

Jesus: The apex of biblical canons

**Author:**Jean-Claude Loba Mkole¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Hebrew,
Faculty of Humanities,
University of the Free State,
Bloemfontein, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Jean-Claude Loba Mkole,
lobamkolejeanclaude@
gmail.com**Dates:**

Received: 12 Oct. 2021

Accepted: 04 Feb. 2022

Published: 11 May 2022

How to cite this articleLoba Mkole, J-C., 2022,
'Jesus: The apex of biblical
canons', *HTS Teologiese
Studies/Theological
Studies* 78(4), a7189.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7189>**Copyright:**© 2022. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

This article aims at showing how Jesus is the apex of biblical canons, the authority that grants the status of sacredness to Christian, canonical and biblical books. It uses an intercultural approach involving three cultural frames of reference whereby the Protestant Church leadership will represent a contemporary culture, while the Roman Catholic Church stands for traditional church culture, and Jesus' authority reflects an original biblical culture. Consequently, the article consists of three parts: the impact of Scripture on the contemporary Protestant Church in Africa, the authority of biblical canon in the Roman Catholic Church and Jesus' authority in original biblical cultures.

Contribution: The article has established that in the biblical cultures, Jesus' authority is recognised in canonical gospels and in extra canonical writings. In the Catholic Church, this authority is celebrated in the liturgy, expanded from the canonical biblical books and translated into the canon law. In the current Protestant Church in Africa, Jesus' authority empowers the ministers to significantly impact their audiences.

Keywords: Jesus; apex; authority; biblical canons; intercultural approach; Roman Catholic Church; Protestant Church.

Findings¹

The ultimate authority of the Christian Bible remains the person of Jesus. He is the apex that confers the intrinsic authority to each canonical book and the extrinsic authority behind the lists of canonical books recognised either by the Roman Catholic Church or Protestant churches. This article has established that in the biblical cultures, Jesus' authority is recognised in canonical gospels and in extra canonical writings. In the Catholic Church, this authority is celebrated in the liturgy, expanded from the canonical biblical books and translated into the canon law. In the current Protestant Church in Africa, Jesus' authority empowers the ministers to significantly impact their audiences.

Introduction

An apex crowns the mountain and embodies other parts such as the base, the slope, the ridge and the face. Weather permitting, when the inhabitants of Kagaba village (part of Blue Mountains in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo) see the snow-white peak of Mount Ruwenzori, they salute it with joy while shouting *imbli kaku* [Ndrūna words meaning literally 'its teeth are shining']. Among the Ndrūna speakers, these words eventually became the second name of the Ruwenzori Mountain. The peak allows people to recognise a Mount from afar even if other parts might remain invisible to the sight. Besides, those who live at the foot of a mount can still view some parts of it with the possibility of not seeing the peak itself.

Metaphorically, Jesus is the apex of the biblical canons that those closer to or far from him can identify as such, faith permitting. Indeed, faith communities play a crucial role in determining biblical canons. Jesus is the authoritative Word of God from whom derives the authority of each canonical book, the entire Bible and related texts, including African religions in the same way as the level of the peak provides authority to the status of a mountain. The word of the same unique God already known in African religions and Judaism is now entirely disclosed in Jesus through his incarnation, public ministry and Easter event, which constitutes the basis of the Church mission (cf. Loba Mkole 2021).

The term apex is used as a conceptual metaphor to express the authoritative position that the Christian communities attribute to Jesus for establishing the intrinsic sacredness of their Canonical Scriptures. Such metaphorical category may be new in the biblical canon debate,

1. The early version of the present research was entitled 'Gospel: Eponym for Christian Canonical Scripture' and presented as a short article at the annual meeting of the Society of New Testament Studies that took place at the University of Marburg, Germany (30 July – 02 August 2019).

Read online:Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

yet 'our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:3). In addition, 'metaphor is an integral part of our ordinary everyday thought and language' (Lakoff & Turner 1989), and it 'allows us to understand ourselves and our world in ways that no other modes of thought can' (Lakoff & Turner 1989:xi; for more details see Hermanson 2006:46).

Canonical criticism has emerged not only as an autonomous discipline but also as an integral part of biblical exegesis that champions, among other things, the reading of the Bible as a whole of which different books form the chapters (Childs 1974, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1985, 1992/2011, 2011; Sanders 1972, 1984, 1987). Canonical studies of recent years have recorded four outstanding publications (eds. Auwers & De Jonge 2003; Loba Mkole 2016a; McDonald 2017; eds. McDonald & Sanders 2008) from which at least one contribution has shown the vital role that Jesus and the New Testament writings played in the formation of Christian biblical canons.

Niebuhr in Auwers and De Jonge (eds. 2003:257, 261, 581) argued that the canonicity of the New Testament entails not only a historical process but also a theological construction. He shows how the canonicity of the New Testament literature hangs on the person of Jesus who constitutes the centre of its different parts (cf. The Synod of Carthage III order in 397: Gospels, Acts of Apostles, Pauline Corpus, Catholic Epistles and Revelation). The New Testament mediates and establishes the historicity of Jesus while it also points out his eschatological manifestation.

