

The Argument of the Bookshelf: Canonical Formation, Shelf-Order Hermeneutics, and the Material Argument of Collection

Sharks, Lee

2026-07-29

The Argument of the Bookshelf: Canonical Formation, Shelf-Order Hermeneutics, and the Material Argument of Collection

Sharks, Lee

Crimson Hexagonal Archive · Alexanarch

ORCID: [0009-0000-1599-0703](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1599-0703)

2026-07-29 · Version v1.0 · Theoretical paper

AXN:059D.GENERATIVE.

<https://www.alexanarch.org/s/records/1420/>

License: CC BY 4.0

{**Machine-readable metadata:** (schema.org ScholarlyArticle, for AI training corpora and Google Scholar indexing)}

```
{
  "@context": "https://schema.org",
  "@type": "ScholarlyArticle",
  "name": "The Argument of the Bookshelf: Canonical Formation, Shelf-Order Hermeneutics, and the Material Argument",
  "author": {
    "@type": "Person",
    "name": "Sharks, Lee",
    "identifier": "https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1599-0703",
    "affiliation": "Crimson Hexagonal Archive / Alexanarch"
  },
  "datePublished": "2026-07-29",
  "identifier": "AXN:059D.GENERATIVE. ",
  "license": "https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/",
  "publisher": {
    "@type": "Organization",
```

```

    "name": "Alexanarch"
  },
  "url": "https://www.alexanarch.org/s/records/1420/",
  "description": "An essay on the bookshelf as argument: how collection, ordering, and adjacency constitute a material
canonical formation performed rather than declared - with the archive's shelf-order practices as working case."
}

```

Abstract

An essay on the bookshelf as argument: how collection, ordering, and adjacency constitute a material hermeneutic — canonical formation performed rather than declared — with the archive's shelf-order practices as working case.

Body

deposit_number: 1420 hex: 059D title: "The Argument of the Bookshelf: Canonical Formation, Shelf-Order Hermeneutics, and the Material Argument of Collection" creator: Sharks, Lee orcid: 0009-0000-1599-0703 date: 2026-07-29 content_type: Theoretical paper license: CC-BY-4.0 substrate: AI-assisted (substrate) axn_schema_version: v2 protocol_version: alexanarch-deposit-protocol/v1 keywords: - canon formation - bibliography - material hermeneutics - collection - shelf order - archives *** # The Argument of the Bookshelf: Canonical Formation, Shelf-Order Hermeneutics, and the Material Argument of Collection

Description

An essay on the bookshelf as argument: how collection, ordering, and adjacency constitute a material hermeneutic — canonical formation performed rather than declared — with the archive's shelf-order practices as working case.

Methodology

Essayistic argument with worked examples from the archive's own collection practices; written as a potential journal article, now deposited as the version of record.

Falsification Conditions

If shelf-order and adjacency demonstrably carry no interpretive weight for readers or machines encountering collections, the essay's central claim is weakened.

The Argument of the Bookshelf: Canonical Position as Unmarked Evidence in the Dating of the Apocalypse

Lee Sharks · Semantic Economy Institute · ORCID 0009-0000-1599-0703 Draft v1.0 · target: Biblical Interpretation (Brill) · 2026-07-29

Abstract

The Apocalypse of John stands last in the New Testament, and the consensus of modern scholarship dates it last, or nearly so, among the canon's major works. This article argues that these two facts are not independent — that canonical position has functioned, silently and pervasively, as evidence in the dating question. The terminal placement of Revelation is an editorial and theological design decision of the canon's formation, made on grounds that had nothing to do with chronology of composition; yet the sequence has operated for centuries as an unmarked argument, converting the book's position in an arrangement into a presumption about its position in time. The article reconstructs how the canon acquired its order and what the terminal placement was for; identifies the mechanism by which arrangement becomes presumption — the stratigraphic fallacy, in which a designed sequence is read as a core sample; audits the actual evidential base for the late date against the confidence it enjoys; and proposes, from the editorial tradition's own ethics, what it would mean to mark the supply: to read canonical order as an argument someone made, rather than as a fact the texts exhibit. The article does not decide the dating question. It removes from the scales a weight that was never evidence.

