

The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate

Michael Kruger

IVP Academic, 2013

256 pages, paperback

A Brief Book Summary from Books At a Glance

By Todd Scaewater

About the Author

Michael J. Kruger is the President and the Samuel C. Patterson Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC.

Introduction

The understanding of the New Testament canon is an unsettled issue. The question used to be more about which books were canonical, but in the last fifty years the question has shifted to what canon actually is and when it came into existence. The “extrinsic” model of canonical creation has become dominant. It says that the church created the canon when it fixed the boundaries of the canonical books in the fourth and fifth centuries. Another model would be the “intrinsic” model, which views the canon as arising organically from within the early Christian religion. These two models are not necessarily mutually exclusive; elements of both may be true. We should also keep in mind that these models are historical models and do not require any theological commitments. This book will explore five central tenets of the extrinsic model and suggest that each tenet is problematic as currently held, although not completely deficient. The result is that our understanding of canon should continue to shift as we better understand the central questions surrounding the nature of canon.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Definition of Canon:

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

Chapter 2: The Origins of Canon:

Was There Really nothing in Early Christianity that May Have Led to a Canon?

Chapter 3: The Writing of Canon:

Were Early Christians Averse to Written Documents?

Chapter 4: The Authors of Canon:

Were the New Testament Authors Unaware of Their Own Authority?

Chapter 5: The Date of Canon:

Were the New Testament Books First Regarded as Scripture at the End of the Second Century?

Summary

Chapter 1: The Definition of Canon:

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

To properly understand the nature of canon, we must first define it. Two competing definitions of canon have arisen in academic circles. The first might be called the “exclusive” definition. A. C. Sundberg in 1968 proposed that “Scripture” and “canon” are distinguishable, and on this basis we cannot speak of the idea of canon until the fourth century or later. This definition has been supported widely and has become the most prominent definition of canon.

But there are a few concerns with this definition. First, distinguishing between Scripture and canon is difficult—would not Christians have distinguished between Scripture and non-Scripture, and therefore had a working canon based on what they deemed to be Scripture? Second, what does it mean that the canon was “closed” by the fourth century? There has actually never been a time when the boundaries of the New Testament were closed in the way this definition requires. Indeed, the earliest official act of a church to declare a canon (defined in this way) is the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Third, nothing happened in the fourth century that made Scriptures more authoritative or “canonical” than they already were in the second to fourth centuries. Other definitions also deserve a voice.

A second dominant definition is the “functional” definition, laid out first by A. von Harnack and Theodore Zahn and picked up more recently by Brevard Childs. This definition holds that canon encompasses the entire process by which the formation of the church’s sacred writings took place, including the collection and use of Scripture. Thus, there is no real separation between Scripture and canon.

Positively, this definition recognizes that Christians did possess an authoritative corpus of books long before the fourth century. Negatively, though, this definition struggles to account for books that were sacred to some communities but not others (*Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, etc.). More difficult is that this definition fails to account for the ontology of the canon (its “being,” what makes canon “canon”). In fact, both of these definitions define canon in relation to its use by the church so that the church’s reception *makes* a book canon.

A third definition of canon might be the ontological definition, that a book is canonical if it was written by God authoritatively for his church. Thus, books were canonical from the moment they were written, even if they were not recognized as such until the second to fourth centuries. One might object that this is a theological definition, but what precludes us from viewing canon and Scripture in the way Christians have for two millennia? The historical-critical view is just as theological, just from the opposite perspective.

If we take this definition, we might think of canon as involving stages of creation by God, recognition by the church, and consensus regarding specific books by the church. If we consider stages of canon rather than a fixed date for its creation, then all three definitions have a place. The ontological definition relates to the creation of Scripture and canon; the functional definition relates to the church’s recognition of Scripture as canon; the exclusive definition relates to the consensus by the church about specific books that are authoritative.

Chapter 2: The Origins of Canon:

Was There Really nothing in Early Christianity that May Have Led to a Canon?

