



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2015.09.09

Timothy H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon*. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 304. ISBN: 9780300164343. Cloth. \$45.00.

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Understanding the formation of the Jewish canon is beset by a paucity of any evidence which might depict precisely the means and method by which the twenty-two-book Jewish canon became accepted. Furthermore, among various Jewish communities existing before the first century, different individual books were considered authoritative. Unfortunately, these communities either did not articulate the bounds of their authoritative collections, or those articulations have been lost, leaving scholars with the task of carefully inferring the texts considered authoritative by individual communities from the texts that they cite or mention as authoritative in some way. These inferences are necessarily tenuous because of the lack of clear evidence.

In *The Formation of the Jewish Canon*, Timothy Lim puts forward a theory explaining the development of the Jewish canon which he calls “the theory of the majority canon.” This theory supposes that before 100 CE “there was not one official canon accepted by all Jews; there existed a plurality of collections of scriptures that were authoritative for different communities” (15). In his conclusion, Lim restates this theory as follows: “By the end of the first century of the Common Era the Pharisaic canon became the canon of Rabbinic Judaism because the majority of those who gathered in the grand coalition at Yavneh were Pharisees” (179).

An important terminological distinction is made here that requires further explanation. Throughout the volume, Lim differentiates between the terms “canon” and “authoritative collection.” In his usage, the term “canon” refers to a “list of biblical books,” and “authoritative scriptures” refers to “collections of authoritative writings before the appearance of the first lists” (4). Certainly semantic precision is important, and in this regard, understanding the term “canon” etymologically as an official list is warranted. However, the conceptual and practical differences existing between the terms “canon” and “authoritative collection” are not readily apparent, and Lim does not explain them in much detail.

The volume progresses in three movements. Chapters 1-2 survey modern scholarly opinions of

the concept of canon and its emergence. Chapters 3-9 attempt to survey the canonical implications of various ancient texts. Finally, chapter 10 is a brief theoretical synthesis derived from these textual studies.

The first part is a critical evaluation of several important threads in the modern discussions of the development of the Jewish canon. Chapter 1 explains the diversity of the use of the terms “canon” and “authoritative scripture” in the scholarly debates about the canon, ending in Lim’s definition of these terms himself, which were mentioned above. He explains the indicators he will use to determine which compositions are authoritative. His argument is that when communities describe writings as prophetic or inspired by God, they are “by implication, different from other kinds of writings” (7). This “difference” is marked by both ideological and formal factors. Ideologically, texts become authoritative when they are understood to communicate a message from God, for example, the idea that the Law of Moses was given by God at Sinai, or the notion of “God-breathed scripture” from 2 Timothy 3:16. Formally, communities mark the texts which they consider authoritative through direct citation or by providing a commentary on an authoritative text. In this vein, allusion also communicates an authoritative set of texts but, of course, it is more difficult to find.

In the second chapter, Lim summarizes current views on the way in which the Jewish canon developed. Following Roger Beckwith and John Barton, he sides against the linear, three-stage theory of the development which proposes that the three subdivisions of the canon were closed sequentially. He also discusses the problems inherent in understanding the gathering at Yavneh as a “council” where the canon was finally closed. Lim follows Shaye Cohen in considering Yavneh to be a “grand coalition” which resulted in the “cessation of sectarianism” (23). Finally, Lim discusses various references to the deposit of texts in the temple, and concludes that the fact that books were deposited in the temple does not prove their canonicity.

The second part of the book—the textual work—begins with an analysis of “early canonical lists,” and to this end, Lim focuses his discussion on the canon lists which appear in BT *Baba Batra* 14a-15b, *4 Ezra*, and Josephus. This chapter focuses on the description of the individual books which make up these lists, and a comparison of the lists with each other. The conclusion Lim draws is that the canon of Rabbinic Judaism was closed between 150 and 250 CE, though even after these dates certain debates persisted.

