PROBLEMS OF THE CANON

D.B. KNOX

The word 'canon' means 'a measuring rod', and has a double application with regard to the Bible. The fundamental meaning is that the books which compose the canon are the measuring rod or rule by which the church measures doctrine. (Cf. Acts 17:11). But secondly the word refers to the list of books which make up the canon or rule.

The New Testament provides clear evidence that the first Christians accepted unquestioned belief in a body of literature which they designated the Scriptures, which was of a special sacred and divine character.

Jesus and the apostles quoted this literature with the introductory phrase 'It is written', and this indicated final and absolute authority of the quotation (Matt. 4:4, 6 and 10; Rms. 1:17; Gal, 3:6, etc. cf. Matt. 21:42; Luke 24:27, John 7:42, 10:35, 20:9; Roms. 11:2). It was their opinion that what was written in Scripture God spoke both originally and to the present readers, (Matt. 19:5; 22:31; Acts 2:16 and Roms. 9:25; 2 Tim. 3:16), and He continues to speak the written Scripture (Heb. 3:7; 10:15). It is therefore an obvious but important truth that the Church did not need to form for itself the idea of a collection of books given by God to be an authorative rule of faith and practise. That is, it did not form for itself the idea of a Bible or a canon.

When at the beginning of the gospel Jews were converted to put their faith in Jesus as their Messiah, they did not abandon their Old Testament, nor modify their views with regard to it, except to see Jesus Christ as fulfilling it. Similarly, when Gentiles were converted, they were converted into a church where the Old Testament was already prized as the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2). Thus the Christian church had a canon from the beginning.

We do not know the way the books of the Old Testament came to be recognized as the very words of God, though it is plain that they were recognized in this way by the Jews of our Lord's time, a recognition which our Lord and the apostles shared and commended. Josephus and Peter (2 Peter 1:21) explicitly state that the books were written through the work of the Holy Spirit of prophecy.

(cf. 2 Peter 1:19). Because Josephus believed that prophecy had ceased after Ezra he was convinced that consequently there could be no sacred Scripture written from that time onward. (C. Apian 1:8).

The question arises, how was it that the early Christians who so highly prized the Old Testament scriptures, added to these scriptures fresh writings which they placed on a level with the Old, as fully inspired by God Himself? The explanation is to be found in the presence within early Christianity of apostles and prophets (1 Cor. 12:28, 29; Eph. 2:20; 4:11), who were recognised as being the instruments of the Holy Spirit to bring to completion the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, (Eph. 3:5; Rom. 16:26; Col. 1:26; Tit. 1:3). The apostles and prophets were the recipients of revelation (Eph. 3:5). The church of the apostles' time recognized the activity of the Holy Spirit in revelation e.g. 1 Tim. 4:1, 1 Cor. 2:9-16. The apostles were conscious that their words were authoritative (1 Thess. 4:2; 2:13; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). St. Paul was conscious that his writing was revelational. Just as Moses was a minister of the Old Covenant, and was read regularly, so the apostles were ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:14), and they were conscious that their writings were of Divine authority, and were to be read along with the Old Testament scriptures (e.g. 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3). Their writings were to be included in the standard of faith and conduct, so that obedience to them was to be the condition of Christian fellowship. (2 Thess. 3:14; 1 Cor. 14:37).

The early Christians were convinced that the Spirit had been poured out upon them and that all Christians had received the annointing of the Holy One. Christians experienced the Spirit as the Spirit of revelation, e.g. 1 Tim. 4:1. It was the consciousness of the Spirit's presence and activity which made it possible for the first Christians to accept the possibility (in contrast to Josephus) of new Scriptures, and within the New Testament itself there is a recognition of the phenomenon of New Testament Scriptures, e.g. Roms. 16:25; Eph. 3:3; 2 Peter 3:16; 1 Tim. 5:8. That it was the activity of the 'one sovereign Spirit' which had created the New Testament scriptures was also the belief of the author of the Muratorian Fragment (I).

Though the consciousness of the Holy Spirit's presence made the concept of additional Scripture acceptable, it did not follow in New Testament times any more than today that everything that a Christian said or wrote with the help of the Spirit should be treated as Holy Scripture and added to the corpus. What was required was the authentication by apostolic authority. There is clear evidence of this in 1 Cor. 14:37 where St. Paul makes a distinction between the words of an apostle and of a prophet or spiritual man.

