

The Canon of the New Testament was intended by Metzger to be an introduction to the topic of canon which introduces the reader to both the historical evidence for the development of the NT canon and the questions and problems regarding its significance (p. v). Metzger begins his tome by sketching the development of the canon that he hopes to argue for in the rest of the book. This consists of (1) the existence of an accepted Jewish canon of Scripture, (2) the authority of the words of Jesus as preserved in oral tradition, (3) the apostolic interpretations of Jesus’s significance in the apostolic letters, (4) the circulation of various Christian writings, and the subsequent distinction between apostolic writings and later patristic literature, (5) the emergence of collections of authoritative writings such as the Gospels and the Epistles, and (6) the translation of these treasured writings into other languages.

Following the introduction, the next two chapters review the literature on the canon. Metzger discusses the renewed interest in canon raised by the Deists, as well as many of the other major issues that have been debated up to the time of his book, concluding with the works of scholars such as Ernst Käsemann, William R. Farmer, Brevard Childs, and Harry Y. Gamble.

Part two provides the historical evidence for the development of the canon of the NT. In chapter 3, Metzger works through the Apostolic Fathers and discusses which books of the NT were cited by them and what their views were regarding these books. Chapter 4 discusses events at the time of the early church that may have influenced the development of the canon such as the rise of Gnosticism, Marcion’s heresy, Montanism, and persecution. Chapter 5 traces the evidence for the development of the canon in the following centuries in the East, while chapter 6 examines the developments in the West. Metzger concludes that during this period, the recognized Scripture has a firmly established center (the Gospels and epistles of Paul) without a clearly defined periphery (Revelation and the General Epistles are not all accepted everywhere; see p. 113).

Chapter 7 examines the various apocryphal books that were used for a time as Scripture in some places, while chapter 8 examines in detail the Muratorian Canon and Eusebius’s discussion of the status of the various NT books in his Ecclesiastical History. Metzger then examines the attempts to close the canon in the East (Chapter 9) and West (Chapter 10), and concludes that “the Latin Church had, in general, a stronger feeling than the Greek for the necessity of making a sharp delineation with regard to the canon” (p. 229). He also covers later developments such as the Reformation and Council of Trent.
Part 3 is a short but helpful discussion of the various problems related to the canon. Chapter 11 deals with problems related to the early church, such as the question of the criteria for canonicity, the relationship between the rule of faith and the development of the canon, and the problems of the plurality of the Gospels and the particularity of the Pauline Epistles. Chapter 12 discusses issues related to modern discussions, such as which form of the text is canonical, whether the canon is open or closed today, the idea of a canon within a canon, and whether the books of the NT are authoritative in themselves or receive authority externally from the church. The book concludes with various appendices.

It is not for nothing that Metzger is well respected in the field of NT. This book is evenhanded and scholarly in tone, and balances scholarship and evangelical piety. I appreciated the value he placed on the theological diversity of Scripture (p. 281–2), as well as the insight that the study of the canon contains both historical and theological elements (p. 284).

There are a few weaknesses worth mentioning. First, the argument that the term “canonical” ought to be applied to both the text and all variants that emerged during the apostolic age (p. 269–270) seems a little weak. Those who believe that the ideal of textual criticism is to reconstruct the “original text” might rightly ask why the canon and the aim of textual criticism should be different. It seems unclear why we ought to accept (for example) the long ending of Mark if we believe that it is not original to the text (p. 270). A second problem is his acceptance of the existence of pseudepigrapha in the canon (p. 284). From a historical point of view, it is doubtful whether books that were known to be pseudepigraphic would have been accepted by the church as Scripture.

Despite these problems, this book is still an extremely helpful and evenhanded introduction to the canon. It is rightly considered a standard in the study of the NT canon, and provides a good entry into the discussion (though one will have to get up to date on recent literature elsewhere since the books is 30 years old). Even if one disagrees with the particular conclusions that Metzger offers, this book introduces the reader to (1) the scope of canon studies, (2) the modern context of canon studies, (3) the historical information with which one must reckon, and (4) numerous suggestions regarding the significance of the issues being addressed. Anyone who works with the NT should be familiar with this resource.