METAPHORS WE READ CANONICAL COLLECTIONS BY: EXPLORING THE NATURE AND EFFECT OF CANONICAL CONTEXTUALITY

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Abstract: The biblical canon is a hermeneutically significant context in which readers encounter individual biblical texts. The "canonical context" is formed by the material form of the collection of biblical books but also functions as a mental construct for readers. The distinction between "mere contextuality" and "meant contextuality" can clarify the role of biblical authors, believing communities, and later readers when studying the concept and context of the biblical canon. Exploring the metaphors that are often used to illustrate the way this canonical context functions can also demonstrate the significance of this area of study. The ways we choose to conceptualize the canonical context will inform the way we understand its function in the task of exegesis and biblical theology. This type of analysis suggests further that the ordering and grouping of canonical sub-collections should be understood as complementary concepts.

Key words: biblical canon, biblical theology, canonical approach, hermeneutics, mere and meant contextuality, metaphors

One of the core claims of a canonical approach to biblical studies is that the shape of the two-testament Christian canon is hermeneutically significant. But what does this mean? While much fruitful work proceeds under the banner of a "canonical approach," there is still sometimes a surprising amount of confusion about the nature and effect of the canonical context (however we define this concept). My modest proposal here suggests that the ways we choose to conceptualize the canonical context will inform the way we understand its function in the tasks of exegesis and biblical theology. The primary metaphors we use to describe how the biblical canon works both illuminate and obscure specific aspects of the canonical context. In this regard, seeing both the *ordering* and *grouping* of canonical sub-collections as complementary concepts can help us account for the tension and compatibility between the different analogies used for the hermeneutical effect of the canonical context. Moreover, these ways of conceptualizing the canonical context are part of the effective history of the Scriptures that can help readers identify and clarify the role that canon plays in the interpretation of biblical texts.[1]

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[1] Because of its multi-dimensional scope, the study of the biblical canon is both challenging and rewarding. Any full study of this topic needs to account for historical, theological, and hermeneutical features. This article aims to recognize this methodological richness but also focus on a specific facet of canonical hermeneutics. For my attempt to engage some of these other areas, see Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon*, NTM 34 (Shef-

I. CANON AS A MATERIAL COLLECTION AND
A MENTAL CONSTRUCT

1. *Material and historical reality.* A starting point is acknowledgment of the biblical canon as a material and historical reality. The canon formation process is complex and sometimes obscure. Any account of canon formation must rely on both internal and external evidence that is often fragmentary, indirect, or capable of multiple warranted interpretations. However, the product of this canonical process is a collection that is stable enough to be discerned and described at length. In addition to their content (the "books" they contain), the "artifactual significance" of canonical collections includes what they can tell us about the textual communities that preserved and passed them along, their possible purpose as written texts, and some of the theological and interpretive commitments of their intended readers.

The relative stability of these collections and sub-collections also allows for an analysis of the arrangement and associations that exist as a result of the canonical process. The biblical canon is a physical collection of written texts that can be understood and studied as a historical reality. To state the rather obvious point, reading canonically would be impossible without a material canonical context.[2]

2. *Conceptual and hermeneutical reality.* A further step that is sometimes neglected is to reckon with the biblical canon as a conceptual and hermeneutical reality. The "concept of canon" involves understanding the nature and authority of the larger whole of the canonical collection conceptually. In other words, the developing macrostructural framework of the intertextually informed canonical collection serves as a "mental construct" that can guide an author or a reader's sense of the Bible as a whole. In this "mind"-set, an individual (author, compiler, or reader) is aware or conscious of a broader theological and literary context. The makeup of this mindset includes an awareness of togetherness (*Zusammen-Denken*) and a consciousness of a broader literary and theological context (*Kanonbewußtsein*).[3] In these

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field: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014); Spellman, "The Scribe Who Has Become a Disciple: Identifying and Becoming the Ideal Reader of the Biblical Canon," *Them* 41.1 (2016): 37–51; Spellman, *One Holy Book: How the Bible Came to Be and Why It Matters*, Primers in Biblical and Theological Studies (Cedarville, OH: Codex, 2021).

[2] In her "zwischenbilanz" of recent research on "kanonischen Auslegung" in the German academic context, Köhlmoos notes that canonical interpreters sometimes neglect a direct discussion of the material questions regarding canon and the canon formation process. Melanie Köhlmoos, "Kanon und Methode: Zu einer Zwischenbilanz der 'kanonischen Auslegung,'" *TRu* 74.2 (2009): 135–46. Accordingly, she queries toward the end of her review, "Kanonisch ohne Kanon?" On the "artifactual significance" of the canon, see especially Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); and Tomas Bokedal, *The Formation and Significance of the Christian Biblical Canon: A Study in Text, Ritual and Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

[3] Sæbø speaks of the *Zusammen-Denken* at work during the development of the Hebrew Bible in Magne Sæbø, "Vom 'Zusammen-Denken' zum Kanon: Aspekte der traditions-geschichtlichen Endstadien des Alten Testaments," in *Zum Problem des biblischen Kanons*, ed. Ingo Baldermann et al., Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie 3 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1988), 115–33. See Balla's discussion of Sæbø's work in Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise*, WUNT 2/95 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 102–5. On the notion of canon-consciousness (*Kanonbewußtsein*), see Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible*, 46–100.

ways, someone might be able to conceptualize a distinct reading context that would guide initial and ongoing assumptions about an individual composition.