It was the mark of a prophet or spiritual man that he will recognize that the apostolic writings are the commands of the Lord. St. Paul gives no indication that all prophecy within the Christian church had the character of being the command of the Lord; indeed he himself felt free to set aside prophetic warnings (Acts 21:10 and 11). But the apostolic word was of a different character. It was the norm for behaviour, and it bound the conscience (1 Thess. 4:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14; 1 Cor. 14:37; Philemon 8; 1 Tim. 3:15; 4:11, cf. 1 Peter 1:12; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Thess. 2:13). Apostolic letters were to be read in the church assemblies in the same way as the Old Testament was read each Sabbath day in the synagogues (Acts 15:21) and doubtless also read by Christians at their assemblies. Thus by apostolic authority the apostolic letters were read along with the other Scriptures (1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3) and were to be regarded as the commandments of the Lord. It is not surprising therefore that they were included in the term Scriptures, as for example all Paul's letters are in 2 Peter 3:16 and Luke's gospel is in 1 Tim. 5:18. (Nor is there any reason for excluding the New Testament Scriptures from 2 Tim. 3:16). The same identification of Old and New Testament writers as equally scriptural is observable in the Apostolic Fathers. Polycarp (Chapter 11) united the Psalms and Ephesians under the titles of 'In the sacred books ... and it is said in these Scriptures "be ye angry and sin not" and "let not the sun go down upon your wrath"'. Similarly 2 Clement 2:4 after quoting a passage from Isaiah adds 'again, another Scripture "I come not to call the righteous but sinners"'. Ignatius of Antioch was conscious of a canon of New Testament Scriptures which he placed alongside the Old Testament

(Philad. 5). He called these Scriptures the gospel and the apostles. Just as in the New Testament the title 'the law' is used for the whole of the Old Testament so 'the gospel' is used by Ignatius of the whole of the New Testament (Smyrn 7), 'Give heed to the prophets and especially to the Gospel'. In the Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs (Benjamin 11), the Acts and Pauline epistles are included in the concept of Holy Scripture. Thus as soon as the early church emerges in the pages of history early in the second century the New Testament was as firmly canonical as was the Old Testament.

The activity of the Holy Spirit and Christ's commission of the apostles are the two factors which provide the possibility of New Testament Scripture. Scripture inspired by the Spirit is authoritative from the moment it is written. It is recognized as authoritative when known to have apostolic authorization. The first recipients of the New Testament writings would know of this authorization from the beginning. Other Christian churches would learn of the existence and authorization of these Scriptures through the lapse of time. In this way the canon of each local church would grow in volume though not in authority.

It is not hard then to see how the New Testament canon must have been formed. For example, when St. Paul wrote a letter to a Christian church he was writing to a community who already had the concept of Holy Scripture as distinct from other literature - yet we find that the recipients added his letter to Scripture. It must be because they were firmly convinced that his writings were prophetic, as the hearers of Isaiah were that he was a prophet; and St. Paul endorsed this conviction. His message, he said was not the word of man but of God 1 Thess. 2:13. It is of course possible that Paul was wrong but the early Christians did not think this was so. They put his letters into the Canon because they believed the Spirit of God was speaking through the Apostle. So it must have been with all the New Testament books. That is to say, these books would have to have been received as prophetic by the first recipients if they were to be received as prophetic by any. For the character of prophecy cannot grow in a writing. It is either there as the ink is drying on the paper, or it is never there.

If it were to be established that a writing was not accepted as Scripture by its recipients when it first appeared, this would be prima facie evidence that it was not Scripture (The Shepherd of Hermes is such a case). However, the re-examination and the weighing of the evidence for the inspiration of a *book already received* is not evidence of this, but only of the scrupulous care that Christians took in the formation of their canon, which should reassure us in using this canon inasmuch as we no longer have access to the evidence through which it was formed.

The Canon grew in the sense that it grew as more prophetic books were written, and in the further sense that different Christian churches enlarged their Canon by receiving copies of New Testament prophecy from churches who had received and recognized them in the first place. But it did not grow in the sense that a book not at first received anywhere was later put in, for that is an impossible concept in view of the very high authority given to the canonical Scriptures by the early Christians. It is only because they were persuaded that the Holy Spirit was speaking also through the writings of the apostles that they could have put these writings alongside the scripture of which Jesus said that God had spoken it.

No decision of church or council, nor growing Christian acceptability, can confer canonicity on a book. What Christians did was to recognize canonicity. They did this from the beginning. A good example is the early letter of Polycarp written about eighty years after the crucifixion. In this short letter (less than five pages in Lightfoot's edition) there are fifty-one quotations, drawn from seventeen of the twenty seven New Testament books. It is plain that for Polycarp and his readers the New Testament books were as authoritative as those of the Old Testament.

