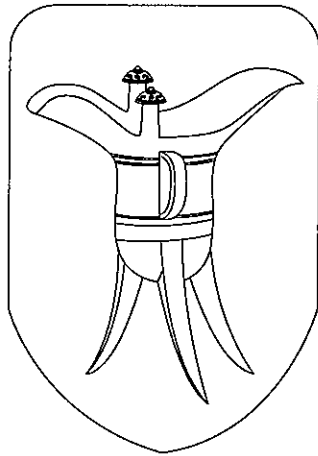


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Anne CHENG

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Damien MORIER-GENOUD



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CANON AND AUTHORITY: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Thomas RÖMER

I would like to offer a brief reaction to the stimulating papers of this volume, by dealing with the following points:

- the question of canonization and the problem of the historicity of the authoritative founders of the document;
- the canonical text and its reception;
- parallels and differences in content and style.

My point of comparison will be the Hebrew Bible, the so-called Old Testament,¹ and I will not deal with the Christian Bible, the canonization of which has a rather different context.²

The Formation of a Canonical Text and its Authority

This topic allows, of course, many reactions from the field of biblical scholarship. First of all, I would like to recall that the traditional date given for Confucius (551–479 BCE) coincides with the time of the promulgation of the Torah, the Pentateuch, which is the oldest “canonical” part of the Hebrew Bible. This observation has given rise to the idea that the sixth century was “a creative epoch of the first order in the history of Israel. This

¹ Even if the term “Old Testament” is commonly used, I prefer to avoid it for a number of reasons. First of all, it is a Christian, and therefore ideological, term. Secondly, it is not a univocal expression, since the Catholic Old Testament, contrary to the Protestant Old Testament, contains books from the Greek Bible, the Septuagint. The term “Hebrew Bible” is more neutral, since it is not used in religious contexts.

² The major difference between Judaism and Christianity lies in the fact that Judaism has never been (at least until 1948, and with the possible exception of the time of the Hasmoneans) a state religion. The canonization of the New Testament, added to the Greek Bible, happened in the context of the rise of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, while the compilation of the Pentateuch took place in the Persian period. Another difference lies in the fact that in Judaism the three parts of the Hebrew Bible do not have the same religious importance. The Torah (the Pentateuch) is the real “canonical document,” whereas the Prophets and the Writings must be related in one way or another to the Torah.

century may claim also Zoroaster, Confucius and the Buddha [...] this century was more than a creative epoch in Israel's history. It was a creative epoch in the history of the world."³ I cannot take up the discussion about the existence of an "axial age."⁴ It is, however, interesting to note this chronological proximity between the Torah and Confucius. One could indeed try to find parallels between the canonization of ancient Hebrew and Confucian literature, as has recently been undertaken by Terje Stordalen, who insisted on the importance of scribes in the establishment of the biblical and the Confucian canon.⁵ It is certainly true, as argued by Stordalen, that both canons served educational purposes,⁶ but this also applies to many other "canons" in the world.⁷ I will restrict my comments to possible parallels between the Hebrew Bible and the evolution and formation of the *Great Learning*.

Later Jewish and Christian tradition has claimed that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, which was, under the Persians, reinforced and canonized by Ezra. Historically this view does not hold.⁸ It was very interesting for me to learn, particularly from the communication of Professor Lee, that the attribution of the canonical part of the *Great Learning* to Confucius does not correspond to historical reality either, even if the historicity of Confucius is certainly much more established than that of Moses. Even if the latter was a historical figure from the twelfth century BCE, he does not

³ D. Winton Thomas, "The Sixth Century BC: A Creative Epoch in the History of Israel," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, n° 6, 1961, p. 33-46. This article is inspired by Karl Jasper's idea of an "Achszeit." See Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Zürich, Artemis Verlag, 1949 (English translation: *The Origin and Goal of History*, Westport, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1976).

⁴ For more details see Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilisations*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1986. For a critique of the concept, see Iain Provan, *Convenient Myths: The Axial Age, Dark Green Religion, and the World That Never Was*, Waco, Baylor University Press, 2013.

⁵ Terje Stordalen, "The Canonization of Ancient Hebrew and Confucian Literature," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, n° 32, 2007, p. 3-22.

⁶ For the Hebrew Bible, this is particularly true for the *Ketubim*, which are in many ways comparable to Greek educational canons. See below.

⁷ Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Homer, the Bible and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World*, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 2, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2003.

