to mention scholarly claims that some of these books are pseudonymous—it would be irrational for Christians to claim that they

[23]For the sake of simplicity, this volume will not delve into all the philosophical minutiae of what proper epistemic conditions are necessary for true belief to become knowledge (whether it be "justification" or "warrant"). Instead, this volume will operate in more general biblical terms, rather than philosophical ones (though this does not deny the validity of handling these issues at a more philosophical level). For more on the justification of knowledge, see William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[24]For further discussions of *de facto* and *de jure* objections, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), viii–ix.

know these twenty-seven are the right ones.[25] Thus, on the *de jure* objection, the problem with the Christian belief in canon is something other than its truth or falsehood, but has to do with whether Christians have adequate grounds for holding such a belief.

Because this volume is designed to address the *de jure* objection and not the *de facto* objection (at least not directly), we must be clear about what it is not trying to accomplish. First, this volume is not attempting somehow to "prove" the truth of the canon to the skeptic in a manner that would be persuasive to him. Our goal here is not to find some neutral common ground from which we can demonstrate to the biblical critic that these books are divinely given. As desirable as that might sound to some readers (leaving aside its feasibility), this volume is not nearly so ambitious. Second, our concern here is not merely to explore how a Christian (for the first time) comes to believe that the canon is from God. Such knowledge can be legitimately acquired in a number of ways—even through something as simple as the testimony of another Christian[26]—and an individual may not even be consciously aware of the process that led to such a belief.[27] Instead, the issue that concerns us here is not about our having knowledge of canon (or proving the truth of canon) but *accounting* for our knowledge of canon.[28] It is about whether the Christian religion provides sufficient grounds for thinking that Christians can know which books belong in the canon and which do not.

Now, if this volume is concerned with whether the Christian religion can account for its knowledge of canon, then much of this volume will be about, well, the Christian religion. And, therefore, it particularly will

[25]Sometimes *de facto* objections and *de jure* objections can appeal to the same evidence. Thus, the disagreements among early Christians about canonical books can be used as an argument that the canon is not true (*de facto*), or it can be used as an argument that Christians are irrational in believing the canon to be true, whether or not it is true (*de jure*). See ibid., ix.

[26]Belief based on the testimony of another person can be justified (or warranted) if that other person's own knowledge is itself justified (or warranted). See ibid., 376–77.

[27]C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 277. A person can know something without knowing *how* he knows it or even *that* he knows it. Awareness that one's beliefs are justified (or warranted) is not necessary for those beliefs to be, in fact, justified (or warranted). As will be seen below, a person can come to know the truth of Scripture by simply apprehending its divine qualities with the help of the internal testimony of the Spirit (and may not be consciously aware of this process).

[28]Evans understands this sort of question as dealing with what he calls "second-level knowledge," namely, how we *know* that we know the Bible is true. He contrasts this with "first-level knowledge," which is just a person's knowing the Bible is true. It is one thing to know the Bible is true (first-level); it is another thing to give an *account* of how we know the Bible is true (second-level). Second-level knowledge inevitably requires the use of the Bible itself when we give an account of how we know that we know it. See discussion in Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 274–82.

be about the *Christian* conceptions of canon, God, history, revelation, knowledge, and more. Thus, the reader should not expect to find here a purely historical account of canon (whatever that means) void of theological categories and considerations. Aside from whether a purely historical account of canon is even possible, this volume will be unashamedly theological in its approach. Indeed, this is unavoidable if we are dealing with the *de jure* objection. How can the Christian religion account for its knowledge of the canon without talking about the Christian understanding of the way knowledge is acquired? It is important to note, however, that this does not mean this volume is disinterested in historical matters. On the contrary, much attention will be given to the key historical issues. We shall argue that the canon can only be rightly understood (and defended) when both history and theology are taken into account. They should be in a dialogical relationship with one another—as allies, not adversaries.

Of course, it is quite unfashionable these days to suggest that theological issues may play a role in historical (or biblical) studies. The quest for purely "objective" history is still firmly entrenched in the psyche of the modern academy.[29] Lessing's ditch is as deep as it ever was.[30] Yet, the interconnectivity between these two areas is beginning to be acknowledged more and more.[31] Iain Provan makes the point that "all the great giants of biblical study in the last 200 years have worked within certain dogmatic and philosophical positions."[32] Francis Watson has pressed the case that biblical theology can only really be done when both categories (Bible *and* theology) are given their due: "Theological concerns should have an acknowledged place within the field of biblical scholarship."[33] Stephen Chapman has also affirmed the relationship between theology and history.

[29]For an example, see Paul Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), esp. 51–52; also John Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, ed. W. Propp (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1–17.

[30]G. E. Lessing (1729–1781) argued that there was an impassable barrier (a "big, ugly ditch") between "accidental truths of history" and "necessary truths of reason." This argument, however, is based on a view where history is investigated neutrally and autonomously with no consideration for theological norms.

[31]See the helpful overview in M. G. Brett, "Canonical Criticism and Old Testament Theology," in *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 63–85; also F. Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), and Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

[32]Iain Provan, "Canons to the Left of Him: Brevard Childs, His Critics, and the Future of Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 50 (1997): 23. See also Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writings on the History of Israel," *JBL* 114 (1995): 585–606.

[33]Watson, *Text and Truth*, 3. See also F. Watson, "Bible, Theology and the University: A Response to Philip Davies," *JSOT* 71 (1996): 3–16.

> Theological concerns are deeply related to questions of historical reconstruction and cannot simply be avoided. Confessional categories are always present, even (or perhaps especially) when they go unacknowledged. It is a mistake therefore to pretend that differences in historical reconstruction turn solely on data and methodology or that historical proposals are unrelated to theological positions.[34]

Thus, as we press forward in our study of canon, we do well to remember the simple observation of Kevin Vanhoozer: "History alone cannot answer the question of what the canon finally is; theology alone can do that."[35]

Now that we have a better understanding of the question at hand—whether Christians have adequate grounds for thinking they can know which books are canonical—we turn our attention to how it will be answered in the chapters to come. The book will be divided into two large sections, the first of which is "Determining the Canonical Model." In this section we begin our taxonomy of canonical models, explaining and critiquing how each of them seeks to authenticate the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Chapter 1 explores what we are calling "community-determined" models of canon, in which the canon is, in some sense, determined by its reception or recognition by individuals or the church. Canon exists when there is a *response* from the community. In chapter 2, which is much briefer, we engage what we are calling "historically determined" models of canon. As the title suggests, these models argue that canon is determined not so much by community reception as by the historical merits of each of the canonical books (or portions thereof). If historical investigations can show a book to contain authentic Jesus tradition or apostolic content, then it is regarded as canonical. With these canonical models as a backdrop, chapter 3 lays forth the case for the "self-authenticating" model, which will become the foundation for the entire volume. Here we shall argue that God has created the proper epistemic environment wherein a Christian's belief in the New Testament canon can be reliably formed. Or, put differently, we shall argue that Christians have adequate grounds for regarding their belief in canon to be justified (or warranted).

The second part of the book is "Exploring and Defending the Canonical Model." In this section we unpack the self-authenticating model of canon in greater detail and examine some potential "defeaters" to the Christian belief in the canon. Are there objections to the canon that have such merit

[34]Stephen B. Chapman, "The Old Testament Canon and Its Authority for the Christian Church," *Ex auditu* 19 (2003): 126.
[35]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 146.

that they could bring doubt upon the grounds of our belief? Chapter 4 explores the divine qualities of canonical books and whether supposed contradictions between canonical books present an insurmountable problem for the Christian view of canon. Chapter 5 dives deeper into the issue of the apostolic origins of these books and whether the first-century environment was well suited for the emergence and growth of a new collection of canonical documents. The last three chapters—6 through 8—examine the lengthy historical process by which each of these twenty-seven books was recognized and received as canonical Scripture by early Christians. In particular, these chapters explore whether divisions and disagreements within the early church provide reasons to abandon the belief that these twenty-seven books are the right ones.

The overall structure of this volume highlights what is (hopefully) its distinctive contribution to the study of canon. Most prior studies of the canon have provided precious little by way of the theology of canon and have focused almost exclusively on historical questions. If theological (and epistemological) questions of canon are raised at all, they are typically done at the end of the study, after the historical investigations are already completed.[36] As noted above, however, this volume is committed to addressing *both* the theology of canon and the history of canon in an integrated fashion. The theology of canon is viewed not as an "epilogue" to be addressed only after the formal investigation of the historical evidence is complete, but instead as the paradigm through which the historical evidence is investigated in the first place. For this reason, this volume begins by analyzing and critiquing canonical models—which are, in essence, various canonical theologies—and only then turns to the historical evidence. Such an approach is bound to disappoint some readers who might have wished more time could have been spent analyzing the historical data (and the author wishes the same!). In a larger volume, perhaps more of this could have been done. However, this balance between theology and history is fitting with the overall goal of this study because (as I hope to show) it offers a more adequate answer to the *de jure* objection to canon and thus provides much-needed assurance to Christians about their belief in these books. With such a perspective in mind, we now turn to the following chapters to take the first steps toward accomplishing that goal.

[36]E.g., H. Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 82ff.; Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 251ff.; F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 255ff.; David G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 342ff.

Part 1

Determining the Canonical Model

1

The Church's Book

Canon as Community Determined

> The decision[s] to collect a group of chosen books and form a "Scripture," are all human decisions.
>
> James Barr

In 1979, Brevard Childs was able to say that "much of the present confusion over the problem of canon turns on the failure to reach an agreement regarding the terminology."[1] Unfortunately, the situation has not changed much since that time. Canonical studies still finds itself so mired in ongoing discussions and disagreements about canonical semantics[2]—what canon "is" and how that should affect our historical reconstructions—that there

[1]B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 51.
[2]Our discussions about canonical semantics will largely focus upon the *concept* of canon, not the etymology and use of the term κανών in early Christianity. For a variety of reasons there seems to be a fascination in modern scholarship with the latter. In fact, Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1954), says, "The word 'Canon' has had a history unsurpassed in interest, perhaps, by any other word in the Greek language" (141). For studies on the word itself, see Hermann Beyer, "κανών," in *TDNT* 3:596–602; Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 289–93; H. Oppel, *ΚΑΝΩΝ. Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes und seiner lateinischen Entsprechungen (regula-norma)* (Leipzig: Dietrich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1937); and E. Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 21–35.

appears to be no end in sight.[3] And while the issue of terminology is certainly an important and necessary one to address in any study of the canon, the indefatigable focus upon it has unfortunately prevented even larger (and arguably more vital) questions from being addressed. In particular, too little attention has been given to understanding overarching *canonical models* that often determine one's definition of canon in the first place. A canonical model is just a way of describing a particular canonical system, if you will, which includes the broader methodological, epistemological, and, yes, even theological frameworks for how canon is understood, and, most importantly, how canon is authenticated. Everyone who studies the origins of the canon has such a system, or process, (whether clearly thought out or not) by which he or she distinguishes a canonical book from a noncanonical book. Thus, a canonical model is not to be equated simply with one's historical conclusions about when and how these books became authoritative, but instead it describes the broader methodological approach that led to those conclusions. It is not just about the date of canonicity (or even its definition), but the *grounds* of canonicity—how does one go about determining which book, or which set of books, belongs in the canon? A canonical model, then, is one's canonical "worldview." Once the issue of canonical models is put on the table, then the scholarly obsession with topics like the definition and date of canon proves to be somewhat myopic. It is not that these topics are unimportant (they are critical), but it is simply that they are derivative. They stem from other prior and broader commitments.

Before us, then, is not simply a choice between historical positions on the New Testament canon (e.g., a late date or early date), but a choice

[3]Some recent studies include J. Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), 1–34; Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 71–110; Stephen B. Chapman, "How the Biblical Canon Began: Working Models and Open Questions," in *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, ed. Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Strousma (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 29–51; J. Webster, "'A Great and Meritorious Act of the Church'? The Dogmatic Location of the Canon," in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons*, ed. John Barton and Michael Wolter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 95–126; Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," 21–35; E. Ulrich, "Qumran and the Canon of the Old Testament," in *The Biblical Canons*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 57–80; J. Z. Smith, "Canons, Catalogues, and Classics," in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 295–311; Kendall W. Folkert, "The 'Canons' of 'Scripture,'" in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Miriam Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 170–79; J. A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 91ff.; G. T. Sheppard, "Canon," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 3 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 1987), 62–69; John C. Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity," *TrinJ* 28 (2007): 229–49; John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 85–197.

between canonical models (one overarching system or another). It is the purpose of the chapters in this section to categorize and describe these various models—a canonical "taxonomy" if you will—and then offer a brief critique and response. Then, the final chapter in this section will briefly outline the canonical model being advocated in this volume, allowing it to be seen against the backdrop of all the other approaches already reviewed. This model will provide the methodological and theological infrastructure for the entire volume and will guide us as we delve deeper into the origins of the New Testament canon.

