THE FORMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN BIBLICAL CANON

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Scripture and Canon

I. The Notion of Scripture

Among the world's great religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have defined themselves in terms of a sacred written text. The development of a collection of scriptures in these traditions appears to have come from a common belief in the notion of a "heavenly book" that contains both divine knowledge and decrees from God. This heavenly book generally contains wisdom, destinies (or laws), a book of works, and a book of life.[1] W. Graham has argued that this notion goes back to ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, where the heavenly book indicated not only the future plans of God but also the destinies of human beings. An example of this can be found in Ps 139:15–16, which says,

> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. *In your book* were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. (NRSV, italics added)

This notion is also carried on in the NT in Rev 5:1, 3 and in the description of the opening of that book in 6:1–17 and 8:1–10:11. In Rev 20 there are books opened before the great white throne of God in heaven and "another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books, . . . and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:12, 15, NRSV). In Exod 32:33 the Lord says that those who have sinned will be blotted out of the Lord's

[1]William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 49–50.

book, and the same notion is carried on in Phil 4:3 in which Paul speaks of Clement and the rest of his colleagues in ministry "whose names are in the book of life."

Graham claims that this idea gave rise to the concept in both Judaism and early Christianity that the repository of divine knowledge and heavenly decrees is a divine book that is symbolized in written scriptures.[2] He also cites an example from the Qur'an that speaks of a divine book of destinies. Surah 57.22 reads: "No misfortune strikes on earth or in yourselves without its being [written] in a Book before we cause it to be. Truly, that is easy for God."[3] Graham goes on to argue that for Judaism, long before the notion of a biblical canon, the Torah was believed to have come directly from God. Moses proclaimed the words and ordinances of God (Exod 24:3) and was commissioned by God to write them (Exod 34:4, 27). It was believed that God was the writer of the *Decalogue,* or Ten Commandments (Exod 34:1; Deut 4:13; 10:4), and according to Graham this gave rise to the notion that the law of God was written down in the form of scripture and played a significant role in the development of the idea of a revealed and authoritative scripture.[4]

For both Judaism and Christianity the final authority for faith is, of course, God, but especially in the later stages of OT Judaism the belief arose that the revelation and will of God were disclosed not only in mighty acts through which Yahweh invades history, that is, in the exodus, but also in written materials. For example, in the Pentateuch, the writing down of something was an important mark of revelation (Exod 24:12; 31:8; 32:15, 32; 34:1; Deut 4:13; 8:10). Just as Moses wrote down the commandments of the Lord in Exod 24:4; 34:27, so also does Joshua in Josh 24:26 and Samuel in 1 Sam 10:25. In the book of Deuteronomy, which was probably written toward the end of the OT era, the king is called upon to write down for himself a copy of the law of God, which he will read all the days of his life in order to recall God's statutes and to remember to be humble in his dealings with his people (Deut 17:18–20). The people were called upon to write the words of God on their doorposts (6:9; 11:20). By way of contrast, the Gospels of the NT do not indicate that Jesus writes anything down or commands others to write anything down.[5] The only NT exception is found in the book of Revelation, where Jesus commands the angels of the churches to put his message in written form (Rev 2:1–3:14).[6]

[2]Ibid., 50–51.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid., 51–52.
[5]The secondary text of John 7:53–8:11, even if genuine, would hardly qualify as a written document.
[6]Gottlob Schrenk, "γράφω," *TDNT,* 1.745.

James Barr has observed that in the OT "the writers do not reckon with a written 'scripture' as a totally dominant, known and acknowledged factor and force in the life of Israel."[7] He goes on to argue that even the prophets who say, "Thus says the Lord," are not speaking on the basis of an already existing text. Almost nothing in the OT suggests that there were sacred scriptures to turn to when guidance was needed.[8] Neither David, Solomon, nor Hezekiah had any focus or emphasis on sacred books current and normative in the life of Israel. Rather, as Barr has pointed out, the OT individuals related to God more through persons (priests, prophets) and institutions (tabernacle, temple) than through sacred writings.[9] This is not to suggest that there were no authoritative traditions in the life of the ancient Jewish people. No religious community exists without canon (or rule)—however it is expressed (scriptures, creeds, liturgies, traditions, etc.)—and by its nature canon must adapt to new circumstances of life to remain canonical.[10]

At what point was the religion of Israel governed by or built upon the Law? It was probably not much before the reforms of Josiah (621 BCE) but certainly no later than the reforms of Ezra (Neh 8:1–8; 9:1–3). The Deuteronomic movement in Israel in the eighth to the seventh centuries BCE no doubt had a major role in effecting that change. See, for example, the admonition to obey the commandments of Yahweh and not to add to them nor take away from them (Deut 4:2). At any rate, when that which was written down in Israel later began to be translated and explained to the people as having normative value in the life of their community (Neh 8:8–11), the notion of scripture was clearly present in Judaism.

