

Canonicity and Social Canons in the Pre-Modern Levant

The making of symbolic hegemony – and the case of early Hebrew Scriptures

The project *Local Dynamics of Globalization in the Pre-Modern Levant*¹ aims to understand the social dynamics that occur when globalising templates come to compete with local habits and traditions over cultural space in given locations of the pre-modern Inner Mediterranean. In humanist and social science discourse one way to regard processes initiated by such encounters would be to see them as struggles between competing social canons. Each of the involved canonical systems would be seen to have their canonical *collection* (of habits, rules, technology, text, images, etc.). Each collection was claimed to be in some sense *superb* (authoritative, formative, etc.) by some *social group* (which would in turn, have specific characteristics).² Taking empirically based reflection into an analysis of long gone canons generates challenges. One of them is to identify an analytical universe that would facilitate historical reflection. Another is to identify a source record that would credibly offer materials for analysis. In this workshop we propose to explore the suitability of Pierre Bourdieu's theory for this purpose. And we propose to study early Hebrew scriptural canonization as our case. Our idea is that Bourdieu's theory of social validation will have a bearing for understanding globalising processes in general in the pre-modern Levant (and indeed beyond), and we hope that applying this perspective to early Hebrew canonization may yield learning for other LDG fields as well.

The biblical and other canons

Scholarship on early Hebrew canonization has conventionally ascribed immense importance to the question of the *form* of the biblical text and collection, often trying to identify the point where the biblical text is thought to have been stabilised and the collection was being closed; the point where users of the text started producing separate commentary instead of in-text glosses.³ In this paradigm canonicity is implicitly understood as a *function of the form of the collection*. It is also tacitly assumed that such a frozen status would be what is reflected in

1 <http://www.stordalen.info/LDG/Home.html>

2 On such a way of defining canon and canonicity, which differs from the conventional format in biblical studies, see Stordalen 2007, 4-8; Stordalen 2012, 16-20.

3 A collection of examples are found in McDonald and Sanders 2002, including an attempt at defining the concept: Ulrich 2002. The same sense occurs in Carr 2011, cf. 178f; van der Toorn 2007, 233ff (under the heading: 'Constructing the Canon: The Closure of the Hebrew Bible').

citation practices and so-called citation formulae across early Jewish literature.⁴

Simultaneously, however, recent study clearly shows that it is the period *prior* to such a petrification of the scriptures which is the historically and ideologically most interesting.⁵

Accordingly, recent study of the early Hebrew canon begins to emphasise the importance of the social contexts in which various books and collections of the current Hebrew Bible emerged as canonical.⁶

Rarely noticed among biblical scholars, comparative research on scriptural and oral canons across the world has documented that most pre-modern religious canons did *not* develop closed collections with stabilised texts.⁷ Starting from this insight, Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued that canonicity is best explored not as a quality residing in the scriptural collection as such, but rather as a human activity: *scripture is something groups do*.⁸ He thought the paradigm of a rigidly fixed holy text as the sole acceptable canon is not much older than the Quran.⁹ We might conjecture that this paradigm is at least as old as the Masoretic Tanak (some time after 400 CE.), but it seems not to be positively attested as an effective social norm much earlier than that. (And even after becoming a holy, unchangeable, text, Tanak was not the only Jewish *canon*.) So, Jewish canons prior to the triumph of the Masoretic paradigm could have had types of canonicity more similar to those of, say, buddhism or Taoism. This would entail that the books we now assume to have been (on their way to becoming) classical or canonical at the time, could well have been situated in a larger social canonical discourse. That discourse would have employed a number of media, some of which would have been oral, others perhaps taking their primary expression in cultural habits of various sorts.¹⁰

It seems clear that the canonical paradigm reflected in the surviving early Hebrew scriptures must have been different from the one in the Masoretic bible: several different versions of ‘biblical’ books were current in the texts from the Judaean Desert (ca. 200 BCE. to 150 CE.).¹¹ The fact that certain early Hebrew scriptures did exercise some sort of authority or influence is clear in the hugely widespread practice of ‘biblical’ texts alluding to other such texts, and of scribes continuously editing and updating what became biblical texts. But we need to consider that these early ‘scriptural canons’ (of sorts) were not sole sources of

