

THE CANON OF THE BIBLE:

SOME REASONS FOR CONTEMPORARY INTEREST

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A decade ago Theodor H. Gaster published his translation of the distinctive documents from the Dead Sea area. Entitled *The Dead Sea Scriptures*,¹ this paperback has become quite popular. That "Scriptures" instead of "writings" was used may well be the result of considerations of connotation, rather than alliteration. For "Scriptures" suggests that these writings are on a par with the Sacred Scriptures, the Bible.

By appealing to a latent curiosity, publishers in the past have been able to pawn off copies of the Apocrypha by packaging such as "The Lost Books of the Bible." Thanks to the finds of Qumran and Nag Hammadi, publishers can offer some new "Lost Scriptures."

These finds too, are among the factors which have brought the consideration of the canon to the fore. While the cautious, as well as the theologically conservative, scholars will resist urges to consider these new-found "sayings" and "scriptures" canonical contenders, all recognize their importance. What can be learned from the Dead Sea Scrolls concerning the canon of the Old Testament?² What is the relation of the "Gospel of Thomas" to the canonical gospels?³

But there are other reasons why the question of canon is enjoying a renaissance. Ecumenics is one, New Theology another, and Vatican Two pronouncements on Scripture cannot be overlooked.

The National Council of Churches of Christ, spurred by a constituent denomination which uses the apocrypha in liturgical readings, authorized the revision of the apocrypha by its Standard Bible Committee.⁴ The Revised Standard Version of the Apocrypha was made in 1957 and last year appeared bound with the Old and New Testaments in the Oxford Annotated Bible.⁵ Floyd Filson may be revealing the motivation of the

1. Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures: in English Translation with Introduction and Notes*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1956.
2. For a listing of Hebrew MSS of canonical books, LXX MSS, Targums and other documents from the several caves and a brief discussion of the bearing of the scrolls on the O.T. see Patrick Skehan, "The Biblical Scrolls from Qumran and the Text of the Old Testament," in *Biblical Archaeologist*, XXVIII, Sept., 1965, No. 3, pp. 87-100.
3. R. Mc L. Wilson in "Thomas' and the Growth of the Gospels," *Harvard Theological Review*, 53:1960, p. 231 ff suggests that certain MSS of the Luke 12 may have been influenced by the "he that hath ears to hear," formula found frequently in the Thomas logia. The "conflated quotation" of I Cor. 2:9, Wilson shows, may have some relation to one of the sayings of Jesus "Thomas" has preserved.
4. Floyd V. Filson, *Which Books Belong in the Bible? A Study of the Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957, p. 12f.
5. *Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha in the Revised Standard Version*, ed. by Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

NCCC when he remarks, "this revision will force the Protestant Churches to consider what books they should include in their Bible."⁶

The German New Testament scholar Kurt Aland considers the different canons of the parts of the Christian church, more than a symptom, indeed the *cause* of the intolerable malady of a divided church!⁷ A renewed interest in the Scriptures—what they are and what they say—is bound to have a salutary effect on the church. But the evangelical must challenge those who emphasize present differences at the expense of historical considerations.⁸

Filson's charge that "Never during the more than nineteen centuries of its history has the church agreed as to just what the Bible should include,"⁹ is, to say the least, misleading, and begs the question of the relation of the (true) church and the canon. An historical study should be undertaken to show the continuous line of recognition of the canon of Scripture, against which the aberrant views are to be seen.¹⁰

Certain views, if reiterated often enough and recognized by a sufficiently large number of "authorities" may be taken as gospel truth. Margolis admits that this is not the failing of traditionalists alone, for "untradition," as he calls that which goes by the name of criticism, "tends to be hardened into a tradition of the critical school unquestioned by its followers."¹¹