The nature of publishing technologies of a given historical time period also govern the concepts of canon that are possible among a given group of people or a society at large. During the Old Testament period, biblical books were written and transmitted on scrolls. Because it was impractical for a single roll to contain the full contents of most biblical writings, any notion of the biblical text as a whole was by necessity conceptual. As the Hebrew Bible formed, the groupings of Law, Prophets, and Writings became an overarching framework by which to order the biblical material. Thus, when readers picked up a portion of a biblical scroll, they had to locate the portion that they were holding conceptually in relation to the other writings held sacred. During the formation of the biblical literature, any notion of the biblical text as a whole required a conceptual component. Though there was not a physical entity (e.g., a large codex) that contained all the scriptural writings, an individual reading only a fragment of a text "could have understood it from within the larger context of this mental construct."[4]

The movement from the tablet to the scroll to the codex form has wide ranging effects on both the process of manuscript transmission and the nature of biblical composition.[5] Even as the codex form was developing during the formation of the New Testament, a mental construct would still be necessary in order to relate physical groupings with one another.[6] Even without a definitive list or a physical assembly of scrolls or codices, someone could still conceive of an inter-related body of literature as a distinct and coherent entity.[7]

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[4] John Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 211. Though he does not use the expression "canon-consciousness," Sailhamer discusses how one might read "canonically" before the canon was a physical reality (208–12). He argues that "a mental construct was just as important, or more so, than the actual physical shape of the OT canon" (211). For Sailhamer, this mental construct is like the picture on the box of a jigsaw puzzle that enables one to conceive of an individual piece in light of the larger image. He states strongly, "Given the mental force of such a construct, a physical copy of the OT canon would have been unnecessary" (212).

[5] Cf. Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1: "The most momentous development in the history of the book until the invention of printing was the replacement of the roll by the codex."

[6] Cf. Hurtado's discussion of the nature of a "virtual collection" of Paul's written correspondence before the development of a codex form that could contain them all. Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 38–39. For the point being made here, the notion of a "virtual collection" conceptually precedes the formal actualization of that collection in a fixed entity (e.g., a codex containing Paul's gathered letters like P[46]). Especially given the publishing technology of a manuscript culture, a haphazard juxtaposition is unlikely. In other words, it would have been financially prohibitive to publish something devoid of careful prior reflection on the content of the publication.

[7] See also Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 31: "The diversity of books is seen to reflect a conceptual unity of the words of a divine author, even though the publication of one complete volume of all such words, a Book in the modern sense, was technologically impossible." Henry Gamble also discusses "the presence of the 'idea' or 'concept' of a theoretically determinate body of writings, even if a fixed list of them had yet to be finally determined." Gamble, "New Testament Canon," 271. Cf. Eugene Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A.

There are historical and theological implications of this facet of the biblical canon, but here we will focus on the hermeneutical elements of this discussion. The notion of a mental construct is part of the "context" experienced by biblical readers. Once a reader experiences an individual text in the setting of a larger collection, that broader textual context then plays a significant and unavoidable role in reading that individual text. Part of the focus of a canonical approach seeks to highlight the meaningfulness of this canonical context. The canon not only delineates the boundaries of the biblical writings but also serves as a "bounded space" in which literary and theological meaning can be discovered.[8]

In this setting, only a canon-conscious reader would be able to make sense of the larger whole when reading a portion or fragment of a biblical book. Without a larger framework in place, this situation could have seriously hampered one's ability to understand the broader canonical context. However, even a rough mental construct could function as the "conceptual glue" that would allow for a holistic reading. This "conceptual glue" allows a reader to maintain a wide-angle lens view that keeps in sight the multifaceted mosaic of meaning that the biblical authors have stitched together through their editorial work. The *conceptual glue*, then, connects the reader to the *canonical glue*.[9] The wide-ranging literary texts, contexts, meanings, and messages found within the biblical literature are bound together by a reader's sense of the "big picture" of the canonical context. Acknowledging the possibility that biblical authors and early readers had some sense of the whole of the Scriptures "in mind" helps explain how the concept of canon could function in a meaningful way before the rise of book forms that were capable of holding the full content of the biblical collection.

Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 25: "With scrolls, the table of contents of the scriptures was a *mental notion*, but it became a *physical object* when a codex contained those books included in that table of contents and not others."

[8] In an attempt to fill out the nature and effect of this type of conceptual context, Paul Fiddes explores the metaphors of space and place in relation to the canon. There is a "space" opened up by the reading and inner dialogue of canonical texts that creates opportunities for a divine encounter, a "place" to hear the Word of God. See Paul Fiddes, "The Canon as Space and Place," in *Die Einheit der Schrift und die Vielfalt des Kanons*, ed. John Barton and Michael Wolter, BZNW 118 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 127–50. Fiddes's metaphors highlight the connection between the possibilities of both the hermeneutical and theological meaning that can be generated within a canonical context. Similarly, Vanhoozer asserts that the canon is "the norm that delineates the *area* in which the church hears the word of God." Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 146. Cf. Stephen Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, FAT 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 109: "The notion of limitation as such is secondary to the more primary sense of 'canon' as a *range* of scriptural witnesses, ordered in such a way that it invites and compels the continual examination of the self and the reexamination of the scriptures."

