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Westar Institute Christianity Seminar

Spring 2020 Meetings

Scripture and Resistance Hybridity:

Without Canon

This paper is written for the Christianity Seminar of Westar Institute to fill several knowledge gaps in our Spring 2020 meeting in Santa Rosa. The occasion for this Spring meeting of the Seminar has its own clumsiness. As we come toward the end of Phase I of our Seminar's work that has covered more or less the first two hundred years of the early Christ movements, we have noticed that we have not had any meetings (or even sessions) about the first two centuries of writing in these movements. The clumsiness is partly and simply about the lack of study of what is certainly more than 850,000 words written by these movements in the first two centuries. But there is more clumsiness to celebrate and bemoan.

Almost all study of the writings of these first two centuries has begun and been dominated by something called The New Testament. And, since the documents of The New Testament were almost certainly written in those first 200 years, one might assume that the Seminar should have at least one meeting in the last eight years about the writings of The New Testament. But it is clear that The New Testament itself is not a document of the first two hundred years, so it would be yet another case of retrojecting a later canonical reality back into the first and second centuries. That is, it would be a core violation of our historical duties to treat The New Testament, which was at the earliest a fourth century document and perhaps as late as a sixth century document as belonging to the first two centuries.

Nevertheless, the Seminar's Steering Committee did think that we should have a meeting about all the early Christ movements' documents of the first two centuries. This paper aims to fill in several gaps as we consider that character of these writings in the first two centuries. My main foci are derivative of other scholarship and meant to cover some additional ground for the Seminar's consideration in Santa Rosa.

The first and main focus of this paper is derivative of the scholarship of Hebrew Bible scholar, David Carr at Union Theological Seminary in New York. It is part of Carr's longer scholarship on the emergence of the Hebrew Bible, and focuses on the important questions of the influence on "hellenistic" literary and educational culture in geographic and diasporic Israel. This paper follows Carr's own consciousness that such influence on hellenistic cultural in Israel effects the ways early Christ people's collection and bundling of their own writings. Here I focus on Carr's careful and innovative reading of hellenistic literary and educational culture relative to ancient meaning-making, emerging complex socio-cultural and religious identities, and the role and method of larger trajectories of writing collections in Hasmonean, second Temple, proto-rabbinic, and early Christ people settings.¹ In many regards, Carr's work and this paper's use of it complement and undergird the paper at this Santa Rosa meeting by Professor Christine Shea.²

The second and secondary focus of this paper is also derivative, but in this case of my own publication and scholarship on the formation of early Christ peoples' lists, collections, and bundlings of writings in the first five centuries. Here the purpose is to allow the Seminar to have a chance to come to speech and ballot about when The New Testament and canonical notions did and did not occur over the first eight centuries.³

Script, Scripture, and (Non)Canon in the Scholarship of David Carr⁴

¹ The Christianity Seminar Steering Committee invited Professor Carr in the summer of 2019 to present his work at the Westar Spring 2020 Santa Rosa Seminar. Although he enthusiastically sought to join us, an already scheduled trip abroad prevented him from being at the Santa Rosa meeting this March. Upon request from the Steering Committee Professor Carr thought a derivative paper by me about his work would be a good way for the Seminar to proceed.

² Title unavailable during the simultaneous writing of these two papers for this meeting, but available upon the reading of the paper at <https://www.westarinstitute.org>

³ Cf. Taussig, "Canon of the Bible," *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed., Steven L. McKenzie, Oxford University Press, 2014; Taussig, ed., *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2013, pp. 500-508.

⁴ Carr's larger work in this area includes a major set of books and papers (cf. below), but this paper borrows mostly from his *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 2004. Credit for ideas in this paper are due to Carr, and any digressions from his position are unintentional and the fault of this author. Some larger work of David. M. Carr in the area of script, scripture, and (non)canon can also be found in *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; *Introduction to the Old Testament: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2010; *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A.*

For the purposes of Westar’s Christianity Seminar, this paper concentrates on the origins of the (later) institutional and traditional “Christian” use of the term “canon.” Although the term “canon” is not appropriate for the Christianity Seminar Phase I’s historical treatment, it is important for the Seminar to be aware of the various and divergent origins of the later Christian term. Here the main purpose is to show that the later traditional use of “canon” did not come fully formed from Christian ideas or practices. Indeed, this paper wants first of all to propose—following Carr’s and others’ scholarship—that earlier practices of making lists, collecting, and promoting writings/readings often had different uses and ambitions. At the same time, this paper is eager to follow Carr in identifying ways these earlier practices brought important and complex commitments to the later Christian practices that have by and large been lost and/or rejected. Particularly, this paper hails Carr’s work for identifying postcolonial meanings⁵ and practices in the ingenious and complicated uses of lists of important writings in broader hellenistic Israel and by association in early Christ movements’ writing collections.