For many years, two sets of criteria have dominated the canonical study of the biblical books. The first one relates to the Jewish Bible and Old Testament for which the ultimate authority is God. The second set pertains to the New Testament for which Jesus is regarded as the ultimate authority. Furthermore, criteria regarding the New Testament books include apostolicity, age, historical likelihood of the content, orthodoxy, agreement with the Old Testament, edifying nature of the document, catholicity, clarity and meaningfulness, spirituality of the contents, acceptance by the Church at large and use for public lessons of the Church (Aedsuwers & De Jonge 2003:313). Jesus is neither mentioned among those criteria that are based on historical-critical research nor do they dismiss him as the ultimate authority. Yet, those criteria remain important, even if they have been established *a posteriori*; they still explain why not every Scripture that recognises Jesus' authority becomes *ipso facto* canonical.

From a perspective of canonical criticism, Jesus stands as the earliest 'regula' (canon or authority) for the Christian community (Mt 28:19, Rm 10:9, 1 Cor 7:10–12) (McDonald (2017:6). Nevertheless, his authority, which is revealed in the Scriptures and recognised by the faith community, also embraces the whole life of the Church and the present cultures that receive and pass it over to the next generations. Thus, the intercultural canonical criticism with its triple

frame of reference (original biblical cultures, church cultures and contemporary target cultures) appears more suitable for tackling the topic under study.

This article aims at expanding the view that considers Jesus as the canon for Christian communities, and it portrays him as the apex of biblical canons, that is, the authority that grants the status of sacredness to biblical books. Traditionally, canon and its derivative adjective canonical refer to the rule of faith and conduct and a list of authoritative books. Positioning Jesus as the apex of biblical canons presupposes the same classical understanding. This study uses an intercultural approach involving three cultural frames of reference whereby the Protestant Church leadership in current Africa will represent contemporary culture, while the Roman Catholic Church stands for traditional church culture, and Jesus' authority reflects an original biblical culture. Consequently, the article consists of three parts: the impact of Jesus' authority in the contemporary Protestant Church in Africa, the authority of biblical canon in the Roman Catholic Church and Jesus' authority in an original biblical culture. Original biblical cultures, church cultures and contemporary target cultures are not unrelated but constitute reference frames for intercultural biblical exegesis, including intercultural canonical criticism (Loba-Mkole 2016a, 2016b, 2019, 2021). Each frame of reference covers different disciplines from which the interpreter may select the ones deemed most appropriate for the subject matter. Consequently, intercultural biblical method is interdisciplinary by nature.

The impact of Jesus' authority in the contemporary Protestant Church in Africa

In current African Protestant churches, gospel ministry is a synonym of preaching Jesus, the living Word of God. The person of Jesus constitutes the underlying canon (rule of faith and conduct) for the entire Bible, as defined by the faith community. The present section shows how the authoritative Word of God in the person of Jesus has transformed the lives of some Christians in Africa, turning them into influential leaders whose preaching and life testimonies impact the intended audiences.

The case study at hand involved three African countries (i.e. Angola, Central Africa Republic and Kenya) and focused on the realities, opportunities and impact of Christian leadership. The following are the 16 lessons learned: (1) pastors are very influential (e.g. they are the most influential persons in the life of 35.3% of interviewed Angolans, 50.2% of interviewed Central Africans and 55.8% of interviewed Kenyans), (2) non-clergy leaders also play strategic roles in a wide variety of arena, (3) women are strategic to the strength of the church but are often under-acknowledged and under-supported, (4) African-led parachurch Christian organisation are central to evangelism, discipleship and social engagements, (5) the Bible as the word of God is vital in the lives of African

Christians, (6) many Africans read motivational books that help readers to achieve success, (7) there is a strong need for local Christian authors, (8) African Christian leaders achieve success through relational networks, (9) African Christian leaders minister within ethnic and inter-ethnic settings that require intercultural skills and commitments, (10) African Christian leaders are increasingly part of a connected world, (11) initiatives that focus on youth are strategic, (12) mentoring is central to leadership development in Africa, (13) formal education is clearly a central part of leadership development, (14) many African leaders are ambivalent about politics but often engage the political arena on behalf of the common good, (15) some Christian churches, organisations and leaders are doing an impressive job regarding the relation with Muslims and (16) better support structures for Christian institutions and leaders exist in Kenya than in Angola or the Central African Republic (CAR) and it is much more difficult to acquire knowledge about leadership realities in Francophone and Lusophone Africa (eds. Priest & Barine 2017:231–238).

Ngaruiya (2017:29–48) is the first to document findings on clergy and non-clergy leaders who have the most influence or impact. They include Pastor Dinis Eurico (Angola), Dr David Koudougouret (CAR) and Bishop John Bosco (Kenya). The respondents rated each leader on a Likert scale based on the following: (1) skill at work, (2) wisdom and knowledge of the local context, (3) ethical integrity, (4) love and service, (5) positive reputation, (6) inspiring teamwork and community mobilisation, (7) efficiency in the use of resources and (8) training other leaders (Ngaruiya 2017:29–30). The assessment of these qualities revolved around three areas: effective leadership, impact and training. Qualities of effective Christian leadership mirrored church commitment, vocational excellence, community connectedness, cultural flexibility, endurance under hardship, lifelong learning, empowering mentorship, openness to technology and passion for civic engagement (Ngaruiya 2017:33–38). Areas of impact covered drug abuse prevention, children and youth education, sex education, fighting against human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), entrepreneurship, music and church leadership development (Ngaruiya 2017:38–41). Lastly, the survey on the training of African Christian leaders captured the amount of knowledge acquired from their childhood homes, educational backgrounds, travels and seminars (Ngaruiya 2017:41–44).

