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Intrinsic Canonicity and the inadequacy of the Community

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Intrinsic Canonicity and the Inadequacy of the Community Approach to Canon-Determination

— John C. Peckham —

John Peckham is assistant professor of religion at Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas.

Scholars continue to discuss and debate the scope of the biblical canon.¹ At the heart of the discussion is the nature of canonicity, including a vital philosophical division between those who believe that the canon is a community-determined construction and those who believe that the canon is divinely appointed and thus merely recognized, but not determined, by any given community.² Numerous studies posit the former position, that the community functions as the final arbiter of what is included or excluded from the scope of the biblical canon (community-canon).³ At the same time, there is considerable support for the latter option (intrinsic canon).⁴

With this division in mind, this study evaluates the community-canon approach from a Christian perspective. It does not intend to delineate the scope of the biblical canon. In other words, it does not

¹ Consider the numerous works that continue to engage the ongoing debate. For instance, Craig G. Bartholomew et al., eds., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (vol. 7 of *The Scripture and Hermeneutics Series*; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); Timothy P. Jones, *Misquoting Truth: A Guide to the Fallacies of Bart Ehrman's Misquoting Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007); Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007); Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

² The basic definition of canon as “rule” or “standard” is widely recognized. The question is what the basis for this “rule” or “standard” is.

³ These approaches are by no means monolithic, so one must apply the emphasis on community to varying degrees. Moreover, for some it is not always clear whether the community-canon view is prescriptive or merely descriptive. Considerable diversity exists among these scholars. With this in mind, consider the essays by James D. G. Dunn, Robert W. Funk, and James A. Sanders in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002); Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995); James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Charles J. Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996).

⁴ See, for example, Milton Fisher, “The Canon of the New Testament,” in *The Origin of the Bible* (ed. Philip Wesley Comfort; Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992), 65–78; Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Introduction Bible* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2002); Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prologomena* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003); Gerhard F. Hasel, “Divine Inspiration and the Canon of the Bible,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5 (1994), 68–105; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

address the inclusion or exclusion of specific books.⁵ Rather, it addresses the logically prior question of the nature of canonicity.

Two major issues, entailing a number of questions, are raised in this regard that may be summed up in two interrelated queries. First, what about radical propheticity? Second, which community? Regarding the first query, what impact might a community-canon approach have upon the potential for a radically prophetic function for that canon? Would not the community approach leave open the considerable possibility that unpopular prophetic messages would be rejected? With this in mind, what is to be made of the apparently revolutionary and community-opposed voices that are preserved in the received, Protestant canon?⁶ The potential community-rejection of genuine prophetic messages itself highlights the second query: which community is authoritative to function as the arbiter regarding canonicity? What time, place, or culture constitutes the applicable community? Moreover, what constitutes a legitimate community in the first place?

1. Two Approaches to Canonicity

Before addressing these queries by means of canonical examples, it is important to clarify the fundamental division between the two approaches to canonicity: community-canon and intrinsic-canon. The primary philosophical distinction relates to this question: Who determines the scope of the canon?

1.1. The Community-Canon Approach

For the community-canon approach, the community (as the name suggests) determines the scope of the canon. This reduces the definition of canon to a collection of books deemed authoritative by a given community.⁷ The community-canon approach thus modifies the traditional view of canon as divinely authoritative Scripture to a more fluid definition, a canon shaped by the authoritative community.⁸

⁵ Although I make no attempt to argue the reasons in this paper, I ascribe to the sixty-six-book Protestant canon. See John C. Peckham, “The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity,” *TJ* 28 (2007): 229–49. Cf. Stephen Dempster, “Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left: Finding a Resolution in the Canon Debate,” *JETS* 52 (2009): 47–77; Charles E. Hill, “The New Testament Canon: Deconstructio Ad Absurdum?” *JETS* 52 (2009): 101–19.

⁶ For lack of a better term I use the term “Protestant canon” to denote the sixty-six-book biblical canon of the OT and NT.

⁷ This is carried out to varying extents depending upon the particular scholar. This approach stems, in large part, from Albert C. Sundberg’s sharp distinction between “Scripture” and “canon,” where Scripture is a fluid categorization of divine writings and canon is reserved for a fixed authoritative list of writings. See Sundberg, *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (New York: Kraus, 1969). Consider also Gerald Sheppard’s influential distinction between canon 1 as a loose category of sacred writings as standard and canon 2 in reference to a fixed, definitive, authoritative list (“Canon,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* [ed. Mircea Eliade; New York: Macmillan, 1987], 65). McDonald leans heavily on this distinction in his interpretation of the formation of the canon while Steinmann criticizes its usage as “purposely confus[ing] two different meanings of canon . . . in order to argue that the canon was not closed until a relatively late date.” See McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 15; Andrew E. Steinmann, *The Oracles of God* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 17.

