

Introduction to the Canon

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In Christian theology the canon of Scripture refers to the list of sacred books that serves as the rule or norm of Christian faith and life. The word *canon* derives from the Greek κανών *kanōn* (Hebrew קנה *qāneh*), which means "reed" or "measuring stick." One sense of *kanōn* was "ruler"—that by which straightness could be measured. The idea of measure in *canon* opened up the term to various metaphorical uses in literature, art, and music, as well as in commerce and in making chronological tables. The weapon known as the "cannon," from which a projectile was shot through a barrel, recaptured the primitive sense of "reed."

The notion of canon as rule or norm of faith and life predominated among Christian writers of the first three centuries ce. Paul invoked peace and mercy on "all who walk according to this *kanōn*" (Gal 6:16). Clement of Rome contrasted the "glorious and holy rule [*kanōn*] of our tradition" with empty and vain cares. Clement of Alexandria urged Christians to live in accord with "the rule [*kanōn*] of faith" and "the rule [*kanōn*] of truth." Likewise, Irenaeus spoke often about "the rule of truth" attested by Scripture and tradition but perverted by heretics.⁴

Despite the prominence of "canon" as rule or norm of faith and life, other Christian uses of *kanōn* are documented. Paul in 2 Cor 10:13–16 employed it to refer to the geographical limits placed by God on Paul's apostolic ministry. From about 300 ce onward, the plural *kanones* was used to designate the decrees or rules promulgated by church councils and synods. The plural *kanones* also referred to various lists or tables, such as those of the parallel passages in the Gospels compiled by Eusebius. The official list of clergy attached to a specific church was also known as a *kanōn*, according to the decrees of the Council of Nicea (Canons 16, 17, 19).

Only in the second half of the fourth century was *kanōn* and its derivatives applied to the list of books sacred to Christians. Athanasius refers to *Shepherd of Hermas* as not belonging to the canon. In his 39th Festal Letter (written at Easter 367), Athanasius distinguished the canonical books (*biblia kanonizomena*) from the apocryphal books. The Synod of Laodicea in 363 ce ruled that only "canonical" books should be read in the churches.

So by the end of the fourth century ce the two components of the Christian concept of "canon" came together: the canon as rule or norm of Christian faith and life, and the canon as the list of books sacred to Christians. Since the first component really concerns the authority of the Bible, the focus of this article will be on the canon as the list of sacred books. Nevertheless, the two issues cannot be entirely separated, as the sections on the history of the canon and the theological issues related to the canon will show. In fact, the genius (or the tragedy, depending on one's perspective) of the Christian theological tradition has been to join to the concept of "canon of Scripture" the idea of an authoritative list of sacred books, and its function as the norm or rule of faith and life.

THE SHAPE OF THE CANON(S) TODAY

All Christians today accept as the first part of the Christian canon of Scripture the books of the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish tradition has divided these books into three categories: Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Twelve Minor Prophets), and Writings (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1-2 Chronicles). The collection of twenty-four books is customarily called "Tanakh," an acronym derived from the first Hebrew letter of each category: תורה (*Tōrā*, Law), נביאים (*Nēbī'im*, Prophets), and כתובים (*Kētūbim*, Writings).

The content of Protestant versions of the Old Testament (OT) corresponds to that of the Hebrew Bible. But the material is arranged differently (under the influence of the Septuagint) and divided into thirty-nine books. The "two-volume" historical books (1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah) and the twelve Minor Prophets are counted as separate books. The thirty-nine books fall into four blocks: Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy), Historical Books (Joshua-Esther), Wisdom Books (Job-Song of Songs), and Prophets (Isaiah-Malachi).

Bibles published under Roman Catholic auspices contain all the books of the Hebrew Bible as well as seven more books—Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch—and some additions to Esther and Daniel. These books were part of the manuscript traditions of the Greek (Septuagint) and Latin (Vulgate) Bibles. In Catholic Bibles, they are interspersed among the uncontested books of the Hebrew tradition, whereas Protestant Bibles that include them customarily place them as an appendix to the OT. The seven additional books are sometimes called "deuterocanonical," suggesting debate about their place in the canon (as opposed to the "protocanonical" books contained in the Hebrew Bible). They

are also known as the Apocrypha ("hidden" or "secret" books), along with other works (3-4 Maccabees, Prayer of Manasseh, 1-2 Esdras) that are sometimes printed in Bibles but not reckoned as canonical Scripture by either Protestants or Catholics. The canons of Orthodox churches contain books over and above what appear in the Roman Catholic canon. The Greek Orthodox Church includes the books of the larger canon as well as 3 Maccabees and 2 Esdras. The Ethiopian Orthodox canon contains even more material (*1 Enoch, Jubilees, pseudo-Josephus, etc.*).

All Christians today share the same canon of twenty-seven New Testament (NT) books. The first division of the NT consists of the Gospels attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as the Acts of the Apostles (written by the author of Luke's Gospel). The thirteen epistles attributed to Paul are divided into two categories: nine written to communities (Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians) and four addressed to persons (1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon). Within these two categories, the letters are arranged by length, from longest to shortest (although Ephesians is slightly longer than Galatians). The Letter to the Hebrews comes next, probably because of its traditional connections to Paul (see Heb 13:22-25). It is followed by the seven "general" or "catholic" epistles: James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude. Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, concludes the NT canon.

THE HISTORY OF THE OT CANON

Two often repeated but very doubtful propositions have dominated discussion about the OT canon. The first proposition is that the list of books belonging to the canon of Hebrew Scriptures was fixed definitively at the Council, or Synod, of Jamnia (also called Yavneh) in the late first century ce. The second proposition is that Jews and Protestants follow the Palestinian canon, whereas Catholics (and Orthodox) follow the canon used in Alexandria. Attention to the problems associated with these two propositions can help to focus what we know (and do not know) about the history of the OT canon.

Was the canon of Hebrew Scriptures really fixed definitively at the Council of Jamnia? Jamnia is the Greek name given to the place called Yavneh-yam in Hebrew, near the Mediterranean coast in Israel, not far from present-day Tel-Aviv. After the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of its Temple in 70 ce by the Romans, Jamnia became the center of a restoration movement led by Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. This movement sought to reconstruct Judaism on the basis of biblical interpretation and the codification of traditions now that the Temple was fallen and the Jewish people no longer controlled their ancestral land. The school or movement begun by Yohanan ben Zakkai synthesized elements from the Pharisaic, scribal, and priestly movements before 70 ce and provided the foundations of what came to be known as the rabbinic movement.

