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# Critical Reflections on the Role of the Canon in New Testament Scholarship

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## Abstract

The modern discipline of New Testament Studies has subjected the various components of the New Testament to close scrutiny, yet it persistently fails to ask critical questions about the New Testament considered as a whole. In its familiar twenty-seven book form, the New Testament may be seen as a fourth-century anthology of early Christian writings based on earlier collections or sub-collections (the fourfold gospel, the Pauline letter collection), yet innovative in establishing a sharply defined boundary between included and excluded texts. An analysis of contributions to this journal over a recent five-year period demonstrates the pervasive influence of this fourth-century construct in determining the scope and priorities of (so-called) ‘mainstream’ scholarship. Greater attention to the contingencies of canon-formation will enable us to locate the texts that came to form the New Testament within a wider early Christian literary landscape.

**Keywords:** New Testament Studies; canon; Eusebius; anthology; contingency

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will be concerned with two related but distinct questions: (1) What is the New Testament? (2) How is the New Testament understood within the discipline of New Testament Studies? I shall argue here that the most appropriate answer to the first question is at odds with the answer to the second question. That is to say: the discipline of New Testament Studies as conventionally practised is based on a problematic understanding of the New Testament.

What is the New Testament? The question might be answered in various ways, but my proposal here is that *the New Testament is a fourth-century anthology of early Christian writings considered to be of authentic apostolic origin.*

The term ‘anthology’ usefully highlights the reality of a selection from a wider range of available literature – or rather, a process of selection and rejection, since an anthology creates a boundary between its privileged contents and a larger body of texts that are passed over. An anthology is not simply a ‘collection’, although this term is often misleadingly applied to the New Testament. ‘Collection’ may imply that previously scattered entities have been brought together into a predetermined whole: ‘collected works’ are an author’s *complete* works. The works present within a collection are there because they are *meant* to be there, and without any one of them the collection would

be incomplete. In contrast, an anthology is the product of contingency rather than necessity.<sup>1</sup>

An anthology gives expression to a certain set of preferences which compilers may or may not share with the reading communities in which they operate, but it also represents an intervention in existing reading practices that invites its users to acquiesce in its value judgements. An anthology may come to be viewed as a normative guide to value and significance, so that the anthologised text becomes a canonical text – prescribed reading for the community concerned. Conversely, texts left outside the anthology will fail to attain canonical status. Since canonical status is the only guarantee that a text will continue to be reproduced, read and used in perpetuity, omitted texts may fall into disuse and oblivion.

As an anthology, the New Testament establishes a boundary between normative texts and counterparts whose claim to apostolic legitimacy has been rejected as false. That boundary is not simply random; it has antecedents in a prior set of decisions about (for example) the plural form of the canonical gospel or the contents of the Pauline letter collection. But neither is the canonical boundary necessary, a mere acknowledgement of what is already implicitly the case. The canonical boundary creates a new reality rather than bringing to light a pre-existing one.

Understood as more like an anthology than a collection, *the New Testament is the product of the fourth century*. Prior to the fourth century, there is ample evidence that most of the texts that came to constitute the New Testament were widely known and valued, yet there is little or no concern to assign a limit to the authoritative literature of the apostolic age. In the earlier period, it is not the case that the question of the canonical limit remains unresolved, as is often anachronistically claimed.<sup>2</sup> There is no unanswered question about the canon, for the question itself does not arise until Eusebius puts it onto the collective agenda. Eusebius has Old Testament lists in his extensive source material, but the nearest equivalents for the New Testament are the lists of the four canonical Gospels he finds in the writings of Irenaeus, Clement and Origen.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of any more comprehensive list, Eusebius finds other means to legitimate his novel project of canon construction, incorporating comments on genuine or pseudonymous literary works in his account of the ‘apostolic age’ and appealing to the citation practices of his trusted authorities.

Eusebius inherits a view long held by otherwise diverse early Christian reading communities, that apostolic literature holds a uniquely privileged status by virtue of its proximity to the figure of Jesus himself. From as early as Papias, previously anonymous texts were assigned to an apostolic author or patron, and in other cases authorship claims were integrated into the text itself.<sup>4</sup> Whether as authors, protagonists, or both, apostles are

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘anthology’ derives from the ἀνθολογία of Meleager of Gadara (first century BCE), compiled from the work of forty-seven poets including Meleager himself. The term is still associated primarily with poetry, but it might also be extended to the late antique use of the codex to accommodate a selection of multi-authored texts with a common genre or theme. On this see Mario de Nonno, ‘Transmission and Textual Criticism’, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies* (ed. Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel; Oxford: OUP, 2010) 31–48, 39–41. The Nag Hammadi codices exemplify this trend.

<sup>2</sup> According to Bruce Metzger, ‘the edges of the canon remained somewhat indistinct for several centuries’, but by the early fifth century ‘[t]he great debate of so many generations was practically over’ (*The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 284, 237). There is little evidence of any ‘debate’ about the contents of the ‘New Testament’ prior to Eusebius.

<sup>3</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.1–4 (Irenaeus), 6.14.5–7 (Clement), 6.25.3–6 (Origen). Eusebius finds lists of Old Testament books in the writings of Melito (*Hist. eccl.* 4.26.12–14) and Origen (*Hist. eccl.* 6.25.1–2).

<sup>4</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.14–16 (Papias names Mark and Matthew as evangelists). Authorship claims within a gospel text occur in GThos, through; GPet 14.60.

themselves canonical figures. For many of their respective readers, the Gospel of John and the Apocryphon of John are each authentically Johannine, the Gospels of Matthew and Thomas are each genuinely apostolic, and the Acts of Peter and of Paul recount the exploits of their great protagonists no less faithfully than the Acts of the Apostles. When Eusebius, Athanasius and others attempt to create a 'New Testament' with a sharply defined boundary, they do so in a context in which Christian readers are consuming a far wider range of popular apostolic literature.<sup>5</sup> The New Testament as defined in the fourth century seeks to curb the uncritical reading habits of these ordinary Christian readers. This anthology of early Christian writings emphatically asserts its own normative status over the closely related texts that it excludes.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this brief preliminary sketch is to begin to highlight the disjunction between a historically informed account of New Testament origins, focusing on fourth-century developments, and the core concerns of the scholarly discipline known as 'New Testament Studies', focused primarily on the first century.<sup>7</sup> It is to this scholarly discipline that we now turn. What are its core concerns, how can they best be identified and characterised, and what understanding of the New Testament is implied in them?