⁸ Sanders comments, “It was quite essential in effect for scholars to devalue the meaning of the word canon in order to apply to the Bible the developing tools of historical investigation borrowed from literary study in other fields” (*Canon and Community*, 1). In this way, “[t]he progress of historical-critical scholarship has under-

Some suggest that the biblical canon is merely an anachronism and thus externally imposed upon the writings.⁹ Others reduce the notion of “canon” to the decisions of a denomination or community. James Sanders is a primary representative of this latter approach; for him, “Biblical canons depend for content and order on the denomination or communion in view.”¹⁰ The biblical canon, therefore, is “something officially or authoritatively imposed upon certain literature” and, as such, “basically a community’s paradigm for how to continue the dialogue in ever changing socio-political contexts.”¹¹

Others attribute less fluidity to the canon yet retain the centrality of the community in canon-determination. Paul McGlasson states, “*Canon* by definition refers to a sacred text treasured in an ongoing community of faith.”¹² Charles Scalise similarly points out, “Including a text in the canon means that it has theological importance for the communities who read it as Scripture.”¹³

In sum, despite variations regarding fluidity and authority, this approach locates canon-determination in the community.

1.2. The Intrinsic-Canon Approach

Conversely, for the intrinsic-canon approach, God determines the scope of the canon, and the community recognizes it.¹⁴ The canon is a collection of authoritative books that are authoritative because God commissioned them.¹⁵ Recognizing the canon does not bear on its canonicity but determines only whether that given community will allow the canon to *function* as authority.

It is important to clarify what the intrinsic-canon approach is not. This approach does not overlook or ignore the variegated history of receiving and recognizing the canon. The historical information

mined the historical reliability and theologically dependability of the traditional biblical canon” (Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” 546).

⁹ See, for example, Philip R. Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 17–27. Cf. Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament.”

¹⁰ Sanders, *Canon and Community*, 15.

¹¹ Sanders, “The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process,” 252, 262. As such, the community may “adapt its authoritative Scriptures in such a way as to meet its own evolving needs” (Brevard S. Childs, “The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* [ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 39).

¹² Paul McGlasson, *Invitation to Dogmatic Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 54.

¹³ Scalise, *From Scripture to Theology*, 45.

¹⁴ In other words, God revealed and inspired the canon, and it was canon even before it may have been recognized as such. Thus, “what is really meant by canonization—[is] recognition of the divinely authenticated word” (Fisher, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 77). So Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 105; Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 192; Anthony C. Thiselton, “Canon, Community, and Theological Construction,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 13. See also the persuasive arguments for the priority of the authority of Scripture and the church’s mere recognition and transmission of Scripture as canon in F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1991), 86–104; cf. idem, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988).

¹⁵ Hasel thus affirms that the “canon developed at the very point when the biblical books were written under inspiration” (“Divine Inspiration and the Canon of the Bible,” 73). Cf. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prologomena*, 318.

regarding the numerous canon-lists and council-discussions is intriguing and important.¹⁶ It is by no means presumed that the community received the canon without controversy or criticism, yet this approach nevertheless maintains that the history of canon-recognition does not change the intrinsic nature of the canon if it was divinely revealed, inspired, and preserved. In other words, if the concept of canon is defined as writings appointed by God, then the history of a canon's recognition does not itself bear on its canonicity, as such.¹⁷

With these approaches in mind, we begin by evaluating the community-canon approach with regard to the issue of the community's recognizing prophets within the canonical writings.

2. Persecuted Prophets

For sake of discussion, consider the conception of canon as limited to what the community views as somehow prophetic or sacred. If the canon is what a particular community determines to be normative, significant methodological questions arise. To illustrate such questions, we first introduce some examples of canonical prophets and then examine the community-canon approach. In each of the cases below, a purportedly authoritative community rejects the message that is later accepted as a truly prophetic, canonical voice.

2.1. Elijah

Consider the case of Elijah. Although we have no canonical books written by Elijah there is considerable canonical information regarding his prophetic ministry. Despite later being recognized as one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history, Elijah faced severe persecution in his own day by his own community. Ahab and Jezebel sought to kill Elijah for his unfavorable messages (1 Kgs 18:7–10; 19:2). Further, in the remarkable Mt. Carmel narrative, God's response determines the difference between true and false prophets. Specifically, God's acceptance of Elijah's offering by fire, contrasted with the lack of response to the call of the false prophets, manifests Elijah's true propheticity (1 Kgs 18:25–40). Notably, just previous to the divine display at Mt. Carmel, the community failed to respond to Elijah's prophetic call (1 Kgs 18:21).¹⁸

¹⁶ While we should not overlook the interpretation of the history of canon-recognition, the interpretation of that history is complex and oft-disputed since it necessarily includes speculation, being "left to a critical reconstruction of the process from indirect evidence (Ben Sira, Josephus, Church Fathers, Talmud, etc.)" (Brevard S. Childs, "The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era," 36).