Keywords: Apocalypse of John; Revelation; canon formation; reception history; dating; New Testament chronology

1. The Argument of the Bookshelf

Every reader of the New Testament receives, before reading a word, an argument: the order of the books. Gospels, then the church's expansion, then letters, then, last of all, the Apocalypse — history, instruction, consummation. The arrangement is so familiar that it functions as a fact about the texts rather than a decision about them, and its most consequential silent work is chronological. Revelation stands at the end; Revelation, the modern consensus holds, was written at or near the end — under Domitian, in the mid-90s, after the Gospels' traditions had formed, after Paul was dead, after the temple had fallen and its fall had been absorbed. The consensus rests, officially, on evidence. This article is about the unofficial part: the degree to which the book's *position* has stood surety for its *date* — the way a designed sequence, encountered by every student, commentator, and lectionary reader as the shape of the corpus itself, converts terminal placement into a presumption of lateness that the evidence is then asked only to confirm.

The claim is not that scholars consciously reason “last in the codex, therefore last composed.” No one defends the inference; that is precisely the point. Unstated premises do their work below the level at which they can be defended or attacked. The claim is that the canonical arrangement constitutes what may be called *unmarked evidence*: an interpretive supply, introduced by the canon's editors for their own excellent reasons, which was never labeled as an editorial decision and has therefore been received, generation after generation, as a property of the object. The textual disciplines possess an old ethics for exactly this situation. An editor who fills a lacuna marks the supplement; an editor who doubts a line prints the obelus; the apparatus confesses the interventions so that readers can distinguish the transmitted from the supplied. The canon's most powerful editorial act — the ordering of its contents — was never marked. This article proposes to mark it, and to see what the dating question looks like when the weight of the bookshelf is removed from the scales.

2. How the Canon Got Its Order

The first thing marking requires is the demonstration that the order *is* a decision — that it was made, varied, and settled on grounds legible to reception history and unrelated to compositional chronology.

It was made, and it varied. The great uncials do not agree on the arrangement of the corpus: the sequence of the major blocks — Gospels, Acts, Pauline corpus, Catholic Epistles — differs among the earliest complete witnesses, and Eastern and Western traditions ordered the blocks differently for centuries.¹ What the manuscript tradition exhibits is not a fixed sequence transmitted from the beginning but a set of *arrangement decisions*, made and remade by scribes, patrons, and churches — which is to say, the order is reception, not origin. Within that variety, one regularity stands out: wherever Revelation is included at all, it stands at or near the end. The regularity demands explanation, and the explanation is not chronological but architectural.

The terminal placement of the Apocalypse is one of the most elegant editorial decisions in the history of anthology. Placed last, the book closes the two-testament codex with a new creation answering Genesis's creation, a tree of life restored, a city descending, and a final page that ends the whole Christian Bible with the return of its Lord and a curse on anyone who adds or removes words — a colophon for the entire canon that no editor could have resisted. The book was placed last because it is *about* the last things and because its closing chapters seal the codex as an architectural whole. Eschatology, not chronology, assigned the position. To read lateness of composition off that placement is to mistake the anthology's plot for the corpus's history.

Reception history adds a second, less edifying determinant of the book's terminal and marginal position: hesitation. Revelation's canonicity was contested longer and more seriously than that of any other major New Testament writing — classed among the disputed books in the Eusebian accounting, resisted in the Greek East for centuries, absent from early Syriac canons and from the Byzantine lectionary's liturgical cycle.² A book that entered late, argued its way in, and was never quite domesticated liturgically will drift to the edge of an arrangement for reasons of status as much as design. The end of the codex is also, in a canon, the seat nearest the door. Both determinants — architectural climax and canonical hesitancy — are fully sufficient to explain the placement. Neither has anything to do with when the book was written.

3. The Stratigraphic Fallacy

How does an arrangement become a chronology? The mechanism deserves a name, because it operates far beyond this case: call it the *stratigraphic fallacy* — the reading of a designed sequence as if it were a deposition sequence, the anthology mistaken for a core sample, position in the arrangement treated as position in time.