## 2. 'New Testament Studies'

An attempt to characterise New Testament Studies as a discipline must meet at least three main criteria if it is to be recognisable and credible. First, it must be broad-based, articulating a tacit consensus about appropriate subject matter and method. Second, it should prioritise analysis of current or recent work in the field, recognising that scholarly disciplines do not remain static but evolve through internal debate and critique. Third, it must be based on verifiable evidence rather than subjective impressions. I have chosen to base my analysis of the discipline as currently practised on a sample of 150 articles published in the journal *New Testament Studies* in 2014-18, the period of my own editorship. The analysis will be based on the titles of these articles so as to identify the major subdivisions that constitute the field as a whole. For comparative purposes, I shall also refer to the articles published in the same journal twenty years earlier, in the five-year period 1994-98.

While work published in a single journal may not be fully representative of an entire academic field, this sample will be indicative of a significant set of priorities within the discipline. With the exception of one themed issue, omitted from this survey, the articles were almost all unsolicited and to that extent they do not reflect the special interests of the editor or editorial board. Around 24% of articles submitted during this period were

<sup>5</sup> Athanasius' well-known Festal Letter for 367 is primarily concerned to deter its readers from reading texts that lie beyond the canonical limit (§§15-16, 21-3, 27-32). For a full translation of the extant text, see David Brakke, 'A New Fragment of Athanasius' Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter: Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon' *HTR* 103 (2010) 47-66, 57-66.

<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I accept the conventional assumption that the process of canon-formation is shaped primarily by 'church fathers' such as Eusebius himself. For a promising alternative approach, see David Brakke, 'Scriptural Practices in Early Christianity: Towards a New History of the New Testament Canon' in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity* (eds. Jörg Ulrich, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, David Brakke; Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2012) 263-80.

<sup>7</sup> As William Wrede already noted in 1897, 'No New Testament writing was born with the predicate "canonical" attached' ('The Task and Methods of "New Testament Theology"', Eng. tr. in Robert Morgan (ed.), *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (SBT 2<sup>nd</sup> series; London: SCM, 1973) 68-116, 70). Wrede continues: 'The statement that a writing is canonical signifies in the first place only that it was pronounced canonical afterwards by the authorities of the second- to fourth-century church' - figures whose authority is accepted by 'no Protestant theologian' (70-71). In the present discussion canon-formation is regarded as a significant *historical* process in its own right, rather than as an occasion for confessional or anti-confessional polemic.

accepted for publication, and the total number of articles submitted was therefore in excess of 600.<sup>8</sup> Submissions were received from scholars in over twenty countries, predominantly from Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand but also in a few cases from Asia (Japan, China, South Korea and Pakistan) and Africa (Uganda). Few of the unsuccessful submissions were rejected on the grounds that their content or approach lay outside the remit of this particular journal, and the published articles thus reflect the research activity of a wider scholarly community. Anonymised articles were peer reviewed by the appropriate specialists on an editorial board of between nineteen and twenty-one members, each serving a fixed three-year term. A total of forty-five scholars from fourteen different countries served in this capacity in 2014–18, of whom fifteen were female. During this period, female scholars accounted for just 14.6% of the published items – a modest improvement from 1994–98, however, when the figure was 5.6%. At this point, *New Testament Studies* does not adequately reflect the current state of the discipline it seeks to represent.<sup>9</sup> It is not clear whether or how far this discrepancy reflects a perceived bias against styles of scholarship that may be favoured by female scholars. It is true that contemporary New Testament scholars may work within areas and perspectives that are not typically reflected in this journal (a point to be followed up later), but empirical evidence may or may not confirm that women scholars are more likely to gravitate towards those areas and perspectives than their male colleagues. Other factors such as career stage may also be significant.<sup>10</sup>

From the evidence of their titles, most of the 150 contributions to *New Testament Studies* published in 2014–18 fell into twelve categories: context (Graeco-Roman and/or Jewish), historical Jesus, canonical Gospels, Acts, Pauline corpus, Hebrews and Catholic Epistles, Book of Revelation, Apostolic Fathers, other non-canonical literature, textual criticism, reception, and general aspects of the New Testament or early Christianity. Admittedly, there is a degree of arbitrariness about the chosen categories. The Gospel of John might have been separated out from the synoptics; the Apostolic Fathers and non-canonical literature might have been placed in the same category. Yet such minor adjustments would not significantly affect the overall picture.

In [Table 1](#) below, articles whose titles place them in two categories rather than one are counted under both headings so that the number of topics covered exceeds the number of articles published. Thus, the titles of fourteen of the forty-six articles on the Pauline corpus also refer to a non-Pauline context, constituting just over half the articles in the context category. To facilitate comparison between findings for 2014–18 and 1994–98, numerical counts have been converted into percentage figures which indicate areas where coverage has been relatively stable and where perceptible shifts of focus are evident.

The difference between the pairs of figures given for ‘Total Articles’ indicates that thirty-one of the 150 articles published in 2014–18 fell into two categories (20.6% of

<sup>8</sup> Information in this and the following paragraph is drawn from my annual reports to the editorial board of the journal, presented at meetings of the SNTS in 2014–18. These in turn drew from data gathered by ScholarOne, the online system for submission and peer review installed by Cambridge University Press in 2014.

<sup>9</sup> According to data collected by the Society for Biblical Literature in January 2019 and available at the Society’s website, women scholars accounted for 25% of the Society’s membership. The equivalent figure for the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* is substantially lower, at around 11% according to the Society’s 2018 membership list (*NTS* 64.2 (2018), 271–80). This depressingly low figure might rise somewhat if the analysis could be confined to members who remain active as researchers or to those who have been elected to membership over the past ten–fifteen years.