¹⁷ The intrinsic-canon approach does not thereby object to recognizing that members of the community contributed to the canon. The divine-human interplay in the writing and compiling of the canonical works is quite important to note. However, that representatives from the community were inspired by the Holy Spirit in producing the canonical writings does not thereby grant authority to the community as a whole.

¹⁸ Specifically, "Elijah came near to all the people and said, 'How long *will* you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.' But the people did not answer him a word." Even afterward, matters remain bleak for Elijah to the extent that he feels that he is the only true prophet remaining after Israel's apostasy to Baal worship (1 Kgs 19:10–18). Of course, God reveals that Elijah is not the only one left, but that he has reserved seven thousand. Nevertheless, if only seven thousand are reserved, what does that say about the vast majority of the community?

2.2. Micaiah

Another illuminating example is that of the oral prophet Micaiah. When Ahab (king of Israel) seeks the help of Jehoshaphat (king of Judah) against Ramoth-Gilead, Jehoshaphat calls for prophetic guidance, specifically for the “word of the LORD” (1 Kgs 22:5).¹⁹ Roughly four hundred “prophets” of Israel counsel to attack Ramoth-Gilead; Jehoshaphat seeks a prophet of the LORD (YHWH), yet Ahab is reticent to call Micaiah, a prophet of YHWH, because his prophecies are unfavorable to Ahab (1 Kgs 22:7–8). In the midst of further prophecies in support of Ahab’s desire to attack Ramoth-Gilead, Micaiah stands alone (despite counsel to provide a favorable and agreeable message and even initially providing such) in revealing the devastation that will follow such a course of action, yet his prophecy goes unheeded (1 Kgs 22:9–29).

2.3. Jeremiah

The difficult prophetic career of Jeremiah provides yet another example that raises questions for a community-canon approach. Jeremiah proclaimed a message of divine judgment against Judah, a message that was rejected by his own community (Jer 18:18; 37–39).²⁰ Not only did the community dismiss Jeremiah’s message, they beat and jailed him for an extended period (Jer 37:15–16) and afterward imprisoned him in a miry pit (Jer 38:6–9). Although Judaism and Christianity recognize Jeremiah’s writings as canonical, his immediate community summarily rejected his prophetic message of judgment.

2.4. John the Baptist, Stephen, Paul, and Jesus

Historical examples of community-opposition to authentic prophetic voices are not restricted to the Hebrew Bible; the NT prophets also faced persecution within their own original community. Despite a broad following of disciples, John the Baptist is beheaded for his prophetic messages (Mark 6:21–29). Later, Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr, being stoned for preaching before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1–60). Then there is Paul, first himself a persecutor and later himself repeatedly persecuted, beaten and imprisoned (Acts 14:19–20; 16:19–34; Acts 22; 2 Tim 4:6–8), and finally martyred.²¹ In this manner throughout the history of the sixty-six-book canon, many prophets were egregiously rejected.

Yet from a Christian perspective, such rejections pale in comparison to the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus Christ himself. Jesus was persecuted by his own community, his opponents repeatedly sought to kill him for his prophetic messages (John 5:18; 7:1), and finally they succeeded in crucifying him (John 19:30).²² Even the majority of his nearest followers, the twelve, temporarily forsook him. Afterwards, previous to the resurrection account, they remained in confusion and despair. Not merely a prophet, but the Son of God, the center of the biblical canon, Jesus himself was rejected and crucified by the supposedly authoritative community of his day.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

²⁰ In Jer 18:18, the community explicitly rejects Jeremiah: “Come and let us devise plans against Jeremiah. Surely the law is not going to be lost to the priest, nor counsel to the sage, nor the *divine* word to the prophet! Come on and let us strike at him with *our* tongue, and let us give no heed to any of his words.”

²¹ Of course, the martyrdom of Paul is not included in the canonical accounts.

²² Jesus himself had spoken numerous times about the community’s rejection of God’s prophets, including the impending rejection of himself (Matt 23:34–37; Luke 11:49; cf. the words of Stephen in Acts 7:52).

