"Modern historians insist that the formation of the Christian biblical canon did not differ from other historical processes and was driven by human agency. What does this mean for biblical authority? This conversation among diverse scholars is a fascinating case study in the varied responses of Christian intellectuals to the challenges posed by modernity."

—David Brakke,
Joe R. Engle Chair in the History of Christianity
and professor of history, The Ohio State University

"This collection of diverse perspectives on the formation and current status of the New Testament canon is an excellent guide for students in understanding a discourse of growing importance among biblical scholars. Stan Porter and Ben Laird's introductory and concluding chapters are exceptional and nicely frame and focus a series of essays from five scholars of differing faith traditions, East and West, and their competing perspectives on the global church's biblical canon(s). The social and historical contexts into which the canonical process was earthed in antiquity are carefully considered. But so are the variety of ongoing theological and existential implications that follow from each contributor's reconstruction of what happened at ground level when the New Testament was formed and received as the church's Scripture during the early centuries of the common era. This collection includes a dialogue between the different contributors that sound a range of agreements and disagreements that classrooms and conferences could take up and explore with new vitality. Like every good textbook, this collection invites more questions than it provides answers. I highly recommend *Five Views on the New Testament Canon* as a fluent and balanced introduction to students interested in the historical origins of the New Testament in both East and West; it is that rare introduction that promises to cue even more consequential questions of the New Testament's continuing importance in forming Christian faith."

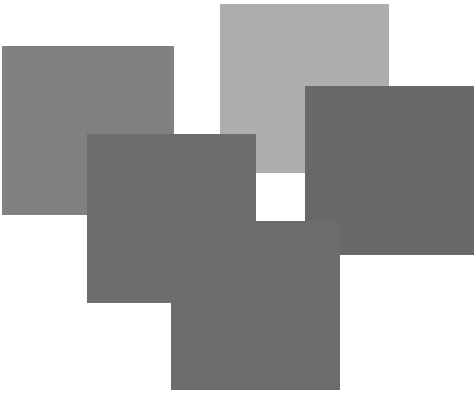
—Robert W. Wall
The Paul T. Walls Professor Emeritus
of Scripture & Wesleyan Studies,
Seattle Pacific University and Seminary

"This volume is a welcome addition to the Viewpoints series, for discussions on the canon of the New Testament have reached an exciting stage, and the five representative views clarify points of agreement and bones of contention between scholars and further the discussion in a useful way. What excites me most is that arguments over the historical origins and development of the canon have led to a fruitful consideration of the ways in which the canon influences the interpretation of the sacred books. The shape of the canon is hermeneutically significant; it makes a difference to how we read this collection of revered writings. In other words, scholars on canon are beginning to ask and answer the important 'So what?' question. What difference does the position of a book in the canon or its place in a mini-collection of canonical books (e.g., the Four Gospels Corpus, the Catholic Epistles) make to how it is read and applied? The fact that the five scholars give different answers does not diminish the importance of what they are saying but only makes it more interesting, for this provides a range of interpretive options for Bible readers to consider."

—Greg Goswell
academic dean, lecturer in Old Testament,
postgraduate coordinator,
Christ College

"Without question, canon formation is one of the most challenging issues in Old and New Testament inquiry today. This is compounded because no one in antiquity preserved this story, and so multiple—often conflicting—interpretations have emerged from engagement with limited surviving primary sources often rooted in perspectives foreign to the sources themselves. The good news is that we now know more than was possible earlier because of careful scholarly research in recent years, including from the contributors to this volume. I applaud their efforts to bring greater clarity to this story and the multiple conflicting perspectives involved in it. I highly recommend this volume to readers."

—Lee Martin McDonald,
Acadia Divinity College, Acadia University



FIVE VIEWS ON THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

STANLEY E. PORTER • BENJAMIN P. LAIRD
EDITORS

JASON DAVID BEDUHN • IAN BOXALL • DARIAN R. LOCKETT
DAVID R. NIENHUIS • GEORGE L. PARSENIOS
CONTRIBUTORS

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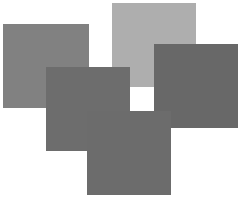

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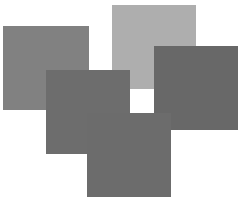


PREFACE

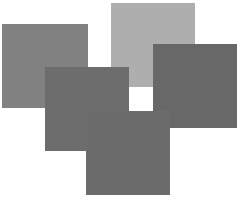
The issue of the formation of the New Testament canon has again become a topic of major discussion. We are pleased with that, because we believe that this is a topic that warrants further exploration. This is not least because there continue to be a wide range of scholarly views on the subject. Because these views are often linked with a variety of theological positions, there are often various and competing interests that insert themselves into the discussion. This volume is an attempt to help sort through many of the issues by providing a means for advocates of some of the various opinions to offer their statements on behalf of these positions and then respond to the proposals of others.

We wish to thank all those who have contributed to this volume in various ways. We first wish to thank our individual contributors. When we contacted each of them, we were not certain of the responses that we would receive. We are pleased that each one has taken his task seriously and offered scholarship of significance in the ongoing debate over the formation of the New Testament canon. We also appreciate their willingness to engage in scholarly debate by offering their essays for the scrutiny of others and their own responding to their colleagues' work. The spirit in which this has been offered has contributed to the enjoyment of working with each author. We also appreciate their timeliness and attention to detail, even though

much of the work on this volume occurred during unfortunate circumstances of enduring a global pandemic.

