

Religion and Normativity  
The Discursive Fight  
over Religious Texts  
in Antiquity

*Edited by Anders-Christian Jacobsen*

THE DISCURSIVE FIGHT OVER  
RELIGIOUS TEXTS IN ANTIQUITY

RELIGION AND NORMATIVITY  
VOLUME 1

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*å e discursive fight over religious texts in antiquity*

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## P r e f a c e

In 2005 the faculty of Theology, Aarhus University, chose as its research priority area *Religion and normativity*. This research priority area builds on existing research on topics covered by the faculty's strengths, and is divided into three themes:

Theme 1: The discursive fight over religious texts

Theme 2: Bible and literature – receptions and transformations of the Bible

Theme 3: Religion, politics, and law.

The research priority area has contributed to a deeper understanding of the role played by religion in defining past and present cultures and societies. Its participants have compared Judaism, Christianity, Islam and antique religions in the light of exegetical, historical and systematic perspectives. In a contemporary context, they have explored whether religion is still normative.

The result of their research is presented in a three-volume work entitled:

*The discursive fight over religious texts in antiquity, Religion and normativity, Vol. 1*, ed. by Anders-Christian Jacobsen.

*Receptions and transformations of the Bible, Religion and normativity, Vol. 2*, ed. by Kirsten Nielsen,

*Religion, politics, and law, Religion and normativity, Vol. 3*, ed. by Peter Lodberg.

The three editors wish to express their sincere thanks to the participants in the research area for many stimulating discussions during the research period, and for their contributions to these three volumes.

The faculty of Theology, Aarhus University, has provided excellent working conditions and financial support, for which we are most grateful.

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*Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Peter Lodberg, Kirsten Nielsen  
Aarhus, April, 2009*



## INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in the preface, in this book a group of scholars from (or with strong connections to) the Faculty of Theology at Aarhus University, Denmark present some of the results of a research project named 'The discursive fight over religious texts in antiquity'. This project has been running since the beginning of 2007. Before that the same group of scholars (more or less) conducted another project entitled 'Critique and Apologetics – Jews, Christians and Pagans in antiquity'. These projects have been conducted under the framework of a research seminar with the title 'Antiquity and Christianity' which was opened in 1999. This book thus provides a taste of the research in the field of 'Antiquity and Christianity' which has now been conducted in organised form at the Faculty of Theology in Aarhus over the past ten years.

The project 'The discursive fight over religious texts in antiquity', which is mirrored in this book, has focused on the factors that played a role in the development of a normative Christian corpus of scripture, and Christianity's response to various interpretations of this canonical corpus. Christianity developed from being a charismatic movement to becoming institutionally more organised. The close relationship between Judaism and Christianity changed, and Christianity manifested itself as a separate religion. The development of a number of alternative interpretations of Christianity also generated a demand for an authoritative collection of texts, binding doctrines etc.

This institutionalisation and a variety of more anonymous processes have influenced the canon of Christian scriptures. Many texts were already used at church services and in teaching, which also contributed to the formation of the Christian canon. Another characteristic feature is that religious groups have consolidated their identity and thus distanced themselves from other religious and social groups by favouring certain collections of texts. Some texts were considered to have a greater degree of truth than others. This meant that certain texts were perceived as generating the norms and values for the religious group's ethics and world view. Eventually, the development of liturgical uses of the texts and the social process of using them to form identities meant that these texts contributed to the shaping of the criteria that legitimised their own normative status.

This development included a shift from oral to written tradition. Written narrative cannot be adjusted to the same extent as oral narrative to meet the expectations of its audience, and this tends to cause dissonance between the values and views of ancient texts and the values and views of readers in a subsequent age. To overcome this disagreement and to justify the normative role of the text, it became necessary to develop special interpretation strategies.

In particular three factors which influenced these processes should be mentioned:

1) Christianity's relation to Judaism:

How did the relationship between ancient Christianity and Judaism affect the Christians' perception of biblical texts and their interpretation? How did the Jewish canonisation of certain texts and the Jewish debate about which texts belonged to this canon influence the Christian debate? How did the fact that Christians were also using scriptures of Jewish origin influence the formation of a canon of Christian writings? The contributions of Anders Klostergaard Petersen, Else K. Holt, Bart Vanden Auweele and Jörg Ulrich address these questions in different ways.

