

THE DEFINITION OF THE TERM ‘CANON’

EXCLUSIVE OR MULTI-DIMENSIONAL?

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Summary

There has been an ongoing debate amongst biblical scholars about how to define the term ‘canon’. In recent years, one particular definition—that canon can only be used to refer to books in a fixed, final, closed list—has emerged as the dominant one. Moreover, some scholars have argued that this is the only legitimate definition that can be used. This essay suggests that a single definition fails to capture the depth and breadth of canon and may end up bringing more distortion than clarification. Instead, the complexities of canon are best captured through using multiple definitions in a complementary and integrative manner.

1. Introduction

Childs once declared, ‘Much of the present confusion over the problem of canon turns on the failure to reach an agreement regarding the terminology.’¹ Although Childs made this statement in 1979, it could just as easily be written in our current day. As scholars continue to probe into the origins and development of the biblical canon, debates and disagreements about canonical semantics have not abated.² What

¹ B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979): 51.

² Some recent studies include, J. Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997): 1-34; Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000): 71-110; Stephen B. Chapman, ‘How the Biblical Canon Began: Working Models and Open Questions’ in *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, ed. Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003): 29-51; J. Webster, ‘“A Great and Meritorious Act of the Church”?: The Dogmatic Location of the Canon’ in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des*

exactly do we mean by the term ‘canon’?³ Does it refer to books that were widely used by early Christians? Does it refer to books that function as Scripture? Or, does it refer only to books that are included in a final, closed list? While these discussions over the definition of canon will certainly continue, and no universal agreement appears to be forthcoming, something does seem to have changed since Childs’ original observation. The definition of canon as a final, closed list of books has begun to emerge as the more dominant one—at least in some circles. Whether or not we want to call this a consensus, more and more scholars are affirming this definition, and, more importantly, they have

Kanons, ed. John Barton and Michael Wolter (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003): 95-126; E. Ulrich, ‘The Notion and Definition of Canon’ in *The Canon Debate*, ed. L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002): 21-35; E. Ulrich, ‘Qumran and the Canon of the Old Testament’ in *The Biblical Canons*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H. J. D. Jonge (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003): 57-80; J. Z. Smith, ‘Canons, Catalogues, and Classics’ in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998): 295-311; Kendall W. Folkert, ‘The “Canons” of Scripture’ in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Miriam Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 170-79; J. A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972): 91ff.; G. T. Sheppard, ‘Canon’ in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 1987): 3:62-69; John C. Peckham, ‘The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity’, *TrinJ* 28 (2007): 229-49; John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994): 85-197.

³ Our concern throughout this article is not the word ‘canon’ itself (κανών, borrowed from the Hebrew כְּנֵה), but the *concept* of canon. Put differently, we are asking what socio-historical or theological phenomenon is referred to when we use the word ‘canon’, not the etymology or history of the term. Unfortunately, considering only the term itself can bring confusion rather than clarity. For example, G. M. Hahneman, ‘The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon’ in *The Canon Debate*, ed. L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002): 406, has attempted to argue for a late date for the canon by appealing to the fact that the term ‘canon’ (in either Greek or Latin) was not used to refer to the list of Christian Scriptures until the Fourth Century in the writings of Eusebius and Athanasius. However, there is no reason to think the appearance of the term itself is decisive—it is the concept behind the term that must be clarified and considered. Although others do not go to the extreme of Hahneman, there seems to be a fascination with the etymology of the term: e.g. B. M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987): 289-93; H. Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985): 15-18; and Ulrich, ‘The Notion and Definition of Canon’, 21-35. In fact, Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1954) declares, ‘The word “Canon” has had a history unsurpassed in interest, perhaps, by any other word in the Greek language’ (141).

argued that other scholars ought to do the same, lest the entire field become plagued by confusion and anachronism.⁴

Such claims are difficult to resist—after all, no one wants to plunge canonical studies into disarray. Moreover, there is certainly something attractive about having a single, unified definition of canon on which we can all agree (and build upon). Nevertheless, we must ask whether this ‘consensus’ position, and the attitude with which it is held, is justified. Does this single definition adequately capture the complexities and nuances of the concept of canon? And are we required to adopt only this definition to the exclusion of all others? It is the purpose of this article to probe more deeply into these questions.

2. The Exclusive Definition of Canon

The definition of canon as a fixed, final, and closed list of books—what might be called the *exclusive* definition⁵—was put forth originally by A. C. Sundberg in 1968.⁶ Sundberg drew a sharp distinction between the terms ‘Scripture’ and ‘canon’ and, on this basis, argued that we cannot speak of the idea of canon until at least the Fourth Century or later. Although Scripture would have existed prior to this time period, Sundberg argues that we must reserve the term canon until the end of the entire process. It would be anachronistic to use the term canon to speak of any second- or third-century historical realities. Thus, simply

⁴ On this point, see Ulrich, ‘The Notion and Definition of Canon’, 34; and Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007): 49-51.