[9] H. G. L. Peels, "The Blood from Abel to Zechariah (Matthew 23,35; Luke 11,50f) and the Canon of the Old Testament," *ZAW* 113.4 (2001): 601, uses the term "redactional glue" to describe the textual editorial seams that tie the biblical material together. He asks, "Does the canon of the Old Testament itself deliver signals of an intended closure? Was there a purposeful final redaction not only of the individual books but also of the books of the Old Testament as a whole? Is it possible to trace the 'redactional glue' between the different sections of the canon?" Sailhamer uses the phrase "canonical glue" in a similar fashion. Salhamer, *Meaning of the Pentateuch*, 253, 465.

II. THE CANONICAL CONTEXT
AS AN INTERPRETIVE GUIDE FOR READERS

1. *Which canonical context? Whose canonical intention?* A core concept in the study of biblical literature is "context." More to the point, what is the "default context" within which study of a given biblical writing will take place? Without denying the preliminary and supplemental role of historical investigation, one can also recognize the prevailing context of the biblical canon for reading biblical literature as Christian Scripture.[10]

Though it is certainly possible to conceive of biblical books independent of the collections where they are located within the biblical canon, this conceptual re-orientation can have a significant effect on one's ability to articulate the message of the Bible and navigate both its unity and diversity. The concept of canon in general allows for a study of "contextuality" that notes the generation of meaning produced by juxtaposing *just these works* in *just this fashion*. The believing community not only received and treasured the biblical writings, they also handed them down to later generations in a way that would maintain their compositional shape and extend their literary legacy.

Readers of the canon encounter individual documents as parts of a developed whole. The concept of canon, then, forms the basis of "understanding" in the church's reading of Scripture.[11] Readers understand and encounter meaning within the framework of this bounded space, this hermeneutically significant set of literary boundaries. In other words, the canon functions as the *Sitz im Leben* of the church's grappling with God's Word to his people and the necessary context for "whole Bible" interpretation.[12]

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[10] Historical investigation is necessary in order to study the biblical writings and understand the dimensions of the canon formation process. The role of history for biblical interpretation typically relates to identifying the relative value of reconstructed settings for understanding the social, intellectual, and theological milieu of an ancient writing and also the relationship between narrative portrayal and a historically reconstructed sequence of events. A canonical approach to reading the Scriptures would argue not only for the *helpfulness* but also the *necessity* of the final form of the canonical texts being taken into account when discerning meaning. The canonical context, in this approach, is an appropriate and necessary further context for reading the biblical narratives, poems, prophecies, and epistles.

[11] After noting the importance of the Spirit, tradition, and the church, Vanhoozer asserts that "it is the *text*, read in a certain canonical way and in a canonical context, that occasions understanding." Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 118. This comment comes in a discussion of what went on in the Acts 8 account of Phillip and the Ethiopian. Vanhoozer writes, "Philip represents a special kind of external aid, namely, the strategy of reading the Scriptures in their broader apostolic and canonical context" (119). In other words, "Philip represents *canonical consciousness:* the new awareness that the testimony to the God of Israel and the testimony to Jesus Christ belong and make sense together" (119).

[12] See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 78: "Israel defined itself in terms of a book! The canon formed the decisive *Sitz im Leben* for the Jewish community's life, thus blurring the sociological evidence most sought after by the modern historian." Childs argues further that "when critical exegesis is made to rest on the recovery of these very sociological distinctions which have been obscured, it runs directly in the face of the canon's intention." Cf. Driver's comparison and contrast of Childs and Old Testament form critic Hermann Gunkel. Daniel R. Driver, *Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church's One Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 105–36. Driver argues that Childs "consciously *inverts*" Gunkel's method, "contradicting the usual form

The phrase "canonical contextuality" has the benefit of emphasizing the notion of *context*. The study of contextuality is the study of a writing's textual or literary context. Where an individual writing is positioned in relation to other writings in a collection (either materially or conceptually) has significant hermeneutical ramifications. This type of study seeks to uncover the "semantic effect of a book's relative position" within the biblical canon.[13] In this sense, "context" is now "context within the literary shape of the final form of the canon."[14] Any time a physical or conceptual reading sequence has been established, the study of contextuality is both instructive and worth pursuing.[15]

At this point of the discussion, we shift from primarily historical modes of inquiry to hermeneutical modes of analysis. After establishing the *fact* of canon, we are asking now about the *function* of the canon. A physical grouping of biblical books or a stated arrangement of biblical books can influence the way each individual text within that grouping is understood in general terms. Oftentimes a grouping or arrangement of texts implies and encourages a rough order of reading that assigns implicit priority to certain texts and draws individual texts into one another's orbit. Indeed, a clearly delineated collection requires a consideration and communication of the relationship between compositional units. The members of a unit have at least one clear common characteristic, namely, that they are present within this particular collection. Given this canonical association, the lingering follow-up question is often whether *clearly delineated* collections have also been *carefully crafted*. If the Old and New Testament represent large and carefully crafted collections of several smaller carefully crafted collections, then a study of the ordering principle or associative logic at work in the formation and function of the collection seems not only warranted but imperative.