Many scholars (e.g., Harry Gamble, C. F. Evans, James Barr) have suggested the earliest Christians could not have conceived of the creation or more Scriptures to be added on to their existing canon. They claim there was nothing inherent within early Christianity to predispose them to creating a New Testament canon. But there are actually a few reasons to believe that they were predisposed to it, and reason to explain why it happened.

First, Second Temple Jews considered themselves to still be in exile (Bar 2:7–10; 2 Macc 2:5–18; 4Q504 2–5; *T. Mos.* 4:8–9). They were awaiting God’s promise to return to them and redeem them. They also viewed the story of the Old Testament books incomplete. These two facts lead us to consider the following. First, if the Old Testament was incomplete, it needed a conclusion, which would require new revelation. Second, in the Old Testament, new revelation generally followed redemptive events. Third, the Old Testament says that eschatological acts of redemption will be accompanied by new revelation (Deut 18:18; Isa 2:2–3; 11:1; 61:1–2). So when early Christians recognized the redemption that Christ brought, they naturally would have expected new divine revelation to accompany it.

A second reason to believe they were predisposed to receive a New Testament canon is the close connection between written documents and covenant. Covenants in the ancient Near East were written as documents, often with a line cursing anyone who would alter the document. Many scholars have recognized that Deuteronomy and the Decalogue are both written in the form of covenant treaties. Thus, early Christians who recognized that they were now in a “new” covenant would expect new written documents explaining that covenantal relationship.

The New Testament does bear features of explaining and solidifying that covenantal relationship as written documents. This includes the inscriptional curse in Rev 22:18–19, the command of Paul to read his letters at church gatherings (2 Cor 10:9; Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27), the role of covenant in Galatians and 1 Corinthians, and the fact that the New Testament came to be called the “new covenant” by Patristics (Melito of Sardis [Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.14]; Tertullian, *Pud.* 10; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.44.3; 3.71.3; 4.134.4; 5.85.1).

A third reason early Christians would have been predisposed to receive a New Testament canon is their understanding of apostleship. New Testament passages abundantly suggest that the apostles spoke the very words of Christ with his authority (Matt 10:20, 14; John 17:8; Acts 10:41–42; 2 Pet 3:2). Patristic evidence suggests that they recognized the same (*1 Clem.* 42:1–2; Justin, *1 Apol.* 39; Ignatius, *Rom.* 4:4; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.1.1). Thus, if the apostles were viewed this way, then their words would naturally be understood as divine revelation.

Several factors would have led to the textualization of their writings. First is a disposition toward written documents in relation with covenantal relationships. Second is that textualization would become natural as the apostles began dying. The same practice existed among Greco-Roman historians, who preferred oral testimony but eagerly recorded it in texts as witnesses began dying. Those who study social and cultural memory theory also recognize the same proclivity among oral cultures, who generally textualize traditions within forty years of the community’s founding. The New Testament documents also share features of the “testamentary” genre (e.g., 2 Pet 1:13–15), which suggests they intended to make permanent their testimony to the gospel. Another motivation to textualize apostolic witness is the need to access the apostle’s teaching

when they were not present. The mission of the apostles to reach the ends of the earth necessitated that they write down their teaching so it could reach where they could not.

In sum, there are several reasons to believe that early Christians would have been predisposed to receive a new canon of texts. The claims of scholars who suggest otherwise should at least be viewed with caution and re-evaluated.

Chapter 3: The Writing of Canon: Were Early Christians Averse to Written Documents?

Many scholars (e.g., James Barr, Robert Funk, Werner Kelber) have claimed that early Christians were not a “bookish” people. They shunned written texts and preferred oral tradition as more authoritative and legitimate. Three main arguments support this position. First, sociohistorical study of early Christianity shows they were an oral culture. Second, early Christians expressly stated their aversion to writing. Third, early Christians’ expectation of an imminent return of Christ led them to avoid writing texts.