Before we begin our survey, we need to recognize from the outset how notoriously difficult it is to categorize scholars (and their approaches) into various camps. Not only are there countless variables to consider, but each scholar has his own distinctive nuances and often has aspects of his approach that could legitimately be placed into multiple categories. Moreover, approaches could be categorized on the basis of varying criteria: definition of canon, date of canon, function of canon, and so forth. With such complexities in mind, some caveats are in order: (1) We will be categorizing the various models not on the basis of date or definition of canon (as is commonly done), but in regard to the method of *authenticating* canon. In other words, on what grounds does one consider a book to be canonical? Or, put differently, on what basis does one know that a book belongs (or does not belong) in the New Testament? (2) If we categorize models on this basis, then it is possible that some scholars who are grouped into the same overall model (on the basis of how they authenticate books) may still have differences in other areas (such as definition and date of the canon). Although there is typically a correlation between these things, it is not always uniform or predictable. In order to avoid confusion, the basis of categorization must be kept in mind. (3) The description of these models cannot (and will not) be exhaustive and thus will inevitably be vulnerable to charges of generalizing. Nevertheless, we shall do our best here to summarize the large sweep of approaches to canonical studies, recognizing that while a broad road map cannot capture every detail, it still remains a very helpful (and necessary) enterprise if we hope to understand the overall landscape through which we all must eventually navigate.

The various canonical models will be divided into two large categories, *community determined* and *historically determined*. This chapter will cover the first of these. As a general description, community-determined approaches view the canon as something that is, in some sense, established or constituted by the people—either individually or corporately—who have

received these books as Scripture. Canonicity is viewed not as something inherent to any set of books, but as "something officially or authoritatively imposed upon certain literature."[4] Thus, a "canon" does not exist until there is some sort of *response* from the community. Simply put, it is the result of actions and/or experiences of Christians. Specific examples of the community-determined model, as will be seen below, can vary quite widely. Some view the canon as somewhat of a historical accident (the historical-critical model); some view it as the result of the inspired declarations of the church (the Roman Catholic model); and others view it as an "event" that takes place when the Spirit works through these books and impacts individuals (the existential/neoorthodox model). But all share this in common: when asked how one knows which books are canonical, they all find the answer in the response of the Christian community.

I. Historical-Critical Model

A. Description

Since the rise of historical criticism during the period of the Enlightenment, scholars have argued that the idea of a canon, with its particular boundaries, is simply (or largely) the product of human activities within the church during the early centuries of Christianity. As the historical investigations of canon throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continued to reveal the disputes and controversies over books within the early church, the "human" element in the canonical process continued to be emphasized and placed at the forefront of scholarly discussions.[5] James Barr epitomizes this approach: "The decision[s] to collect a group of chosen books and form a 'Scripture,' are all human decisions."[6]

Since the canon is viewed as merely the product of normal human processes—a trend that Webster calls the "naturalization" of canon[7]—scholars have subsequently sought to explain the existence of the canon

[4]J. A. Sanders, "The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process," in McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 252.

[5]E.g., J. S. Semler, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*, 4 vols. (Halle, 1771–1775; repr., Gütersloh: Mohn, 1967); Adolf von Harnack, *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1889); Harnack, *Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of a New Creation* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1925); J. Leipoldt, *Geschichte des neuetestamentlichen Kanons* (Leipzig: Hinrichs Buchhandlung, 1907).

[6]James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 120. Elsewhere Barr refers to the canonization process strictly as the "decision of the later church" and therefore without authority; see James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 50. See also, Schubert Ogden, "The Authority of Scripture for Theology," *Int* 30 (1976): 252; and Willi Marxsen, *The New Testament as the Church's Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 15–16.

[7]Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of Canon," 101.

on the basis of specific historical phenomena. Harnack famously laid the impetus for the New Testament canon at the feet of Marcion, arguing that the canon is a "creative act" of the church in response to his heretical teachings.[8] Others have suggested that the canon is simply a sociocultural concept that reflects the relationship between a religious society and its texts.[9] Thus, canon is just a social phenomenon that arises when a community desires to express its identity.[10] As Kelsey notes, canon is the church's "self-description."[11] From this perspective, to say a text is canonical is not so much to speak of the text at all, but to speak about the function of the text within a particular religious community.[12] And still others have understood canon as a political construct, an ideological instrument, created to wield power and control.[13] One cannot under-

[8]Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 2 (New York: Dover, 1961), 62n1. See also Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (London: A&C Black, 1972); German title: *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968). For other assessments of Marcion's influence on the canon, see R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 35–62; and Robert Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 126.

[9]Smith, "Canons, Catalogues, and Classics," 295–311; H. J. Adriaanse, "Canonicity and the Problem of the Golden Mean," in van der Kooij and van der Toorn, *Canonization and Decanonization*, 313–30; A. Assmann and J. Assmann, eds., *Kanon und Zensur, Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987); and Paul Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 17–27.

[10]Paul Ricoeur, "The 'Sacred' Text and the Community," in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*, ed. W. D. O'Flaherty (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979), 271–76. A number of recent studies of canon have taken on a *comparative* dimension, showing how other religions, groups, and communities have their own sorts of "canons." E.g., Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Strousma, eds., *Homer, the Bible and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Tomas Hägg, "Canon Formation in Greek Literary Culture," in *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, ed. Einar Thomassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010), 109–28; W. C. Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SPCK, 1993); L. Alexander, "Canon and Exegesis in the Medical Schools of Antiquity," in *The Canon of Scripture in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. P. S. Alexander and K. Jean-Daniel (Lausanne: Éditions du Zèbre, 2007), 115–53; Armin Lange, "Oracle Collection and Canon: A Comparison Between Judah and Greece in Persian Times," in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, ed. C. A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 9–47; and many of the essays in Anders-Christian Jacobsen, ed., *Religion and Normativity*, vol. 1, *The Discursive Fight over Religious Texts in Antiquity* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009).

[11]D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 106.

[12]Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of Canon," 98–101; J. Nissen, "Scripture and Community in Dialogue," in Auwers and de Jonge, *The Biblical Canons*, 651–58.

[13]On this general topic, see A. K. Bowman and G. Wolf, eds., *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001); James E. Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52–80; Robert P. Coote and Mary P. Coote, *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Gerald L. Bruns, "Canon and Power in the Hebrew Scriptures," *CI* 10 (1984): 462–80; K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*

stand canon without understanding what it was designed to combat, suppress, or refute.[14] This approach is most aptly seen in the work of Walter Bauer and his modern adherents.[15] Bauer argues that there was no "orthodoxy" or "heresy" within earliest Christianity, but rather there were various "Christianities," each competing for dominance. Thus, says Bauer, the New Testament canon we possess is nothing more than the books chosen by the eventual theological winners—a historical accident, so to speak.

Regardless of the particular version of the historical-critical[16] approach one may hold, all versions share a core belief that the canon is a fundamentally human construct that can be adequately accounted for in purely natural terms. How then does one know which book should be in the canon? For the historical-critical approach this is the wrong question to ask. The issue is not about which books *should* be in the canon, but simply which books *are* in the canon. Since the canon is an entirely human creation, all we can do is simply describe what happened in history. The canon has no metaphysical or intrinsic qualities that need to be accounted for—"canon" is not something that describes the quality of a book, but is something that is *done* to books.[17] Hugo Lundhaug embodies such an approach: "Canonical status is not an intrinsic quality of a text, but a status bestowed upon it by a community of interpreters."[18] Thus, often

(Philadelphia: Fortress, 2006). In response to the idea that canons always represent those in power, see Willie van Peer, "Canon Formation: Ideology or Aesthetic Quality?," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 97–108.

[14]Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 68; David Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter," *HTR* 87 (1994): 395–419; and George Aichele, "Canon, Ideology, and the Emergence of an Imperial Church," in Thomassen, *Canon and Canonicity*, 45–65.

[15]Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). For an overview of Bauer and a modern critique, see A J. Köstenberger and M. J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Modern Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

[16]Admittedly, the use of this term *historical-critical* can be confusing because scholars from various canonical models would claim to use the historical-critical method. Moreover, there are various versions of the historical-critical method; see Anthony C. Thiselton, "Canon, Community, and Theological Construction," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006), 4. Nevertheless, even with these limitations, this still seems to be the most fitting term to capture this canonical model, as long as the imprecision of the term is kept in mind.

[17]Smith, *What Is Scripture?*, 237. It needs to be noted that not all in the historical-critical camp think that every *book* in the canon (or portion of a book) is merely a human creation, but their view is that the canon *as a whole* is a human creation. Thus, inevitably, aspects of this approach will overlap with the "canon within a canon" approach discussed below. Such overlap is impossible to avoid in any canonical taxonomy.

[18]Hugo Lundhaug, "Canon and Interpretation: A Cognitive Perspective," in Thomassen, *Canon and Canonicity,* 68.

the real concern for adherents of the historical-critical model is not to declare which books are the "right" ones, but to make sure that no one else declares which books are the "right" ones. Such distinctions, argues Helmut Koester, are simply the result of "deep-seated prejudices."[19] No book should be privileged over another. All books are equal.[20]

Consequently, as the historical-critical model continues to redefine canon and push it further into the realm of church history—more the result of human than of divine activity—the critical question ceases to be about the boundaries of the canon (which books), but now is about the very legitimacy of the canon itself (should there be one at all). H. Y. Gamble declares, "It ought not to be assumed that the existence of the NT is a necessary or self-explanatory fact. Nothing dictated that there should be a NT at all."[21] James Barr makes a similar claim: "Jesus in his teaching is nowhere portrayed as commanding or even sanctioning the production of a . . . written New Testament. . . . The idea of a Christian faith governed by Christian written holy Scriptures was not an essential part of the foundation plan of Christianity."[22] Thus, we see again that the historical-critical model rejects any intrinsic value to these texts and places the impetus for canon entirely within the realm of later church decisions.

Such a canonical model inevitably has an impact on the date and definition of canon. If canon is something that is created and constituted by the community, and there is nothing inherent in these books to make them canonical, then a canon cannot exist before the community formally acts.[23] Thus, it is not unusual for the historical-critical approach to have a fairly late date for canon and to insist on a strict semantic distinction between Scripture and canon.[24] In this regard, appeal is often made to the

[19]Helmut Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," *HTR* 73 (1980): 105.

[20]This trend is vividly seen in the recent concern to make sure apocryphal literature is treated with equal regard and that the terms *apocryphal* and *noncanonical* are understood to be anachronistic. E.g., H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM, 1990), xxx; R. W. Funk, "The Once and Future New Testament," in McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 554–55; and Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

[21]H. Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 12.

[22]James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority and Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 12.

[23]W. Wrede, *The Origin of the New Testament*, trans. J. S. Hill (New York: Harper, 1909), 138–39.

[24]Not every scholar who makes a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon is representative of the historical-critical model. Moreover, not every scholar in the historical-critical model would adopt this sharp distinction between Scripture and canon. Most notably, Harnack was willing to call a book canonical if it was cited as Scripture by the early Christian communities; the canon did not have to be closed before it could be called such. See discussion in Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 1–33. Nevertheless, the sharp distinction between these two terms has become quite fashionable in recent years; e.g., G. M. Hahneman, "The Muratorian Fragment and the

work of A. C. Sundberg, who insists that we cannot speak of the idea of canon until at least the fourth century.[25] Sundberg employs an *exclusive* definition of canon, arguing that it is a fixed, final, closed list of books, and therefore we cannot use the term *canon* to speak of any second- (or even third-) century historical realities.[26] To do so would be "anachronistic." Although Scripture would have existed prior to this time period, Sundberg argues that we must reserve the term *canon* until the end of the entire process. Thus, simply marshaling evidence of a book's scriptural status in the early church—as is so often done in canonical studies—is not enough to consider it canonical. The book must be part of a list from which nothing can be added or taken away.

B. Evaluation

Limitations of space allow for only brief evaluations of each canonical model in this chapter (and the next). However, further responses will be offered throughout the rest of this volume as appropriate. In regard to the historical-critical model, only a few observations can be made here. On a positive note, it must be acknowledged that the historical-critical model is correct to remind us of the role of the Christian community in the formation of the New Testament canon. Indeed, the canon did not drop from the sky on golden tablets, fully formed and complete—it had a long (and sometimes complicated) historical development, and human beings played a role in that development. This important aspect of canon is occasionally forgotten by some approaches (as we shall see below).

That being said, however, the fundamental problem with the historical-critical model is not its affirmation that the church played a role, but rather its insistence that the church played the determinative and decisive role. Quickly swept aside are any claims that these books contain any intrinsic

---

Origins of the New Testament Canon," in McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 405–15; L. M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 20–69; J. Barton, "Canonical Approaches Ancient and Modern," in Auwers and de Jonge, *The Biblical Canons*, 199–209; Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 18–19; James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 120; Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, 104–5; and Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 44–47.