3. The Inadequacy of the Community-Canon Approach

3.1. What about Radical Propheticity?

In light of the examples in §2, we return to the first of our two primary queries: What about radical propheticity? That is, what impact might a community approach to canonicity have upon the potential for a radically prophetic function for that canon? The examples in §2 illustrate a key weakness in the community-canon approach: communities, for obvious reasons, tend to reject critical messages and calls to reform, preferring favorable, pleasing words.²³ Communities may reject prophetic messages that run counter to their own interests, thus jeopardizing the prophetic function to call for reform and change. While it is not valid to assume that every particular community would reject critical voices, human beings tend to avoid radical criticism (cf. Isa 30:10; 2 Tim 4:3). If a particular community is the final arbiter of canonicity, divinely commissioned revolutionary voices opposed to the value-system of that community could be legitimately precluded in favor of community-sponsored pseudo-prophets.²⁴

This is not to suggest that it is impossible for a community to accept prophetic critique or that a community could not preserve messages that are revolutionary and/or community-opposed. On the contrary, it is evident that both contemporaneous and later communities did accept prophetic voices.²⁵ Nevertheless, under a community-canon approach wherein the community holds primacy in determining the canon, such messages could be legitimately silenced. In other words, absent external standards or qualifications, whatever community that is considered authoritative would be thus authorized to discard divinely commissioned messages.²⁶

3.2. Which Community?

3.2.1. Who Is a True Prophet?

This brings us to the second of our primary queries: Which community was or is legitimate and adequate to determine the validity or invalidity of purportedly prophetic messages? In numerous instances referenced above, the immediate community fails to recognize both oral and writing prophets.²⁷ If the community is authoritative to determine canonicity, why are those whom the canon calls “false prophets” not genuine prophets by virtue of their community’s support? This question exposes a contradiction between the biblical conception of propheticity and the supposed primacy of

²³ Biblical hamartiology (the depravity of human nature) raises serious issues for the primacy of the community. The carnal nature inclines to reject authority, especially such authority that threatens one’s own desires and/or interests.

²⁴ By “legitimately” here and below, I do not mean that the decision should be considered legitimate but that by the internal logic of the community-canon approach such community-determinations should be considered legitimate, at least for the particular community that made them. This problem of what might be called canonical relativism is revisited below.

²⁵ Beyond the examples already referred to in this essay, one might think specifically of (at least some of) the recipients of Galatians and 2 Corinthians, among others.

²⁶ Interestingly, it seems that some reject a rigid canon for fear of stifling diversity difference, yet it seems that a community-canon approach could equally stymie diversity and difference.

²⁷ In many (if not all) such cases there was a minority that did recognize and receive the prophetic message. Moreover, many later communities have accepted these individuals as truly prophetic voices. These two significant facts are revisited below.

the community to determine canonicity. Specifically, the biblical concept of a true prophet refers to one divinely authorized to speak for God (Jer 15:19; Acts 3:18, 21).²⁸ There is then, by definition, a divinely appointed authority belonging to true prophets that is thereby inconsistent with the epistemological primacy of the community. Yet if the community is considered to be authoritative to determine the validity of prophets, such prophetic authority is logically (if not actually) compromised. Further, divinely commissioned prophets may be legitimately replaced by pseudo-prophets since, if the community is truly the arbiter of canonicity, whomever the community accepts is thereby an authoritative voice.

The primacy of the community to determine the canon is therefore logically inconsistent with the claim of 1 Kgs 18 (to take but one example) that those whom the community accepted as prophets were false prophets in contrast to the true prophet Elijah, whom the community rejected. In this way, the way the Bible defines a true prophet contradicts the view that the community possesses epistemological primacy. True prophets are commissioned by God regardless of whether any particular community accepts them.

3.2.2. What Constitutes a Legitimate and/or Adequate Community?

One might reply that since the community that rejected Elijah was apostate it was disqualified from having a voice in canon-determination. However, such an argument implicitly subjects that community to an external standard and thus conflicts with the community-canon approach, which posits the community as the prime, authoritative arbiter. Such an appeal to an external standard actually supports the primary thesis of the intrinsic-canon approach that communities are not authoritative to *determine* canonicity but that the community must apply external criteria to *recognize* canonicity.

One might further suggest two factors presumed to be in favor of the community approach. First, in many (if not all) of the cases above, there was a minority that did recognize and receive the prophetic message. Second, many later communities accepted and preserved those truly prophetic voices. However, these facts actually serve to further highlight the inadequacy of the community-canon approach.

For example, the early Christian community accepted Paul's prophetic authority, although after some reticence (Acts 9:10–30). At the same time there were other communities, such as the Jewish leadership, who rejected Paul's prophetic validity (Acts 23:1–15). This conflict between contemporary communities points back to the larger question: Which community possesses primacy with regard to canonicity? Moreover, what qualifies as a legitimate community in the first place? May any two or more constitute a community and thus legitimately function as arbiters of their own canon? Why does