We also wish to thank all our friends at Kregel for their support of this project. From first to last, the people at Kregel have been supportive of the idea and then its execution in this volume. We wish to thank, in particular, Laura Bartlett for her attention to all facets of this project, including details that others might overlook, as well as Robert Hand, who provided excellent guidance throughout the process. We also wish to thank Shawn Vander Lugt for again so expertly managing this book through production.

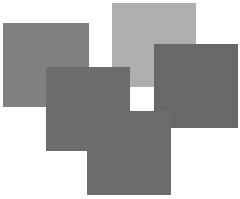
Each of the editors wishes to thank the other for the opportunity to work together on this project. What began as a chance meeting at one of their doctoral examinations has become a friendship shared over common interests. We look forward to further work together.



ABBREVIATIONS

ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
BBR	*Bulletin of Biblical Research*
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BIB	*Biblica*
BMSEC	Baylor-Mohr Siebeck Studies in Early Christianity
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
EC	*Early Christianity*
EKK	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ExAud	*Ex auditu*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JRS	*The Journal of Roman Studies*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series

JTI	*Journal of Theological Interpretation*
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
MPER	Mitteilungen aus der Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek
NPNF	The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PPSD	Pauline and Patristic Scholars in Debate
RivB	*Rivista biblica italiana*
SBR	Studies of the Bible and Its Reception
SE	*Studia Evangelica*
SP	Sacra Pagina
TENT	Texts and Editions for New Testament Study
TS	*Theological Studies*
VC	*Vigiliae Christianae*



CONTRIBUTORS

Jason David BeDuhn (PhD, Indiana University Bloomington), Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona

Ian Boxall (DPhil, University of Oxford), The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC

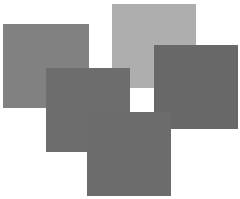
Benjamin P. Laird (PhD, University of Aberdeen), John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia

Darian R. Lockett (PhD, University of St. Andrews), Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, La Mirada, California

David R. Nienhuis (PhD, University of Aberdeen), Seattle Pacific University and Seattle Pacific Seminary, Seattle, Washington

George L. Parsenios (PhD, Yale University), Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Brookline, Massachusetts

Stanley E. Porter (PhD, University of Sheffield), McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Stanley E. Porter and Benjamin P. Laird

Within a fairly short time of their formation as a recognizable group, Christians began using written texts for a variety of purposes. These texts provided a record of developments within the early church, served as a central medium for the proclamation of their message, and offered a means of providing necessary instruction and exhortation. The use of written works in Christian communities may not seem especially remarkable today, but we must not overlook what they indicate about the roots of Christianity and the literary environment in which they originated. Jesus is not known to have composed any written documents, and only a small percentage of early Christians were literate or had the means to purchase works of literature. Despite these factors, early Christians are known to have composed and circulated a large body of writings. This is clearly attested by a considerable number of writings—both canonical and noncanonical—that have survived from the early centuries of the Christian era. Christianity was, and continues

to be, a movement known for its emphasis on written testimony and instruction.

The fact that written texts played such an important function in early Christianity may not seem that profound or significant to those living today, given that the majority of the world's major religions now recognize the authority of a specific collection of writings. To varying degrees, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists, to name just some of the more prominent religions in the modern world, commonly recognize a body of religious writings as authoritative scripture. Outside of Judaism, however, the prominent role of written texts would have been unusual in the first-century Greco-Roman world. Unlike many Greeks and Romans, whose religious experience was often limited to prescribed cultic practices and public gatherings, Christians were known for the emphasis they placed on the public reading and study of religious writings and for the formative role that these texts served in their teaching and doctrine.

Because literacy rates in the first-century Mediterranean world are known to have been relatively low, it might be assumed that the use of Scripture was largely limited to theologians, church leaders, and perhaps a small number of other educated individuals who were fortunate enough to have access to these writings. As we examine the practices associated with early Christian worship, however, and as we consider the ways in which ancient literature was read in public settings, the plausibility of this conclusion begins to diminish. As Harry Gamble helpfully explains, "It may seem paradoxical to say both that Christianity placed a high value on texts and that most Christians were unable to read, but in the ancient world this was no contradiction. In Greco-Roman society the illiterate had access to literacy in a variety of public settings."[1]

1. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 8.

One interesting reference to the role of Scripture in the life of the early church appears in the extant writings of the second-century apologist Justin Martyr. At the end of his monumental work known as the *First Apology*, Justin famously describes some of the primary activities that took place when Christians gathered together, one of which was the public reading of Scripture: "And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things."[2] Of note in this brief description is Justin's assertion that the reading of Scripture was a common practice during public gatherings of Christians. While many Christians would not have owned private copies of the Scriptures or even had the ability to read them, Justin's description would suggest that those who routinely took part in a gathering of the local church would have acquired a familiarity with the content of these writings through the common exercise of public reading.[3] It is also noteworthy that Justin refers not only to "the prophets," a general reference to the writings contained in the Old Testament, but also to the "memoirs of the apostles," a clear reference to the New Testament Gospels. This would suggest not

2. *1 Apol.* 67 (ANF 01). A similar statement may be found in Tertullian's *Apology* (*Apol.* 39).