In response to these arguments, we see first that while early Christians lived in a predominantly oral culture with the vast majority of people being illiterate, this does not mean they had an “oral state of mind” (as Kelber says) that shunned texts. On the contrary, some written texts in Christianity were probably written so they could be performed orally (e.g., the Gospels) and others written with oral features (e.g., Hebrews). Texts could therefore support oral proclamation.

We also see that early Christianity was a culture of “textuality.” They wrote many books and wrote them early, as early as the 40’s (James and Galatians, depending on their dating). Many manuscripts also demonstrate a professional and literary quality. Christians were committed to the Old Testament Scriptures, which were written, and early Christians may have used notebooks for Scriptures and *testimonia* (notebooks with Old Testament quotations to aid in proclamation and teaching). They were also committed to the codex and to the use of *nomina sacra* (abbreviations of the divine name), which evinces a distinct Christian literary culture that gave much thought to how they recorded their traditions. Hence, their oral proclivities did not equate to a rejection of writing, but the proper and distinct use of it to support their oral proclamation.

As for Christians expressing aversion to writing, scholars point mostly to Papias’s statement, “I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of the living and surviving voice.” F. C. Baur interpreted this to mean that Papias preferred “the living word” as opposed to “the dead, transient written text.” But actually Papias is referring to typical historiographical practice, to prefer the testimony of a living person rather than a written text. “Voice” in his statement refers to a literal voice, a person, not to some ethereal oral tradition. Some scholars (e.g., Kelber) also point to Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6 that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life. Kelber interprets this against a polemic against “the written medium,” but such an interpretation is far from what Paul means. He is referring simply to the distinction between the Old and New Covenants, with letter referring to the way the covenant is expressed—the old was expressed in writing on tablets, while the new is expressed by the Spirit on the heart.

The third argument, that Christians' expectation of an imminent *parousia* would restrain them from writing, is problematic. First, those who claim that Jesus and/or the apostles believed Jesus would return in their lifetime (e.g., Albert Schweitzer, Bart Ehrman) misunderstand the way apocalyptic imagery functions in the relevant New Testament texts (Mark 13:30; 9:1; 1 Thess 4:15–17). They also fail to notice how a delay in the *parousia* was not a major issue in the second century, which it would have been if early Christians understood that Jesus and Paul taught that the *parousia* would happen in the first century. Second, this argument fails to note that the Qumran community expected an imminent eschaton but still amassed a huge library of texts, with organized scribal activity. As David Meade and Gerd Theissen have noted, Jewish apocalyptic beliefs actually fueled their literary proclivities and caused their literary production to flourish.

Chapter 4: The Authors of Canon: Were the New Testament Authors Unaware of Their Own Authority?

Part of “canonical orthodoxy” is that the New Testament authors were not aware that they were writing Scripture. Scholars such as Hans Hübner, William Wrede, Lee McDonald, Werner Kümmel, Harry Gamble, John Goldingay, and others have made such claims. Whether the New Testament authors would have called their writings “Scripture” is irrelevant, since the real question is whether they were aware they spoke with God’s authority as the mouthpiece of Christ. The biblical evidence suggests they were quite aware of this role.

Paul’s message was “not from man nor through man,” but was “through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal 1:1). Those who turn from his gospel have turned to a different gospel (1:6). He received his gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:11–12). Paul recognizes his message as being the “word of God” (1 Thess 2:13) “through the Lord Jesus” and the “will of God” (1 Thess 4:2–8). Anyone who did not recognize Paul’s commands as commands from the Lord should be recognized (1 Cor 14:37–38). Paul could also command his audience in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to walk according to the tradition they received from Paul and his co-workers (2 Thess 3:6, 14). Thus, the tradition he taught was authoritative and from Jesus himself.