Crucial for Carr’s study is the second half of his book (Part II) which is given over to “Textuality and Education in the Eastern Hellenistic World.” Per Carr and others, by and large the hellenistic practice and meanings of making lists of important writings and promoting the public readings of these special writings on the lists derives from, expands, and modifies mostly classical⁶ and post-classical Greece and—to some extent—Rome.⁷ Hellenistic cultures

Sanders. Eds. R. Weis and D. Carr. JSOT Supplement Series 225. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996; “Untamable Text of an Untamable God: Genesis and Rethinking the Character of Scripture.” *Interpretation* 54 (2000):347-362.

⁵ “The concept of “hybridity” from postcolonial criticism can help articulate the complexity of the cultural interaction here. Postcolonial studies have shown a variety of ways in which formerly colonized cultures find themselves articulating their resistance to colonization through partially adopting cultural forms from their colonizers. Native Americans adopt specific forms of writing in the process of competing with the writing culture of European settlers. African writers explore what it might mean to write a specifically African novel. Asian communities pose their ancient writings as “Bibles” to balance the Christian Bibles often used by missionaries. Within the phenomenon of cultural contact, few cultural expressions—by colonizer or colonized—are pure. Instead, they are hybrid mixes. Often the influence of the colonizer is subtly present even in the very ways in which colonized peoples attempt to diverge from their colonizer’s cultural models. Cf., Carr 197.

⁶ “Under the guidance of the teacher...the students branched out in their reading, covering larger stretches of classic literature, such as Euripides, Isocrates, and others, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, that often occurred in the educational texts and standard lists found in ancient theorists such as Quintilian. As before, Homer took pride of place, but now portions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were used that had not been read and memorized; the student learned glossaries of Homeric language, lists could be constructed on moral ideas, and so on. Students no longer sang as much, but they still lead aloud, while also practicing adding accents to teach models and otherwise perfecting their oral demonstration of their comprehension of the given text.” Carr, 192,183.

frequently and energetically followed in multiple directions the lists of the classical Greek “good books” and produced creative additions for the lists of iconic⁸ and well-known Greek and Greco-Roman “classics”.⁹

“Roman-period educational theorists like Quintilian argued that it was especially important to introduce such fine literature at an early age lest impressionable young students be morally formed by sub-standard, contemporary writings (*Inst.* 18.5-6). So also, Pliny the Younger writes of how the student would start and return again and again to the same central texts and authors. Along the way, teachers provided some helps. For example, Roman period authors like Quintilian built on earlier Greek antecedents in composing and using *florilegia* (excerpt collections) consisting of literary extracts organized by moral or other categories.” Carr: 182.

Carr, whose primary work is in Hebrew Bible, ponders then especially the way hellenized greater Israel also made such lists and promoted reading them. Because greater Israel was for much of this time under direct or indirect Seleucid and/or Ptolemaic imperial rule, writing and reading in Greek versus Hebrew was contested. It is quite clear that much hellenistic literature and educational practice occurred in Israel, even to the extent of important Greek *gymnasium* education happening in Israel, especially in Jerusalem. Carr examines and summarizes these contestations about language and the educational character in second century BCE Israel:

In sum, these sources appear to reflect the unfolding of an increasingly hostile encounter that included a conflict between two forms of text-supported education-enculturation: (1) some form of Jewish education-enculturation into Torah observance, and (2) education-enculturation into a more broadly defined Hellenistic identity. Such education-enculturation seems to have coexisted in earlier Palestine, at least among its more elite groups, and Hellenistic education

⁷ Cf. paper by Professor Christine Shea in this meeting for more on Greek and Latin processes of collecting and promoting writings.

⁸ (T)he Hellenistic educational literature was distinguished from its counterparts in focusing almost exclusively on a set of human authors rather than claiming that the texts were divinely inspired or faithfully copied from bygone times by a set of divine scribes.” Carr, 185.

⁹ “Amid this variety in Hellenistic educational arrangements, we see the emergence of a remarkable consistency in what was taught. Indeed, past and present research has identified the Hellenistic period as having achieved a regularity in pedagogy that was not seen previously in Greek education....Looking more closely at these early teaching materials, we still see the abecedaries that were already attested for classical Greek education, but these were followed by more regularized series of other teaching materials, such as syllable lists, name lists, and lists of multisyllabic words.” Carr, 178,179.

appears to have continued after the revolt, despite the anti-Hellenistic protestations of some post-Hasmonean documents. (Carr: 257)

What is especially striking is Carr's close and complex examination of greater Israel's making lists, sometimes collecting, and regularly promoting what it wants to portray as iconic and well-known "classic" Hebrew writings.

