

HOLY SCRIPTURE

AND

THE CANON

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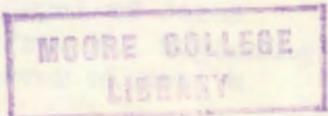
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THE CANON

The word 'canon' means 'a measuring rod', and thus it has a double application with regard to the Bible. The original and fundamental meaning is that the books which compose the canon are the measuring rod or rule by which the church measures doctrine. Thus the canon, i.e. the books which comprise it, is the standard by which Christian truth is to be tested. (Cf Acts 17:11) But secondly, the word 'canon' refers to the list of books which make up the canon or rule. It is this latter use of the word which is the subject of this article.

Primarily the word canon refers to the character of the books. They are the rule by which our religious ideas are to be measured. They are this because of their character, which results from God being their Author. They are inspired by Him for the purpose of being a revelation of Himself. Being the words of God, they are of supreme authority. If a writing is not canonical in this sense of being inspired by God as a revelation, that is, if it is not God-breathed, no decision of church or council can ever confer this character of canonicity on it. On the other hand, if it is inspired by God, no adverse decision of the church can ever detract from its character and God-given canonicity. That there was such a body of documents having this character in existence at the time of our Lord and His apostles, is evident from the attitude and words of our Lord and His apostles, and it is not difficult to establish by historical research, that these documents were what we know as our Old Testament.

Thus, when the Christian church was brought into being by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the apostles, it had from the beginning a canon of scripture. It was never without a

Bible, that is to say, without books which were regarded as of absolute authority in matters of faith and conduct.

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 very Word of God. Thus the Christian church was not required to form for itself the idea of a canon, (or, as we would say, a Bible), that is, a collection of books given by God to be the authoritative rule of faith and practice. It had a canon from the beginning.

But 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 place 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 recognised 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),

(Christ had instituted a new covenant in His death Eph. 3:2) 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).

It is interesting to note that neither our Lord, nor the New Testament writers, although they held clear and strong views of 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. We should not regard it as accidental, but rather providential, that the 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, so as to be reflected in their teaching, the addition of the New Testament books to the canon would have presented a difficulty for the Christian community. As it was, we can see from the pages of the New Testament that the apostolic writings were placed by the apostles themselves alongside the Old Testament as scripture (1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:16).

There are three distinct things to keep in mind when considering the canon. (i) How the books came to have their character as canonical. (ii) How the books came to be accepted as canonical, i.e. how the canon came to be formed in the second sense of the word. (iii) How the books composing the canon

may be verified and tested as canonical in the first sense of the word, that is to say, as God-inspired and, therefore, the standard by which faith and practice is to be shaped.

With regard to the first question, Holy Scripture was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and, therefore, such books have the character of canonicity, i.e. they have the authority of God from the moment of their composition. The Christian church cannot by any of its decisions either add to, or detract from the character of such a book. If it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, it has the character of canonicity from the time of its composition. What books should be regarded as having this character is the second question.

The second question, with regard to the Old Testament, is shrouded in the mist of history. All that we may say is that the Old Testament canon was accepted by the Jewish church and by our Lord and His apostles, at the time of the beginning of the gospel. With regard to the New Testament books, the history of their formation into a list of recognised books is not altogether clear, as the evidence has not fully survived, but it was probably as follows:- A book would be authoritative from the time that the prophet or the apostle wrote it and imposed it on the church to which it was addressed, as an authoritative word, and it would be recognised as authoritative by all that section of the Christian church which knew of its apostolic authorship, and of its imposition by apostolic authority on the Christian church. However, New Testament books were written to local Christian communities, and there would, therefore, be a passage of time between the writing of any book (with its acceptance by the local church to

which it was written), and the acceptance of it throughout the whole Christian fellowship. Time would have to elapse before the book was known throughout the worldwide Christian church. We know that the early Christian church was conservative in its willingness to recognise books as canonical, and this, of course, was right, and is our safeguard. It was no light thing to place fresh books alongside the Old Testament Bible, as being equally God-inspired. In fact, it was not till the end of the fourth century that the Christian church came to one mind about all the New Testament books which it included in the list of the canon.

Thirdly, the question arises, how may we know that any particular book is rightly included in that list? Some theologians affirm that it is the decision of the church which confers canonicity on a book. But this is not so. All the church can do is to recognise the character of the book, and for the great bulk of our New Testament books, this character was recognised without dispute by Christians from the time of the composition of these books, for they were received at the hands of the apostles.

