While in the second and third centuries early Christianity was engaged in its own exercise of self-definition and social formation over against Greco-Roman society, on the one hand, and (other) contemporary Judaisms, on the other, the nascent rabbinic movement was similarly engaged. The early rabbis (too) defined their movement’s character and authority (a) by promulgating a new and particular rendition of the core biblical narrative, (b) confirming for themselves a particular canon of biblical scriptures, (c) creating and promulgating within their circles their own idiomatic literary creations, for which they ultimately claimed the authority of revelation by reason of an alleged chain of tradition going back to Moses on Sinai, and on these bases (d) representing themselves to late-Roman Palestinian Jewish society and to the Palestinian Jewish Patriarchate as kind of occupational guild comprising the exclusive heirs of Mosaic authority.

From the perspective of the social-anthropology of knowledge, this paper tries to demonstrate that there is a socially constructed set of homologies among: (a) how rabbis re-conceived biblical history, (b) how they defined the canon, (c) how they perceived of the authority of their newly formed professional guild, and (d) what their formative documents, particularly the Mishnah, did. Understanding how these elements in early rabbinitic circles served to create a systemic whole of
mutually re-enforcing shared perceptions contributes a case study in the social-anthropology of “canonical refashioning.”

By canonical refashioning I refer to a process by which an authoritative tradition that serves a “canonical function”—that is, delimiting what and who is authoritative for whom—is continuously refashioned sometimes explicitly (for example, by redefining “what is in and what is out of a biblical collection,” as did the early Reformation with respect to the Church’s “Old Testament”), but more often implicitly. Indeed, part of the conceptual framework that underlies this paper is that empirically speaking, canonical refashioning, often implicitly achieved, is an essential aspect of a group or society opting for a canonical tradition as the formal basis for putative authoritative persons making putative authoritative claims. This being said, permit me in the next section to say more about this paper’s conceptual underpinnings.

2. **Definitional Issues**

Before proceeding it is worth starting on a common page as regards what we might mean when we use the term “canon.” One might start by noting that a community may have authoritative scriptures without having a canon. Indeed, the early Christian literature that ultimately came to be included in the New Testament was scriptural writing in

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