The genius and power of greater Israel's energized production, promotion, and adjustment of groups of texts has to do with the way these various readings of "good books" challenge imperial domination and gives opportunities for more self-determination of the broad and diverse demographic of the people of Israel. Israel used larger learnings from hellenistic lists of writings and the resulting education produced both active resistance to hellenistic culture, presence, domination and a lively picture of alternative identities for larger Israel. Carr shows thoroughly how the lists of Israel's good books created resistance to hellenistic power and inventiveness and development of the growth greater self-understanding for Israel's people.

In particular, the way larger hellenistic collections of iconic and widespread writings were integrated into Israel's elaborated self-understanding and strategy allowed Israel as a diverse set of cultures to claim and develop their own collection of Hebrew writings. The renewal of reading Hebrew stories (instead of Greek classics) fostered anti-hellenistic expressions of a vivacious semi-independence from Greek and Roman domination and/or quasi-successful resistance to hellenistic imperialism. In what Carr correctly labels a post-colonial approach to hellenistic (Greco-Roman?) power, Israel's identities and abilities throughout the Mediterranean grew. Specifically, greater Israel found itself in the middle of an elaborative, innovative, and strategic building of its own writing collections and lists. This process was by and large open-ended and multiple in the groupings of writings that further developed for at least four centuries. Carr's overview has many different examples, but also clear overarching conclusions:

My argument is that this peculiar mix provided a crucial impetus for at least two developments: (1) the sharpening and hardening of the Jewish scriptures into a

purportedly pre-Hellenistic collection,¹⁰ and (2) the studied use of this hardened collection as the focal point of a Greek-like, yet Hebrew, educational process, a process privileging Judean elites and others educated in Hebrew Scriptures amid an increasingly expansive Hasmonean kingdom.

In terms of a larger sense of self-understandings for the diverse people of Israel in the Mediterranean, the hellenistic-based models of writing collections became for Israel successive resistance to some imperial attacks on Israel as people and viable long-term compromise and inventiveness in the face of Israel's loss of political independence and homeland.

Carr takes some time in this book—as he often does in his other books—to think out loud about the implications of this strategic postcolonial development of specific kinds of lists of readings. So, his Chapter 11, “The Origins of Scripture as a Hellenistic-Style Anti-Hellenistic Curriculum” is immediately followed by his Chapter 12, “Concluding Reflections on the Hellenistic Shaping of Jewish Scripture: From Temple to Synagogue and Church”. Although he does not say exactly this, I read Carr's assessment and appreciation of what he calls the “resistance hybridity” of hellenistic Israel as a very close parallel with the early Christ peoples' pre-canonical lists of writings (270). The likes of the letters of Paul, Irenaeus' praise of his own invention of a collection of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as “four winds that blow” and “four corners of the earth,” the bundling of Johannine letters, collections of martyr stories, Marcion's bundling of Luke and Paul, some gathered letters of Ignatius, and Tatian's Diatessaron might be parallel to the hellenistic lists and the ways greater Israel followed the idea of those lists in rebuilding a dimension of solidarity, self-understanding, and independence. And such writings alongside stories and readings from the Torah and prophets at early Christ people meals could easily have a similar character to the way Israel's produced hellenistic lists for inverted and resistant new identities. I read Carr as entertaining hellenistic Israel's clever inversion of Greek and Roman lists of important classical works to read in order to build new resistance and

¹⁰ Carr describes the shifts in “Scriptures” in the second century BCE following a less constricted third century BCE: Ben Sira's own curriculum description is written somewhere around the turn from the third to the second century and includes Torah, wisdom, prophecies, parables, and proverbs, including material gleaned from foreign travels (39:1-4). In contrast, his grandson repeatedly refers to three items...“Torah” and “prophecies,” and a third group whose designation varies, “others that followed them.” (Carr:261) Complicating the tensions and nuanced mix, Carr comments also later: “And once again, this definition is hybrid: appropriating Hellenistic cultural forms in the process of opposing them.” (264)

identity for Israel within its own renewed Hebrew lists as being “resistant hybridity” in ways similar to those of the early Christ people. Or put somewhat chronologically, larger Israel’s savvy use of the Greek and hellenistic lists of good books to read for both resistance and accommodation to the explicit and implicit rulers gives early Christ writings/readings clear strategies for their own complicated resistance, antagonism, and adaptation orality, writings, and readings.