⁸ An overview of the critical research on the Pentateuch since the eighteenth century can be found in Albert de Pury and Thomas Römer, "Le Pentateuque en question: position du problème et brève histoire de la recherche," in Albert de Pury and Thomas Römer (eds.), *Le Pentateuque en question*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2002 (2nd ed.), p. 9-80.

have much to do with the “literary Moses” as depicted in the Hebrew Bible.⁹ I also found very stimulating Professor Lee’s demonstration that the attribution of the *Great Learning* to Confucius likewise only happened at a very late stage, possibly in the twelfth century CE. The same applies to the Pentateuch. The idea that it was written by Moses was based on the fact that in the Pentateuch some passages are said to have been written down by Moses (Exod 24:4; 34:27; Deut 31:9, 24, etc.¹⁰), an idea that led in the *Prophets* and the *Writings* to the expression “*torat moshe*” (the teaching¹¹ of Moses),¹² leading to the hypothesis of Mosaic authorship no earlier than about five centuries after its promulgation.¹³ The need to place a foundational document under the authority of a major figure of the past was apparently not inherent to its initial writing, but could happen centuries later.

The Broadening of a Canonical Text, or a Canonical Text and its Reception

Another possible point of comparison between the *Great Learning* and the Hebrew Bible is the growing of the text. The Torah was, for two or three centuries, regarded as the only authoritative text of nascent Judaism, but was then complemented by the addition of the *Nebiim*, the prophetic books,¹⁴ which provided the narrations and the laws of the Pentateuch with

⁹ Even if the historicity of Moses is rejected by some scholars, there are some hints in the biblical tradition of the memory of a leader of a small group of “Hebrews” around the end of the twelfth century BCE; see Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1997; Thomas Römer, *Moïse: “Lui que Yahvé a connu face à face,”* Paris, Gallimard, 2002.

¹⁰ In other passages it is Yhwh himself who writes down laws, as the Decalogue, cf. Deut 31:18.

¹¹ “Torah” is generally translated as “Law”, due to the Greek rendering *nomos*. The Hebrew root *y-r-h* expresses more the idea of teaching and instruction.

¹² See Josh 8:31-32, 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 14:6, 23:25; Mal 3:22; Dan 9:1, 13; Ezr 3:2, 7:6; Neh 8:1; 2 Chr 23:18, 30:16. Most of these texts refer to “as it is written in the teaching of Moses,” which is either the book of Deuteronomy, or in most cases the Pentateuch.

¹³ It is not clear when exactly this idea arose. The suggestion that the entire Pentateuch was written by Moses is not attested in the Hebrew Bible. It appears in writings from the first century BCE, in New Testament texts and in Jewish writers from the same time, like Philo and Josephus. The Talmud clearly expresses the idea, although it also contains other ideas about the origin of the Torah, as shown by Robert J. Thompson, *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism since Graf*, *Vetus Testamentum*, Supplements 19, Leiden, Brill, 1970, p. 1-12.

¹⁴ There is, of course, much debate, as to when this happened, and some scholars argue that the Law and the Prophets had, from the beginning, the same authority (see in this sense Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon For-*

an eschatological perspective. As a reaction to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and the rise of Christianity, which was initially a Jewish sect, Jewish authorities decided to fix a tripartite canon by adding the *Ketubim*, the Writings, which present an anthology and incorporate the so-called wisdom literature.¹⁵ These modifications took place in the course of the second century CE.

The arguments brought forward by Professors Feuillas and Darrobers, underlining the fact that the new “canonical” edition of the *Great Learning* by Zhu Xi was at least partially, but perhaps mainly, a reaction against the growing importance of Buddhism and Taoism, are of great interest. But at the same time, the new canon integrated elements from these traditions. The same holds true for the different stages of the development of the Jewish canon, which are also partially linked to the idea of separation from other ideologies like the Persian dualism or the Hellenistic worldview, even though these also enter into the canon. This development starts with the pre-canonical edition of the book of Deuteronomy which, despite being edited in order to counter Assyrian political and ideological domination, is constructed in the same way as Assyrian loyalty oaths. Even the Deuteronomistic language is adopted from that used in Assyrian treaties.¹⁶

I would also like to briefly comment the distinction between Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. This distinction offers an interesting parallel to the founding documents of Judaism. Let us compare the Torah or the Bible to Confucianism, and the Talmud, which contains rabbinic discussions and interpretations of the Torah, to Neo-Confucianism. Of course the development of both discourses is complex, and one may be skeptical about this kind of comparison. The main difference between both corpora probably resides in the fact that the Tanak, the Hebrew Bible, had received at this

mation [Forschungen zum Alten Testament 27, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2000], who argues that the separation of the books reaching from Genesis to Malachi was made at a very late stage). But it seems much more plausible to understand the edition of the *Nebiim*, which must have happened at the end of the second century BCE, as an attempt to control prophecy and to provide a supplement to the Pentateuch. For further details, see Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of Hebrew Scriptures*, Library of Ancient Israel, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

¹⁵ Albert de Pury, “The Ketubim, a Canon within the Biblical Canon,” in Philip S. Alexander and Jean-Daniel Kaestli (eds.), *The Canon of Scripture in Jewish and Christian Tradition. Le canon des Écritures dans les traditions juive et chrétienne*; Publications de l’Institut romand des sciences bibliques 4, Lausanne, Éditions du Zèbre, 2007, p. 41-56.

