This book collects thirteen essays, which are the result of a research project conducted mostly by young scholars either working at or connected with the Faculty of Theology of Aarhus University, Denmark. The project is part of a long-term enterprise that aims to investigate “religion and normativity.” This volume concentrates on the role played by the collections of texts in the formation of the identity of religious groups, with a special focus on the institutionalization process of early Christianity. As stated in the introduction, the scholars involved in these investigations paid particular attention to three factors: (1) Christianity’s relation to Judaism, (2) Christianity’s relation to ancient Greco-Roman culture, and (3) Christianity’s development toward orthodoxy. Thus this book is not an all-embracing inquiry on the formation of Christian canon; rather, it offers a range of theoretical insights as well as empirical examples on how the authoritative writings were understood and used in specific historical and cultural environments.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part theoretical aspects are presented. A. Klostegaard Petersen makes his start from a contemporary issue, the Danish government’s decision in 2005 to launch a huge project having the purpose of compiling cultural canons in the main forms of art (architecture, film, literature, music etc.).
Reflecting on how attempts of this sort have the function of establishing identity markers on the particular social group they are addressed to, Klostegaard Petersen analyzes the significance of texts’ canonizations in different cultural settings. After inspecting the various gradations and perceptions of authoritative writings and canons, where authority can be situated either at the level of content or at the level of form, he argues that the selection of a normative corpus of writings represents an attempt to impose a closure on the semiotic process, in other words, to restrain the production of new interpretations and the attribution of new meanings to the texts. According to his view, in the struggle for controlling cultural processes, to privilege a fixed set of writings upon others is intended to have a regulating function over the *semiosis*. Klostegaard Petersen, however, notices that, quite paradoxically, attempting to close the process of *semiosis* cannot but result in a failure, since it does not prevent the rise of new interpretations.

The same focus on interpretations recurs from a different point of view in the second contribution, by J. Hyldahl, whose purpose is to highlights the relationship between canonical and noncanonical texts. Hyldahl explains the canonization process of text corpora in antiquity as a development of the fundamental shift from oral to written tradition, which he sets into a persuasive theoretical frame. Hyldahl then recognizes as a consequence of that process the emergence of the need to relate the fixed traditions from the past to the present time, a task that brought Stoic philosophers as well as Jewish and Christian exegetes to undertake an intense hermeneutical activity on their normative canons. In the case of Christian tradition, this activity led to the production of a range of different (re)writings of the normative books: commentaries, handbooks, martyr literature, poetry, and texts labeled as apocryphal. Hyldahl reflects on the status that such writings have over against the biblical text and reaches the conclusion that, as long as they are controlled by the texts they interpret, they also gain a certain degree of normativity.

K. Pollmann, who focuses on “Normativity, Ideology, and Reception in Pagan and Christian Antiquity,” proposes perceptive definitions of such items on the ground of ancient sources. Then she turns to reflect on the transformation of a religion into an ideology; in her view, this shift corresponds to the exclusion of other possible readings and interpretations of faith. Pollmann provides a thorough example of such a critical passage by commenting on Ambrosiaster’s exegesis of Gal 3:28 and by showing how this writer drew his own reading of the biblical text and the justification of his contemporary social order into a circular argument, having the purpose of confirming the latter as normative.

J. Engberg deals with the repercussions that ancient discussions had on the provenance of texts and on their perception as normative and canonical. He recalls how the strongest argument for the normativity of a text was its antiquity (“the older is the better”),
alongside the stature of its authorship. At times the consensus of the churches over a book also proved to be an important consideration. Engberg shows, then, how these principles worked in three critical cases, concerning (1) the ancient debate over the Revelation of John, (2) Irenaeus’s treatment of the provenance of the Gospel of John, and (3) Tertullian’s debate with the Marcionites on the status of the Gospel of Luke over against the other Gospels. Engberg offers clear-cut analyses of such cases showing how the bestowing of authority to one Gospel or another from the part of Irenaeus and Tertullian was practically affected by their own theological agendas.

G. Lønstup deals with the construction of memory and its impact on the creation of normativity through the concrete example of the traditional shaping of Constantinople as the “new Rome.” An established element of such a portrait was the idea that Constantinople was built on seven hills: Lønstup questions whether that idea is traceable in fourth- and fifth-century sources, as it is often assumed by scholars, or it is a later construction. Through an accurate reading of the original sources, she shows that the myth of Constantinople founded on seven hills originated in early medieval period as a metaphorical expression later transferred to the topography of the city.