Judaism's belief that the revelation and will of God had been preserved in written documents was also shared by the earliest Christian community. The early church, by and large, believed that God had acted decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and that all of this had been *foretold* in the normative literature of Judaism—the Hebrew scriptures. It also held that the proclamation of and about Jesus was passed on faithfully through the oral tradition of the church, much of which was written down and *later* (ca. 170 CE) became widely recognized as normative literature in many of the churches. Some of the NT writings began around this time to function as sacred scripture in large segments of the church. The recognition of the NT writings as scripture

[7]Barr, *Scripture,* 5.

[8]Many of the Psalms, especially 19, 119, which focus on the meditation on the word, law, precepts, and statutes of God, are almost certainly pre-exilic in origin, but most of these quite possibly do not date before the time of Josiah's finding of the book of the Law (probably Deut) ca. 622–621 BCE (cf. 2 Kgs 18:20a with 22:3–13).

[9]Barr, *Scripture,* 5.

[10]For a further development of this thought, see Sanders, *Torah and Canon.*

can only be described as a growing process that was not unanimously or simultaneously acknowledged in the ancient churches. The Christian books that eventually received this normative status were not the same for all the churches, and even when there was general agreement the authority of the literature was not acknowledged at the same time by every church. This much can be seen in the differences in the "lists" of early Christian literature recommended or tabulated for church use in the fourth century and later.[11]

Just how soon the *recognition* of the inspiration and authority of the NT literature—that is, the recognition of its scriptural status—took place is not possible to date with any precision, but it seems certain that with one possible exception no part of that body of literature was so recognized in the first century. Only the book of Revelation (ca. 90–95) claims for itself such a lofty position that would come close to the notion of inspiration and scripture (Rev 1:3, 10–11; 22:7–9, 18–19; cf. Deut 4:2). Indeed, Krister Stendahl has observed that this is the only book in the NT that claims to be a revelation from God.[12] Along with that, the author of 2 Pet 3:15–16 (written ca. 120–150 CE and possibly as late as 180 CE) apparently recognized Paul's letters as "scripture"; however, nowhere does Paul or any other author of the NT claim this special recognition for his own writings. Even the Gospels do not in themselves claim final authority. Divine authority appears to be reserved for Jesus alone (Matt 28:19–20), even though the many OT citations and allusions in the Gospels attest to the authoritative status of the OT in the life and ministry of the early Christian communities.

Although Paul was mindful that he was communicating the authoritative words of Jesus on occasion (1 Cor 7:10–11; 9:14; 11:23ff.), he apparently was unaware of the divinely inspired status of his own advice (1 Cor 7:12, 25). He never wrote as if he himself were setting forth scripture, although he did acknowledge the superior authority of the words of Jesus in settling matters of Christian ethics. He likewise emphasized his own apostolic authority in resolving disputes in the churches he founded (e.g., 1 Cor 4:14–5:5; 7:12ff.; 2 Cor 13:10). Although Paul is the first NT writer to make a qualified claim to being inspired by the Spirit in regard to what he said, he still does not write "scripturally," that is, consciously aware that he is writing from a divinely inspired and therefore scripturally authoritative perspective. Even though his counsel to the Christians at Corinth about the marital status of a woman whose

[11]See ch. 8, which compares and contrasts several important lists of NT books.

[12]Krister Stendahl, "The Apocalypse of John and the Epistle of Paul in the Muratorian Fragment," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays In Honor of Otto A. Piper* (ed. W. Klassen and G. T. Snyder; New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 240.

husband has died is joined by the words, "And I think that I too have the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 7:40, NRSV), this is a far cry from an acknowledgment by Paul of the scriptural status of his letter to the Corinthian community. This passage certainly suggests Paul's awareness that he is speaking by the power of the Spirit and that he is thereby giving what he considers to be the will of God in the matter, but it is still a step removed from saying that he is consciously writing scripture.