Rasmussen (2017:65–84) identified Pastor Oscar Muriu and Bishop Maisha as leaders with impact and pointed to Campus Crusade and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as influential organisations. He pinpointed the following features as the driving force of their successful leadership: (1) investing in the relationship, (2) investing in human capital through formal education and monitoring, (3) investing in individuals, churches and organisations that can create all kinds of social capital and (4) investing in research (Rasmussen 2017:82, see also Hendriks 2017:157–167).

Nupanga-Weanzana (2017:103–113) searched on Christian organisations, programmes or initiatives that positively impacted their constituencies. The top three most influential Christian organisations in Kenya were World Vision, Compassion International and the Red Cross. Central African Republic voted for 'Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui' ('FATEB'), 'Caritas' and 'Campus pour Christ'. Angola favoured 'Mocidade para Cristo' (Youth for Christ) and Departamento de Assistência Social Estudos e Projectos and Associação dos Escuteiros de Angola (DASEP) (Nupanga-Weanzana 2017:103). According to Nupanga-Weanzana (2017:104–111), the characteristics of these influential organisations include postcolonial identities or patterns and the broadened vision of human flourishing. Moreover, he considers these features 'the new face of successful Africa and a successful church' (Nupanga-Weanzana 2017:112).

Besides, the study by Kwaka-Sumbu and Roux (2017:135–153) recognised seven women as the most influential leaders: Dr Adelaide Catanha, Mrs Eunice Chiquette and Pastor Luisa Mateus for Angola; Mrs Marie Paule Balezou and Mrs Marie Louise Yakemba for CAR; and Alice Kirambi and Professor Esther Mombo for Kenya. These women have overcome considerable resistance in the churches, communities and societies they serve (Kwaka-Sumbu & Le Roux 2017:151).

The impact of the Christian Protestant leaders in current Africa had permeated all vital areas of leadership. Their authority derives from Jesus in whom they believe and whom they preach, using the intrinsic authority of each book of the extrinsic authority of the biblical canon of 66 books that the Protestant Reformation recognised for the first time in 1559 at La Rochelle Confession in France (cf. Brown & Collins 1990:1042–1043; Coogan 2011:12–15; McDonald 2017a:498):

Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these: Of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings, I Chronicles, II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Of the New Testament: The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, The Acts of the Apostles, Paul's Epistles to the Romans, Corinthians I, Corinthians II, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians I, Thessalonians II, To Timothy I, To Timothy II, To Titus, To Philemon, The Epistle to the Hebrews, The Epistle of James, The first and second Epistles of Peter, The first, second, and third Epistles of John, The Epistle of Jude, The Revelation of John. All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

The authority of the biblical canon in the Roman Catholic Church

In the Roman Catholic Church, biblical canons derive from the listening and response to Jesus through liturgical celebrations, catechetical and theological expansions, synodal or council decrees and the canon law.

It is noteworthy that the vision of the book of Revelation on the eschatological city or state suggests that all material forms of the biblical, liturgical and judiciary canons would cease in that city and give way to the purest, most whole and unmediated communion with God and Jesus Christ:

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there...No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev 22:23–25; 21:3–5)

Before that immediate and complete bliss in the presence of God, believers still need to be guided by the Holy Spirit and the literary forms of biblical, liturgical and judiciary canons, as well as by their ethical codes and hermeneutical frameworks or paradigms.

Even if they are distinct, the biblical, liturgical and judiciary meanings are dialectically interrelated. The Christian liturgy celebrates the deeper meanings of biblical canonical books and provides profound insights and comfort for canonical discipline. However, a fully-fledged liturgy feeds itself upon the reading of biblical canonical books and integrates within its offerings (Eucharistic canons) the joys and pains of the people of God, constituted according to the canon law. The canon law delineates the contours of practical implications of biblical canonical books and defines the validity of liturgical canons. The Eucharist unifies all the biblical, juridical and liturgical meanings. It is during this unique celebration that people of God (see canons 204–207) get together to listen to the Word of God from the reading of the canonical books and offer the Eucharistic canons (anaphoras) to God for his glory and the salvation of the humankind and the creation. Furthermore, the Eucharistic liturgy has precedence over biblical canon books and judiciary canons because it more effectively celebrates the memory of the person behind the Christian canonical books and the Christian discipline of life. The Code of the Canon Law (especially Canon 897) states the following about the sacrament of the Eucharistic Jesus:

The most venerable sacrament is the blessed Eucharist, in which Christ the Lord himself is contained, offered, and received, and by which the Church continually lives and grows. The Eucharistic Sacrifice, the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord, in which the Sacrifice of the cross is forever perpetuated, is the summit and the source of all worship and Christian life. By means of it the unity of God's people is signified and brought about, and the building up of the body of Christ is perfected. The other sacraments and all the ecclesiastical works of the apostolate are bound up with, and directed to, the blessed Eucharist (The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland 1983:165)

Christianity or Jesus tradition as lived in the Roman Catholic Church (John Paul II 1983) or elsewhere is about an operative remembrance (see already Stuhlmacher 1997:285). This remembrance coupled with the worship of the real presence of Christ wholly occurs during a Eucharistic celebration, which constitutes the compendium of the Christian symbolic world where through the mediation of an ordained Priest, Jesus recapitulates and reconciles everything with himself (past–present–future beyond all liturgical, biblical and juridical canons) and offers it to God the Father on behalf of the assembly. The Eucharist constitutes 'the privileged setting in which God speaks to us... who hear and respond. Every liturgical action by its very nature steeped in sacred Scriptures' (Benedict XVI 2010:69).

