



POLITICS and
the Making of the
NEW TESTAMENT

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Finally, a note to my readers. I use "Catholic" throughout the book only as a descriptive label and synonym for "orthodox." I do not use these terms because I intend to pass any sort of judgment that the original Christians who used these terms were in fact "catholic" in their views or "orthodox" in their beliefs, but simply because they were the labels they used for themselves. Therefore, "Catholic" (always with a capital C) is a *technical term* that always refers to one of the factions in early Christianity, serving to differentiate it from other factions with labels like Valentinians, Montanists, Marcionites, Ebionites, etc. As I show in Chapter 6, this faction was the one the emperor Constantine favored, as we can see from many edicts in which he bestowed gifts, reparations, and privileges upon them, using this specific Christian term. *I do not use it as a synonym for "Roman Catholic,"* a term that did not even come into existence until much later. I repeat this warning later in the book, but I wish to state it clearly here as well, to avoid all possible misunderstanding.

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Chapter 1

WHAT A "CANON" OF SCRIPTURE IS—AND IS NOT

A true canon of scripture is a rare event.

Scholars of comparative religions often use the term *canon* to refer to any traditional assemblage of sacred texts. One sees references, for example, to the "Vedic Canon," the "Taoist Canon," the "Canon of the Five Confucian Classics," and so on. But as we shall see, the term *canon* is properly restricted to a much more specific phenomenon that is not the same as the gradual accumulation, over time, of a set of sacred scriptures. However popular and widespread, using the terms *canon* and *scripture* as if they were roughly synonymous involves a comprehensive misunderstanding. When comparative religions scholars use the term *canon* to refer to any collection of scriptures, the result is widespread confusion.

Similarly, biblical specialists often speak of the "canon of scripture," or "the biblical canon," without realizing how peculiar or unusual that phrase would have sounded when it first appeared. The terms *canon* and *scripture* are not synonymous, although some recent studies of the process by which the Christian scriptures were selected use the terms as if they were. For example, consider this statement: "There are no agreed-upon definitions of canon in contemporary writing. Perhaps what we mean by scripture is covered by a scripture canon, namely, that which is written down and

becomes normative for a religious community is *both scripture and canon*.²¹

A true canon of scripture is actually a rare event in the history of the world's religions. The few actual canons that exist were created in fourth- and fifth-century Mediterranean Christianity, third-century rabbinic Judaism, and seventh-century Islam. To understand the unusual circumstances that caused canons of scripture to appear in just these three religious traditions, we must begin by clarifying from a comparative religions perspective the historical difference between *scripture* and *canon*.

In the comparative study of religions,² the term *scripture* refers to a semidurable, semifluid, *slowly evolving* conglomeration of sacred texts (not by any means necessarily all in written form) in use by members of a religious tradition over hundreds or even thousands of years. Such conglomerations of sacred texts exhibit a strikingly unbounded quality, defying clear-cut definition as to which writings belong to the body of sacred scripture or which text is the "official" or "correct" text of a particular writing. As Chinese religions expert Miriam Levering explains: "It is a fallacy . . . to expect scriptures . . . to be neatly bounded. . . . In the rather rare cases where communities saw value in closing the canon, new scriptural or semi-scriptural forms [were immediately] created (e.g., the Talmud) to allow for the ongoing process of insight or revelation."³

The vast conglomeration of Hindu sacred texts provides a good example of this semifluid, boundless character. In his study, "Scripture in India," Thomas Coburn writes:

The traditional Hindu view is that there are 108 Upanishads and, of these, a dozen or so are identified as "early," that is, composed in the half millennium or so after about 700 B.C.E. And yet in the word index of Vedic material that began appearing five decades ago, the Vaidika padānukrama-kosa, no fewer than 206 Upanishads are indexed and some of these have been written occasionally even in modern times and certainly right up to the Middle Ages. The relatively recent origin of these Upanishads, together with the fact that some of them are highly sectarian and that there even exists an "Allah Upanishad" — written in praise of Islam . . . is exceedingly

[disconcerting] for any view that takes only the early Upanishads as normative.⁴

As we shall see, a canon results when someone seeks to impose a strict boundary around a smaller subset of writings or teachings within the larger, slowly evolving "cloud of sacred texts." Any effort to promulgate the new subset with the force of law creates an immediate tension between the new subset and the powerful, living religion surrounding it. The fixed boundary requires strenuous official efforts to enforce it. Efforts to prevent additions or deletions often fail, however, since it is the nature of sacred scripture to grow and change along with the changing religious situation. Moreover, creating this kind of authoritative subset—whether the specific term *canon* is used or not—is never a minor or obscure event.