Most of our New Testament was received everywhere in the church from the beginning. No New Testament book was rejected everywhere and then accepted. But some books were only known locally at first, and the passage of time was needed for them to be accepted universally. (The history of this growing unanimity on the part of the church with regard to what should be included in the canon is traced in the textbooks).

A test that may be applied to a book claiming canonicity, is the confirmity of its doctrine with the rest of scripture. For if a book is in

reality canonical, the Holy Spirit will have been its author, and this implies that its teaching about God will be in conformity with the teaching of all those other books of which the Holy Spirit is also the author. In this way, the remarkable agreement in doctrine and ethics throughout the pages of the Bible is a striking vindication of the truth of the inspiration of scripture and the correctness of the canon.

The canonicity of a book is sealed for us by the fact that the Christian church has heard God's voice in it through the centuries. The word of God is active. Christ's sheep, our Lord affirmed, hear His voice. Each generation in the church receives the Bible as the Word of God and hands it on, adding its own testimony to the uniform testimony of God's people who have gone before, that in these pages, Christ's voice is indeed to be heard. The church may recognise the canon as something already existing. It cannot, by its decision, confer canonicity; for no church or council can confer authority on a Word which is already the source of authority because breathed forth by God and because it attests itself in the heart of the believer by the testimony of the Spirit as God's Word.

THE CANON

A paper read to the Fellowship of Biblical Studies
Symposium 24 March 1976

(a) THE CANON AND INSPIRATION

The New Testament provides clear evidence that the Christians accepted unquestioned belief in a body of literature which they designated the Scripture, 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 & 10; Roms. 1:17; Gal. 17:3 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 require to form for itself the idea of a collection of books given by God to be an authoritative rule of faith and practise. That is, it did not form for itself the idea of a Bible or a canon. The church did not grow spontaneously but was founded; and the apostles, the authoritative teachers sent by Christ carried with them a body of divine Scriptures which they imposed on the churches which they founded, to be received with the same absolute authority as Jesus and the apostles had received these books. That is to say, these written words were to be received as the very words or oracles of God. (Matt. 19:5; Rom. 3:2; Heb. 3:7).

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 the author of 2 Peter were of the opinion that the books were written through the work of the Holy Spirit of prophecy. Because Josephus believed that prophecy ceased after Ezra, he was convinced that there could be no sacred Scripture written from that time onward. (C. Apian 1:8)

With regard to the New Testament, the extraordinary fact that has to be explained is how the first Christians who held the highest possible views of the character and authority of Scripture came to add to the Canon books written in their own time. The explanation is their conviction about the presence of the Holy Spirit of prophecy and the presence of the apostles commissioned by Christ and endorsed by him with the signs of apostleship. The early Christians were convinced that the Spirit had been poured out upon them and that all Christians had received the anointing 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 there is a recognition of the phenomenon of New Testament Scriptures, e.g. Roms. 16:25; Eph. 3:3; 2 Pet. 3:16; 1 Tim. 5:8.

Though the consciousness of the Holy Spirit's presence made the concept of additional Scripture acceptable, it did not follow 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 a 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 & 11). But the apostolic word was 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 Pet. 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 1 Peter 3:16 and Luke's gospel is in 1 Tim. 5:18. (There is no reason for excluding the New Testament Scriptures from 1 Tim. 3:16). The same identification is observable in the Apostolic Fathers. Polycarp (Chapter 11) united the Psalms and Ephesians "In the sacred books ... as it is said in these Scriptures 'be ye angry and sin not' and 'let not the sun go down upon your wrath'". Similarly 11 Clement 2:4 after quoting a passage from Isaiah adds "again, another Scripture 'I came not to call the righteous but sinners!'"

Ingnatius was conscious of a canon of New Testament Scriptures which he placed alongside the Old Testament (Philadd 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 Ingnatius 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.

"What needs emphasis at present about these facts is that they obviously are not evidences of a gradually-heightening estimate of the New Testament books, originally received on a lower level and just beginning to be tentatively accounted Scripture; they are conclusive evidences rather of the estimation of the New Testament books from the very beginning as Scripture, and of their attachment as Scripture to the other Scriptures already in hand. The early Christians did not, then, first form a rival "canon" of "new books" which came only gradually to be accounted as of equal divinity and authority with the "old books"; they received new book after new book from the apostolical circle, as equally "Scripture" with the old books, and added them one by one to the collection of old books as additional Scriptures, until at length the new books thus added were numerous enough to be looked upon as another section of the Scriptures." B.B. Warfield
The formation of the Canon of the New Testament.
Inspiration and Authority of the Bible p.412.