⁵ Chapman, ‘How the Biblical Canon Began’, 34-35, uses the term ‘extrinsic’ instead of ‘exclusive’. The former term is also used in Smith, ‘Canons, Catalogues, and Classics’, 297. But, Chapman does use the latter term in Stephen B. Chapman, ‘The Canon Debate: What It Is and Why It Matters’ (presented at the SBL, San Diego, 2007).

⁶ A. C. Sundberg, ‘Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon’, *Studia Evangelica* 4 (1968): 452-61; A. C. Sundberg, ‘The Making of the New Testament Canon’ in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971): 1216-24. Of course, Sundberg is not the first scholar to propose a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon. Its roots can be traced to W. Staerk, ‘Der Schrift- und Kanonbegriff der jüdischen Bibel’, *ZST* 6 (1929): 101-119; G. Hölscher, *Kanonisch und Apocryph. Ein Kapitel aus der Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Kanons* (Naumburg: Lippert, 1905); and arguably back to Semler’s original critique of canon, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon* (Halle, 1771-1775). See discussion in Iain Provan, ‘Canons to the Left of Him: Brevard Childs, His Critics, and the Future of Old Testament Theology’, *SJT* 50 (1997): 9-11; and Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets*, 34.

marshalling evidence of a book's scriptural status in the early church—as is so often done in canonical studies—is not enough to consider it canonical. The book must be part of a list from which nothing can be added or taken away.

Sundberg's exclusive definition of canon was initially supported by a number of key scholars such as D. H. Kelsey,⁷ James Barr,⁸ and Harry Gamble,⁹ and, in more recent years, has continued to gather adherents. John Barton, while rightly recognising that multiple definitions of canon have some validity,¹⁰ still seems to prefer the exclusive definition: 'Much clarity could be gained if we agreed to distinguish sharply between these two concepts [of scripture and canon].'¹¹ Geoffrey Hahneman has been a vigorous advocate of the exclusive definition declaring, 'Once a distinction is made between scripture and canon, the idea of a New Testament canon does not appear applicable until the fourth century.'¹² Lee McDonald has consistently promoted Sundberg's definition in his many writings over the last twenty years and is no doubt one of the reasons for its recent popularity.¹³ Eugene Ulrich is quite forceful in his approach, arguing

⁷ D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975): 104-105.

⁸ J. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980): 120.

⁹ Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 18-19. Elsewhere, Gamble nuances his view further and acknowledges that other definitions have some validity; e.g. H. Y. Gamble, 'The Canon of the New Testament' in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. E. J. Epp and G. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989): 201-243; H. Y. Gamble, 'The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis' in *The Canon Debate*, ed. L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002): 267-94.

¹⁰ Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 1-34.

¹¹ J. Barton, 'Canonical Approaches Ancient and Modern' in *The Biblical Canons* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003): 202; see also J. Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985): 55-82.

¹² G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992): 129-30; see also G. M. Hahneman, 'The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon' in *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002): 405-415.

¹³ L. M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995): 13-21; L. M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007): 38-69; L. M. McDonald, *Forgotten Scriptures: The Selection and Rejection of Early Religious Writings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009): 11-33. As a whole, McDonald is more balanced in the way he holds Sundberg's definition, recognising that other definitions have some validity.

that unless scholars accept the exclusive definition, discussions will be ‘confusing and counterproductive’.¹⁴ Likewise, the recent work of Craig Allert insists on the ‘*necessity* of proper distinction between the terms “Scripture” and “canon”’.¹⁵ Even this brief survey of scholars (and more could be added¹⁶), suggests that David Nienhuis was correct when he observed that ‘Sundberg’s position has enjoyed widespread acceptance.’¹⁷

But, is the widespread acceptance of this position justified? We begin our analysis by noting that there are many positives to this position that ought to be acknowledged. For one, the exclusive definition of canon rightly captures the reality of the canon’s ‘fluid’ edges prior to the Fourth Century. It took some time for the boundaries of the canon to solidify and the exclusive definition accommodates this historical fact by using different terms for different stages. Moreover, this definition helps remind us of the important role played by the church in the recognition and reception of the canon. By restricting the term ‘canon’ to only the final stage when the church has decisively responded, the exclusive definition keeps church and canon from being unduly divorced from one another—the two concepts go hand in hand. However, there are a number of concerns about this definition that need to be explored.

First, it is difficult to believe that the sharp Scripture-canon distinction drawn by modern advocates of the exclusive definition would have been so readily shared by their historical counterparts in the Second Century. Would early Christians have regarded Scripture as fluid and open-ended and only canon as limited and restricted? If they were able to say that certain books in their library were Scripture, then that implies they would have been able to say that other books in their library were *not* Scripture. But, if they are able to say which books are

¹⁴ Ulrich, ‘The Notion and Definition of Canon’, 21-35.

¹⁵ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, 51; emphasis mine.

¹⁶ E.g. George Aichele, ‘Canon, Ideology, and the Emergence of an Imperial Church’ in *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, ed. Einar Thomassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010): 45-65; J. C. T. Barrera, ‘Origins of a Tripartite Old Testament Canon’ in *The Canon Debate*, ed. L. M. McDonald and J. A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002): 128-45; David L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2006): 1-10; and J. C. Poirier, ‘Scripture and Canon’ in *The Sacred Text*, ed. Michael Bird and Michael Pahl (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010): 83-98.