What makes it difficult to believe that the Gospels were viewed as scripture from the first is the liberty that the evangelists took in changing their sources. Matthew and Luke evidently felt free to adapt, change, and smooth out the Gospel of Mark[13] as well as a "Q" source.[14] At any rate, the kind of warning given in Revelation (22:18–19) was certainly not heeded in reference to Mark. Also, as late as the last half of the second century, Tatian, who had a special interest in the Gospels and who was evidently concerned with the differences between them, showed a profound willingness to change them in order to set forth a unified gospel called the *Diatessaron*. Would he have taken such liberties with the Gospels if he had considered them to be sacred scripture and therefore inviolable? L. G. Patterson[15] contends that even at the end of the second century Christian writings were not yet *generally* called "covenant" or "scriptures" either.[16] Although Christian writings existed almost from the beginning of the church,[17] it did not seem to have any interest in writing new scriptures. Von Campenhausen is right when he claims that early Christianity was not a "religion of the Book," but rather "the religion of the Spirit and the living Christ."[18] The church had an oral tradition concerning Jesus that was taught and proclaimed in the early communities of faith (Acts 2:42; 4:33; 6:4) alongside the scriptures of Judaism (the OT[19] and several noncanonical sources and probably the oral traditions

[13] See, for example, how both Matt and Luke drop the first part of Mark's quotation, which was erroneously attributed to Isaiah but which originated with Mal 3:1. See Mark 1:2 and compare with Matt 3:3 and Luke 3:4. The subject changes are also quite striking, for example, compare Matt 3:16 to Mark 1:10, and Matt 14:1 to Mark 6:14 where Matt smoothes out the more embarrassing title of Antipas.

[14] "Q" is an abbreviation for the German word "Quelle," meaning "source." This is a convenient way to designate a source containing sayings of Jesus common to both Matt and Luke and not found in Mark, which may also have been partially oral in form.

[15] L. G. Patterson, "Irenaeus and the Valentinians: The Emergence of a Christian Scripture," *Studia Patristica* 14 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989).

[16] Irenaeus does, of course, refer to "both of the covenants" in which the righteousness of God is displayed. See *Adv. Haer.* 4.28.1–2 cited in ch. 1.

[17] For example, Q, but see also Luke 1:1–4.

[18] Von Campenhausen, *Formation,* 62–63. The same could be argued for the ancient Jewish community of faith as Barr, *Scripture,* 2–7, has shown.

[19] Because the term "Old Testament" is not found in the Christian community until the end of the second century CE in the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian, it is premature to speak thusly of the Jewish scriptures that only later received that designation in the church. As will be stated more clearly in a following discussion, even the precise limits of the later designated "Old Testament" scriptures were not clear for a considerable time after the "apostolic" era had ended. However, because of the clumsiness of finding any precise designation for these scriptures (even "Hebrew Scriptures" is not precise), "Old Testament" or "OT" will be used throughout this study with the understanding that it will often be used as a term "projected" backwards on the Jewish Scriptures.

of Judaism, some of which were later codified in the Mishnah). They searched these diligently in order to find witness (prophetic announcement) to the event of Jesus that they had experienced.[20]

The basic properties of "scriptures," both for ancient Judaism and Christianity, appear to have been fourfold. According to Farley, scripture was: "(1) a written collection, (2) of divine origin (from Yahweh), (3) communicating his will and truth to his covenant people, (4) to function as an enduring source of regulations for the corporate and individual life of the people."[21] Bentley Layton contends that when a particular writing was recognized by a group of Christians to contain inspired authority then it was elevated to the status of scripture. He correctly observes the limited agreement in the early church on such matters and finds only sporadic affirmation of Christian documents in the first three centuries. He defines "scripture" as "a body of written religious literature that members of a religious group consider authoritative in matters such as belief, conduct, rhetoric, or the running of practical affairs."[22] Layton's understanding of "canon" is not clear, however, and he seems to suggest the presence of several early collections of closed canons of Christian literature before the year 200 CE.[23] But there is no evidence for the existence of such scripture canons at that time. The only biblical canon that existed—if any existed at all during that time—was in Judaism. For example, as we will show in chapters 5 and 6, only Melito's canon of OT scriptures, which was derived from contact with the Jews in a visit to Palestine, is known in the church from the end of the second century. Only Irenaeus' fourfold gospel canon of the NT existed at that time. Whether Marcion (ca. 140) had a biblical canon as such is highly debatable, as we will show in chapter 6.

The above descriptions of "scripture" are, however, only a part of an overall understanding of the matter for the early church. Unlike Judaism, early Christianity's view of scripture was also eschatological at its core—that is, there was the belief that the scriptures had their primary

[20] A. R. C. Leaney, "Theophany, Resurrection and History," *StEv* 103.5.112, has rightly observed that the early Christians were concerned to find a scripture "to fit a fact, and were far from inventing a fact to fit the Scripture."

[21] Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 58. See also Kelsey, *Uses,* 89–94.

[22] Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987) xvii.

