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Keywords
Bible, biblical canon, hermeneutics

Disciplines
Biblical Studies | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Publisher
Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd

Publisher's Note
Excerpt kindly provided with permission by Sheffield Phoenix Press.

ISBN
9781909697263

This book is available at DigitalCommons@Cedarville: http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/faculty_books/166

Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible

New Testament Monographs, 34

Series Editor
Stanley E. Porter

Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible

Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon

Ched Spellman

Sheffield Phoenix Press

2014

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Published by Sheffield Phoenix Press
Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield
Sheffield S3 7QB

www.sheffieldphoenix.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Typeset by CA Typesetting Ltd
Printed on acid-free paper by Lightning Source

ISBN-13 978-1-909697-26-3
ISSN 1747-9606

Dedication

For my Family
¡Lo Hicimos!

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Preface

> But resume your course, O my story, for this
> aging monk is lingering too long over marginalia.[1]

Traversing the long and winding road that led to the final form of this book has been both humbling and rewarding. I am grateful for the support and interaction with family, friends, and colleagues I have experienced along the way. I am particularly thankful for the faithful support of my wife Leigh Anne and my two spunky daughters Hope and Kate.

In line with the function of this autographic paratext, I will only preface the content of what follows further by articulating one of my favorite intertextual tautologies: What I have written, I have written.

Ched Spellman
Cedarville, OH

1. Umberto Eco's narrator Adso of Melk in *The Name of the Rose* (trans. William Weaver; San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1994), p. 25.

List of Abbreviations

ABD	*Anchor Bible Dictionary*
ANF	*The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; rev. A. Cleveland Coxe; American Reprint of the Edinburgh Edition; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983).
AF	*The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (ed. Michael W. Holmes; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).
Baba Bathra	*The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Tractate Baba Batra; Chapters 1–2, 22A; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992).
BDAG	*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (ed. Walter Bauer; trans. and rev. W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 3rd edn, 2000).
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuggartensia* (ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977).
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*
Canon Debate	*The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
Did	*Didache*
DSS	The Dead Sea Scrolls
DBAT	*Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament*
DTIB	*Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).
EH	Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* (or *Church History*), in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (ed. and trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson, 1994), I, pp. 73-404.
ESV	English Standard Version
EuroJTh	*European Journal of Theology*
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner; Leiden: Brill, 1990).
Hermas	*The Shepherd of Hermas*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Periods*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JTI	*Journal of Theological Interpretation*

JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
Kenyon	*The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Descriptions and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts on Papyrus of the Greek Bible* (ed. Frederic G. Kenyon; 16 vols.; London: Emery Walker, 1933–41).
Lampe	*A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (ed. G.W.H. Lampe; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).
Liddell–Scott	*A Greek-English Lexicon* (ed. Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott; ed. and rev. Henry S. Jones; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 9th edn, 1996).
Louw-Nida	*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (ed. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida; New York: United Bible Societies, 2nd edn, 1989).
LXX	The Septuagint
MT	The Masoretic Text
NA^{27}	*Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th edn
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NPNF	*A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*.
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
RBL	*Review of Biblical Literature*
Skeat	Theodore C. Skeat, *The Collected Biblical Writings of T.C. Skeat* (ed. J.K. Elliott; Supplements to Novum Testamentum, 113; Leiden: Brill, 2004).
SBL	The Society of Biblical Literature
Sira	*Ben Sira*
SP	*Studia Patristica*
SWJT	*Southwestern Journal of Theology*
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965).
Thayer	*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti* (trans. and rev. Joseph Henry Thayer; New York: American Book Company, 1889).
TNTC	Tyndale's New Testament Commentaries
ubs^{4}	*The Greek New Testament* (ed. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).
VTS	*Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenshaft*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift Theologie und Kirch*

Introduction

Questioning Canon

What is the Bible, and how does it work? In a community of faith whose identity is directly related to a collection of sacred writings, these questions are particularly relevant. The Christian churches have rightly developed a high view of the biblical canon they have received. However, there is sometimes little reflection among evangelical believers on how this book actually came into being. Evangelical Christians confess the authority of a closed canon. However, evangelical treatments of bibliology have sometimes tended to neglect the formation of that canon in their construction of a doctrine of Scripture.[1] This disposition is unfortunate because one's understanding of the story of how the Scriptures came to be has a direct impact on how God's revelation is understood and how the Bible is interpreted.