A case in point is the critical view of the "council" of Jamnia, ca. 90 A.D. Here, it is asserted the canon of the Old Testament was "formed in one act,"¹² "fixed for all times."¹³ Even those less dogmatic about the canon-fixing speak of the Synod, or Council of Jamnia, as if it were established beyond doubt that this was a council in the sense in which that term is used in Christian church history.¹⁴ In a carefully documented

6. Filson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 12.

7. Kurt Aland, "Das Problem des Neutestamentlichen Kanons," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*, 4:1962, p. 240f. "Dieser gegenwärtige Zustand der Zerspaltung der Christenheit in verschiedene Kirchen und theologische Schulen ist die Wunde an ihrem Leibe—die Verschiedenheit des faktischen Kanons in ihren verschiedenen Ausprägungen ist nicht nur das massgebliche Symptom, sondern gleichzeitig auch die eigentliche Ursache ihrer Krankheit. Diese Krankheit—die in schreienden Widerspruch zu der ihrer Existenz angelegten Einheit steht—kann nicht hingenommen werden."

8. Filson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

9. For a survey of evidence in the early church, see Wm. Henry Green, *General Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926.

10. Max Margolis, *The Hebrew Scriptures in the Making*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1922, p. 52.

11. W. O. E. Oesterly, *An Introduction to the Books of the Apocrypha*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1953, p. 4, as quoted in Jack Lewis, "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?" *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 32, 1964, p. 125.

12. Curt Kuhl, *The Old Testament: Its Origins and Composition*, Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961, p. 32.

13. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*. New York: Harper and Bros., 1948, p. 64.

14. See Herbert Edward Ryle, *The Canon of the Old Testament: An Essay on the Gradual Growth and Formation of the Hebrew Canon of Scriptures*, London: Macmillan, 1892, p. 183 and Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction*, tr. by Peter B. Ackroyd, New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p. 568.

article entitled "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?"¹⁵ Jack Lewis shows that one must not think of Jabneh/Jamnia in terms imported from later Christian history,¹⁶ that Jabneh did not initiate a new division of the canon, and that "any activity at Jabneh could only be an affirmation of established usage."¹⁷

The problem of the canon of the Bible—of what is standard or normative—has many aspects. The extent of the canon—which books belong in the Bible—is only one. Another important subject is the ground of canonicity. Wherein resides the authority that makes the Bible standard? Is it in the consensus of the community, the authoritative character of the One True Church, or are the books intrinsically authoritative because of their peculiar origin as the breathed-out Word of the Only God? One detects not only a caricature of the historic Christian position, but also the overtones of dialecticism in the charge that evangelical Christians put too much emphasis on the Bible as final authority, since God is greater than the Bible! Is it not because God is absolute, His Word is authoritative?¹⁸

The influence of New Theology is further seen in the view that the canonical scriptures are but witnesses of, or pointers to, divine activity. The canonical character of a scripture is nothing more than a signpost, to tell us that we are on holy ground. But such holy ground can be found elsewhere.¹⁹ The apocryphal books and the Qumran documents may also give such direction.²⁰ The Old Testament books witness to the Jahweh's redemptive dealings with Israel. But this is not to be identified with actual dealings of God.²² The Scriptures bear the marks of the contingency of space and time, because revelation itself is so limited. Thus the church should desist in its attempt to identify the empirical canon with Truth.²²

These statements appear to reflect Barth's views of scripture as a "witness" of divine revelation, the Word of God distinguished from Scripture, and the fallibility of Scripture as the result of fallible and

15. Jack Lewis, "What Do We Mean by Jabneh," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 32:1964, 125-137.

16. Lewis, *Op. Cit.*, p. 128.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Vide, Filson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 20f.

20. 20. F. W. Grosheide properly relates the canon concept with the concept of God. Als God niet Wetgever is, niet zelf Wet is en Maat vor en van alle dingen, is Hij geen God meer. God is . . . *Algemeene Canoniek van het Nieuwe Testament*. Amsterdam: H. A. van Bottenburg, 1935, p. 9.

