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Canon: Process, Not Product?
by Brennan Breed in Articles



THIS WEEK IN CANON: AN AJR FORUM BRENNAN BREED DESCRIBES THE CANON(S) WITHIN THE CANON.

In relation to sacred scripture, “canon” designates a group of texts that are authoritative for a particular community’s religious faith. Some texts are inside the canon, and thus canonical. Others are outside, located in a lower register of authority. This boundary between in and out is conceptual and metaphorical, yet it has real effects on how we approach texts.

This inside/outside metaphor deserves scrutiny. Boundaries between the inside and the outside have a tendency to calcify into limits that seem natural and necessary even when they are contingent. An inside is never entirely sealed from what lies outside; elements within a given boundary usually share much in common with elements excluded on the outside. As Jacques Derrida puts it, “the outside is the inside.”

For instance, the political borderline between the United States and Canada does not correspond to any distinctive trait of their inhabitants. The porous border is at a fairly arbitrary location; there is no necessary reason to use the 49th parallel(ish) to distinguish between Canada and the United States. These borders are historically contingent, emerging from European colonial ventures competing with Native American territories, shifting over the centuries by means of conquest and purchase. Distinctions between inside and outside tend to make historically contingent, emergent, local, and temporary arrangements appear necessary, teleologically determined, universal, and unchanging.

Likewise, textual canons are created by means of boundaries separating sacred, authoritative literature from other sorts of texts. When we read the literature of the Second Temple, we observe a resemblance between the inside of the biblical canon and those books outside the canon. One finds stories of Moses, stories of David, stories of Daniel, psalms, legal materials, apocalypses, creation stories, court stories, and more, both inside and outside.

Second Temple period Jews produced, redacted and transmitted a wealth of literary material. Only centuries after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, various religious communities included some of these works in biblical canons. It seems that some of the materials included, such as Song of Songs and Qohelet, may not have been generally regarded as sacred or authoritative until quite late. Some texts, like the Torah, were held in particularly high esteem in Second Temple Judaism, but there is no evidence that this prestige excluded other texts from sacred status. The inside of the biblical canon is composed of a segment of the outside (the general field of Second Temple Jewish literature) that has been folded in upon itself, producing a boundary and the attendant effects of canonical status.

Some of these effects are illusionistic. For example, there is a teleological illusion: canonicity makes it seem that these texts were always destined to be included in the biblical canon, and that they find their truest expression in that context. Yet the Song of Songs, for example, functioned in ways other than “exclusive sacred authoritative literature” at different points in its history, and it continues to function in other ways after canonization. The truth is that what is inside the canon has always been, and will always be, outside the canon, too.

The seeming finality, fixedness, and singularity of the canonized text is another related effect of canonization. Many scholars assume that, after canonization, the pluriformity of Second Temple Jewish texts supposedly collapses into a frozen form of something like the Masoretic Text. But this is only an illusion, for several reasons.

First, by the time we find the first canon there are already multiple canons for Christians and for Jews. The list of books included in Christian Old Testaments varies widely from the early centuries of the Common Era to the debates surrounding Protestantism. Some books, including Tobit, Judith, 1-2 Maccabees, Baruch, Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon and portions of Daniel, existed for more than a thousand years in a liminal state, under suspicion but never quite excused from the canon. They eventually settled (1) inside differing Eastern Orthodox canons, (2) in a marginal “deuterocanonical” position for Roman Catholics, and (3) outside the canon of most Protestant Christians. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians also include many other ancient Jewish texts such as 1 Enoch and Jubilees in their canon; these books seem to have been sacred and authoritative for many Jews in the Second Temple period, while Qohelet seems to have been broadly suspect.

From the start of the canonization process, there have, always been multiple Jewish canons: there is the rabbinic canon listed in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Baba Bat. 14a), which disagrees with the Masoretic order in the Leningrad and Aleppo codices – neither of which agree with any Christian canonical ordering. Some communities, such as the Beta Israel Jews of Ethiopia, include in their distinct canon diverse texts such as the Testament of Abraham, a Jewish text from the early centuries of the Common Era. Then there is the particular canon held by the Samaritans, a community closely related to Judaism that still lives on today. And scholars have recently used the non-confessional phrase “Hebrew Bible” to vaguely reference all of these canons (and none of them specifically), which facilitates conversation but also reifies the illusions of the inside and outside.

Second, canons do not determine the form of the books included within them — they merely designate which books are in or out. The content of biblical books has never been quite fixed, as we can see from the pluriformity of texts found at Qumran. The text of the book of Daniel, for example, is remarkably different in several Qumran scrolls that preserve it. The text of the Septuagint version of Daniel, canonical for the Eastern Orthodox churches, preserves one of these ancient versions that diverges from the Masoretic Text, and also includes additional stories such as Susannah and the Elders. The canons of religious communities generally do not regulate the textual tradition of the books included; Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity used a wide variety of textual types and did not seem to think that the differing texts were un-biblical.

Similarly, while many scholars claim that the textual form of biblical books “froze” after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, scribes continued to emend and “correct” texts within the various streams of textual transmission. The addition of vowels by the Masoretic scribes, the continuing effort to edit texts to conform to a putative original version, the translation of the text into many different languages, and the incorporation of critical notes and apparatuses in modern editions are all examples of the ongoing process of changing the text that is contained within the various supposedly frozen canons.

One conclusion is that canons are never fully closed. They need readers and interpreters to interact with them, and thus they require verbal and textual supplementation (cf. Neh 8:7-8). Paradoxically, canons are formed by the production of an extra-canonical list that establishes its boundaries—which is, itself, non-canonical. Moreover, the “Hebrew Bible” isn’t a self-contained canon for any community. For Christians, the New Testament extends the canon, and for many Jews, rabbinic literature constitutes a parallel canon without which the Bible is incomplete. The insides of canons were never purged of pluriformity and flux in the textual world beyond them. There was never an inside of a canon that was one, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

The book of Daniel, for example, was not initially canonical. But for many communities, it became so. The book of Daniel now exists both within and outside of several different canons, and can (and should) be studied as it functions in all of these different contexts. The various canonical locations and textual forms of Daniel, and the particular sets of texts that these

different canons placed alongside Daniel, encourage different conversations, theologies, practices and political commitments. The particularities of the various non-canonical and canonical locations of the book of Daniel likely have affected the way that it has been used, interpreted, or even ignored. The canonical situations of Daniel (including its respective canon-within-canon position and its relation to extra-canonical-canon materials) situate it within specific structures of religious discourse particular to each community. Studying Daniel's textual development and history of use would require us, then, to conceive of the concept and the actual practice of canon as changing over time in different ways according to the uses and ideologies of different communities, and remaining sensitive to these changes in each context.

As Walter Benjamin once said, "The canon is in perception." It is a concept produced by particular communities and often functions in an ideal manner that does not coincide with the way that the texts function in the communities themselves. Every community, it is clear, has a canon-within-the-canon, a part-of-the-canon-that-is-ok-to-ignore, and an extra-canonical-canon.

And yet, perceptions create real effects. The temporary, contingent category of the biblical canon and its attendant effects are not merely ideal. These effects have shaped religious practices, political formations and cultural mores. Canonical collections all preserve a wide variety of ancient voices, theologies, ideologies and preoccupations. Reading with the canon in mind will hurt our reconstructions of Second Temple Judaism, but it will help us chart the various trajectories of transmission, use, and interpretation of many texts produced by Second Temple Judaism as they have travelled through time and space.

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