<sup>10</sup> For nuanced reflection on issues in this area, see Hindy Najman, ‘Community and Solidarity: The Place of Women in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Judaism’, in *Women and the Society of Biblical Literature* (ed. Nicole L. Tilford; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019) 135–43.

**Table 1:** Categories of New Testament Studies Contributions

Table 1	NTS 2014–18: numerical	NTS 1994–98: numerical	NTS 2014–18: percentage	NTS 1994–98: percentage
Context	26	24	17.3%	12.2%
Historical Jesus	2	6	1.3%	3.1%
Gospels	29	63	19.3%	32.1%
Acts	14	8	9.3%	4.1%
Pauline corpus	46	60	30.7%	30.6%
Hebrews/Catholic Epistles	13	9	8.7%	4.6%
Revelation	5	6	3.3%	3.1%
Apostolic Fathers	4	3	2.6%	1.5%
Non-canonical	13	4	8.7%	2.0%
Textual criticism	10	18	6.7%	9.1%
Reception	8	1	5.3%	0.5%
New Testament/ Early Christianity	11	15	7.3%	7.7%
Total articles	150 [181]	196 [217]	-	-

the total), a significant percentage increase on the equivalent figures for 1994–98 (21 of 196, i.e. 10.7%). The main reason for this is the greater prominence of references to Graeco-Roman or Jewish contexts in the more recent set of titles. Other significant shifts of focus may be seen in the relative decline of attention to the canonical Gospels vis-à-vis the Pauline corpus and the increased attention to non-canonical literature and reception. More significant than these shifts is the relative stability of the categories themselves, which indicates that the discipline of New Testament Studies as reflected in this journal is subdivided into relatively self-contained objects of scholarly attention. In most cases, these take the form of groups of texts suggesting an orientation towards exegesis at the expense of history more broadly conceived.

How far is a journal operating *de facto* with these categories representative of the discipline after which it is named? As we have noted, the gender imbalance among its contributors does not necessarily affect the scope of its coverage – although that possibility cannot be ruled out. Its international reach is striking: articles are still published in German and French, though in declining numbers; the increasing predominance of English-language articles is due in large part to scholars from all over continental Europe. Contributors are overwhelmingly located in northern rather than southern hemisphere contexts, but the northern hemisphere is itself a diverse place. The major point at which the journal is *un*-representative of the discipline in its fullest scope seems to be determined not so much by the global north/south divide as by scholarly traditions oriented towards the object of study rather than thematising the sociopolitical context or ethnic, gender or sexual identity of the interpreter. This latter focus on the text as viewed from the perspective of the interpreting subject is influential especially in some strands of North American scholarship, where it is promoted by the Society of Biblical

Literature,<sup>11</sup> but it is largely absent from contributions submitted to or published in *New Testament Studies* at least during the period surveyed here.<sup>12</sup> The scholarly traditions of the journal are predominantly European in origin, although shared by many non-European scholars across the world, and within these traditions the New Testament texts are deemed worthy of intensive study in their own right without explicit regard to their relevance to issues of contemporary concern or their relation to the cultural identity of the interpreter. The journal represents a style of scholarship often described as ‘mainstream’ – a term that can have positive or negative connotations, signifying a commitment either to properly rigorous scholarly standards or to an illusory ‘objectivity’ that masks and legitimates the interests of stereotypical ‘white male scholars’. Debates around these competing views of scholarly responsibilities are evident across a broad range of academic disciplines, as illustrated by the current focus on ‘decolonizing the curriculum’.<sup>13</sup>

*New Testament Studies* represents ‘mainstream’ New Testament scholarship in the sense that it exemplifies the scholarly tradition in which most people identifiable as ‘New Testament scholars’ received their primary academic formation. My concern here is with how this tradition of scholarship construes its object of study, the ‘New Testament’, and I therefore pass over the question of whether it is at fault in failing to acknowledge and thematise the identity or politics of the interpreter. The question here is whether the mainstream discipline is at fault in failing to acknowledge and thematise the New Testament itself, viewed as a whole. As we have seen, mainstream New Testament Studies as represented by the journal of that name subdivides the New Testament into a series of discrete fields operating relatively independently of each other, focused on specific groups of texts and the historical contexts in which they originated. *The New Testament itself is implicitly viewed as a neutral container for its component texts or text-groupings*. The question of the selection of just these early Christian texts is bypassed; for the most part, reception is reduced to transmission, the domain of a textual criticism concerned exclusively with New Testament manuscripts rather than early Christian literature as a whole.<sup>14</sup> The New Testament represents the space within which certain scholarly operations can be carried out, but the question as to how that space is

<sup>11</sup> The SBL programme for its 2022 Annual Meeting features work not only in areas typically regarded as ‘mainstream’ but also in multiple areas where contemporary political or cultural concerns form the primary interpretative context. Sessions were scheduled with a focus on African-American Biblical Hermeneutics, Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics, Bible and Popular Culture, Biblical Exegesis from Eastern Orthodox Perspectives, Contextual Biblical Interpretation, Ecological Hermeneutics, Ethnic Chinese biblical studies, Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible, Gender, Sexuality, and the Bible, Homiletics and Biblical Studies, Islands, Islanders, and Scriptures, Latino/a and Latin American Biblical Interpretation, LGBTI/Queer Hermeneutics, Metacriticism of Biblical Scholarship, Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation, Postcolonial Studies and Biblical Studies, Racism, Pedagogy and Biblical Studies, Slavery, Resistance, and Freedom, Missional Hermeneutics, and Womanist Interpretation.

<sup>12</sup> From *NTS* 56.1 (January 2010) onwards, instructions for contributors in the inside front cover of each issue have stated that ‘[t]he journal welcomes submissions employing [a variety of] methods, such as exegetical, historical, literary-critical, sociological, hermeneutical and theological approaches to the New Testament, including studies that employ gender, ethnicity or ideology as categories of analysis, and studies in the history of interpretation and effects’. The reference to gender, ethnicity and ideology was intended to encourage a wider range of submissions, but it is not clear that this aspiration was met during the period under review.