How are these lists of writings and whole societies’ readings or at least implicitly participating in the stories in these honored writings related to the notion of canon? Carr’s assessment is both clear and nuanced.

“(T)he Hebrew scriptures that formed the core of study in this semi-Hellenistic, broadened form of Jewish form of education were not a “canon,” neither in terminology nor function. Indeed, as Assmann and others have shown, the Greek word “kanon” was not applied to a list of authoritative books until the church synod decisions of the late fourth centuries....

Though Jews had long since had a normative and bounded collection of books in the form of the Torah, they did not use the term *kanon* (or a Hebrew equivalent) for it, and they certainly would not have applied the term to a broader collection within the education-enculturation system of semielites in Second Temple Judaism, it probably does not make sense to use the term “canon” or even “protocanon” to describe it.

Rather, the emergent Hebrew collection is—as its users often suggest—a collection of “scriptures”: numinous, divinely inspired writings that were a crucial part of a process of education-enculturation, writings to be kept on the mouth and written on the heart, so that Jews from Judas to Josephus could remain Torah-observant and resist the onslaught of the Greco-Roman world. It is only with the subsequent journey of these texts into the Greek and Christian context that we see the application of the term “canon” to them as a part of a broader Christian Bible. Somewhat later the rabbis incorporated these “Scriptures” into a broader, graded group of writings, now combined with collections like the Mishnah and two Talmuds, which were designed as records of an originally non-written, oral Torah from Moses. I will now take a brief look at each of these contexts—rabbinic and Christian...” (Carr: 276)

The question of how such Christ movement texts of the first two centuries CE which the Christianity Seminar has focused on for the past eight years relates to “canon” must—to my

mind—observe Carr’s position. Yet, Carr’s work—in tandem with Professor Shea’s paper on non-Hebrew/Jewish classicly read writings of the Greco-Roman worlds—has some additional insight for our work as a Seminar. I have to extend what I see as Carr’s additional insight in my own words, since this particular book of his does not have the space to pursue the Seminar’s questions about issues of “canon” and the early Christ movements’ writings in the first two centuries CE.

Given Carr’s delicate and insightful picture of hellenistic larger Israel and its proactive “resistant hybridity” that is particularly visible in its advancement of larger Israel’s writings and readings as well as reinstatement and revision of Hebrew writings/readings in a time when Hebrew as a public language had faded dramatically, I propose another dimension on “canon.” Of course, per Carr there is no such thing as “canon” in the first two centuries CE of Christ movement writings. (More on that later.) However, the application of Carr’s picture of hellenistic writings/readings for Israel to early Christ writings/readings helps articulate several more dimensions of writings/readings/canon for both earlier and later Christ people/Christian centuries.

At the end of his chapter on “Textuality and Education in the Eastern Hellenistic World,” Carr returns to the nuances that appreciate the “hybrid resistance” of the lists, writings, and readings of this period, while turning away from much later “canons.”

In all this, let me be clear: our evidence does not suggest that the Hasmoneans successfully introduced an educational system or set of Scriptures that all Jewish groups recognized, not that their system was created *ex-nihilo*....Furthermore, the limits appear to have been focused on indigenous education, not the texts in Greek translation. When Jewish groups used scriptural works in Greek translation they appear to have included a wider range of works outside the initial twenty-two-book collection. For example, the early Christian movement, in its initial stages a Jewish sect, appears to have worked with a set of Scriptures that—at least in the case of Jude 14—included the book of Enoch. (272)

I propose to project Carr’s work into the first five centuries CE on Christ people/Christians in the following ways:

- Carr’s “resistant hybridity” for larger hellenistic Israel can (should?) be applied to the writings/readings of the first two centuries of Christ movement. The clever inversions

and borrowings of hellenistic Israel from much earlier Greek and Roman lists of exceptional writings/readings to “civilize”/enculturate” Greek and Roman citizens and later hellenized Greece also pertain to the creative and resistant writings of the early Christ people. With their own writings/readings, the early Christ people did “resist the onslaught of the Greco-Roman world” in a “resistant hybridity” (post-colonial strategy) both content-wise and generically similar to and often derivative of Carr’s picture of hellenistic larger Israel.

