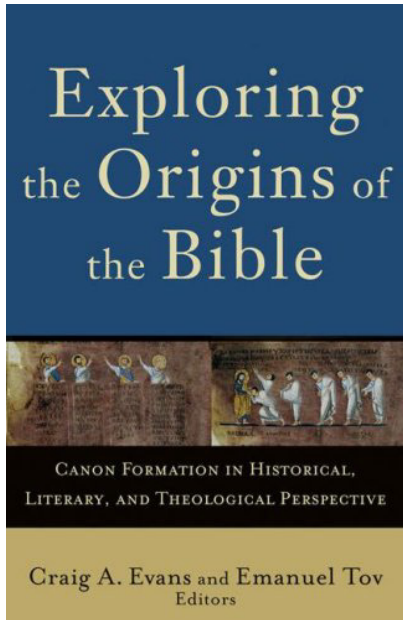


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Evans, Craig A., and Emanuel Tov, eds.

*Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*

Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology

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These essays are the result of the Hayward Lectures at Acadia Divinity College in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, in April 2006. They provide basic information for students and general readers who want to go deeper in understanding the issues involved in the study of the biblical canons. In the introduction Evans surveys for the novice the versions of the Hebrew Bible, its early translations, the contents of the Hebrew Bible, the books of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and the contents of the New Testament. I note one error: Serapion, bishop of Antioch, should be dated late second century, not early third (26).

Emanuel Tov, "The Septuagint as a Source for the Literary Analysis of Hebrew Scripture," gives a balanced account of the variants in the Septuagint from the Masoretic Text and other texts of the Hebrew Bible. He covers different types of variants and provides examples where the Septuagint represents an earlier form of the text and where a later form of the text. He concludes that, except for Job, where "the large deviations in the LXX of Job were produced by the translator," the "differences from the MT in the LXX should probably be ascribed to the early date of the Hebrew manuscripts from which the translation was made and to their derivation from circles different from the ones embracing the MT" (56).

James H. Charlesworth, "Writings Ostensibly outside the Canon," notes pre-100 C.E. evidence of a tripartite Jewish Scripture. I disagree that the citations given from Josephus weaken Josephus's indication of a closed canon (63). Also, I question that fluid texts necessarily mean there was no collection (63). The classification of the books in the Pseudepigrapha (64–67) is very helpful. Charlesworth offers important reasons for reading the Pseudepigrapha (70–73, 81–84) but perhaps exaggerates the extent to which these books were considered sacred by many early Jews. His characterization of earlier study of Second Temple Judaism as "caricatures" and "misconceptions" (74–81) is itself sometimes a caricature.

I found Stephen G. Dempster's "Torah, Torah, Torah: The Emergence of the Tripartite Canon" even-handed and helpful. He surveys internal evidence in the Old Testament of canon consciousness (authoritative writings) in three collections: Law, Prophets, and Wisdom. The schematization of Law as ethics, Prophecy as eschatology, and Wisdom as practical concerns, however, is too restrictive. My own observation is that, since "Law and Prophets" continued in use after there was certainly a tripartite Scripture, the use of this terminology did not necessarily mean only a bipartite collection.

In "The Role of 'the Septuagint' in the Formation of the Biblical Canons," R. Glenn Wooden addresses three questions: "How Have the Greek Translations of the Hebrew Scriptures Influenced the Development of the Biblical Canons?" "What Influences Led to the Development of the Different Old Testament Canons?" and "What Can We Learn from This Complex Situation?" He concludes (146) that those who took the gospel to Gentiles by telling the story in Greek and not asking inquirers to learn Hebrew and Aramaic set a precedent that continues today, namely, presenting "the Scriptures in the language of the hearers and not in their original form."

Craig A. Evans, in "The Apocryphal Jesus: Assessing the Possibilities and Problems," advocates "an openness to the possibility of early, reliable tradition" in apocryphal texts "but at the same time urging greater caution in their use" (147). He examines four other Gospels than the canonical four: Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Papyrus Egerton 2, and Secret Gospel of Mark. Contrary to Crossan, Koester, and others, Evans renders a negative verdict on these works providing early, independent material. He concludes that the Gospel of Thomas had a late second-century Syrian origin and was dependent on Tatian's Diatessaron. The Akhmim Gospel Fragment is perhaps not to be equated with the Gospel of Peter and in any case is too fantastic and coherent with late traditions to offer reliable information. Papyrus Egerton 2 represents "a second-century conflation of Synoptic and Johannine elements, rather than primitive first-century material" (167). Evans accepts the argument that the Secret Gospel of Mark is a hoax by Morton Smith.

Stanley E. Porter's "Paul and the Process of Canonization" discusses the process by which Paul's writings were assembled, not the formal recognition of their canonicity by the church. He examines five theories of the Pauline letter collection: the theory of gradual collection (Zahn and Harnack); the theory of lapsed interest in Paul followed by later collection (Goodspeed and Knox); the composite antignostic theory (Schmithals); the theory of personal involvement by a member of the Pauline circle (Moule—Luke; Guthrie—Timothy); and the theory of Paul's own initiative in collecting four letters (Trobisch). Then Porter presents his own theory of Paul's personal involvement in a thirteen-letter collection.

In "Wherein Lies Authority? A Discussion of Books, Texts, and Translations," Lee Martin McDonald considers the theological implications of early lists with different books included and the different canons accepted in different churches (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Ethiopic) today, the variety of text forms in the early transmission of biblical texts (since the early church did not attempt to establish one text type, "Which form of the text should function as the canonical biblical text for the church today?" [229]), and different translations, ancient and modern ("the ancient church never suggested that only one translation of the Bible was inspired and all others were not or were less authoritative" [236]). The authority and inspiration of the text with its power to transform lives is not dependent on our having an original and perfect text. The authority is Jesus (Matt 28:18), not a particular collection, text, or translation (238).

Jonathan R. Wilson, in "Canon and Theology: What Is at Stake?" outlines the views of high Protestant Scholasticism, high Tridentine Catholicism, and high Modernism and their shortcomings. He offers as an alternative the kingdom of God. "[T]he canon and the community are bound together in their participation in the kingdom of God. And canonicity is located neither in the canon nor in the community but in their participation in the kingdom of God" (251–52).

This book well introduces the issues and some of the evidence in regard to canon formation. Although not all the authors are evangelicals, the book is written for an evangelical readership. The scholarly honesty of the presentations make a plea for a view of inspiration and authority consonant with the messy details of history.