<sup>13</sup> As defined by Keele University’s *Decolonizing the Curriculum Manifesto*, ‘decolonizing the curriculum means creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world.’ Cited by Elizabeth Charles, ‘Decolonizing the Curriculum’, *Insight* 32 (2019) 1–7, 1.

<sup>14</sup> ‘New Testament manuscripts’ here refers to manuscripts of books eventually included in the now-standard twenty-seven book New Testament. For critical comments on the unreflective use of ‘New Testament’ in textual criticism, see Brent Nongbri, *God’s Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018) 12–13, 19–20.

defined and marked out from other spaces is left unexplored.<sup>15</sup> On this view, the formation of the New Testament takes place exclusively through the production of its individual texts: once the latest text has been completed we have a complete New Testament, and the later definition of the familiar twenty-seven book form is an incidental recognition of what is already the case rather than an act of construction. Individual texts and text-groups are intensively studied, but the New Testament itself is taken for granted.

The 150 peer-reviewed articles published in *New Testament Studies* in 2014–18 were accepted for publication because the editor and editorial board members considered that they each made a significant original contribution to scholarship. The broad categories may be similar to those of twenty years earlier, but a closer comparison between the more recent and the older scholarship would reveal that ongoing critical debate within the discipline has had an impact and that past certainties and assumptions have constantly been scrutinised, challenged, and rejected or updated. The impact of that ongoing critical debate would be still clearer if the starting point for comparison were pushed back further, to 1974 or indeed to 1954 – the year in which the first two issues of *New Testament Studies* appeared. The one area where it is hard to see evidence of progress and development is in the understanding of the New Testament as a whole. In the discussion to follow I shall argue that, as a historically oriented discipline, New Testament Studies must engage more seriously with the contingent historical processes that turned some early Christian texts but not others into a New Testament.

### 3. Constructing the New Testament

Historical accounts of the formation of the New Testament canon have generally followed the example of Eusebius in tracing citations of already authoritative texts in key figures such as Irenaeus in the West and Origen in the East.<sup>16</sup> Such an approach can show that two bodies of apostolic texts were established at a relatively early date – the four Gospels (supplemented by Acts) and the collection of thirteen or fourteen Pauline letters – but it will not demonstrate the existence of an overarching New Testament containing a specifiable number of texts.<sup>17</sup> The second- and third-century evidence shows no clear trace of a seven-letter Catholic Epistles collection, there are uncertainties about the status of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation, and texts such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas are also in play. Prior to Eusebius, there is no sense that the lack of an agreed canonical boundary is an unresolved problem: where the core texts are certain, there is no need to debate the extent of the periphery. As cited by Eusebius, Origen knows exactly how many books there are in the Hebrew Old Testament: they are twenty-two in number, like the letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and Origen proceeds to list their Hebrew and Greek titles.<sup>18</sup> Yet Eusebius can find in

<sup>15</sup> One exception is Christopher M. Tuckett's 'What Is New Testament Study?' (*NTS* 60 (2014) 157–84). Tuckett rightly advocates studying New Testament texts within their broader early Christian literary environment, on the grounds that the later canonical boundary should not be projected back onto the literature of the formative period.

<sup>16</sup> See Metzger, *Canon*, 113–64; Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Eng. tr. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) 182–306.

<sup>17</sup> On the fourfold gospel, see my *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) 411–509; on the Pauline letter collection, Eric W. Scherbenske, *Canonizing Paul: Ancient Editorial Practice and the Corpus Paulinum* (Oxford: OUP, 2013); Martin Wright, *The Dividing Wall: Ephesians and the Integrity of the Corpus Paulinum* (London: T & T Clark, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.1–2. The tradition of the twenty-two Hebrew books stems from Josephus (c. *Ap.* 1.37–40), as Eusebius notes (*Hist. eccl.* 3.10.1–3).

Origen no equivalent list of New Testament texts – only a list of canonical Gospels, a reference to the possible pseudonymity of several letters attributed to Peter and to John, and a short discussion of the authorship of Hebrews, drawn respectively from Origen’s commentaries on Matthew and John and his homilies on Hebrews.<sup>19</sup> The long treatise on scriptural interpretation that forms book 4 of Origen’s *De Principiis* has nothing to say about the contents of scripture. The only canonical list in either Irenaeus or Origen serves to identify four Gospels and to differentiate these texts from their competitors, but the fourfold canonical gospel is not as yet integrated into a canonical New Testament.

New Testament lists co-ordinated with Old Testament ones begin to appear in the second half of the fourth century,<sup>20</sup> and, as is well known, the first to list a New Testament in its familiar twenty-seven book form was Athanasius in his 39<sup>th</sup> Festal Letter of 367. Other Eastern lists of this period tend to list 26 books, omitting Revelation, but Athanasius’ lead was followed in the West by Jerome (c. 395), Augustine (c. 397) and Rufinus (c. 404).<sup>21</sup> These are the key figures who construct a New Testament that is still taken for granted in the modern scholarly discipline of New Testament Studies. Jerome, Augustine and Rufinus would find nothing objectionable or surprising in the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*. This Greek New Testament includes all the right texts and excludes the wrong ones; it is concerned to follow the readings of the best available manuscripts;<sup>22</sup> it includes and extends the cross-referencing system devised by Eusebius in his canon tables;<sup>23</sup> it presents ‘the New Testament’ as a singular entity with a fixed structure and content. New Testament Studies as we know it is based on the decisions of patristic authorities of the later fourth and early fifth centuries – figures who themselves *became* authorities through decisions taken in the centuries that followed.<sup>24</sup> In the canon lists, the older view of the apostolic writings as constituted by a clearly defined core and an under-defined periphery is definitively superseded, as the prospect emerges of a singular ‘Bible’ for which the lists provide an anticipatory Table of Contents.<sup>25</sup> The question that now arises is how the core/periphery model gives way to the list model.