Several scholars have recently called for a reversal of this perceived oversight. For instance, Craig Allert argues that 'delving into the important history of how our primary source documents came to be collected is a foundational issue' for those affirming a high view of Scripture.[2] Stephen

1. E.g., in his recent book *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), Timothy Ward devotes one full page to the issue of canon formation and only a sentence to describing the actual process (pp. 91-92).

2. Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p. 36. Noting that 'it is a significant lacuna that the understanding of the formation of the Bible is rarely broached by those who offer a "high view of Scripture"', Allert argues that 'a high view of Scripture should take account of the historical process that bequeathed to us the Bible' (p. 10). The question mark in Allert's title looms large, as he contends that the history of canon formation calls into question an evangelical 'high view' of Scripture. For Allert, 'a historical understanding of the formation of the New Testament canon should inform an evangelical doctrine of Scripture' primarily because 'the content of the biblical canon, as we know it today, was not a particularly early feature of ancient Christianity: the Bible was not always "there" in Christianity. Yet, the church still continued to function in its absence' (p. 12). In Chapters 1 and 2 below, I seek to take up this task in general and interact with some of Allert's arguments specifically. For a recent polemical defense of the authority of Scripture in light of the canon debate, see James M. Hamilton, 'Still Sola Scriptura: An Evangelical View of Scripture', in *The Sacred Text* (ed. Michael Bird and Michael Pahl; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), pp. 215-40.

Chapman issues a similar charge, arguing that an evangelical understanding of Scripture must deal directly with the implications of the canon formation process.[3] The question of how and why the Christian canon 'came to be' inherently involves a history that has implications for the reception of that canon among the community that views it as authoritative. Questions of canon thus have considerable significance for the doctrine of Scripture and the interpretive task.[4]

When discussing the function and formation of the biblical canon, there are generally two areas that require careful attention. First, external historical evidence is examined. This external evidence consists of extra-biblical material that mentions, quotes from, or expounds upon biblical material. Many times, this type of external evidence is the only kind of data that is used in understanding the formation of the canon. In recent years, though, there has been a recognition of the importance of internal evidence from the biblical texts themselves. This line of inquiry asks if the biblical writers might have had a robust 'canon-consciousness'.[5] If the biblical writers

3. Stephen B. Chapman, 'Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible', in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew, *et al*.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), pp. 167-206. Chapman is primarily concerned with the notion of inspiration and how the canon formation process affects its claims. He asks, 'Can a theological doctrine of Scripture successfully embrace what history says about how Scripture became Scripture? Is the biblical canon an accident of history or an inspired work of God?' (p. 168).

4. Thomas Söding begins the wide-ranging collection of essays in *The Biblical Canons* (ed. J.M. Auwers and H.J. de Jonge; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003) by stating, 'Der theologische Anspruch des biblischen Kanons ist enorm' ('Der Kanon des alten und neuen Testaments. Zur Frage nach seinem theologischen Anspruch', in *The Biblical Canons*, p. xlvii). One of Söding's overarching concerns in developing a 'canonical hermeneutic' is to emphasize the theological impact of the concept of revelation on the formation of the Jewish and Christian canons. Similarly, Christoph Dohmen and Manfred Oeming begin their study of the 'what' and 'why' of the biblical canon by affirming, 'Die Bildung des biblischen Kanons ist für Theologie und Kirche von enormer Bedeutung' (*Biblischer Kanon: Warum und Wozu? Eine Kanontheologie* [Freiburg: Herder, 1992], p. 11). Bruce M. Metzger laments in 1987 that 'few works in English consider both the historical development of the New Testament canon and the persistent problems that pertain to its significance' (*The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], p. v). Metzger seeks to address this lacuna by including after his survey of external evidence a major section on historical and theological problems concerning the canon (pp. 251-88).