Chapter 4 discusses the canonical implications of the commission of Ezra (Ezra 7:12-26). Lim argues that Ezra knew and used Genesis through Joshua, and called this entire collection Torah. Further, he argues that by appointing Ezra in some official capacity, the Persians elevated the status of the Judean Torah (inclusive of Joshua) by lending their authority to these local laws.

The implications the *Letter of Aristeas* has for understanding the development of the canon are discussed in chapter 5. After a lengthy examination of the dating and genre of the writing, Lim concludes that the “central kernel” of truth in the letter is that the Jewish laws were translated into Greek early in the Ptolemaic dynasty, possibly as a reaction to the standardization of the Homeric poems. Lim argues that this translation became canonical for the Jewish community in Alexandria. In this section Lim also examines the reception of the Greek translation in Philo and Josephus, concluding that while the Greek Pentateuch was authoritative for Philo, it was merely

a translation for Josephus.

The prologue to Sirach, Sirach itself, and the “library of books” Judas Maccabeus described in 2 Macc 2:13-15 are described in chapter 6. The argument that Lim puts forward is that the prologue to Sirach does not express a closed canon because it is trying to argue that Sirach itself ought to be considered authoritative/canonical. Further, Sirach 44-50, the so-called “praise of the fathers,” also does not indicate a fixed canon. This argument hangs on the inclusion of ch. 50 in the section itself and not treating it as an appendix. The result is that “scripture in the view of Ben Sira is not just the traditional biblical texts, but also the wisdom tradition that he himself has committed to writing” (106). Finally, Lim argues that the comparison between Judas Maccabeus and Nehemiah in 2 Maccabees is quite general, and does not describe the creation of an official library in the Maccabean period. Therefore, these texts indicate the emergence of “collections of authoritative writings that served Jewish communities in Judea and Egypt” (117), but they do not provide evidence for a closed canon either before or during this period.

Chapter 7 describes the Dead Sea Scrolls and the implications this collection has for understanding of the development of canon. Lim presupposes that the collection of manuscripts was essentially curated by the sectarian inhabitants of Qumran. He argues that this collection demonstrates “a broadly bipartite collection of authoritative scriptures consisting of the ‘Torah of Moses,’ referring to the Pentateuch, and an undefined collection of writings that are considered prophetic” (120). Lim suggests that the Psalms would also have been considered prophetic because of the sectarian assumption that David was both the author of the Psalms and a prophet himself. Because the sectarians also used writings in addition to those later included in the Jewish canon, Lim understands the sectarians to have a “graded authority, a sliding scale of influence, ranging from those that are authoritative interpretations of the biblical texts to sources and traditions that were used to produce the rulebooks and other sectarian scrolls” (121).

In the context of discussing *peshet*, the form that biblical commentary often takes in the DSS, Lim makes what I think is one of the most provocative observations of the entire volume. While discussing the formal method of separating biblical lemmata from interpretation, he argues that making use of this method requires that the biblical lemma be treated as authoritative by the author—but its meaning in context is “supplanted in favour of the meaning attached to it by sectarian exegesis. . . . The *peshet* is formally a comment and supplement to the biblical lemma, but in practice it is understood as the authoritative expression of divine intention” (139). Later in the conclusion, he expands this observation very briefly by including the Pauline Letters (188). His contention is that authoritative interpretation of authoritative texts is instrumental to the formation of a new canon. I very much wish that this observation had been developed in greater depth.

Chapter 8 tries to tease out which books were considered authoritative by the Essenes and the Therapeutae. In describing the works considered authoritative among the Essenes, whom Lim associates with the inhabitants of Qumran, he looks at the statements of Philo and Josephus, and concludes that their “scripture” was the Pentateuch, but they also treated some of their own compositions as authoritative, though these are distinguished from the biblical books. In considering the authoritative works of the Therapeutae, Lim looks at Philo’s *On the Contemplative Life* § 24-28. Here Philo mentions that each home of the Therapeutae has a room

devoted to their sacred books, which contain “only the law and the oracles delivered under inspiration by the prophets along with the Psalms, and the other (books) by means of which religion and sound knowledge grow together into one perfect whole” (152). Lim supposes that “laws” should be considered the entire Pentateuch because in other places Philo uses “laws” to mean the five books of Moses.