The problem associated with the term "Council of Jamnia" arises from applying later Christian understandings of terms like *council* or *synod* to first-century Judaism. The Jamnia/Yavneh movement was a school active in the late first and early second centuries ce. There was no single meeting (like a church synod or council) gathering Jewish scholars from all over Palestine and beyond to make decisions affecting all Jews. From the sources available to us, what took place at Jamnia were debates over traditions, and there is no indication that the resolutions of these debates were immediately accepted or taken to be definitive for all Judaism. In fact, the movement begun by Yohanan ben Zakkai is best viewed as a minority seeking to respond creatively to one of the greatest crises in Jewish history.

One of the traditions debated at Jamnia concerned which books "made the hands unclean." The ritual uncleanness of the hands and their purification is treated in the Mishnah's tractate *Yadayim*. In *m. Yad.* 3:5 we are told as a general principle: "All the Sacred Scriptures make the hands unclean." Therefore, after touching the scrolls containing the Scriptures, one is expected to wash one's hands. The reason for this belief and this practice remains somewhat mysterious to us: Was it magical thinking, away of instilling reverence, or something else? The Mishnah paragraph goes on to narrate a rabbinic debate about whether Ecclesiastes and/or Song of Songs makes the hands unclean. Unless they do, they would not count as sacred Scripture. The paragraph recounts the opinions of various rabbis on the matter and concludes that both books make the hands unclean, thus affirming their status as Scripture.

There were other debates among rabbis about the status of five biblical books. There were doubts about Ecclesiastes, presumably because of its negativism about life, and Song of Songs, presumably because of its eroticism when not interpreted allegorically. Likewise there were objections to Ezekiel because it contradicted the Torah at some points, Proverbs because of its internal contradictions, and Esther because its Hebrew text never mentions God. These debates are noted in rabbinic sources. But there is no indication that these were widespread objections (they seem in fact to be individual or minority views) or that the Council of Jamnia met in formal session to make decisions about what belonged on the list of canonical books.

In fact, the basic canon of Hebrew Scriptures was probably fixed long before the so-called Council of Jamnia, perhaps as early as the second century bce. Parts of the Torah (the first five books, also known

as the Pentateuch) are acknowledged to be very ancient (hymns and legal materials). But the final form of the Torah most likely appeared in Israel's exile in Babylon, or shortly thereafter. Thus "the book of the Law" found in Josiah's time probably refers not to the Torah itself but perhaps to a code incorporated into the Torah in its editing process (see 2 Kgs 22:8–13). The mandate given by the Persian king to Ezra that he should govern the province "Beyond the River" according to the "wisdom of your God which is in your hand" Ezra 7:25 may refer to the Torah that was newly edited in Babylon and may indicate its function as rule or norm for life in Israel. Yet there are too many uncertainties involved with this text (the date of Ezra's mission, whether the "wisdom" indeed refers to the Torah, whether the Torah was intended to be used as the Jewish law-code under the Persians) to put it forward as real proof for the canonical status of the Torah in the fifth or fourth centuries bce.

We are on surer ground (ironically) with the prologue to the noncanonical (for Jews and Protestants) book of Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus). The book was written in Hebrew at Jerusalem around 200 bce by Jesus the Son of Sirach, son of Eleazar, of Jerusalem (50:27). It was translated into Greek by the author's grandson after he came to Egypt in 132 bce. The Greek text is part of the wider (Catholic) canon, whereas the Hebrew original is not part of the Jewish-Protestant canon. In the prologue, Sirach's grandson describes his grandfather as having devoted himself to the "reading of the law and the prophets and the other books of our fathers." This mode of speaking suggests that by the mid-second century bce there was a recognition of the classic threefold division of books and a belief that these books contained the traditional wisdom of Israel.

One aspect of the controversy that led to the Maccabean revolt in the 160s bce was the attempt to substitute for the Torah another law-code and thus bring the Jews of the Land of Israel into line with other peoples of the Seleucid Empire. According to 1 Macc 1:56–57, measures were taken to destroy copies of the Torah and to punish those who retained them. After the revolt and victory of the Maccabees, Judas is said to have "collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war that had come upon us, and they are in our possession" (2 Macc 2:14). Thus Judas Maccabeus is supposed to have continued the process of collecting records and books that Nehemiah had undertaken. Some scholars take this description to indicate that in the second century bce the Jewish people already had a clear idea of sacred Scriptures that were to be preserved in the capital city of the Jewish people.

The evidence from the Qumran community neither affirms nor denies a second-century bce date for the Hebrew canon. On the one hand, the Essenes (who founded this community probably out of disappointment at the course of the Maccabean revolt) read the books that we know as the Hebrew Scriptures. Manuscripts of all but the book of Esther have been found at Qumran. Whether its absence is due to the Essenes' objection to Esther because of its content or only because of historical accident is not clear. The Qumran community undertook regular study of the Hebrew Scriptures and made copies of them. They also produced biblical commentaries on the Prophets, designed to show how the "mysteries" of prophecies were being resolved in the life and history of their own community. They made anthologies of biblical texts on various topics. The Qumran Essenes were very much a "biblical" community, and the biblical manuscripts from Qumran have yielded valuable information about the textual history of the Hebrew Bible.

On the other hand, it is not at all clear whether and how the Qumran Essenes distinguished between canonical and noncanonical books. Besides biblical books, copies of community rules (*Manual of Discipline*, *Damascus Document*), hymnbooks (*Thanksgiving Hymns*), biblical commentaries (*Pesharim*), previously known and unknown Pseudepigrapha (*Jubilees*, *Genesis Apocryphon*), a battle plan for the eschatological conflict (*War Scroll*), and what some regard as an alternate version of the Torah in which God speaks the words of "Scripture" in the first person (*Temple Scroll*) have been found. The problem is that we do not know (nor does there seem to be any way of knowing) how the Qumran Essenes looked upon these books. Did they regard them as inferior, equal to, or even superior to what we know as canonical Scripture? Thus the Dead Sea discoveries prove only that the "canonical" books were very important to the Qumran Essenes. But they do not tell us whether, in fact, the Essenes had any idea of a "canon" of Scripture or to what books they may have accorded or denied canonical status.

