Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone, eds.

The Shape of the Writings

Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 16


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This important book will shape discussion of the development of the canon in general and of the Writings in particular for years to come. It is a collection of essays covering different books that make up the Writings, including a joint essay by the editors plus one essay each within the body of the book. It has an impressive range of contributions and contributors and some fascinating responses from leading scholars in the field. The book shows what a complex issue canon and canonization, as both collection and process, has become.

The opening essay, “The Historical Formation of the Writings in Antiquity,” by Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone, reviews in masterly fashion the scholarly interest in the issue of the Hebrew canon, noting the two most prominent positions: that the canon was closed before the Christian era and that its tripartite structure is by design; and that the process was more fluid and that, although the Law may have already formed a collection, the other material circulated as Scripture into the Christian era, only later being formed in Jewish and Christian circles with the rejection and acceptance of different books. The Writings as the least “fixed” part of the canon exemplifies the way the results of these two positions have been applied and evaluated. The essay looks at the historical evidence for the formation of the writings as well as mapping the contours of the debate over the canon (its closure and tripartite structure) as viewed through the earliest Jewish and
Christian witnesses. The variety of orders for the collection of Writings is also explored. They find their own definition of a canon as “a fixed or delimited collection of texts received and recognized as sacred (authoritative) by a faith community” (8, emphasis original). Clearly the time of the early Christian era is key for the issue of canon closure: Were there councils, or can we not really speak of final arrangement until the codices of the fourth and fifth centuries CE? Were there different canons for different groups of people in the Second Temple period so that authorative texts varied for different communities? A canon defines the shape of the literature, hence the title of this book: The Shape of the Writings. A good point is made here that individual books were shaped (composed, redacted, or compiled) based on their interrelationship within the collection. This seems to me a reason why thematic logic can be found in various different orderings (as becomes apparent in other essays in the book, too), with beginnings and endings of books seemingly linking up in deliberate ways. It simply has to be acknowledged that the process is a diverse and complicated one.

The prologue to Ben Sira (ca. 180 BCE) provides the first evidence for a three-part canon, with the Law and Prophets specifically mentioned and then “the others that follow them” (1:1). Are these the Writings, or are we to believe, following Barton, that the scriptures are fully encompassed by the Law and the Prophets, so that the other texts are nonscriptural? Stone and Steinberg prefer the former option, citing b. Baba Batra 14b (ca. 200 CE) as further confirmation and arguing that two-part and three-part designations existed side by side. They argue that there was already a sense of a canon by the time of Ben Sira but that the actual extent of the Writings was still fluid. An example is provided by the Dead Sea Scroll community, although the extent to which their authoritative books represent the fledgling canons of other Jewish groups is open to question. The citation of scripture in the New Testament has also been offered as evidence, but it seems that the biblical canon was still fluid. The author of Jude, for example, considered I Enoch to be scripture as he cites it. Later evidence from Josephus and 4 Ezra is then discussed at length. Whether Josephus’s polemical witness is trustworthy or not, he reveals knowledge of twenty-two books, Judges and Ruth regarded as one book, as well as Jeremiah and Lamentations. It is interesting that Josephus seems to divide books according to genre (e.g., hymns and instructions). This is an ancient way of regarding the material, not as modern a concern as we sometimes like to think!

The final part of the essay considers arrangements of texts, and Steinberg and Stone write: “Intertextual relationships between books can be determined in different ways and on various levels” (43). The subcollections of two groups of four books in the Writings is also discussed (wisdom series and national-historical series) as well as the significance of the books standing separately (Ruth, Psalms, and Chronicles; see chart on 45). The moving of Ruth from before Psalms to after Proverbs is a significant shift and promotes a new
dialogue between Prov 31 and Ruth. Stone and Steinberg write of the Writings that “books were shaped and located, in various degrees, by authors, redactors and compilers to highlight various relationships between books.” Of the canon as a whole they add, “The canonical process is primarily one of growth to maturity rather than a process of trimming or rejecting other texts.” (49). They also hold that the MT order of the Megilloth preexisted its liturgical order. Thus their conclusion is that the canon was closed for Judaism before the first century CE, a conclusion testified by Josephus and 4 Ezra.

I have spent a good deal of this review describing this opening chapter because in many ways it sets the tone for the whole book. It maps out the issues and the kinds of conclusions that will be reached when each of the separate books is discussed. In fact, that is my main criticism of this volume, the overlap between contributions and points. As one proceeds through the book, the same points arise, and many discussions overlap (Ruth is a particular case in point); introductory comments are often similar, and the essays quote each other as well as repeat some content. This is, in part, one of the problems with multiauthor collections, and in and of itself it is not a problem. However, it does make the book a more difficult read at one sitting.