¹⁷ David R. Nienhuis, *Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007): 235.

(and are not) Scripture, then how is that materially different from saying which books are in (or not in) a canon? Thus, it seems some degree of limitation and exclusion is already implied in the term 'Scripture'. As Iain Provan observes, 'The question I am asking is whether the idea of scripture does not itself imply the idea of limitation, of canon, even if it is not yet conceived that the limits have been reached. I believe that it does so imply.'¹⁸ If so, then the necessity of a strict demarcation between Scripture and canon largely disappears.

Second, while the exclusive definition insists the term canon cannot be used till the New Testament collection has been officially 'closed', significant ambiguity remains about what, exactly, constitutes this closing. If it is absolute uniformity of practice, across all of Christendom, then, on those terms, there was still not a canon even in the Fourth Century. Indeed, on those terms we *still* do not have a canon even today.¹⁹ If the 'closing' of the canon refers to a formal, official act of the New Testament church then we are hard pressed to find such an act before the Council of Trent in the Sixteenth Century.²⁰ The fact of the matter is that when we look into the history of the canon, we realise that there was never a time when the boundaries of the New Testament were closed in the way the exclusive definition would require. Stephen Chapman comments on this problem, 'Rather than being a minor problem, this inconsistency casts significant doubt upon the appropriateness of the entire approach. Why should scholars adopt as the correct usage of the term 'canon' a meaning that does not correspond fully to any historical reality?'²¹ Ironically, then, the exclusive definition is as guilty of anachronism as any of the views that it critiques.

¹⁸ Provan, 'Canons to the Left of Him', 9-10.

¹⁹ E.g. the modern day lectionary of the Syrian Orthodox Church still operates on the 22 book canon of the Peshitta, and the modern day Ethiopian church appears to have a broader New Testament canon, though the exact number is unclear. For further discussion see Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 218-28.

²⁰ H. Gamble, 'Christianity: Scripture and Canon' in *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Frederick M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985): 46-47. Gamble argues that church councils like Laodicea (360) were local, not ecumenical, and therefore had no binding authority. McDonald agrees, 'There was never a time when the church as a whole concluded that these writings and no others could help the church carry out its mission in the world' ('The Integrity of the Biblical Canon', 131-32).

²¹ Chapman, 'The Canon Debate', 14.

This leads us to the third, and arguably the most foundational problem for this definition. Inherent in the exclusive definition is an insistence that the Fourth Century represents such a profoundly different stage in the development of the New Testament that it warrants a decisive change in terminology. Indeed, Dungan refers to the stage of Scripture and the stage of canon as ‘very different’.²² But, was the canon so very different in the Fourth Century? While a broader degree of consensus was no doubt achieved by this point, the core books of the New Testament—the four gospels and the majority of Paul’s Epistles—had already been recognised and received for centuries. Whatever supposedly happened in the Fourth Century neither altered the status of these books nor increased their authority.²³ It is precisely at this point that the limitations of the exclusive definition become clear. The abrupt change in terminology gives the impression that these books bore some lesser status prior to this point; it communicates that Christians *only* had Scripture and not a canon. Or, as one scholar put it, prior to the Fourth Century Christians only had a ‘boundless, living mass of heterogenous’ texts.²⁴ At best this is obscurant, and at worst misleading. Moreover, it feeds the notion that the canon was somehow the result of ‘a great and meritorious act of the church’.²⁵ It implies there was (and could be) no canon until the church officially acted. Stephen Dempster highlights this problem, ‘Reserving the terminology “canon” for only the final collection of books obscures the continuity that exists at earlier times. To accept such a limiting definition might suggest that the canon did not have a history, only to be created *ex nihilo*, the result of a [church] council.’²⁶

An example of this third issue can be seen clearly in the recent work of Craig Allert. The stated goal of his volume is to ‘emphasize the centrality of the church in the formation of the New Testament’.²⁷ It is no surprise, then, that he is such a strong advocate of Sundberg’s definition of canon because, as he acknowledges, ‘Sundberg’s work has had the effect of pushing the decisive period, that of formal

²² Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible*, 133.

²³ Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 18-19.

²⁴ Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible*, 132-33.

²⁵ Webster, ‘The Dogmatic Location of the Canon’, 96-97.

²⁶ Stephen G. Dempster, ‘Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left: Finding a Resolution in the Canon Debate’, *JETS* 52 (2009): 51.

²⁷ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, 67.

canonization, into the fourth and fifth centuries.²⁸ Such a late date for canon allows Allert to raise the profile of the church—it was there from the beginning whereas the canon only arrives late on the scene. He declares, ‘The Bible was not always “there” in early Christianity. Yet the church still continued to function in its absence.’²⁹ While Allert is right to remind us of the important role of the church, this whole approach to the development of the canon raises some concerns. If the core books of the New Testament were functioning as authoritative Scripture by the middle of the Second Century, then is it really helpful to claim that early Christians did not have a ‘Bible’? This sort of language seems to bring more confusion than clarity. Although it may prevent one kind of misperception (that the canon was neat and tidy in the Second Century), it ends up promulgating an even bigger one (that early Christians had little interest in a New Testament until the Fourth Century).