The key transitional figure is Eusebius. A key concern of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is to establish a rationale for a limited collection of authoritative apostolic writings, and in doing so Eusebius sheds light on a diversity of scriptural practices as he attempts to create order out of apparent chaos. In a well-known passage, Eusebius differentiates groups of texts he describes as *homologoumena* (universally acknowledged), as *antilegomena* (disputed) and as *notha* (spurious).<sup>26</sup> The four Gospels, Acts and Pauline Epistles together with 1 John and 1 Peter constitute the *homologoumena*, with Revelation precariously poised

<sup>19</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.3, 7, 11.

<sup>20</sup> See Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity* (Oxford: OUP, 2017) 110–260.

<sup>21</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 110–18, 129–34, 141–8 (twenty-six book Eastern lists: Cyril of Jerusalem, Synod of Laodicea, Gregory of Nazianzus), 197–230 (twenty-seven book Western lists).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Augustine, *de Doct. Chr.* 2.14.21–15.22.

<sup>23</sup> For the rationale for their inclusion from the 7<sup>th</sup> edition onwards, see Eberhard Nestle, ‘Die Eusebianische Evangelien-Synopse’, *NKZ* 19 (1908) 40–51, 93–114, 219–32.

<sup>24</sup> See Conrad Leyser, ‘Late Antiquity in the Medieval West’, *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (ed. Philip Rousseau; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 29–42, 32–3.

<sup>25</sup> The relationship between Canon Lists and Table of Contents is explicit in Codex Amiatinus, a ‘pandect’ or complete Bible produced in early eighth century Northumbria. Here the actual Table of Contents is followed by diagrams depicting the Canon Lists of key authorities including Jerome and Augustine. On the significance of the Amiatinus prefatory matter, see my article, ‘Self-portrait of a Bible: The Ezra Image of Codex Amiatinus’ (*Religions* 2022, 13, 550, 1–9 (online, open access)) 1–2.

<sup>26</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.1–7.



between *homologoumena* and *notha*, awaiting further discussion.<sup>27</sup> That further discussion appears to tilt the balance against inclusion of this book, and Eusebius' 'New Testament' thus consists in twenty-one writings that he regards as genuinely apostolic in origin. The discrepancy between this figure and the Athanasian twenty-seven is accounted for by the probable absence of Revelation but above all by the rejection of five of the seven so-called 'Catholic Epistles'. While 1 John and 1 Peter are included as individual texts, Eusebius rejects their incorporation into a third canonical collection alongside the Gospels and the Pauline letters. In this proposed New Testament, the two isolated non-Pauline letters seem mere appendices to the dominant Pauline collection.

Eusebius is aware that a seven-letter Catholic Epistles collection is widely used and valued but he nevertheless rejects it. He claims that the Epistles attributed to James and Jude are never cited by earlier ecclesiastical writers and that there is thus no evidence that these texts existed at an early date.<sup>28</sup> In the case of 2 Peter, Eusebius states that it is not regarded as canonical in the tradition he has received, and he cites Origen as reporting doubts about the apostolic authorship of 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John.<sup>29</sup> Suspected pseudonymity is the key factor in the exclusion of the five texts, and it is to this that the term *antilegomena* refers.<sup>30</sup> Pseudonymity is suspected rather than asserted, and the suspicion is attributed to unnamed others. Neither Eusebius nor Origen commits himself to the potentially controversial claim that the texts in question are inauthentic and should be discounted. They merely report that the issue has been raised, just as a modern scholar might report that the authorship of Ephesians or 1 Timothy is 'disputed' without taking a side in that dispute. Like 'disputed', *antilegomena* implies that arguments for and against authenticity may each have merit and that this is a reasonable topic for discussion. Whether such discussions ever took place is unclear: Eusebius may mean no more than that there is *potential* for a debate between an ecclesial tradition that believes all seven Catholic Epistles to be genuinely apostolic and one like his own that does not. Crucially, however, the fact or allegation that an authorship attribution has been questioned is sufficient to deny canonicity to the text in question. In Eusebius' New Testament, canonical authority is an extension of apostolic authority. If the so-called Second Letter of Peter may have been written by someone other than Peter, it should not feature among the authoritative canonical writings. If a text is to be trusted, it needs a trustworthy attribution to an author directly commissioned by Jesus Christ to speak on his behalf.

While some texts are *antilegomena*, 'disputed', others are *notha*, 'spurious'.<sup>31</sup> There is only a relative difference between the two categories, and the same text could be placed in either category in different contexts. The passage in book 3 that features this terminology is a summary of earlier references to literary activity in Eusebius' contributions to the apostolic biographies of James, Peter, Paul and John.<sup>32</sup> Having recounted the death of

<sup>27</sup> Eusebius returns to this issue at *Hist. eccl.* 3.28.1–5 (Caius of Rome, Dionysius of Alexandria: Revelation authored by the heretic Cerinthus?); 3.39.6 (Papias: two individuals named John?); 7.24.1–25.27 (Dionysius of Alexandria, in debate with followers of Nepos, a millennialist bishop). Cf. also *Hist. eccl.* 3.18.1–3 (citing Irenaeus). Eusebius' sympathies lie with anti-millennialists who reject Revelation rather than millennialists such as Papias and Irenaeus (cf. *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.11–13).

<sup>28</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 2.24–25.

<sup>29</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.10.

<sup>30</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.3.

<sup>31</sup> According to David L. Dungan, 'the first group of 'disputed' writings were well known in all of the major Catholic churches', whereas the *notha* 'were scarcely known or used by any of them' (*Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 2006) 74). It is not true that these popular texts were scarcely known, and it is not clear why Eusebius would have mentioned them if he thought that was the case.

<sup>32</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 2.1.2–5, 2.23.1–24 (James), 2.14.4–15.2, 2.25.5–8, 3.1.2 (Peter), 2.22.1–8, 2.25.5–8, 3.1.3 (Paul), 3.18.1–3, 3.23.1–19 (John). Book 2 of the *Historia ecclesiastica* serves as a supplement to the Acts of the Apostles.