3. For additional insight pertaining to the role of public reading in early Christian gatherings, see Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2009); Brian J. Wright, *Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017); Paul Borgman and Kelley James Clark, *Written to Be Heard: Recovering the Messages of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). However, we must also remember that there were those who could read these texts. Over the course of time, a system of manuscript markings was developed to guide readers. These are known as ekphonetic notation and are found on numerous ancient biblical manuscripts, especially those used liturgically. Such notation is often not included in editions of ancient manuscripts. For some major exceptions, see Stanley E. Porter and Wendy J. Porter, *New Testament Greek Papyri and Parchments. New Editions: Texts*, *Plates*, 2 vols., MPER 29, 30 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), esp. nos. 24 and 40.

only that the public reading of Scripture was common during Christian gatherings, but that it included the ancient Jewish writings as well as a diverse collection of freshly composed Christian works.

The use of Scripture, of course, was not an aberration during a unique period of Christian history. For nearly two millennia, the New Testament writings have served as an important foundation of the church's doctrine, shaped the church's mission, and provided inspiration to countless readers. It is, in fact, no exaggeration to conclude that the New Testament has been the most influential collection of writings—religious or otherwise—since the time they were composed some two millennia ago. Despite the profound influence that the New Testament writings have played in shaping the church's doctrine and teaching and the affection that they continue to receive today, several of the events and factors that played a role in the formation of the New Testament canon remain a matter of dispute, as does the canon's theological basis and hermeneutical significance. Many contemporary readers have serious questions regarding the historical factors that led to the origin of the New Testament—questions that often have very practical implications for one's understanding of Christianity. How do we know that the correct books were selected? Who was responsible for determining what material was included? What makes one writing more authoritative than another? Was the concept of a "canon" of agreed-upon authoritative writings merely a later invention? Was this process designed to suppress certain forms of Christianity that were viewed as unacceptable? These are just a few of the types of important questions that linger in the minds of many today.

It does not take much imagination to appreciate the significance of these types of questions for one's understanding of the Christian faith. Depending on one's perspective, the writings contained in the New Testament might be regarded as the authoritative and trustworthy witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ or as simply the extant records of one version of

Christianity that rose to prominence at some point during the post-apostolic period. This book is designed to provide a variety of perspectives on important questions such as those raised above. Whether one is a student formally studying the New Testament for the first time or has engaged in serious study of the background and origins of the New Testament for many years, our hope is that the present volume will provide useful information and insight that will enable readers to become familiar with the major issues in the canon debate and how they are addressed by scholars from various backgrounds. More will be said later in this introduction about the objectives and content of this volume. It will be helpful to begin, however, with a brief survey of scholarship relating to the New Testament canon and the major issues that are often disputed.

A Brief History of Prior Discussion of the New Testament Canon

The subject of the New Testament canon has elicited significant interest in recent scholarship, resulting in the publication of numerous works that attempt to lay out the major parameters of the discussion. This has not always been the case, however, as scholars took up the subject of the canon's formation only infrequently during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century and rarely at all before then. As Bruce Metzger explains,

> Throughout the Middle Ages questions were seldom raised as to the number and identity of the books comprising the canon of the New Testament. Even during the period of the Renaissance and Reformation, despite occasional discussions (such as those by Erasmus and Cajetan) concerning the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews, several of the Catholic Epistles, and the Book or Revelation, no one dared seriously to dispute their canonicity.[4]

4. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 11.

Through the sixteenth century, the canon's status was largely unquestioned, despite several lingering questions regarding the authorship and background of several of the canonical writings. The legitimacy of the canon was largely taken for granted and was not a subject of significant scholarly curiosity or inquiry. However, as scholars during the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods began to focus more intently on issues relating to the historical background of the individual canonical writings, questions relating to the canon's formation and legitimacy began to be pursued with greater rigor. This was to be expected, of course, as challenges to the traditional view of the authorship and dating of the biblical writings have natural implications for one's understanding of the formation of the New Testament canon.

From roughly the seventeenth century until the middle of the nineteenth century, the study of the canon proceeded mostly in fits and starts. During this time, scholars began to explore various aspects of the canon's development and produced a variety of scholarly works, albeit much less frequently than works on the canon are typically produced today.[5] It was during the middle of the nineteenth century that scholarship relating to the formation of the canon began to increase in earnest. Since this time, a number of articles, monographs, and other scholarly works have been published on virtually all aspects of the canon. These works seem to have appeared in three major waves before the present resurgence, which we will briefly outline below. Our objective here is not to provide an exhaustive history of research relating to the New Testament canon but rather to account for the seminal works that have shaped scholarly discussion. We fully recognize that, in addition to what we mention here, other scholarly works on canon have

5. For an overview of the scholarship related to the New Testament canon prior to the twentieth century, see Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 11–24.

been published since the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it is worth noting some of the enduring works in the field.[6]

Works to note from the middle of the nineteenth century include the English scholar Brooke Foss Westcott's surprisingly thorough historical study that attaches appendices with much of the evidence still considered in discussions of canon.[7] Westcott's work on canon, which went through seven editions over forty years, is still worth consulting, even if it is usually neglected in contemporary debate, as it provides a historically grounded argument for early canon formation by a theologically oriented New Testament scholar. The German scholar Heinrich Holtzmann wrote a similar kind of book at about the same time, in which he argues for a historically grounded Protestant (Lutheran) view of the canon in distinction to a Roman Catholic view that emphasized tradition.[8] Their work was followed by the more progressive historical-critical scholarship of the Alsatian scholar Edouard Reuss, who argues for a later date of canonical formation and acceptance, in his thorough history from the earliest Greek manuscripts to the nineteenth century.[9]

