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The Canon of Scripture

Chapter 22

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A CANON WITHIN THE CANON?

THE 'INNER CANON'

In our survey of the canon of scripture thus far, occasional mention has been made of the idea of a 'canon within the canon'.¹ This is an idea that has received wider support and publicity in more recent times.

In a lecture delivered at Oxford in 1961 Professor Kurt Aland expressed the view that, as the Old Testament canon underwent a *de facto* narrowing as a result of the new covenant established in Christ, so also the New Testament canon 'is *in practice* undergoing a narrowing and a shortening,' so that we can recognize in the New Testament as in the Old a 'canon within the canon'.² This is a not unexpected attitude on the part of a scholar in the Lutheran tradition; it is common form, for example, for theologians in that tradition to pass a depreciatory judgment on those parts of the New Testament which smack of 'emergent Catholicism' or 'incipient catholicism'.³ The 'actual living, effective Canon', as distinct from the formal canon, 'is constructed according to the method of "self-understanding"'.⁴

But if it is suggested that Christians and churches get together and try to reach agreement on a common effective canon, it must be realized that the 'effective' canon of some groups differs from that of others. Professor Aland wisely spoke of the necessity to question one's own actual canon and take the actual canon of others seriously.⁵

If in the Lutheran tradition, and indeed in the evangelical tradition generally, the four chief Pauline epistles (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians) play a leading part in the effective canon, there are other Christians for whom Paul's 'captivity epistles' are the New Testament documents most directly relevant to the present age.⁶ Others would give the Synoptic Gospels pride of place, and yet others the Johannine writings.

The late Norman Snaith, in his day a distinguished Methodist Old Testament scholar, found pre-eminently in the great prophets of Israel those features of true religion which were to find their finest flowering in the Pauline gospel of justification by faith (later embraced and proclaimed by Luther and the Wesleys). But the message of the prophets had been encased in an iron binding of *habdalah*, 'separation', consisting of the priestly legislation of the Pentateuch at one end and the work of Ezra at the other, which (in his eyes) anticipated those elements in first-century Judaism which were inimical to the gospel of Christ (especially as expounded by Paul).⁷ There are others, however, who find in the priestly legislation, especially in its sacrificial and other cultic ordinances, allegorically interpreted, the most wonderful adumbration of the gospel to be found

anywhere in the Old Testament. The suggestion has even been made (more in popular Bible exposition than in serious exegesis) that, when the risen Lord on the Emmaus road opened to the two disciples ‘in all the scriptures the things concerning himself’ (Lk. 24:27), he took up the successive forms of sacrifice prescribed in the opening chapters of Leviticus—the burnt offerings, the cereal offerings, the peace offerings, the sin and guilt offerings—and showed them how each in its own way foreshadowed his own sacrifice.⁸ To some of us such an idea seems incredibly far-fetched, but there are other Christians to whom it is self-evident, and if the priestly legislation belongs to their inner canon, it must be allowed its place within the church’s canon.

There are those who see the difficulties inherent in the idea of an ‘inner canon’ and try to avoid them by using such an expression as ‘material centre’ (in German, *Sachmitte*). What they usually have in mind, however, is ‘some passage or group of passages which “really” express and grasp this central matter; so that indirectly we are back again with a sort of inner canon’.⁹ Such a ‘material centre’ might be compared to the ‘rule of faith’ to which the early Christian fathers appealed; but the rule of faith was not any kind of inner canon; it was rather a summary of the essence of scripture, properly interpreted. One may think of the Reformers’ principle of biblical interpretation according to the ‘analogy of faith’—the analogy of faith being the main thrust of scripture, as they understood it.¹⁰