Writing in the late first century ce (93–95) in response to the anti-Jewish slanders of Apion (an Alexandrian writer of the first century ce), Josephus contrasted the "myriads of inconsistent books" possessed by the Greeks with the twenty-two (and only twenty-two!) of the Hebrew Scriptures that contain the record of all time. He divided them into three categories: the five books of Moses, the thirteen books of the Prophets, and the remaining four books containing hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life. Behind the number twenty-two (instead of twenty-four) may be a tradition associated with the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet (twenty-two) and the related idea that all wisdom is present in Israel's Scriptures. To arrive at this number, Josephus (or his tradition) may have joined Ruth to Judges or Psalms, and Lamentations to Jeremiah. It is not necessary to assume that Josephus shared his rabbinic contemporaries' doubts about the canonical status of Ecclesiastes or Song of Songs.

The traditional number of twenty-four books appears in 4 Ezra 14:45–46, written in the late first or early second century ce. The text distinguishes between "the twenty-four books" that are to be made public and read by worthy and unworthy alike, and "the seventy that were written last" that are to be given to the wise among the people. This text is important because it differentiates between canonical and "apocryphal" ("hidden") books, and because it gives the traditional number of books constituting the Hebrew canon.

The twenty-four books are listed in a *baraita* (a tradition from 70–200 ce) in tractate *Baba Batra* of the Babylonian Talmud: the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy); the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, the Twelve); and the Writings (Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Chronicles). Note that in some cases (the places of Isaiah, Ruth, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, and Daniel and Esther) the order of books differs from what has become the traditional one. Since the books were written on multiple scrolls and not in one codex or leaf-book, like the Christian Bibles, the order of books was not very important.

From the Jewish sources we know that by the late first century ce there was a distinction between sacred or canonical books and other books. These books numbered twenty-four (or twenty-two) and were divided into three categories: Law, Prophets, and Writings. How these books came to be regarded as canonical among Jews is not entirely clear. This seems to have been a gradual development, perhaps beginning with the Torah (see Ezra 7:25–26), and gradually extended to the Prophets and Writings (prologue to Sirach) by or in the second century bce (2 Macc 2:14). There is little evidence and no need for an official declaration by a "council" or "synod" at Jamnia/Yavneh regarding the number and content of canonical books. The debates about the status of certain books (Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ezekiel, Proverbs, Esther) need not be taken to mean that there was widespread and serious doubt about their canonical character, at least to the extent that they were in danger of being dropped from the canon in the first or second centuries.

The second doubtful proposition dominating discussion about the OT canon assumes that Jews in Alexandria had a wider canon of sacred books (including the seven "deuterocanonicals") and that early Christians simply took over that canon. But the real story is not so simple or straightforward.

The Greek Bible has a long history. The delightful legend in the *Letter of Aristeas* and other sources that seventy(-two) translators working seventy(-two) days produced the same version conceals a complex process in which the various parts (probably the Torah first of all) of the Hebrew Bible were translated into Greek. The process probably began not long after the time of Alexander the Great and continued with various revisions (Theodotion and Aquila) into the second century ce. Although one purpose of the translation may have been to give access to the Jewish Scriptures to non-Jews, the primary beneficiaries were Greek-speaking Jews living outside the land of Israel.

The Greek Bible, or Septuagint (meaning "seventy" for the seventy[-two] translators of the Aristeas legend), was the Bible of the early Christians. While Jesus and the first Palestinian Christians probably did use the Hebrew Bible, as soon as Christianity moved beyond the land of Israel the Greek Septuagint became the church's Bible. However, there is evidence from Qumran of the use of the Greek Bible even within the boundaries of Palestine. Most NT writers quoted the Bible according to the Septuagint version. And very quickly the early Christian evangelists and apologists used the Septuagint as the quarry for their arguments to "prove" the truth of Christianity (e.g., by appealing to *parthenos* in the Septuagint of Isa 7:14 to base the virginal conception of Jesus on Scripture; see Matt 1:23).

Jews reacted to the Christian appropriation of the Septuagint in two ways. They responded defensively by arguing that the Hebrew Scriptures did not say what the Christians found in the Greek Bible (see Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*). They also revised the Greek Bible to bring it more in line with the wording and textual tradition of the Hebrew original (the revisions ascribed to Theodotion and Aquila). A second line of response was simply to ignore the Greek text altogether and thus to hand it over to the Christians. The Greek Bible was a Jewish production. It was used extensively by Hellenistic-Jewish writers such as Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus. Yet it has been kept in existence mainly by Christians. There are a few fragmentary manuscripts (some among the Dead Sea Scrolls) that can be identified as Jewish. But the vast bulk of evidence that we have for the Septuagint is Christian.

The Christian character of our evidence for the Septuagint makes talk about the wider canon of the Alexandrian Jews both circular and suspect. There is no sure way of knowing whether Alexandrian Jews had a clear idea of a biblical canon and what they may have included within it. What we do know is that some Christians (perhaps under Jewish influence) included in their canon some books beyond those customarily included in the Hebrew canon.

The evidence of the earliest full manuscripts of the Septuagint is surprisingly mixed. The fourth-century Sinai manuscript contains Tobit, Judith, 1 and 4(!) Maccabees, Wisdom, and Sirach. But it does not have Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, and is missing most of Joshua through Kings. The fourth-

century Vatican manuscript does not include the books of Maccabees. The fifth-century Alexandrian manuscript contains the traditional "wider" canon (including the seven "deuterocanonicals") but suggests that *Psalms of Solomon* belongs somehow with the Scriptures.

The early Christian manuscripts of the Greek Bible and the early patristic evidence indicate that there was some fluidity regarding the status of the "deuterocanonical" books. Although the lists of OT books drawn up by Origen (185–254 ce) and Athanasius (367 ce) correspond to the Hebrew canon, in practice both writers used the "deuterocanonical" books. In the Latin West the position of those books within the canon of Scripture seems to have been firm from Tertullian (late 2nd and early 3rd cent.) onward. Thus Jerome's insistence in the late fourth century on a return to the Hebrew canon was controversial and regarded as something of an innovation. He was first to call the deuterocanonicals the "Apocrypha." He quoted from them and praised their ethical content, but did not regard them as part of the canon and argued that they may not be used for establishing doctrine.