²⁸ Thus, a prophet may be referred to as God's "spokesman," literally, his "mouth" (Jer 15:19; cf. Ex 7:1–2). In Acts, God is said to have spoken "by the mouth of his prophets" (Acts 3:18, 21; cf. Matt 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23). In Num 11:26, 29, true prophets are those upon whom God has put his Spirit. On the other hand, false prophets are those whom God has not commanded or sent (Deut 18:20; Jer 14:14; 23:21, 32; 28:15; Ezek 13:6), those willing to say what people desire to hear (Isa 30:10; Mic 2:11), and those with inconsistency between their words and previously recognized prophets (Isa 8:20; Deut 13:2–3). Peter proclaims that "no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:21). Similarly, 1 John 4:1 exhorts, "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (cf. Matt 7:15). These indicators of true or false prophets point toward divine commission, not human recognition, as the requisite of true propheticity. Thus, "a prophet is an authorized spokesperson for God with a message that originated with God" (Walter Kaiser Jr., "Prophet, Prophetess, Prophecy," *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker], 642). Cf. P. Verhoef, "Prophecy," *NIDOTTE* 4:1067–79.

the Damascus or Jerusalem Christian community possess authority to accept Paul in contrast to his former community? Further still, by what authority is the NT added to the so-called OT?²⁹ Indeed, by what authority do Christians accept Christ in distinction from other communities that reject him? Community fiat will not suffice.

If each community is authoritative to determine their own canon, then since mutually exclusive canons of sacred writings are posited by various communities, the “Christian canon” is not authoritative over and against the canon of any other community but is authoritative only within the community or communities that determine and/or recognize it. This amounts to a canonical relativism that is mutually exclusive to a universally authoritative biblical canon (cf. Matt 24:14; 28:19–20; Acts 17:30; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16).

Perhaps one might posit that a later community, whether a community of a particular time and place or the collective early Christian community over a period of time, is authoritative to determine canonicity. Yet the same problems apply to later communities. On what grounds should one accept that a later community is more legitimate and/or adequate to determine canonicity?³⁰ As was the case for the earliest Christian community, the “community” is not monolithic decades or even centuries later. There are now and have been in ages past numerous communities that differ regarding the scope of sacred writings as canon. Examples include the times of the early church (the so-called canon of Marcion³¹ and Irenaeus’ view of the Scriptures vs. his Gnostic opponents³²), over one thousand years later (the canon posited by the Council of Trent vs. the Thirty-Nine Articles³³), and more recent times (the Gospel revisions of the Jesus Seminar³⁴). Hence, asserting that a later community might be authoritative to determine the canon likewise raises the question, “Which community?”

²⁹ The NT authors themselves appear to base their claims on a “canonical” argument, specifically that their message is the legitimate continuation of the Tanakh (cf. Luke 24:27; Acts 18:28; Rom 1:2; 16:26; 1 Cor 15:3). See also the brief discussion of the internal canonical support for the concept of canon in its etymological sense of “rule” or “standard” in the discussion of “The Adequacy of the Intrinsic-Canon Approach” below.

³⁰ Considering the examples above of communities that rejected true prophets, it may be too optimistic to hope that other communities will not make similar mistakes (cf. Prov 14:12; 16:25). There is no guarantee that a later community would be a better arbiter of the canon than an earlier community.

³¹ Marcion rejected the OT and of the NT accepted only an edited version of Luke and ten letters of Paul including Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Galatians, 1–2 Corinthians, 1–2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Philippians, and the non-extant epistle to the Laodiceans, which many believe was a forgery. See McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 325.

³² According to Irenaeus, the Gnostics selectively used portions of the Scriptures, claiming that such writings were incorrect and/or corrupted, and they supplemented these with their own pseudepigraphal writings and secret oral traditions. See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.2.1. Irenaeus responded with a multiple-pronged argument that the authentic apostolic teachings had been preserved and passed down (*traditio*) by the church in the Scriptures. See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.33.8. In the development of his argument, Irenaeus appeals to apostolic succession and tradition not in order to set up an authority that competes with the apostolic writings (the Scriptures) but in order to exclude the false, secret teachings and pseudepigraphal documents of his opponents in favor of the primacy of Scripture. See John C. Peckham, “Epistemological Authority in the Polemic of Irenaeus,” *Did* 19 (2008): 51–70.

³³ The Council of Trent in its fourth session, April 8, 1546, included the OT Apocrypha whereas the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England of 1562/1571 excluded apocryphal books from doctrinal decisions but considered them useful for reading. See McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 210.