[23] Ibid., xix–xxi.

fulfillment in Jesus (e.g., Matt 2:5, 17, 23; 3:3; 4:14; Mark 14:49; 15:28; Luke 4:21; Acts 1:16; John 17:12; 19:24, 28). Paul adds that this fulfillment is also found in the Christian community (see Rom 4:23; 15:4; 16:26; 1 Cor 9:10; 10:11). The church still held that the OT scriptures themselves were of unimpeachable authority (John 10:35; Matt 5:18), but Jesus the Christ was considered the primary norm for understanding and using the OT scriptures.[24] Schrenk notes that for primitive Christianity scripture is "the authoritative declaration of the divine will," but that it was "not valid apart from the 'I say unto you' " of Jesus—that is, its christological fulfillment.[25] Childs is correct when he writes,

> the Christian understanding of canon functions theologically in a very different way from Judaism. Although the church adopted from the synagogue a concept of scripture as an authoritative collection of sacred writings, its basic stance toward its canon was shaped by christology . . . the Old Testament functioned as Christian scripture because it bore witness to Christ. The scriptures of the Old and New Testament were authoritative in so far as they pointed to God's redemptive intervention for the world in Jesus Christ.[26]

It is important to observe that the author of Acts, possibly writing ca. 90–100 CE, but probably 66–70 CE, relates that the community life of the early church was focused on "the apostles' teaching" and *not* on the OT scriptures. None of its regular daily activities appear to have involved such a study (Acts 2:46–47). Although the book of Acts is sprinkled throughout with OT references, which were employed as sacred texts for preaching about Jesus (e.g., 2:17–21, 25–28, 34, 35; 4:25–26; 8:32–33, passim), one does not find any particular devotion to OT study emphasized or commanded in most of the NT. The exceptions are found in the later post-Pauline texts of 2 Tim 2:15 and 3:14–15.

Although there is no question that the OT scriptures (the limits of which were not yet precisely defined in the time of Jesus) were viewed as authoritative in the early Christian churches (e.g., Matt 21:42; 22:29; 26:56; Luke 24:32, 44; John 5:39; 1 Cor 15:3ff.), the matter of when the NT literature began to be given the same status as the OT writings in the ancient churches is difficult to determine. This will be the primary focus in chapter 6. However, it can be said in advance that when the early churches began to place Christian writings alongside the OT scriptures as authoritative documents for the church and used them in Christian worship, the transition to their recognition as sacred scripture had begun.

Before examining the notion of canon in the early Christian community, the difficulty of finding current sources that define "scripture"

[24] See especially 2 Cor 3:12–16.

[25] Schrenk, "γράφω," *TDNT,* 1.760. See also Barr, *Scripture,* 14–15, and Kümmel, *Introduction,* 335.

[26] Childs, *Biblical Theology,* 64.

should be underscored. There is no end of definitions of canon in contemporary writing and perhaps what is meant by scripture is covered by the notion of canon. That which is written down and becomes normative for a religious community is both scripture and canon. Although both terms can be interchangeable, they can also be distinguishable.

II. The Notion of Canon

The meaning of "canon" is not synonymous with that of "scripture," even though there is considerable overlap. Scripture has to do with the divine status of a written document that is authoritative in the life of a community of faith. Canon, in the general sense that we intend here, denotes a fixed standard or collection of writings that defines the faith and identity of a particular religious community. In this sense, all scripture is canon, but a biblical canon is the collection of scriptures that comprise the authoritative witness and instruction for a religious body.

A. "Canon" in the Ancient World

The Greek κανών is derived from κάνη, a loan word from the Semitic קנה that means "measuring rod" or "measuring stick." Among the Greeks the word came to mean something that is a standard or norm by which all things are judged or evaluated, whether the perfect form to follow in architecture or the infallible criterion (κριτήριον) used to measure all things.[27]

The ancient world was filled with canons (guides, models, regulations) for almost every sphere of activity. It was a concept found in sculpturing and architecture as the perfect frame to be copied. In music the monochord was the canon by which all other tonal relationships were controlled. Even in philosophy the canon or criterion was used to discover what was true and false.[28] Beyer has shown that Epicurus himself argued that logic and method in thought stemmed from a canon (κανών) or basis by which one could know what was true or false and what was worth investigating or not.[29] This is not unlike the way the

[27] See the helpful descriptions of the use of the term by Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "κανών," *TDNT,* 3.596–602 and Robert W. Funk, *Parables and Presence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 151–53. A brief but careful theological and historical description of the use of the term in the church is found in Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 118–23. A more recent and excellent treatment of the term is also found in Metzger, *Canon,* 289–93.

[28] Beyer, "κανών," 596–98.

[29] Ibid.

biblical scriptures have been understood and employed in the Jewish and Christian communities of faith.