A second major wave of scholarship on the canon took place near the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. During these years, several notable works on the New Testament canon were published by some of the most enduring figures in the discussion. The most thorough but in some ways most problematic treatment of the New Testament

6. For additional treatment of scholarship on the canon produced during the twentieth century, see Harry Y. Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis," in *The Canon Debate*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 267–94; Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 25–36.
7. Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 7th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1896).
8. Heinrich Julius Holtzmann, *Kanon und Tradition: Ein Beitrag zur neueren Dogmengeschichte und Symbolik* (Ludwigsburg: Ferdinand Riehm, 1859).
9. Edouard Reuss, *Histoire de canon des écritures saintes dans l'église Chrétienne* (Strasbourg: Treuttel et Wurtz, 1863); ET of 2nd ed. of 1863: *History of the Canon of the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Church*, trans. David Hunter (Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1884).

canon was written by the German scholar Theodor Zahn,[10] who provides extensive documentation of sources in very full footnotes throughout. His work was instrumental in formulating some of the enduring theories regarding canon formation such as the early use of the canonical writings in Christian worship, but he is inconsistent regarding the date of canon formation. He apparently wanted to argue for an early, pre-Marcionite form of an incipient canon but recognized that there was still flux even past 200 CE. He was promptly attacked for his conclusions regarding the significance of 200 CE by Adolf Harnack, who argued for a later date than Zahn, with both of them responding to the possible influence of Marcion.[11] Not to be outdone, the French Roman Catholic scholar Alfred Loisy, writing at approximately the same time as Zahn, published a thorough and in some ways equivalent treatment of the topic in French, just years before he was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic church for his modernist views, not least his elevation of critical biblical scholarship over the traditions and dogma associated with Catholicism.[12] With respect to the biblical writings, Loisy criticizes the conviction that some works were of divine origin, describing this belief as "naïve," "inconceivable," and "artificial and fragile."[13] Further contributions to the discussion were made by the German scholar Hans Lietzmann, who succeeded Harnack at Berlin, in a short volume that recognizes

10. Theodor Zahn, *Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons*, 2 vols. (Erlangen: Deichert, 1888–1892). Zahn wrote a shorter summary of his view in Zahn, *Grundriss der Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons: Eine Ergänzung zu der Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1904). The first volume of Zahn's work is critically and insightfully reviewed by Alfred Plummer, "Zahn on the New Testament Canon," *Classical Review* 3 (1892): 410–12.
11. Adolf Harnack, *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200* (Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1889); ET: *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (New York: Macmillan, 1925).
12. Alfred Loisy, *Histoire du canon du Nouveau Testament* (Paris: J. Maisonneuve, 1891); ET: *The Origins of the New Testament*, trans. L. P. Jacks (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950).
13. Loisy, *The Origins of the New Testament*, 10–11.

the continuing difficulties of the canonical question,[14] and by Caspar René Gregory who treats both canon and text (although canon in 290 pages).[15] A similar though much abbreviated work was written by the Scottish classicist Alexander Souter, who also provides forty pages of documents pertinent to the discussion of canon (most untranslated from their original sources).[16]

One of the frequent elements of the first two waves of discussion of the New Testament canon—besides their often exhaustive recounting and treatment of the early documentary sources—is their attention to canon formation and its importance up to and including the sixteenth century or so, a feature that is often not treated at length, and sometimes at all, in the later discussions. Nevertheless, we see that regardless of the orientation of the author and the nature of their conclusions, similar issues regarding history, theology, the role of the church and tradition, and the importance of various forms of evidence, among others, continue to emerge in discussion of the New Testament canon.

A third surge in studies of the New Testament canon took place in the 1960s and lasted until the 1980s. One of the first significant works on canon published during this period was that of the German church historian Hans Campenhausen.[17] This thorough and well-documented treatment of the New Testament canon reflects a new trend in canon studies in that it is only concerned to treat in detail the period up to Origen. During the 1980s, the work by William Farmer and Denis Farkasfalvy combines the interests and approaches of a Protestant (Methodist) and a Roman Catholic, with their emphases

14. Hans Lietzmann, *Wie wurden die Bücher des Neuen Testaments heilige Schrift? Fünf Vorträge*, Lebensfragen (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1907).
15. Caspar René Gregory, *Canon and Text of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1907), esp. 5–295.
16. Alexander Souter, *Text and Canon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1954).
17. Hans Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968); ET: *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (London: A&C Black, 1972).

upon the early church and the church fathers.[18] This period may conveniently be closed by noting the book on canon by Metzger, who recognizes the relatively neglected study of canon.[19] Just a year later, F. F. Bruce published his book on the biblical canon, which focuses mostly upon the New Testament writings.[20] The works of Metzger and Bruce are notable for their evaluation of a variety of historical witnesses to the early state of the canon, their consideration of several factors that may have prompted the formation and recognition of the canon, and their discussion of various theological matters that had previously received only scant attention.[21]

Scholarly engagement with the subject of the canon has continued steadily since the 1990s. Since this time, a number of journal articles, essays, and specialized studies on various aspects of the canon have been published. As a general observation, works produced since the 1990s on the entirety of the canon have been written for a more popular audience, while the more scholarly works have tended to focus on particular aspects of the canon's formation such as a particular canonical subcollection, the reception of the New Testament writings in the extant works of historical figures (e.g., Papias or Irenaeus), or the significance of a particular witness to the early state of the canon such as the Muratorian Fragment, the *Diatessaron*, or the canon of Marcion.