[25]A. C. Sundberg, "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon," *SE* 4 (1968): 452–61; Sundberg, "The Making of the New Testament Canon," in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 1216–24.

[26]Chapman, "How the Biblical Canon Began," 34–35, uses the term *extrinsic* instead of *exclusive*. The term *extrinsic* was also used by Smith, "Canons, Catalogues, and Classics," 297ff. But Chapman does use *exclusive* in "The Canon Debate: What It Is and Why It Matters," (presented at the Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, 2007).

authority that might have been a factor in their reception. The canon is instead explained as merely the result of the "contingent"[27] choices of the church. Such an approach provides us with a merely human canon stripped of any normative or revelational authority and thereby unable to function as God's word to his people. Thus, the historical-critical approach does not really construct a positive model of canon, per se, but rather *deconstructs* the canon entirely, leaving us with an empty shell of books.[28]

Although most adherents of the historical-critical model would not likely view such a deconstruction as problematic, it does raise the question of how they establish that the canon is a solely human enterprise in the first place. How does one demonstrate this? One not only would have to rule out the possibility that these books bear intrinsic qualities that set them apart, but also would need to show that the reception of these books by the church was a purely human affair. Needless to say, such a naturalistic position would be difficult (if not impossible) to prove. Appeal could be made to evidence of human involvement in the selection of books, such as discussions and disagreements over books, diversity of early Christian book collections, the decisions of church councils, and so forth.[29] But simply demonstrating some human involvement in the canonical process is not sufficient to demonstrate *sole* human involvement. The fact that proximate, human decisions played a role in the development of the canon does not rule out the possibility that ultimate, divine activity also played a role. The two are not mutually exclusive. It appears, then, that the insistence on a human-conditioned canon may not be something that can be readily proved—or even something that its adherents regularly try to prove—but is something often quietly assumed. It is less the conclusion of the historical-critical model and more its philosophical starting point.

C. Sundberg's Definition of Canon

Before we leave our discussion of the historical-critical model, it is important that we consider Sundberg's exclusive definition of the canon as a final, fixed, closed list. Although this definition is not the sole property

[27]Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 83.

[28]Of course, attempts have been made to salvage some "authority" for these books even in the midst of their entirely human character. For a review and critique of such attempts, see Webster, "The Dogmatic Location of Canon," 101–7.

[29]E.g., for Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 1–11, diversity is early Christianity's most decisive characteristic and the backbone of his argument that the canon is a human invention of the proto-orthodox. For more on the issue of diversity in early Christianity, see Köstenberger and Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 41–67.

of the historical-critical model, it is commonly employed by this model and therefore warrants a brief assessment and response here.[30] We should acknowledge from the outset that much of the impetus behind Sundberg's definition is commendable. Certainly we would agree that the church's role in receiving these books is a critical aspect of canonicity and one that Sundberg's definition certainly captures. Moreover, we would agree that "Scripture" and "canon" are not synonymous in every way, and distinctions between them can be helpful at points (though the kind of distinctions and their severity need to be further clarified). However, there does not appear to be any compelling historical requirement to adopt this definition, despite the confident assertions of some that it creates historical anachronisms.[31] On the contrary, a number of residual concerns about this definition raise questions about whether it is really the best way to capture the historical phenomenon of canon.

Although the strict demarcation between Scripture and canon may seem clear to Sundberg, it seems difficult to imagine these two concepts being separated within the minds of, say, second-century Christians. In order to recognize a certain book to be Scripture in the first place, an early Christian would have needed to be able to say another book in his library was *not* Scripture. And as soon as Christians began to declare which books are, and which books are not, Scripture, how was this materially different from declaring which books are in, or not in, a canon? Thus, it seems that the term *Scripture* already implies exclusion and limitation to some degree, making a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon more difficult to sustain.[32] We might even say that collections of scriptural books are, in some sense, "closed" simply because they include some books and not others.

One wonders, then, whether the sharp Scripture-canon distinction really brings greater clarity to our understanding of the canon's development (as advocates of that distinction maintain), or whether it runs the risk of imposing artificial either–or categories upon it. Was the state of

[30]Sundberg is not the first, or the only, scholar to propose a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon. Its roots can be traced to W. Staerk, "Der Schrift- und Kanonbegriff der jüdischen Bibel," *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 6 (1929): 101–19; G. Hölscher, *Kanonisch und Apocryph: Ein Kapitel aus der Geschichte des altestamentlichen Kanons* (Naumburg: Lippert, 1905); and arguably back to Semler's original critique of canon, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*. See discussion in Iain Provan, "Canons to the Left of Him: Brevard Childs, His Critics, and the Future of Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 50 (1997): 9–11; and Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets*, 34.

[31]Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, 49–50; Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 158ff.; L. M. McDonald, "The Integrity of the Biblical Canon in Light of Its Historical Development," *BBR* 6 (1996): 104.

[32]Provan, "Canons to the Left of Him," 9–10.

the canon so very different in the fourth century that we are obligated to use different terminology when discussing any prior time period? Such a rigid division seems hard to justify historically. After all, before this time most of the New Testament books had already been functioning with sacred authority for generations, and their place in the New Testament corpus was fully secure.[33] The supposed closing of the canon in the fourth century neither changed their status nor increased their authority—it was already as high as it could be.[34] In regard to the function of these books, one could rightly say there was already a canon, or at least the category of a canon, well before the fourth century.[35] Sundberg's definition is so focused on the final stage of the canon's development that it misses the fact that it is, after all, a *stage*—and therefore is intimately connected to, and dependent on, what has come before. As we shall argue below, the concept of canon cannot be reduced to a single point of time. It is best conceived of as a continuum—less like a dot and more like a line.

Moreover, the fourth century does not appear to provide the decisive and formal "closing" of the canon, as Sundberg's definition would require. If one is looking for a time when the boundaries of the canon are absolutely fixed with no exceptions, then it will not be found in the fourth century—nor even in the modern day, for that matter.[36] If the "closing" of the canon refers to a formal, official act of the New Testament church, then we are hard-pressed to find such an act before the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.[37] The challenge for Sundberg's definition, then, is that it never fully corresponds to any historical reality.[38] To insist that we have a canon only when there is an officially closed list with no exceptions is to insist on a canon that never existed. Ironically, then, it is the exclusive definition of *canon* that appears to be, at least at some points, "anachronistic."

---

[33]H. Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis," in McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 271.
[34]Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 18.
[35]Sheppard, "Canon," 62–69, would define this approach as what he calls "canon 2."
[36]E.g., the modern-day lectionary of the Syrian Orthodox Church still operates on the twenty-two-book canon of the Peshitta, and the modern-day Ethiopian church appears to have a broader New Testament canon, though the exact number is unclear. For further discussion see Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 218–28.
[37]H. Gamble, "Christianity: Scripture and Canon," in *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Frederick M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 46–47. Gamble argues that church councils like Laodicea (360) were local, not ecumenical, and therefore had no binding authority. McDonald agrees: "There was never a time when the church as a whole concluded that these writings and no others could help the church carry out its mission in the world" ("The Integrity of the Biblical Canon," 131–32).
[38]Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets*, 108.

For these reasons, the exclusive definition of canon seems particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding. Insisting that the early church *only* had "Scripture" prior to the fourth century not only gives the misleading impression (unwitting or not) that the state of the canon in these earlier stages must have been radically different, but can also give the impression that, in some sense, the church actually constitutes or creates the canon. But this seems to confuse the reception of the canon with the existence of the canon. Why could there not be a canon prior to its reception by the church? Indeed, if one views the canon as Christians have historically understood it, namely, as the product of God's divine covenant-making activity (as we shall discuss further below), then there is no reason to think that we should reserve the term *canon* to refer only to the end of the entire process, as Sundberg suggests. Indeed, from the perspective of God's revelational activity, a canon exists as soon as the New Testament books are written—the canon is always the books God has given to the corporate church, no more, no less.

With these considerations in mind, we can agree with M. G. Brett when he states, "Attempts to draw a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon are of limited value."[39] Although Sundberg's definition rightly captures certain aspects of canon, it does not adequately account for others. While this is true of every definition (to one degree or another), we hope to make progress below in crafting a more balanced definition that can more adequately capture the various historical phenomena surrounding canon.

II. Roman Catholic Model

A. Description

On the surface it may seem that the Roman Catholic model is quite the opposite of the historical-critical model we just described—and in many ways this is true. However, in regard to the overall category of "canon as community determined" we shall see that these two models share a common methodology in regard to how canon is authenticated. At the core of the Roman Catholic view of canon is Rome's view of the authority of Scripture. Roman Catholicism denies that ultimate authority exists in the Scriptures alone (*sola scriptura*) and has consequently adopted the well-

[39]M. G. Brett, "Canonical Criticism and Old Testament Theology," in *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, ed. A. D. H. Mayes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67. Of course, as noted above, there are *some* ways that canon and Scripture are different, but just not the way Sundberg suggests. See discussion below in chap. 3.

known trifold authority structure that includes Scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium (the church's teaching authority).[40] The key component in this trifold authority is the Magisterium itself, which is the authoritative teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church, primarily manifested in the pope and his bishops.[41] Although the Magisterium is presented as only one of three sources of authority, it is distinguished by the fact that it alone has the right to interpret Scripture and tradition, and, more importantly, it has the sole authority to define what writings constitute Scripture and tradition in the first place.[42] Thus, as we shall discuss further below, questions are raised about whether the authority within the Roman Catholic system is really equally divided among these three sources, or whether it functionally resides in the church (or Magisterium) itself.[43]

The implications of this approach on the question of canon become immediately clear. When faced with the dilemma of how we know which books should be in or out of the canon, the Roman Catholic model claims a quite simple solution. As H. J. Adriaanse observes, "Catholic Theology . . . has solved the canon problem with a plea to the authority of the Church."[44] Thus, the canon is ultimately community determined. The fundamental challenge from Roman Catholicism is that in order to

[40] *Dei Verbum*, 2.9–10. See Walter M. Abbott, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966). For a helpful discussion about new developments in Vatican II, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); and A. Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 96ff.

[41] The conciliar document, *Lumen Gentium*, from Vatican II, refers to the pope as having "infallible teaching" (3.18), as does the document *Pastor Aeternus*, from Vatican I, which declares the pope's teaching to be "infallible" and "irreformable" (Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie R. Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 4 vols. [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003], 3:358). For discussion, see John H. Armstrong, *A View of Rome: A Guide to Understanding the Beliefs and Practices of Roman Catholics* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 73–82; Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001), 210–25; and Mark E. Powell, "Canonical Theism and the Challenge of Epistemic Certainty," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 195–209.

[42] *Dei Verbum* declares that it is through sacred tradition, which the Magisterium defines, that the "full canon of sacred books is known" (2.8). Moreover, it states, "The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church" (2.10).

[43] It should be noted that the Roman Catholic Church insists that the Scripture is always superior to the Magisterium. *Dei Verbum* adds, "This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it" (2.10), and the Catholic Catechism says, "Yet, this Magisterium is not superior to the word of God, but its servant" (86); see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994). Despite these qualifications, one still wonders how Scripture can be deemed the ultimate authority if the Magisterium is able to define, determine, and interpret the Scripture in the first place. Even with these declarations from Rome, residual concerns remain about whether the Magisterium *functionally* has authority over the Scriptures.

[44] Adriaanse, "Canonicity and the Problem of the Golden Mean," 318.

have an infallible Scripture, we need to have an infallible guide (namely, the church) to tell us what is, and what is not, Scripture.[45] As Karl Rahner asserts, "[Scripture] exists because the church exists."[46] Thus, it is argued, the Protestant claim of *sola scriptura* is inevitably hollow—you cannot have Scripture as the ultimate authority if you have no certain way of knowing what Scripture is.[47] One needs an external source of authority, outside of the Bible, in order to know what should be included in the Bible. Karl Keating declares, "The Catholic believes in inspiration because the Church tells him so."[48] The sixteenth-century Roman Catholic cardinal Stanislaus Hosius, papal legate to the Council of Trent, put it more bluntly: "The Scriptures have only as much force as the fables of Aesop, if destitute of the authority of the Church."[49]

As for the formal definition of the term *canon*, this model does not produce uniformity across Roman Catholic writers. Though one might expect Sundberg's definition of canon as a final, closed list to be particularly attractive to the Roman Catholic model, the term *canon* is often used simply to refer to the books that functioned as an authoritative "norm" or standard for the Christian community, that is, as Scripture. Since Catholics more readily acknowledge the inspiration of these books—in contrast with the historical-critical view above—they are often more willing to view the canon as something that existed, in some sense, earlier than the fourth century. Thus, Joseph Lienhard is quite comfortable declaring that "about 180, there is a New Testament," and "a New Testament exists when a collection of Christian writings is generally accepted in the church as equal in authority to the Jewish Scriptures."[50]

---

[45]This argument is the cornerstone for modern Roman Catholic apologetics. E.g., Scott Hahn and Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993); David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996); Patrick Madrid, ed. *Surprised by Truth* (San Diego: Basilica, 1994).