In terms of the history of Christianity, a canon of scripture, properly so called, did not appear until church officials, acting under the guidance of the highest levels of the Roman government, met together on several specific occasions to create a rigid boundary around the approved texts, forever separating them from the larger "cloud of sacred texts." These actions, which we properly call canonization, were high-profile events and are easily detectable because they have had such a major impact on the whole religious community from that moment onward.

It is possible to say exactly when a canon of scripture was created in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but not in any of the other religions of the world. I know of no evidence to suggest, for example, that religious officials ever met for the specific purpose of putting a boundary around anything within the vast conglomeration of Vedic texts mentioned by Coburn. Thus, to refer to all of the Upanishads as "the Vedic canon" results in serious confusion, leading to numerous false assumptions. The Upanishads were never canonized. Similarly, in his discussion, "Taoism: Classic and Canon,"⁵ L. Thompson writes that the entire corpus of Taoist texts, called the *Tao Tsang* (meaning "hidden or secret texts on Taoist subjects"), is extremely vast, covering all sorts of materials, some of which are not religious at all.⁶ "This 'Bibliotheca Taoica' is a huge

assemblage of writings covering all kinds of subjects, ranging in date from as early as the fourth or third century B.C.E. to as recently as the beginning of the twentieth century. Its contents were not early on circumscribed and defined as were those of the Western Bible or the Qur'an."⁷

But Thompson then makes the common mistake of referring to this shapeless mass as "the Taoist canon." The Bibliotheca Taoica was never canonized. The same objection applies to other phrases such as the "Confucian canon," the "Pali canon," or the "Tibetan Buddhist canon." Not one of these semifluid, boundless, evolving conglomerations of sacred texts was ever canonized by a religious elite gathered for that specific purpose.

No Canon of Scripture at Qumran

The manuscripts found at Wadi Qumran, including both biblical texts and sectarian writings, provide a perfect illustration of my point. Ask any Qumran expert to give a definitive list of the writings the covenanters regarded as scripture: for example, did the covenanters regard the Book of Jubilees as having scriptural authority?⁸ What about the Temple Scroll?⁹ How many Psalms were in their "Bible"? Answers vary, depending on which expert you ask.¹⁰

The same lack of clear-cut boundaries is visible in the varieties of the text of the biblical manuscripts found at Qumran.¹¹ This multiplicity of texts ranges from minor differences to different editions of whole books. Eugene Ulrich describes two editions of Exodus, two of Joshua, and two of Jeremiah, and there are other examples.¹² The Israeli textual authority Emanuel Tov "has divided the entire corpus of the so-called Qumran biblical manuscripts and fragments into five textual categories: texts written with the special orthographic practices of Qumran scribes (ca. 25 percent); proto-Masoretic texts (ca. 40 percent), pre-Samaritan texts (ca. 5 percent), texts close to the Hebrew model for the Septuagint (ca. 5 percent), and nonaligned texts (ca. 25 percent)."¹³ This leads Tov to the conclusion that, in view of the evidence at Qumran, it is impossible

to decide which was "the original text" of any book of the Hebrew Bible, and that it may be time to abandon the whole idea of "reconstructing the original text."¹⁴

Likewise, we cannot speak of a "canon of scripture" at Qumran. The variety of manuscripts treasured there indicates the semifluid character of the process through which scripture accumulated over time. Eugene Ulrich describes the result using the image of baklava:

The books [of Scripture] were the result of a long literary development, whereby traditional material was faithfully retold and handed on from generation to generation, but also creatively expanded and reshaped to fit the new circumstances and new needs that the successive communities experienced through the vicissitudes of history. So the process of the composition of the Scriptures was organic, developmental, with successive layers of tradition. Ezekiel was commanded to eat a scroll and found that it was as sweet as honey (Ezek. 3:1-3), so perhaps I may be permitted to use the image of baklava for the composition of scriptural texts: many layers were laid on top of earlier ones by successive generations over the centuries, as the traditions were handed on faithfully but creatively adapted, and formed into a unity of the honey—sometimes heated—of the lived experience of the community over time.¹⁵

