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Canons at War

"Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World." Edited by Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, Brill Academic Publishers, 283 pages, $95.

Yaacov Shavit
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In the 19th century, it was very popular to say that the Bible was the book of the Jewish people just as Homer's epic was the book of the Greeks. The proponents of that approach believed that the title "People of the Book" could be applied not just to the Jews and Christians, but also to the Greeks, and that the Bible and the Homeric epic – despite the vast difference between the two – were the two fundamental books of culture (namely, that of the West). This approach was based on the view that "secular literature," and not just religious books, could be considered a "canon," and that both types of literature functioned together as the source and foundation of a Weltanschauung, of laws, of rules of behavior and of visions of the past, and as the authority, inspiration, model and example for future generations. The proponents of this approach consider the most cogent proof of its validity to be the fact that, after these "canons" are sealed, they are opened up in order to incorporate additions, expansions and commentary of various kinds.

It is therefore no wonder that the title of this collection of essays includes both the Bible and Homer. However, in addition to offering this fascinating view of the Bible and Homer, this collection teaches us that there have been other "Peoples of the Book" or "text communities" that have had their own unique "books" – both in the sense of a "canon" and in the sense of "religious books." Margalit Finkelberg suggests "formative books" as an appropriate term to describe these books. She believes that this general term could overcome the difficulties involved when attempts are made to distinguish between religious books and secular literature. The term can be applied to books that have shaped the world of a given public and which have determined its identity.

The first to use the word "canon" was apparently Athanesius, patriarch of Alexandria, who lived during the fourth century. He was referring to the list of books that the Church had declared to be scriptures (previously, "canon" was defined as a list of beliefs incumbent upon all devout persons). The definition of a select number of works from the ancient world's secular literature as a canon seems to have first appeared only in the 18th century. Since that time, there has been a frequent blurring of the distinction between, on the one hand, a canon of scriptures and a philosophical or literary canon, which includes the "classical" works of a given culture. In any event, there is a striking similarity between the religious and secular contexts regarding the process of selection, determination of the list of works and the granting of canonical status. The process of canonization is the expression and central revelation of, on the one hand, the history of a religion and a culture, and, on the other, the struggles between them for control, authority and representation.

Wide horizons

The present collection of essays, which is the fruit of discussions held by an international research group that convened at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute for Advanced Studies, appears against the backdrop of

oppressive center of authority – Eurocentrism, racism and "maleness" – whose power derives from its canonical authority. This "Battle of the Books" – to use the title of one of Jonathan Swift's works – is based on the assumption that a change in the canon is, on the one hand, a necessary condition for the introduction of change in the hegemonic system in the world of ideas and values, and, on the other hand, a central expression of that change.

In any case it is obvious that considerable criticism will be generated by any attempt to establish a canon, as Harold Bloom tries to do in his "Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages" (1994) or, as it has been done in the Jewish world, through the selection of works to be included in the canon and thereafter, through the creation of the "Jewish bookshelf."

This scholarly collection, with its wide horizons, demonstrates that the struggle for the canon was an integral part of the cultures of the ancient world, from Rome to China, and that, in each case, the canonical corpus – until it was sealed – was a dynamic system that was open to struggles and changes. The essays in this volume offer a comparative discussion of, on the one hand, the interests and processes that shape a canon and, on the other hand, the identification of the mechanisms and people behind its creation.

The history of canonization has two aspects: The first is the process of canonization and its goals; the second the manner in which the book, list

canonical works become a reference point for the literature that they inspire and which can be seen as derivatives of those works. The first process is connected, in many cases, to a transition from an oral literature to a written one; in some cases, to the integration of a number of books into a single book, to a decision on the authentic and certified version and, finally, to the sealing of the canon.

The second aspect involves the struggles between various groups and outlooks in each of the different religious and cultural systems concerning the granting of canonical status. In some instances, in reaction to the hegemony of a canon that represents the mainstream view, "heretical" groups create their own alternative canon. Moreover, bestowing canonical status on a book or on a corpus of books that expresses the unification processes of religion and culture, does not necessarily negate the existence of other books that have not been canonized.