[46]Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 362.

[47]Recent Catholic critiques of *sola scriptura* include Robert A. Sungenis, ed., *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Santa Barbara: Queenship, 1997); and Mark Shea, *By What Authority?* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996).

[48]Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 127.

[49]Confutatio Prolegomenon Brentii, *Opera*, 1.530. English translation from Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997), 1:86 (2.6.2).

[50]J. T. Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), 27, 28. Farkasfalvy also shares this definition of canon; see W. R. Farmer and D. M. Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* (New York: Paulist, 1976), 102. Rahner acknowledges that both definitions play a role; see K. Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961), 28n18, 29–30. Hoffman would lean toward Sundberg's definition; see Thomas A. Hoffman, "Inspiration, Normativeness, Canonicity, and the Unique Sacred Character of the Bible," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 447–69.

B. Evaluation

It should be noted from the outset that, like the historical-critical approach above, the Roman Catholic model rightly captures certain aspects of canon. Indeed, the church's historical reception of these books plays an important role in our conviction that they are from God (though there are differences in how that role is construed). Moreover, the willingness of Roman Catholics to acknowledge that the canonical process is not entirely human, but involves divine activity, is a refreshing alternative to the naturalistic approach so common in the historical-critical model. That said, a number of historical and theological concerns about the Roman Catholic model remain, which we will attempt to briefly outline here.

We begin by noting that there are different conceptions of the church-canon relationship within the Catholic model, which are too often twisted together and left undifferentiated. Thus, we must be careful to "untwist" them if we hope to make some progress. One Catholic conception of the church-canon relationship views the church not as creating or constituting the canon, but merely as recognizing the authority of the canon that was already there. On this conception, the church's role is primarily epistemological—it is the sole and fundamental means by which we infallibly *know* which books belong in the canon. It is only in this sense that one could say that the canon is dependent upon the church.[51] We see this approach even in Vatican I, as the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* declared, "These books the church holds to be sacred and canonical not because she subsequently approved them by her authority . . . but because, being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author."[52] Lienhard similarly states, "No Catholic would want to say that the authority of the Bible derives simply from the decree of a council. Trent recognized the Bible; it did not create it. The Bible is in the Church, but *not from the Church*."[53]

If these last two statements were the extent of Catholic formulation, there might be little to disagree with here (though there are still some problem areas, as we shall see). Unfortunately, there have been more

[51]R. Murray, "How Did the Church Determine the Canon of Scripture?," *HeyJ* 11 (1970): 115–26, discusses how this less stringent Catholic position is much closer to the classic Protestant approach.
[52]Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:806.
[53]Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority*, 72, emphasis mine. For a similar view, see George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper, 1959), 66. The words of Augustine could also be added, "I would not believe in the Gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me to do so" (Augustine, *Fund*. 1.6). Calvin's understanding of this statement can be found in his *Institutes*, 1.7.3.

stringent expressions of the church-canon relationship. Another Catholic approach views the church not simply as the means by which the canon is infallibly recognized (although it does affirm this), but as, in some sense, the foundation or the grounds for the canon. As Rahner puts it, we "derive the essence of the Scripture from the essence of the church,"[54] and therefore the Scripture is "derivative"[55] from the church and "an act of the Church."[56] This sentiment is echoed by Peter Kreeft, who argues that the church "caused" the canon because it preceded the canon: "The first generation of Christians did not even have the New Testament."[57] Hans Küng states it more directly: "Without the Church there would be no New Testament."[58]

Although these two approaches are distinguished here, it is important to keep in mind that they are often bundled together without distinction in many treatments of Catholic theology, and often by Catholic writers themselves. Our evaluation, then, will attempt to address both of these views. As for the first approach, the fundamental claim of the Roman Catholic model is that *sola scriptura* is untenable because, without some external infallible authority, there is no way to know which books are to be included in the canon.[59] This epistemological challenge, in the words of Catholic author Patrick Madrid, is that Christians do not have an "inspired table of contents" that reveals "which books belong and which books do not."[60] If only Christians had this inspired table of contents, then we would not need the authoritative rulings of the Roman Catholic Church to authenticate the canon. Although such an argument is made repeatedly within Catholic writings, it proves to be problematic upon closer examination.

Imagine for a moment that God had inspired another document in the first century that contained this "table of contents" and had given it to the church. We will call this the twenty-eighth book of the New Testament

[54]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 373.
[55]This is Rahner's term (ibid., 371).
[56]Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 75 (cf. 36).
[57]Peter Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 20.
[58]H. Küng, *The Council in Action: Theological Reflections on the Second Vatican Council*, trans. C. Hastings (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 187.
[59]On this point, see the impressive volume by Nicolaus Appel, *Kanon und Kirche: Die Kanonkrise im heutigen Protestantismus als kontroverstheologisches Problem* (Paderborn: Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1964). For a helpful summary and response to Appel, see David G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 350–52.
[60]Patrick Madrid, "*Sola Scriptura*: A Blueprint for Anarchy," in *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*, ed. Robert A. Sungenis (Santa Barbara: Queenship, 1997), 22.

canon. Would the existence of such a book have satisfied the Catholic concerns? Would this allow Catholics to affirm *sola scriptura* and deny the need for an infallible church? Not at all. Instead, they would simply ask the next logical question: "On what basis do you know that *this* twenty-eighth book comes from God?" And even if it were argued that God had given a twenty-ninth book saying the twenty-eighth book came from God, then the same objection would still apply: "Yes, but how do you know the twenty-ninth book came from God?" And on it would go. The Catholic objection about the need for a "table of contents," therefore, misses the point entirely. Even if there were another document with such a table, *this document would still need to be authenticated as part of the canon*. After all, what if there were multiple table-of-contents–type books floating around in the early church? How would we know which one was from God? In the end, therefore, the Roman Catholic objection is to some extent artificial. Such a "table of contents" would never satisfy their concerns, even if it were to exist, because they have already determined, *a priori*, that no document could ever be self-attesting. In other words, built into the Roman Catholic model is that any written revelation (whether it contains a "table of contents" or not) will require external approval and authentication from an infallible church.

This insistence that canonical books, by definition, require external validation raises questions about whether the Catholic model pays adequate attention to the intrinsic authority built into these books and how that intrinsic authority could play a role in their authentication. Ironically, then, the Catholic model, at least at this point, is quite similar to the historical-critical model above. Both so overemphasize the reception by the Christian community that they overlook, at least in practice, the internal qualities of the books themselves. Although the Catholic model would not formally deny that these books bore intrinsic authority prior to their formal canonization, such an approach unwittingly downgrades their intrinsic authority during this period by portraying it as virtually unknowable without the help of formal church declarations.[61] Rahner

[61]Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 109–10. It is here that the classic Roman Catholic distinction is made between the authority of Scripture with respect to itself (*quoad se*), and the authority of Scripture with respect to us (*quoad nos*). This distinction is designed to argue that the Scriptures are still the ultimate authority in respect to themselves, but they are known to us only through the authority of the church. Bavinck offers the appropriate response to this idea when he contends: "This distinction [between *quoad se* and *quoad nos*] cannot be applied here. For if the church is the final and most basic reason why I believe the Scripture, then the church, and not the Scripture, is trustworthy in and of itself (αὐτοπιστος)" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 457). See also, Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:86ff. (2.6.2).

does this very thing when he states, "[Canonicity] cannot be established, it seems, from the books themselves."[62] The problem, then, is not that the church plays a role in identifying canonical books (Protestants would agree with this), but the Catholic insistence that it plays the *only* and *definitive* role.

In regard to the more stringent Catholic approach to the church-canon relationship, the idea that the canon is "derivative"[63] from the church or "caused"[64] by the church also raises a number of concerns: (1) Although the New Testament was not completed all at once, the apostolic teaching was the substance of what would later become the New Testament.[65] And it was this apostolic teaching, along with the prophets, that formed the foundation for the church, rather than the other way around.[66] As Ephesians 2:20 affirms, the church was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets."[67] The church is always the *creatura verbi* ("creation of the Word").[68] Chapman sums it up: "The biblical canon is not a creation of the church, the church is instead a creation of the biblical canon."[69] (2) The earliest Christians *did* have a canon, namely, the Old Testament itself (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6; 2 Tim. 3:15–16), which seems

[62]Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 25. Hoffman goes even further when he declares, "It is the church's decision, and this alone, not some inherent component of inspiration or normativeness, that is the ultimate reason why a book is or is not canonical" ("Inspiration," 463).
[63]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 371.
[64]Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity*, 20.
[65]Turretin declares, "Although the church is more ancient than the Scriptures formally considered (and as to the mode of writing), yet it cannot be called such with respect to the Scriptures materially considered (and as to the substance of doctrine) because the Word of God is more ancient than the church itself, being its foundation and seed" (*Institutes*, 1:91 [2.6.16]).
[66]Calvin wrote, "The Church is, as Paul declares, founded on the doctrine of Apostles and Prophets; but these men [of the Roman Catholic Church] speak as if they imagined that the mother owed her birth to the daughter." See John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 267.
[67]William Hendriksen, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 142; Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspective on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979), 93–95; and others, argue that "prophets" here is a reference not to the Old Testament, but to a revelatory office within the first-century church (cf. Eph. 4:11). Even if that is the case, however, it does not affect the overall argument here that the revelational deposit given to God's spokesmen (which is preserved in the New Testament), is not the result of the church's activity, but the foundation for the church's activity. Those who view "prophets" as a reference to the Old Testament writers include John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 243; Chrysostom, Theodoret, Ambrosiaster, and Beza; see Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 282. In addition, Polycarp seems to make an allusion to Eph. 2:20 and understands "prophets" in the Old Testament sense (*Phil.* 6.3).
[68]M. S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 37–71; and J. Webster, "The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation," in *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 191–210.
[69]Stephen B. Chapman, "The Old Testament Canon and Its Authority for the Christian Church," *Ex auditu* 19 (2003): 141.

to have existed just fine prior to the founding of the church.[70] There are no reasons to think that the Israel of Jesus's day had any infallible revelation from God that helped it choose the books of the Old Testament canon. (3) From the very earliest days, believers received Paul's letters as Scripture (1 Thess. 2:13), Paul clearly intended them to be received as Scripture (Gal. 1:1–24), and even other writers thought they were Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16). Thus, the Scriptures themselves never give the impression that their authority was "derivative"[71] from the church, or from some future ecclesiastical decision. (4) It was not until the Council of Trent in 1546 that the Roman Catholic Church ever made a formal and official declaration on the canon of the Bible, particularly the Apocrypha.[72] In light of this scenario, what can we make of the Roman Catholic claim that "without the Church there would be no New Testament"?[73] Are we to believe that the church had no canon for over fifteen hundred years, until the Council of Trent? The history of the church makes it clear that the church did, in fact, have a functioning canon long before the Council of Trent (or even the fourth-century councils). J. I. Packer sums it up well: "The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity . . . Newton did not create gravity but recognized it."[74]

From all of this it is clear that there is some confusion in the Catholic model (at least in its more stringent versions) regarding human agency and divine agency. For example, Kreeft's argument that the church "caused" the Bible is based on the fact that the Bible was written by "apostles and saints."[75] Although Kreeft is technically correct that the Bible was written by human beings—human beings who were part of the "church"—to say that they are the "cause" of the Bible is obscurant at best. Surely, we must distinguish between ultimate and proximate causes. Although human beings are no doubt the proximate cause of the Bible, the ulti-

[70]Of course, the state of the Old Testament in the first century has been challenged; e.g., Albert C. Sundberg, "The 'Old Testament': A Christian Canon," *CBQ* 30, no. 2 (1968): 143–55. For more on this topic, see n. 55 in chap. 4.
[71]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 371.
[72]Early councils such as Laodicea (363), Hippo (393), and Carthage (397) produced canonical lists, but these were regional councils, and there were disagreements among them, as well as scattered disagreements even after the councils were over. E.g., Augustine was more favorable to the books of the Apocrypha (*Civ.* 18.36), but also admitted that they were not accepted by the Jews into their canon (*Civ.* 19.36–38). In contrast, Jerome was decidedly against them (see prologue to *Expl. Dan.*). See standard discussion in Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 209–47, and *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
[73]Küng, *The Council in Action*, 187.
[74]J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 109.
[75]Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity*, 20.

mate cause is none other than God himself. It is God's activity to inspire the biblical authors that produced the Scriptures. He, not the church, determined what would be inspired and what would not. Kreeft has confused the *instruments* God used to produce the Bible (human beings) and the ultimate cause of the Bible (God himself). Or, put differently, he has confused the historical order of church and canon (church is "first") with the theological order (canon is "first"). N. T. Wright describes this confusion in the Catholic view.