As a result, Scripture interpretation can hardly – if not vainly – be separated from ecclesiastical traditions. As Karavidopoulos (1997; see also Stuhlmacher 1997:11) puts it:

... it is generally accepted, beyond the individual differentiations of the researchers, that the ecclesiastical community and its tradition take chronological precedence, as far as time is concerned, in comparison to the recording of the Gospels, and, of course, of the rest of the books of the New Testament. It is therefore not right to over-emphasize the superiority of the Bible against the Church, nor, on the other hand, does emphasis on the absolute power of the Church against the Bible find any justification. (p. 258)

The canon law is linked to the Scripture because it stipulates practical ways of living Christian mysteries and emulates the fulfilment of Law and Prophets achieved in Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 5:17, Lk 24:27). It maintains discipline within the ecclesiastical society. The Christian believers have found themselves in the necessity of establishing norms based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the appreciation of the realities that the believers experience in the world (cf. Paralieu 1985:11). As Jean Paul II (1983) puts it:

... it is necessary to remind ourselves of that distant heritage of law contained in the books of the Old and New Testaments. It is from this, as from its first source, that the whole juridical and legislative tradition of the Church derives. (p. xiii)

Regarding the hot debate about the justification by law or grace, Jean Paul II (1983) provides a clear and moderate answer in the following terms:

Although St Paul in expounding the mystery of salvation teaches that justification is not obtained through works of the law but through faith (cf. Rm 3:28, Gl 2:16), nonetheless he does not exclude the binding force of the Decalogue (cf. Rm 13:8–10, Gl 5:13–25; 6:2), nor does he deny the importance of discipline in the Church (cf. 1 Cor 5 and 6). Thus the writings of the New Testament allow us to perceive more clearly the great importance of this discipline and to understand better the bonds which link it ever more closely with the salvific character of the Gospel message. (p. xiii)

The close link between the gospel message and the canon law derives further from the purpose of the code that consists of not replacing faith, grace, charisms and, above all, charity, but

to facilitate an orderly development in both ecclesiastical and individual persons, while attributing a primacy to love, grace and charisms (John Paul II 1983:xiii).

From the fourth century onwards, the Roman Catholic Church in which subsists the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church (*Lumen Gentium* # 8) maintains the list of 73 canonical books, as attested in the early synodal biblical canons. Collins (1983) showed that the:

[D]ecisions of some local councils – Laodicea (363) in the East, Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) in the West – showed that by the end of the fourth century there was at least substantial agreement among the churches as to the constitution of the New Testament. (p. 37)

These decisions informed the number, order and content of the biblical books of the Vulgate Bible (5th century). The Council of Trent (16th century) did not add or remove any books that received recognition in previous councils, contrary to common opinion. The Jerusalem Bible and the Catechism of the Catholic Church of the 20th century abide by the same decisions featuring 73 canonical books. The latter got first recognition by the Synod of Rome in 382 and confirmed by the Synod of Carthage III in 397, as recorded in the *Codex Canonum Africanae Ecclesiae* of 419 CE:

The Canonical Scriptures are these: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two books of Paraleipomena, Job, the Psalter, five books of Solomon, the books of the twelve prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, Esther, two books of Esdras, two books of the Maccabees. Of the New Testament: four books of the Gospels, one book of the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles of the Apostle Paul, one epistle of the same [writer] to the Hebrews, two Epistles of the Apostle Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, one book of the Apocalypse of John.²

Jesus' authority in original biblical cultures

Jesus Christ in canonical literature

According to Mark (1:1–15), the Gospel of Jesus closely relates to the ministry of the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist, as he starts preaching the message of repentance and faith. Jesus appears to the medium, the message and the canon of the Christian Bible. He is the canon of the Christian Bible because he was in the beginning, was with God and was God (Jn 1:1). He is the canon for interpreting the Word of God (Jn 1:18) because he is himself the Word or the Message of God that became man (Jn 1:14) and remains the only begotten Son of God and the medium through whom God has revealed himself to humanity (Jn 1:18). His words are eternal (Mt 24:35). He is the only person in whom the fullness of God dwells bodily (Col 1:19) and who can fill

²The four books of Kings include 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings; the two books of Paraleipomena refer to 1 and 2 Chronicles; the five books of Solomon mean Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon and the Wisdom of Ben Sira, while the two books of Esdras imply Ezra and Nehemiah.

humanity with that fullness of God (Ep 3:19). If you believe in Moses, you should believe in Jesus (Jn 5:46).

Moreover, Jesus is greater than Jonas or Salomon (Mt 12:38–42). Whoever sees him sees God (Jn 14:9); whoever welcomes him receives God (Mt 10:40); whoever is touched or healed by him is being set free for the glory of God (Mk 2:10); whoever lives and dies for him will be rewarded by God (cf. Mt 5:12). Although Jesus did refer to the written Word of God in his preaching of God's reign while quoting Moses, Prophets or Psalms (Lk 24:27, 44), Jesus remains the medium, the message and the canon par excellence that interacts with its audiences through audiovisual, written and life experiences. He is the apex of the Word of God because he embodies the totality of God's revelation (cf. Col 1:19).