Using the Qumran evidence as a springboard, scholars writing in the important volume *The Canon Debate*¹⁶ went on to other, more far-reaching conclusions: "There was no canon of scripture in *Second Temple Judaism*";¹⁷ *rabbinic Judaism* did not operate with a closed canon;¹⁸ early Christianity never intended to have a closed canon of scripture.¹⁹ These scholars drew their unprecedented conclusions with considerable hesitancy. One scholar, James A. Sanders, who has been exploring the "dialogic character of scripture" and probing the riddle of the canon for decades,²⁰ has this explanation: "Shedding the 'Jamnia mentality,'" i.e., the idea that the rabbis closed the canon at the "Council of Jamnia," "has not been easy for the Western mind."²¹ In Sanders's view, canonization

was a problematic development from the start; he now sees it as an unfortunate attempt to "freeze the text,"²² which was, in any case, doomed to failure since "the Bible is dialogical literature.... No closure [of the scripture collection within a canon] can curb the dialogue that is at the heart of Scripture."²³

The unbounded quality of the collection of scriptures at Qumran, and the wide variability of the text of these same scriptures in rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity as well, are precisely the characteristics observed by others in the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, the Chinese Confucian tradition, and indeed of any religion having oral or written normative traditions. From this perspective, the way the Qumran covenants, the rabbis, and early Christians treated their sacred texts was quite normal.

Misleading Use of Novel Terminology

If some scholars have failed to distinguish canon and scripture clearly, others have confused the issue by employing novel terminology. For example, comparative religions scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith described the processes, from the second through the seventh centuries C.E., by which the early Christian, rabbinic Jewish, Gnostic, Mandaean, Zarathustrian [*sic*], Manichaean, and Muslim communities accumulated and selected their respective scriptures as "the Scripture movement... in the process of crystallization."²⁴ Smith rightly recognized that something significant and unusual was going on, but—because he used the ambiguous concept "crystallization"—he failed to pierce the riddle. He observed that "Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese counterparts, teasingly similar in other respects, have *little or none of this particular notion*, [namely the] creation of a limited collection or a book of sacred writings from the 'founder.'"²⁵ But Smith left it at that without attempting to discover what it was that prompted a few Middle Eastern religious communities to produce a *canon* of scripture, i.e., an officially sanctioned, officially limited collection of sacred writings.

Over the past two centuries of biblical studies, scholars have

shown little awareness of the uniqueness of the Christian canon of scripture compared to the scripture collections in the other world religions.²⁶ One reason is that biblical scholars, too, tend to use novel terminology. For example, in his essay, "Christianity, Scripture and Canon," H. Y. Gamble Jr. sees nothing strange in the Christian canon of scripture even though he realizes that *scripture* and *canon* are not quite the same thing. He explains their conjunction by saying, "The development of a canon of Christian scripture was part of a larger movement in the ancient church towards religious self-definition."²⁷ In the 1970s, Gamble had taken part in a three-year interdisciplinary seminar at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, on the theme "normative self-definition in Judaism and early Christianity." The project, which drew dozens of scholars from North America and Europe, produced a wealth of insights regarding the ongoing redefinition of religious communities in the Greco-Roman world. Constant re-self-definition is a typical, ongoing feature of all religious traditions, Middle Eastern or other; it is a good way to characterize their ordinary active, organic vitality. But a *canon* of scripture is not an ordinary event. Gamble's focus on the category of religious self-definition obscured precisely what was distinctive about the Christian canon of scripture (and its Jewish and Muslim equivalents).²⁸

Recent secular Western historians who specialize in Greco-Roman history have also failed to notice the peculiarity and uniqueness of the many *kanones*—canons—that appeared in Greek culture after the fourth century B.C.E., but for a different reason: they simply take for granted a rather vague understanding of what these *kanones* are. Typical is H. Beyer's discussion of *kanōn* in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, which consists primarily of an idealization of "the Greek": "[*Kanones*] becomes the 'norm,' i.e., the perfect form and therefore the goal to be sought or the infallible criterion by which things are to be measured.... For the Greek seeks what is perfect, balanced and harmonious, i.e., the ideal." As we shall see below, a *kanōn* has little to do with a supposed aesthetic appreciation of "perfect form."²⁹