> This makes the rather obvious logical mistake analogous to that of a soldier who, receiving orders through the mail, concludes that the letter carrier is his commanding officer. Those who transmit, collect and distribute the message are not in the same league as those who write it in the first place.[76]

It is this confusion that leads Catholics to regularly claim that the Bible is a product of the church, instead of acknowledging that it is really a product of God's activity, only to be recognized and obeyed by the church.[77] Here again we see commonalities with the historical-critical model above. Both so overemphasize the role of the community that the divine origins of these books are either denied or overlooked.

Of course, all these concerns simply lead up to the most fundamental concern, namely, whether the Roman Catholic model, in some sense, makes the Scripture subordinate to the church. The answer to that question is revealed when we ask another question: How does the Roman Catholic Church establish its *own* infallible authority? If the Roman Catholic Church believes that infallible authorities (like the Scriptures) require *external* authentication, then to what authority does the church turn to establish the grounds for its own infallible authority? Here is where the Roman Catholic model runs into some difficulties. There are three options for how to answer this question.

(1) The church could claim that its infallible authority is authenticated by (and derived from) the Scriptures. But this proves to be rather vicious circular reasoning. If the Scriptures cannot be known and authenticated

[76]N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 63.

[77]There are additional problems with Kreeft's argument. Even if Kreeft were right and human beings ("apostles and saints") could rightly be considered the cause of the Bible, this would still not prove an ongoing infallibility for the church. Simply because certain *members* of the church were used by God to produce the Bible does not mean that the church as an institution bears the attribute of infallibility. And even if it did, there is no reason to think that such infallibility would be a perpetual and ongoing attribute throughout the existence of the church. In the end, therefore, Kreeft's "cause-and-effect" argument proves to be problematic.

without the authority of the church, then you cannot establish the authority of the church on the basis of the Scriptures. You cannot have it both ways. Moreover, on an exegetical level, one would be hard-pressed to find much scriptural support for an infallible church (but we cannot enter into this question here).[78]

(2) The church could claim that its infallible authority is authenticated by external evidence from the history of the church: the origins of the church, the character of the church, the progress of the church, and so forth.[79] However, these are not *infallible* grounds by which the church's infallibility could be established. In addition, the history of the Roman Church is not a pure one—the abuses, corruption, documented papal errors, and the like do not naturally lead one to conclude that the church is infallible regarding "faith and morals."[80]

(3) It seems that the only option left to the Catholic model is to declare that the church's authority is self-authenticating and needs no external authority to validate it. Or, more bluntly put, we ought to believe in the infallibility of the Roman Catholic Church because it says so.[81] The

[78]For discussion of the key Roman Catholic proof text in this regard, Matt. 16:18, see D. A. Carson, *Matthew: Chapters 13–28*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 368ff.; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 334; and Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 422–24.

[79]Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 346–59. Rahner seems to argue on *historical* grounds that the Catholic Church is the true church (and therefore rightly bears authority). He states that Roman Catholicism is the true church because "it possesses in the concrete a closer, more evident and less encumbered historical continuity with the church of the past" (357). However, if our assurance of the church's authority is only as certain as the historical evidence, then how is that an improvement over those Protestants who claim that the extent of the canon can also be determined by historical evidence (as opposed to being determined by the church)? Are not both claims as certain as the historical evidence? How then can it be claimed that only Roman Catholicism avoids the problem of uncertainty regarding the extent of the canon?

[80]This language of "faith and morals" comes right from Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, or "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," and also from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 891. The history of papal errors has been well documented. Examples include Pope Liberius, who signed an Arian confession condemning Athanasius; Pope Honorius, who was condemned by the Third Council of Constantinople for the heresy of being a monothelite; Pope Boniface VIII, who declared salvation to be impossible outside of Rome, but then the opposite was taught by Vatican II (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 1.2–3, makes this clear), and on it goes. For more, see Hans Küng, *Infallible? An Unresolved Inquiry* (Edinburgh: Continuum, 1994); and Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 248–53. Of course, the Roman Catholic Church attempts to mitigate some of these errors by suggesting that the pope is infallible only in a very narrow sphere, that is, when he speaks *ex cathedra* (*Catholic Catechism*, par. 891). Since the Roman Catholic Church has no infallible list of *ex cathedra* statements, however, one wonders how the church can know which statements of the pope hold infallible authority and which do not (Powell, "Canonical Theism" 202–3).

[81]Indeed, the essence of this very option is taken by Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity*, when he argues that "The Church is infallible because she is faithful" (102). The problem with this claim is obvious: Who determines that faithfulness is the standard for deeming something to be infallible?

Catholic Church, then, finds itself in the awkward place of having chided the Reformers for having a self-authenticating authority (*sola scriptura*), when all the while it has engaged in that very same activity by setting itself up as a self-authenticating authority (*sola ecclesia*). On the Catholic model, the Scripture's own claims should not be received on their own authority, but apparently the church's own claims should be received on their own authority. The Roman Catholic Church, functionally speaking, is committed to *sola ecclesia*.

If so, then this presents challenges for the Catholic model. Most pertinent is the question of how there can be a canon at all—at least one that can genuinely challenge, correct, and transform the church—if the validation structure for the canon, in effect, already presupposes that the church bears an authority that is even higher? On the Catholic system, then, the canon's authority is substantially diminished. What authority it does have must be construed as purely derivative—less a rule over the church and more an arm of the church, not something that determines the church's identity but something that merely expresses it.[82] Even Lienhard, when discussing Rahner's expression of the Roman Catholic view, expresses his discomfort with its implications: "For Rahner, the Church produces the Bible; *it is difficult to see how the Church is not primary, the Scriptures secondary*."[83]

III. Canonical-Criticism Model

A. Description

As we continue our survey of community-determined models, we turn now to a relatively new perspective on the canon that has emerged in the last thirty years, known as canonical criticism. This new approach to canon originally arose in discussions among Old Testament scholars—Brevard Childs and James Sanders primarily—and thus went largely unnoticed within New Testament circles for a period of time.[84] But Childs expanded

---

And who decides the definition of "faithful"? The answer, as seen above, is the church itself. Thus, we again see that the authority of the Roman church is essentially self-authenticating.

[82]Farkasfalvy even refers to the canon as the church's "act of self definition" (Farmer and Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon*, 103).

[83]Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority*, 84, emphasis mine.

[84]Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*; Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1984); James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon*; Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Sanders, "Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 531–60; Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); and R. W.

his work also into the arena of the New Testament, and thus we will be focusing our discussions here primarily on his approach to canonical criticism.[85] This new approach has been driven largely by Childs's frustration and dissatisfaction with how the historical-critical approach to Scripture has hampered biblical theology. Childs argues that the meaning of the biblical text is not best found by trying to discover its earliest "layer" via form criticism, source criticism, or redaction criticism—the standard tools of modern critical scholarship—but the meaning of a text is bound up with how the text functions within its larger canonical context. In other words, contrary to popular perceptions, the text is best understood not at its earliest stage of literary development (after the scholar peels back the various layers), but in its latest stage of literary development, when it has taken its final shape.[86] The endless critical quest for the "original" text that underlies the final canonical form is misguided, argues Childs, because it is "prone to abstraction and speculation" and is unable to provide a normative text for the Christian community.[87] Thus, the central tenet of canonical criticism (at least according to Childs) is that only the final canonical form of the text embraced by the early church is the proper ground for biblical theology and exegesis. Childs declares, "The traditional scope of the New Testament provides an established context which has been received by the Christian church as faithfully reflecting the full dimensions of the gospel. The canon provides this point of standing from which one's identity with the church universal is made."[88]

Wall and E. E. Lemcio, *New Testament as Canon* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992). For a helpful summary of canonical criticism, see Mikeal C. Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 255–94; Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); John Barton, "Canonical Approaches Ancient and Modern," in Auwers and de Jonge, *The Biblical Canons*, 199–209; Bartholomew et al., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*; multiple authors in *HBT* 2 (1980): 113–211; and Frank W. Spina, "Canonical Criticism: Childs Versus Sanders," in *Interpreting God's Word for Today*, ed. Wayne McCown and James Earl Massey (Anderson, IN: Warner, 1982), 165–94.

[85]It is important to note that Childs himself does not prefer the term *canonical criticism* (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 82), but that term has been used to refer to this approach since it was coined by Sanders (see *Torah and Canon*, ix–xx).

[86]Of course, Childs acknowledged that understanding the prehistory of the text still has *some* value in our exegetical task; see discussion in Barton, "Canonical Approaches Ancient and Modern," 201; Noble, *The Canonical Approach*, 145–86; and Stephen B. Chapman, "Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible," in Bartholomew et al., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, 176.

[87]Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 43. Sanders disagrees with Childs here and is less concerned about only considering the final form of the text; he is more open to considering earlier forms of the text and how it changed over time—the "canonical process" as Sanders calls it (*Canon and Community*, 21–45). See discussion in Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 302–4; and Spina, "Canonical Criticism," 183–86.

[88]Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 30.

Driving Childs's insistence that only the final form of the New Testament is normative are two factors. (1) Childs argues that it is only the final form of the New Testament canon that brings together the divergent (and often contradictory) streams of early Christianity and provides a larger framework in which they can be understood and even harmonized.[89] In other words, the theological struggle among the early factions of Christianity is what shaped, formed, and molded the canon as we know it; to ignore the final form of the canon in favor of its earliest layer is to ignore all the factors that went into shaping it and thus is to ignore the real "historical" aspect of canon. (2) The final form of the New Testament should be normative because the final redactors who put the New Testament together intentionally shaped the material into a medium that would allow it to be transmitted to future generations. As Childs explains, this canonical shaping was done "precisely to loosen the text from any one given historical setting, and to transcend the original addressee."[90] If one approaches the text only on the basis of historical-critical methodologies, then meaning is restricted to the original context that produced that sublayer of tradition and has no lasting significance for the ongoing ecclesiastical community.[91] Thus, argues Childs, the final canonical form should be used because it provides a "flexible framework" for interpretation that is otherwise distorted by the "historicist's rigid model."[92] R. W. Wall agrees: "The tools of historical criticism misplace Scripture's theological reference point with a historical one, freezing its normative meaning in ancient worlds that do not bear upon today's church."[93]

---

[89]Ibid., 27–29; McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 301. Childs's assessment of diversity within the early church is quite similar to that of Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*; James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 1990); and G. T. Sheppard, "Canonization: Hearing the Voice of the Same God Through Historically Dissimilar Traditions," *Int* 34 (1982): 21–33. Watson is skeptical about whether the final canonical form really accomplishes this goal of unifying the divergent Scriptures and resolving interpretive conflict (F. Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994], 43–45).

[90]Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 23. Childs remains fairly vague on exactly how this material is transformed so that it is normative for future generations, but he says that "there was no one hermeneutical device used" (23).

[91]Gerald T. Sheppard, "Canon Criticism: The Proposal of Brevard Childs and an Assessment for Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 4 (1974): 3–17. Sheppard notes, "To the degree that historical-grammatical or historical-critical exegesis is successful in reviving a 'lost' historical context, it effectively de-canonizes the literature by putting it in some other context than the canonical" (13).

[92]Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 24.

[93]R. W. Wall, "Canonical Context and Canonical Conversations," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 166.