³⁴ The Jesus Seminar decides by consensus vote which deeds and sayings of Jesus are historical, thus rejecting many deeds and sayings of Jesus contained in the canonical four Gospels and favoring others from

In order to overcome such problems, one might point to a particular historical community as the legitimate arbiter of canonicity. If so, one must be prepared to demonstrate the superiority of that community that affords it the authority of canon-determination over and against all others. Moreover, this demonstration, insofar as it attempts to uphold a community-canon approach, must be accomplished without recourse to external standards, including criteria of canonicity. Appeal to standards external to the community itself would deny the primacy of the community in canon-determination. Appeal to criteria of canonicity would amount to the circular argument that the community is authoritative to *determine* the canon *because* they selected the right books.³⁵

In the absence of objective criteria by which one proposed canon is superior to others, the door is left open to the objection that it is merely the historical dominance of a particular community that ultimately carries the day for one canon or the other.³⁶ If, after all, the canon is an arbitrary construct that depends upon merely the agreement of some human community, why adopt any canon at all? If the scope and authority of the canon is solely community-based, it appears that the canon would either be authoritative only for some communities and not others or it would remain in flux, ever-shifting according to community-opinion. In the former case, the canon has lost its claim to universal authority and thus much of its significance. In the latter case, the function of canon in its etymological sense of “rule or “standard” appears to be nullified, or at least sterilized on the basis of the ideological dismissal of the very concept of an objectively authoritative canon in favor of the authority of community-consensus.³⁷

Thus, the community-canon approach (1) leaves open the danger of the rejection of radical community-opposed, but truly prophetic, voices; (2) requires a compelling and/or internally consistent rationale for the selection of the particular community or sect that legitimately functions as canon arbiter; and (3) contradicts the biblical conception of propheticity, which posits that divinely appointed authority belongs to true prophets independent of the acceptance of any community.

4. The Adequacy of the Intrinsic-Canon Approach

The intrinsic-canon approach appears to avoid the problems discussed above. However, that is not to say that the intrinsic-canon approach is without its limitations. In my view, the issue of canonicity in an intrinsic-canon approach comes down to two fundamental questions:

documents such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the hypothetical *Q*. See, for instance, Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 1999).

³⁵ Of course, this appeal would also support the ideology of the intrinsic-canon approach, which proposes that accurate canon-recognition (in contrast to determination) accords with the criteria of canonicity by which the divinely commissioned writings are identified.

³⁶ Consider Philip Davies’s contention that canonization was a process whereby a privileged class controlled the politics of reading (*Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* 17–27). For an interesting and informative, if at times controversial, analysis of the impact of political forces on canon recognition in early Christianity, see David L. Dungan, *Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

³⁷ Consider Robert Funk’s call for a new Bible with a version to “include whatever traces of the original strangeness of Jesus and Paul we can isolate or reconstruct and eliminate everything else” and a second version that would “contain the current twenty-seven books plus others” in sections by dates, a massive book of literature in successive stages (“The Once and Future New Testament,” 556–57).

1. Is there a divinely determined canon?
2. What is the scope of that canon, and on what basis is it recognized?

The extensive nature of both questions eludes sufficient response due to the nature of this brief study.³⁸ However, it seems that both questions might be capable of plausible suggestions that, in turn, afford a working approach to canonicity. Such a working approach, in my view, requires two major allowances. First, one must allow that divine revelation is possible and be willing to examine the data with such a possibility in mind. Second, one must seek to recognize the scope of the canon based on the criteria of divine revelation.

Regarding the second parameter, the criteria of divine revelation requires simply that a canonical book be divinely appointed and commissioned.³⁹ These two allowances highlight the limitations (but not defeaters) of the intrinsic-canon approach. Specifically, humans cannot prove with certainty that divine revelation exists. Secondly, even if they could, they could not prove with certainty the scope of the canon.⁴⁰ With regard to both limitations, a decision of faith is required, which seems appropriate considering canonical exhortations to faith.

4.1. The Role of the Community in Canon-Recognition and Preservation

As previously mentioned, the intrinsic-canon approach recognizes that the variegated and complex history of canon-reception is important, yet it does not believe that history bears on the canonicity of the writings themselves.⁴¹ This is based, not on ignorance or indifference regarding history, but on the differentiation between what something *is* and what it is *recognized to be*. To say otherwise would raise an enormous difficulty for Christian theology.⁴² For instance if what something *is* is relegated to what the community recognizes it to be, then Jesus Christ is divine only to the extent that he is recognized

³⁸ I briefly address these two questions in Peckham, “The Canon and Biblical Authority.” For a more detailed treatment, see R. T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*; Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*.

³⁹ For an outline of this approach, including some suggested criteria of canonicity that stem from this seminal characteristic of divine commission, see Peckham, “The Canon and Biblical Authority.”

⁴⁰ The limitations regarding lack of certitude, however, do not cast reproach upon the intrinsic-canon approach since postmodern epistemology has highlighted the requisite of choice underlying the starting point(s) of any epistemology in light of the defeat of positivism. For an informative introduction that promotes a quest for the best explanatory model, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003). In this manner, there is no ground for the supposition that a non-theistic approach to canon is somehow more objective. As Thiselton points out, “Non-theism or positivism is no more value-free than *theism*” (Thiselton, “Canon, Community, and Theological Construction,” 4).