Augustine (early 5th cent.) emerged as the defender of the wider canon (including Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Sirach, Wisdom, and Baruch). Various local councils followed Augustine. In fact, they were simply endorsing what had become the general consensus in the West and in large parts of the East. And this remained the basic situation up to the time of the Reformation. In general, the wider canon was accepted, but it seems to have made little doctrinal or practical difference; there may also have been pockets of resistance to it. Indeed, it became customary to include in Latin Bibles some works not held to be canonical at all: Prayer of Manasseh and 3-4 Esdras.¹³

When the Reformers embraced the principle of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), they raised anew the question of what constitutes sacred Scripture. Martin Luther had a particular doctrinal objection to 1 Macc 12:45–46, which was offered as the biblical ground for prayer on behalf of the dead and was thus involved in the controversy over indulgences. Luther criticized 2 Maccabees (and Esther) as containing "too much Judaism and pagan vice." He returned to Jerome's principle of "Hebrew truth": The OT consists of the books contained in the Hebrew canon. Nevertheless, Luther included the so-called Apocrypha in an appendix to his 1534 German translation. His practice set the pattern for many Protestant Bibles through the centuries; the "Apocrypha" are not interspersed among the uncontested books but are included in a separate section by themselves.

In response to Luther and other Reformers, the Council of Trent in 1546 set aside Jerome's distinction between "Hebrew truth" and the Apocrypha. It followed the tradition of the Latin Vulgate and adopted the wider canon, including the seven controversial books. It produced the first definitive list of OT books, and its decree is followed in Bibles prepared under Catholic auspices until this day.

So the matter is more complicated than saying that Protestants follow the Palestinian canon and Catholics follow the Alexandrian canon. The evidence we have for the wider canon is Christian. Christians may have borrowed the wider canon from Jews, but we cannot be certain about that, and still less about when and where the borrowing took place. What is certain is that there was some fluidity regarding the contents of the OT in early Christianity. The two decisive moments that led up to the present division among Christians are the debate between Jerome (for "Hebrew truth") and Augustine (for the wider and by then "traditional" canon of the Latin West), and the challenge by Luther and other Reformers to the Apocrypha and the response by the Council of Trent affirming the wider canon.

THE HISTORY OF THE NT CANON

The complexity and fluidity that marked the development of the OT canon were matched in the development of the NT canon. The Bible of the earliest church, of course, was the Greek OT. It was studied carefully as a book about Jesus the Messiah, the place where the prophecies fulfilled by him could be found. It was also read publicly at church gatherings. There seems to have been no conscious movement in the early days of Christianity to produce a new collection of sacred books. Primitive Christianity focused on the person of Jesus, especially his death and resurrection. The OT supplied the necessary reading material when interpreted from the perspective of Christ and of promise and fulfillment.

By 200 ce, however, there was general acceptance in the churches of the core of what we call the NT canon, consisting of the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's epistles, 1 Peter, and 1 John. By the late fourth century the Greek and Latin churches for the most part had accepted the twenty-seven-book NT canon, used in churches ever since. What happened between the first days of the Christian movement and about 400 ce to bring about the now traditional NT canon?

The earliest NT writings—Paul's uncontested epistles (Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon) were all more or less responses to particular problems and situations in the mid-first-century churches of Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. Yet these "occasional" writings were viewed as also having lasting value and significance for other churches. One response to this evaluation

of Paul's letters was to collect them into a kind of anthology. Another response was to imitate Paul's style and language, and to bring them to bear on the problems of the late-first-century churches in the Mediterranean area. Some scholars see this response as the origin of the so-called deutero-pauline writings: Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastorals (1-2 Timothy, Titus). One theory is that Ephesians was originally prepared as the introduction to an early collection of Pauline letters and a kind of summary of Pauline thought for late-first-century Christians. At any rate, by the late first or early second century the Pauline letters—both those seven undoubtedly composed by Paul and the six others ascribed to him—had been gathered in a corpus of Pauline texts. And with the Pauline collection came problems of interpretation, as 2 Pet 3:16 indicates: "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (NRSV).

Whereas Paul wrote first to bridge the geographical distance, the evangelists wrote to bridge the chronological distance separating Jesus' death and resurrection, on the one hand, and their readers on the other. One of Mark's several purposes in writing the first Gospel around 70 ce was to gather into an order and present in written form the available traditions about Jesus. Matthew and Luke, writing around 90 ce, independently followed Mark's biographical-theological outline and supplemented it with teachings from Q (the Sayings Source) and other sources. John, probably working independently from the Synoptic evangelists, put into order the traditions about Jesus that developed in the Johannine school and presented them in the framework of Jesus' public activity ("Book of Signs" = John 1–12) and his last days ("Book of Glory" = John 13–21). So by the end of the first century there were at least four full-scale collections of traditions about Jesus. Nevertheless, though these Gospels eventually became part of the same canon of Scripture and do in fact complement one another, there is no indication that the evangelists set out to produce their Gospels as "sacred Scriptures."

The other books of the NT were also composed in the late first century (70–100 ce). Acts was Luke's second volume, the companion to his story of Jesus. The letters ascribed to Peter, James, and Jude are analogous to Paul's letters, and probably circulated on the same basis. Hebrews has a vague relation to Paul (see Heb 13:22–25) and often was taken to be part of the Pauline corpus. The Johannine epistles and Revelation had obvious connections with the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine school.

The books of the NT were all composed by the beginning of the second century ce (though some scholars today push 2 Peter and the Pastorals well into the second century). But they still had not attained the status of "canon." The Christian writers of the early second century—the so-called Apostolic Fathers—allude to and even quote these writings (especially the Gospels and the Pauline writings). However, there is not yet an indication that these books represent a true canon—that is, a list of sacred books that serves as the rule or norm of Christian faith and life.

Two historical forces facilitated the development of a NT canon. One (Marcion) sought to make the canon too small. The other (Gnosticism and Montanism) tried to make the canon too large.

Marcion, a wealthy shipowner from Sinope (a seaport of Pontus along the Black Sea), was a member of the Christian community at Rome in the mid-second century. Marcion regarded Christ as the messenger of the Supreme God of goodness. This God was to be distinguished from the inferior God of justice, the creator and God of the Jews. Therefore, Marcion rejected the entire OT. He also believed that the apostles misunderstood the teaching of Christ. Thus his NT "canon" contained only ten letters attributed to Paul (the nine to communities, plus Philemon) and the Gospel of Luke (Paul's alleged companion in Acts). Even these books had first to be shorn of what Marcion judged to be "interpolations" (e.g., 2 Thess 1:6–8; Gal 3:16–4:6) that conflicted with his reading of Paul. The effect of Marcion's narrow canon would have been the complete rejection of Christianity's past in Judaism. And that was a step the churches at Rome and elsewhere were not willing to take.