Chapter 9 considers the writings which seem to be authoritative from a consideration of the New Testament texts. The chapter begins with an extended discussion of Matt 23:34-36, which has been taken by some to indicate those texts which Jesus thought authoritative or canonical. Lim suggests that there are not really canonical implications that can be drawn from this passage; Jesus simply refers to a collection of stories describing the shedding of innocent blood. Lim next describes Luke 24:44, which has often been understood to be an early indication of the tripartite canon. He concludes that by taking the broader context into view, particularly Luke 24:25-7, the phrase “all scriptures” indicates the knowledge of a third division (and perhaps more) beyond laws of Moses and prophets. Thus, Lim contends that in Luke “law” is equivalent to the Pentateuch, the Prophets are undefined, and Psalms could either be indicative of another category of authoritative text, or could be considered to be one of the Prophets.

In this chapter Lim also considers the assumption that Paul used the LXX text type rather than the MT text type in his scriptural citations. Basing his observations on an article by Moisés Silva, he suggests that the evidence is far less definitive than normally assumed; in most cases, Paul cites a textual tradition common both to MT and LXX.

The third and final section of the book is a short synthesis of the preceding textual analysis. Lim reiterates his view that the three stage theory cannot be maintained, suggesting instead the theory of the majority canon, which asserts that at Yavneh the canon of the Pharisees became the canon of Rabbinic Judaism, not because the gathering at Yavneh functioned as any kind of definitive council, but because the majority of those in attendance were Pharisees.

A few difficulties with Lim’s argument present themselves. The distinction between “canon” and “authoritative collection” seems forced. If I have understood Lim’s distinction properly, “canon” is the institutional recognition of the authority of certain compositions indicated by the production of an official list stating which books are officially authoritative. Lim is able to maintain this distinction for the most part with the exception of what he calls the Pharisaic canon, and his insistence that the Greek translation of the Pentateuch was authoritative for Alexandrian Jews. Neither of these canons are defined by an officially authoritative list, and so seem not to conform to his definition of “canon.”

Additionally, Lim has a tendency to equate references in ancient texts to Torah, Prophets, or Writings as categories of authoritative works with the categories as we have them in various canonical collections of the modern period. That ancient authors categorized works which they considered authoritative is a significant observation—but perhaps these categories are not always equivalent in extent to their modern counterparts. As an example, Lim himself points out that the term “Torah,” in the various collocations in which it appears in Neh 8-10 refers to a hexateuch consisting of Genesis-Joshua (69-72). If indeed it is the case that Neh 8-10 refers to these six books by the term “Torah,” this is something of a variant usage to the category “Torah,” and

could well indicate that other ancient authors are also using the term “Torah” to mean legal collections which are not equivalent with the Pentateuch as we know it today.

Finally, Lim’s consideration of the formation of the Jewish canon intentionally limits itself to the most relevant Jewish sources. Though he does briefly describe Origen’s and Jerome’s thoughts on canon (38-41), he has not interacted with the rest of the Patristic tradition. But beyond this, he has not looked at any of the texts from among the large corpus of Eastern Christianity. The scarcity of evidence for the process by which the canon develops would seem to require that any text mentioning the process of canonization is worth considering.

These difficulties aside, several elements of this book are to be commended. First, Lim has summarized well some of the major debates in the current scholarship on canon. These summaries will be of immediate use to anyone unfamiliar with the particular arguments being made about the origins of the canon. Of more benefit though is the fact that this volume moves beyond these discussions to a careful consideration of the texts which gave rise to these modern theories. For these reasons, the book will prove beneficial to anyone wishing to understand the scholarly discussions about canon by giving them ready access to the most significant ancient texts and the major critical issues surrounding their interpretation.