In the area of grammar the notion of canon was extremely prominent. The term κανών was used in regard to grammar by the Alexandrians, who set forth a canon of writers whose Greek was used as a model. By ca. 25 BCE the Roman grammarians were following especially the model of Virgil's *Aenid* in their writing, but also the models of Cicero and Sallust. These Latin grammarians, in the tradition of the Greeks, deemed it very important to follow certain models in their writing and, according to Suetonius, they were also actively involved in training the rhetoricians of the day in the best principles of grammar. The importance of strict adherence to these rules of grammar can be illustrated with two examples from Suetonius' *Lives of Illustrious Men.*

The first example shows that one of the worst insults of the day was to be accused of ignorance of proper grammar. Marcus Pompilius Andronicus was more interested in his Epicurean sect than in giving special attention to matters of grammar in his writing. The resulting criticisms of his grammar by his colleagues was so vitriolic that he was forced to leave Rome in shame. Suetonius writes:

> Marcus Pompilius Andronicus, a native of Syria, . . . was considered somewhat indolent in his work as a grammarian and not qualified to conduct a school. Therefore, realizing that he was held in less esteem at Rome, not only than Antonius Gnipho, but than others of even less ability, he moved to Cumae, where he led a quiet life and wrote many books.[30]

Around the time of the birth of Christ the canons of grammar were given a very high authority. This can be seen in the second example—the well-known account of Marcellus' attack on the grammar of leading Roman officials, including that of the Caesar Tiberius himself.

> Marcus Pomponius Marcellus, a most pedantic critic of the Latin language, in one of his cases (for he sometimes acted as an advocate) was so persistent in criticizing an error in diction made by his opponent, that Cassius Severus appealed to the judges and asked for a postponement, to enable his client to employ a grammarian in his stead: "For," said he, "he thinks that the contest with his opponent will not be on points of law, but of diction." When this same Marcellus had criticized a word in one of Tiberius's speeches, and Ateius Capito declared that it was good Latin, or if not, that it would surely be so from that time on, Marcellus answered: "Capito lies; for you, Caesar, can confer citizenship upon men, but not upon a word."[31]

[30] Suetonius, *The Lives of Illustrious Men: On Grammarians,* 8, LCL.
[31] Ibid., 22.

Thus, laws, regulations, and patterns (canons) were commonplace in the ancient world long before the time when both Jews and Christians began to take interest in closed canons (precise collections) of scriptures. The question that requires further exploration is whether and to what extent these and other cultural influences had conscious or unconscious affect on the decisions of both Jews and Christians in the common era, leading them to establish canons of sacred scriptures.[32]

B. "Canon" in Christian Culture

At the end of the first century CE, Clement of Rome called the Corinthians away from strife to the "glorious and venerable rule (κανόνα) of our tradition" (*1 Clem.* 7.2).[33] As will be shown later, Irenaeus used the term in reference to the rule of faith that governed orthodox Christianity at the end of the second century in Rome. Around the same time, Clement of Alexandria spoke of the rule (κανών) of faith that was the truth of the church even though he did not apply the term specifically to the biblical literature.[34] From the middle of the fourth century of the common era and onward, κανών was also increasingly used of the collection of sacred writings of both the OT and NT.[35]

Eusebius is generally thought to be the first to use κανών of a collection of Christian scriptures, in his *H.E.* 6.25.3, ca. 325 CE. A careful study of Eusebius' references to the scriptures of the church, however,

[32] It is disappointing that almost every significant investigation of the Christian canon today omits any discussion of the Greco-Roman sociological influence on the notion of canon in the ancient Christian community. Dieter Georgi's examination of the opponents of Paul in the second letter to the Corinthians *(Die Gegner des Paulus im 2 Korintherbrief)* published in English as *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) includes a most welcomed epilog on the question of canon in the ancient Greco-Roman world. See especially the questions he raises and his observations on pp. 427–434 and also his excellent bibliography and footnotes on pp. 435–445. A doctoral seminar that Georgi directed at the Harvard Divinity School in the Fall of 1979 produced a number of important but as yet unpublished papers on the topic. Unfortunately, the papers are still on the closed shelves of the Andover Library.

[33] The precise meaning of this phrase is difficult to determine. It could refer to the Christian message and its implications that had been passed on in the church, *or* to a common code of church ethics, *or* to a reference to the Christian use of the OT scriptures. Probably the first of these is intended.

[34] See Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.15.125, where κανών is the harmony between the Law and the Prophets on the one side and the covenant instituted by the incarnation of the Lord on the other.