Rather than isolate the dynamics of groupings as an outlier to the more central notion of the "canon as a whole" or the "individual book on its own," it may be more fruitful to revise our understanding of the canonical context in order to account for the contours of a carefully curated collection of carefully curated sub-collections. Reckoning with the form and function of canonical sub-collections can generate insight for both historical investigation in the canon formation process and also the hermeneutical effect of canonical collections on the reading process.

2. *Mere and meant contextuality.* The level of analysis that observes these contextual effects without dealing with the issue of intention might be described as "mere contextuality." Mere contextuality is the effect that arises in the mind of the reader

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critical account in form critical terms." In this sense, the "the canon itself became the setting for the life of the people, the community of faith." According to Driver, Childs seeks to answer the question "Does canonical scripture transcend the circumstances of its creation and provide the *Sitz* for a community's life of faith and practice?" (105). See similar terminology in Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 114.

[13] John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 213.

[14] Christopher Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 179.

[15] Cf. Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible*, 101–41.

when writings are seen in relation to other writings. This level of analysis focuses on the connections produced by a broader literary context. Moreover, studies of mere contextuality are not necessarily concerned with how individual writings come to be included in a collection, associated with certain groupings, or positioned in a specific manner. Instead, the focus is on the result of that physical placement or conceptual location. The concern is more on the meaning generated by the juxtaposition than on how an ordering or a grouping came to be. In sum, the goal of mere contextuality is to demonstrate and observe the meaningful effect that an order of reading has on our understanding of the biblical books. One might note the textual and theological fittingness of Revelation and its vision of "the end" as the final word of the New Testament canon, for example, regardless of whether or not this position was designed by an author or compiler.

On one hand, a study of contextuality that restricts itself to analyzing the effect that the broader context of the biblical collection has on an individual writing without recourse to intention (i.e., mere contextuality) has been solidly established and can bear hermeneutical fruit. On the other hand, there are also ways to ask whether the shape of the biblical canon has been intended in some way. This analysis moves from "mere contextuality" to "meant contextuality." Indeed, the location of a particular writing in a collected group of writings demonstrates that someone has *already* deemed them connected in some way. In some cases, at least, the order of reading itself represents an interpretive move. As John Barton notes, "Collecting books together is potentially an interpretive process."[16] To give a standard example, the position of the Law and the Gospels at the beginning of the Old Testament and New Testament, respectively, indicates their perceived foundational role. Christopher Seitz observes further that "order and association precede lists, and they are accomplishments of a deeply theological nature to begin with."[17] In this regard, the concept of canonical shaping and canon-consciousness among the believing community seems to allow for the possibility of an intended contextuality.

The study of mere contextuality recognizes the often unacknowledged impact that sequence and ordering have on readers. The study of meant contextuality considers the ways in which the content of the biblical writings and the direction of the biblical authors themselves have shaped the very canonical context in which we access and read the Scriptures. The meaning of biblical writings initially *influences* and is subsequently *influenced by* the canonical context in which they then circulate. Contributing to a profile of meant contextuality, biblical authors make intertextual references to other biblical books and also to broader canonical sections and subcollections. For example, Paul discusses the "the law" (Rom 3:21a) in light of texts from individual Psalms (Rom 3:10–18) and also the Genesis narratives that feature Abraham (Rom 4:1–25). Alongside these intertextual references, he also refers to "the Law and the Prophets" that bear witness (Rom 3:21b). Paul thus develops his

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[16] John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville: WJK, 1997), 343.
[17] Christopher Seitz, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 45.

theological argument in light of the meaning of specific texts and also the cumulative message of named canonical sections.

To give another example, through compositional strategy and canonical shaping, Deuteronomy ends the Pentateuch and is followed by Joshua, the first book in a sequence of prophetic histories. The end of Deuteronomy depicts Moses composing and completing "a book of the Law" (Deut 31:24–29) and the beginning of Joshua refers to the "book of the Law" that is to be remembered and revered (Josh 1:7–8; cf. Ps 1:1–2; Mal 4:4). Examining the placement of Deuteronomy beside Joshua requires examining local and global compositional strategy (passage-level and book-level meaning) and also local and global canonical shaping (association of Deuteronomy with a Prophetic History sequence and also the possible force of a "Law–Prophets" construct). This pattern can also be seen in the reception history when those in the believing community refer not only to individual texts and biblical books but also groups of biblical books and distinct sub-collections.[18]

III. THE METAPHORS WE READ CANONICAL COLLECTIONS BY

1. *Meaning and metaphor.* If the "concept of canon" functions as an inevitable interpretive guide for readers, then further consideration of *the manner in which* the canonical context functions is in order. My modest proposal here is that the analogies and metaphors that readers use for the way biblical collections work will inform their understanding of canon and canonical interpretation.

In their now-classic study, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson observe the prevalence of metaphor in everyday speech and also the influence that metaphors have on how a person or group perceives a concept or issue. In this way, the metaphorical language we utilize partially structures "what we do and how we understand what we are doing."[19] Their central claim is that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action" and that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."[20] The study of the nature of metaphors is complex, but the established point here is that metaphorical concepts express and also shape our understanding of human interactions and experiences.