⁴¹ Much of the conflict revolves around differing views on the dating of the fixed and authoritative closing of the canon, including considerable disagreement with regard to the method for deciding the matter (e.g., the weight given to lists, quotations, allusions, etc.). For the argument in favor of a late date for the closing of the canon, see McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*; Sanders, “The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process.” For arguments in favor of early recognition of the canon, see Peter Balla, “Evidence for an Early Christian Canon (Second and Third Century),” in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 372–85, cf. the brief summary in Peckham, “The Canon and Biblical Authority.”

⁴² To be sure, this assumes that God is the ultimate epistemological authority. This does not require a naïve realism, but merely commitment to God as the epistemological compass, assuming that he never possesses false knowledge. Thus, something *is* whatever God knows it to be.

as such. For Christians, this would have the objectionable result that the nature of Jesus Christ is itself relative to community-recognition, calling to mind the failure of such recognition by the vast majority of Christ's contemporaries.⁴³ From a Christian perspective, this magnifies the inadequacy of a community approach to determine the canon.

Importantly, however, the intrinsic-canon approach does not intend to rule out the community from the canon-recognition process, which is essential to the *functional* (not intrinsic) authority of the canon.⁴⁴ Rather, from the standpoint of the intrinsic-canon approach, the community should recognize its own inadequacy to *determine* the canon and, accordingly, seek to *discover* the scope of the canon as divinely intended.⁴⁵ This encourages humility in approaching divine revelation, promoting a healthy spirit of submission in seeking divine revelation to reform the community as opposed to the intentional or unintentional re-forming of divine revelation.

At the same time, the intrinsic-canon approach celebrates the community's role in preserving and recognizing the canon. It recognizes that the community approach is inadequate for determining the canon, but that does not mean that all communities inadequately recognize the canon. On the contrary, the community has been integral to preserving and passing down (*traditio*) the canon to all future generations.⁴⁶ From an intrinsic-canon perspective, God uses the willing community throughout the ages to preserve and disseminate his canonical revelation. Thus, the intrinsic-canon approach recognizes the community's competence to preserve information (i.e., the canon itself as well as relevant history) that affords the opportunity to recognize the canon.⁴⁷ It is not necessary to disparage the community's contribution in the history of the canon in order to concurrently recognize the community's inherent limitations with regard to the ability to determine that same canon.

4.2. The Theocentric Foundation of the Intrinsic-Canon Approach

A further criticism of the intrinsic-canon model might cynically suggest that it is quite a coincidence, perhaps too good to be true, that the intrinsic canon matches up with the canon that is recognized by one's particular community.⁴⁸ However, if one has decided to believe in a God who reveals himself to

⁴³ Of course, numerous communities reject the divinity of Christ. But does that rejection have any bearing on the divinity of Christ *itself*? Conversely, does the Hindu belief that Brahman is the Supreme Being make it so? Does the Christian rejection of that belief determine it to be false? It seems, rather, that the truth (if there is any objective truth at all) of these statements is independent of community-acceptance or rejection.

⁴⁴ In other words, the intrinsic canon is the divinely intended canon, which God intends to be recognized, and submitted to, by the community. The recognition of the canon affords it functional authority in the life of the community and/or individual. The intrinsic-canon approach thus affords intrinsic authority to the canon prior to its recognition by any individual or community but seeks the functional authority of the canon that follows correct canon-recognition.

⁴⁵ Concurrently, recognizing the inadequacy of the community does not entail a belief that the individual is a proper locus of authority. Rather, humans, as imperfect whether individually or corporately, lack the adequacy as well as the authority to bestow or determine canonicity.

⁴⁶ For instance, consider the motivations of Irenaeus in passing along (*traditio*) the apostolic teachings. See Peckham, "Epistemological Authority in the Polemic of Irenaeus."

⁴⁷ Moreover, this model does not require that each successive community be more qualified to determine or recognize the canon than the ones before.

⁴⁸ See Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon, in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 21–35.

human beings through inscripturation, it does not seem at all unreasonable also to believe that this same God provided means for the community to recognize that revelation as “canon.” One may reject the epistemological decision of the intrinsic-canon model to believe in and recognize divine revelation, but that moves the discussion far beyond canonicity to the philosophical question of theism itself.⁴⁹ If this is the grounds for rejecting the intrinsic canon, it would seem better to address the issue at its core, not regarding the issue of canon but of theism. On the other hand, if one is willing to allow for the possibility of the internal coherence of theism, and further, a type of theism that expects recognizable divine revelation, then it appears that the intrinsic-canon model may lay claim to an equivalent possibility and perhaps even plausibility.

