CHAPTER TWO

THE STUDY OF CANONS AND CANONIZATION

Introduction

What happens when a book begins to be read as a classic or part of a selection of classics? A sentence or turn of phrase, previously bereft of significance beyond its literal import, is suddenly pregnant with meaning and worthy of exegesis. What happens if a collection of texts is deemed an authentic conduit to God’s will or legal right? Its very ontological status is raised, and minute inconsistencies within the texts themselves or challenges from outside sources can undermine the very definition of truth to which a community adheres. In neither of these cases are the texts themselves agents. Rather it is their body of readers who, out of a need for exemplary literature or select writings through which to approach the divine, make the books more than the sum of their pages, endowing them with a new authority and significance. This elevation binds these texts, their writers and audiences together in a new authoritative relationship. It creates a new universe of possible meanings and functions for these valorized works. This reverence or appreciation for the texts draws lines around the audience, including, excluding and defining the community. At this nexus of text, authority and communal identity, a canon has been formed.

Regardless of their specific qualities, canons can be studied as a unified phenomenon that appears when communities authorize certain texts, radically changing the ways they are interpreted and used. The Greek work kanón originally meant ‘measuring stick’ or a tool used to guarantee straightness, thus connoting the notion of a standard. Aristotle employed the term in the context of the virtuous man, whom he considered to be ‘the standard of good measure’ in ethics.¹

Epicurus would consider logic to be the ‘kanòn’ of true knowledge.²

In the early Christian tradition Paul used the word to refer to the ‘straight path’ of correct belief, and ‘canon’ soon acquired the meaning of the ‘list’ of sacred writings that guided the believer. Over the centuries the term ‘canon’ has thus come to indicate a set of authoritative or exemplary texts within a specific community of readers. Fierce debates have raged of late and much ink has been spilled in efforts to provide more exact definitions for the word.³ Its true and global import, however, is best grasped not through restricting it to an exhaustive definition, but rather through viewing its reflections in the myriad studies on canons and canonicity produced by scholars from different fields. By examining the variety of canons, their commonalities, and efforts to distill the essence of canonicity, we can identify common historical processes and acquire conceptual tools useful for understanding the emergence and function of the hadith canon in Islam.

Canons in Context and the Emergence of Canon Studies

Canons have emerged in scriptural, literary or legal contexts, and it was in these fields that the study of canons and canonization began.⁴ In the 1970s, however, the various strands of critical theory and postmodernism penetrated these arenas and presented a common challenge to the master narrative of canons and objective criteria. Although there remains scholarship devoted to religious, literary and legal canons, these fields have increasingly adopted the common language of hermeneutic studies in a joint investigation of the “politics of interpretation.” Leading experts such as Frank Kermode and Stanley Fish have exemplified this development, as they straddle Biblical studies and literature, and

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³ In his study of the canon as a tool of social control, M.B. Ter Borg, for example, tries to distill the “primordial definition” for the concept of canon, concluding that its essence is that of an “objectified standard rule”; see M.B. Ter Borg, “Canon and Social Control,” in *Canonization and Decanonization*, ed. A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 411–2; see also Jonathan Z. Smith’s “Canons, Catalogues and Classics” in the same volume, pgs. 299–303.
⁴ Scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith, H.J. Adriaanse and Jan Assmann have sought to remind audiences that it is the theological usage of canon that lies at the root of all modern discussion of the issues; see Jonathan Z. Smith, “Canons, Catalogues and Classics,” and H.J. Adriaanse’s “Canonicity and the Problem of the Golden Mean” in *Canonization and Decanonization*; 295, 316.