There are also what we might call metaphors we *read by* when considering the shape of the biblical canon. The controlling metaphor that is used when describing

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[18] See Stephen Chapman, "Interpretation by Canonical Division in Early Judaism and Christianity," in *The Shape of the Writings*, ed. Julius Steinberg and Timothy Stone, Siphrut 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 281–304.

[19] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5, 3–24. Lakoff and Johnson represent the scholarly shift that sees metaphor not only as a feature of figure and rhetoric but more fundamentally as a feature of meaning and cognition. See further Zoltán Kövecses, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–15; and more broadly, Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Relevant here is Ricouer's discussion of metaphor and the "semantics of discourse" in Paul Ricouer, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (London: Routledge, 2003), 74–115.

[20] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 3.

the nature of canonical contextuality will likely both highlight and hide certain features of the concept. Some elements will be explained but other elements will be obscured.[21] Enlisting a metaphorical image in order to understand or clarify the nature of the Bible is appropriate because readers inevitably work with an implicit conceptual framework for making sense of the setting and context of a given literary work. For readers of the biblical canon, identifying which analogy or set of illustrations most closely represents their understanding of the Bible's context can be instructive for their deepening study of the Scriptures.[22]

To illustrate the above discussion of the hermeneutical effect of the canonical context, we can consider a brief series of analogies.[23] Each of these metaphors illustrates a facet of how canonical contextuality functions for readers. For the metaphors to make sense, they also draw upon established assumptions about the biblical canon as both a material collection and a mental construct.

2. *Entries in a textual database.* One way to conceptualize the canon is to view it as a textual database. In this analogy, individual biblical texts are part of a searchable database. This would still be "canonical," in that, the searchable texts (the "data set") would be determined by the list and content of the canonical books. However, the literary context of an individual book or the shape of the broader collection could be bypassed. This way of seeing the Bible is increasingly common in a society that is dominated by cloud computing, search engine technology, and destabilized literary contexts.[24] The metaphors for accessing information in the age of the internet also continue to undergo rapid change. Some of the earliest conceptions of data

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[21] Lakoff and Johnson note that "the very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another (e.g., comprehending an aspect of arguing in terms of battle) will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g., the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 10–11. Ian Paul further explains that "the act of coining a metaphor is itself an act of interpretation, of selecting, emphasizing, and drawing attention to certain aspects of reality, but ignoring, sidelining, or passing over other aspects." Ian Paul, "Metaphor," in *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 509.

[22] This analysis is also appropriate because new experiences or areas of study are marked by the complex and creative use of metaphorical concepts. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, "New metaphors make sense of our experience in the same way conventional metaphors do: they provide coherent structure, highlighting some things and hiding others" (139). From a different perspective, Lundhaug draws on Lakoff and Johnson's work and discusses the interplay between metaphor and canon. Hugo Lundhaug, "Canon and Interpretation: A Cognitive Perspective," in *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, ed. Einar Thomassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2010), 67–90. Cf. Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Discarded Imagination: Metaphors by Which a Holy Nation Lives," in *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 17–48.

[23] The following examples are not intended to be exhaustive but rather illustrative of the way metaphors might influence thinking about how the canonical context functions.

[24] Because of the speed and complexity of these shifts in publication technology, studies of reading and digital media are many and interdisciplinary. For an entryway into this discussion, see Lutz Koepnick, "Reading in the Digital Era," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (August 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.2; and Naomi S. Baron, *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

storage drew upon existing physical files and spatial locations. This mental model of a "directory structure" is one that "connotes physical placement—the idea that a file stored on a computer is *located* somewhere on that computer, in a specific and discrete location."[25] This model would encourage highly structured systems of folders that categorize and display information and various files. By contrast, those whose "mental model" is drawn from search engine technology usually conceptualize information retrieval as searching for the specific piece of data needed from one large (usually unseen) repository like a single large folder, a deep reservoir, or a kind of "laundry basket" of relevant information.[26]

Many readers in today's world access the biblical text through either a website browser or an app on a mobile device.[27] This scenario is a logistical feature of recent publication technology that entails both positive and negative consequences for reading and the acquisition of knowledge. However, this method of information retrieval still has the power to frame someone's engagement with literary texts. If one's only access and interaction with the Bible is through digital media, then this could potentially shape the way one understands the theological and literary context of the Bible as a whole.

In other words, the most familiar concept used to understand how the Bible works might become the "canon as a searchable database" metaphor. This orienting starting point highlights the fact that the Bible is made up of texts that contain verbal content and repetition. These words and phrases can be searched, organized, and reorganized with remarkably precise results depending on the key words utilized. Most ways of accessing this textual database also have options to display larger blocks of texts that imitate pages of a codex or the endless scroll of a roll. Conversely, this mental model usually renders the shape of a book or the scope of a collection as an invisible and incidental feature of the reading experience. If used exclusively, this conceptual framework would not have the resources to make sense of the "canonical context" as a factor in interpretation. For readers with this primary metaphor, the biblical canon could certainly have an important role to play but it would have to be supplied from a different source.[28]

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[25] See Monica Chin, "File Not Found: A Generation that Grew Up with Google Is Forcing Professors to Rethink Their Lesson Plans," *The Verge* (22 September 2021).