James, Eusebius states that the letter attributed to him is 'spurious' and not simply 'disputed' as in the later summary.<sup>33</sup> There is no real inconsistency here. In one case Eusebius commits himself to the view that the Epistle of James is pseudonymous, in the other he simply reports the existence of that view. Whether this text is spurious or merely disputed, it is excluded from Eusebius' New Testament either way. There are five texts that he more confidently identifies as *notha*: the Acts of Paul,<sup>34</sup> the Shepherd of Hermas,<sup>35</sup> the Apocalypse of Peter,<sup>36</sup> the Epistle of Barnabas,<sup>37</sup> and the Didache of the Apostles.<sup>38</sup> These works are 'spurious' in different senses. Two are straightforwardly pseudonymous: Eusebius is sure that Peter did not write the Apocalypse attributed to him and that the apostles did not collectively author the Didache. Eusebius does not question the authorship of Hermas and Barnabas but regards their texts as *notha* because their claim to apostolic authorisation is tenuous: Hermas is greeted by name in Romans 16.14,<sup>39</sup> Barnabas was supposedly one of the seventy missionaries sent out by Jesus,<sup>40</sup> but neither figure can claim the authorisation by Paul that qualifies Luke to be a New Testament author.<sup>41</sup> The Acts of Paul belongs among the *notha* because it purports to provide a truthful record of the apostle's exploits but fails to do so. In each case, there is a failure to secure the unambiguous apostolic link that Eusebius believes is necessary for canonical status.

Eusebius' differentiation of *homologoumena*, *antilegomena* and *notha* might be understood in one of two ways. First, it might suggest that Eusebius is opposing an account of Christian scripture that is clear about its core texts (four Gospels, Acts, Pauline letters) but supplements them with an indefinite number of increasingly peripheral texts without attempting to fix a boundary or limit. In that case, the five *notha* listed exemplify a broader category that might include other popular texts that Eusebius mentions elsewhere (e.g. the Acts of Peter; the Preaching of Peter; 1 and 2 Clement)<sup>42</sup> or that he does not mention (e.g. the Protevangelium of James; the Epistula Apostolorum). Eusebius' New Testament in twenty-one books would represent the rejection of this older core/periphery model.

Alternatively, the combination of twenty-one *homologoumena*, six *antilegomena* (including Revelation) and five *notha* might constitute a possible New Testament in thirty-two books. Eusebius would then be advocating a minimal New Testament over a maximal one, but both versions would represent attempts to establish a definitive content and a clearly defined boundary. Eusebius states that he has found it necessary to list the

<sup>33</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.25: νοθεύεται.

<sup>34</sup> Eusebius does not elsewhere refer to the Acts of Paul, although he attests the tradition that Paul was beheaded in Rome under Nero's orders, which is probably derived from it (*Hist. eccl.* 2.25.5; cf. the martyrdom episode of the Acts of Paul, §§3–5).

<sup>35</sup> Eusebius notes that the Shepherd of Hermas is widely known and used in public (*Hist. eccl.* 3.3.6–7) and that it is not only known but also 'received' (ἀποδέχεται) by Irenaeus (*Hist. eccl.* 5.8.7).

<sup>36</sup> The Apocalypse 'said to be of Peter' is expounded in the *Hypotyposesis* of Clement of Alexandria (*Hist. eccl.* 6.14.1).

<sup>37</sup> The Epistle of Barnabas is cited in the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria (*Hist. eccl.* 6.13.6) and expounded in his *Hypotyposesis* (*Hist. eccl.* 6.14.1).

<sup>38</sup> Eusebius refers to this work as τῶν ἀποστόλων αἱ λεγόμεναι Διδαχαί (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.4). In the Greek manuscript of the Didache, the title is given as Διδαχὴ τῶν δώδεκα ἀποστόλων ([De] *Doctrina Apostolorum* in the two Latin manuscripts of the two ways section). Eusebius' plural is probably another variant title for the Didache or a mistake, rather than a reference to some other work. Athanasius refers to Διδαχὴ καλουμένη τῶν ἀποστόλων as a work suitable for catechumens (*Ep. Fest.* 39.20).

<sup>39</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.6.

<sup>40</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 1.12.1, 2.1.4 (cf. Lk 10.1–20).

<sup>41</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.4.6–7.

<sup>42</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.2 (Petrine texts); 3.15.1–16.1, 4.22.1, 4.23.11, 5.6.3, 6.13.6 (letter(s) of Clement).

disputed and spurious books so as to differentiate them from genuinely canonical books, and the reason why this is necessary is that the books listed for exclusion are 'known to most churchmen'. A differentiation between books that should be acknowledged by all and those that are merely 'known' is only necessary if the 'known' books are widely regarded as canonical. Here, then, the content of the New Testament is under negotiation, with some advocating the inclusion of both a seven-letter Catholic Epistles collection and a group of supplementary apostolic texts in different genres.

This distinction between a minimal and a maximal New Testament finds some support in external evidence. Striking parallels to Eusebius are found in the so-called Muratorian Canon, suggesting that the much-disputed proposal of an early fourth-century date is probably correct.<sup>43</sup> Like Eusebius, the Muratorian Canon includes four Gospels, Acts, a Pauline letter collection and 1 John in its list of canonical texts and presents the Apocalypse of Peter and the Shepherd of Hermas as disputed or spurious.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Eusebius, this list includes a second Johannine epistle together with Jude, omits Hebrews and 1 Peter and accepts the Book of Revelation. This is a New Testament in twenty-three books, with no trace of the Catholic Epistles collection. Setting aside the issue of the two apostolic apocalypses, the difference between this list and Eusebius' is that one includes 2 John and Jude and the other includes Hebrews and 1 Peter.<sup>45</sup> A further example of Eusebius-like canonical minimalism may be seen in a stichometric list published by Theodor Mommsen in 1886 and covering both Testaments.<sup>46</sup> Here four Gospels are listed in the order Matthew-Mark-John-Luke, and there are said to be thirteen rather than fourteen Pauline Epistles. These are followed by the Acts of the Apostles, Revelation, and three Johannine and two Petrine letters – but with the dissenting opinion also noted that there is just one Johannine and one Petrine letter.<sup>47</sup> The dissenting voice represents a New Testament in twenty-one books, differing from Eusebius primarily in its exclusion of Hebrews – a feature characteristic of Roman church tradition, as Eusebius himself notes.<sup>48</sup> Hebrews is included, however, in three Syriac manuscripts of a complete New Testament in twenty-two books, differing from Eusebius only in the inclusion of the