It is interesting to note that neither our Lord, nor the New Testament writers, although they held clear and strong views of t the authority of scripture, defined the limits of canonicity. In this, doubtless, the providence of God may be seen; for the infant Christian church did not have a closed, but an increasing canon, augmented from time to time as the apostles either wrote or authenticated those books which we now know as the New Testament.

Nor should we regard it as accidental, but rather providential, that limits of canonicity were not settled among the Jews themselves until after the separation of the unbelieving Jewish community from the Christian church. Had the limits of the scripture been a firm and closed question in the time of our Lord and His apostles, the addition of the New Testament books to the canon would have presented a difficulty for the Christian community.

In this connection there is a further point to note. Although it is inconceivable that Jesus and his hearers did not know to what books he was referring when he said that the Scripture cannot be broken, or that Paul did not know what books he had in mind when he commended the Jews for preserving the oracles of God, or that the apostles did not know what Old Testament books they were imposing as God's word on their gentile converts, yet the content of the canon, i.e. the list of canonical books, is not a doctrine of revelation but has been left by Providence to Christians to arrive at by the use of their God given gifts of intelligence, spirituality and historical research. The result is that some books are more certainly in the canon than others. There is however little reason for thinking that any have been included in error, or that any genuine prophecy has been omitted. Throughout the centuries Christians have confirmed that the books of the canon are God's word, for they have heard his voice in them.

It is only the phenomenon of prophecy which makes the concept of an authoritative canon intelligible. Prophecy may be defined as men speaking from God, being moved by God's Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Prophecy is God's words spoken through the agency of men, e.g. "God spoke by the mouth of David" (Acts 4:25). Put another way, prophecy is human words spoken by men which are God's words because he had spoken them through his influence and control of the speaker.

Since God created mankind in his own image, human personality has an affinity with the divine so that human relationships are reflective of the divine nature and character. It follows that language drawn from human experience can be a reliable medium to describe in a true way divine thought and character and actions. Consequently it is possible for God to use human language directly and not merely analogically to describe his relationship with us.

The Bible tells how God has used human language to speak to men directly; for example, at the burning bush God addressed Moses directly, and at Mt. Sinai God spoke directly to the Children of Israel the Ten Words. During his incarnate life our Lord Jesus Christ taught his contemporaries the things of God using direct human language. Thus Scripture testifies that God has used human words for direct communication between himself and men. There is no suggestion in the context that he was using the language analogically, but on the contrary simply, directly and normally, as we would use it in communicating one with another.

Besides these words directly addressed by God to men, as at Sinai or during the incarnation there is another phenomenon, namely, of God addressing us through prophets. For example: there frequently occurs in the Old Testament the phrase 'Thus says the Lord' followed by words in direct speech addressed to men by God. These words of God through the prophet are not men's words about God but are God's words addressed to men. This is how the prophet designated them and this is how they were received. Consequently these words will have the character of infallibility, that is to say, of utter reliability and truthfulness; and they will be perspicuous, that is to say, able to be understood by the hearer, for this was God's purpose in speaking them: and they will be authoritative over the will and conscience, being the words of God.

Holy Scripture brings before us a third phenomenon. Not only are there direct words of God spoken at Sinai or in Galilee, and also words spoken by prophets, but thirdly there is the phenomenon of written prophecy. God not only used the mouth of his servants but also the pen of his servants, and so we have the fact of Holy *Scripture*, that is to say prophetic *writings*. The New Testament testifies to this third phenomenon, for example Matt. 19:5. Here reference is made by Jesus to words which he ascribed to God which were never spoken but were written from the beginning. In fact the whole of the Old Testament has this character of being written prophecy and has received the imprimator of Jesus when he said 'the Scripture cannot be broken', for only God's word has this infallible, unbreakable characteristic.

Notice that it is the Scripture, the written word, the word which we have, to which Jesus testified that it was God's word.

Jesus taught that what the Scripture says God says (Matt. 19:5; 22:31) The same attitude to Holy Scripture is reflected in the rest of the New Testament. In Acts 1:16 and 4:25, the Apostles speak of God as the author of the words of the Old Testament. So too in Hebrews 3 the writer, quoting Psalm 95, bypasses the human author with the phrase, 'The Holy Ghost says'. St. Paul puts the matter in a nutshell in 2 Tim. 3:16 in which he states that Scripture is 'God-breathed'. The words are God's words. Just as the words a man breathes are his words, and reflect what he wants to convey, to the best of his ability, so the God breathed Scriptures are God's words and reflect God's intentions perfectly and completely. Therefore, Holy Scripture, since it is the word of God, is true in respect to all the things which God is saying through it. It will be infallible, that is to say, utterly reliable, it cannot be broken or proved wrong, it must be fulfilled. It will also be able to be understood because this was God's purpose in giving it, and it will be sufficient because this again is God's purpose that the men of God might be completely furnished for every good work (1 Tim.3:17).

