Critical Issues in the Formation of the Hebrew Bible

Lee Martin McDonald

It is a special privilege to contribute to this volume honoring such a deserving biblical scholar. Bruce Chilton has significantly enriched our understanding of the New Testament, including early Christianity and Judaism of Late Antiquity. Few scholars have achieved his level of competence in their fields, and even fewer have made their fields as accessible as Bruce has. His facility in oral and written communication is well known, and he is one of the few who communicates intelligibly to scholars during the week and also to church laity on Sundays! I have appreciated getting to know Bruce personally and have admired his significant commitment both to the academy and his faith. He is a rare model for students, scholars, and church leaders. Like many others, I have learned much from him and extend to him my heartfelt congratulations on this special occasion as we recognize his many valued contributions to all of us.

The processes that led to the canonization of the Hebrew Bible (HB) are complex and challenging. Because there are no ancient sources that describe the processes that led to the formation of the HB, it has remained a conflicted and often an untold story. Our awareness of the origin and development of the HB has been further complicated by the lack of agreement among biblical scholars on foundational issues, especially the criteria employed for determining canonization as well as the meaning of the terminology used to describe the process of canonization, namely, what does canon mean or refer to? Another important factor that complicates investigations into the formation of the HB is that biblical scholars do not agree on the dating of the various books or events mentioned in it, which are essential in understanding the HB’s formation. Likewise, several anachronistic terms are regularly used by scholars, which often cloud or prejudice the investigation of canonization, such as “biblical,” “non-biblical,” “canon,” “canonical,” “non-canonical,” “apocryphal,” and “pseudepigraphal.”

Here I examine several pivotal ancient texts from which scholars regularly draw a variety of conclusions about the formation of the HB. While some later rabbinic texts reflect a rationale for the closing the HB canon, it is not clear
how widespread such notions were either in late Second Temple Judaism or in Judaism of late antiquity. Because the historical evidence for how the HB was formed is often paltry and invites more questions than answers, it is important that scholars remain open for a better understanding of the formation of a biblical canon in antiquity. Although these are obstacles in gaining clarity on the matter, we are closer now to a better understanding than was possible previously.

This following investigation focuses on important distinctions in terminology, the major texts that scholars study to formulate positions on the formation of the HB, and possible influences and antecedents that led to its formation.

1 The Emergence of Sacred Scripture

The belief that God inspired prophetic individuals to produce sacred messages appears quite early in Jewish literature, at least from the time when Jewish prophets wrote down what they believed were oracles from God, but probably also earlier. The presumption that God has communicated with human beings both in oral and written transmission through prophetic individuals (e.g., Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and others) has a long history. This notion may have originated in a widespread belief in the existence of divinely written books that were transmitted through prophetic figures. An early belief about a heavenly or divine book containing both divine knowledge and decrees from God was believed to include wisdom, laws, a book of works, a book of life, the future plans of God, and the destinies of human beings. Traces of this belief can be seen in Ps. 139:15–16:

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. (NRSV, italics added.)

This is similar to Exod. 32:33, where the Lord says that those who have sinned will be blotted out of his book. Moses was also believed to have received, written down, and delivered the words and ordinances of God (Exod. 24:3; 34:4, 27) who was believed to be the author of the divine commandments (Exod. 34:1 and Deut. 4:13; 10:4). This early belief in the existence of heavenly books, or books of divine origin, does not appear to be far removed from the notion that God inspired prophets to write divinely received messages for