Child's approach, then, would reject the historical-critical notion that the idea of a canon is merely "a late, ecclesiastical activity, external to the biblical literature itself, which was subsequently imposed on those writings."[94] On the contrary, Childs would affirm that the church's "canonical consciousness" was there from the beginning and "lies deep within the New Testament literature itself."[95] Likewise, Childs's approach would reject any sort of "canon within a canon" model (see discussion in chap. 2) because it fragments and distorts a canon that is the final result of many generations of development and progress among the early Christian communities and thereby fails to provide a coherent and unified basis from which to declare a gospel message that has abiding significance to the modern-day church.[96]

By now it is clear how Childs's canonical-criticism model determines which books should be included in the canon. It consists of the books (and the shape of those books) finally settled upon and received by the early church as the basis for their understanding of the gospel. Even so, Childs does not restrict the technical term *canon* to only this final stage (as Sundberg's exclusive definition would do). Since Childs recognizes the importance of the canonical "process" by which the books were "collected, ordered, and transmitted,"[97] and the way the canon still functioned authoritatively during this time, then he is quite willing to use the term to refer to the interval before the canon reached its final shape.[98] Thus, he rejects the sharp distinction between Scripture and canon, saying that they are "very closely related, indeed often identical."[99] Childs plays a significant role, then, in establishing what we will call a *functional* definition of the term *canon* that provides an

[94]Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 21.
[95]Ibid. See Watson's helpful discussion on this point in *Text, Church and World*, 37ff.
[96]E.g., Childs criticizes Jeremias for his claim that "the authoritative form of the gospel for the Christian church is to be located in the reconstructed *ipsissima verba* of Jesus" (*The New Testament as Canon*, 537). Sanders disagrees with Childs at this point and is more open to a "canon within a canon" approach. See discussion in Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," 268–69; and Provan, "Canons to the Left of Him," 3–4.
[97]Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 25.
[98]Though this is Childs's most core definition, admittedly he uses the term *canon* or *canonical* in so many different ways that it can become quite confusing for the reader. For example, while some would understand "canonical process" as the gradual *recognition* of books by the believing community, Childs uses the phrase to refer to the way the books were changed, edited, and modified by the believing community, a process that normally would be associated with *redaction criticism* and not canon. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 36n84, observed that the word *canonical* modifies over thirty different words in Childs's work.
[99]B. S. Childs, "On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 9.

alternative to Sundberg's.[100] Instead of merely denoting a closed list, Childs and others have suggested that the term can refer to a collection of books that constitutes a religious norm for a community (regardless of whether the collection is "open" or "closed").[101] A canon would exist, on this definition, when there is evidence that books are functioning as Scripture. James Sanders agrees: "Canon as *function* antedates canon as *shape*."[102]

B. Evaluation

A number of positive things are certainly worth noting about the approach of canonical criticism. Most notably, Childs's willingness to allow theology back into the world of biblical studies is to be commended. His approach "takes as its primary task the disciplined theological reflection of the Bible in the context of the canon."[103] Also, the fact that Childs argues that exegesis ought to be done on a canonical level, considering the contribution of all twenty-seven (or sixty-six) books and the way they interact, is a refreshing change within the world of modern scholarship. Indeed, it has to be acknowledged that the meaning of any given text, or any given book, is related to how it fits with other texts and other books.[104] Lastly, Childs's critique of modern critical methodologies and the manner in which they splinter and fracture the canonical text is also a welcome feature of his work (and all too rare among those in modern biblical scholarship). However, a number of concerns remain.

Childs has argued that our canonical texts have undergone significant development throughout the canonical process as successive Christian generations not only chose writings, but have shaped, modified, and redacted these writings. Such a view broadens the activity of inspiration by moving it beyond its traditional locale—in the "apostles and prophets"—and

[100]Chapman, "How the Biblical Canon Began," 34–35, uses the term *intrinsic* instead of *functional*. The term *intrinsic* was also used by Smith, "Canons, Catalogues, and Classics," 297ff. Chapman uses *inclusive* in "The Canon Debate: What It Is and Why It Matters."

[101]See also Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, 56; Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets*, 106–10; P. R. Ackroyd, *Continuity: A Contribution to the Study of Old Testament Religious Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 13–14; S. J. P. K. Riekert, "Critical Research and the One Christian Canon Comprising Two Testaments," *Neot* 14 (1981): 21–41; and Sheppard, "Canon," 62–69.

[102]James Sanders, "Canon: Hebrew Bible" in *ABD* 1:843, emphasis his.

[103]Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 122; see also B. S. Childs, "Interpretation in Faith: The Theological Responsibility of the Old Testament Commentary," *Int* 18 (1964): 432–49.

[104]D. M. Smith, "John, the Synoptics, and the Canonical Approach to Exegesis," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and O. Betz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 166–80. See also, Robert H. Gundry, *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2005), 1–17.

expanding it to include the overall ecclesiastical community.[105] Chapman describes Childs's view of inspiration as something that happens "through various *communal* media."[106] Of course, there is not space here to enter into a full discussion of different models of inspiration, but Childs's view encounters a number of difficulties that we can briefly mention.

(1) Childs is hard-pressed to justify a sociological view of inspiration from the Scriptures themselves. The variety of biblical texts on the subject (and we cannot engage them here) give no indication that inspiration is a community affair, but rather view it as operative in key individuals and at key junctures in redemptive history.[107] Robert Gnuse observes, "The biblical tradition does not seem to give a direct affirmation to the social model of group inspiration; rather the group always seems to be addressed or led by a chosen individual."[108]

(2) There is also no indication that the early church viewed itself as bearing the same degree of inspiration as the apostles, or as bearing the authority to add, change, or modify the Scriptures (either Old Testament or New).[109] Based on the Old Testament precedents of Deuteronomy 4:2 (cf. 12:32) and Proverbs 30:5–6, as well as Josephus and other Jewish texts,[110] the reoccurring integrity formula "you shall neither add nor take away" is picked up in the New Testament context by Revelation 22:18–19, *Didache* 4.13, Papias (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15), *Barnabas* 19.11, Dionysius of Corinth (*Hist. eccl.* 4.23.12), Irenaeus (*Haer.* 5.13.1),

[105]Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, 104. Childs has been accused of rejecting the concept of inspiration; see David M. Williams, *Receiving the Bible in Faith: Historical and Theological Exegesis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 25–26. However, it would be more accurate to say he has a different view of inspiration that corresponds more closely to a "social construal of revelation" (Chapman, "Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible," 172n24).

[106]Chapman, "Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible," 180.

[107]Childs's view of inspiration is similar to that of Norbert Lohfink, "Über die Irrtumlosigkeit und die Einheit der Schrift," *Stimmen der Zeit* 174 (1964): 31–42; Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999); and J. L. McKenzie, "The Social Character of Inspiration," *CBQ* 24 (1962): 115–24. The essence of this view is critiqued by I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), 37ff.

[108]R. Gnuse, *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation, and the Canon of Scripture* (Mawhaw, NJ: Paulist, 1985), 60.

[109]The frequent Patristic discussions of apostolic authority and its uniqueness is adequate to make this point here; for a helpful example, see C. E. Hill, "Ignatius and the Apostolate," in *StPatr*, vol. 36, ed. M. F. Wiles and E. J. Yarnold (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 226–48. Childs's allowance for modifications to Scripture is seen by his argument that the text of any book should not be the original autograph but the earliest "received text," though he does not define what this is (*The New Testament as Canon*, 518–30, esp. 529).

[110]Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.42; *Aristeas* 310–11; *1 Enoch* 104:9–10; *1 Macc.* 8:30; 11QTemple 54:5–7; *b. Meg.* 14a.

and others.[111] The church understood its role as the preserver of inspired texts, not the editor of them.[112]

(3) If the canonical documents can be continually shaped by successive Christian communities, what is significant about the fourth-century community that gives it permanent normative status?[113] Why should that particular community be the point where the shape of the canon is "frozen"? The apparently arbitrary nature of this stopping place led Frank Spina to ask, "Is canon being accorded too lofty a position when its existence may simply be the result of a historical accident?"[114] If the canonical documents were revisable for the first four centuries of the Christian church, then there seems to be no reason offered by Childs for why the canonical documents would not continually be open to revision even up to the present day.[115] If so, then there can be no "final form" of the canon from which Childs can do his biblical theology.

(4) If the response to this problem is that the Christian community has the authority not only to shape, mold, and change the canonical documents, but also to decide when to stop the "canonical process" and create a final canonical version, then it is difficult to avoid the implication that the church bears more authority than the canon itself.[116] Thus, canoni-

[111]David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1208–16; W. C. van Unnik, "De la régle μήτε προσθεῖναι μήτε ἀφελεῖν dans l'histoire du canon," *VC* 3 (1949): 1–36; and M. J. Kruger, "Early Christian Attitudes Towards the Reproduction of Texts," in *The Early Text of the New Testament*, ed. C. E. Hill and M. J. Kruger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[112]For more on the early church's view of Scripture, see John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

[113]It is important to note that the objection to Childs here is not precisely the same as the one made by John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1996), 91–94. Barton argues that there is no way to determine which canon should be received by the church because there was disagreement over canonical *books* within early Christianity. This question has been addressed by others; see Provan, "Canons to the Left of Him," 11–25; and Christopher Seitz, "The Canonical Approach and Theological Interpretation," in Bartholomew et al., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, 58–110. Instead, the objection here pertains to the idea that the early church had communal inspiration to make *textual* changes or additions prior to the fourth century but not after.

[114]Spina, "Canonical Criticism," 183.

[115]James A. Sanders, "Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism," *HBT* 2 (1980): 173–97, has a more consistent position here than does Childs. He agrees that the Christian community can (and does) modify the text of the canon, but believes that it still has the right to do so today (187).

[116]Chapman, "Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible," attempts to avoid the ecclesiological implications here by suggesting that Childs's view does, in fact, honor the "prophetic-apostolic witness" (179). However, Chapman's explanation that "for Childs the prophetic-apostolic witness is more than simply what individual prophets originally said and wrote" proves to be rather thin (179). It is unclear how this solves the problem because, again, the authority still shifts from the original apostles-prophets to the subsequent community, who adds their own inspired material. Simply to *call* this community revelation the "prophetic-apostolic witness" does not alleviate the problem. Chapman himself seems to recognize this when he says that

cal criticism finds itself in a very similar place as the Roman Catholic model above.[117] Carl Henry, critiquing Childs's position, puts it well: "If the canon represents a judgment by the community of faith . . . does not the community really constitute an authority just as ultimate, and even more so, than the canon?"[118] In the end, the canonical-criticism approach provides us with another canon derivative from, and dependent upon, the Christian community and thus unable to genuinely rule over it as the *norma normans* (the norm that norms).

This particular problem is brought into sharper relief when Childs's own approach to Scripture is considered. Although his critique of modern critical methodologies (form, source, and redaction criticism) may give the impression that he repudiates these methodologies, such is not the case.[119] Childs recognizes that some people might think he is proposing a "return to a traditional pre-Enlightenment understanding of the Bible," but he reassures the reader that "such an endeavor is not only wrong in concept but impossible in practice."[120] Childs quite readily accepts the conclusions of these methodologies, including suggestions that the text reflects the influence of redactional activity, pseudonymous authors, internal and historical contradictions, ancient myth, political infighting, and the like. Consequently, Childs's determination that a book belongs in the New Testament canon does not constitute a judgment that it is historically accurate or written by an apostle. These are not the issues that matter to Childs (and they have already been rejected by his commitment to the critical conclusions of modern scholarship).[121] Rather, to say that a book

Childs's model, in the eyes of those who hold a more traditional view of inspiration, "may still concede too much to tradition and ecclesiology" (180).

[117]Chapman even offers the canonical model as something that "provides new opportunities for conversation and rapprochement between Protestants and Catholics" ("Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible," 174).

[118]Carl F. H. Henry, "Canonical Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 8 (1990): 99.

[119]Provan, "Canons to the Left of Him," 26–30, argues that there is a tension in Childs over his acceptance of modern critical methodology, and he argues that Childs should be more critical (!) of its validity.

[120]Childs, *The New Testament as Canon*, 35.

[121]Childs, of course, would object: "It is a basic misunderstanding of the canonical approach to describe it as a non-historical reading of the Bible. Nothing could be further from the truth!" (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 71). Indeed, it is this interest in "history" that distinguishes Childs from the approach of literary criticism (to which he is often compared). And in this regard, Barton's criticism is misguided (*Reading the Old Testament*, 102). Childs's objection aside, it is clear that he continues to view the Bible as a book full of historical errors, mistakes, political maneuvering, and other problems. Thus, Childs is able to declare that "a general hermeneutic is inadequate to deal with the particular medium through which this experience [of historical Israel] has been mediated" (71). In other words, since this "particular medium" is full of historical problems and contradictions, we must approach the book with a different hermeneutic that can allow God to still "speak" through such a book. Childs is

belongs in the canon is simply to say that these books, and not others, are what the church has chosen as the best summary of what constitutes the Christian faith and the Christian gospel.

Thus, it is here that we come to the crux of the canonical-criticism model. The canon is "authoritative" not because it is historically true or derived from the apostles; it becomes authoritative when a particular community embraces it in faith. Incredibly, then, the canonical-criticism approach has a strong component of existentialism built into it, leading many to draw comparisons to Barth's and Bultmann's view of Scripture.[122] What is most important is not whether the content of the text actually happened, but that "the text itself actually influenced a living community."[123] There must be a reception by a community before the canon has any religious or normative function—which makes the authority of the canon, to some extent, dependent upon human ratification. For canonical criticism, "revelation is channeled not into objective truth, but rather into experiential dynamic."[124] In many ways, then, canonical criticism is an ironic overreaction to the modern critical methods that Childs is so eager to refute. While the modern critical methods may have overlooked the final text for the sake of getting to the historical reality "behind" it, Childs's canonical criticism has overlooked the historical reality behind it for the sake of focusing on the final text.[125] He has retained literary context, but has lost the historical context. We are left simply with words that have little connection to the real world.

---

more frank elsewhere: "The Canonical context makes different uses of historical material. At times the context *hangs very loosely on history* as it bears witness to a *representative reality* which transcends any given historical situation" (Brevard S. Childs, "A Response," *HBT* 2 [1980]: 204, emphasis mine). Childs is free to insist that this is a "historical" approach, but one wonders whether his use of the term is entirely fair. If one is to suggest that the Bible only "hangs very loosely on history" and instead offers a "representative reality," then at least the term *historical* should be qualified to reflect such an approach.