[35] Beyer, "κανών," 3.600–601. See also Hennecke, *Apocrypha,* 22–24, and G. W. H. Lampe, "The Early Church," in *Scripture and Tradition* (ed. F. W. Dillistone; London: Lutterworth, 1955) 24ff.

indicates that his favorite terms for speaking of this literature were "encovenanted" (ἐνδιάθηκος)[36] and "recognized" (ὁμολογούμενον). The preferred term for describing a list of sacred scriptures is "catalog" (κατάλογος; *H.E.* 3.25.6 and 4.26.13). When Eusebius uses the term κανών, he is generally focusing on the church's traditions or its rule of faith. Of the ten times he used the term, only two are possible candidates for an exclusive list of sacred scriptures (*H.E.* 5.28.13 and 6.25.3). Although he provides the first datable list of the later recognized canonical books of the church in *H.E.* 3.25.1–7, he does not use κανών to refer to it, but rather "encovenanted (ἐνδιάθηκος)," in *H.E.* 3.25.6. Setting forth what he claimed was Origen's canon of scriptures, Eusebius writes:

> These things he inserts in the above mentioned treatise. But in the first of his [Commentaries] on the Gospel according to Matthew, defending the canon of the church (τόν ἐκκλησιαστικὸν φυλάττων κανόνα), he gives his testimony that he knows only four Gospels." (*H.E.* 6.25.3, LCL)

The question here is whether the "canon of the church" refers to the rule of faith or to a body of sacred Christian literature, that is, a list or catalog. The context suggests that he is talking about a collection or catalog of writings.

Origen's "encovenanted books (ἐνδιαθήκους βίβλους)" are cited in *H.E.* 6.25.1. His typical term for a collection of sacred books is not "canon," but "encovenanted," even though he apparently uses κανονά (canon) in reference to the list of four Gospels in *H.E.* 6.25.3. Athanasius in his *Festal Letter* of 367 CE uses a verbal form of "canon" (κανονιζομένων = "canonized") in reference to a body of sacred literature.[37] The earliest use of a form of κανών for a collection of scriptures appears around the middle of the fourth century. We should be clear, however, that the term "canon" was not regularly used in reference to a closed collection of scriptures until David Ruhnken used it thus in his 1768 *Historia critica oratorum Graecorum*.[38]

With such a long delay in the church's use of "canon" to describe a closed body of Christian scriptures, one must ask why there was such an emergence of "canon consciousness" in the church of the fourth

[36] Metzger, *Canon*, 292, translates this term "contained in the covenant" for canonical literature as opposed to "apocryphal" for noncanonical literature.

[37] See the complete text of this letter in ch. 9.

[38] For a helpful discussion of the background on the use of the term for a collection of scriptures, see Gregory Allen Robbins, "Eusebius' Lexicon of 'Canonicity,' " in *Studia Patristica* 25 (ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone; Leuven: Peeters, 1993) 134–41, who has argued cogently that unlike more modern authors, Eusebius never used κανών in reference to the collection of sacred scriptures. He also agrees that the list Eusebius provides of Origen's OT canon is an invention by Eusebius, since Origen used the number twenty-two to refer only to the books of the *Jewish* collection of scriptures, but not to his own *Christian* collection.

century CE. The answer may be found in part with a better understanding of the socio-historical conditions present in the fourth century CE. Again, we must ask to what extent was the Hellenistic ideal of following that which is a perfect guide adopted in the religious thought of Judaism, Christianity, and later Islam (the three major ancient religions with a canon of sacred scriptures)? It may well be that in the historical climate of the developing church the many interactions with "heretical" teachings (see ch. 7) led the church to propose a standard by which it could define authentic Christianity. This was done at first by the "rule of faith" that appears to have embodied the oral tradition about Jesus, but eventually also by the rule of certain writings that were believed to transmit faithfully the tradition of Jesus.

The proposal in the church of a standard "rule" eventually led to the formation of a *closed* canon of authoritative writings (scriptures) that, as A. C. Sundberg has argued, was unique in the Christian church since it had not received a closed canon of scriptures from Judaism.[39] The church had inherited from Judaism the notion of sacred scripture, but the concept of a closed canon of scriptures was a much later development, as will be argued in chapters 4–7. According to Sundberg, there were three stages in the history of the NT canon: (1) the rise of the NT writings to the status of scripture; (2) the conscious groupings of such literature into closed collections, for example, the four Gospels and the epistles of Paul; and (3) the formation of a closed list of authoritative literature.[40] In his discussion of the Christian writings, for example, Eusebius employs a threefold classification of the Christian literature that indicates a literary category between authoritative and heretical for writings deemed profitable for teaching but not considered normative in the church. According to Eusebius, Origen's three categories were (1) "Recognized" (ὁμολογούμενα), meaning those writings recognized by all; (2) "False" or "not genuine" (ψευδῆ or νόθα), referring to those writings that were forged by heretics; and (3) "Disputed" (ἀμφιβαλλόμενα in *H.E.* 6.25.8 or ἀντιλεγόμενα in *H.E.* 3.25.3), referring to those writings whose apostolic origins are doubtful (see the whole passage in *H.E.* 3.25.1–7 where all three designations are

[39] A. C. Sundberg, "The Making of the New Testament Canon," *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (ed. Charles M. Laymon; Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) 1216. This will be discussed in ch. 3.