The Gospels are anonymous (probably to mimic the anonymous Old Testament historical writings), but they give clues that they are writing authoritative documents that are tantamount to Scripture. Mark 1:1’s “beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” suggests it is a written version of the apostolic “gospel.” It echoes prophetic formulas such as Hosea 1:2, and the Gospel follows the same outline as Peter’s early sermon in Acts 10:34–43. Peter also seems to be the eyewitness behind Mark’s accounts.

John 21:24 says the Beloved Disciple is the eyewitness behind the Gospel, and a comparison with John 15:27 (“you will also bear witness because you have been with me from the beginning”) suggests the “witness” of the Beloved Disciple (John 21:24) is also “from the beginning” of Jesus’ ministry. Moreover, John 20:30–31 mentions the “words written in this book,” which is a phrase used throughout the Old Testament to refer to Scripture (Deut 28:58; 2 Chron 34:21; Jer 25:13).

Luke 1:1–4 probably refers to apostolic witness as the foundation for Luke’s testimony (e.g., apostles are witnesses throughout Acts [1:8; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39–41; 26:16]). Paul is even described as a “minister and witness” (Acts 26:16), similar to “eyewitnesses and ministers” in Luke 1:2. Apostles are also devoted to the “ministry of the word” as Luke’s “eyewitnesses of the word” (Luke 1:2) are his sources. Also, Luke’s use of “delivered” in Luke 1:2 suggests he is dealing with apostolic testimony and tradition.

Finally, Matthew 1 opens with “the book of the beginning/Genesis,” which may intentionally evoke Genesis. Matthew presents Jesus throughout as a New Moses and also divides Jesus’ teaching into five different discourses. Thus, all four Gospels seem to be consciously finishing the history of Israel with apostolic testimony and in a scriptural manner of writing.

Other New Testament writings also suggest their awareness of writing as authoritative and inspired mouthpieces for Christ. Hebrews 2:1–4 says the message of salvation was “declared by the Lord and attested to us by those who heard [i.e., the apostles],” and David Allen has argued (*Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews*) that Hebrews is a reworked, Christological Deuteronomy. Second Peter 3:2 juxtaposes “prophets” and “apostles,” putting them on equal footing, and the author describes himself as an apostle in 1:1. He also refers to Paul’s writings as Scripture (2 Pet 3:16), suggesting that 2 Peter is Scripture as well (since they are both apostles). 1 John 1:1–4 uses eyewitness language to say the message was proclaimed to “us,” the author and the other apostles. Finally, Revelation explicitly presents itself as divine revelation through an angel (Rev 1:1) and places a curse on those who would add or take away from the writing (22:18–19).

Chapter 5: The Date of Canon:

Were the New Testament Books First Regarded as Scripture at the End of the Second Century?

Many modern scholars have settled on c. AD 200 as the earliest period at which the New Testament writings were considered Scripture. Irenaeus has been called the “principal architect” of the canon, while another scholar has said Irenaeus “essentially created the core of the New Testament canon of Holy Scripture.” But a fresh examination of the evidence suggests that the New Testament writings were considered Scripture far earlier than Irenaeus.

We will start with Irenaeus and move backward. Irenaeus does not use Scripture in a way that suggests he is doing something new. He cites it throughout *Against Heresies*, until Book 3, in an assuming and unapologetic manner. He also recognizes the fourfold Gospel and that it had to be fourfold because of the four corners of the earth. While some scholars believe Irenaeus is here trying to substantiate the Gospels as Scripture, it is more likely he is “simply offering a retrospective theological explanation for a longstanding church tradition” (161).

Then there are contemporaries of Irenaeus. The Muratorian Fragment recognizes twenty-two books as Scriptural. It traditionally dates to c. AD 180, but some scholars recently have tried to push it forward to the fourth century. None of these new arguments are convincing, though, so we have a canonical list as early as AD 180. Theophilus of Antioch wrote *To Autolytus* around AD 177, in which he argued that Christian writings had the same level of integrity and authority

as Old Testament writings because of their common inspiration by the Holy Spirit (*Autol.* 3.12). In this letter he cites Matthew, John, and Luke, and elsewhere created a Gospel harmony of all four Gospels (Jerome, *Epist.* 121.6.15). Tatian's wrote his harmony, the *Diatesseron*, in the same period. Clement of Alexandria employed New Testament passages throughout his writings, even claiming our four Gospels are the only true ones. He cites Matthew 757 times, Luke 402 times, John 331 times, and Mark 182 times.