[122]Connections between Childs and the existentialism of Barth and Bultmann are noted by many scholars: McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 304; M. G. Brett, "Against the Grain: Brevard Childs' Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflections on the Christian Bible," *MT* 10 (1994): 281–87; David Dickermann, ed., *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology: A Memorial Colloquium Held at the Yale Divinity School, January 28, 1969* (New Haven, CT: YDS Association, 1969), 33; Roy A. Harrisville, "What I Believe My Old Schoolmate Is Up To," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 7–25; and Noble, *The Canonical Approach*, 4.

[123]Spina, "Canonical Criticism," 179. Spina offers a helpful discussion of the "existential" problems of Childs's view on 181–82.

[124]Henry, "Canonical Theology," 104.

[125]Only a view of Scripture that takes *both* the history behind the text and the text itself seriously can overcome this problem. Modern critical methods and canonical criticism have each opted for only one of these.

In the end, despite its positives, the canonical-criticism model reduces the canon to those books that the Christian community has determined are the basis for their religious encounter with God. Largely missing in this model is that the canonicity of these books is in any sense connected to the fact that they bear (and have always borne) intrinsic authority, or that they derive from the apostolic era and bear a historically accurate apostolic message. This overemphasis on community reception, once again, creates a canon that is, in some sense, dependent upon the community it is intended to rule.

C. Childs's Definition of Canon

As noted above, Childs (as well as others inside and outside canonical criticism) has offered an alternative to Sundberg's *exclusive* definition of canon by suggesting a *functional* one. Canon exists not when there is a final, closed list, but when books function as authoritative Scripture for the community—and this happened well before the fourth century.[126] There is much in this functional definition of canon that is welcome. In particular, it more accurately captures the historical reality that early Christians did possess a functioning canon even by the second century, though the borders were still fuzzy.[127] Thus, this definition does not run

[126]Harnack argued that a book could be considered canonical only if it were expressly called γραφή or introduced with γέγραπται. In contrast, Zahn argued that a book could be canonical without these formulaic markers, as long as there are indications that it enjoyed authoritative use. Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, makes a clear distinction between Zahn's view and Harnack's (1–14). However, we should be careful not to exaggerate the differences between Harnack and Zahn. Although they disagreed about *how* to determine a book's scriptural status (formulaic markers or authoritative use), they did agree that a book's canonicity was determined by its scriptural status (or function), as opposed to being a part of a final, closed list. In this sense, Harnack and Zahn essentially held the same view.

[127]Some might raise the question of how the functional definition accounts for books that were considered Scripture by some early Christian groups but never were received into the final canon (e.g., *1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas*). What shall we call these books? Both Allert (*A High View of Scripture?*, 171) and McDonald (*Forgotten Scriptures: The Selection and Rejection of Early Religious Writings* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 23–25) argue against the functional definition because it would force us to regard these other books as canon. The exclusive definition, they argue, avoids this very sort of imprecision. However, two responses are in order: (1) This objection seems confused about what the functional definition is trying to do. The functional definition is simply saying that we should be allowed to call these twenty-seven books canon when they are being used as authoritative Scripture in the life of the church. Just because some other books were occasionally used as Scripture does not negate this approach, nor does it mean we are obligated to call these other books canon. The only way we would be obligated to call them canon is if we believed that the mere use of a book *makes* it canonical (more on this below). (2) Allert and McDonald argue that the functional definition is negated by the fact that there were disagreements over what was Scripture. If so, then the exclusive definition should be negated for the same reason. As discussed above, well after the fourth century there continued to be disagreements about which books belonged on

the danger of downplaying the authoritative nature of these books during this period, as the exclusive definition does. In addition, this definition seems less prone to unduly inflate the role of official church declarations about the canon—as if those declarations somehow "created" or "established" the authority of these books.[128]

Even with these positives, however, the functional definition of canon suffers from one of the same weaknesses as the exclusive definition. Whether one defines canon as final reception (exclusive), or as authoritative use (functional), neither of these definitions fully accounts for the divine origins of the canon. Put differently, both of these definitions largely overlook the ontology of the canon—what it *is* apart from what it does. As noted above, if one takes the historic Christian position that the canon was given by God—and does not just "become" a canon at a later point—then the canon can also be defined simply as the scriptural books that God gave the corporate church. We shall call this the *ontological* definition. On this definition, one could have a canon, in principle, even before it was used authoritatively (functional) and certainly before it was formally received by the church (exclusive). God's books are authoritative prior to anyone using them or recognizing them. Surely, the existence of canon and the recognition of canon are two distinguishable phenomena. Why, then, should the term *canon* be restricted to only the latter? This distinction is critical because it reminds us that neither the church's use of these books (functional definition) nor the church's final reception of these books (exclusive definition) is what *makes* them canonical. They are canonical by virtue of what they *are*, namely, God's books.

Given that the ontological definition of canon is, from one perspective, the most concrete—we have a canon when these God-given books *exist*—it is not difficult to imagine that a case could be made that the term *canon* should be used only in this sense. Perhaps one could argue the *opposite* position of Sundberg, namely, that canon only means the books given by God and therefore cannot be used to refer to the later, drawn-out recognition process. But this too would be mistaken. If we are

---

the church's canonical list. All this reminds us that a degree of imprecision is inevitable in all definitions of canon.

[128]Even though Childs generally uses this functional definition, his insistence that only the final form of the canon is normative (because it has been changed all along the way) implies that the church, in some sense, determines the canon (as argued above). Thus, there is a tension in Childs's system between his preferred definition of canon and his insistence that only the final form is ultimately normative.

to be balanced, it seems we need *three* aspects to our definition of canon: canon as reception (exclusive), canon as use (functional), and canon as divinely given (ontological).[129] As we shall discuss further below, we are not forced to choose between these three, but can recognize that each of them captures true aspects of canon. When all three are considered in tandem, their weaknesses can be balanced out, and a more well-rounded understanding of canon can emerge.

IV. Existential/Neoorthodox Model

A. Description

Whereas the models above have authenticated canon primarily through the collective and corporate "community," the existential/neoorthodox model tends toward a more individualistic and experiential approach.[130] The locus of authority is found not in the Scriptures themselves but ultimately in the individual who engages with them.[131] Authority exists when (and only when) an individual experiences God's word and responds to it in faith. The classical existential approach is best known through Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolph Bultmann, and other dialectical theologians. Although they differed extensively from one another—and certainly are not all "existential" in the same way or to the same degree[132]—we shall need to

[129]Each of these definitions can *roughly* correspond with dates for the canon's emergence. The exclusive definition typically leads to a fourth-century date, the functional typically leads to a second-century date (though arguably books function as authoritative prior to this period), and the ontological would lead to a first-century date.

[130]Even though the existential model is more individualistic, we still include it under the "community-determined" category because ultimately canon is still determined by *human reception*.

[131]Gnuse, *Authority of the Bible*, 75–86.

[132]The differences (and conflicts) among these three are well documented: e.g., Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1947), 188–221; Karl Barth, "Rudolf Bultmann: An Attempt to Understand Him," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (London: SPCK, 1962), 83–132; and Herman Ridderbos, *Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 15–16. Despite the differences between these three, they all share a "dialectical" theology and thus, in regard to the issue of canon, they best fit together under this heading we call "existential." On the similarities between Barth's and Bultmann's views of Scripture, see David Congdon, "The Word as Event: Barth and Bultmann on Scripture," in *The Sacred Text*, ed. Michael Bird and Michael Pahl (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 241–65. Although we could easily have added Schleiermacher to this category of "existential," we must limit ourselves to just Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann. For a look at Schleiermacher's view of the canon, see Christine Helmer, "Transhistorical Unity of the New Testament Canon from Philosophical, Exegetical, and Systematic-Theological Perspectives," in *One Scripture or Many?*, ed. Christine Helmer and Christof Landmesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13–50.

group them together under one heading here.[133] Barth (or Barthianism[134]) believed that the Scriptures are not the word of God, per se, but merely a *witness* to the word of God (Jesus Christ).[135] Revelation is not a propositional statement about God; rather it is an event (*Ereignis*), an encounter, something that "happens" to an individual.[136] Thus, the Scriptures are not the word of God in a static sense, but "become" the word of God when an existential experience occurs.[137] Barth contends, "Again it is quite impos-

[133]As a result, the individual nuances of these theologians cannot be fully addressed or adequately appreciated in this brief treatment (nor does each aspect of the existentialist model described below always apply to all three). Particularly difficult in this regard are the varied and contradictory opinions about Karl Barth and his doctrine of Scripture. Helpful overviews of this issue can be found in John D. Morrison, "Barth, Barthians, and Evangelicals: Reassessing the Question of the Relation of Holy Scripture and the Word of God," *TrinJ* 25 (2004): 187–213; and G. W. Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," in Carson and Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, 271–94.

[134]In recent years, some "neo-Barthian" scholars have argued that virtually all prior assessments of Barth's understanding of Scripture have been mistaken and that he is, in fact, more orthodox than has been realized. Prior critics of Barth's doctrine of Scripture include Cornelius Van Til, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 14ff.; and C. F. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 1:203–12, 2:40–48, 4:257–71. More sympathetic (and recent) opinions include Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation," in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 26–59; and Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelicalism," in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguelez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 55–74. While Barth has no doubt been misunderstood by some (Van Til, at points, was guilty of this), it is difficult to believe that he has been universally misread—even by the likes of T. F. Torrance—and that only now is he understood for the first time. In disagreement with McCormack is Mark D. Thompson, "Witness to the Word: On Barth's Doctrine of Scripture," in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham: Apollos/IVP, 2008), 168–97. Nevertheless, portions of this section can be read as a critique of "Barthianism" if one does not believe Barth actually held these views.

[135]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), I/1:88–111. See also, Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962). Because Barth always sees revelation as an "event," he is unclear about the degree to which Scripture is still, in some sense, the "word of God" apart from the Spirit's use of it. At times, Barth seems to say that it is not (I/1:107, 112, 124), and other times, that it is (I/1:120, 121).

[136]T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910–1931* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 98–105; Roger Nicole, "The Neo-Orthodox Reduction," in *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response*, ed. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 121–44; Paul K. Jewett, *Emil Brunner: An Introduction to the Man and His Thought* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1961), 22–23.

[137]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:110–11. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), objects to the idea that neoorthodox theology teaches that the Bible "becomes" the word of God (12n22). Instead, he says that neoorthodox theology teaches that "the Bible becomes the instrument that reproduces the 'Christ event' in one subjectively" (ibid.). Although Reymond's clarification is welcome, the phrase "becomes" still seems to accurately capture the essence of the neoorthodox belief. No one suggests the term "becomes" *exhaustively* captures this position, but that it accurately communicates (1) the revelation-as-event character of neoorthodoxy, and (2) how the neoorthodox understand scriptural authority in "functional" terms. See Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 84–85;

sible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God."[138] Consequently, there is a division between issues of history and issues of faith in existential/neoorthodox thinkers. According to Barth, it doesn't matter that the Scriptures contain historical mistakes; God can still use the fallible records of men to speak meaningfully to his church.[139] Brunner also allowed for God to speak in the midst of contradictions within the Scripture: "God can speak to us His single, never contradictory word through . . . the contradictory accounts of Luke and Matthew."[140] Likewise, Bultmann's famous article "New Testament and Mythology" declares the New Testament not to be historically accurate, but to be mythologically conditioned in a manner incompatible with the modern scientific age.[141] Moreover, Bultmann argues that it does not matter whether the New Testament reflects real history; the thing that matters is not the historical cross but the "preached cross."[142] For Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann, what matters is the existential connection made with God through the Scriptures, not whether the Scriptures are historically "true."

The implications of this approach upon canon are immediately evident. If a particular document only "becomes" the word of God during an existential experience, then the canon is defined as those books through which the church encounters the living voice of God. Barth declares, "Discovery of the canon . . . is to be understood only as an event."[143] Avery Dulles notes, "For Barth himself, the canon was charismatically determined. In certain books the church heard God speaking; in others it did not."[144] For the existentialist, historical questions are not germane to the issue of canon in the first place; form criticism, source criticism, and investigations into

---

Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, 39–50; and Mary Kathleen Cunningham, "Karl Barth," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 183–201.

[138]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2:499. A very similar statement can be found in E. Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. O. Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), 15.

[139]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:509; Nicole, "The Neo-Orthodox Reduction," 125–26; Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 196–200, 272–89.

[140]Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, trans. W. Amandus Loos (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980), 173; Robert L. Reymond, *Brunner's Dialectical Encounter* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 10–15.

[141]Rudolph Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1–43. See also, Bultmann, ed., *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (New York: Harper, 1961), 1–44.

[142]For a helpful discussion of Bultmann in this regard, see R. B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 103–26.

[143]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:109.