The apostles were instructed and commissioned by Jesus to be the founders of the Gospel. In the forty days after the resurrection he instructed

them in the things concerning the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), and in the prophecies of scripture with reference to himself (Luke 24:44-47). The sermons in Acts and the instructions and injunctions in the apostolic letters will reflect this teaching of Jesus.

Before his death he promised that the Holy Spirit would reveal truth which the apostles were not then in a position to receive from him. The Spirit would lead them into all truth, as the Spirit would reveal his mind (John 16:12-15).

The apostles were commissioned by Christ to be his mouthpiece (Luke 10:16, Gal. 4:14). They spoke, they were God's messengers (Gal. 4:14; 1 Thess. 2:13) and wrote with authority (1 Cor. 14:37 etc.) and Christ gave them signs confirming their authority.

It was through the apostolic and prophetic ministry that the New Testament revelation was given (Eph. 3:5) and received.

(b) THE LIMIT OF THE CANON

It is inconceivable that Jesus and his hearers did not know to what he was referring when he said 'the Scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35). It is equally inconceivable that St. Paul did not know what books were contained in the scriptures which he commended the Jews of his time for preserving or that the apostles did not know what Old Testament books they were imposing on the Gentile churches. What were these books?

(a) The nearest contemporary evidence of what these books might be is Josephus (C. Apian 1:8) when he confines the Scriptures to 22 books. Josephus' views were forcefully reiterated by Cyril of Jerusalem in his catechistical lectures (4.35) and endorsed by Jerome.

(b) It is worth noting that Philo in his voluminous writings never quoted from the Apocryphal Old Testament. It is not intrinsically likely that Josephus or the so called Council of Jamnia should have innovated by excluding these Apocryphal books if they were already received as Scripture.

(c) Moreover the Old Testament canon which Jesus knew had the same order of the Old Testament books as the 'Palestinian' canon of Josephus. It is very difficult to see how the Deuterocanonical books could be included in this order.

Because of this evidence, the Apocryphal or 'Deuterocanonical' books of the Old Testament can only be regarded as having very doubtful claims to

have been spoken to us by God. The Council of Trent, however, regarded them as of equal inspiration as the rest of the Old Testament. But just as it is a principle of Roman Catholic moral theology that doubtful orders ought never to be exercised and that doubtful laws do not bind the conscience, so deuterocanonical books ought not to be put alongside undoubted scripture. Normative authority over the conscience must be absolute, or it is non-existent. God's word binds the conscience, and being God's word does not admit of degrees.

Similarly with regard to the New Testament canon, a writing is either God's word (as understood by Jesus and the apostles) or it is not. 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 these 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 church would grow in volume though not in authority. 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 (e.g. the Shepherd of Hermes). 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 in as much as we no longer have access to the evidence through which it was formed.

PROPHECY AND THE CANON

Paper read at a Symposium at St. Barnabas Broadway

27 October 1975

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 has spoken them through his influence and control of the speaker. Thus Balaam told Balak that he was unable to say just anything that Balak wanted but could only speak the words which God gave him. (Numbers 22:38; 23:5).

Before we look more closely at the phenomenon of prophecy, we must examine whether human language is able to be a vehicle for the expression of accurate and infallible divine communication. We note first that God created mankind in his own image. This includes the concept that human personality has an affinity with the divine and that human relationships are reflective of the divine nature and character so that language drawn from human experience is 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: We frequently read in the Old Testament the phrase "Thus says the Lord" followed by words in direct speech addressed to us by God. These words of God through the prophet are not men's words about God but are God's words addressed to us. 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 our words 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 imprimatur 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. Consequently Jesus appealed to the Scripture as final authority. He repelled the temptations of Satan with the phrase, "It is written." That is to say, this written word has final authority, because it is God's word. He confidently expected all the Old Testament prophecies to be inevitably fulfilled. What is written must be fulfilled (Luke 22).

The same attitude to Holy Scripture is reflected in the rest of the New Testament. In Acts 1:16; 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 Psalms 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 I breath are my words, and reflect what I want to convey, to the best of my 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).