2) Christianity's relation to ancient Greco-Roman culture:

How did the relation to Greco-Roman culture in general contribute to the formation of a Christian literature, and to what extent was this literature shaped by an idea of Christian written tradition as an alternative basis for a new culture? How have the ancient Greco-Roman texts affected Christianity? These issues include the use of both Greek philosophy and Greek mythology and iconography. The contributions of Jesper Hyldahl, Karla Pollmann, Gitte Lønstrup and Anders-Christian Jacobsen discuss these questions, among other things.

3) Christianity's development towards orthodoxy:

In the first stage of the Christian era (1st-3rd centuries) the conflict between the church's main-stream and heterodox interpretations (e.g. Montanism and Gnostic currents) was due to disagreement about the fixation of the scripture and its canonical status and interpretation. The Nag Hammadi sources have helped to shed light on these discussions between orthodoxy and heresy. The same can be said about the ancient discussions about the provenance of ancient texts. The age and the origin of texts played an important role for their normative and canonical status. The discussions about the definition of the Christian biblical canon ended in the 4th century. After that the discussion concentrated on how to interpret the canonical scriptures. The development towards orthodoxy often included 'fights' between different groups – Jews and Christians, various currents of early Christianity etc. Most often these 'fights' were 'discursive'. However, from time to time they also had more corporeal aspects. The biblical canon was not defined without struggle.

This book consists of thirteen contributions which cover many of the topics which have been studied in the research project entitled 'The discursive fight over religious texts in antiquity'. However, it was not our intention to include all the topics which we have worked on. Consequently, these contributions should be seen together with other books and articles which have been or will be published as results of the project. The contributors to this book have largely been allowed to decide their own themes and titles. Notwithstanding this fact, the contributions are quite coherent and represent almost all the main aspects of the project. This mirrors the high degree of commun-

ication and discussion enjoyed by the research group over the years. The book has two main parts: the first part deals mainly with theoretical aspects (but always including examples of empirical material). And the second part consists of more detailed studies of empirical material (but always bearing relevant theories in mind).

In the first essay in this book Anders Klostergaard Petersen tries to define what the canonisation and authorisation of texts mean. His basic argument is that canonisation and authorisation are attempts to limit the production of new interpretations and new meaning (to constrain the semiotic riverrun). He takes his point of departure in the current Danish cultural debate, which has been greatly influenced by the government's publication of a variety of canons such as a cultural canon, a historical canon etc. Here canonisation means defining what is good and what is bad, what is important and what is unimportant, etc. Against this background Klostergaard Petersen finds that the concept of canonisation tends to be understood in a much too narrow sense in biblical exegesis and related areas of scholarship. Klostergaard Petersen says that: 'So I concur with the attempt made in an article by Jonathan Z. Smith to broaden the concept of canon to designate a much more prevalent cultural element.' According to Smith and Petersen, canonisation is not only a question of defining a corpus of texts as normative and authoritative for a religion or a religious community. Texts and books are not the only things that can be normative. However, Petersen concentrates on what happens when authority is attributed to texts, and furthermore on the different ways in which authority can be attributed to texts. Petersen answers the first question as follows:

To allot authority to a text is to ascribe it a semiotic privileging and, therefore, culturally regulating function. It is a way of extracting elements or stages from the cultural production – or in the case of religions, from the theological *Wirkungsgeschichte* – by elevating them to a semiotic foundational status.

Petersen's answer to the second question is that authority can be attributed to texts in different ways, for example on the basis of the content of the text, because of the reader's interpretation of the text, or because of the use of the text as an artefact. Finally, Petersen discusses how the concept of 'canon' should be defined. Petersen wants to widen this concept, and understands the concept of 'canon' to mean lists of authors or texts which are taken to be authoritative in their respective areas. This is the modern literary concept of 'canon'. According to Petersen, this concept can also be found in antique traditions including early Christianity and Judaism. With his broad introduction to concepts of authority and canonicity, Petersen sets the stage for the following contributions, which all in one way or the other discuss the use of these concepts in antiquity.

Jesper Hyl Dahl discusses how texts gain authority and normativity, and how the relations between canonical and non-canonical texts should be understood. So he continues the theoretical discussions which were begun by Petersen. In order to understand the differences and the interplay between these groups of texts, Hyl Dahl describes the development from oral to written tradition. The writing down of oral traditions gave