From Montanism (a late 2nd-cent. sect) and Gnosticism (a broader religious movement in the 2nd and 3rd cents.) there was pressure to extend the limits of the list of "sacred books." These were different movements and had different histories. What they had in common, however, was an emphasis on revelations from above in the context of religious experiences. Both movements attracted followings in second-century Christianity and posed a threat to the kinds of Christianity that eventually coalesced into "orthodoxy."

The Gnostics in particular produced a substantial body of writings, as the Nag Hammadi Library, discovered in 1947 in Egypt, attests. Although those documents are written in Coptic (a late dialect of Egyptian) and were copied in the late fourth century, many were composed in Greek in the second and third centuries. Some scholars even contend that parts (e.g., of the *Gospel of Thomas*) go back to the first century and antedate our canonical writings. Moreover, also in circulation were other "apocryphal" Gospels attributed to various apostles (Peter, Philip, Thomas, etc.) and groups (Ebionites, Nazarenes, Egyptians, etc.) as well as various Acts of Apostles (John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, etc.), Apocalypses (Peter, Fifth and Sixth Ezra, etc.), and Letters (to the Laodiceans, 3 Corinthians, etc.). Some of these started out as novels—innocent entertainment for an interested Christian public. But others, especially

the gnostic writings, were intended to convey the fruit of religious experience and to teach about God, the world, and the human condition.

The problem facing the churches in the late second century was clear: How does one distinguish among the various Christian writings? Which ones are to be taken seriously? Which are to be read in the churches? On which can one base Christian doctrine?

The major operative criteria seem to have been orthodoxy of content, apostolic origin, and general acceptance by the churches. The words *operative* and *seem* are important, because no one theologian systematized these criteria nor did any central institution (council, bishops, or pope) promulgate them. Rather, judging from the results, one can deduce that these three criteria guided the second- and third-century church as it moved toward a basic canon of NT books.

"Orthodoxy" meant that a book had to be consistent with the basic doctrines already recognized as normative by churches. "Apostolicity" implies at least the presumption of apostolic authorship (John, Matthew, Paul, Jude, James, Peter) or association with an apostle (Mark with Peter, Luke with Paul). "Acceptance" indicates that these books were used in the churches and cited by reliable bishops and theologians. This combination of theological and historical criteria probably governed the complicated process by which the NT canon was established in its basic outline. What was included in that outline by the late second century can be known from the so-called Muratorian Canon.

The Muratorian Canon is named after its discoverer and editor, Ludovico Muratori. In 1740 Muratori published an eighth-century Latin manuscript consisting of eighty-five lines and providing comments on books included in and excluded from the NT canon. Almost all scholars date the original composition (whether in Latin or Greek) to the late second century. Without being an authoritative or definitive document, the Muratorian Canon shows what books were accepted at Rome and what books were rejected. There are some surprising absences and the even more surprising presence of the book of Wisdom.

The first part of the Muratorian Canon is lost, but it clearly referred to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. The next items are the Gospels of Luke and John, "the Acts of All the Apostles" (perhaps a way of excluding the apocryphal acts of particular apostles), Paul's letters to the churches and to individuals, the letter of Jude, two letters of John, Wisdom ("written by Solomon's friends in his honor"), and the apocalypses of John and Peter. The list acknowledges that the *Apocalypse of Peter* is contested by some ("which some of our people will not have to be read in church"). It rejects as infected with Marcion's heresy the alleged Pauline letters to the Laodiceans (probably not the one in Col 4:16) and the Alexandrians (probably not Hebrews). It also rejects *Shepherd of Hermas* as canonical, since it was written "in the city of Rome quite recently, in our own times." It goes on to reject the writings of Arsinous, Valentinus, and so on before the manuscript breaks off. There is no mention of Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, and 3 John.

Writing in the early fourth century, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, distinguished three kinds of books vying for recognition in the churches. Twenty-two books were "universally acknowledged": the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline epistles (including Hebrews), 1 John, 1 Peter, and ("should it seem right") Revelation. The "disputed" books ("but recognized by the majority") were James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2-3 John. The third category ("spurious") included books not recognized as canonical: *Acts of Paul*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Barnabas*, *Teaching of the Apostles*, *Gospel of the Hebrews*, and ("should it seem right") Revelation.

These two lists—one from the West and the other from the East—show consensus regarding the main part of the canon and controversy regarding the edges (Hebrews, some catholic epistles, Revelation). The fourth-century Sinai manuscript contains all twenty-seven books (though in a peculiar order) plus *Barnabas* and part of *Shepherd of Hermas*. The fourth-century Vatican manuscript breaks off in the middle of Hebrews, before reaching Paul's letters to individuals and Revelation (the order of the books differed from what later became standard). The fifth-century Alexandrian manuscript included *1 Clement*, part of *2 Clement*, and (at one time) *Psalms of Solomon*. The early manuscripts confirm the evidence of the Muratorian and Eusebian lists that there was general agreement about most of the books but persistent "fuzziness" about the limits of the canon and the status of the books in the canon. The distinguished theologians of the fourth and early fifth centuries did much to clear up that "fuzziness."

In his festal letter of Easter 367 ce, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, listed the twenty-seven books that now make up our canon: four Gospels, Acts, seven catholic epistles, fourteen Pauline epistles (including Hebrews), and Revelation. He called them the "springs of salvation" (see Isa 12:3) and affirmed that "in these alone is the teaching of true religion proclaimed as good news; let no one add to these or take anything from them." Jerome included the same books on his list but elsewhere acknowledged that the "custom of the Latins" does not accept Hebrews, and the "churches of the Greeks" do not accept John's Apocalypse. Likewise, Augustine listed the same twenty-seven books but recognized that some books

had not been accepted by all the churches. So by the late fourth and early fifth centuries there was growing consensus about the twenty-seven books as constituting the NT canon. Yet there was no official church pronouncement about the canon and no firm agreement at all about the order of books (which apparently was not regarded as important).

The Third Council of Carthage (397 ce), following the Council of Hippo (393 ce), resolved that nothing should be read in church under the name of the divine Scriptures except the canonical writings. The NT books are listed as follows: Gospels, Acts, thirteen Pauline epistles, Hebrews, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, James, Jude, and John's Apocalypse. However, the best manuscripts of Pope Innocent I's list (405 ce) seem to omit Hebrews.