MANY WITNESSES, ONE CHURCH, ONE LORD

‘Does the canon of the New Testament constitute the unity of the church?’ This was the title of a well-known essay by Ernst Käsemann; he gave his question the answer ‘No’. He based his answer on the ample witness which the canon bears, in his view, to the *disunity* of the first-century church. If Galatians and Acts, Romans and James, the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse are brought together (as we have them) in one authoritative collection, then this collection ‘provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions’. This multiplicity need not be accepted as binding: the New Testament canon imposes the duty of ‘discerning the spirits’, even within its own component writings. If justification by faith be taken as the criterion for such discernment, Käsemann implies, then ‘emergent catholicism’ will be recognized for the secondary development that it is.¹¹

The gospel, that is to say, is contained in the canon, but is not coextensive with the canon. The canon, to adapt Luther’s metaphor, is the cradle in which the gospel is laid.

To Käsemann’s essay a reply was made by Hans Küng. Küng maintains that the catholicity of the canon is a good thing in itself. The multiplicity which Käsemann finds in the New Testament is a multiple expression of the gospel. ‘The Catholic attitude is to be, in principle, open in every direction that the *New Testament* leaves open; not to exclude, either in principle or in practice, any line that belongs to the New Testament... By including Paul along with Acts, Paul along with James; by, in short, making the *whole* New Testament canonical’, the church carried out her duty of ‘discerning the spirits’. As for ‘the bold programme of “a Canon within the Canon”,’ it amounts to a demand to be

‘more biblical than the Bible, more New-Testament-minded than the New Testament, more evangelical than the Gospel, more Pauline, even, than Paul’.¹²

It would be hazardous to try to name any part of scripture—even the genealogical tables!—in which some receptive reader or hearer has not recognized an effective and redeeming word from God. In the nineteenth century William Robertson Smith, called to account before a church court, affirmed his belief in the Bible as the Word of God and gave this as his reason: ‘Because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming love of God; because in the Bible I find God drawing near to me in Jesus Christ, and declaring to me, in Him, His will for my salvation. And this record I know to be true by the witness of His Spirit in my heart, whereby I am assured that none other than God Himself able to speak such words to my soul.’¹³ This was expressed in the genuine tradition of Calvin and the Westminster divines. If Robertson Smith had been asked just where in the Bible he recognized this record and experienced this witness, he would probably not have mentioned every book, but he might well have said that the record of God’s love and the witness of the Spirit were so pervasive that they gave character to the Bible as a whole. Others might bear the same testimony, but might think of other parts of the Bible than Robertson Smith had in mind.

If those who adhere to the principle of an inner canon concentrate on that inner canon to a point where they neglect the contents of the ‘outer canon’ (as they might call it), they deny themselves the benefits which they might derive from those other books. N. B. Stonehouse gave as his ‘basic criticism’ of Luther’s viewpoint ‘that it was narrowly Christocentric rather than God-centred, and thus involved an attenuation and impoverishment of the message of the New Testament. However significant *was Christum treibet* may be for the understanding of the New Testament, it lacks the breadth of perspective and outlook given by understanding it, for example, in terms of the coming of the kingdom of God’. But, ‘formulating his criterion in narrow terms, and insisting upon the same manifestation of it in each writing of the New Testament’, Luther ‘missed much of the richness of the revelation of the New Testament organism of Scripture’.¹⁴

With a rather different emphasis, but to much the same effect, Ernest Best (probably with Rudolf Bultmann and other ‘existential’ exegetes in mind) has put it this way:

The New Testament contains a variety of interpretations from a variety of contexts... The Gospel of Luke and the Pastoral Epistles with their non-existentialist interpretation clearly met a need of the late first century and the beginning of the second and it can be argued that they have met the need of many Christians since then. They have sustained the church through many difficulties and have enabled it to take care of itself not only in time of persecution but also in time of heresy. Had we only the existentialist interpretation of Paul and John, supposing that their interpretations are purely existentialist, the church might well have lacked an essential element for its continued existence.¹⁵

The multiplicity of witness discernible in the New Testament is a multiplicity of witness to Christ. To quote the title of a helpful work by William Barclay, it presents us with ‘many witnesses, one Lord.’¹⁶ In his more academic work, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, J. D. G. Dunn does not play down the diversity, but finds the unity which binds it together in the witness which it bears to the Jesus of history who is identical with the exalted Lord of the church’s faith and preaching.¹⁷ What Jesus said of the Hebrew scriptures is equally applicable to the New Testament writings, ‘outer canon’ as well as ‘inner canon’: ‘it is they that bear witness to me’ (Jn. 5:39).