[26] Some of the anecdotal examples given in Chin, "File Not Found," for conceptualizing databases include "one massive file" or a "laundry basket where you have everything kind of together, and you're just kind of pulling out what you need at any given time." Relevant to the current discussion is the way analogies and metaphors are used in attempts to bridge the gap between different generations of users. As Lakoff and Johnson note, "Much cultural change arises from the introduction of new metaphorical concepts and the loss of old ones." Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 145. They explain that "if a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to" (145).

[27] Cf. Ched Spellman, "The Canon after Google: Implications of a Digitized and Destabilized Codex," *Princeton Theological Review* 16.2 (2010): 39–42. One of the most popular online Bible resources is BibleGateway.com, which describes itself as "a searchable online Bible in more than 200 versions and 70 languages that you can freely read, research, and reference anywhere."

[28] For example, the confessional position of the website/app developer influences both how texts are displayed and which texts are searchable. For example, does the results page display texts in "canoni-

3. *Inclusion in a bound collection.* Another way to see and conceptualize the canonical context is to emphasize the discrete shape of individual books**.** These individual books or writings are bound together in something like a modern binder with loosely connected leaves. While these books are gathered together in a binder, they are relatively interchangeable. They might be moved around, shuffled, or relocated without any major loss of meaning or significance. The "canon as a binder" image is also similar to the "canon as a container," where the most important aspect of the broader context is inclusion within the binder or container. The location within the binder/container is still perhaps noted, but placement on the inside takes priority over position within these boundaries.

This image has an important theological angle, as this can account for how individual biblical texts can have authority in and of themselves. The canonical binder is essentially "open" until the last biblical text is written, and then the binder snaps together, the lid is placed on the container, and the canon is closed.[29] As a container, the canonical collection would serve to separate certain writings from all others and also to preserve the included writings for future use.[30]

In addition to this historical and theological point about inclusion in the collection, this analogy for the biblical canon could also have a hermeneutical effect. If the central concern is whether or not an individual book is found among those gathered within the collection, then the focus of interpretation would typically extend only to the scope of the book as a whole and not its literary neighbors in other parts of the bound collection. The canonical collection is important in this concept, but primarily for the historical and theological reasons of canon formation.

4. *Sequence and the montage effect.* When considering the arrangement of biblical books in a collection and, in particular, focusing on the effect of books appearing in a sequence or list, there is an effect similar to the "montage effect" in film. John Sailhamer develops this analogy in his work on the hermeneutics of Old Testament

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cal order"? Are there easily accessible options for viewing a "book" apart from searches?). Moreover, the teaching of a given community could account for what the reading experience does not lend itself to (e.g., the message of books as a whole or the grand storyline of the Old and New Testaments).

[29] Craig Allert describes a "binder mentality" in *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon*, Evangelical Ressourcement (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 38–40. He notes that "the picture here is that of an open three-ring binder: the church simply accepts and receives as authoritative a canonical document and then places the received document, without judgment, into the waiting binder. Once the last document has been written, received, and accepted, the binder is snapped forever, making the New Testament a closed collection, a closed matter" (39). While Allert uses this metaphor to critique an evangelical high view of Scripture, I am examining it here not as an explanation of how the canon forms in history but simply as a metaphor for how the canon functions for readers. For an account that seeks to assess and answer Allert's critique on historical and theological grounds, see Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

[30] Morgan uses the "canon as container" metaphor to describe one approach to the function of a literary canon. Donn F. Morgan, "Studying the Writings as Postexilic Literature and Canon," in *Oxford Handbook of the Writings of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Donn F. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1–16. He notes that a container "divides, collects, and separates" (4). Within the canonical container, then, "the books are kept—safe and separate—from others" (4).

theology.[31] Originally developed by cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein, the notion of "montage in cinematography" describes "the effect of meaning which one achieves by juxtaposing two related or unrelated pieces of film."[32] According to Eisenstein, typical film viewers "are accustomed to make, almost automatically, a definite and obvious deductive generalization when any separate objects are placed before us side by side."[33] The film can consistently have this effect because "competent viewers (or readers) always seek to understand the parts in light of the whole."[34] "Juxtaposition of parts," then, "implies a whole, so that even where such a whole does not actually exist, a whole is supplied by the viewer (or reader)."[35]

The "montage effect" is similar to the Kuleshov Effect, named after Soviet film director Lev Kuleshov, who analyzed the effect that sequencing had on viewers. In a famous short film experiment, Kuleshov interspersed the same footage of a man's face devoid of expression between a series of random images (e.g., a hot bowl of soup, a woman lying in a coffin, and a young girl playing with a stuffed animal). The juxtaposition of these images had the effect of projecting a series of differing emotional responses among viewers. While the man's expressions appeared to change in response to each new image, the footage was in fact exactly the same.[36] For purposes of the current study, the relevant insight of both the montage effect and the Kuleshov Effect is that juxtaposing discrete elements in a work of art (i.e., literature/film) impacts the meaning that viewers/readers perceive.

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[31] See Sailhamer, *Introduction,* 213–15.

