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*Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in
Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (review)

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REVIEWS

EXPLORING THE ORIGINS OF THE BIBLE: CANON FORMATION IN HISTORICAL, LITERARY, AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE. Edited by Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov. Pp. 272. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008. Paper, \$22.99.

This volume, edited by Craig A. Evans (Acadia Divinity College) and Emanuel Tov (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), presents essays on the formation of the biblical canon. It begins with the origins of the canon from historical and literary critical perspectives and concludes with theological reflections.

Following an introductory chapter by Evans, the volume begins with Tov's chapter on the Septuagint as a source for the literary analysis of the Hebrew Bible. Readers acquainted with Tov's earlier work (e.g., *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* [2nd rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001]) will find much here that is familiar. Focusing on passages in which the Septuagint shows evidence of a fairly literal translation of a Hebrew *Vorlage*, Tov argues that in many instances the Septuagint witnesses to an earlier literary stage in the formation of the Hebrew Bible. In addition to such familiar examples as Jeremiah and Deuteronomy 32, Tov also examines several chapters in 1 Kings, Joshua–Judges, and 1 Samuel 2.

In chapter 2, James Charlesworth (Princeton Theological Seminary) argues that the “canon” of early Judaism and Christianity remained porous, if not open, much longer than is commonly assumed. Many works “ostensibly” excluded from the official canon(s) of rabbinic Judaism and orthodox Christianity were deemed sacred by many Jews and Christians. Furthermore, many of these texts are useful for dispelling common misconceptions of Second Temple Judaism (e.g., cessation of prophecy after Ezra).

Stephen Dempster (Atlantic Baptist University) argues for the early emergence of a tripartite Hebrew canon in chapter 3. Dempster presents internal evidence of “canonical consciousness” in the biblical texts themselves, consisting of “the primacy of the Torah, but also the importance of an eschatological impulse and practical concerns” (p. 104). Next Dempster considers external evidence (e.g., Josephus, Qumran scrolls, etc.) which contains references to either a two-part or three-part canon. Dempster concludes that the basic tripartite structure of the Hebrew canon “goes back to the end of the biblical period itself” (p. 125), and that a more or less fixed canon had emerged by the end of the first century C.E.

In chapter 4, Glenn Wooden (Acadia Divinity College) examines the role of the Septuagint in the formation of both the Christian Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible. Although the Protestant Reformation brought about a

shift toward the priority of the Hebrew (Masoretic) text, Christianity has historically looked toward the Septuagint as its authoritative Old Testament text. According to Wooden, virtually all of the early Christian evidence indicates that the Christian Old Testament was the Septuagint, and the Christian preference for the Septuagint also played a significant role in the formation of the Masoretic text as the authoritative text of rabbinic Judaism.

Chapter 5, by Evans, examines four non-canonical Gospels which some have argued as early accounts preserving data on the historical Jesus: the *Gospel of Thomas*, Egerton Papyrus 2, the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, and the *Gospel of Peter*. Evans finds that the texts in question date no earlier than the mid- to late-second century and are likely dependent upon the canonical Gospels. In the case of the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, Evans contends that it is actually a modern forgery composed by its purported “discoverer,” Morton Smith (pp. 167–171).

In chapter 6, Stanley Porter (McMaster Divinity College) discusses the relationship of the Pauline corpus to the apostle and argues that Paul or one of his associates gathered together the first collection of his letters. This close personal involvement, Porter contends, is not restricted to the undisputed letters, but includes the entire thirteen letter Pauline corpus, which, on the basis of the earliest manuscript evidence, appears to have been arranged in two sub-collections (letters to churches and letters to individuals), both of which are arranged in order of decreasing size.

The final two chapters, by Lee McDonald (Acadia Divinity College) and Jonathan Wilson (Carey Theological College), examine the theological ramifications of the preceding discussions of canon formation as they pertain to biblical authority. McDonald argues that the “canon” of the early church was not a book but a person—Jesus Christ—and suggests that the authority of the biblical canon derives solely from its witness to the incarnate Word of God. Similarly, Wilson applies the post-modern critique of the modern quest for the “universal” to the issue of canonicity and concludes that biblical canon may avoid historical particularity only through “the Christian conviction that the work of Jesus Christ continues today,” that is, in the ongoing redemption of creation *within history* (pp. 248–249).

In several instances, the essays in this volume (especially those by Charlesworth and McDonald) may serve as helpful overviews of current scholarship on the canon, aside from their own contributions. The concluding focus on theological ramifications and the basis of canonical authority sets this volume apart from many other works on the subject.

Some of the essays in this volume are more convincing than others. Dempster’s “internal evidence” for a tripartite canon, while perhaps evidencing an early quasi-canonical status for the Torah and the authority of prophecy (but not necessarily prophetic books!), does not indicate a tripartite

canon, and without this biblical evidence, his claim that the arrangement of the Hebrew canon “goes back to the end of the biblical period itself” (p. 125) is difficult to maintain. Likewise, Porter’s chapter on the Pauline canon too easily dismisses the objection to Luke as the likely compiler of the first Pauline corpus on the grounds that Acts shows no knowledge of Paul’s letters. Porter counters by pointing to the lack of material concerning traditions about Jesus in Acts as proof that Luke was not compelled to include all important facts in his writing, yet the fact that Jesus is not a major character in Acts (due to his ascension to heaven), while Paul clearly is, invalidates Porter’s argument. As well, Charlesworth’s discussion of writings ostensibly outside of the canon could be improved by a discussion of the distinction between “scripture” and “canon.” Charlesworth seems to assume that the two terms are more or less interchangeable, but this may not necessarily be the case. Nevertheless, his main point—that the “canon” of early Judaism and Christianity was porous and that many writings now denied “Scriptural” status were regarded as sacred by at least some groups—is well-founded.

On the whole, this collection of essays provides an informative presentation of many of the issues surrounding discussions of canon formation. The essays are written so as to be easily accessible to the non-expert, yet they do not (generally) over-simplify this enormously complex subject. Finally, the breadth of topics covered in this volume is impressive and gives fairly equal attention to both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament, while also addressing practical theological concerns, which surround and arise from scholarship on the origins of the Bible.

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אשור, בבל ויהודה: מחקרים בתולדות המזרח הקדום (ASSYRIA, BABYLONIA AND JUDAH: STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST). By Hayim Tadmor. Edited by Mordechai Cogan. Pp. 364. Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2006. Cloth, \$14.06.

This book contains nineteen previously-published articles by Hayim Tadmor. Tadmor, who passed away just before the appearance of this volume, mastered two academic disciplines, Assyriology and Biblical studies. Although the fields are interrelated, each is a discipline in its own right. Tadmor was not a “consumer” of scholarship in one field for the service of the other; he was a “producer” of top-rank works in both areas of