Of course it has always been possible to reject the notion that God has spoken and to attribute the words which say 'thus saith the Lord', to the religious imagination of the writer and to explain Scripture as merely human reflections about divine truth. It is possible to reject the authority of Paul or the other writers of the New Testament as though God's Spirit was not speaking through their penmanship. But prophecy was a recognized phenomenon in biblical times. Jeremiah, for example, distinguished clearly between true prophecy and imitative prophecy (Jer. 26:15; 27:15) and we must face the question where there is such a category as true prophecy, because if it is a fact then it becomes central to all our discussions of our knowledge of God. Yet in present day writings on the character and authority of Scripture and on the criteria for the formation of the canon the concept of prophecy is often over-looked. If we agree that there is such a thing as written prophecy it means that prophecy is distinct from all other human literature. Prophecy is from heaven, the word of God, infallible, true,

utterly reliable, meeting our needs and which can never be broken and will always be fulfilled. All other human literature, however inspiring, however true, however helpful is from men.

The concept of written prophecy involves the concept of the Canon, that is, the list of writings recognized as prophetic and therefore authoritative. It is conceivable that we may make a mistake in our list of such writings; we may include in the canon literature which God has not spoken in this prophetic way, or we may thrust out of the canon that which God has spoken. But if we believe there is prophecy, then we must have a canon, that is to say, a list of what is recognized as prophetic and so different from all other human literature because of its authoritative nature through its divine authorship.

The concept of Deuterocanonical books, if this is taken to mean a second level of authority, is of course of fantasy. Books are either God's prophetic word, or not, and if not, they are to be classified with human literature and excluded from the canon of Scripture, however helpful or true they may be. Similarly there cannot be a 'canon within the canon', because prophecy does not admit of degrees. God's word may have different purposes (and therefore different values for us at different times), but if it is God's word, i.e. prophecy, it will have, (and always have) the characteristics of the divine nature. The problem of the canon is a modern problem, springing from an abandonment of the traditional Christian doctrine of Holy Scripture. Inadequate explanations are offered for the existence of the canon of Scripture in the early Church, e.g. 'The authority of the biblical writings is based on the fact that they reliably record the predictions of Christ in the Prophets and the testimony to Christ of the Apostles'. (*The formation of the Christian Bible* Campenhausen, p.330). This puts the cart before the horse. The authority of the Old Testament for Christians never rested on its reliability in predicting Christ. It was authoritative before Christ began his ministry (cf. his threefold 'It is written') It was authoritative because it was God's word, and for this reason its predictions could be relied on, even before they were fulfilled in Christ (e.g. 'That which is written must be fulfilled in me'). It was authoritative because it was prophecy, that is, breathed out by God, through the mouth of his servant.

The same is true of writers of the New Testament. The spiritually minded man recognized them as prophecy (1 Thess 2:13). This was the only way prophecy is ever recognized. Thus the spiritually minded man would recognize that what Paul wrote was the word of God (1 Cor. 14:37). In fact, such recognition of God's word was the test for spiritual mindedness.

The problem of the canon cannot be solved till the question of the existence of written prophecy is resolved. For if it does not exist, the concept of a canon will evaporate to vanishing point.

The concept of canon is a simple one; it is simply the putting into the pidgeon hole of prophecy certain writings, while all other literature goes into the other pidgeon hole. There is no mystique about the canon. There may be a mistake in the list, though there is little liklihood of this. Christians today receive the canon through those who first received the documents and accepted them as prophetic. The only test nowadays is the test of consistency. Plainly if a writing is inconsistent with the rest of the canon God could not have written it.

Everything that is rightly in the canon is the word of God, so that whatever the document is plainly teaching, that God is teaching. We will need of course to use the reflective gifts given by God to us and to others, to find out what God is teaching us through these historic documents. For the most part this is plain, but sometimes it needs some degree of exegetical skill to elucidate the meaning. For example, we need to distinguish the principle which is the unchanging mind of God for human relationships from the cultural form through which the principle must of necessity be expressed. For if the culture changes, the form of expression may no longer be appropriate, but the principle taught us through this expression will be abiding and part of God's revelation to us. But we are not at liberty to set aside what Scripture teaches about the mind of God for us, once this is established, for Scripture is authoritative. It is God's word to us. Though we are at liberty to believe that the early church made a mistake in its inclusion of any particular book, and so may reject this from the canon, we are not at liberty to pick and choose from

among the statements of a writer that we accept as prophetic as to what we would like to believe or to obey.