Despite some persistent "fuzziness" about the edges of the canon (continuing up to this day in Eastern churches), it is fair to say that shortly after 400 ce the twenty-seven books of our present NT canon were recognized as sacred writings that can serve as the rule or norm of Christian faith and life.

The most important subsequent challenge to that consensus came from Martin Luther in the early sixteenth century. Luther had theological problems with four books: Hebrews, because it teaches no repentance for sinners after baptism; James, because it is an epistle of "straw"; Jude, because (according to Luther) it depends on 2 Peter and quotes apocryphal OT writings; and Revelation, because it lacked the proper prophetic and apostolic dimensions. Luther placed these four books at the end of his German translation of the NT, though he did not remove them from the Bible.

Underlying Luther's objections to these books was the theological principle that biblical books should be evaluated according to their success in "promoting" (*treiben* ["drive"] in German) Christ. The books that most successfully promote Christ (in Luther's opinion) are John's Gospel, Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans, and 1 Peter (and perhaps also Ephesians and 1 John). Without denying the now traditional twenty-seven-book canon, Luther raised the issue of "the canon within the canon"; that is, some books are more important and thus more "canonical" because of their great theological value in promoting Christ.

At its fourth session (April 1546) the Council of Trent listed the twenty-seven "received" books of the NT. There was some debate about recognizing the historical distinction between the "acknowledged" and the "disputed" books, but not much came of this. What is important about the Council of Trent's action was that for the first time the content of the Bible was made an article of faith and confirmed with an anathema: "If anyone does not receive these books in their entirety, with all their parts ... as sacred and canonical, and knowingly and willingly rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema."

The traditional canon of twenty-seven NT books was confirmed also in several Protestant confessions of faith: the French Confession of Faith (1559), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Thirty-Nine Articles issued by the Church of England (1563), and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). Thus the general agreement about the NT canon today among Catholics and Protestants.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

What we can and cannot know about the history of the canon of Scripture is relatively clear. The result is a general agreement among the Christian churches as to what constitutes sacred Scripture (apart from the question of the deuterocanonicals/Apocrypha). Nevertheless, associated with that history and consensus are some interesting theological problems.

Terminology. For Jews the Scriptures are "Tanakh" (*Tôrâ, Nēbî`îm, Kētûbîm*), the Hebrew acronym for the three main divisions of books. For English-speaking Jews, they are the "Hebrew Scriptures" or the "Jewish Scriptures."

The Christian Bible, however, is divided into two major parts, traditionally called the OT and the NT. In recent years biblical scholars, theologians, and ecumenists have questioned the value and accuracy of these traditional titles. To many "modern" people the adjective *old* can carry with it a pejorative connotation—something no longer useful and, therefore, to be thrown out or disregarded, in favor of what is more useful and valuable (the "new"). The word *testament* is used in English now mainly in legal contexts—one's last will and testament. Another possible translation of the Greek noun διαθήκη *diathēkē*, besides "testament," is "covenant," which is by far a more central biblical concept (though not nearly as central as biblical theologians of the past have made it). But with Old and New Covenants comes the problem of the opposition between "old" and "new" as well as the failure to recognize that the Bible speaks of multiple covenants, or at least multiple renewals, of the one covenant. Adding to the confusion are the different values associated with "old" and "new." In antiquity, the "old" was good and the "new" had to prove its value. Today the "old" is obsolete and, therefore, disposable, whereas the "new" is at least advertised (therefore, widely accepted) as superior and destined to replace the "old."

This controversy about labeling the two parts of the Christian Bible is more than a debate about words. It really concerns Christian attitudes toward the legacy of Israel: Is the OT to be jettisoned (as Marcion suggested), or to be kept as an essential part of Christian faith? If it is to be kept, how should it be used—as religious texts to be taken seriously in their own right, as preparation for the gospel, or as the necessary presupposition for understanding the NT?

Christians have proposed some substitute titles for OT and NT: Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, Jewish and Christian Scriptures, and First and Second/Other Testaments. These proposals, however, bear their own burdens. The terms *Hebrew* and *Jewish* can imply that Christians have ceded these books back to Jews, thus reviving Marcion's program. The Catholic canon contains some OT books surely composed in Greek (Wisdom, 2 Maccabees) and others whose only extant or best preserved versions are in Greek (1 Maccabees, Sirach, Judith, Tobit, Baruch). And "First" versus "Second" or "Other" is really a bland version of "Old" and "New," and carries with it the same basic set of problems. So until a more suitable substitute emerges, we will probably continue to talk about the OT and the NT. Nevertheless, we now recognize better the problematic nature of those labels.

The Canonical Text. The Council of Trent's decree about the canon of Scripture took as its criterion (at least in content) the Latin Vulgate. What was canonical in the Vulgate (the "common" Latin version) counted as Scripture. This meant that the seven deuterocanonical/apocryphal books were reckoned to be part of the canon for Catholics. Protestants followed Luther's lead in denying to these writings canonical status, in part at least because they were not in the Hebrew text. This famous controversy from the sixteenth century raises the prior question: Which text is the canonical one?

Both Catholics and Protestants today take as their norm the "original" Hebrew and Greek texts. But which is the original text? Textual critics have developed for both Testaments theories of local text-types: Palestinian, Samaritan, and Babylonian families for the Hebrew OT; and Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine families for the Greek NT. These local groupings are much debated today. The point here is, however, that the Hebrew and Greek textual traditions are far from uniform in every respect.

Some parts of the Bible are now generally acknowledged *not* to have been originally part of the books with which they have been transmitted. Two well-known examples are the passage about the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11) and the compendium of resurrection appearances (Mark 16:9–20). Moreover, many books are acknowledged *not* to have been written by their traditional authors: Deuteronomy (by Moses), the Psalms (by David), James and Jude (by the Lord's brothers), the later "Pauline" writings, and so forth. One factor toward acceptance of these writings into the canon may well have been their traditional ascriptions. Do they, therefore, remain in the canon under false pretenses?