<sup>43</sup> Introduction, text, and translation in Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 175–83. For the early fourth-century dating, see Albert Sundberg, 'Canon Muratori: A Fourth Century List', *HTR* 66 (1973) 1–41. The parallels with Eusebius leave me unconvinced by Geoffrey Hahneman's arguments for a later dating to c. 375 (*The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 216–17), or by Joseph Verheyden's reassertion of a late second- or early third-century dating ('The Canon Muratori: A Matter of Dispute', in *The Biblical Canons* (ed. J. W. Auwers and H. J. de Jonge; BETL; Peeters: Leuven 2003) 487–556), or by Clare Rothschild's suggestion that the document is a forgery ('The Muratorian Fragment as Roman Fake', *NovT* 60 (2018) 55–82). The much-discussed reference to the recent origin of the Shepherd of Hermas (*nuperrime temporibus nostris... sedente cathedra urbis romae aeclesiae Pio eps fratre eius...*, ll. 74–77) exemplifies the strategy of claiming knowledge of a text's post-apostolic origin in order to deny its authority: cf. Tertullian, *de Baptismo* 17 (Acts of Paul); Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.38.5 (Clementine literature); Athanasius, *Ep. fest.* 39.21 (texts attributed to Enoch, Moses, and Isaiah). As for *nuperrime temporibus nostris*, Irenaeus can speak of the end of Domitian's reign as 'not long ago' (*neque...ante multum temporis*), although writing 80–90 years later (*Adv. haer.* 5.29.4). Does a writer who creates a fictitious family link between the brothers Pius and Hermas know or care exactly when Pius lived?

<sup>44</sup> In ll. 72–73, *quam quidam ex nostris legi in ecclesia nolunt* must reflect doubt about the status of the Apocalypse of Peter. The Shepherd is emphatically rejected as a 'recent' and post-apostolic text (ll. 73–80). These assessments do not exactly match Eusebius', but they are close.

<sup>45</sup> For a thorough survey of all issues relating to the Muratorian fragment, see now Clare K. Rothschild, *The Muratorian Fragment* (STAC; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

<sup>46</sup> Text and introduction in Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 188–93.

<sup>47</sup> The list is found in the context of a larger work dating from c. 365, preserved in manuscripts from the tenth century (now in Rome, previously Cheltenham) and the eighth–ninth centuries (St Gall). In the Rome manuscript only, 'Ep[istu]lae Ioannis III' and 'Ep[istu]lae Petri III' are each corrected or glossed with the phrase, 'una sola'.

<sup>48</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.4–5; 6.20.3.

Epistle of James; the latest of these manuscripts dates from the year 1234.<sup>49</sup> There is ample evidence for the existence of a New Testament along Eusebian lines, with only minor variations and persisting in some quarters over an extended period.

As we have seen, Eusebius' differentiation of *homologoumena*, *antilegomena* and *notha* is an attempt to dismantle a proposed New Testament in thirty-two books, and an almost identical maximal New Testament is to be found in the stichometry copied into a Greek and Latin manuscript of the Pauline Epistles, Codex Claromontanus, dated to the sixth century.<sup>50</sup> The stichometry must predate the manuscript, as it has been incompetently copied by a scribe who has failed to list Pauline texts between Ephesians and 1 Timothy and who thinks that the two Petrine letters are addressed to Peter, by Paul. Once this second error is corrected, the result is a standard list of seven Catholic Epistles (in the order Peter-James-John-Jude) followed by the Epistle of Barnabas, the Revelation of John, the Acts of the Apostles, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse or Revelation of Peter. This list contains four of Eusebius' five *notha*; only the Didache is missing. The list also shows evidence of design. If Barnabas is viewed as an eighth Catholic Epistle, the remaining five books form a chiasmic structure in which two apostolic apocalypses enclose two sets of apostolic Acts separated by the non-apostolic Shepherd. The Eusebian *notha* have been marked as such by a later annotator, who has similarly marked *ad Petrum prima* on the mistaken assumption that this referred to a non-canonical work. In the original list, however, there is no sign of any such differentiation. The close correspondence between this New Testament and the maximal Eusebian one appears to be unique, but there is a partial analogy in Codex Sinaiticus, which in its present incomplete form concludes with the sequence Revelation-Barnabas-Shepherd and may originally have included still more texts.<sup>51</sup> A potential grouping of the Apocalypses of John and Peter with the Shepherd of Hermas is also evident in the Muratorian Canon.<sup>52</sup> Two of the Eusebian *notha* texts listed in the Claromontanus stichometry are extremely long: the compiler estimates 4000 lines for the Shepherd and 3560 lines for the Acts of Paul. For comparison, the estimate for the Acts of the Apostles is 2600 lines, and the combined figure for the four *notha* is comparable to the total for the four Gospels. A maximal *Novum Testamentum Graece* along these lines would be around 50% longer than the Nestle-Aland editions.

In differentiating candidates for canonical status into *homologoumena*, *antilegomena* and *notha*, Eusebius advocates a New Testament in twenty-one books but recognises the possibility either of a much larger thirty-two book version or an intermediate collection in twenty-six or twenty-seven books consisting of the *homologoumena* plus the five disputed

<sup>49</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 237–43.

<sup>50</sup> For the account outlined here, see the full discussion in Kelsie Rodenbiker, 'The Claromontanus Stichometry and its Canonical Implications', *JSNT* 44 (2021) 240–53. I am grateful to Dr Rodenbiker for much helpful discussion of this manuscript and other issues discussed in this paper. For the text and introduction, see Gallagher and Meade, *Biblical Canon Lists*, 183–88.