Prior to Irenaeus, we have Justin Martyr, who mentored Tatian, suggesting Justin also knew of the four Gospels. Justin refers to "gospels" (*1 Apol.* 66.3) that were written by the apostles (*Dial.* 103). He also cited from all three Synoptic Gospels, and seems to have borrowed his *logos* terminology and some themes from John's Gospel. Although some have questioned whether he viewed them as Scripture because he calls them "memoirs of the apostles," he is probably using Papias's language, and he speaks of them as on par with the Old Testament prophets (*1 Apol.* 67.3).

The apostolic fathers are difficult to handle in this regard, but they show much evidence that they regarded the apostles' writings as authoritative Scripture. When they use language reminiscent of New Testament passages, sometimes even verbatim, some scholars claim we cannot know for sure that they were citing written texts. But this supposition is problematic. It assumes Christians were averse to written texts and preferred oral tradition into the second century, which we have seen is erroneous. The apostolic fathers were also quite literate, suggesting they would have been very interested in written texts. Even the Gospels writers themselves rely on written sources (e.g., Luke 1:1–4). Also, certainty is too high a bar for historical investigation. It is more plausible to believe the apostolic fathers were citing apostolic writings when the wording is verbatim or nearly so, than to believe they were recording hypothetical oral tradition or hypothetical written sources.

Papias, around AD 125, supposedly learned about the Gospels from John the Elder (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.3–4, 15–16). Papias is clear that the Gospels originated from the apostles, or through their testimony. Papias also knew 1 John, 1 Peter, Revelation, and some Pauline epistles, and likely knew John's Gospel.

The Epistle of Barnabas (c. AD 130) cites Matt 22:14 nearly verbatim and introduces the citation with "it is written," suggesting the author is citing the written Gospel. Ignatius knew at least some of Paul's letters and even mentioned them in *Eph.* 12:2. Ignatius also clearly understood the apostles to be as authoritative as Christ and refers to their writings as having "decreeds" and "ordinances," words use of Old Testament law. Polycarp knew John personally and mentions Paul several times in his letter to the Philippians as having far more authority than him as a bishop. He also tells his readers to read Paul's letters (*Phil.* 3.2). First Clement (c. AD 96) relied heavily on Paul's letters and regarded the apostles as having the authority of Christ himself (*1 Clem.* 42:1–2).

Finally, in the New Testament, 2 Peter 3:16 refers to Paul's letters as on par with the Old Testament. First Timothy 5:18 also cites a combined quotation of Deut 25:4 and Jesus' saying in Luke 10:7, referring to them both as Scripture.

In sum, Irenaeus did not first recognize the apostolic writings as Scripture. His contemporaries and those before him, even Peter and Paul themselves, recognized that the apostolic writings carried the same authority as Christ's words.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three implications to the findings of this study. First, it reminds us that most scientists and historians operate within a paradigm, with certain lenses. These paradigms always need to be questioned and refined.

Second, there are enough problems with the extrinsic model of canon to question its validity. This study has not proved the intrinsic model, but merely questioned the tenets of the extrinsic model. In fact, we can profitably think about canon from three different perspectives using these different models, and doing so will help us have the best understanding of what the canon is.

Third, more academic consideration should be given to the intrinsic model. This model does not necessarily mean that Scripture is inspired, but it is merely a historical model designed to explain how the canon arose within the early Christian movement.

Copyright 2017, Books At a Glance

This Book Summary was first published on Books At a Glance and is used here with permission.