With these concerns on the table (and more could be added), one might get the impression that this critique has been offered to challenge the overall legitimacy of the exclusive definition. However, that is not the intent here. If the above concerns are addressed, then the exclusive definition still has an important role to play. After all, the exclusive definition is correct that the boundaries of the canon were not solidified until the Fourth Century—and, in this sense, we did not have a ‘canon’ until that time. The exclusive definition just needs to acknowledge that this is a general consensus and not an official act of ‘closing’ with airtight boundaries that somehow increased the authority of these books.³⁰ Thus, the main point of this critique is not to do away with the exclusive definition entirely but to challenge those advocates of the exclusive view who claim that it is the *only* legitimate perspective on canon. Given the limitations and weaknesses of the exclusive definition we have observed, we should be hesitant to think it completely exhausts the meaning of the term. If we are to fully appreciate the depth and complexity of ‘canon’, we must also let other definitions have a voice.

²⁸ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, 88.

²⁹ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, 12.

³⁰ By ‘general consensus’ I mean that the vast majority of the church was in agreement about the boundaries of the canon, even though there may have been pockets of the church that still had differing views.

3. The Functional Definition of Canon

Although the exclusive definition of canon may be the dominant one at the current time (or at least the one that has enjoyed increasing popularity), it is not the only option on the table. Childs has played a central role in promoting an alternative definition, arguing, in contrast to Sundberg, that the term 'canon' need not be restricted to a final, closed list but can 'encompass the entire process by which the formation of the church's sacred writings took place'.³¹ If a collection of books functions as a religious norm, regardless of whether that collection is open or closed, then Childs is comfortable using the term 'canon'. Or, put differently, the term canon can be employed as soon as a book is regarded as 'Scripture' by early Christian communities. Thus, Childs argues against any rigid separation between Scripture and canon, saying that they are 'very closely related, indeed often identical'.³² For our purposes here, we shall refer to this definition as the *functional* definition of canon.³³

Of course, the pedigree of this functional definition goes back further than Childs. Barton points out how Harnack's entire reconstruction of the origins of the New Testament canon is predicated upon this very definition.³⁴ Harnack argued that a book could be considered canonical when it was expressly regarded as 'Scripture'—which usually required the use of formulaic markers like γραφή, or γέγραπται. On this definition, the origins of the New Testament canon would be dated to the middle of the Second Century, dramatically earlier than the fourth-/fifth-century date advocated by Sundberg. Barton also distinguishes Harnack's approach from that of Zahn who was willing to regard a book as canonical apart from formulaic markers, as long as it enjoyed some degree of widespread

³¹ B. S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1984): 25.

³² B. S. Childs, 'On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology' in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 9.

³³ Chapman, 'How the Biblical Canon Began', 34-35, uses the term 'intrinsic' for the functional definition, as does Smith, 'Canons, Catalogues, and Classics', 297. Elsewhere, Chapman uses the term 'inclusive' ('The Canon Debate', 12).

³⁴ Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 4-8. For Harnack's original thesis, see A. von Harnack, *Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of a New Creation* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1925).

use by early Christians (allowing for an even earlier date for canon).³⁵ However, the distinction between Zahn and Harnack should not be overplayed. Their disagreement hinged upon the *way* to determine the church's view of a book (formulaic markers vs widespread use), not whether the church's view of a book was the key factor in deciding canonical status. The definitions of Harnack and Zahn are in agreement on the critical point: canon is determined by the *function* of a book in the church and not whether it was regarded as part of a final, closed list. In this sense, Harnack and Zahn really hold to the same general approach to canon.

The functional definition has also found support from a number of modern scholars, particularly those who have an association with Childs and/or the 'canonical criticism' camp.³⁶ James Sanders recognises that the functional perspective on canon is valid because it is the predecessor of the exclusive perspective, 'Canon as *function* antedates canon as *shape*.'³⁷ G. T. Sheppard provides a helpful distinction between canon as a 'rule, standard, ideal, norm' and canon as 'fixation, standardization, enumeration'.³⁸ He designates the former as 'Canon 1' and the latter as 'Canon 2', recognising the legitimacy of both. Chapman has persistently critiqued the exclusive definition while suggesting that the functional definition should have its place at the table,³⁹ as have Provan,⁴⁰ Meade,⁴¹ and Dempster.⁴²

The functional definition has many positives and provides a welcome balance to the exclusive definition. For one, it accurately

³⁵ Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 1-14. As observed by Barton, Zahn's emphasis on the early Christian use of canonical books (instead of just formulaic markers) has found some support in the recent statistical work of Franz Stuhlhofer, *Der Gebrauch Der Bibel von Jesus bis Euseb: Eine statistische Untersuchung zur Kanongeschichte* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1988). Stuhlhofer argues that the core canonical books of the New Testament were used substantially more often (in proportion to their size) than non-canonical books (and even the Old Testament).