The normativity of the Christian Bible derives from the person of Jesus viewed from three unique aspects of his mystery: *exousia* (authority), proximity with God and divine filiation (Schmitt 1982:143–152). On the one hand, Jesus' *exousia* proceeds from the sovereign force of his teaching and action (cf. Mt 7:28–29, Mc 1:1–8.22, Lk 4:32). This authority further exhibits itself through Jesus' antithetical assessment or super understanding of the Law (Mt 5:21–28) and his sovereign choice of the disciples (cf. Mc 1:16–20). On the other hand, Jesus' *proximity* with God is manifest through his preaching of the reign of God after his baptism, during which the Holy Spirit came down to anoint him while the Father declared him as his beloved Son with whom he is pleased. The reign of God drew closer than ever through Jesus' ministry of proclaiming the Good News to the poor, setting free the captives, healing the sick, casting out the demons (cf. Lk 4:16–19), feeding the hungry or quenching the thirsty (Jn 6:1–56).

Besides being the authoritative harbinger of the reign of God, Jesus reveals his *divine filiation* through the *abba* formula that he uses for addressing God (Mt 26:42, Lk 23:46, Jn 11: 41). In the Gospel of John, the Father–Son language is a constitutive element of a family metaphor that describes both the divine family of God (God the Father – the Son – and the Paraclete) and the extended family of God, which includes the disciples of Jesus: 'As the Father has sent his Son, Jesus sends his disciples (Jn 17:18; 20:21). The Paraclete, or special helper, is sent to assist the family with their task' (Van der Watt 2000:409). Jesus' ministry, however, culminates in the Easter event of his passion, death and resurrection. Within this historical-literary context, the gospel of Mark (14:62) releases the compendium of Jesus' identity as the Christ, Son of God and Son of man (Loba-Mkole 2000:1119–1145). The resurrection constitutes the confirmation and the new point of departure for Jesus' traditions and canons. Joseph Schmitt (1982:159) argued that the testimony of Jesus is the prelude and foundation of his resurrection by God, while inversely, the Easter event is the confirmation of the gospel, which it consumes.

Although Jesus had quoted books of the Hebrew Bible or referred to them as Moses, Prophets and Psalms, he had not issued a list of biblical books for the Hebrew Bible nor for any additional ones such as the New Testament sub-collection. He rather appointed disciples and after showing them how he fulfils the Scriptures (Mt 5:17), he gave them the authority to carry on his mission of preaching the reign of God, healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, casting out the demons and greeting households with peace (cf. Mt 10:1–42, Mk 1:15–20, Lk 10:1–24). Jesus conferred to Peter the duty of tending his sheep (21:15–19). He entrusted the disciples under the care of his Father (Jn 17:15), the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22) and his mother, the Virgin Mary (Jn 19:26–27). The disciples went out to preach the reign of God, repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus (Ac 2:38). Yet, neither Jesus nor his disciples did hand over a particular set of canonical books, except his own life and ministry (Mt 26:26–29, Mk 14:22–25, Lk 22:14–20, 1 Cor 11:23–26, Mt 28:16–20, Lk 24:36–49, Jn 20:19–23, Act 1:6).

In short, the authority of Jesus in preaching the Word of God (Moses, Prophets and Psalms), his proximity with God, his divine filiation, the fulfilment of the Scriptures in his words and deeds, the handing over of his own life and not a set of canonical books and his commissioning of the disciples all point to him as the canon or the authoritative Word of God, the Gospel of God. Differently put, he is the apex that gives authority to biblical books and canons.

The earliest Christian Bible in which all the canonical and some non-canonical books feature is what can be called the Alexandrian or Egyptian Bible, which has the support of the following manuscripts: Sinaiticus (4th century CE), Vaticanus (5th century CE) and Alexandrinus (5th Century AD). Vaticanus and Sinaiticus (S for Old Testament and \aleph for New Testament) are the most ancient Bibles preserved in single codices. Steak opines that S/ \aleph is earlier than B. It originated from the dictation carried out in Caesarea, following an order for a Christian Bible placed by the emperor Constantine to Eusebius of Caesarea while B is a codex copied in Egypt (Steak 1999:605–609 in Bogaert 2003:156). Two arguments seem to support the Caesarean origin S/ \aleph : the reading ‘antipatrida’ instead of ‘patrida’ in Mt 12:54 and the reading ‘samarias’ in place of ‘kesareas’ in Ac 8.5. Both readings in S/ \aleph more likely point to a Caesarean origin (Steak 1999:617–618 in Bogaert 2003:156). However, the page layout (three columns in B and four columns in S/ \aleph) and the book order are different although – if they belong to the same scriptorium – those features could reflect a similar design (the same page layout and the same book order). Besides, B is more economical. Out of one skin, it produces four bi-folio instead of two like in S/ \aleph (Steak 1999:583–625 in Bogaert 2003:156). Furthermore, B has fewer blank folios than S/ \aleph , and it displays a further improvement as long as the making of the codex is concerned (Bogaert 2003:156).

