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Creating the Canon

Composition, Controversy, and the Authority of the New Testament

July 11, 2023 | \$30, 264 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0110-3

Some questions about the New Testament are far from settled, to say nothing of misconception and confusion. In this wide-ranging yet accessible overview, Benjamin Laird offers constructive insight on matters tied to the composition, collection, and authority of the New Testament canon.

The Composition of the New Testament Writings

When we think about the composition of the New Testament writings, we often envision an aged man with a large white beard hovering over a wooden table carefully dipping his quill in a bottle of ink as he pensively writes by candlelight. Such is the image portrayed by several prominent artists such as Rembrandt and Jan Lievens in their portraits of the apostle Paul, one of the more well-known writers of Scripture. Behind these depictions is the underlying assumption that writing in the ancient world typically took place in quiet and isolated places, and that it was fairly similar to writing in the modern age, apart, of course, from the more primitive materials that were used. If Paul were writing today, we might expect him to flip a light switch before settling in at his desk to work from his computer, but the solitary nature of the work would remain unchanged. It is certainly understandable why this assumption of writing in the ancient world remains common. The studies of ancient book culture and literary conventions are heavily specialized academic fields that are largely unfamiliar to contemporary readers of the Bible. Other than a small handful of postgraduate students and academics who have the patience and inclination to study technical works that address obscure literary practices from antiquity, few contemporary readers are familiar with the basic process by which ancient works were commonly composed, assembled, and distributed.

While our knowledge of ancient literary practices is far from complete, a number of significant discoveries of ancient manuscripts over the last few centuries have yielded fresh insights on a host of issues related to writing in the Greco-Roman world. We now have a much greater understanding of the features and characteristics of various literary genres, the materials that were often used to produce literary works, the manner in which writings were often disseminated and preserved, and the role that written texts played in society. The material discovered at sites such as Oxyrhynchus and Nag Hammadi included several early biblical manuscripts (e.g., the Bodmer Papyri and Chester Beatty Papyri) and other early Christian writings (e.g., early noncanonical works such as the *Gospel of Thomas*), as well as a large trove of personal letters, business documents, and religious texts that were used throughout the Mediterranean world. Naturally, much of the attention has focused on what these writings may reveal about the culture in which they were written, though they also provide significant insight about the role of literary works and documents in ancient society, the physical features and characteristics of ancient writings, and a host of other related matters. Despite the significant attention that has been given to what people were reading and the role of literature in ancient society, surprisingly little attention has been given to the simple question of how writers went about their work. There cannot be a simple answer to this question, of course, as each literary genre is unique, as were the circumstances facing each individual author. A letter to a colleague about a particular matter of business, or a personal letter between a husband and a wife, was typically a much more straightforward process than the production of a philosophical or religious treatise, a historical work, or other types of literature that were intended to circulate among larger audiences.

The study of how writings were composed and produced in the Greco-Roman world is of particular interest to the study of the background of the New Testament. While Christianity was certainly not the only segment of ancient society in which literature played a significant role, its affinity for written texts was one of its defining characteristics. As Larry Hurtado explains, "Reading, writing, copying, and dissemination of texts had a major place—indeed, a prominence—in early Christianity that, except for ancient Jewish circles, was unusual for religious groups of the Roman era" (*Destroyer of the Gods*).



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There were certainly a number of written accounts that describe the origin and exploits of various deities or address one aspect or another of ancient worship. For the most part, however, written texts appear to have played a less foundational role in Greco-Roman religion than in Jewish and Christian circles. Most people did not attend a weekly study on writings about Poseidon, for example, or carefully scrutinize a collection of religious texts for instruction pertaining to the proper worship of a Roman emperor. In many contexts, religious activity appears to have been largely cultic in nature with a focus on external acts of worship, with most people simply paying their respects to various deities when, where, and how it was deemed appropriate in their particular environment.

In light of the unique role that written texts have played in Christianity for two millennia, it will be helpful to briefly consider what may be determined regarding the manner in which the biblical authors composed and distributed their works. Our concern in this volume, after all, is not limited to how and why certain writings were recognized as part of the New Testament. These matters are certainly of great importance and will be taken up in various ways in subsequent chapters. Ultimately, we are interested in the broader story that began with the composition of individual texts and ultimately culminated with the establishment of a widely recognized collection of canonical works. Before we entertain questions relating to the formation and authority of the canon, it will be beneficial to briefly consider how the biblical authors likely went about the task of composition, and even how they “published” their completed material. Although it is important to carefully assess and evaluate *what* the biblical authors wrote and *why* they wrote it, it is also helpful to consider *how* the biblical authors went about their work. When Luke set out to compose his Gospel, for example, what would have been involved in the process of creating his unique account of Christ’s life, teaching, and salvific work? Did he simply patch together existing traditions that had circulated orally or in a number of existing literary sources, perhaps adding his own literary touch and historical insights along the way? What was the source of the unique material contained in his Gospel? Did he rely on sources that are no longer extant for this information? What about the apostle Paul and those responsible for the Epistles contained in the New Testament? Did they simply receive reports about a particular situation and then retreat to their private quarters to compose written instructions and admonitions in response to the matters at hand? In short, what can we conclude about the actual composition of the New Testament writings and their initial distribution?