In the second part of the volume, studies of more empirical nature are presented. E. K. Holt deals with the relationship between the authority of the Bible and exegesis, observing the specific case of Jeremiah. Noting that until the 1980s the authority of the prophet Jeremiah was not challenged in biblical scholarship, she inquires what is, if any, the normative theological significance of a prophetic text today. In her view, the normative meaning of the text is a matter of individual choice. She concludes her contribution with a provocative question concerning the current academic debate: Are American and European scholars on two increasingly separated sides (the former ones on the side of “orthodoxy of faith” and the latter on that of “orthodoxy of reason”), or there is still room for a third possibility?

R. Falkenberg analyzes the two extant versions of the gnostic treatise the Sophia of Jesus Christ as examples of textual reuse. Most of that postresurrection revelatory dialogue is based on the Letter of Eugnostos. An attentive examination of these two texts, compared also with other gnostic literature, allows Falkenberg to reconstruct a three-stage soteriological chronology, consisting in cosmogonic time, anthropogonic time, and the gnostic author’s present time.

J. Ulrich writes about the dispute over Scripture in Justin’s Dialogue with the Jew Trypho, a text that witnesses one of the earliest stages in the canon debate. The normative status of most of what would later be called by Christians the “Old Testament” (the five books of Moses, the Major Prophets, the twelve Minor Prophets, the Psalms, and some parts of the
historical and wisdom books) is held as normative by both Trypho and Justin. However, this does not mean that the two contenders reach a consensus at the end of their conversation. Ulrich shows that this happens mainly because they do not share the same hermeneutical propositions: for Justin, it is appropriate to read the Bible through Christ and his message; this is not acceptable for Trypho. The exegetical issue, thus, becomes crucial.

A. C. Jacobsen recovers the norms that regulated Origen’s allegorical exegesis of the Bible. Against the claim that the conclusions of Origen’s exegetical process are completely random, Jacobsen argues that a complex network of normative structures, ranging from theological, philosophical, literary, and rhetorical norms, rules Origen’s interpretative process. Despite this fact, the results of Origen’s exegesis are never foregone: on the one hand, theological norms are very strictly respected; on the other hand, philosophical and rhetorical rules are considered to be subsidiary, and often they are adapted to exegetical purposes.

B. V. Auweele deals with the interesting question of how the Song of Songs, a fine example of erotic poetry, became part of the biblical canon. After an overview of recent scholarship, he turns to the ancient sources and observes that the canonical status of the Song was never questioned, while it has been always quite clear that it must be read metaphorically and not literally. This book is thus opened to a variety of interpretations that never threaten its canonical status.

N. A. Pedersen focuses on Athanasius’s thirty-ninth Festal Letter, which contains the first extant list of the twenty-seven writings that still today are held as the canonical New Testament. Through a careful contextualization, Pedersen argues that the pivotal concern that urged Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria to close the New Testament canon was the fight he was conducting against the Melitians and the need to charge them with using unauthorized writings. Pedersen then stresses Athanasius’s personal charismatic authority as the main factor assuring a wide circulation to his thirty-ninth Festal Letter.

J. Hart recovers the influence of Islam on the formation of the normative corpus of Mandæan scriptures, which is nearly contemporary to the closure of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic canons. Focusing mainly on the Ginza and the Book of John, Hart argues that Mandæans were aware of the role that normative writings played in the expansion of Islam, and this had an impact on the standardization of their own literary production.

C. Cvetkovic deals with Augustine’s influence on Bernard of Clairvaux’s and William of St. Thierry’s theory of the mystical union. In Cvetkovic’s view, Bernard and William held Augustine as normative, though they differed from his interpretation. Bernard reproduced
Augustine’s use of 1 Cor 16:17 (Qui adhaeret Domino, unus spiritus est) as a foundational text for his mystical theology and professed that the unity between the Son and the Father is different from the unity between God and the human soul, the latter being a union of will and established by love. On the other hand, William recovered the Augustinian concept of the Holy Spirit as love, which was not used by Bernard; this allowed William to build a more optimistic view of the union of the human being with God.

Although the question of the formation of biblical canons has been one of the most debated in scholarship, this book shows how it is still possible to explore it in original ways, though nonsystematically. The multidisciplinary approach chosen by the authors undoubtedly helps the reader to look at the canonization and authorization processes from fresh perspectives, often linked with dominant themes of contemporary historical research, such as orality and textuality, identity construction, social formation, and Wirkungsgeschichte. Although the language and argumentations are generally very clear and the bibliography often essential (sometimes too much essential!), the complexity of its theoretical perspectives makes this reading suitable to scholars or at least advanced students with a strong background on the subject.