Even if Bogaert (2003:153–176) accepted the improvement of B in terms of codex making, he refutes reasons that led for positing the origin of S/ \aleph in Caesarea and argues that

Vaticanus and Sinaiticus belong to a same scriptorium in Egypt. He agrees with Rahlfs (1899:72–99 in Bogaert 2003:157) who linked B with the order placed by the emperor Constant 1st to Athanasius. As for the scribal errors pointing to Caesarean origin, the possibility of having produced them elsewhere cannot be ruled out because Hexapla annotations were largely known outside Caesarea in the late fourth century. In addition, as for Old Testament texts, B has none of the characteristics of Origenian or Caesarean text, except the text of Isaiah (which is an exception that confirms the general rule). Furthermore, B does not have Eusebian canon. Similarly, S/ \aleph does not contain an Origenian or Caesarean text of first hand. B and S/ \aleph often represent the Egyptian text in agreement with the Coptic and Ethiopian texts. B is closer to Athanasian canon (*Festival Letter*. 367 CE). With the latter it shares some prominent features, such as the absence of the books of Maccabees, the presence of the books of Esther, Judith, Tobit, Wisdom and Sirach/Ecclesiasticus as literature for the beginners or the presence of supplements to Daniel, Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah that are not found in the Hebrew Bible. This close link between B and Athanasian canon does not preclude the Alexandrian origin of S/ \aleph (Bogaert 2003:158). It may imply that a considerable time elapsed between the making of S/ \aleph and B. In any case, it is with the event of the codices such as S/ \aleph , B and A that the Christian libraries present both Old Testament and New Testament books in one codex or one volume, attesting physically the unity of the two testaments as the Christian Bible, the Word of God or the Gospel.

Jesus in extra-canonical literature

Non-canonical literature about Jesus is abundant, but only some significant samples are examined here: Gospel of the Ebionites, Gospel of the Hebrews, Gospel of the Nazoreans, Unknown Gospel (Papyrus Egerton 2), Secret Gospel of Mark, Protevangelium of James, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Thomas (Sayings of Jesus), Thomas the Contender, Apocryphon of James, Dialogue of the Saviour, Passion/Resurrection Gospels, Gospel of Nicodemus (cf. Acts of Pilate), Gospel of Peter, Apocalypse of Peter, Resurrection Dialogues, Gospel of Mary, Epistula Apostolorum, Gnostic Writings titled ‘Gospel’ (eds. Brown et al. 1990:1065–1068). The non-canonical gospels can be divided roughly into five categories: (1) fragmentary gospels, (2) infancy gospels, miraculous birth and unusual childhood, (3) sayings and teachings, (4) passion and resurrection and (5) resurrection dialogues (cf. eds. Brown et al. 1990:1065–1068).

Fragmentary gospels are found mainly in fragments and Church Fathers quotations. They include the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Nazoreans, the Papyrus Egerton 2 and the Secret Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of the Ebionites is preserved in quotations from Epiphanius. These quotations relate to the appearance of John Baptist, Jesus’ baptism, the choice of disciples, the saying about Jesus’ true family, a saying against sacrifice and a saying pertaining to Jesus’ Passover meal (eds. Brown et al.

1990:1066). The Gospel of the Hebrews is preserved in the quotations by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyril and Jerome. They depict the descent of pre-existent Christ into Mary, the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at his baptism, a post-resurrection appearance to James. They also contain wisdom saying of Jesus (cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.9.45; 5.14.96; *Gos. Thomas.* 2). The Gospel of the Nazoreans is preserved in its Aramean and Syriac versions. The sayings quoted by Origen, Eusebius and Jerome deal with Jesus claiming his sinlessness when his mother and brothers initiate to take him for baptism (cf. Jerome, *Adv. Pelag.* 3.2). It also qualifies the bread in the Lord's Prayer to mean 'of the future' (Jerome, *In Mt.* on 6.11). The healing of a man's withered hand conveys the message of enabling him to earn his livelihood as a mason (Jerome, *In Matt.* on 12.3). Regarding the passion narrative, Barabbas's name becomes the 'son of their teacher' and tearing the Temple veil is replaced by collapsing a large lintel. Papyrus Egerton 2 features in codex papyrus of four *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel*, published by H.I. Bell and T.C. Skeat in 1935. The Fragment is dated no later than 150, and its content displays independence and anteriority regarding the canonical gospels with which it shares parallel passages. The Secret Gospel of Mark is a fragmentary copy of a letter by Clement of Alexandria to Theodore. It was found in 1958 by M. Smith in the Mar Saba Monastery near Bethlehem. In his letter, Clement reports the following: (1) While at Rome with Peter, Mark wrote the 'Acts of the Lord' (canonical Mark) for catechumens but did not report Jesus' secret acts. (2) After Peter's death, Mark brought to Alexandria the copy of his canonical gospel and the secret gospel to form his first book designed for the gnostic fellows. (3) The copy of this book was leaked to the gnostic Carpocrates (ca. 125), who added lies because of libertine practices. Although Markan in style, the Secret Gospel of Mark is closer to John, given the content. The first passage (Lv 23-2r:11), which can be located immediately after Mark 10:34, reports that Jesus raised a woman's brother from the tomb at Bethany. The risen man, after 6 days, came to Jesus at night while covering his naked body only with a linen cloth (cf. Jn 11:1-11, Mk 14:51-52). In another scene proper to Secret Gospel of Mark (2r:14-16), which can follow Mark 10:46, Jesus, while coming to Jericho, refuses to receive three women, including the sister and the mother of the youth. The Secret Gospel of Mark dates before the canonical version, which might have removed some scenes (cf. eds. Brown et al. 1990:1066).

The infancy gospels (Protevangelium of James, Infancy Gospel of Thomas) concentrate on the miraculous birth and powers of the child Jesus. They also 'provided popular piety and art with affirmations of the perpetual virginity and "royal" origins of Mary' (eds. Brown et al. 1990:1066).