- These likenesses also assure that Carr’s “hellenistic” Israel’s creative “resistant hybridity” was not a “canon,” and neither were the first two centuries of the Christ movements.
- The ways hellenistic Greek and “hellenistic” Israel lists of special writings/readings creatively inverted and resisted imperial domination and creatively created new identities are direct progenitors of the first two centuries of the writings/readings of the Christ people. Such borrowing and inheriting of the practice of new lists and collections of special writings/readings allow us today to understand how dependent the early Christ writings depended on the process Carr describes in the immediately earlier period.
- As the second century Christ (lists of) writings/readings articulated more their complex combination of resistance to and dependence on the more neo-classical Roman version of “civilizing” lists of iconic lists of writings, a kind of haunted larger similarity emerges between the later canon in Christianity and Roman imperial domination. That is, it seems that the provisional inversions and creative identities in hellenistic Israel and early Christ people use and undermine the classical Greek and Roman civilizing pretensions.¹¹

*What About Canon in the First 2-6 Centuries of the Christ and Christian Movements*¹²

¹¹ Cf, the creative analysis and definition of Jonathan Z. Smith in “Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith, pp. 36–52. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

¹² This second main section of this paper consists mostly of a major portion of a previous article I have published. In this second part of this paper I cite in total almost seven pages from my “Canon of the Bible,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed., Steven L. McKenzie, Oxford University Press, 2014. Thereafter I also

[Beginning marker for large segment Taussig article of Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation on “Canon of the Bible.” Cf. footnote 11]

The Development of the “New Testament.” The development of privileged collections of writings for the Christ movements is, at least for the first hundred years, more or less the same as for other traditions of Israel. From the earliest writings of Paul and the earliest gospels in the traditions of Mark and Thomas, there is evidence that the Septuagint was available and considered to have considerable authority as a collection. There seems to be little indication of any privileged collection of Hebrew scriptures in the life of the first century Christ movements, since their literature quotes only the Septuagint.

The collection now known as “The New Testament” did not exist even in an implicit form for at least 330 years after Jesus died. For those first three hundred plus years, the only hints of something that might eventually become the New Testament were various lists from different Christ movement writers and the regional “synods” of the movements. These lists of what early Christ followers should read did not agree with one another. As lists proliferated and Christ groups grew in numbers over the first several centuries, some groups started collecting the actual writings of Paul and others, but none of these collections corresponded to the 27 books that eventually would become the New Testament. In the fourth century, some church officials and groups began to try to propose what the best readings for early Christians were. But no historian—either conservative or liberal—can find even the idea of a collection of books called the New Testament, much less an actual collection of books, before 400 c.E. It was perhaps in the fifth century that the first collection of books actually corresponded to the 27 books of the New Testament. There is no evidence of an actual book called the New Testament or the (Christian) Bible until at least the eighth or ninth century.

The Lists of Recommended Books. The first person to list what early “Christians” should read seems to have been the theologian Marcion. Around the middle of the second century, Marcion declared that everything written for Christ groups was in error except for the works of Paul and certain parts of the Gospel of Luke. The errors which concerned Marcion had

cite a significant section of a chapter from my longer book, *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2013, pp. 500-508. These citations are indicated in the paper itself, and—just as in my treatment of Carr’s work in the first section of the paper—I indicate where I am adding new material of my own beyond the Oxford and Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt volumes.

to do with what he perceived as an overdependence on the traditions of Israel in books like the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, and the Gospel and letters of John. It seems relatively certain that Marcion did indeed make such a list... Nor did the opponents of Marcion produce lists of their own.

Perhaps the most assertive opponent of Marcion was Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, France, who wrote in the last several decades of the second century and the first decade of the third century. Irenaeus' critique of Marcion had little to do with Marcion's list of privileged books. Without making his own list of books, Irenaeus seems to be the first thinker to have used the term "The New Testament" as an inexact term for "Christian" documents in distinction from the Hebrew scriptures. Irenaeus also seems to have been aware that there were a number of gospels. In response to either Marcion's insistence on the one Gospel of Luke or the existence of a number of gospels, Irenaeus was the first to designate Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as needing to be considered privileged gospels. Irenaeus' central point in defense of these gospels is that one must have four gospels since there are four corners to the earth and the wind blows from four directions.

Another implicit endorsement of these four gospels also occurred in the late second century. The Syrian theologian, Tatian, did not so much designate them as privileged as use them as sources for a cut-and-paste story of all four gospels. This new amalgamation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John was probably in response to rising concern among the Christ people about differences among the many gospels. The other "list" of gospels from the late second century was from Clement of Alexandria. He rejected the full authority for Mark and Luke, and accepted Matthew and John because only those two were at that time thought to be written by apostles.