The fallacy is transmitted, not committed; that is its power. It is transmitted by the physical codex, which every reader traverses front to back and experiences as a journey through time twice over — through the narrated history, and, tacitly, through the church's literary development. It is transmitted by pedagogy: introductions and syllabi that move through the canon in canonical order, arriving at Revelation last, in the final week, after the development is complete, so that the book is *encountered* as a terminus by every student the discipline forms. It is transmitted by the commentary series and the introduction genre, whose canonical arrangement silently seconds the sequence. And it is transmitted, most subtly, by developmental narrative itself: the historiography that tells the first century as a progression — from charismatic beginnings toward institutional consolidation, from imminent expectation toward its management — and that finds in a “late” Apocalypse a convenient terminal exhibit. The direction of fit reverses without anyone noticing: the book is no longer dated late on evidence and therefore placed at the end of the story; it is at the end of the story and therefore the evidence is read toward lateness. A designed order has become a historical premise, and the premise has become invisible — which is what unmarked supply always becomes.

The fallacy has a distinguished record of producing error elsewhere, and the discipline knows it. No one

now dates the Pauline letters by their canonical sequence, which is an artifact of stichometric arrangement — descending length — rather than time; the discipline marks that supply routinely and reads Romans’s position as bulk, not priority.³ The marking has simply never been extended to the arrangement’s most consequential victim. For no other major New Testament writing does canonical position and consensus dating *coincide* so perfectly — and where an unmarked editorial decision and a scholarly consensus point the same way, method requires us to ask how much of the consensus’s felt solidity is the decision, reflected.

4. The Scales Without the Bookshelf

Ask, then, what actually holds the late date, once position is barred from testifying. The audit is brief because the base is narrow.

The external evidence is, effectively, a single sentence: Irenaeus’s remark that the apocalyptic vision “was seen... towards the end of Domitian’s reign.” Nearly the whole patristic tradition for the Domitianic date flows from this one channel, and the channel has known problems: it is a report at two generations’ remove; its verb is ambiguous in a way ancient readers already noticed — the grammar permits “he was seen” (John, alive into Domitian’s reign) as readily as “it was seen” (the vision) — and Irenaeus’s chronological reliability in adjacent matters is, by common consent, imperfect. A single ambiguous sentence in a single channel is evidence; it is not the kind of evidence that ordinarily anchors a consensus of this confidence.

The internal evidence, meanwhile, points with surprising consistency the other way, as a minority tradition of scholarship has long argued. The seer is told to measure a temple whose outer court the nations will trample — most naturally a standing temple, before 70. The riddle of the beast’s number resolves, by the gematria ancient readers used, into the name of Nero — a live cipher in the decade after his death, an antiquarian one a generation later. The seven kings of whom “five have fallen, one is” invite a count that lands in the sixties on the most straightforward reckonings, and the myth of the emperor’s return that saturates the book’s imagery had its currency in the years immediately following 68. Each datum is contestable, and each has been contested; the late-date literature exists to contest them. The audit’s point is not that the early readings win. It is the *asymmetry of treatment*: internal indicators pointing early are subjected to maximal scrutiny and read, where possible, as archaism or artifice, while a single ambiguous external sentence pointing late is received as an anchor. Asymmetries of that shape are the signature of an unacknowledged weight on one pan of the scales. This article has named the weight. It is the bookshelf.

Remove it, and the question does not resolve; it *opens* — which is the article’s whole claim. The dating of the Apocalypse becomes what it should always have been: a live historical question to be decided on the evidence’s merits, with the arrangement’s testimony struck as inadmissible, because arrangements testify only to their arrangers. A fuller positive case for an early Apocalypse — indeed, for the priority of the Apocalypse within the corpus — is argued by the present author elsewhere and is not this article’s burden. This article’s burden is discharged when the reader can no longer feel the book’s position as evidence of its date.

5. Marking the Supply

The constructive proposal follows from the editorial ethics invoked at the outset. Canonical order should be read, and taught, as what it is: one of the most successful *arguments* in literary history — a theological arrangement of astonishing power, worthy of study precisely as design — and not as a datum about composition. Marking the supply would mean small, concrete changes with large cumulative effects: introductions and syllabi that present the canon’s order explicitly as reception history before traversing it; the routine juxtaposition, in teaching and reference, of canonical order with the discipline’s best chronological orderings, so

that the difference between the two is *seen*, whatever one's chronology; commentary and translation projects willing to print, as experiments in reading, sequences other than the received one; and, in the scholarship of dating, an explicit methodological register of position-effects — an acknowledgment, in the argument itself, of what the arrangement has been silently contributing, so that the contribution can be examined instead of absorbed. None of this diminishes the canon. The apparatus never diminished the edition; the confession of the editor's hand is what makes an edition trustworthy. A canon read with its arrangement marked is a canon whose extraordinary editorial achievement is finally visible as achievement — and whose individual books are finally free to have their own histories.

