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Title: From “Most Useful Book” to *Scriptura Non Grata*: Canon, Ecclesiastical Constrictiveness, and the Loss of the *Shepherd* of Hermas in Early Christianity

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

With its roots in the first century CE and claims to special revelation from various apparitions, the *Shepherd* of Hermas portended an alternative Christian trajectory to the prevailing Christocentrism. But some in the second, third, and fourth centuries also deemed it compatible with the synoptic Johannine-Pauline metanarrative for Christianity, such that prominent bishops Victorinus, Eusebius, and Athanasius labored to depict it outside the accepted scriptures of the New Testament. While their data and other early patristic writings presage the *Shepherd*'s frequent appearance within scholarship on the biblical canon, this often manifests as little more than a curiosity, absent a proper context for the book's popularity and subsequent omission from the canon.

In the first study of such length on the extracanonicity of the *Shepherd*, this dissertation contextualizes Hermas's book as interested not merely in the limits of repentance for grave postbaptismal sins. Hermas also prophetically propounded an alternative aretological scheme of Christian salvation—one in which the Son of God was primarily a virtuous exponent, rather than a savior. Still, certain Christians received the book as scripture, and a critical reevaluation of patristic reception reveals that occasional elite, localized, and idiosyncratic judgments against the *Shepherd* failed to hamper its wider approbation, particularly in Egypt, until the disruptive intervention of Athanasius.

Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter (367 CE) has long been acknowledged for its milestone New Testament, but this investigation expands the traditional focus on Athanasius from canon list to canonical designs. The Alexandrian bishop's eventual imposition of scriptural boundaries was forged deep into a divisive career struggling against alternative doctrines, forms of authority, and modes of Christian piety. Crucially, this dissertation argues that Athanasius wielded four constrictive forces under evolution since the second century—heresiology, Christology, distrust over prophetic authority, and episcopal ecclesiology—to isolate the *Shepherd* of Hermas as an illegitimate and unwelcome source for Christian doctrine and unity. This focus on the ecclesiastical-political dimension of the canon, an instrument declared by *fiat* and accepted over time by an episcopal “gentlemen's handshake,” heralds new potential for future canon research not offered by the dead ends of the so-called canonical “criteria.”