In the period 190–310 c.e., there seems to have been little interest in establishing a privileged list of books. Nor did the Council of Nicea in the early fourth century produce any such list. However, Constantine's commissioned historian, Eusebius, did produce a list as a part of his writings. Eusebius created three categories of early Christian literature:

- 1) "recognized" (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts of the Apostles, 14 letters of Paul, I Peter, I John),

- 2) “disputed” (James, Jude, II Peter, II John, III John) and,
- 3) “spurious” (The Acts of Paul, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles).

The Revelation to John seems to have been both “recognized” and “spurious” in Eusebius’ somewhat confusing discussion of it.

This uncertainty in Eusebius’ discussion of the Revelation to John highlights the character of Eusebius’ lists. Although some twenty-first century writers cite his lists as authoritative, in using the categories of “recognized, disputed, or spurious” it is not clear that Eusebius is making judgments about the value of the different books so much as reporting on how the books were treated.

As it unfolded, the fourth century was eventful, if inconsistent, in regard to the eventual New Testament. Many historians place the Muratorian Fragment in the fourth century, although it can be dated anywhere from 180 to 800 C.E. This document without a known author lists Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the Acts of the Apostles, 13 letters of Paul, Jude, “two (letters) with the title John,” and the Wisdom of Solomon (a book without any mention of Jesus and almost certainly written before Jesus). It does not list either of the letters of Peter, III John, or the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The regional church council of Laodicea in Asia Minor met in 363 and 364. There are no written records of it, but later reports contain two different lists from the council, one recommending the same 27 books as are in today’s New Testament, the other recommending 26 books and leaving out the Revelation to John. There was another regional gathering in Hippo, North Africa, but here too there were no records of what was decided. A later council in Carthage reported in 397 that the Hippo “synod” had produced a list of the same 27 books known today as the New Testament.

For most scholars of New Testament canon, the decisive moment for the formation of the New Testament came in the spring of 367 C.E. when Athanasius, a bishop in North Africa, wrote a “festal letter” at Easter, instructing the Christians of North Africa to read 27 books as their authoritative literature. As in Hippo and possibly Laodicea, these 27 books were the same books as eventually came to be the New Testament known today. Athanasius calls this list the

“The New Testament” and uses “canon” to refer to his list. This letter was not meant for all of Christianity at the time, but just the Christians of North Africa. Nor did Athanasius provide any of the churches with copies of these 27 books.

The Apostolic Constitutions, most likely written in the early fifth century, listed everything on Athanasius’ list except the Revelation to John, but added I Clement, II Clement, and 8 books of the *Constitutions* themselves. This final list discussed here demonstrates, then, some increasing agreement at the beginning of the fifth century on the authoritative status of the 4 Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, 13 letters of Paul, Hebrews, the 2 letters of Peter, the 3 letters of John, and Jude; but it destabilizes Athanasius’ list of 27 with its own list of 36 books.

One complex issue around this discussion of ancient lists that point toward the eventual New Testament is its exclusion of a major non-western part of ancient Christianity. While western Christianity grew toward its Catholic and Protestant conceptions of the New Testament, the churches of Syriac and Ethiopian origin treated all of these issues quite differently. These churches developed different and more expansive lists, and even today differ with western Christianity as to what scriptures are authoritative. The Syriac version of the New Testament, known as the Peshitta, does not include II Peter, II and III John, Jude, and the Revelation to John. The Ethiopian New Testament includes books otherwise not a part of other New Testaments: The Sunodos, The Octateuch, The Book of the Covenant, and the Didascalia.

The Collections of Christian Literature. During the first five centuries of Christ communities, there were a number of collections of early Christian literature. In contrast to the various lists, these collections had little relationship to the eventual New Testament. They do demonstrate that for some communities the actual collection of literature became important.

It is likely that by the end of the first century there were at least several collections of the letters attributed to Paul. Since the production of books themselves only began in earnest during the second and third centuries, most of these Pauline collections must have been in scroll form. Who made these collections of Pauline literature is less clear. They could have been from the more established Christ communities in their second and third generations. Or, they could have been collected by some very early Christian schools.

It is quite certain that in the second century a number of “Christian” schools emerged. Some of these schools had at their disposal various written works, both from the “Christian” writers of the first and second centuries and often from important philosophical writers as well. These school collections almost certainly contained works from the eventual New Testament and works outside it. By the fourth century, such school collections could have been relatively large. But there seems to have been little interest in these collections corresponding to the various lists of recommended instructions for “Christians” at large. And, by the fourth century a considerable number of “Christian” communities seem to have collections of literature to read in worship and study settings.