Importantly, the internal coherence of the intrinsic-canon approach may appeal to the intentions evidenced within the canon itself. It appears that both God and the human authors intended the canonical writings to be read as canon, from the etymological standpoint of canon as “rule” or “standard.”⁵⁰ Indeed, an abundance of biblical evidence, from both OT and NT, conveys the intention for the writings to have a continuing, authoritative function like a rule or standard.⁵¹ Thus, the concept of an authoritative canon is not an external imposition upon the Bible.⁵² Although the technical, contemporary meaning of canon may be anachronistic when applied specifically to the mindset of biblical authors, the kernel of a collection of authoritative writings (divinely bestowed) is evident in the text.⁵³ Furthermore, the idea of authoritative writings that cohere and explain one another exists within the canon itself.⁵⁴ Thus, “canon”

⁴⁹ Once again, this approach questions whether a non-theistic approach to canonicity is virtuous or objective. Cf. Thiselton: “Non-theism or positivism is no more value-free than *theism*” (“Canon, Community, and Theological Construction,” 4).

⁵⁰ Some might consider this a matter of circularity, appealing to the canon for support of canonicity. However, any proposed authority must be in coherence with its own doctrines as well as its own phenomena. The intention recognized in the Bible to be read as canon does not itself prove its canonicity but does provide the necessary condition for such a canonical approach.

⁵¹ Perhaps the capstone OT statement comes from Isa 8:16, 20, “Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. . . . To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.” Numerous times writers are given divine instruction to write things down as instruction or teaching for others (Exod 17:14; Jer 30:2; Rev 1:11). The intent for the continuing authoritative function of such works is also apparent (Deut 31:9, 12; Josh 1:8; 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; Neh 8:8–18; 9:3). Moreover, throughout the OT, the prophets continually called the people to “hear the word of the Lord” (Amos 3:1; Jer 2:4; Ezek 6:3; Hos 4:1). Likewise, NT writers repeatedly appeal to OT writings as authoritative (Rom 4:3), including Jesus himself (Luke 10:26). In the NT, the intention for a “rule” or “standard” is likewise apparent. Jesus obviously considered his words to be foundational, likening those who heed his words to the one who builds on the rock (Matt 7:24, 26). The apostles likewise expected their teachings to continue authoritatively. For instance, 2 Tim 1:13 exhorts, “retain the standards of sound words which you have heard from me” (cf. 2 Thess 2:15; 3:14; Tit 1:9; 2 John 9–10; Jude 3; Rev 22:18). Moreover, such expectation was fulfilled as the early Christians were “continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42; cf. Tit 3:8). Finally, the authority of Scripture is unequivocally stated in numerous instances (Acts 17:11; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19–21).

⁵² In fact, Childs points out, “From the evidence of the New Testament it seems clear that Jesus and the early Christians identified with the scriptures of Pharisaic Judaism” (Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 26).

⁵³ Balla thus correctly argues, “the later use of the term ‘canonical’ should not prevent us from seeing an awareness in the authors of the New Testament of a connection between the writings of the ‘Old Testament’ and their own writings” (“Evidence for an Early Christian Canon [Second and Third Century],” 373).

⁵⁴ For instance, the aforementioned counsel of Isa 8:20, “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.” Moreover, Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, utilizes

is not an external construct imposed on the text.⁵⁵ The scope of the canon, which is not explicitly listed in canonical documents themselves, is another matter. Nevertheless, from a theistic perspective, the intrinsic-canon approach is internally coherent and plausible. To be sure, if one has ruled out *a priori* the possibility of a divinely determined canon, then one would not seek to discover and recognize the divinely intended scope of Scripture. However, on the other hand, once one has decided to allow for the possibility of a divinely determined canon (rather than ruling it out *a priori*) then one can seek to recognize a canon of divinely appointed writings.

The intrinsic canon-approach thus presents a plausible, internally coherent approach to the issue of biblical canonicity responsive to the all-too-common supposition that the Bible is merely a human construct. In doing so, the intrinsic-canon approach impinges upon the larger question regarding the foundational authority of Scripture. If the Bible consists merely of books selected based upon human whims and power structures, why should one accept it as trustworthy and authoritative today? Why adopt such texts instead of any others that might be popular or personally palatable? Indeed, why accept any writings as authoritative at all? When it comes to such a decision of faith, the canon's significance is rooted in its claim to divine revelation, inspiration, and commission. The divine origin of Scripture makes it the authoritative and trustworthy foundation for theology and practice, to be received not merely as "the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13).

Moses and all the prophets to explain "the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27, 44; cf. Matt 5:17–18). Elsewhere Jesus teaches that the Scriptures testify of him and that one who believes Moses should believe him; conversely, if one does not believe Moses, it is clear why one does not believe him. (John 5:39, 46–47). Paul contends that he believes "everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14; cf. 2 Cor 4:2). Moreover, belief is to be in accordance with the gospel preached by the apostles, which is not their own message but itself received from the Lord (Gal 1:8–12).

⁵⁵ Metzger thus correctly states, "The canon is complete when the books which by principle belong to it have been written" (*The Canon of the New Testament*, 287).