³⁶ Of course, Childs himself does not prefer the term 'canonical criticism' (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 82), but that term has been used to refer to this approach since it was apparently coined by Sanders (*Torah and Canon*, ix-xx).

³⁷ James Sanders, 'Canon: Hebrew Bible' in *ABD* 1:843 (emphasis his).

³⁸ Sheppard, 'Canon', 64.

³⁹ Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, 71-110; Chapman, 'How the Biblical Canon Began: Working Models and Open Questions'.

⁴⁰ Provan, 'Canons to the Left of Him', 9-11.

⁴¹ D. Meade, *Pseudepigrapha and Canon* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986): 24.

⁴² Dempster, 'Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left', 50-51.

captures the historical reality that early Christians did possess an authoritative corpus of books long before the Fourth Century, even if the edges were not entirely solidified. Thus, it does not run the risk of unduly diminishing the perceived authority of these books in pre-fourth-century context. In addition, this definition seems less prone to artificially inflate the role of official church declarations about the canon—as if those declarations somehow ‘created’ or ‘established’ the authority of these books. That said, however, the functional definition still has its weaknesses. Two of these can be noted here. First, McDonald has pointed out that the functional definition struggles to account for books that were regarded as Scripture by some early Christian communities but never made it into the final, closed canon; e.g. the *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, etc.⁴³ What shall we call these books? McDonald argues that the functional definition leads to confusion because it is forced to call these books ‘canonical’. How can a book be canonical and then cease to be canonical? If we would only use the exclusive definition, he argues, then such confusion could be avoided.⁴⁴ McDonald is correct to point out this issue and it should be acknowledged that there is some imprecision in the functional definition here. However, it is not clear that the issue is as serious as McDonald suggests, nor that it mandates the sole use of the exclusive definition. For one, there does not appear to be anything particularly problematic or confusing about saying that some early Christian communities had different functional canons. There was widespread agreement about the core canonical books, but some disagreement over the peripheral books was inevitable. Some books were ‘canonical’ in the eyes of certain communities, even though they would never become part of the church’s permanent collection. The functional definition appropriately captures this reality. The exclusive definition claims to avoid the problem of imprecision because it waits till the Fourth Century when the canonical boundaries were finally fixed. But, as noted above, the boundaries of the canon were not absolute even in the Fourth or Fifth Centuries—indeed, disagreements continue to the modern day. Thus, we are reminded that all definitions, including the

⁴³ McDonald, *Forgotten Scriptures*, 23-25.

⁴⁴ McDonald argues that terms like ‘decanonization’ or ‘temporary canonization’ are nonsensical (*Forgotten Scriptures*, 23-25). For more on this issue, see A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, eds., *Canonization and Decanonization* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998).

exclusive definition, suffer from a level of imprecision—that is unavoidable whenever a definition seeks to capture an evolving historical situation (like the development of the canon).

The second weakness of the functional definition is more significant and is also one that is shared by the exclusive definition. Both of these definitions fail to adequately address the *ontology* of canon. That is, these definitions do not incorporate what canon *is* in and of itself, apart from what it does in the church (functional) or how it is delineated by the church (exclusive). If we only have the functional and exclusive definitions, then we can only conclude that this thing we call ‘canon’ cannot exist prior to its being used as Scripture or prior to the church’s reaching a final consensus. The church must act for there to be a canon. In this regard, the functional and exclusive definitions seem to confuse (or at least are prone to confuse) the church’s reception of the canon with that which *makes* a book canon. A book can become canonical, but on its own it is nothing. Of course, for some modern scholars, this would not be viewed as a problem. Viewing the canon as a purely community-dependent entity is not uncommon today—it is what John Webster calls the ‘naturalisation’ of canon.⁴⁵ If the canon is nothing in and of itself, then it must be the result of contingent (and to some extent, arbitrary) human processes. Harnack is a prime example of this naturalisation as he attributes the existence of the canon to the church’s response to Marcion.⁴⁶ He declares, ‘No greater creative act can be mentioned in the whole history of the Church than the formation of the apostolic collection and the assigning to it of a position of equal rank with the Old Testament.’⁴⁷ Others have argued that the canon is merely a socio-cultural concept that reflects the relationship between a religious society and its texts.⁴⁸ Still others have suggested canon is just

⁴⁵ Webster, ‘The Dogmatic Location of the Canon’, 101.

⁴⁶ Harnack’s core thesis regarding Marcion was supported by Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972); German title: *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968). For other assessments of Marcion’s influence on the canon, see R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity: An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 35-62; and Robert Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965): 126.

⁴⁷ A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma II* (New York: Dover, 1961): 62, n.1.

⁴⁸ Smith, ‘Canons, Catalogues, and Classics’, 295-311; H. J. Adriaanse, ‘Canonicity and the Problem of the Golden Mean’ in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998): 313-30; A. Assmann and J. Assmann, eds., *Kanon und Zensur, Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II*

a social phenomenon that arises when a community desires to express its identity.⁴⁹ As Kelsey notes, canon is the church's 'self-description'.⁵⁰ And, always popular is the idea that 'canon' is just a political construct, an ideological instrument, created to wield power and control.⁵¹

The problem with these community-dependent views is that they do not represent the historical Christian position on the canon. Although it is out of vogue in some critical circles today, Christians have traditionally believed that the canon is a collection of books that are given by God to his corporate church. And if the canonical books are what they are by virtue of the divine purpose for which they were given, and not by virtue of their use or acceptance by the community of

(München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987); Paul Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 17-27.