In possibly the third century and certainly the fourth century, monasteries also became centers of considerable study, and they began to have libraries within their building complexes. One of the largest and earliest collections of this sort is the Nag Hammadi “library” found in 1945 in a jar several miles from a fourth-century Pachomian monastery in central Egypt. One of the most interesting aspects of the Nag Hammadi collection is that it is in the form of actual books. From other non-Christian libraries of that time, it seems clear that by the fourth century such a monastic library would have probably contained both books and scrolls.

Relative to the New Testament it is probable that some of these collections included all 27 books of the eventual New Testament. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that any of these collections contained only these 27 or even grouped them together as a “New Testament.” Indeed, it seems improbable that there were any separate collections of the 27 books of the New Testament in the first 400 years of Christian tradition.

The Actual Production of New Testaments. Although we have very few actual examples, it is almost certain that some of the collections of “Christian” literature of the fourth century had multiple little “books” in actual leather bound form. For instance, the collections found at Nag Hammadi consist of leather bound books, each of which contains 3–10 separate works.

There are two reasons to doubt that the first 500 years of “Christianity” produced one book called the New Testament that included the specific 27 little “books” that now make up the New Testament. First, the technology of book production was such that putting all 27

“books” into one was most probably impossible. Second, as seen in the above study of the lists of books for “Christians” to read at that time, there was not consensus on what the “mandatory” New Testament content was until at least the fifth century.

Around the year 405, it seems likely that the theologian and translator Jerome had a unified translation of the 27 documents of the eventual New Testament. Later versions of the Vulgate contain an introduction to the translation most likely written by Jerome himself. This introduction both assumes and declares that the Vulgate translation of the 27, and only 27, books has special authority for Latin Christians. So although it was not actually one book, both its unified translation and its introduction come quite close to it being an actual book called the New Testament.

The first New Testaments—as an actual book—were probably produced within two or three centuries of Jerome, as the Jerome’s translation of the 27 gained authority in the churches. This production of an actual book of the New Testament somewhere between the seventh and ninth centuries signaled on one level the end of an at least 600 year process of the making of the New Testament as we know it. On another level, this consensus had a number of limits. Perhaps most important is that this “New Testament” was only for those who read Latin. In the seventh through ninth centuries of flourishing Syrian and Ethiopian Christianity the scrolls and codices did not follow the consensus of Latin-speaking North Africa and Western Europe. Rather, in these regions authoritative collections of Christian books were not the same. Even today, the fifth-century decisions of a major part of Syrian Christianity to have a New Testament contain just 22 books (excluding II Peter, II John, III John, Jude, Revelation of John) are still held to be authoritative; and for many centuries Tatian’s Diatessaron (described earlier) replaced the four Gospels.

In the ensuing 1,000 or so years (450–1500 c.e.) in both the east and west, many different versions of the New Testament were produced. The vast majority of these New Testaments were in Greek and Latin, languages that no one spoke in most of the areas where Christianity existed.

With the advent of the printing press, the New Testament became available to the broader population beyond those who read it in Latin and Greek. With translations into the

common tongues and the mass distribution via the printing press, rather suddenly the New Testament was of direct interest to common folk.

This change in public consciousness produced several responses from church leaders. Martin Luther tried unsuccessfully to have four books—Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation—removed from the New Testament as read by the new Protestant public. And, in the sixteenth century, several church-wide bodies (including the Roman Catholic Council of Trent) for the first time declared that 27 specific books officially belonged in the New Testament.

Since the mid-1970s some biblical scholars have participated in what has come to be known as “canonical criticism.” The term itself has not been able to focus energy or a collegium of scholars. Nor have people been able to agree on either approaches or conclusions. Nevertheless, it bears noting that even in their disagreement a number of scholars have brought the phenomenon of textual canon to the attention of broader spheres of interest. Together these efforts and disagreements can be characterized as pointing to the way canon as a textual phenomenon convenes particular kinds of meaning. At points this interest in canon in itself as a particular kind of meaning has been as broad as simply acknowledging that closed sets of texts make particular kinds of meaning, while at other junctures this interest in canon has been in the service of an assertion of a particular kind of Christian meaning. Still others have been interested in the ways certain sets of texts have influenced either the course of history or the course of biblical scholarship. More technical aspects of this loose and vague field of canonical criticism have concentrated on how the biblical canon(s) have been formed.

The name most often associated with canonical criticism has been Brevard Childs, although he himself rejected the term. Childs’ work has shown great scope, and dealt with technical, philosophical, theological, and—one might say—even apologetic dimensions of canon. The earlier work of James Barr is often seen as a predecessor to that of Childs. James Sanders’ more recent scholarship powerfully convened formal and technical interest in what canon meant as both an ancient and modern meaning-maker. In terms not dissimilar, Jacob Neusner and Burton Mack both deconstructed notions of canon formation and reflected on what was at stake in larger cultural investments in canon. Perhaps the most even-handed and over-arching of this work has been done by Lee MacDonald.