A fundamental characteristic of the composition of the New Testament writings that is often overlooked is its collaborative nature. As the content and features of ancient writings are examined, it becomes increasingly apparent that writing in the Greco-Roman world often involved collaboration between an author and a number of individuals, each of whom served a specific role during the compositional process. While the biblical writers were ultimately responsible for the content of their writings, the evidence would suggest that they worked directly with a number of individuals who contributed in one way or another to the composition, publication, and distribution of their writings.

-Taken from chapter one, “The Composition of the New Testament Writings”



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Benjamin P. Laird (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is associate professor of biblical studies at the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. His recent publications include *The Pauline Corpus in Early Christianity*, *40 Questions about the Apostle Paul*, *Five Views on the New Testament Canon*, and the forthcoming *The New Testament Canon in Contemporary Research*. He lives in Lynchburg, Virginia, with his wife and five children.

The Composition of the New Testament Writings

“Benjamin Laird has written an insightful and helpful introduction to how we got the New Testament. Laird explains everything from ancient writing practices to book production and publication to letter writing in antiquity, as well as the origins and reception of Christian texts, and the importance of apostolic authority. A helpful read for anyone interested in the what and the how of the Bible.”

—**Michael F. Bird** is academic dean and lecturer in New Testament at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia

“*Creating the Canon* is a dependable guide for the early formation of the New Testament. It not only introduces the major scholarly voices in the debate, it also is structured to answer several common questions regarding the composition, formation, and the authority of the New Testament. Though the questions are common, Laird does not merely offer simple answers; rather, his work engages insights from textual criticism and canon research to address the origin, extent, and authority of the canon. Accessible to the student, yet filled with insights for teachers and scholars, Laird’s volume will be a helpful reference tool for many and provide a gateway into deeper canon studies for others—highly recommended!”

—**Darian R. Lockett**, professor of New Testament at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“For those who wrestle with the nature and significance of the scriptural canon in modern Christianity and wonder about its ancient origins, Benjamin Laird’s book cuts a lucid and engaging path through many aspects of the canon’s composition, formation, and authority. Laird writes both as a historian and as a Christian, combining critical attention to sources and hermeneutics with a personal sense of the importance of these questions today.”

—**Jane Heath**, Durham University

“As one treks into the rugged terrain of New Testament canon studies, a daunting range of issues looms on the horizon. Benjamin Laird maps out the general contours of current scholarship and then proposes his own path forward. His study provides a panoramic view of canon-related considerations but also raises significant questions concerning the relationship — between apostolicity and the ecclesial recognition of divinely inspired texts.”

—**Paul A. Hartog**, professor of theology at Faith Baptist Seminary

“The wonderful thing about studying the origins of the New Testament canon is that there’s always more to discover. It seems like a well without a bottom. This new volume by Benjamin Laird exemplifies this reality. In this wide-ranging study, Laird not only revisits older questions but also explores newer ones, creating a fresh and helpful addition to the growing body of work on the origins of the canon.”

—**Michael J. Kruger**, president and Samuel C. Patterson Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina

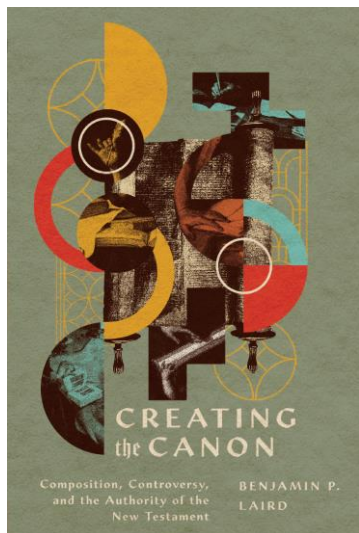


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ENDORSEMENTS



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“If you are a follower of Christ, then you need to know where your New Testament came from. The New Testament—why it looks and reads the way it does—is the theme of this excellent book by Benjamin Laird. The author explores textual criticism, inerrancy, pseudonymity, apostolicity, and many other topics that are highly relevant for anyone wanting to read and understand their New Testament. I cannot recommend this work highly enough.”

—**David Alan Black**, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary



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