[40] Ibid., 1217. A careful description of the canonical process is found in Sanders, *Canon*, 21–45. Sanders' more recent work, *Sacred Story*, 127–47, 175–90, has an excellent discussion of the process of recognition of the authority and the stabilization of the OT biblical text. He makes points that are applicable to both the OT and NT canonical inquiry. See also his "Text and Canon: Old Testament and New," in *Mélanges Dominique Barthélemy: Etudes bibliques* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 38; ed. Pierre Casetti, Othmar Keel, and Adrian Scheuber; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981) 373–94.

used).[41] Eusebius probably invented this classification himself. That final grouping for Eusebius—the questionable category—gradually fell away in the church, and the ancient literature became either canonical or apocryphal.[42] For Eusebius, only the "recognized" category appears to have functioned as scripture; nonetheless, on two occasions he called the letter of Clement to the Corinthians (*1 Clement* written ca. 95 CE) a "recognized" writing. In *H.E.* 3.16.1 he writes "There is therefore one *recognized* epistle [of Clement] (Τούτου δὴ οὖν ὁμολογουμένη μία ἐπιστολὴ φέρεται)" and again in *H.E.* 3.39.1 "Thus the *recognized* writing of Clement is well known (Ἡ μὲν οὖν τοῦ Κλήμεντος ὁμολογουμένη γραφὴ πρόδηλος)." Eusebius' canon or catalog of sacred NT scriptures included twenty of the NT writings, possibly the book of Revelation, and possibly also *1 Clement,* though that is not certain since he does not call the letter of Clement "encovenanted (ἐνδιάθηκος)."

Before moving on to a discussion of the recognition of the OT as canon, some observations by James Sanders about the nature of the biblical canon should be noted. He emphasizes that there are two essential characteristics of canon, i.e., adaptability and survivability.[43] He claims that a key factor in a document becoming canonical in a particular community was its ability to be adapted to the historical circumstances and life setting, or *Sitz im Leben,* of the people and also its ability to survive and to give life to that community. In regard to Israel, Sanders contends that what was first canonical was not a document or a writing, but a *story* that gave to Israel its identity and its life. Written documents as canon came later in the canonical process, but they still functioned in the same way within the community. What that story was for Israel, he says, had two primary themes—Moses and David—and only those two themes survived. Throughout the history of Israelites in the OT, the focus was not on a written word, but rather on a story that gave the Israelites their identity and was adaptable to their historical situation.[44]

Sanders makes yet another point about the stabilization of that story in written form between the time of the Persian domination of Israel and the end of the first century CE. He contends that during this time the written text was relatively fluid, marked by two distinct ideas about the Word, namely,

[41] See Schneemelcher's discussion in *New Testament Apocrypha* (rev. ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 1.31. And see R. P. C. Hanson, who, in his *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954) 133–45, has argued convincingly that Origen's classification system was an invention of Eusebius. He claims that Origen had neither a NT list of books nor any notion of a NT canon.

[42] Both Origen's and Eusebius' lists are included in ch. 8.

[43] Sanders, *Sacred Story,* 18–19.

[44] Ibid.

> the idea of the living Word of God ever dynamically new and fresh, and the idea of traditions that were becoming stabilized into certain forms but were generation after generation in need of being adapted to and heard afresh in new historical contexts.[45]

He cites examples of how scribal changes of the sacred text actually continued until the end of that period of stabilization and did not dramatically reduce until after that time. Sanders also links the end of altering the text to the notions of the demise of prophecy in Israel and verbal inspiration.[46]

There seems to be an almost exact parallel to these developments in the case of the NT writings. At first the church existed with a story and without its own "sacred text"—that is, Christian scriptures. The earliest Christian communities acknowledged the OT writings as their scriptures, and in the NT the writers sometimes change or adapt the wording of the OT texts to suit their own needs.[47] But the OT writings could not in themselves explain the church's identity or give it its peculiar life. That was wrapped up in a story about Jesus the Christ. The earliest canon of the Christian community was the story of Jesus (however differently it was told and adapted) that was later written down. For quite some time, the Christian text (primarily the Gospels, but also Paul) was highly flexible in the Christian community, as is evidenced by the many textual variants in the NT documents.[48] The sacred text was adaptable to life circumstances of the community of faith, but it is clear that the community also changed the text to make it more relevant to its own needs. See for example, the textual history of 1 John 5:7, Acts 8:37, and John 3:13. This practice of adaptation was especially common in the church in the first two centuries when, unlike in some parts of Judaism (1 Macc. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41), it was believed that the age of the Spirit (and consequently prophecy) was still in operation.[49] In the fourth to the sixth centuries there was a movement toward a stabilized NT text and the formalization of that text as canon in the Christian community.