Different text-types, later additions to books, and the phenomenon of pseudepigraphy (whereby books are attributed to famous people who didn't actually write them) raise interesting questions in connection with the canon of Scripture. However, the fundamental principle in these debates is that canonicity pertains to the document as the document of the faith-community. It is not tied to a particular text-type or to one edition of the work or to the accuracy of what is said about its original circumstances. Most biblical scholars today would agree that textual criticism approaches (but may never reach) the original texts (also called "autographs"—written by the first author), that the history of transmission makes John 7:53–8:11 and Mark 16:9–20 canonical (but not Johannine or Markan), and that the biblical Pseudepigrapha are fully canonical (though perhaps not composed by their alleged authors). There is no need for an obsessive or overly scrupulous attitude toward determining the exact text of the canonical Scriptures. The history of the canon indicates that a certain "fuzziness" has always been part of the process.

The Value of the Deuterocanonals/Apocrypha. The seven additional books included in the Catholic OT are not very controversial today. They are customarily read in Catholic churches as Scripture but receive no special prominence. When included in Bibles produced under Protestant auspices they generally appear in a special section ("The Apocrypha"). Whether readers wish to regard them as canonical depends largely on personal decision and theological tradition. The inclusion of these books in *The New Interpreter's Bible* is indicative of the current inclusive attitude (as opposed to the exclusiveness of thirty or forty years ago).

The question remains, however: Do these books make a difference? Tobit and Judith are now understood as short stories or novellas (like Jonah and Esther). They are far more important as sources for post-exilic Jewish piety than as historical documents. Although hardly histories in the modern scientific sense, 1 and 2 Maccabees do supply a great deal of information about Palestinian Judaism in the second century bce. Luther's objection to the alleged teaching about prayers for the dead in 2 Macc 12:44–45 no longer stirs much controversy. The text is regarded as the author's own peculiar interpretation of Judas Maccabeus's decision to send a sin-offering to the Jerusalem Temple on behalf of himself and his surviving colleagues in the light of the alleged idolatry committed by Jewish soldiers who fell in battle (see 2 Macc 12:39–43).

The book of Baruch is a kind of pastiche of words and phrases from the Hebrew Bible (especially Daniel 9, Job 28, and Isaiah 40–66). It provides reflections on the theological significance of Israel's exile in the sixth century bce and the subsequent restoration to the land of Israel. The book of Sirach adds greatly (fifty-one chaps.) to the corpus of Wisdom literature in the Bible. Not all of its contributions, however, are welcome to readers today (especially its misogynistic statements, as in 42:9–14).

The book of Wisdom is probably the most significant among the seven additional books. Written in Greek at Alexandria in the first century bce in Solomon's persona, Wisdom blends the religious traditions of the Hebrew Bible with the language and conceptuality of Greek philosophy; for example, in talking about immortal (3:1–12) and even pre-existent souls (8:19–20), the cardinal virtues (8:7), the perishable body weighing down the soul (9:15), and divine providence (14:3). Moreover, Wisdom's depictions of the Suffering Righteous person (1:16–3:12), the pre-existent figure of Wisdom (7:22–30), and Wisdom's activity throughout the history of Israel (as in the exodus, according to 18:14–19) possess great christological significance. The presence of the book of Wisdom in the canon makes the Catholic Bible different from the Protestant Bible. Likewise, the presence of the NT books makes the Christian Bible different from the Jewish Bible. These differences need not be exaggerated or developed into matter for polemics (as they have been in the past). Yet they should be acknowledged.

Open or Closed? The longstanding debate between Catholics and Protestants about the limits of the OT canon raises a related question: May the churches add or subtract books from the canon of Scripture? The answer is that they may but probably will not and should not do so.

The matter of adding books to the canon is sometimes brought up with regard to a modern spiritual classic such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." The obvious objection is that, however inspiring and deeply theological King's letter may be, it has not been used and accepted by the churches for almost two thousand years, as the canonical books have been.

Perhaps the most intriguing case involves the discovery of ancient books. In the late 1940s there were two sensational discoveries of manuscripts roughly contemporary with the NT: the Jewish manuscripts that constitute the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the gnostic Christian codices from Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Some scholars argue that the *Gospel of Thomas*, discovered at Nag Hammadi, contains forms of Jesus' sayings that are older and more original than their parallels in the canonical Gospels. Assuming that these scholars are correct (and there is much doubt about that), should we make the *Gospel of Thomas* part of the church's canon? Or suppose that the hypothetical collection of sayings known as Q (from the German *Quelle*, meaning "source") and used independently by Matthew and Luke in their editions of Mark were to be discovered whole and entire. Would Q be part of the canon? Or what if archaeologists were to discover Paul's "previous letter" (1 Cor 5:9) or his mysterious Letter to the Laodiceans (Col 4:16)? Would these documents become Scripture?

The basic principle in dealing with these ancient books would be the same as that applied in determining the case of modern works: the use and acceptance of these books within the churches. Before a council or a world-church body or a pope could decree these ancient but lost books to be canonical, there would have to develop some pattern of use and acceptance on the local level leading to a broad consensus. In other words, such books would have to recapitulate the process that the undoubtedly canonical books had already passed through. However, this is very unlikely to happen, precisely because the NT books of the canon share a common 1,600-year history apart from the other books. The more likely scenario is that Q or the "previous letter" or the Letter to the Laodiceans would be accepted not as canonical but rather as valuable witness to the early church's faith (such as *Didache*, *1 Clement*, the letters of Ignatius, and so forth).

There have also been occasional proposals to omit books from the canon. Although he never omitted them, Luther did express doubts about the theological value of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. More daring modern theologians have come forward with proposals toward streamlining the canon in the alleged interests of ecumenism, or getting rid of the hierarchical-patriarchal thinking represented by the Pastorals, or doing away with the so-called "anti-Jewish" passages in John's Gospel, or purging the canon of the wild apocalypticism in Revelation. Such extreme proposals are worth considering, precisely because they force us to rethink the content of the biblical books and decide whether the complaints are justified. But it remains highly unlikely that anything will come of them, precisely because of the 1,600-year tradition of use and acceptance.

Canon Within the Canon. Although adding to or subtracting from the canon of Scripture seems unlikely and unwise, the churches have always placed more emphasis on some books than on others. There is a significant amount of theological diversity within the canon in both the OT (compare Ecclesiastes and Daniel on life after death) and the NT (compare Paul and James on faith and works). Indeed, there is so much diversity that according to some the canon has been the principle of disunity, not of unity, in the churches. One can analyze the history of the church by looking at what books exercised the predominant influence in various traditions: Matthew and the Pastorals among Roman

Catholics, Paul's letters (especially Galatians and Romans) among Protestants, the Johannine writings for the Eastern Orthodox, the early chapters of Acts for sectarians, and so forth. It is fair to say that every Christian group takes its stand on certain canonical books and ignores others.