Sayings and teachings of Jesus as found in the Gospel of Thomas, Thomas the Contender, Apocryphon on James and Dialogue of the Saviour are similar to their counterparts recorded in the canonical gospels, although they are more elaborate than the canonical ones. For example, Gospel of Thomas not only contains some variants of Synoptic parables

(20; 9a; 65a [66]; 21d; 96; 64a; 107; 57; 109; 76a; 8a; 63a) but also includes extra parables (e.g., 21ab; 97; 98) that are not found in the Synoptic gospels. Furthermore, the Gospel of Thomas does not explain the parables of the Sower (9a) and the Wheat and Weeds (57). On the contrary, the Gospel of Thomas (64b) expands on the Great Supper by indicating that business people will not enter the reign of God. A similar anti-wealth statement shapes the story of the 'Unjust Steward' (Lk 16:1-13) (eds. Brown et al. 1990:1067).

Thomas' exclusive authority for interpreting Jesus' teaching appears established in a variant of 'Peter's confession' (13). Other secret sayings are attributed to Thomas the Contender/Matthias and James. Thomas' exclusive authority for interpreting Jesus' teaching is established in a variant of 'Peter's confession' (13). Thomas the Contender reveals the rejection of the body and its lusts as the basis of Jesus' teaching, while the Apocryphon of James is more in tune with the four canonical gospels. Parallel passages concern the following topics: reward of disciples (Ap. Jas 4:22-37, Mk 10:31-37), the necessity of the cross (Ap. Jas 5:31-36:11, Mk 8:31-37), speaking in parables (Ap. Jas 7:1-10, Mk 4:10-12), sowing the Word (Ap. Jas 8:10-27, Mk 4:13-20), woe against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Ap. Jas 9:24-10:6, Mt 3:7-10), seed sown in a field (Ap. Jas 12:20-30, Mk 4:27-29). Besides, Apocryphon of James contains other sayings similar to Johannine tradition and sayings attributed to the risen Lord (8:5-10) and unparalleled parables (e.g. a parable about the date palm, 7:22-35).

Passion/resurrection gospels include Acts of Pilate, Gospel of Peter and Apocalypse of Peter. The Acts of Pilate (Act Pil) is also known as the Gospel of Nicodemus, a combination of the Acts of Pilate and another writing on Christ's descent into hell. It expands the story of Pilate's wife (Mt 27:19), the account of Jesus' death based on Luke and John, while the stories about the guards at the tomb derive from Matthew (28:11-15). The Gospel of Peter (Gos Pt 1-2) has Herod as the one who had ordered the killing of Jesus.

In its turn, the Apocalypse of Peter (Ap. Pt) narrates how Jesus revealed to Peter the events surrounding his crucifixion, such as an immortal Jesus laughing at people who were trying to kill him but failed (Ac. Pt 81:3-83:15).

Finally, resurrection dialogues include the Gospel of Mary (Gos. Mar) and the Epistula Apostolorum (Ep. Apo). The first is a private revelation to Mary (Magdalene) relating to a resurrection dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, a subsequent vision of the ascent of the soul and the commissioning of the disciples to preach. Epistula Apostolorum shares post resurrection revelations parallel to those found in Gos. Mar, but with allusions to all four gospels and some epistles (eds. Brown et al. 1990:1068).

Different genres of the extra-canonical literature examined here include: infancy narratives, miraculous birth and

unusual childhood narratives, sayings and teachings, passion and resurrection narratives and resurrection dialogues. They basically share the same topics with the canonical gospels even if their styles and specific contents differ. They also attest an extraordinary authority of Jesus, even if their entire contents did not qualify them to be selected among canonical gospels. They certainly provide some useful information about the faith of the Early Church before the authoritative listing of the Christian biblical canons. In any case, Jesus remains the ultimate rule of faith and conduct for canonical and extra-canonical biblical books of early Christianity. However, canonical books serve as authoritative and legal frame in which the faith community recognises and emulates the words, deeds and gestures of Jesus to regulate their Christian lifestyle.

