Timothy H. Lim


How did certain Jewish writings become canon? Or to put it in layman’s terms, how did certain Jewish texts become something more, something special, something even demarcated as holy? I state the obvious when I say that this is a fascinating, but immensely difficult and complex question. Indeed, for Timothy Lim, authoring _The Formation of the Jewish Canon_ led him to suffer sustained bouts of insomnia and anxiety (ix). As evidenced by his clear and dense yet readable presentation on this complicated subject, however, his anxiety and insomnia seems to have paid off. His work, composed of ten chapters with helpful summaries at the end of most of the chapters, presents an accessible, thoroughly researched account of what is known thus far about the canonization process of the Hebrew Bible as well as the various quandaries and issues that remain unresolved.

In particular, Lim’s work is centered on three main questions: 1) When did the canon of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament close? 2) What is the process underlying its formation? And 3) did all ancient Jews have a single canon or did various groups have their own? (p. 2) By focusing on these particular queries, Lim’s work attempts to add a “historical perspective. . . . to the public discussion of the canon” (p. 2).

Lim begins in the first chapter by looking at the variety of meanings of and concepts associated with the terms “canon” and “authoritative scripture,” which Lim carefully differentiates. Canon, according to Lim, refers to “the lists of biblical books,” of which there are numerous, while “authoritative scriptures” refers to “the collections of authoritative writings before the appearance of the first lists” (p. 4). He clarifies further that authoritative scriptures refers not to “a fixed list of books decided by an official body,” but texts that were accepted, utilized and recognized as divinely inspired by particular Jewish and Christian communities (p. 6).
He further outlines the criteria he uses to judge whether a text was viewed as authoritative. The main factor of authority seems to be that a text was deemed prophetic or inspired by God, and hence, “different from other kinds of writings” (p. 7). Though Lim does not delve into what might have led a text to be viewed as prophetic or divinely inspired in the first place, this feeling of authority is manifest by citations of the texts, either direct or indirect, in sources from different communities. Moreover, the authority of a particular text can be given credence or upheld by imperial authorities, such as the Persian government during the Achaemenid period.

The second chapter provides an overview of the scholarship on the emergence and closing of the Jewish canon. Of particular focus is the three-stage theory or the linear development of the canon, which states that the canon’s tripartite division of the canon—the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings—were closed in sequential order. Lim argues that though the division of the canon can “be seen as a clue to its development,” (p. 27), it is not clear which set of texts and what order are implied by the titles, “the Prophets” and “the Writings” (p. 34). Moreover, Lim argues that the Samaritan schism and the council of Yavneh, two events which function as the “two pillars of the three-stage theory,” (p. 34) fail to provide a clear and reliable understanding of how the canon developed or was formulated. Lim finishes the chapter with an examination of different references about the depositing of books at the Temple and finds that they do not indicate whether a text was canonized.

From the third chapter till the ninth, Lim closely analyzes various texts that might shed a light on the canonical process. He begins in the third chapter by examining the earliest canonical lists and notices in b. Baba Bathra 14a-15b, Josephus, 4 Ezra and Origen, among others. He notes that there is no agreement among these lists of the order or sectioning of the books of the canon. As such, Lim posits that, though the closing of the canon in Rabbinic Judaism likely occurred between 150 and 205 CE, this probably did not end all debates.

Lim next turns to a close analysis of Ezra 7:12-26 and Nehemiah 8-10 in chapter 4. He argues that though it is difficult to ascertain the nature of the “torah” that Ezra read aloud to the congregation in Neh 8:1, other parts of Nehemiah appear to indicate that Ezra-Nehemiah were familiar with six books, Genesis to Joshua, and likely called this collection of laws and narratives the “torah.”

Chapter 5 offers a full and extensive review of the Letter of Aristeas as a means by which to gain a fuller understanding of the Septuagint (LXX). After presenting an overview of issues related to authorship, genre, and dating of Aristeas, Lim closely analyzes this text as well as the writings of Philo and