Subjects that have received a greater degree of attention in recent years include the emergence of the various canonical subcollections (e.g., the fourfold Gospel, the Pauline corpus,

18. William R. Farmer and Denis M. Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon: An Ecumenical Approach* (New York: Paulist, 1983).
19. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*.
20. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Glasgow: Chapter House; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 115–251.
21. Additional works of note published during the 1960s through the 1980s include C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1962); Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1965); Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Moule's volume was revised in subsequent editions in 1966 and 1981.

and the Catholic Epistles) and the insight that our knowledge of ancient literary conventions may provide for how collections of writings were typically assembled, distributed, and reproduced. Unlike the seminal works of the past that focused primarily or even exclusively on historical matters, many contemporary scholars have expressed significant interest in hermeneutical questions related to the canon, many of which are taken up by the contributors of this volume.

Although a substantial number of scholarly works have been published over the last three decades on the reception of certain canonical writings, one or more early witnesses to the canon, and a number of additional subjects, we may briefly highlight three volumes published since the 1990s that have contributed to the study of the New Testament canon as a whole. Lee Martin McDonald's 2007 publication of *The Biblical Canon* covers the entire canon and devotes roughly two hundred pages and several appendices to the New Testament writings.[22] McDonald has published additional works on the New Testament canon, many of which expand upon the content of this volume. A second volume is Tomas Bokedal's 2014 monograph that seeks to "draw the reader's attention to historical dimensions of the canon and its interpretive possibilities for our time."[23] While recognizing that the formation of the canon was a historical process, Bokedal places attention on the theological significance of the canon and textual features that point to its normative function in the life of the church. A third work is Edmon Gallagher and John Meade's study of early canonical lists.[24] A number of earlier authors cited above include such lists, but this volume provides a thorough treatment of the lists

22. Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007). This volume builds upon two prior editions, the second of which was published in 1995.
23. Tomas Bokedal, *The Formation and Significance of the Christian Biblical Canon: A Study in Text, Ritual and Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), xiii.
24. Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

found in the writings of church fathers, biblical manuscripts, and other sources, all with English translations.

Major Issues in the Canon Debate

Despite a proliferation of scholarly publications that have been produced over the last two centuries on virtually every facet of the New Testament canon, scholars often disagree over fundamental questions relating to the canon's formation as well as a variety of theological and hermeneutical matters. Before presenting various perspectives on the canon, it is helpful first to offer a brief overview of some major points of contention.

The historical questions regarding the canon are numerous and wide-ranging. While we cannot discuss or even identify each of the historical questions that have been debated in recent decades, we may briefly mention four disputed subjects that are central to the debate over the canon's composition and early formation. These are: (1) the biblical authors' self-understanding, (2) the major factors which prompted the formation of the canon, (3) the process involved in the canon's formation, and (4) the question of authorship and apostolic authority.

We will briefly treat each of these issues in order. (1) There is significant disagreement regarding the sense in which the biblical authors understood the nature of their own writings. When an author such as Paul composed an epistle, did he anticipate that it would be regarded as Scripture or even as part of a larger body of writings that would be read by Christians in future centuries, or did he simply seek to address matters of immediate concern with no thought of its future use? To state the question differently, if Paul or one of the other authors of the New Testament writings were alive today, would they be surprised to learn that their works were preserved and still being read, or would they express disappointment that they were not being read as often or taken as seriously as they envisioned? The occasional nature of the New Testament writings—for example, Paul wrote his letters to address current issues in local churches—is often emphasized, and rightly so. The biblical authors clearly

wrote with identifiable audiences in mind and sought to address matters that they perceived to be relevant to their unique situation and that of their readers. The situation facing the original audience and the circumstances that prompted an author to write are certainly more apparent in some writings than others, yet the occasional nature of the New Testament writings is widely acknowledged. What is more difficult to determine, of course, is what the authors of the New Testament believed about the nature of their work. Did they believe that their writings were of relevance to those who were not among the original recipients? Did they anticipate that their works would be preserved and ultimately read by Christians around the world and treated as authoritative Scripture? By accepting certain writings as canonical Scripture, are modern Christians ascribing certain attributes to the writings that were not anticipated by the original authors? Many would argue that a writing's occasional nature does not preclude its status as authoritative Scripture or its universal relevance today, yet the precise sense in which the authors of the New Testament understood the nature of their writings remains a matter of dispute.

(2) There remains significant debate over the leading factors that prompted the formation of the New Testament canon. Some have suggested that the canon's emergence was a natural and organic process that was the inevitable result of the natural affinity that early Christians shared for the apostolic writings. No single event precipitated the formation of the canon, some have argued, and no organized body or individual was responsible for its establishment or determining its contents. There may not have been widespread agreement relating to the extent of the canon in the first few centuries of the Christian era, but the core elements of the New Testament were widely recognized. According to this perspective, those writings believed to be rooted in the apostolic period were quickly embraced as authoritative Scripture, and because of their elevated status, they eventually came to be recognized as a discrete literary collection.