¹⁶ Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction*, London, New York, T & T Clark, Continuum, 2005, p. 73-90.

time a textual form (the Masoretic one) that could no longer be altered,¹⁷ whereas the Confucian canon continued to show great variability.¹⁸ Zhu Xi's attempts to offer a commentary to Confucian teaching correspond in a way to the efforts of rabbis to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the Torah, so to ensure that ritual and legal prescriptions could be observed in different historical and sociological contexts. Even if, theoretically, the Torah is considered to be the foundation of Judaism (the Torah is read ritually in synagogues), the real authority in Jewish life (for those who are religious Jews) is the Talmud, which is the result of classical Jewish learning through Late Antiquity and the Geonic period and gained its authoritative status in the Middle Ages. The constitution of the Talmud reflects a long history that started with the rabbinic distinction between a written Torah and an oral Torah, which Moses was supposed to have received on Mount Sinai when God revealed the Law to him.¹⁹

In the Middle Ages, the oral Torah (the rabbinic commentaries) was put down in writing and ended up as the Talmud, which became the main text of orthodox Judaism, a status that it still enjoys to the present day. Interestingly, the Talmud is the result of a merging of various different commentaries and ideas about the way to understand the Mosaic Laws.²⁰ These differences might be compared to what Guillaume Dutournier characterized as the two different ways in which Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan understood the *Great Learning*.

Finally, I would like to conclude this point by referring to a topic that was raised by Stéphane Feuillas in his introduction; that is, the debate about the understanding and interpretation of the main themes of the *Great Learning*, which still remain controversial today. Undoubtedly, the same holds true with regard to the Torah and the Talmud. The text and the different ways in which it was received are often so intermingled that it is difficult to undertake what Feuillas calls a "neutral interpretation," if such a thing is ever possible.

¹⁷ Except the vocalization, which did not become standardized before the Middle Ages. See Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, Assen, Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1992, p. 44-49.

¹⁸ Julia Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship in China: The Heart of Chinese Wisdom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 139-153.

¹⁹ David Charles Kraemer, *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.

²⁰ As Kraemer puts it: "Though other religious systems understand that revelation can yield alternative interpretations, they generally do not translate that fundamental fact into a doctrinal expression... The Bavli, in contrast, makes such alternatives a programmatic expression of its doctrine" (*The Mind of the Talmud*, *op. cit.*, p. 188).

Parallels and Differences

The *Great Learning* and the Bible have influenced two major civilizations and continue to do so today. However, there are, of course, major differences between the two documents.

First of all, the *Great Learning* and its commentary are considerably shorter than the Torah or the Hebrew Bible.²¹ The Bible is a "religious" document, which is not the case for the *Great Learning*, the aim of which was to instruct rulers on how to lead their country. The Jewish Bible, contrary to the Christian Bible, never served such a purpose²² (even if nowadays some Jewish fundamentalists are keen to attribute such a role to it), although some of its texts do have educational functions. The propositions of the *Great Learning* are concerned with the political and material world, as pointed out by Professor Darrobers, whereas the Bible contains teachings which aim first and foremost to foster the identity of Judaism.

The books in the Bible that come closest to the *Great Learning* are the wisdom books and especially the book of Proverbs. There are stylistic parallels between the *Great Learning* and wisdom literature with regard to the use of anadiplosis and anaphors, which occur in some Psalms (Ps 150:1-5; 121:1-2), in the book of Proverbs (Prov 30:11-14), and in other texts.

The idea that one has to scrutinize all things in order to acquire knowledge is a central theme of the book of Proverbs. Some proverbs that deal with the king are also closely related to the *Great Learning*. For instance, "A king brings stability to a land by justice but one who exacts tribute tears it down" (29:14) or "Loyalty and truth preserve a king" (20:28) come quite close to the ideas of the *Great Learning*. But these similarities would probably be common to most wisdom traditions concerning a king's good behavior.

²¹ As the anonymous reviewer kindly pointed out in commenting on this paper, which of course is written by a non-specialist regarding the *Great Learning*, one should also take into consideration that there is a very important literature of commentaries about this short text.

²² The view of kingship in the Hebrew Bible is ambiguous. Most parts of it were written after the loss of political autonomy. Some kings are depicted in a positive way (David, Josiah), while others are characterized ambiguously (Solomon) and most negatively. The book of Proverbs, however, contains some passages about the king (see below) that probably stem from the royal court and originated at the time of the Judean monarchy. See Roger Norman Whybray, "The Sage in the Israelite Royal Court," in John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (eds.), *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1990, p. 133-139. Some later texts express the hope of the coming of an ideal ruler or a new David, which gave rise to messianism.

Two Questions to Conclude

It would be very interesting to explore the relationship between the written text and orality. For some parts of the Bible it seems clear that the written text is the result of oral transmission,²³ but what about the *Great Learning*? Some stylistic features seem to indicate that the text stems from oral teaching or that it was conceived for this purpose. Or were they meant to be learnt by heart? The relationship between the written text and its oral appropriation is of major importance for all “canons.”

²³ Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*, Library of Ancient Israel, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996; David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.