Socrates: However, when friendly people . . . want to converse with each other, one's reply must . . . not only be true, but must employ terms with which the questioner admits he is familiar . . . .

I believe we rejected the type of answer that employs terms which are still in question and not yet agreed upon . . . .

You say this and that about virtue, but what is it?

. . . to define so-and-so, and thus to make plain whatever may be chosen as the topic for exposition. For example, take the definition given just now . . . , it was that which enabled our discourse to achieve lucidity and consistency.¹

Plato may not seem the most apt starting-point for a discussion of the biblical canon, but I suggest that he might be. Though he was not always correct in his views, he did manage to make several rather permanent advances in human civilization. Perhaps one of the most frequently applied — or forgotten with resultant peril — is his insistence that intelligent argument cannot safely proceed without a clear definition of terms. Some scholars think that “canon” is a theological *terminus technicus* with a clear meaning, a specific denotation, and a long history of discussion, while others think that the term may be used more broadly to fit any of several aspects related to the collections of authoritative sacred texts of Judaism or Christianity.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider and attempt to clarify the notion and definition of “canon.” It is an understatement to say that confusion currently surrounds the term and permeates recent discussions of the topic. A topic periodically dormant, it has generated a great deal of interest in the current generation due to the new and unexpected light that the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls contributes to the rather scant body of evidence otherwise available.

A problem that arises in discussion of topics that are intermittently vigorous and then dormant is that continuity and valuable advances in the discussion get lost. It is quite predictable that the discovery of a cache of ancient manuscripts of books that came to form the Bible of Jews and Christians would excite both popular and scholarly attention, in the hopes of sharpening our knowledge of the history of the Bible’s formation. Indeed, great gains have been made in that knowledge, but many recent discussions bemoan the lack of clarity and agreement regarding terminology. Is there a fixed target with a clear bull’s-eye that writers must agree to aim at, or is there only a general area within which one may aim at any of a number of spots? Is there “no king in Israel” so that all can do or say what is right in their own eyes? Is there need for a guide to the perplexed?

This chapter will be a sustained attempt at clarifying the definition of “canon” and discussing some of the attendant concepts which partly overlap with that of canon and cause blurring of the picture. The specific histories of the various aspects which make up the Jewish and Christian processes toward the different canons lie beyond the limits of this chapter, but many of those aspects are discussed in The Canon Debate. The discussion here will first treat some preliminary considerations and then turn to the definition of “canon,” surveying a spectrum of theological dictionaries, isolating the essential elements of the concept of canon, and distinguishing it from other related concepts that tend to cause confusion.

## I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

### A. Etymology

Although much ink has been spilled discussing the etymology of the “canon” of the Scriptures, the effort produces only mildly interesting and only mildly helpful results, because the word as used in later theology or biblical studies does not coincide with ancient usage for the most part. The word can be traced to the Sumerian *gi, gi-na,* meaning “reed” and its extended meaning “standard.” Hebrew and other Semitic languages received these meanings, as did Greek, though the last multiplied additional metaphorical uses.

For practical purposes regarding the canon of Scripture, Bruce Metzger is correct that “the word ‘canon’ is Greek; its use in connection with the Bible belongs to Christian times; the idea of a canon of Scripture originates in Judaism.” The term as used in relation to the Bible arose in Christian circles, though it was borrowed from the Hellenistic world. Commonly in Greek the term originally had a concrete meaning and then several metaphorical extensions. It meant a “rod” or “measuring stick” and acquired the figurative senses of “norm” or “ideal”: in the realm of sculpture it meant the “perfect form of the human frame”; in philosophy, the “basis . . . by which to know what is true

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2 *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002).