<sup>51</sup> Codex Sinaiticus in its present form concludes at Hermas Sim. 9.18.5, with just under 20% of this text still to come. Given the loss of all but short excerpts from Genesis-Joshua, it is possible that the codex has also suffered substantial losses at its end. David Parker suggests that the inclusion of Barnabas and Hermas reflects Athanasius' listing of non-canonical books useful for catechumens (*Ep. fest.* 39.20, referring to Hermas but not to Barnabas); D. C. Parker, *Codex Sinaiticus: The Story of the World's Oldest Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson; London: British Library, 2010) 31. Since the Sinaiticus Old Testament includes two books that Athanasius omits from both his 'canonical' and 'useful' categories (1 and 4 Maccabees), there is no reason to assume that its canonical New Testament will correspond exactly to Athanasius'. Details of the contents and pagination of this manuscript are available in the *Codex Sinaiticus Reference Guide* (Peabody: Hendrickson; London: British Library, 2010) that accompanies the facsimile volume.

<sup>52</sup> The Muratorian Canon fully accepts 'only' (*tantum*) the Apocalypses of John and Peter and rejects the Shepherd of Hermas (ll. 76–80), implying that for some these constitute a group of canonical apocalypses.

Catholic Epistles and (perhaps) Revelation. It is precisely this intermediate New Testament that gains traction in canon lists of the later fourth century and beyond.

Eusebius also mentions a fourth category of texts, spurious like the *notha* in that they falsely claim apostolic authority yet, unlike the *notha*, pose a danger to orthodox faith in view of their heretical content. Gospels claiming the authorship of Peter or Thomas and Acts featuring Andrew or John should be utterly rejected.<sup>53</sup> Although themselves *notha*, they are not to be reckoned among the church's *notha*; even a cursory glance will show that they are utterly different in style and content from *homologoumena*, *antilegomena* and *notha* alike. When confronted with heresy, the three previous categories of text merge back into one so that the key differentiation is now located between categories 1–3 and category 4. For Eusebius, no one will risk the integrity of their faith by reading the Shepherd of Hermas or the Acts of Paul, texts that retain a certain status even when excluded from the canon; but it is another matter to read the Gospel of Thomas or Peter, texts that have enlisted apostles in the service of heresy. Naive readers of such texts may have taken their apostolic authorship attributions at face value and so put their faith at risk, and it is this danger that Eusebius strives to counter.

Here too it is possible to relativise Eusebius' categories. The common factor underlying the texts in all four categories is that they represent themselves as *apostolic*, featuring apostles or figures authorised by apostles as authors and/or protagonists, thus claiming an authority over their readers that derives from Christ himself. In historical perspective, there is no obligation to follow Eusebius in assigning the Acts of the Apostles, the Acts of Paul, and the Acts of Andrew or John to three mutually exclusive categories: these texts all belong to the single category of narratives featuring apostolic protagonists. Similarly, Eusebius is aware of six texts attributed to the apostle Peter – Gospel, Acts, *Kerygma*, two Epistles, Apocalypse – and uses all four of his categories to account for them.<sup>54</sup> Yet these categories are unlikely to reflect the views of most early readers of these texts. There is little incentive to engage with a text one believes to be 'spurious'.

Eusebius' attempt to delimit authentic from inauthentic 'apostolic' texts is a remarkable scholarly achievement, complementing the equally impressive 'canon tables' he devised to give scholarly credibility to his edition of the four canonical Gospels. In both cases, Eusebius demonstrates a unique ability to bring clarity and order to complex bodies of data that he himself has painstakingly compiled.<sup>55</sup> His appeal to the concept of pseudepigraphy to discredit texts he regards as *antilegomena* and *notha* simultaneously creates a 'New Testament' and anticipates the modern scholarly tendency to question traditional authorship attributions. While the familiar twenty-seven book version is not exactly the New Testament that Eusebius wanted, he is aware that it is a possible outcome of the discussion he is initiating – given the popularity of the seven-letter Catholic Epistles collection and the Book of Revelation. Above all, Eusebius makes the emergence of a New Testament collection seem natural and inevitable, as though bringing to light some inherent necessity that just these texts should coalesce into a single book – along with their Old Testament counterparts. Yet the rationale for this construct merits further scrutiny, with a particular focus on the exclusions it entails.

<sup>53</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.6–7.

<sup>54</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 3.3.1–4; 3.25.2–6. 1 Peter is a *homologoumenon*, 2 Peter is *antilegomenon*, the Apocalypse of Peter is *nothon*, the Acts and Gospel of Peter are heretical.

<sup>55</sup> For appreciation of Eusebius' scholarly achievements, see James Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019); Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 133–232; Matthew C. Crawford, *The Eusebian Canon Tables: Ordering Textual Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

#### 4. Conclusion

New Testament scholarship may be informative about the circumstances in which each of the twenty-seven books was composed, but it typically has little or nothing to say about how precisely those books came to constitute a New Testament while other books were passed over. As we have seen, New Testament scholarship views its object as stable and self-evident, a neutral container for the various items or sub-collections that comprise it and form the main focus of scholarly attention. One of several early proposals about the contents of the New Testament has been projected back into the late first or early second century, as though the decisions of the later era would correspond exactly to the situation more than two centuries earlier, at the close of the so-called ‘apostolic age’. Assuming such a correspondence would be justified only if the twenty-seven favoured texts were known to be *inherently* canonical, with their pre-existing canonical status simply awaiting formal institutional recognition. Inherent canonicity may be a necessary assumption in some theological and confessional perspectives, but from a historical standpoint it is hard to evade the conclusion that texts become canonical only as they are received as such – a contingent rather than a necessary process.

This contingency of selection and rejection makes it appropriate to view the New Testament as an *anthology*. New Testament texts only come to be what they now are through a complex reception process that detaches them from wider literary environments and highlights their intertextual links to each other. A text set in a canonical context – the fourfold gospel, the Pauline or Catholic letter collection – is no longer the same entity as it once was during its pre-canonical phase, when it may have been read alongside texts that will eventually *become* ‘apocryphal’ or ‘heretical’ as they are passed over in the process of canon-formation. Those texts too were highly valued by their early readers, and they deserve better than the casual treatment or total neglect they endure when scholarship absolutises the canonical boundary. In taking more seriously the non-canonical literature ascribed to Thomas, Peter, Mary, or James, new perspectives may come to light on their canonical counterparts.

**Competing interest.** The author declares none.