4 For representative discussion of this kind of material, see still Leiman 1976; Beckwith 1985.

5 This is a main point in Carr 2011.

6 See Edelman 2014, esp. the introductory chapter.

7 See for instance Levering 1989; Tworuschka 2000.

8 Smith 1993, esp. 18-20.

9 Smith 1993, chs. 3 and 4.

10 For a window into one such medium, namely music, see Stordalen 2013.

11 Segal 2007, 6: “the expression “the biblical text,” [...] is a misnomer. There was no single version of the Bible that one could point to as the biblical text, but rather many different texts.

authority; they were embedded in a world whose symbolic universe was likely dominated by orality and habit – just like scribes were never only scribes but also sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, dwellers, food consumers, users of clothing, etc. Before exploring the canonical implications of early Hebrew texts, biblical scholars need to form some opinion about how such texts and their scribes (and any additional users) may have been situated in a larger web of social values and validation practices. We need a clearer understanding of social conditions for the production of *canonicity* in early Hebrew communities. We also need a clearer understanding of possible distinctions and interaction between scriptural and other social canons. The production of social values and canonicity is a frame for addressing the issue of canonical scriptures. This opens the question of the format of early Hebrew canons in entirely new ways, with practice and orality as important factors.

A historical social science perspective

At first sight, there is hardly enough historical evidence for biblical scholars to start answering questions like those above. This might change if we consider the available evidence through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theories of practice, of rules, social fields, and symbolic capital. While Bourdieu is not generally recognised by biblical scholars as a student of canonicity, a core element of his *oeuvre* was an attempt at interpreting and codifying how social processes validate cultural products, which may then acquire symbolic significance and power. In his analytical universe there are available models and paradigms for the interaction between social symbolizations, their curators, and their users in the relevant social field(s).¹² Relying on this universe, scholars like John Guillory have already offered an interpretation and critique of modern canonising practices.¹³

We propose that biblical scholars could attempt a similar interpretation of the Hebrew material, trying to locate habit, oral practices, and scriptural productions in different, perhaps adjacent, social fields. (Such social fields would, of course, have to be established as historically plausible). Their respective symbolisations would need to be considered as taking or not taking part in the same 'economy'. That 'economy' would then be the dynamic ascribing value (or not ascribing value) to the various symbolizations. To the historian, however, the problem is that only the written form of such cultural capital survived, which has been a major obstacle for interpretation. Attempting a reconstruction along these lines, one would therefore possibly have to imagine different social fields and their political and cultural interplay. If successful, that might generate a new understanding of early Hebrew

12 The most relevant of Bourdieu's texts are available in Bourdieu 1990, esp Book 1; Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu 1993, esp. part 1.

13 Guillory 1993.

(scriptural and other) canonization.

Such a new understanding should, we hope, have the potential to describe general dynamics occurring in the pre-modern Levant when competing cultural patterns, organised around distinct social symbolisations, came to interact. We hope to use this perception to start understanding just how individual agents might have construed these ‘competing’ canons, and perhaps adopted or adapted them. This would help identify and analyse the micro arenas in which competing canons had to be negotiated. It should also offer a perspective on the macro arena in which the struggle between competing canonical symbolisations was put on. All this should contribute to forming an interpretive framework for the LDG project.

The workshop

All presenters in the workshop are asked to offer some reflection on conditions for or practices of the production of social canonicity and canons, each expert according to her or his field of speciality. Scholars working with historical material are asked to consider aspects of Bourdieu's social theory in their historical reflection. Scholars working with social science theory are asked to consider challenges of historical investigation in their presentation of relevant social theory. In addition, all contributors are asked to consider these goals:

- to explore what aspects of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory might be relevant to the investigation of the making and working of social canons in the pre-Modern Levant
- to start formulating, as a historical case study, a corresponding discussion of early Hebrew canonicity and canonization
- to explore how a study of early Hebrew canonization could contribute to establishing interpretive patterns for the LDG project and for individual LDG studies

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