Not all scholars are convinced, however, that the emergence of the canon was a natural process or even that the concept of canon had emerged during the first few centuries of the Christian movement. Many have concluded that there was no consensus in the early decades of the Christian era on which writings were to be regarded as Scripture and that it was not until the church was faced with significant internal division or some type of external threat that the need for an established body of apostolic writings became apparent. There may have been a basic concept of Scripture among early Christians, it might be argued, but it was not until decades or even centuries later that the concept of a canon emerged. This emergence of a canon, it has been suggested, was likely prompted by the recognition that the church needed an established body of authoritative writings that could be used to suppress theological movements regarded as aberrant and harmful and to more carefully define the beliefs that were to be the essence of the Christian faith. Some have speculated that it was the influence of the second-century heretic Marcion or the threat of Gnostic Christianity during the second century that led the church's leadership to reject some writings and to elevate the status of those now regarded as canonical. Others, on the other hand, have contended that the universal recognition of the canon does not appear to have taken place until the fourth century when the church's leaders sought to unite a diverse network of Christian communities throughout the Roman world around a unified body of doctrine. This effort was a necessary measure to confront various theological controversies such as the one instigated by the subordinationist Christological teaching of Arius that was opposed by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE.

(3) Scholars differ in the ways in which they account for the actual process of the canon's formation. With such a diverse body of writings composed by various authors, each of whom wrote during a different time, in a unique place, and under different circumstances, it is only natural to ask how the writings of the canon came together and emerged as a single

literary collection recognized by Christians around the world. For some, the process likely had more to do with the reception of the individual writings than with specific circumstances or events that may have made an immediate impact on which writings were included in the collection. It might be argued, for example, that Christian readers naturally gravitated to writings that were regarded as foundational to the faith, theologically sound, and practically significant. As collections of early Christian writings circulated, certain writings were commonly present and remained popular, while the circulation of others was largely limited to certain locations and eventually waned in popularity. By the fourth or fifth century, the writings now contained in the New Testament had stood the test of time, so to speak, and remained widely esteemed for their connection to the apostles, their theological importance, their fidelity to the teaching of Christ and the apostles, and their practical relevance for Christian living.

A similar understanding of the canon's development also affirms that the formation of the canon was a gradual and natural process, but it places more emphasis on the development of various subcollections. As will be discussed further below, most of the canonical writings first circulated as part of one of three or four smaller subcollections of Christian writings. We find evidence, for example, for the early circulation of the fourfold Gospel, the Pauline Epistles, and the Catholic Epistles—the last of which occasionally circulated alongside of Acts—and possibly some of the Johannine writings.[25] Because of the existence of these smaller collections, it might be suggested that the formation of the canon was simply the result of the eventual combination of the smaller collections into a single codex, a process that would have been quite natural at the time.

Others are more inclined to assume that specific events or threats to the church were largely responsible for the formation

25. See Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 84–124.

of the canon. As previously noted, the perceived need for a collection of authoritative writings is often thought to have emerged when the church faced various theological controversies and when its leadership sought to unite against certain theological systems of thought deemed aberrant or seen as a threat to the church's unity. It was in response to such threats that the church's leadership actively suppressed and marginalized some writings and elevated the importance of others. Consequently, it may be said that the church's leadership—leadership that was very much tied to the state by the middle of the fourth century—was largely responsible for establishing which writings were to be regarded as authoritative Scripture and for shaping the canonical collection that has been passed down over the centuries. Those who hold to this perspective tend to understand the emergence of the canon more as a consciously planned ecclesial event than as a natural or spontaneous development.

(4) A fourth major historical matter of controversy relates to the subject of authorship and the scope of apostolic literature. As a result of the developments during the Enlightenment period, biblical scholars began to question much more strenuously the authenticity and the traditional view of authorship of numerous writings in the New Testament. Scholars began to challenge, for example, the tradition that the Gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the authenticity of several of the epistles ascribed to authors such as Paul, Peter, and John. Unwilling to take anything for granted and equipped with new methodological approaches to the study of ancient texts, scholars began to scrutinize the language and content of each writing and to ascertain what the content of each work might reveal about the historical context in which it was written. These studies often concluded that the New Testament canon includes several inauthentic writings produced during the late first and even as late as the mid-second centuries. The nineteenth-century German theologian F. C. Baur, for example, famously argued

that the authentic epistles in the Pauline letter corpus were limited to Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians, a collection which he referred to as the *Hauptbriefe* (the primary or main letters). Many other scholars embraced similar positions (or, in some cases, even more extreme ones), concluding that several of the canonical epistles were written by the companions of the apostles or by their later admirers who sought to evoke the apostles' authority to combat theological controversies or simply to contextualize the teaching of the apostles for subsequent generations of Christians. Many concluded, for example, that the Pastoral Epistles were written long after Paul's lifetime, as late as the mid-second century, to combat the rise of Gnostic Christianity or the teachings of Marcion.

It is not difficult to recognize the ways in which one's viewpoint on the authorship of the New Testament writings will invariably influence one's understanding of the formation of the canon or perspective on its contemporary relevance. To return to the Pauline letter corpus, the determination that several of the epistles attributed to Paul are later pseudepigraphal works will naturally demand that one embrace the position that this collection did not emerge until several decades after Paul's lifetime, perhaps even as late as the mid-second century, or that new writings such as Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, and the Pastorals continued to be added to the collection at various points after Paul's martyrdom. As this example effectively illustrates, scholarly perspectives on the emergence of the canon are often shaped less by the earliest and most relevant historical witnesses to the canon and more by critical assessments of the authorship of the individual writings. One would be hard-pressed to find evidence in the historical sources, for example, that the authenticity of Ephesians or Colossians was seriously questioned in the early church or that these writings only began to circulate as part of the Pauline corpus some years after the collection emerged. When these writings are determined to have been written years after the lifetime of Paul, however, theories that hold to a later emergence of the corpus

or its gradual expansion in subsequent decades become more attractive and even necessary.