⁴⁹ Paul Ricoeur, 'The "Sacred" Text and the Community' in *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*, ed. W. D. O'Flaherty (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979): 271-76. A number of recent studies of canon have taken on a *comparative* dimension, showing how other religions, groups, and communities have their own sorts of 'canons'. E.g. Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Homer, the Bible and Beyond* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003); Tomas Hägg, 'Canon Formation in Greek Literary Culture' in *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, ed. Einar Thomassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010): 109-128; W. C. Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SPCK, 1993); L. Alexander, 'Canon and Exegesis in the Medical Schools of Antiquity' in *The Canon of Scripture in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. P. S. Alexander and K. Jean-Daniel (Lausanne: Éditions du Zèbre, 2007): 115-53; Armin Lange, 'Oracle Collection and Canon: A Comparison between Judah and Greece in Persian Times' in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, ed. C. A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (London: T&T Clark, 2009): 9-47; and many of the essays in Anders-Christian Jacobson, ed., *Religion and Normativity, Vol 1: The Discursive Fight over Religious Texts in Antiquity* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, 106.

⁵¹ On this general topic, see A. K. Bowman and G. Wolf, eds., *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); James E. Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 52-80; Robert P. Coote and Mary P. Coote, *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Gerald L. Bruns, 'Canon and Power in the Hebrew Scriptures', *CI* 10 (1984): 462-80; K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993): 68; David Brakke, 'Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter', *HTR* 87 (1994): 395-419; and Aichele, 'Canon, Ideology, and the Emergence of an Imperial Church', 45-65. In response to the idea that canons always represent those in power, see Willie van Peer, 'Canon Formation: Ideology or Aesthetic Quality?', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 97-108.

faith, then, in principle, they can exist as such apart from that community. After all, are not God's books still God's books—and therefore still authoritative—*prior* to anyone's using them or recognising them? Surely, the existence of canon and the recognition of canon are two distinguishable phenomena. Why, then, should the term 'canon' be restricted to only the latter and not the former? Thus, our definition of canon cannot be limited to only the functional or exclusive definitions because neither of them account for this phenomenon; neither allow for the ontology of canon to play a role. Now, this does not mean that all those who use the functional or exclusive definitions have no ontology of canon. It simply means that these definitions *themselves* do not allow for an ontology of canon. Unless this limitation is addressed, such definitions, whether intended or not, inevitably encourage the 'naturalisation' of canon.⁵²

4. The Ontological Definition

In order to accommodate the historical Christian approach to the canon, we need a definition that moves beyond the functional and exclusive ones. So, we shall call this the *ontological* definition. The ontological definition focuses on what the canon is in and of itself, namely *the authoritative books that God gave his corporate church*. One might say that this definition looks at canon from a divine perspective, rather than from only an ecclesiological perspective. 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

⁵² Adherents of the exclusive definition may respond that their definition does not necessarily encourage the 'naturalisation' of canon because it allows for books to be regarded as 'Scripture' prior to their recognition by the church. While this is certainly true, two concerns still remain. (a) As we noted above, the strict demarcation between Scripture and canon tends to diminish the authority of the former; i.e. it suggests there was *only* a loose, unbounded collection of Scripture prior to the church's formal decisions. Thus, whatever ontology the exclusive definition might grant to 'Scripture', it is still understood to be different from the ontology of 'canon'. (b) What is still lacking in the exclusive definition is an ontology of canon where the *limits* are determined by the purpose for which they were given, apart from the actions of the church. If God really gave certain books to serve as a permanent guide for the church—as the ontological definition maintains—then there is nothing incoherent about arguing that those limits are already there *in principle*. The 'canon' is always the books God intended as a permanent foundation for his church; no more and no less. In this sense, the canon is 'closed' as soon as the last book is given by God.

function or reception. On this definition, there would be a canon even in the First Century—as soon as the New Testament books were written. Of course, such a definition is inevitably retrospective in nature. The gospel of John would have been ‘canon’ ten minutes after it was written, but the early church would not yet have known it. It was only at a later point, when the corporate church had finally recognised which books belonged in the canon, that it could then look back and realise that there was a ‘canon’ even in the First Century.⁵³ But, there is nothing illegitimate about affirming this reality. If canonicity is not merely something that *happens* to a book, then we can affirm a book is canonical when that book is produced. B. B. Warfield employs the ontological definition when he says, ‘The Canon of the New Testament was completed when the last authoritative book was given to any church by the apostles, and that was when John wrote the apocalypse, about A.D. 98.’⁵⁴

No doubt, those committed to a rigid historical-critical approach to the study of the canon will balk at the ontological definition as inappropriately theological.⁵⁵ One cannot use a definition for canon