[45] Ibid., 140. This same idea is also found in Dunn, *Living Word,* 153–61.

[46] Ibid.

[47] This is often characteristic of midrashic exegesis. Notice the example of the changing of the text from receiving gifts to giving gifts in Eph 4:8 (cf. Ps 68:18) and how the author of Heb changes the focus of Ps 8:4–6 in 2:6–8. He makes a *temporal* interpretation of the LXX words βραχύ τι, which is clearly not in the context of the psalm, so that he might have a predictive witness from the psalm to Jesus.

[48] Although many of the variants in the NT manuscripts can be explained away as simple scribal mistakes or glosses (e.g., see Rom 5:1 and the textual evidence for either ἔχομεν or ἔχωμεν, as well as 8:1, 4, and so on), many changes or additions in the texts were not accidental, but deliberate.

[49] Observe, e.g., the additions of Mark 4:10–12 to the original parable of Jesus. Quite possibly the interpretation in 4:13–20 was also added later by the church.

Finally, the distinction in the notion of canon between "canon 1" and "canon 2" should be commented upon. Gerald Sheppard has argued that the term "canon" had a dual meaning in the ancient world. On the one hand, the term could refer to a rule or standard, that is, an authoritative voice that is followed whether it is written or oral in form. He calls this "canon 1." In a very real sense, Israel had a canon when the tradition of Moses receiving the Torah on Sinai was accepted into the community. Whatever functioned in the community of Israel as an authoritative guide was "canon" in the sense of Sheppard's "canon 1." On the other hand, he recognizes that the term also came to refer to writings in a temporary or even permanent fixation or standardization. This he calls "canon 2." This recognizes that both literature and persons were often acknowledged as authorities (canon 1) in the religious communities of the ancient world long before they were placed into fixed or standardized norms (canon 2).[50]

The discussion of the NT canon below will show that some writings that at one time were deemed inspired and authoritative in the Christian community (canon 1) were later excluded from an authoritative body of literature for the church (canon 2).[51] In many ways it is not surprising that writings such as Sirach and Wisdom were a part of an authoritative and respected "canon 1" of the early church and yet did not achieve the status of "canon 2" in much of the church or in Judaism. James Sanders stresses the need to distinguish between the two meanings of canon when he writes:

> Keeping in mind the two meanings of the word *canon,* authority and invariability, one should be careful to distinguish between the near stability of the Genesis-to-Kings complex at the end of the sixth century BC and the dynamic character of a nascent collection of prophets. A canon begins to *take shape* first and foremost because a question of identity or authority has arisen, and a canon begins to *become unchangeable* or invariable somewhat later, after the question of identity has for the most part been settled.[52]

[50] Gerald T. Sheppard, "Canon," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade; New York: Macmillan, 1987) 3.62–69, here 64–67 where he cites many examples of both kinds of "canon."

[51] Recall that Eusebius calls *1 Clement* a "recognized" epistle in *H.E.* 3.16.1 and 3.29.1. We should note that Barr, *Scripture,* 75–79, describes three forms of canon that he designates "canon 1," "canon 2," and "canon 3" but in a quite different sense than what we find in Sheppard. For Barr, "canon 1" refers to the list of books that comprise the biblical scriptures. "Canon 2" has to do with the final stages of each book as opposed to the original form of the book, and "canon 3" is "the principle of attraction, value, and satisfaction that makes everything about canons and canonicity beautiful" (76–77).

[52] Sanders, *Torah and Canon,* 91. This notion is also found in Dunn, *Living Word,* 145–53, who follows Sanders' main theses.

In the case of "canon 1" the authority is not firmly fixed and if this is kept in mind, many of the difficulties of the Hebrew biblical canon will become more clear. Why did the residents of Qumran feel free to change the biblical text, even the law of Moses, and why is there so much discussion about whether books like Ezekiel, Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach "defile the hands" among the rabbis of the second through the fifth centuries? Perhaps because the literature had not yet reached "invariability" but was nevertheless recognized as authoritative by many if not most of the Jews from at least the first century on. We will return to this discussion in chapter 5.

In the broadest definition of the term "canon," neither the Israelites nor the Christians were ever without a canon or authoritative guide; they always had a *story* that enabled them to establish their identity and give life to their community. It will be argued in this book that the existence of a closed collection of sacred scriptures was a later development for Israel as well as the church. It will be shown in chapter 6 that the basic outlines of the NT canon began to emerge with Irenaeus in a polemic against heretical teachings in which he lists the writings that he believes are free from such errors and that faithfully reflect the Christian message—that is, the "rule" or "canon" of faith. Before that, however, chapters 3, 4, and 5 will focus on questions related to the origins and development of the OT canon.