In addition to these significant historical issues, scholars have offered a variety of perspectives on diverse theological matters pertaining to the canon. This may be seen, for example, in how scholars have articulated the basis of the canon's authority. Now that the extent of the canon has been widely recognized, do the canonical writings remain authoritative for Christians living today? If so, what is the basis of this authority? Do the works of the New Testament bear authority because of their intrinsic nature, because of their apostolic origins, because they were deemed authoritative by the church at a particular point in time, or simply because God in his providence led the church to make use of them? These types of questions have been answered in a variety of ways and continue to be debated.

As noted above, it is commonly thought that the church's leadership was largely responsible for establishing and shaping the canon of Scripture. This viewpoint often leads to the related conclusion that the authority of the canonical writings—whether real or perceived—is based upon its reception by the early church. Contrary to what some might expect, those who point to the reception of a writing as the basis of its authority often hold differing perspectives on the significance of authorship. For some, the human hand behind the composition of the writings is inconsequential. Whether a writing was composed by the apostle Peter in the first century or an unknown Christian writer in the early second century, a writing such as 2 Peter should be recognized as authoritative because of its reception by the church. Interestingly, this type of reasoning may be observed among those who hold very different viewpoints about authorship and the role of inspiration. Some may argue, for example, that the New Testament contains several pseudepigraphal writings but that the pseudepigraphal nature of a work does not negate its authoritative status. What matters is that God in his providence saw fit to include these writings in the biblical canon and that they bear

witness to divine truths. On the other hand, those who deny the presence of pseudepigraphal works in the canon might affirm the authority of an anonymous work such as Hebrews based on the conviction that God has likewise led the church to embrace it as authoritative Scripture. In sum, many hold that each of the writings of the canon, regardless of the human author, has been effectively used to inform, inspire, and encourage God's people and should not be rejected or relegated to secondary status simply because of a particular judgment about the circumstances surrounding its composition.

Not all who attribute the canon's perceived authority to its reception by the church agree that the New Testament writings continue to bear authority today. According to some scholars, there is a notable difference between perceived and actual authority. The church may have recognized certain writings as canonical, but this does not change the nature of the writings or make them any more authoritative today. Why should the canonical writings be recognized as authoritative by modern readers simply because they were recognized as such by Christians during a particular time in history? According to this line of thinking, canonicity is merely a historical designation that is incapable of altering the inherent nature of human writings. The writings produced by early Christians, whether or not they were ultimately recognized as canonical, are human compositions that are little more than expressions of personal perspectives on matters of religious interest. They describe notable events, reflect on various theological subjects, and offer instruction on pertinent matters facing the church during a particular time, but those who penned these works were certainly not flawless and often treated these subjects in a manner that reveals their personal biases, antiquated thinking, and unrefined thought. Contemporary readers may resonate with the content of the canonical writings and find its instruction to be a helpful guide for living the Christian faith in modern contexts, but this does not change the fact that these writings are merely human reflections on ancient events and matters of theological

interest. That certain writings came to be recognized as canonical Scripture may be observed as a matter of historical fact, but this historical development should not be confused with actual or intrinsic authority.

A far different explanation of the authority of the writings is shared by those who affirm the divine inspiration of the canonical writings and/or the authority of certain writers. Rather than attributing the authority of the canonical writings to their early reception by the church—a reception marked primarily by the widespread use of writings in public worship—or to a particular ecclesiastical body at some point in church history, others have argued that the authority of the writings should be based upon their status as inspired Scripture. According to this perspective, the church simply affirmed or recognized the writings that could be traced back to the apostles and their close companions and bore the characteristics of divine inspiration—characteristics such as catholicity and orthodoxy. According to this perspective, the recognition of a writing's authority is not to be confused with the basis of its authority. The New Testament writings remain authoritative today, it might be argued, because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, not because they were received by the church in general or recognized by an ecclesial body during a particular time in church history. As Michael Kruger has contended, "Books do not become canonical—they are canonical because they are the books God has given as a permanent guide for his church. Thus, from this perspective, it is the existence of the canonical books that is determinative, not their function or reception."[26] One of the challenges to this perspective, of course, is determining how one is to determine which writings were in fact inspired. Is this a subjective opinion based upon one's evaluation of a writing's content? Is it an inadvertent recognition of the church's authority given that it equates the inspired writings with those the

26. Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 40.

church received? Alternatively, is it based on the identity of the human authors, a viewpoint that makes one's critical assessment of the historical background of the writings determinative? In sum, if inspiration is to be regarded as the basis of a writing's authority, how is this to be assessed? By weighing its content, by its historical reception, or by its human authorship?

Having discussed several of the major historical and theological issues that feature prominently in canon studies, we may finally observe that scholars often disagree about the possible hermeneutical significance of the canon. For some, one's reading of the New Testament is to be informed by the way the canonical writings are arranged and structured and by various intertextual features that are present throughout the text. Those who hold to this perspective often emphasize that the canonical structure of the New Testament did not arbitrarily develop and that readers should approach the text with an awareness of what the placement of a given writing may reveal about its canonical function, that is, the way it is designed to complement or provide balance to the other writings. According to this perspective, the New Testament is not to be read as an assortment of disparate writings with little connection to one another, but as part of a coherent story of redemptive history.