⁵³ In light of the ontological definition, one might wonder what language should be used to describe ‘lost’ apostolic books (e.g. Paul’s other letter to the Corinthians). Are we obligated to call these books ‘canon’? Not at all. C. Stephen Evans, ‘Canonicity, Apostolicity, and Biblical Authority: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections’ in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2006): 155, makes the argument that we have good reasons to think that lost books were not intended by God to be in the canon. He declares, ‘It seems highly plausible, then, that if God is going to see that an authorized revelation is given, he will also see that this revelation is recognized. On this view, then, the fact that the church recognized the books of the New Testament as canonical is itself a powerful reason to believe that these books are indeed the revelation God intended humans to have’ (155). If God did not intend these lost books to be in the canon, then we have little reason to call them ‘canon’. As for what to call these lost books, we could refer to them simply as ‘other apostolic books’ or even as ‘Scripture’. In regard to the latter term, this would be the one place where a distinction between ‘canon’ and ‘Scripture’ would be useful. Whereas Sundberg advocates a more permanent distinction between Scripture and canon, we would argue that this distinction would only apply to the narrow issue of lost apostolic books. When that issue is in view, canon is rightly a subset of Scripture—all canonical books are Scripture, but not all scriptural books are canonical. However, outside of this particular issue, there seems to be little reason to make a sharp distinction between Scripture and canon.

⁵⁴ B. B. Warfield, ‘The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament’ in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1948): 415.

⁵⁵ For examples of those who argue theological perspectives have no place in biblical studies, see Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?*, 51-52; and also John Collins, ‘Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?’ in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, ed. W. Propp; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990): 1-17.

that involves any theological considerations, we might be told. But, why are we obligated to study the canon on purely historical-critical terms? Why should we be obligated to use the term canon in a way that prohibits the very approach to the canon that Christians have held for two millennia? Indeed, one might argue that, in this sense, the historical-critical approach has its own theological bias—just in the opposite direction. More and more, scholars have recognised that theological and historical concerns are not easily separated, nor should they be. Iain Provan makes the point that, ‘All the great giants of biblical study in the last 200 years have worked within certain dogmatic and philosophical positions.’⁵⁶ Francis Watson has pressed the case that, ‘Theological concerns should have an acknowledged place within the field of biblical scholarship.’⁵⁷ This is especially true in the field of canonical studies. Floyd Filson has made the simple, but often overlooked, observation that, ‘The canon is a theological issue.’⁵⁸ Vanhoozer concurs, ‘History alone cannot answer the question of what the canon finally is; theology alone can do that.’⁵⁹

Although the ontological definition brings a healthy balance to our definition of canon, we are not arguing here that it should be the *only* definition of canon. On the contrary, the ontological definition is being offered to complement (or round out) the functional and exclusive definitions. All three of these definitions make important contributions to our understanding of canon and therefore all three should be used in an integrative and multi-dimensional manner. The exclusive definition rightly reminds us that the canon did not fall in place overnight; it took several centuries for the edges of the canon to solidify.⁶⁰ The functional definition reminds us that prior to the determination of the final shape

⁵⁶ Provan, ‘Canons to the Left of Him’, 23. See also Iain Provan, ‘Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writings on the History of Israel’, *JBL* 114 (1995): 585-606.

⁵⁷ F. Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997): 3. See also F. Watson, ‘Bible, Theology and the University: A Response to Philip Davies’, *JSOT* 71 (1996): 3-16.

⁵⁸ Floyd V. Filson, *Which Books Belong in the Bible? A Study of the Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957): 42.

⁵⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005): 146.

⁶⁰ As noted above, the exclusive definition still plays a legitimate role as long as some of its weaknesses are addressed. In particular, the exclusive definition needs to view the Fourth Century as the time that the church reached a general consensus on the boundaries of the canon, not the time in which the church officially acted to close the canon in an airtight manner.

of the canon there was a core collection of books that functioned with supreme authority in early Christian communities. And the ontological definition reminds us that books do not just *become* authoritative because of the actions of the church—they bear authority by virtue of what they are, books given by God. When all three perspectives on the canon are considered together, a more balanced and more complete vision of the canon is realised. Thus, we should not be forced to choose between them.

In addition, this multi-dimensional approach to the definition of canon provides much-needed clarification to the ongoing debate over the ‘date’ of canon. As Barton and others have already noted, the date assigned to the canon is, to some extent, correlative to the definition of canon one brings to the table.⁶¹ On the exclusive definition, we do not have a ‘canon’ until about the Fourth Century. On the functional definition, it seems that we have a canon at least by the middle of the Second Century. On the ontological definition, a New Testament book would be canonical as soon as it was written—giving a first-century date for the canon (depending on when one dates specific books). When these three definitions are viewed together they nicely capture the entire flow of canonical history: (1) The canonical books are written with divine authority; → (2) The books are recognised and used as Scripture by early Christians; → (3) the church reaches a consensus around these books. The fact that these three definitions are linked together in such a natural chronological order reminds us that the story of the canon is indeed a *process*; and therefore it should not be artificially restricted to one moment in time.⁶² Put differently, the story of the canon is organic. It is like a tree at different stages of its life: the young seedling just inches high, the adolescent sapling, and the full grown adult. Even though there are changes, at each stage we can still use the same terminology, namely a ‘tree’. Perhaps, then, we need to rethink the whole concept of the canon’s ‘date’. Instead of discussing the date of canon, we might consider discussing the *stage* of canon.