Conclusion

The article has established that the ultimate authority of the Christian Bible remains the person of Jesus in all frames of reference of intercultural canonical criticism, which includes original biblical cultures, church cultures and contemporary target cultures. In the current or contemporary Protestant Church in Africa, Jesus' authority empowers the ministers to significantly impact their audiences. In the Catholic Church, this authority is celebrated in the liturgy, expanded from the canonical biblical books and translated into the canon law. In the biblical cultures, Jesus remains the ultimate rule of faith and conduct for canonical and extra-canonical biblical books of early Christianity. In short, Jesus is the apex that confers the intrinsic authority to each canonical book and the extrinsic authority behind the lists of canonical books recognised either by the Roman Catholic Church or Protestant churches. However, each frame of reference has its own ways of interpreting the authority of Jesus and the canonicity of the Scriptures.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges that the present article is part of the research project under Prof. Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé, Department of Hebrew, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.C.L.M. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Auwers, J.-M & De Jonge, H.J. (eds.), 2003, *The biblical canons*, Leuven University Press, Leuven.
- Benedict XVI, 2010, *The word of the Lord*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi.
- Bogaert, P.-M., 2003, 'Aux origines de la fixation du canon. Scriptoria, listes et tires. Le Vaticanus et la stichométrie de Mommsen', in J.-M. Auwers & H.J. De Jonge (eds.), *The biblical canons*, pp. 153–176, Leuven University Press, Leuven.
- Brown, R. & Collins, R., 1990, 'Canonicity', in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer & R. Murphy (eds.), *The new Jerome biblical commentary*, pp. 1034–1054, Prentice Hall, Hoboken, NJ.
- Brown, R., Perkins, P. & Saldarini, A., 1990, 'Apocrypha; Dead sea scrolls; other Jewish literature', in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer & R. Murphy (eds.), *The new Jerome biblical commentary*, pp. 1054–1068, Prentice Hall, Hoboken, NJ.
- Childs, B., 1974, *The book of Exodus: A critical, theological commentary*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Childs, B., 1979, *Introduction to the Old Testament as scripture*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Childs, B., 1980, 'Response to reviewers of introduction to the Old Testament as scripture', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16, 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030908928000501608>
- Childs, B., 1984, *The New Testament as canon: An introduction*, SCM Press, London.
- Childs, B., 1985, *Old Testament theology in a canonical context*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Childs, B., 1992/2011, *Biblical theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological reflection on the Christian Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Childs, B., 2011, *Biblical theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological reflection on the Christian Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Collins, R.F., 1983, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Student Christian Movement, London.
- Hendriks, H.J., 2017, 'Empowering leadership – A new dawn for African Christian leadership', in J.R. Priest & K. Barine (eds.), *African Christian leadership: Realities, opportunities and impact*, pp. 155–171, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Hermanson, E., 2006, *Metaphor in Zulu: Problems in the translation of biblical metaphor in the book of Amos*, SUN Press, Stellenbosch.
- John Paul II, 1983, 'Apostolic constitution Sacrae Disciplinae Leges', in The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland (ed.), *The code of canon law in English translation*, pp. vii–ix, Collins, Bangalore.
- Karavidopoulos, D.I., 1997, 'The interpretation of the New Testament in the Orthodox church', in C. Landmesser et al. (eds.), *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift. Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums*, pp. 251–262, De Gruyter, Berlin.
- Kwaka-Sumba, T. & Le Roux, E., 2017, 'African women's leadership – Realities and opportunities', in J.R. Priest & K. Barine (eds.), *African Christian leadership: Realities, opportunities and impact*, pp. 135–153, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M., 1980, *Metaphors we live by*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Lakoff, G. & Turner, M., 1989, *More than cool reason: A field guide to poetic metaphor*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Loba-Mkole, J.-C., 2000, 'Mark 14:62. Substantial compendium of New Testament Christology', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 56(4), 1119–1145. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v56i4.1810>
- Loba-Mkole, J.-C., 2016a, *Biblical canons in church traditions and translations*, Sage, London.
- Loba-Mkole, J.-C., 2016b, 'Intercultural construction of the New Testament canons', in J.-C. Loba-Mkole (eds.), *Biblical canons in church traditions and translations*, pp. 240–261, Sage, London.
- Loba-Mkole, J.-C., 2019, 'Intercultural translations of Christian canonical scriptures', *Acta Theologica* 39(1), 156–180. <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/acta.v39i1.9>

- Loba-Mkole, J.-C., 2021, 'Intercultural constructions of the New Testament: Epistemological foundations', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(2), a6739. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6739>
- McDonald, L.M., 2017, *The formation of the biblical canon*, vol. 2, Bloomsbury T & T Clark, London.
- McDonald, L.M. & Sanders, J.A. (eds.), 2008, *The canon debate*, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA.
- Ngaruiya, K.D., 2017, 'Characteristics of influential African leaders', in J.R. Priest & K. Barine (eds.), *African Christian leadership: Realities, opportunities and impact*, pp. 29–47, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Niebuhr, J., 2003, 'Exegese im kanonischen Zusammenhang: Überlegungen zur theologischen Relevanz der Gesalt des neutestamentlichen Kanons', in J.-M. Auwers & H.J. De Jonge (eds.), *The biblical canons*, pp. 557–584, Leuven University Press, Leuven.
- Nupanga-Weanzana, 2017, 'Word and deed – Patterns of influential African Christian organizations', in J.R. Priest & K. Barine (eds.), *African Christian leadership: Realities, opportunities and impact*, pp. 103–113, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Paralieu, R., 1985, *Guide pratique du code de droit canonique*, Tardy, Bourges.
- Priest, J.R. & Barine, K. (eds.), 2017, *African Christian leadership: Realities, opportunities and impact*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.
- Rahlf's, A., 1899, *Alter und Heimat der vatikanischen Bibelhandschrift*, Nachrichten von der Königlichen, Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Göttingen.
- Rasmussen, S., 2017, 'Connected – The role of social capital for leaders with impact', in J.R. Priest & K. Barine (eds.), *African Christian leadership: Realities, opportunities and impact*, pp. 65–84, Orbis Books, New York, NY.
- Sanders, A.J., 1972, *Torah and canon*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR.
- Sanders, A.J., 1984, *Canon and community: A guide to canonical criticism*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Sanders, A.J., 1987, *From sacred story to sacred text: Canon as paradigm*, Augsburg Fortress Press - Wipf and Stock Publishers, Philadelphia, PA.
- Schmitt, J., 1982, 'La genèse de la christologie apostolique', in B. Laurent & F. Refoulé (eds.), *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie. Dogmatique I*, pp. 129–183, Cerf, Paris.
- Stuhlmacher, P., 1997, 'Der Kanon und seine Auslegung', in C. Landmesser (ed.), *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift. Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums*, pp. 261–290, De Gruyter, Berlin.
- Van der Watt, J., 2000, *Family of the king: Dynamics of metaphor in the Gospel according to John*, Brill, Leiden.