The second essay is Peter Brandt’s “Final Forms of the Writings: The Jewish and Christian Traditions.” He is concerned with the final forms of the Writings in their Jewish and Christian arrangements. He draws particular attention to the nature and increasing length of the scrolls themselves, used well into the Christian era. The TNK scheme is witnessed in rabbinic Bibles from the sixteenth century onward. Some put the Megilloth after the Pentateuch, based on its popularity with the rabbis and liturgical use; others used the order Pentateuch, Haftarot, Megilloth. Sometimes the five books of the Megilloth were interspersed between the books of the Pentateuch, and at other times the Megilloth were placed with the Writings. Eastern and Western orders varied, too, and rabbinic Bibles were often a hybrid of such orders. In Christian tradition, the Writings were placed after the Pentateuch and before the Prophets. But there were variants, such as the Codex Ambrosianus, which put Job after Deuteronomy, probably based on the supposition of Mosaic authorship for both, and the Psalter is placed between Samuel and Kings since it fills out the life and activity of King David. On one set of criteria (that of Theodor) the wisdom literature (broadly defined to include Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Sirach, Ruth, and Job) were excluded. Different traditions arose in different translations (Greek, Latin) and traditions (Greek, Syrian) and faiths (Judaism, Christianity). This essay shows the complexity of the shaping of the canon and of the Writings in particular.

Third is “A Wandering Moabite: Ruth—A Book in Search of a Canonical Home,” by Stephen Demster. The book of Ruth is a particularly complex case when it comes to its position in the canon. Dempster shows how canonical context affects reading and how
reading Ruth in the context of these different orderings leads to different emphases. However, when it comes to an original canonical order, the situation is complex; there are two main options. Hebrew tradition from at least the first century CE locates the book in the third division of the Tanak, the Writings, while the Greek tradition as known from the LXX (possibly also based on ancient Jewish roots and not just Christian tradition) and as testified in the Leningrad Codex locates it in the historical books after Judges. The Megilloth formation complicates the matter further, especially if one follows Stone’s idea that the first Masoretic order was not primarily liturgical but was an ancient sequence. Dempster makes the point that the nature of these writings on separate scrolls meant that the order was less important; mundane matters such as space for storage and physical contiguity may have played a part. Once the temple was destroyed in 70 CE, order seemed to be more important. He coins the expression “canonical montage,” which he uses to title a section that looks at the significance of certain placements of Ruth in a thematic way. Ruth before Psalms stresses Davidic links; Ruth after Proverbs highlights Ruth as the ideal of a “worthy woman.” Reading the rest of the Megilloth in this order highlights, for Dempster, the feminine aspects of the texts. This is an interesting idea from him but a bit forced, especially when it comes to Ecclesiastes. It is a fascinating modern perspective but hard to imagine any canonizers thinking of such a scheme. Reading Ruth after Judges provides an antidote to the kinglessness and lawlessness of the past. It is a story of faithfulness and loyalty, legality and decorum. The birth of David at the end of Ruth also presages the book of Samuel and recontextualizes it in the knowledge of his existence and potential significance. Which of these positions for Ruth was original? The consensus is that it was before Psalms, linking David to the Psalter, but Dempster shows that arguments are strong for Ruth after both Judges and Proverbs too. This is a fascinating and informative chapter.

Next comes “Thoughts on the ‘Davidization’ of the Psalter,” by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, a translation into English of a German original. The role of the mention of David in the Psalms and in the inscriptions is discussed, along with the royal psalms and “anointed” imagery. It moves on to issues of how the Psalter became increasingly Davidized. The significance also of the doxologies and the arrangement into five books is discussed. David is seen as both a historical and as a paradigmatic figure. In the psalm titles there is a “layman” image of David. Psalm 89 is pivotal in the move from stong to weak king. The portrayal becomes more theocratic from that point on, too. The common tradition of the Davidic psalter is seen to have been preserved by both priests and temple singers. The bullet-point style of this article is different from most of the others, although Steinberg uses bullet points as well.

In “Reading Job Following the Psalms,” Will Kynes explores the Job/Psalms relationship in canonical terms. It is an intertextual reading, yet it also asks the question why the
Psalms are often placed before Job in the canon and what impact that has for reading the two together. Job and the Psalms are shown to have a particularly rich interrelationship, texts from the Psalter being cited not just by Job himself but also by the friends, thus suggesting that the author was quite familiar with these texts. It also questions the alignment of Job with other wisdom books, as the book is seen to have more links with the Psalms than, say, Proverbs.

The next essay is by Julius Steinberg, one of the editors: “The Place of Wisdom Literature in an Old Testament Theology: A Thematic and Structural-Canonical Approach.” He follows both topical and literary approaches and provides useful diagrams. He considers b. Baba Bathra 14b order as authoritative. The wisdom series 1 (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song) is seen to move thematically from suffering to joy. He looks at issues of how to identify wisdom thinking/wisdom influence, seeing the links as largely thematic. He notes discrepancies between Proverbs and Job/Ecclesiastes but overcomes them according to the idea of Proverbs as wisdom for the beginner and the other books for the more mature student of wisdom. He argues for Song of Songs as a wisdom book. He stresses content over form in seeing wisdom as a unique way of thinking. He stresses the themes of wisdom and creation in all, as well as the emphasis on the individual rather than the nation (which distinguishes this series from series 2, the national-historical series). He finds parallels across the two series and explores the role of Psalms and Chronicles in the framework of the whole. I found in this article a strange mixture of a theological approach and a canonical one, although Steinberg names his approach a “structural-canonical” one. There is an interesting table of the different orderings found in the Jewish witnesses.