Scholars are drawn to canonical readings of the New Testament for a variety of reasons. For some, the canonical reading of Scripture is appropriate, even demanded, in view of the way the writings have been preserved. Because God led the church not only to recognize a specific collection of writings but to preserve them in a particular form, the form should not be overlooked or regarded as something of mere historical interest. Others seem drawn to a canonical interpretation of the New Testament for the practical reason that it elevates the importance of certain writings that historical-critical scholars have relegated to secondary status. For scholars such as Brevard Childs, a canonical reading of Scripture is a necessary antidote to the unfortunate consequences of biblical scholarship during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that deter-

mined that certain writings were inauthentic or products of the post-apostolic church.[27] Critical scholars may be correct in their judgment that certain writings are inauthentic, Childs and others have suggested, but misguided in relegating them to secondary status. A work's significance is to be measured not by its ability to withstand the judgments of historians but by the contribution it makes to the canon as a whole and its use in the life of the church. Rather than obscure relics of antiquity, the canonical writings have been preserved and treasured by the church for two millennia. As an illustration of how a canonical reading might shape one's perspective on the significant role of the writings deemed inauthentic by critical scholars, consider Childs' perspective on the Pastoral Epistles. In his work on the Pauline letter corpus, Childs suggested that these writings are designed to demonstrate to readers how the teachings of "Paul" were to be understood and applied in their contemporary context.[28] While Childs did not affirm the authenticity of the Pastorals, he nonetheless recognized the notable contribution that they make in providing clarity regarding the church's application of the Pauline writings in later contexts. As readers will observe in the chapters that follow, some of the contributors to this volume hold strongly to the necessity of a canonical approach to the New Testament but disagree on various subjects such as the role of the church in the canonical process and the historical background of the individual writings.

Another matter that seems to be unsettled among those who advocate a canonical interpretation is the extent to which the doctrine of inspiration applies to the canonical process. Should inspiration be limited to the composition of the texts, or might it also apply to the formation of the canon or even the

27. The same concern has also led many to embrace a so-called theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS). For this reason, many of those associated with the theological interpretation movement have been drawn to a canonical reading of Scripture.

28. Brevard S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 69–75.

arrangement of the material? At what point does inspiration end and human activity begin? Also, what is the relationship between inspiration and divine providence? Might it be possible to attribute certain aspects of the formation of the canon to inspiration and others to providence?

Despite some modern adherents, not all scholars are convinced of the legitimacy or even of the benefit of reading Scripture in a canonical manner. Such scholars might object that the original readers would not have had access to the broader canon and would, quite naturally, have read the writings independently and without the influence or even the awareness of a larger body of writings. Are we to suppose that early Christians were somehow disadvantaged by their inability to read the writings they received in their proper canonical context? Were the original readers of 1 Peter, for example, incapable of fully understanding and benefitting from this epistle without access to the other Catholic Epistles? Some might also object that discrepancies in how the writings were arranged and presented in different times and in different locations call canonical approaches to the reading of Scripture into question. If a canonical interpretation is to be recognized, which specific canonical arrangement is to be preferred? The extant biblical manuscripts attest to a noticeable degree of divergence in the way the individual writings were presented and arranged. Some manuscripts, for example, place the Catholic Epistles immediately after Acts, while others place them after the Pauline Epistles.[29] There are also differences in how the writings within a given subcollection are arranged. This is most apparent in the witnesses to the Pauline Epistles and Catholic Epistles. With regard to the Pauline Epistles, it has been observed that the writings were initially arranged on the basis of length. The only notable exception to this,

29. See Stanley E. Porter, "The Early Church and Today's Church: Insights from the Book of Acts," *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 17 (2015–2016): 72–100, esp. 73–75.

of course, is Hebrews. As the textual witnesses indicate, however, the placement of Hebrews at the end of the corpus was a later development that took place several centuries after the Pauline corpus first began to circulate.

In sum, many scholars remain reluctant to embrace canonical approaches to the study of the New Testament out of concern that the canonical features of the New Testament are later developments in church history that provide little assistance in understanding the original message of the biblical writers or how the canonical writings would have been understood by their readers. Proponents, of course, remain convinced that a canonical reading is demanded by the way the writings have been preserved and handed down over the centuries by the church, that some of the canonical features of the New Testament emerged prior to the post-apostolic period, and that a canonical reading provides a helpful correction to what they regard as the unfortunate neglect of certain writings.

What This Volume Aims to Accomplish

As we have observed, scholars continue to debate several significant questions relating to the canon, such as the precise circumstances that prompted the composition of each writing; the way the writings were collected, edited, distributed, and preserved; the basis of Scripture's authority; and the manner in which the canonical writings are to be interpreted and applied in modern contexts. Given the complex nature of the subject of canon, it is simply not possible for a single volume such as this to provide a comprehensive treatment of all facets of the canon's history or the many theological and hermeneutical subjects to which it relates. There are simply too many subjects to explore and too many perspectives to consider! Rather than attempting to offer a thorough overview of the history of the canon or focus on a particular aspect of its history, our objective in this volume is to provide readers with a unique opportunity to evaluate a variety of perspectives on the more foundational questions relating to the study of canon.