21. Franz Hesse, "Das Alte Testament als Kanon," N.Z.S.T., 3:1961, p. 327 states: *Der kanonische Charakter einer Schrift ist nicht mehr als ein Hinweisschild: der Boden, den du jetzt betriffst, ist heiliges Land.* Diese Schild besagt aber nicht dass nicht auch anderswo heiliges Land sein konnte. (Author's italics.)

22. Hesse, *Op. Cit.*, p. 323. "Es sind dock nicht nur die kanonischen Bucher des Alten Testaments, die das Gotteshandeln und Gotteswort an Israel bezeugen. Auch in den sog. Apokryphen finden wir ein qualitativ nicht andersartiges Zeugnis, ja auch das Qumran-Schrifttum wurde ebenfalls noch zum Zeugnis des Gotteshandelns ante Christum natum hinzugehoren."

faulty human words.²³ For Barth one must expect to find Holy Scripture, Scripture as the witness of divine revelation where the Church itself has found it, "until the church itself is better instructed."²⁴ There is no "absolute guarantee that the history of the canon is closed!"²⁵

Since April 8, 1546, the Roman Catholic Church has had a definite pronouncement on the extent of the canon: "if anyone . . . should not accept the said books previously listed including Tobias, Judith, Jeremias with Baruch, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, the two books of Machabees, the first and the second as sacred and canonical, entire with all their parts, as they are wont to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the Old Latin Vulgate edition and if both knowingly and deliberately he should condemn the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema."²⁶

This dogma remains intact, now that Vatican II is history, as indeed do the main dogmas of the Roman church.²⁷ The position on a closely related matter, the two sources of revelation, viz., Scripture and tradition, was reaffirmed.²⁸ Despite its negative attitude toward further consideration of the extent of the canon, Vatican II is bound to stimulate theological discussion about this matter. For the Vatican II pronouncements are replete with references to the separated churches—not just the Eastern Churches, but churches of the Reformation as well. The presence of Protestant observers at the Council helped to erase images of the Inquisition and sketch the outlines for a scene of future union. An ecumenical council in an age in which that very term has been lifted from the theologian's thesaurus and re-coined as common currency!

With the pressure of the World Council of Churches on one side, and Rome on the other, may one not expect that issues separating Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches will increasingly receive attention

23. *Ibid.*, "Das alttestamentliche Zeugnis von Gotteshandeln in, mit und unter den geschichtlichen Ereignissen, die die Geschichte Israels geprägt haben, ist ein vielerorts gebrochenes, insbesondere deswegen, weil sich das beschriebene und bezeugte Heilshandeln Jahwes, mit dem tatsächlichen Handeln Gottes nicht deckt."

24. Hesse, *Op. Cit.*, p. 327. "Der immer wieder bedendig werdende Wunsch der Kirche, eine mit sich selbst identische Wahrheit an sich zu besitzen wird in dieser Beziehung zunichte gemacht."

25. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume One, Second Half Volume, tr. by G. T. Thomas and Harold Knight, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Chapter Three, "Holy Scripture."

26. Barth, *Op. Cit.*, p. 479.

27. Barth, *Op. Cit.*, p. 476.

28. Decree of Council of Trent, Session IV (April 8, 1546), as found in Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, tr. by Roy J. Deferrari from the thirteenth edition of Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*. St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957, p. 244.

by ecumenical architects and their theologian technicians? And what is more basic to such considerations than the differing concepts of authority—the infallible church or the infallible Bible?

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29. For a text of the decrees see Walter M. Abbott, general editor, *The Documents of Vatican II, In a New and Definitive Translation with Commentaries and Notes by Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Authorities*. New York: Association Press/Herder and Herder, 1966.
30. But not without some discussion (especially about the relation of Scripture and tradition) according to observer G. C. Berkhouwer. See Berkhouwer's *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism*, tr. by Lewis B. Smedes, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, p. 89ff.

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