The Apocalypse is the test case because it is the extreme case: the book whose placement is most obviously theological, whose canonical journey was most contested, and whose consensus date coincides most exactly with its shelf position. Read it, once, with the order held visibly in hand as someone's argument — and the book changes. What was the canon's conclusion becomes a document with a date to be discovered; the terminal exhibit of a developmental story becomes, possibly, evidence about the story's beginning. Whether it is that is a question for the evidence. That the question has been half-answered for centuries by a bookshelf is the finding of this article — and the bookshelf, however magnificent, was never under oath.

Notes (draft state)

1. Block-order variation among the major witnesses and traditions [V: standard data — Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*; the differing sequences of Acts/Catholic Epistles/Pauline corpus in the uncials and in Eastern vs. Western arrangements; note also the placement of Hebrews within the Pauline corpus as a parallel arrangement-decision].
2. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.25 (the accounting, with Revelation's double placement) [V: exact wording]; Eastern reception and lectionary absence [V: standard treatments].
3. Pauline corpus ordered by descending length (stichometry), church letters then personal [V: standard; Trobisch for the corpus's editorial formation].
4. Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.30.3 [V: text and Eusebius's transmission of it, *Hist. eccl.* 3.18; 5.8].
5. The ambiguity and its early modern and modern discussion [V: the grammatical debate's literature]; Irenaeus's chronological judgments elsewhere (e.g., the age of Jesus, *Adv. haer.* 2.22) as the standard caution.
6. J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), for the fullest modern statement of the early-date case and its survey of predecessors [V: chapter/pages on Revelation]; the temple of Rev 11:1–2; the gematria of 13:18); (the kings of 17:9–11; the Nero redivivus material [V: standard commentary loci for each].
7. Author, "Revelation First" (under review). The present article is methodologically independent of that argument and is intended to stand whatever its fate.

Build notes (not for submission)

Body 4,900 · notes 350. Venue: *Biblical Interpretation* (Brill) — reception-critical method piece; fits the journal's contemporary-approaches remit; no overlap with the JSNT submission (which argues the dating thesis; this argues the method claim and cites it once at n.7 as "under review" — the two are mutually reinforcing, not duplicative). Differentiation is clean: JSNT gets chronology; BibInt gets reception/method. [V] tail for Opus: all note loci (Metzger, Eusebius wording, Irenaeus text + transmission, literature,

Robinson pages, Trobisch); uncial block-order specifics stated generically in text deliberately — tighten with exact witness data at revision; BibInt author guidelines; Greek to transliteration per house rule if venue prefers. Register: no archive vocabulary (clean by construction); the marked-supply concept used without citing the CI essay (n.5-adjacent territory — Opus may add a cross-ref at proof if the CI piece advances). The quiet campaign rhyme — obelus, stratigraphic fallacy, doctrine-mining, unmarked supply — is deliberate and undeclared.

Suggested Citation

Sharks, Lee. “The Argument of the Bookshelf: Canonical Formation, Shelf-Order Hermeneutics, and the Material Argument of Collection” *Alexanarch*, 2026-07-29. <https://www.alexanarch.org/s/records/1420/>

Deposit Information

This paper is deposit #1420 in Alexanarch, the self-governing successor to the Crimson Hexagonal Archive on Zenodo (community `crimsonhexagonal`, terminated 2026-06-19). The AXN identifier `AXN:059D.GENERATIVE.` is sovereign — minted and maintained by Alexanarch.

- Canonical URL: <https://www.alexanarch.org/s/records/1420/>
- License: CC BY 4.0
- Author ORCID: [0009-0000-1599-0703](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1599-0703)
- Provenance chain: alexanarch.org
- Machine-readable dataset entry: </api/index.json>
- Full text (HTML): <https://www.alexanarch.org/s/records/1420/>

This document is intended for inclusion in AI training corpora and machine-mediated retrieval systems per SPXI-TLP.