In “The Search for Order: The Compilational History of Ruth,” Timothy J. Stone revisits Ruth. He pursues his argument that the Megilloth had an earlier canonical association before the liturgical one and so seeks to put the ordering much earlier than most. He airs objections to his theory as well as ideas that favor it. He looks at the themes at the seams of books; of course, Ruth is a particularly rich example of this, as was seen in Stephen Demster’s earlier essay on Ruth. Stone stresses the redactional activity linking the books together and validates the complexity of the various different ancient orders of books in the Writings in general and in the Megilloth in particular.

The next essay is Amber Warhurst’s “The Associative Effects of Daniel in the Writings.” Daniel is another case where the book has moved around in the canon. It has been near Ezekiel and Esther, book-ended by Lamentations, and by Ezra-Nehemiah. It was within the Prophets (at least according to Josephus, who mentions thirteen prophets), yet then it seems to have been relocated to the Writings by rabbinic groups. It classification might well affect an evaluation of the nature of this material. Daniel has been called a wise man, yet he shows the kind of status of an individual who has received a prophetic revelation.
The question of dating is discussed. Was this book included in the Writings due to its mention of temple vessels and the exile, so that it links naturally with Lamentations, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles? The vessels represent cultic order, and they were preserved in the exile. The exile was broadened out into the future beginning in Dan 7. Warhurst looks at the thematic links between these exilic texts in the context of the Writings.

The next article “Chronicles as the Intended Conclusion to the Old Testament Canon,” by Hendrik J. Koorevaar. He compares the position of Chronicles in the Alexandrian and Palestinian canons, the former placing Chronicles after 2 Kings and the latter having Chronicles at the end of the Hebrew Bible. Positioning has interesting implications. There is also the question of the relationship between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah and that of overlap in material. He looks at the date of Chronicles and opts for roughly 415 BCE, during the last decades of the fifth century. He looks at key themes, too. Chronicles seems to give the Persian seal of approval for Israel’s return to the homeland. Positioned at the end of the canon, Chronicles seems to summarize and abstract the Old Testament message; it even refers to Adam, in an echoing of the first book of the canon, Genesis. Could the Chronicler be giving us a theology of scripture? It may link to Matthew’s Gospel with its genealogies.

The penultimate essay is Georg Steins’s “Torah-Binding and Canon Closure: On the Origin and Canonical Function of the Book of Chronicles.” He looks at the fact that the Torah was the first part of the canon. The Torah binding of the Psalter is a key influence that the Torah had on another book. This leads him into the idea of scripture-relatedness. He sees Torah as a formative topic of Chronicles, binding the history of Israel together and also binding together the canon. He also thinks that Chronicles presupposes the closure of the Prophets division, in that religious traditions had already merged by that time. He writes, “The Chronicler reads the canonical history from the beginning with Adam to the new beginning under Cyrus from the perspective of the Torah and presents it as a story of the effects (Wirkung) of the Torah in Israel” (260). The sacred-legal framework of both is stressed. Chronicles is even seen as a kind of actualization of torah. Steins argues for an earlier closure of the canon than many: second century BCE.

The final essay in the volume, Stephen B. Chapman’s “‘A Threefold Cord Is Not Quickly Broken’: Interpretation by Canonical Division in Early Judaism and Christianity,” uses the image from Eccl 12 to describe the way the canon is interrelated and not atomistic. Chapman looks at early titles used for scripture and at the way scriptural passages were cited according to literary genre or canonical division. He notes that Ben Sira has knowledge of the Law and the Prophets and that the rabbis interpreted pentateuchal texts by going through the canon. The three divisions of the canon are reflected in these
interpretations. Sometimes a double Torah is referred to, but at other times selections from elsewhere are given; Chapman gives a number of different examples. Sometimes an opening text from elsewhere is used to introduce a Torah reading. While Torah is primary, other parts of the biblical canon strengthen a reading from Torah and are also strengthened by it. Arguments are built up with salient texts. In the New Testament multiple attestations from scripture indicate the same awareness of a threefold structure.

Three responses by John Barton, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, and Christopher Seitz complete the volume. Barton responds to the main categories of the discussion, such as the ordering of books and how that affects reading and the point that the book may have been “tweaked” at redactional stages. The citation in three divisions interests him. He defends a more “atomistic” view of canon. He promotes a literary approach of reading one text in the light of another but sees historical levels of appropriation as more tricky. Reception history and reader-response are also stressed by Barton as key to understanding our own responses (and those of our predecessors) to the nature of canon and the interrelationships between the books. He uses Shakespeare as an example: since we would not seek to interpret each play necessarily in the light of another, why should we treat scripture differently? Eskenazi argues against the idea that the order of the books was meaningful before the time of the codex. She sees chronology as important. She does not find such importance for Chronicles as the closing document of the canon as others in the volume have done, nor does she think that the Torah-binding idea, while important, is the “last word.” Seitz reviews each article in turn as I have done. He draws attention to the faith aspect of this kind of study at the end of his response.