[32] Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 214. The main work Sailhamer utilizes is Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942). See also Eisenstein, "Methods of Montage" in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt, 1969), 72–83; and Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," in Leyda, *Film Form*, 45–63. For Eisenstein, "montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another." Eisenstein, "Dialectic Approach," 49. Knight observes that as a result of the popularity of some of Eisenstein's films (e.g., *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*), "the word montage came to identify not cutting in general, but specifically the rapid, shock cutting that Eisenstein employed in his films. Its use survives to this day in the specially created 'montage sequences' inserted into Hollywood films to suggest, in a blur of double exposures, the rise to fame of an opera singer or, in brief model shots, the destruction of an airplane, a city or a planet." Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies* (London: Macmillan, 1957), 79. Cf. Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, trans. Christopher King (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 89–167 (a section entitled "Rhythm and Montage").

[33] Eisenstein, *Film Sense*, 4.

[34] Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 214.

[35] Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 214.

[36] For a brief overview of this effect, see Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2011), 191–93, 217–21. Pramaggiore and Wallis observe that Kuleshov's analysis "illustrated that the meaning of a shot was determined not only by the material content of the shot, but also by its association with the preceding and succeeding shots" (192). Both Eisenstein and Kuleshov are key pioneers and advocates of Soviet montage theory (see the first two chapters of David C. Gillespie, *Early Soviet Cinema: Innovation, Ideology and Propaganda* [London: Wallflower, 2000], 22–56). Contemporary cinematography scholars usually temper the original enthusiasm of Kuleshov and his students regarding the success of this "effect." For instance, McLean comments, "While *some* meaning can be produced through editing, a considerable amount of contextualization is required before spectators provide the 'crucial interpretive linkages' that the Kuleshov effect theoretically comprises." Adrienne L. McLean, "Kuleshov Effect," in *Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory*, ed. Roberta E. Pearson and Philip Simpson (London: Routledge, 2001), 254–55.

In a cinematic montage, distinct scenes or images are juxtaposed in quick succession. Montage sequences also usually incorporate a dramatic musical score or a voiced narration that offers commentary on voiceless images or clips. In these ways, viewers are encouraged to understand discrete scenes or images in light of one another. The meaning of individual units is influenced by what comes before and after. The inevitable meaning-making drive in viewers or readers is at the heart of what contextuality entails, and this cinematic analogy can help a reader of the biblical canon conceptualize the hermeneutical effect that juxtaposition has when reading a collection of texts. Just as a film encourages viewers to synthesize scenes that follow one another, a canonical collection encourages readers to view texts as part of a meaningfully shaped whole. This hermeneutical effect is prominent for readers committed to sequential reading of biblical texts within a collection.

Sailhamer reflects that "the semantic purpose of montage in film (and biblical texts) is to represent themes and images that are larger than the limitation of the medium itself—that is, larger than an individual "shot-piece" (a discreet piece or frame of film)."[37] When two shots are juxtaposed on screen, "the viewer is forced to identify elements of both shots that are characteristic of a single theme or an image of a theme."[38] For Sailhamer, the ordering of biblical books involves the same type of process. As he writes, "A canonical order ensures that the books of the OT are read in a predetermined context."[39] There are in fact multiple ways that the canon has been ordered and "each of these contexts has its own particular semantic effect (montage) on the meaning of the individual biblical books."[40]

The analogy of the montage effect in film highlights the importance of arrangement and the impact of linear sequence on a reader encountering a literary collection. A possible objection to the value of this effect relates to variations in these arrangements. If different orderings of biblical books within a sequence are utilized in different communities across time, then how can this meaningful effect have any bearing on the interpretive task of reading these books? An initial general response to this challenge is that the hermeneutical "montage effect" of juxtaposed works within a literary collection would still apply to each of these various orderings. Each sequence would adjust the hermeneutical effect that might be generated by the literary neighborhood a given writing might have when it takes up residence within a material or conceptual order of reading. The fundamental insight that jux-

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[37] Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 214. Pramaggiore and Wallis argue that "one of the basic theoretical principles of [film] editing is that the meaning produced by joining two shots together transcends the visual information contained in each individual shot. In other words, the meaning of a sequence of shots is more than the sum of its parts." Pramaggiore and Wallis, *Film*, 192. They note that "as the Soviet practitioners understood, editing synthesizes the cinematography and *mise en scène* of individual shots into a series of images that, when taken as a whole, transcend the limitations of any one of the images in isolation" (220).

[38] Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 214.

[39] Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 214.

[40] Sailhamer, *Introduction*, 214. He observes that "in the history of the OT Canon there are, in fact, several such canonical contexts, e.g., the order of the English Bible, the Greek Septuagint, or the Hebrew texts, for which, in fact, there are several contending orders."

taposition within a sequence generates a hermeneutical effect, though, is actually not impacted by variation within an order of reading (especially when those variations are measured and exhibit detectable rationale).[41]

5. *Compilation and gravitational pull.* Another analogy for the way that books relate to one another in a canonical collection is the gravitational pull among planets within a solar system. Timothy Stone develops this analogy in his work on the compilation of the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible.[42] In our solar system, a number of planets rotate around the sun at varying distances. Many of these planets also have one or more smaller moons that rotate within their orbit. In this way, we might conceive of a literary compilation of books that have general but also specific relational profiles. This analogy helps a reader recognize that certain books "gravitate" toward one another when they are included in the same collection or sub-collection. They tend to circulate together and when they appear in lists, they are typically close or clearly related in some way to one another.