5. Stephen G. Dempster, 'Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left: Finding a Resolution in the Canon Debate', *JETS* 52 (2009), pp. 47-78, outlines the current state of the canon debate and makes a case for the relevance of internal as well as external evidence. He also emphasizes the value of the notion of 'canon-consciousness'. According to Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 70-71, this type of canonical approach argues that 'canon was not a late, ecclesiastical

wrote their books in light of other writings that were already deemed authoritative and in that sense 'canonical', this internal evidence can be useful in the canon formation discussion.[6] An investigation of the internal evidence also seeks to understand the function that individual writings serve within the canon as a whole. In the interpretive task, the first step is to understand how a particular document ended up in the collection of biblical writings. The next step is then to understand how that individual writing functions in its position in the wider collection.

With this step, the discussion moves from the realm of history to the realm of hermeneutics. Once the canon has been established historically, one can investigate the hermeneutical role that the concept of 'canon' plays in the interpretive task. Recognizing the possibility that biblical writers and later church leaders likely had some form of 'canon-consciousness' lends support for a similar pursuit among subsequent generations of biblical interpreters. If a contemporary interpreter accepts the canon as a legitimate historical reality, then he or she would benefit from intentionally appropriating this 'canon-conscious' mindset as well.

Outline of Thesis and Development of Argument

In this book, I will seek to demonstrate that contemporary interpreters of the Bible have legitimate grounds for utilizing the concept of canon as a control on the interpretive task. The notion of 'control' here is a way of asserting that the concept of canon is a significant and meaningful factor in biblical interpretation. In other words, this concept of canon both *guides* and *governs* biblical readers.[7] These reflections also aim to provide

ordering which was basically foreign to the material itself, but that canon-consciousness lay deep within the formation of the literature'. Cf. Daniel R. Driver's extensive discussion in *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 137-59. Chapter 2 develops this notion of canon-consciousness.

6. See the section below on intertextuality. Cf. John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 212-13, who notes that 'many written texts, especially biblical ones, were written with the full awareness of other texts in mind. Their authors assumed the readers would be thoroughly knowledgeable of those other texts. The New Testament books, for example, assume a comprehensive understanding of the OT. Many OT texts also assume their readers are aware and knowledgeable of other OT texts'.

7. Cf. the work of George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as a Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), who examines how the concept of canon functions as a 'semiotic mechanism' that suppresses and limits readers as they interact with the biblical text. Though he notes that canon also has a generative hermeneutical function, Aichele focuses on the ideological limitations that the concept of canon necessarily invokes. Aichele generally views the positive features of canon that follow in this study as negative. For him, the canon is an 'oppressive

a strong foundation for the practice of canonical interpretation of both testaments.

The development of the above argument will take place in four broad stages. Chapters 1 and 2 form the first major section. In Chapter 1, methodological decisions and the key terms of the canon debate will be delineated. This chapter will function as more than a perfunctory review of the research and a statement of methodology, though it will accomplish these ends. Rather, in defining the relevant terms, crucial elements of the argument are already being introduced and defended. Important definitional discussions here include the terms 'canon', 'Scripture', and 'canon-consciousness'.[8] Historical evidence will also be considered that recognizes the existence of the canon as a historical artifact (i.e. an actual entity). Working through the historical evidence will involve outlining the process of canon formation and also summarizing the external attestation of the Old and New Testaments by extra-biblical sources. In Chapter 2, this external historical evidence will be examined for possible indications of a 'canon-consciousness' among the believing community during and after the biblical period.[9]