It is necessary to distinguish what God is saying from the form of the language through which this word comes. This is true in all human writing and is also true of Holy Scripture. For example, if we use a metaphor we distinguish between what is intended to be said and the form in which it comes. If I were to say 'you are a donkey' you would be mistaken if you tried to prove this wrong by showing that you did not have four legs or unduly long ears, indeed that endeavour would only prove the truth of my statement! We see then that in all language we must distinguish between what is intended to be said and the form in which it comes. What God intends to say will be true, or else it was not God who said it. Similarly, it will not be stated ambiguously nor will the form of the language be misleading. Thus if God intends to teach us about history or about science as a means by which we are to learn about him, then those statements about history and science will be true, for if they are not, God never said them. For the most part it is not hard to find out what a passage is intending to teach nor to distinguish in the teaching from the form in which it is expressed. This is the sense in which the written Scripture is infallible and true.

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 prophesying 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 the concept of prophecy is often overlooked. If we agree that there is such a thing as 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 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 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 prophetic and so different from all other human literature.

The Christian church has always had a Canon. In the time of Jesus and the New Testament the concept of Scripture as the word of God was already firmly established and Jesus and the Apostles testified to it. Paul commended the Jews of his time as having preserved the oracles of God, that is to say he confirmed the Canon of his time. The

concept of Deuterocanonical books, if this is taken to mean a second level of authority, is of course a 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.

It is not hard 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 were not the word of man but of God. You may of course think Paul was wrong but the early Christians did not think this was so. They put his book into the Canon because they believed the Spirit of God was speaking through the Apostle. So it must have been with all New Testament books. That is to say, these books would have to have been received as prophetic by the first recipients. 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. Thus a book would have had to have been accepted as prophetic by the first recipients for anyone else to accept it as prophetic. 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 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.

The concept of Canon is a simple one; it is simply the putting into the pigeon hole of prophecy certain writings, while all other literature goes into the other pigeon hole. There is no mystique about the Canon. There may be a mistake in the list, though there is little likelihood 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 elucidate the principle which is being expressed from the cultural form through which the principle is 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 once this is established, for

Scripture is authoritative. It is God's word to us and his word is infallible, reliable, and will not trip us up. From this it follows that God will not speak one sentence of a writer and not the next; just as when Isaiah said "Thus saith the Lord", the whole of what he said under this heading is the word of God. Of course the prophet may be a false prophet, or the apostle a false apostle. But this was not the view of the early Christians with regard to our Scriptures. Though we are at liberty to believe that the early church made a mistake in its inclusion of any particular book (or part of that book), and so may reject this from the Canon, we are not at liberty to pick and to choose from among the statements of a writer that we accept as prophetic as to what we would like to believe or to obey.

THE END OF "BIBLICAL THEOLOGY" (SO-CALLED)

Review of the article entitled "Trends and Perspectives in Biblical Theology" by the Reverend Professor James Barr, read at the Fifth International Congress in Biblical Studies, Oxford 3rd September, 1973, published in the Journal of Theological Studies, October, 1974.

Read to the Fellowship of Biblical Studies, Sydney July 24, 1975 by D.B. Knox.

This is an important article. It sings the swan song of biblical theology as this term is applied to a phenomenon of the immediate post war world of biblical studies.

It is a short article of only seventeen pages. Barr acknowledges that biblical theology is a broad term but for the purpose of the article he distinguishes three senses. Firstly the term describes a movement in modern theological studies which reasserted the authority of the Bible though in a changed form, and secondly as a sub-section of this movement he uses the term to describe the writing of books which are theologies of the Old or New Testament, and thirdly he uses it in a further sub-division for monographs which take a more limited area, e.g. the theology of the Deuteronomist or Luke's view of history or the meaning of the covenant and so on.

Barr regards G. Ernest Wright's The Old Testament against its Environment 1950 and God who Acts 1952 as good examples of the movement in its hey-day. The books of the movement are characterized by two assumptions:

- 1) 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.