This way of conceptualizing the relationship between biblical books also helps show that variation in a list or linear sequence does not automatically negate any hermeneutical influence. Rather, even in multiple diverse orderings, certain books can maintain a direct or indirect relation to one another within a discrete collection. Planets in a solar system may not always align along strict coordinates or stay exactly the same distance apart at every moment, but they nevertheless maintain their place within the solar system as a whole and retain their relative locations in that geometrically complex space. So too, biblical books may vary in sequence (by "moving around") yet remain part of the biblical canon as a whole and often with discernable proximity to a common profile of texts in a canonical sub-collection. The letter to the Hebrews, for example, migrates across but never departs from the Pauline corpus in New Testament manuscript groupings. The book of Genesis, by contrast, is planted firmly at the beginning of the Pentateuch.

Both of these metaphors help articulate and conceptualize a particular function of canonical contextuality for readers. The montage effect helps illustrate the linear aspect of an established sequence of biblical books. The gravitational pull of planets helps illustrate the complexity and balanced stability that accompanies "movement" within and across sub-collections. If we diversify the metaphorical concepts we use to describe and illustrate the hermeneutical effect of canonical context, our measured assessment will have more explanatory power and gain the ability to account for historically diverse ordering patterns.

IV. BOOK ORDERING AND CANONICAL GROUPING AS COMPLEMENTARY CONCEPTS

Observing this feature of the canonical context also recognizes the multi-faceted nature of the biblical canon itself. The composite shape of the broader ca-

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[41] In the terms developed above, this phenomenon would be an example of "mere contextuality."

[42] Timothy J. Stone develops this analogy in *The Compilational History of the Megilloth: Canon, Contoured Intertextuality and Meaning in the Writings*, FAT 2/59 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 6–8.

nonical collection is formed by the groupings of the individual sections and also strategic texts that connect these corpora. Reckoning with the material and mental category of sub-collections can help readers better understand "canonical context" as including the "grouping of the groupings."

There sometimes surfaces a justifiable concern that "canonical context" may function as an overly theoretical construct that flattens out the particularities of individual writings. The framework of a canon as a collection of collections, though, can relocate the intensity and direction of the guidance that the canon provides. The associative unity generated or suggested by a canonical collection is multifaceted and multilayered. A sub-collection connects individual writings within the purview of a circumscribed number of texts gathered together based on a local set of criteria (e.g., genre, authorship, narrative continuity, theological compatibility). This scenario represents an organic process of recognition rather than an external and arbitrary up or down application of a categorical label or status.

Another common objection to the study of book order as a factor for interpretation is the presence of different orderings within the lists and manuscripts of various communities. In one way this is an important historical situation that must be taken into account. If the canonical context requires a sequence that is static, then a canonical approach would be threatened by even minor differences in the order of books. However, the categories of mere and meant contextuality can account for the way that order and arrangement manifest within a collection. Variation in sequence sometimes indicates an interpretation of a biblical book's function in relation to other biblical books. Far from discounting the meaningful role of a canonical context, this example seems to demonstrate it. The material shape of the canonical collection can shed light on the way that it was understood and utilized within a community. Variations in ordering among books within the biblical canon is certainly present but should be understood in light of the historically demonstrable and readily discernible patterns of stability that can be detected on a small scale and a large scale across the collection.

Both book ordering *and* book grouping, then, would be hermeneutically significant. They contribute to the effect that the canonical context can and does have for early and later readers. Connecting these two concepts (ordering and grouping) is another means by which a reader can find the canonical context meaningful even in the presence of diverse variations in ordering. This interpretive framework also opens up an avenue to recognize both "close" and "distant" pairing within the context of a collection (i.e., books right beside one another and also books that are clearly connected but with a number of works between them).[43]

Here the meaningful force of a linear sequence functions *within* the associative pressure of a gathered collection. The crux of the issue relates directly to the her-

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[43] For further reflection and illustration of this issue (e.g., the varying position of Chronicles alongside Kings, as the first entry in the Writings, and as the final book of the Hebrew Bible), see Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading*, 172–83; and Spellman, "Hermeneutical Reflections on Canonical Sub-Collections: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Canon Formation*, ed. W. Edward Glenny and Darian Lockett (T&T Clark, forthcoming 2023).

meneutical effect of "grouping" and not *only* in the syntagmatic relations of proximity and juxtaposition. Sub-collections generate an effect through both discernable arrangement and the "achievement of association" that occurs within a canonical grouping.[44] Book ordering and broader grouping units are not mutually exclusive but are factors that can be analyzed in tandem. Thinking about the "shape" of the canonical context with sub-collections as orienting starting points allows a reader to recognize the meaningful effect of both ordering (which prompts questions about the implications of arrangement) and grouping (which prompts questions about the implications of association).

Lakoff and Johnson have noted that "it is by no means an easy matter to change the metaphors we live by."[45] It is also by no means easy to change the metaphors we read by. Choosing one metaphor over another when conceptualizing the canonical context will not necessarily determine the possibility of good interpretation. However, the goal of the study above is to demonstrate that this choice certainly has an array of possible effects for readers. The metaphors we use to conceptualize a poetics of canonical collections usually highlight certain meaningful aspects of this context even as they hide other facets of meaning. Moreover, these historical and hermeneutical reflections can help us see how the shape of the biblical canon itself might be understood as an early form of biblical theology among the earliest churches.

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[44] Cf. Seitz, *Goodly Fellowship*.

[45] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 145.