⁶¹ Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 1-34.

⁶² The fact that certain definitions of canon tend to match with certain stages of canonical history should not be taken as an indication they cannot be used for other stages. For example, the ontological definition—defined as the books God gave his church—could still be used to refer to the canon in the Second, Third, or Fourth Centuries (and even now!). Likewise, the functional definition could be used in any century where books were regarded as Scripture. It is actually the exclusive definition that is most limited in this regard; it cannot be used prior to the Fourth Century.

This latter term brings out the multi-dimensional nature of canon, whereas the former implies that canon is, and only can be, one point in time.

Once these three definitions are allowed to interface with one another, it also becomes evident that they, in some sense, imply one another. If a canonical book is a book given by God to his church (ontological definition) then we might naturally expect his church to recognise it as such and use it as an authoritative norm (functional definition). And if a canonical book is a book used as an authoritative norm (functional definition), we might naturally expect that the church would eventually reach a consensus on the boundaries around such books (exclusive definition). And if the church has reached a consensus on the boundaries around certain books (exclusive definition), then it is reasonable to think these are the books that have already been used as an authoritative norm (functional definition), and also the books that God intended his church to have (ontological definition). The manner in which these definitions reinforce one another suggests that they are not contradictory as so many suppose, but instead are to be seen as complementary.

It is also worth noting that these three definitions of canon fit quite well with the established categories of modern speech-act philosophy.⁶³ Speaking (which would also include divine speaking) can take three different forms: (i) *locution* (making coherent and meaningful sounds or, in the case of writing, letters); (ii) *illocution* (what the words are actually doing; e.g. promising, warning, commanding, declaring, etc.); and (iii) *perlocution* (the effect of these words on the listener; e.g. encouraging, challenging, persuading, etc.).⁶⁴ Since any speaking act can include some or all of these attributes it would be out of place to suggest that only one of them is the proper definition for what we call 'speaking'. These three types of speech-acts generally correspond to the three definitions of canon outlined above. The ontological

⁶³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002): 159-203; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); William P. Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1976); and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁶⁴ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 100-103; M. S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002): 126-27; Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 1-36.

definition of canon refers to the actual production of these books and thus refers to a *locutionary* act. The functional definition refers to what the canonical books actually do in the life of the church and thus refers to an *illocutionary* act. And the exclusive definition refers to the reception and impact of these books on the church and thus refers to a *perlocutionary* act. Again, a multi-dimensional approach to the definition of canon brings out these nuances in greater richness and depth.

The manner in which speech-act philosophy uses three complementary definitions for the term 'speaking' can provide some practical insight into how the same can be done with the term 'canon'. Speech-act philosophy sees no need to choose just one of these definitions to the exclusion of all others, nor should we do so in regard to canon. Of course, authors may employ one particular definition of canon at any given time, but this need not be viewed as problematic. The particular definition employed may be determined simply by what an author desires to emphasise. If an author wants to emphasise the ecclesiastical dimension of canon, then the exclusive definition may be most appropriate.⁶⁵ If an author wants to emphasise the authoritative role played by canonical books, then the functional definition is best. And if an author desires to view canon from the perspective of its divine origins, then the ontological definition is most suitable. But, even when just one of the definitions is employed, the other two definitions can still be viewed as legitimate and complementary (just as in speech-act philosophy). Moreover, it should be acknowledged that it is not always necessary for an author to choose which definition he or she is using (nor feel the need to explain to the reader which definition is being used). Sometimes the term 'canon', like the term 'speech', is used in such a general manner that all three definitions could be in view. In the end, this term can be employed with a substantial amount of flexibility; and this flexibility is a reminder of the depth and richness of this thing we call 'canon'.

5. Conclusion

Brevard Childs was correct that much of the confusion over the history of the canon has to do with differences in terminology. However, that

⁶⁵ See n. 60 above.

problem is not solved by imposing a single definition of canon on modern scholars. On the contrary, insisting that only a single definition rightly captures the depth and breadth of canon may end up bringing more distortion than clarification. While the exclusive definition correctly reminds us that a general consensus on the boundaries of the canon was not achieved until the Fourth Century, it can give the misleading impression that there was little agreement over the core books prior to this time period. While the functional definition correctly reminds us that New Testament books served as an authoritative norm at quite an early time, it still does not address what these books are in and of themselves. While the ontological definition brings the necessary balance to both of these approaches—offering a reminder that these books do not *become* canonical simply by the actions of the church—it too cannot stand alone. To have only the ontological definition would lead us to wrongly conclude that these books were basically lowered from heaven as a completed canon with no development or history in the real world. Ironically, then, perhaps the debate over canon is best addressed not by choosing one definition, but by allowing for the legitimacy of multiple definitions that interface with one another. If canon is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, then perhaps it is best defined in a multi-dimensional fashion.