Although even the term “canonical criticism” mostly occasions disagreement, this clumsy and charged set of efforts can be credited with two achievements: 1) the unfocused identification of questions about whether “canon” is a naturalized category of meaning within the field of biblical interpretation; and 2) an almost unconscious match between these various assertions of meaning in and for biblical canon with Jonathan Z. Smith’s keen observation that the creation of meaning is at the heart of any arbitrary human selection of privileged objects, ideas, or texts.¹³

¹³ A prior part of my *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* article above treats Smith’s larger examination of the category of “canon” from a history of religions perspective: “Within the realm of biblical interpretation, canon is a term deployed as a key notion in how meaning is made, from ancient writings through the creation of a privileged set of authoritative texts. As such, canon belongs to a larger pattern of human meaning-making, through setting aside sets of objects, practices, or wordings as privileged. According to Jonathan Z. Smith, this identification of a privileged set exists in close coordination with the establishment of a cadre of persons who are called upon to apply the limited set to the infinite variety of human experiences. The tension between the unending field of that which is to be understood and the limited frame of objects, practices, wordings, or texts useful for meaning elicits ingenuity.

In this way, the basic structure of canon as a larger pattern of human meaning-making is, according to Smith, divination. That is, the practice of using a limited number of objects to divine meaning from an endless variety of occasions provides the basic frame for understanding how canon functions for a wide spectrum of religious systems. For instance, the southwestern African diviner with a basket of twenty-four objects uses just those objects in instruction for his clients as they negotiate a large variety of questions and dilemmas about their daily lives. For biblical interpretation, the limited number of interpretive means (i.e., the objects in the basket) are the privileged set of books. Exegetes, hermeneutes, and other castes of interpreters, then, are ingenious agents in the production of meaning from the limited set of texts with reference to an unending variety of human circumstances.

One can note that placing the biblical category in a larger frame of human patterns of behavior does not diminish the canon, but helps identify the particular creative activity inherent in the establishment, management, and practice of privileging a limited set of texts for an ever widening field of human experience.

This also coheres with the etymology of the Greek *kanon* and the Latin *canon*. The basic meaning in these ancient languages is that of a stick or rod used for measuring. It also carries the tangible meaning of charts or lists. By extension it can connote metaphorically standards by which something is judged or the judging itself. In some cases, this extends to the designation of a judging authority. So the ancient (that is, Hellenistic and Greco-Roman) references to *kanon* do not really indicate a collection or even a list of privileged books, but a much larger and more vague category of measurement, with the physical act of measurement dominating over the metaphorical.

For Smith the creativity and meaning provided in the dynamic of canon has almost nothing to do with the quality of the set of “objects” selected. Indeed, that which makes up the list is by and large “arbitrary,” although it may in some vague sense represent “pre-occupations” of the groups making the selection. The creative ingenuity is in fact heightened by this arbitrary character of the set of, in the case of written canon, books. Nor is the privileged set of objects or texts ‘closed’ or ‘static.’” (Cf. Smith, Jonathan Z. “Canons, Catalogues, and Classics.” In *Canonization and Decanonization*, edited by A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, pp. 295–311. Leiden: Brill, 1998; and Smith, Jonathan Z. “Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith, pp. 36–52. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 1982; 44)

Ending marker for large segment Taussig article of Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation on “Canon of the Bible.” Cf. footnote 11]

Ballots for Christianity Seminar:

1. The collection now known as “The New Testament” did not exist even in an implicit form for at least 330 years after Jesus died.
2. The first 500 years of “Christianity” produced books called the New Testament that included the specific 27 little “books” that now make up the New Testament.
3. The Council of Nicea produced the first New Testament.
4. In the spring of 367 c.e. when Athanasius, a bishop in North Africa, wrote a “festal letter” at Easter, instructing the Christians of North Africa to read 27 books as their authoritative literature. This was the first New Testament.
5. It seems that the provisional inversions and creative identities in hellenistic Israel and early Christ people use and undermine the classical Greek and Roman civilizing pretensions.¹⁴
6. “Hellenistic” Israel’s creative “resistant hybridity” was not a “canon,” and neither were the first two centuries of the Christ movements.

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¹⁴ Cf. the creative analysis and definition of Jonathan Z. Smith in “Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon.” In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith, pp. 36–52. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

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