Every case presented in the various essays contributes to a clarification of the similarities and differences between that case and the others. Moreover, each case enables one, on the one hand, to understand why some canons cross cultural barriers while others have remained within their specific cultural context, and, on the other hand, to answer the question of what came first: the canon's creation or the worldview that a canon must be created through the selection of texts.

Ancient `multiculturalism'

Stephen B. Chapman analyses in his essay the various theories that attempt to determine both the stages in the creation of the biblical canon and the reasons and circumstances that granted canonical status to individual books and then to the entire biblical corpus (their "physical" incorporation in a single "book" took place much later, in the 10th century). According to the traditional Jewish view, the Bible was sealed in Yavneh, in the year 90 and it was only then that it received canonical status as a body of scriptures. In Chapman's opinion, the Pentateuch received the status of a scripture (which was later extended to other books) i   tion to the central status that early

Nevertheless, the difference between the Bible as a scripture and the Homeric epic as a canon is deep and substantive. Furthermore, they have a different status: Greek and Hellenistic culture had many books but no single canonized work, writes Robert Lamberton in his essay on the corpus of neo-Platonic books. Furthermore, among the various groups in this multivariegated culture, a unique status was granted to different books. The Homeric epic, which was the target of harsh criticism, enjoyed preferred status among the proponents of the neo-Platonist school (and, through that school, among the Church Fathers) as a source of wisdom. In contrast, there were hardly any controversies over the status of the Bible among either Jewish or Christian theologians.

Shaul Shaked's fascinating article deals with the different nature of the process in which the Zarathustrian canon (the Avesta) was shaped and the process of the formation of the Zoroastrian literature that was composed at a later stage in the Pahlavi language. The process was lengthy, extending over approximately 1,500 years, and its history, during a large part of this time frame, is a mystery. Apparently, this canon was written down only in the sixth century B.C.E. and it did not have the nature of a "sealed" canon, in which nothing can be altered in deference to its antiquity. Instead, during this lengthy period of time, the canon was supplemented and expanded, and elements of external sources were borrowed. Other canons underwent a similar process but, in the Persian case, borrowings from external sources were neither overlooked nor denied. At the same time, the Zoroastrian canon (which must be distinguished from other ideas and motifs that had an immense impact beyond the boundaries of Persian culture) never broke through Iran's borders.

Although worship of the Iranian god, Mithra, was widespread throughout the Roman Empire, reaching its height in the third century, it was superceded by Christianity. The book's coeditor, Guy G. Stroumsa, believes that Christianity's victory over the "Oriental religions" stemmed from the fact that the Mithraic religion, unlike Christianity, did not have its own "book." It did not have a popularly r   d holy book in the form of a codex.

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scroll by a book, in the form of flat sheets of papyrus or parchment, written on both sides and sewed up within a binding – had a decisive impact on the canon's success. In other words, the Christian gospel did not only have a revolutionary content; it also gave rise to a "community of readers" that had a new character. The Jewish response to this new, competing phenomenon was to prevent the oral Torah, the Talmud, from being written down in order to preserve the sacred status of the Torah and keep it from falling into the hands of heretics.

The final essay in the collection is by Andrew Plaks, who discusses the creation of the canon of the Confucian texts, which lack any religious dimension whatsoever and which became the foundation of Chinese culture. The article suggests an illumination that can be derived from the way the Far East looks at the Near East. Plaks believes that the common denominator that writers of this collection seek to find within the various canons of the ancient Near East is too narrow. The points of similarity are not necessarily a canon's status and content, but rather the processes of its creation, its formation and its reception.

In an atmosphere of opinions where "multiculturalism" and "anti-canonism" sometimes express dogmatism, generalizations and narrow-mindedness, rather than pluralism and tolerance, it is important to learn that the culture of the ancient world was no less "multicultural" – and perhaps even more so – than the modern one, and that debates over a society's canon are not a new phenomenon. This collection, only some of whose essays have been mentioned here, is not only a book that will interest scholars studying the phenomenon of canonization. It is also a contribution whose importance cannot be underestimated in the ongoing debate on canons.

Prof. Yaacov Shavit teaches in Tel Aviv University's Department of Jewish History. His book, "The War of the Tablets: The Defense of the Bible in the 19th Century and the Babel–Bibel Controversy" has recently been published by Am Oved.

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