Consequently the writers of the movement assumed that biblical theology was quite distinct from study of religions. Barr however, reaches the conclusion that all this is now in the past. The history and study of religion is flourishing as never before while biblical theology has ceased. It has been absorbed by the history of religions. This should not have been the case if the pre-suppositions of biblical theology were right. Indeed as Barr points out, biblical theology was intended to keep at bay the history of religions and philosophical theology. But these grow stronger as it withers. It had hoped to re-state the authority of the Bible, but that authority is being questioned now more than ever before. A good example of the change of perspective is Barr's accusation that the biblical theology movement in its handling of the Old Testament failed to do justice to Judaism as a religion that stands in valid continuity with the Old Testament. In other words Barr assumes the very thing that biblical theology denied, namely the continuum of religious experience in the Old Testament with other forms of religion, and in particular with Judaism. If Barr's assumption is correct and it is a near universal assumption nowadays, then, in my judgment there can no longer be any such thing as 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. Barr affirms that instead of the unity, the theological diversity of the Bible is now

accepted, and that its authority qua Bible, can no longer be assumed. Just as Professor Wiles regards systematic theologians like Barth as poets, (The remaking of Christian theology p.107) rather than scientists so Professor Barr likens the Biblical theologian to a landscape painter. Imposing his own interpretative unity on the survey.

It will be seen then that Barr's article is important as indicating a watershed which has been crossed some time ago and of which Barr is well down the slopes on the other side. Indeed the watershed was crossed by the supporters of biblical theology themselves. They are on the same side of the watershed as is Barr, though at the time they strenuously denied that they were in this position, and sought to maintain a position on the other side of the watershed by affirming the uniqueness of biblical religious experience. For example, Wright wrote in the foreword to The Old Testament against its Environment that the purpose of his book was to "lay emphasis upon those central elements of Biblical faith which are so unique and sui genesis that they cannot have developed by any natural evolutionary process from the pagan world in which they appeared." But Barr has proved that this position was an impossible one by showing that there are now no scholars, not even Wright himself, who occupy the position dug out and fortified with such gusto in the early fifties. As Barr points out, the distinctive feature of the problem is the authority of the Scriptures, and the distinctive feature of the biblical theology school was to place the authoritative revelation of God in the acts narrated in the Old and New Testament, and not 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. As I pointed out in an article in February 1960 in the Reformed Theological Review, revelation through uninterpreted acts is a chimera and the tenor of Barr's article confirms that this is so. The problem that christian theologians must grapple is whether there is a revelation from God unique to the Old and New Testaments. Biblical theology said that there was, but accepted the presupposition of modern scholarship as to the fallible character of the biblical writings, so that these theologians were forced to say that the supernatural revelation which they affirmed lay in the acts and not in the interpretive narrative of the acts. But while maintaining this position that revelation was in acts and not in propositions, they ignored one of the most fundamental of the acts of God as narrated 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 enscripturated. Indeed all our knowledge of the auditory and other acts of God comes through enscripturated prophecy, for it is this character that the Scriptures claim for themselves. Prophecy is the phenomenon which must be tackled by modern biblical and theological studies. "The God Who Acts" remains a silent God. Wright and Barr are agreed on this. Thus they are both on the same side of the slope. They have both abandoned the God of Christianity. For it is the God who spoke that the Christian Creed affirms, "who spoke by the prophets". Thus the Biblical theology school of the fifties is hanged by its own petard of ignoring the most characteristic acts of the God who acts!

If biblical prophecy is what it claims to be, and 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 so it follows that only the religious experience which conforms to that inscripturated revelation is authentic in contrast to all other religious experience which is not based on the word of the God who spoke, not merely in acts which have perished only in acts (as biblical theology maintained - an unstable position as Barr has shown), but who spoke in revelation contained in enscripturated prophecy, that is, in words infallibly given through the action of God by His spirit and which remain with us today for us to read and understand and which bring us into relationship with the true God.

The fatal internal contradiction of the Biblical theology movement was that while seeking to maintain belief in the transcendent God, it exhausted any supernaturalness from the acts on which it based its knowledge of Him.

The phenomenon of enscripturated prophecy is the watershed. It is a thoroughly supernatural phenomenon as is the incarnation and God's speaking the Ten Words out of the fire at Sinai. If the phenomenon is accepted as actual, then the canon and tradition is merely a commentary, accurate or otherwise, on the revelation, so that both canon and tradition become subordinate and ancillary. But from Barr's standpoint they rightly become central, as he emphasizes in his article, for they are then a most important aspect of the history of religion which in the face of denial of the phenomenon of prophecy, and in particular, inscripturated prophecy, becomes the only source of our knowledge of religious truth. In a word, the crux is whether prophecy exists, for if it does it must supersede experience as the subject matter of theology.

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