When defining the nature and extent of the Christian canon, several questions immediately arise. Is the biblical canon best understood in historical, theological, or hermeneutical terms? In discussions of canon, there is often a tendency to gravitate toward one of these three emphases. As mentioned above, some theological accounts of the nature of Scripture do not exhibit an awareness of the hermeneutical features of the biblical text as a collection of literary documents. Conversely, in a history of religions approach, the biblical writings are viewed in the same category as any other writing in the same period.[10] Thus, in this approach, the theological aspects of the bib-

ideological institution' that '*prevents* people from reading these diverse and ambiguous books or that so controls the reading of these texts that people are in effect blinded and crippled by the canonical constraints' (p. 226). He also maintains that the ideological 'control' of the canon ultimately fails due to the open nature of textuality in general: 'Canonical control fails because of "unlimited semiosis", in other words, because signifying systems always exceed any possible level of control' (p. 17). This discussion will be revisited in Chapter 4 in a section on the nature of textuality in relation to the concept of intertextuality.

8. For a summary of these important definitions, see 'The Terms of the Debate and the Role of Presuppositions' section below in Chapter 1.

9. Other evidence of 'canon-consciousness' among the believing community includes historical documents such as the prologue to Sirach (for the Old Testament) and the Muratorian Fragment (for the New Testament), as well as biblical texts such as Lk. 24.44 (which possibly alludes to the tripartite shape of the Hebrew Bible during New Testament times). See the discussion of this evidence in Chapter 2.

10. E.g., Allert seeks to discuss the formation of the New Testament from the perspective of a 'sympathetic *religious historian*' (*High View*, p. 13). The religious historian 'looks at the contexts of antiquity as neutrally as possible and then describes them

lical canon are generally underdeveloped. Furthermore, in some purely literary approaches, the historical and theological issues that swirl around the canon debate are bracketed out of the investigation in favor of exclusively synchronic readings.[11]

The definitional discussion of Chapters 1 and 2 will seek to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the theological, historical, and hermeneutical features of the biblical canon. To illustrate (and anticipate subsequent discussions), the provisional definition of canon as 'God's word to his people' can serve to highlight each of these aspects of the nature of 'canon'. That it is *God's* word to his people points to the 'dogmatic location' of the canon in the economy of salvation. This theological emphasis seeks to account for the way God uses Scripture in his action of revelation and redemption.[12] That it is God's *word* to his people highlights the verbal aspects of canon as a collection of literary writings (i.e. words!) that require skillful reading and interpretation. That it is God's word *to his people* points to the historical location of the canon and its gradual development among a believing community of authors and readers. Any account of 'canon' that takes one of these three areas as primary to the exclusion of the other most likely has not adequately accounted for the fundamental aspects of what a canon in general, and the biblical canon in particular, entails. All three aspects of the nature of 'canon' are important and worthy of sustained academic

as accurately as possible' (p. 13). The alternative, for him, is the pastoral apologist perspective (that 'starts from the modern perspective and imposes it upon…the evidence of antiquity') or the 'neophyte' or 'generalist' perspective (that 'comes to the topic with little to no disciplined theological or historical training with which to tackle the topic').

11. Some of these purely literary approaches will be addressed in Chapter 4's discussion of the textual feature of intertextuality.

12. For a study of Scripture along these lines, see John B. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and John B. Webster, 'A Great and Meritorious Act of the Church? The Dogmatic Location of the Canon', in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons* (ed. John Barton and Michael Wolter; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 95-126. Webster's goal is 'a dogmatic ontology of Holy Scripture: an account of what Holy Scripture *is* in the saving economy of God's loving and regenerative self-communication' (*Holy Scripture*, p. 2). In *Words of Life*, Ward develops a theological account of bibliology by emphasizing that the Scriptures are an integral part of 'God's action in the world'. In this regard, see also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 113-237; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of the Covenant', in *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), pp. 159-203; Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002); and Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2011).

treatment.[13] Moreover, the fullest definition of canon will incorporate all three elements.