[144]Avery Dulles, "Scripture: Recent Protestant and Catholic Views," in *The Authoritative Word: Essays on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 241.

the authorship or date of books are not the means by which one decides whether a book is part of Scripture.[145] Christians do not experience God in the Scriptures because they are canonical; rather they are "canonical" because Christians experience God in them.[146]

When it comes to questions of the canon, Barth appears quite committed to the idea that the sixty-six books of our canon are the only books that God uses to actively speak to his church.[147] However, his downplaying of historical matters and his focus on existential matters prevent him from being able to provide any real basis for why we should be restricted to these certain books. Consequently, Barth "affirms the sixty-six books are the canon, but he leaves the door open to extensions."[148] As Dulles notes:

> The decision concerning the canon, for Barth, . . . is not irrevocable. In the sixteenth century, Barth admits, the Reformation churches changed the canon by excluding certain books (the deuterocanonicals) that had previously been accepted. Conceivably the church might decide to change the limits of the canon again at some future time.[149]

Brunner takes advantage of this door opened by Barth and walks right through it, arguing that the borders of the canon are not fixed.

---

[145]E.g., Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), 168–69, attacks any position that seeks to establish canonicity/authority on the basis of historical conclusions about a book's authorship. Referring to this approach he declares, "And on what a quaking ground has the Church of the Reformation, and its 'orthodox' perversion, placed both itself and its message! We owe a profound debt of gratitude to the historical criticism that has made it quite impossible to maintain this position" (168). In other words, we can base a book's authority not on historical investigations, but on existential encounter.

[146]This statement should sound quite similar to Bultmann's famous maxim, "The saving efficacy of the cross is not derived from the fact that it is the cross of Christ: it is the cross of Christ because it has this saving efficacy" (Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 41). Brunner says something similar: "Not because I believe in the Scriptures do I believe in Christ, but because I believe in Christ I believe in the Scriptures" (*Revelation and Reason*, 170).

[147]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:101.

[148]Nicole, "The Neo-Orthodox Reduction," 133. Barth, in an effort to affirm the sovereignty and freedom of God, wants to make sure that we do not "lock up" the work of the Holy Spirit by imprisoning it in Scripture. But the unfortunate outcome of this effort is that Barth implies that the Spirit can move through books other than Scripture: "We recognize that the fact that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God does not mean that in the Bible, the Church and the world there are not *other words* . . . and *other revelations* which are quite real" (*Church Dogmatics*, IV/3:97, emphasis mine). Kimlyn J. Bender, "Scripture and Canon in Karl Barth's Early Theology," in *From Biblical Criticism to Biblical Faith*, ed. William H. Brackney and Craig A. Evans (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 164–98, notes that "Barth is quite ambivalent about questions of canonical boundaries" (179) and documents a letter from Barth to Harnack in which Barth expresses that there is "no *a priori* impossibility" of God speaking through noncanonical books (180). See further discussion in Gabriel Fackre, "Revelation," in Chung, *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology*, 6–8; and Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, 38.

[149]Dulles, "Scripture," 241.

> The question of the canon has never, in principle, been definitely answered, but is continually being reopened. Just as the church of the second, third, and fourth centuries had the right to decide . . . what was "Apostolic" and what was not, on their own responsibility as believers, so in the same way every church, at every period in the history of the church, possesses the same right and the same duty.[150]

The implications of Brunner's comments are clear. Which books are considered "apostolic"—and therefore in the canon—is determined by each generation's *experience* with those books. Thus, the canon of Scripture has "fluid edges"[151] and will change from generation to generation. But Brunner goes even further and suggests what Barth only implied, namely, that God could speak to his church in books *outside* the Bible.[152] After all, if truth is mediated through personal experience, who is to say that a person cannot hear God's voice in another book? Is God restricted by the Bible? Brunner simply takes his existential approach to its logical conclusion. Likewise, Bultmann also affirms that the "word of God" is not to be equated with the Scripture, but he is even more radical in his existential approach to the Christian faith than are Barth and Brunner, causing some to criticize Bultmann for denying that a religious encounter requires *any* connection to a historical Jesus.[153] Thus, Bultmann also leaves the door wide open to the possibility that such an encounter could happen through other books outside the canon.[154] Indeed, many of Bultmann's more radical successors (Karl Jaspers, Fritz Buri, and Van Austin Harvey) continued to make the case that existential fulfillment need not have anything to do with Christ at all, but could occur through other historical figures worthy of emulation—thus eliminating any need to consider the New Testament books as a unique source of revelation.[155]

---

[150]Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 131.

[151]Jewett, *Emil Brunner*, 35.

[152]Emil Brunner, *Our Faith* (New York: Scribner's, 1926), 10–11; Nicole summarizes Brunner's view: "Somehow it is God's voice, too, in the Koran or the Vedas" ("The Neo-Orthodox Reduction," 141). Also implying the same thing is Brunner's statement, "God can, if he so wills, speak his Word to a man even through false doctrine and correspondingly find in a false Credo-credo the right echo of his Word"; Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), 137.

[153]See Brunner's critique of Bultmann in *Truth as Encounter*, 41–49; G. E. Ladd, *Rudolf Bultmann* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1964), 35.

[154]Morris Ashcraft, *Rudolf Bultmann* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), 73–76.

[155]Strimple, *The Modern Search*, 128–34. These followers of Bultmann claimed they were only being consistent with Bultmann's own statements, such as, "Anyone who asserts that to speak of God at all is mythological language is bound to regard the idea of an act of God in Christ as a myth" (*Kerygma and Myth*, 33–34). If Bultmann is correct, then why does "revelation" from God have to be connected to the historical Jesus at all?

B. Evaluation

We begin by affirming a number of commendable aspects of the existential/neoorthodox model. As with all the community-determined models, it rightly recognizes that the reception of these books by the Christian community is an important aspect of canon. There is undoubtedly an existential component to how the canon is authenticated, and it is important to be reminded of that reality (though there is not *only* an existential component). In addition, we would agree with Barth, as he appeals to Calvin, that the "Bible constitutes itself the Canon. It is the Canon because it imposed itself upon the church as such."[156] Barth seems to recognize some aspect of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture here, though we shall register disagreements later about the specific way that is understood. For this reason, we also can appreciate Barth's understanding of the relationship between the church and the Scripture, where he always affirmed the priority of the latter over the former (even if one might view such a position as inconsistent with other parts of his thinking). These many positives aside, however, there are still substantial concerns with this overall model that need to be mentioned.

The most fundamental concern pertains to the existential model's unfortunate separation of the authority of God and the authority of Scripture. The Scripture has no intrinsic authority, but is "contingent" upon whether God decides to use it.[157] For Barth, "the texts are authoritative *not in virtue of any property they may have*."[158] Consequently, these texts must be considered canonical on *other* grounds, namely, "in virtue of a function they fill in the life of the Christian community."[159] But this leads to three problematic areas. First, if the boundaries of the canon are determined solely by the existential experience of the community, then the boundaries of the canon are fluid and ever changing.[160] And a perpetually uncertain canon is unable to function as an authoritative norm for the church. If the canon is regarded as an entirely personal and existential "event," then

[156]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:107.

[157]Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), does the same thing when he says, "The Bible is not in and of itself the revelation of God but the divinely appointed means and channel of this revelation" (57).

[158]Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture*, 47, emphasis mine.

[159]Ibid.

[160]In response to critiques that his position is subjectivism, Barth emphasizes the *objective* nature of revelation by saying that revelation is really found in the person of Jesus himself (*Church Dogmatics*, IV/3:175–80). Though such a Christocentric clarification is welcome, it still does not solve the problem of subjectivism, because how does one have access to this Jesus apart from the scriptural testimony about him? And since Scripture is itself not revelation, then its value remains solely in its subjective appropriation by a community. For more discussion, see Fackre, "Revelation," 2–4.

there can never be a "right" canon, but simply the "current" canon—the canon that the church is now using. Henry observes:

> [On the Barthian view] the idea of a fixed scriptural canon collapses. Only isolated fragments of the Bible that "impose" themselves become the Word of God, and these cease to be the Word of God when not self-imposing. What is Word of God for some need not be Word of God for others—or can be, or not, at different times and places.[161]

Thus, the neoorthodox canon is reduced to a human-determined document that bears no real authority in and of itself.

Second, if Scripture does not bear authority in itself and is contingent upon reception by the community, then the community begins to take on authority equal to (if not greater than) that of Scripture. Stanley Grenz and John Franke run into this very problem when they make what is arguably a "Barthian" distinction between the authority of God and the authority of Scripture: "Ultimate authority [is located] only in the action of the triune God. If we must speak of a 'foundation' of the Christian faith at all, then, we must speak of neither Scripture nor tradition in and of themselves."[162] Thus, they declare, "neither Scripture nor tradition is inherently authoritative," and therefore both are "contingent on the work of the Spirit."[163] With this distinction in hand, Grenz and Franke are able to place church tradition and Scripture on equal footing. While acknowledging that in some sense the canon constitutes the church, they also declare that "canonical Scripture . . . is itself derived from that [Christian] community and its authority."[164] Just as in the Roman Catholic and canonical-criticism models above, it is unclear how this position is able to establish a canon that can function as an authority over the church.[165]

Third, if the existentialist model is correct that there is nothing distinctive about the biblical books, then the very *concept* of a canon is in jeopardy. We noted above that Barth (along with others) argues that the New Testament contains contradictions and historical mistakes (and for Bultmann, outright myth), but that God can speak through these documents anyway—that is, what matters is not history, but faith. But if accu-

[161]Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 259–60.
[162]Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 117.
[163]Ibid.
[164]Ibid.
[165]Ironically, Barth himself was much clearer about the Scripture being an authority over church tradition. See *Church Dogmatics*, I/2:574, and discussion in Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book?," 43ff.

rately recounting God's historical acts does not matter—nor anything else inherent in these books—then why should we have any concern about the extent of the canon at all? If God can supernaturally speak through any book (in his sovereignty and power), then what difference does it make which books ended up in the canon? In this regard, Bultmann's extreme approach may prove to be the most consistent. If there is nothing distinctive about these books (in and of themselves), then canonical boundaries are nonsensical. And therefore a canon is nonsensical.

In summary, the existential/neoorthodox view suffers from some of the same overall weaknesses of the other community-determined models. In its overemphasis on the subjective reception of these books, it does not adequately account for the intrinsic authority of these books or their historical and apostolic origins.

V. Conclusion

This chapter has been devoted to a variety of canonical models that see canon as community determined: historical-critical, Roman Catholic, canonical criticism, and existential/neoorthodox. Though they vary to one degree or another, they all authenticate the canon by appealing to its reception by the Christian community (either corporately or individually). Although these models rightly recognize the importance of community reception as an aspect of canon, they have absolutized this aspect so that it becomes the defining characteristic of canon. This has created an imbalanced approach to canon that is problematic not so much for what it affirms, but for what it leaves out. Largely overlooked in the above models are (1) the intrinsic authority and internal attributes of these books that makes them authoritative and (2) the historical origins of these books and the fact that they stem from the apostolic age and accurately capture the redemptive activities of God in Jesus Christ. As a result of these omissions, these models are left with a canon that is derived from and established by the church, and thus is unable to rule over the church. In effect, the canon has so much become the church's book that it is unable to be God's book.

This study of the New Testament canon and its authority looks deeper than the traditional surveys of councils and creeds, mining the biblical text itself for direction in understanding what the original authors and audiences believed the canon to be. *Canon Revisited* distinguishes itself by placing a substantial focus on the *theology of canon* as the context within which the historical evidence is evaluated and assessed. In effect, this work successfully unites both the theology and the historical development of the canon, ultimately serving as a practical defense for the authority of the New Testament books.

"Rarely does academic specialization in canon studies converge with thorough commitment to biblical authority. Careful, accessible, and wise in his explorations, Michael Kruger has given us a gift that will keep on giving for generations to come."

MICHAEL S. HORTON, *J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California*

"A well-written, carefully documented, and helpful examination of the many historical approaches that have been written to explain when and how the books of the New Testament were canonized. Kruger also moves beyond the historical to the theological, concluding that the concepts of a self-authenticating canon and its corporate reception by the church are ultimately how we know that these twenty-seven books belong in the New Testament."

ARTHUR G. PATZIA, *Senior Professor of New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary; author,* The Making of the New Testament

"Of all the recent books and articles on the canon of Scripture, this is the one I recommend most. It deals with the critical literature thoroughly and effectively while presenting a cogent alternative grounded in the teaching of Scripture itself. This is the definitive work on the subject for our time."

JOHN M. FRAME, *J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando*

MICHAEL J. KRUGER (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is professor of New Testament and academic dean at Reformed Theological Seminary (Charlotte, NC), is the author of *The Gospel of the Savior*, and the coauthor of *Gospel Fragments* and *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*. His research on Christian origins has made him a trusted authority on the development of the New Testament canon.

BIBLICAL STUDIES / NEW TESTAMENT

CROSSWAY
www.crossway.org