Luther made this issue explicit by contending that some books (John, Galatians, Romans, 1 Peter) best promote Christ, and other books (Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation) are theologically suspect or less useful. Luther's forthrightness on this matter has led to a debate about the propriety of acknowledging a "canon within the canon"; that is, whether there is a small core of allegedly superior books within the entire collection of canonical books.

There is a positive value to recognizing and admitting that various Christian groups have paid more attention to some biblical books than others. Such an exercise can contribute greatly to a kind of Christian unity, for one group can see that the other group also bases itself on the Scriptures. In this way the canon—despite, indeed because of, all its diversity—can help toward Christian unity.

The problem comes with raising the "canon within the canon" to the level of a theological principle. Any list of "core" books is bound to be arbitrary and unbalanced. We might find ourselves repeating what Marcion tried to do by reducing the Scriptures to some Pauline letters and an expurgated version of Luke's Gospel. Even Luther's list, despite its theological sophistication, has the effect of muting certain voices within the canon. Should the church ignore the plea for social justice and practical Christianity found in the letter of James? Should Revelation's reminder of the transitory character of earthly empires and its hope for a heavenly kingdom be kept from Christian people? Should the early church's struggle to develop adequate and effective social structures that is witnessed in the Pastorals be pushed aside?

There is much in the Bible that reflects the situation of a small group of people in the ancient Near East (Israel) or the position of a religious minority movement in the Greco-Roman world (the early church). There are materials (for example, the NT "household codes"—e.g., Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; and 1 Pet 2:13–3:12) that seem quaint or shocking or even monstrous to Westerners today. Yet these same texts can offer hope and encouragement and direction to some Christians (as in China) who find themselves in analogous minority settings.

The debate about the canon within the canon is stimulating intellectually and challenging theologically. But elevating it to a theological principle runs the risks of theological arbitrariness and of silencing voices that the church needs to hear.

Canon and Church. In matters of both history and theology there is an inextricable connection between the canon of Scripture and the church. The nature of this connection has in the past been the topic for debate and polemic. Catholics have often appealed to the gradual development of the biblical canon to show that the Bible is the church's book, since the individual books grew out of the church's experience and were declared canonical by the church. In this view the canon is the "authoritative collection of books." Protestants have argued that the books of the Bible provide the rule by which church life is to be guided and measured in all ages. The (divine) authority resides in the books, which proved themselves to be inspired and, therefore, authoritative. Thus the canon is the "collection of authoritative books."

These traditional formulations of the issue of canon and church each contain some truth: The canon of Scripture is the church's book, and the canon functions as the norm of church life. The problem comes when one loses sight of the symbiotic relationship between canon and faith community. Christianity is not really a "religion of the book," nor should it make the Bible into an icon (something to be admired but never touched). Just as in its historical development the canon of Scripture demanded a faith-community, so also in church life today the canon ought to actualize and guide the faith-community.

Vatican II's Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*) insisted that "Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others." This is a sound and balanced Catholic approach to a problem that every church faces in some form, though it leaves unresolved exactly how disputes are to be adjudicated. The conciliar statement is preceded by what surely must be applauded as an ecumenical breakthrough between Catholics and Protestants: "[The] Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it."

Criticism of the Canon. The discovery of early Christian writings outside the canon of Scripture—the Nag Hammadi documents and the so-called NT Apocrypha—has led in some quarters to the questioning of the canon itself. Some of these documents may be older than books contained in the canon, or at least they may contain traditions that are more primitive and, therefore, more authentic than what appears in the canon. Moreover, the church's canon represents a narrow selection of early Christian writings. The early Christian movement was far more diverse and even exotic than the traditional canon allows. The canon was shaped by representatives of one kind of Christianity and has served as an instrument of censorship and repression for 1,600 years—so some say.

One may agree or disagree with these criticisms on historical grounds. The evidence is ambiguous, with serious scholars on either side. In dealing with them on a theological level, however, it first is necessary to distinguish between study of the NT as a canonical document (by and for the faith-community) and research on Christian origins. The latter pursuit involves all the available resources, no matter what their origin or theological orthodoxy. The former pursuit focuses on those books that the faith-community has singled out as expressing accurately and properly what it believes. One cannot divorce history and theology entirely, of course. But Christian origins and NT study are not precisely the same.

Early Christianity may well have been even more diverse than its scriptural canon indicates. The problem for us today is that we have no way to decide whether the piety represented in the Nag Hammadi documents or the NT Apocrypha was a lunatic fringe or a serious contender to what emerged as the mainstream of "orthodoxy." So the attempt to tie the NT canon to one movement among many stands or falls with the same historical undertaking. Given the literary and theological diversity with the canon, however, it is hard to imagine those twenty-seven books as expressing the ideology and political skill of one party among early Christians.

Canonical Criticism. One approach to Scripture that is prominent in biblical scholarship today is called canonical criticism. As formulated by Brevard Childs, it is more a theological program than an exegetical method. The first task of the canonical critic is to describe the theological shape of the final canonical form of the biblical book. Thus the focus is on the book itself, not (at least primarily) on its pre-history or sources or parallels. The second task is to explore the theological significance of the canonical text for the community of faith not only in the past but also in the present and future. This step involves the history of interpretation as well as more obvious modes of actualization in preaching and teaching.

One does not have to subscribe entirely to Childs's program or follow him in all its details to recognize the merits of his proposal. Its focus on the present canonical text is sound on both literary and theological grounds. Its interest in the Bible as a collection of religious books is only appropriate to a work whose central theme is God's relationship to a people and, through Christ, to all peoples. Objections to Childs's program concern its lack of interest in historical issues and its fluid and ambiguous use of the word *canonical*.

Whatever the merit of the objections (and they are serious), the program of canonical criticism describes what Christian preachers and teachers do. Directed by the tradition of faith, they come to the canon of Scripture expecting to find in it guidance for their lives. They recognize the need first of all to understand the Scriptures on their own terms—with respect for their language, modes of communication, and content. Then reflecting on how the Scriptures have been used within the faith-community (Jewish and Christian), they try to discern what the text might be saying to their own social and/or personal situation. They seek to discover analogies between the experiences of the ancient faith community and those of faithful people today. They seek to show that the canonical Scriptures can and do illumine the lives even of those who live in different times and places. Born of preaching, canonical criticism is a preacher's method.

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