This history of the formation (or, better, the articulation) of the canon has come into the centre of theological investigation nowadays. This is not unconnected with the demise of the school of Biblical Theology which occupied a prominent position in theology studies a quarter of a century ago. The term 'Biblical Theology' described a movement in the nineteen fifties which aimed at reasserting the authority of the Bible, though in a changed form. The movement was characterized by two assumptions of which the concept of a canon was a natural corollary. These were: (i) that there is a unity to be discovered in the Bible, and (ii) that if the Bible's teaching can be truly distilled, the distillate would have, without further argument, a normative status.

As a consequence Biblical Theology was seen to be quite distinct from the study of religions. All this is now in the past. Nowadays, in the dominant section of the theological establishment, the religious experience in the Bible is no longer regarded as distinct from but continuous with other forms of religious experience in non biblical religions. If this assumption is correct (and it is a near universal assumption nowadays) then there can no longer be any such thing as a distinctive Christian theology as a discipline in its own right, as in the past. It now becomes merely a subdivision of the study of human religiosity and religious ideas. Instead of the unity, the theological diversity of the Bible is now accepted, and its authority *qua* Bible, can no longer be assumed.

A distinctive feature of the Biblical Theology school was a denial of the existence of inscripturated prophecy, for it placed the authoritative revelation of God in the acts narrated in the Old and New Testament, and not (as in classic Christian theology) in the verbal propositions of the narrative, e.g. 'The Bible is not primarily the word of God, but the record of the acts of God, together with the human response thereto' G.E. Wright, *The God who Acts* p.107. However, revelation through uninterpreted acts as is a chimera. The problem that Christian theologians must grapple with in dealing with the Canon is whether there is a

revelation from God unique to the Old and New Testaments given by God himself. Biblical Theology said that there was, but accepted the presupposition of modern biblical scholarship of the fallible character of the biblical writings, so that the supernatural revelation, which it affirmed, lay in the acts and not in the interpretive narrative of the acts. Yet this position that revelation was in acts and not in propositions ignored one of the most fundamental acts of God recorded in the Old and New Testaments, namely, the act of prophecy. Prophecy is verbal action, and in the Old and New Testaments this verbal action of God is sometimes auditory, at other times inscripturated. 'The God Who Acts' of Biblical Theology remains a silent God. But to accept this conclusion is to abandon the God of Christianity! For it is the God who spoke that the Christian Creed affirms, 'who spoke by the prophets'.

If biblical writings are prophecy as they claim and as they have been testified by Christ and the Apostles, then there is an authority within our reach which is unique, and it follows that only religious experience which conforms to that inscripturated revelation is authentic. On this basis, Christian theology is sharply distinguished from the study of religions which are not based on the unique supernatural revelation of the true God.

The fatal internal contradiction of the Biblical Theology movement was that while seeking to maintain belief in the transcendent God who acted on behalf of His people, it exhausted any supernaturalness from these acts of His, the Scriptures, on which it based its knowledge of his supernatural acts. The collapse of this movement (following the earlier abandonment of the traditional doctrine of scripture) has left the concept of the canon in an equivocal position. If the canon does not consist of unique revelation, what are the criteria of its boundaries, or indeed why should it exist as a distinct body of literature at all?

The phenomenon of inscripturated prophecy is the watershed. Inscripturated prophecy is a thoroughly supernatural phenomenon, as is the Incarnation of God's speaking the Ten Words out of the fire at Sinai. If the phenomenon is accepted as actual, then Christian tradition, including the formation of the list of canonical writings, is merely a commentary, accurate or otherwise, on

the revelation, and is subordinate and anciliary. But from the standpoint of modern theology, the formation of the canon in the sense of the articulation of the list of canonical books is a most important aspect of the history of religion which, in the face of denial of the phenomenon of inscripturated prophecy, becomes the source of our knowledge of religious truth. In a word, the crux is whether inscripturated prophecy exists, for if it does it creates a canon which must supersede human experience as the subject matter of theology.

The canon came into existence because God's people believed they were in possession of prophetic writings, writings different in character from all other literature because they were spoken by God, as Jesus and his apostles clearly teach. The existence of prophetic writings and the canon are identical concepts. If the concept of the canon is to be freed from the enigma in which it is at present involved, modern theological study will need to come to terms with the concept of prophecy.

D. BROUGHTON KNOX