However, after delineating various aspects of these distinctive approaches, I shift into a study of the hermeneutical and literary aspects of the nature of the biblical canon. The rationale for this movement is twofold. First, the scope of a single book is not wide enough to cover all three aspects adequately. Second, of the three areas, the hermeneutical aspect has not received as much attention in the broader field of canon studies and thus merits further study.

Accordingly, in Chapter 3, I will argue that the existence of a canon as a historical reality allows for the affirmation that the collection has an inevitable and significant contextual effect on its readers ('Mere Contextuality'). Reading an individual writing as part of a larger collection affects the nature and direction of the connotations and assumptions that are made by the reader (i.e. it affects the reading process). This phenomenon is a hermeneutical factor that takes place regardless of the ordering and contents of the collection being read (e.g. the Hebrew Bible versus the Septuagint ordering of the Old Testament). In this sense, the point here is a general hermeneutical insight, though it will be applied directly to the Christian canon in the next steps of the argument.[14] This hermeneutical phenomenon is also practically inevitable, as it has an impact whether or not the reader acknowledges this factor.

After establishing the existence of this contextual effect on readers of a canonical collection, internal biblical evidence will be examined for possible indications of a 'canon-consciousness' among the biblical authors. There are indications that the biblical authors wrote their works with an awareness of a pre-existing body of authoritative literature and that they saw themselves as contributing to this body of literature.[15] This type of evidence would indicate the possibility that elements of the contextual effect of canonical shaping might have been intended by the biblical authors themselves ('Meant Contextuality').

In Chapter 4, I will argue that the presence of a canon with intended contextual features sets the limits for discerning intertextual connections

13. Joseph Blenkinsopp argues that 'study of the canon is not a panacea for Biblical Studies nor can it explain everything. But no historical or theological explanation will be adequate which neglects it' (*Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977], p. 17). Blenkinsopp also contends that 'it should be obvious by now that the study of the canon is not just of historical, archeological or literary interest. On the contrary, it raises questions of rather basic significance for both synagogue and church' (p. 151).

14. A simple case in point is the way Christian readers understand the New Testament in light of the Old Testament.

15. The phrase employed here ('an awareness of a pre-existing body of authoritative literature') can be understood as a preliminary definition of 'canon-consciousness'.

among the writings within that canon. This discussion is a natural implication of the arguments of Chapters 1–3. Because the biblical writings are part of a broader collection (i.e. a canon) and this canonical context has an inevitable and possibly intended effect on readers, these aspects of the canon can function as a control on the types of intertextual connections that an interpreter will discern and view as legitimate. If the broad framework of the canon is in some way intentional, then the scope and direction of intertextual possibilities can be understood in a similarly intended manner. In other words, the canon both guides and governs a biblical interpreter's detection and interpretation of intertextual references and their fertile potential for rich biblical meaning. Moreover, the concept of canon eliminates certain views of the nature of intertextuality and also limits the exponentially large number of possible intertextual connections that might be brought to bear on biblical texts.

In Chapter 5, I will seek to demonstrate that the contextual effect of the intertextually informed shape of the canon helps identify the intended audience of the Bible as a whole.[16] The question of 'original' or intended audience is a perennial issue in the interpretation of any ancient text. Taking the shape of the biblical material into account allows biblical readers to identify and voluntarily associate with the expectations generated by an authoritative canonical collection. Strategic biblical texts identify the ideal readers of the biblical canon as those who allow their sense of this intentionally designed canon to direct their textual investigations and their response to its theological witness.

All in all, the development of the argument as a whole will include an integration of exegetical, historical, and hermeneutical analysis. The study will also seek to bring the broad areas of canon studies, historical studies, and literary studies into a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue. Thus, the book and bibliography that follows includes interaction with substantial works that deal with canon formation, the nature of external historical evidence for canon, and the hermeneutical issues of textuality, contextuality, and intertextuality.[17]

16. This chapter relates to my thesis in particular by showing an important way *the concept of canon* is *utilized* in the interpretive task, namely, to help identify the intended readership.

17. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical texts cited in English are from the NASB, and all biblical texts cited in Greek are from the ubs[4].