In short, it must be acknowledged that the churchmen of the age after Marcion were right when they insisted on a catholic collection of Christian scriptures in opposition to his sectarian selection.¹⁸

CRITERIA TODAY

Dr Ellen Flesseman-van Leer has argued that those who accept the traditional canon of scripture today cannot legitimately defend it with arguments which played no part in its formation.¹⁹ She is supported by Hans von Campenhausen, who maintains nevertheless that ‘the Scripture, read in faith and with the aid of reason, still remains the canon, the “standard”. Without adherence to the Canon, which—in the widest sense—witnesses to the history of Christ, faith in Christ in any church would become an illusion.’²⁰ Of course it would, because the written testimony to Christ on which that faith is based would have disappeared.

This written testimony is enshrined in both Testaments, and both remain indispensable. ‘Even an Old Testament read with critical eyes’, says von Campenhausen, ‘is still the book of a history which leads to Christ and indeed points toward him, and without him cannot itself be understood.’²¹ Adolf von Harnack showed a strange insensitivity when he said that the Protestant church’s continuing in his day to treasure the Old Testament as a canonical document was ‘the result of a paralysis which affects both religion and the church’.²²

Those who are interested in the Bible chiefly as historians of religious literature have naturally little use for the concept of a canon. Old Testament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha are as relevant to their studies as the contents of the Hebrew Bible; for them there is no distinction in principle between the New Testament writings and other early Christian literature from (say) Clement of Rome to Clement of Alexandria. But for theologians, and indeed for members of Christian churches in general, the principle of the canon is one of abiding importance.

Some may say that they receive the traditional canon as God’s Word written because it has been delivered to them as such. Others will say that, if the traditional canon is indeed God’s Word written, there will be recognizable criteria which mark it out as such.

If the criteria which satisfied men and women in the early church are no longer so convincing to us as they were to them, on what grounds (apart from the bare fact that this is the canon which we have received) can we justify our acceptance of the traditional canon? It is not only legitimate but necessary to know what these grounds are and to state them.

So far as the Old Testament is concerned, this is a heritage with which the Christian church was endowed at its inception. Its contents meant much in the life of the church's Lord; they cannot mean less in the life of the church. 'What was indispensable to the Redeemer must always be indispensable to the redeemed.'²³ Differences may persist over matters of detail, such as the relation of the deuterocanonical books to those which belong to the Hebrew Bible, or the right of books like Esther, Ecclesiastes or the Song of Songs to be included in the canon. But these differences do not affect the main point—the essential place that the Old Testament has in the church's scriptures. And if questions arise about the inclusion of certain books which at one time were disputed, such questions may best be given a comprehensive answer. It is probable that the considerations which led to the inclusion of the Song of Songs in the canon would be dismissed by us as quite misguided. But with hindsight it is a matter for satisfaction that the Christian canon does include this exuberant celebration of the joy that man and woman find in each other's love.

Where the New Testament is concerned, the criterion of apostolicity can still be applied, but in a different way from its second-century application. Luke's Gospel, for example, does not seem to be in any way indebted to Paul, and has no need to be validated by his apostolic authority: Luke's access to the testimony of eyewitnesses and other primitive 'ministers of the word', with his own handling of the material he received, may well give the reader confidence that his record is based on the authentic apostolic preaching.²⁴ The letter to the Hebrews needs no apostle's name to certify its credentials as an original first-century presentation of the significance of the work of Christ as his people's sacrifice and high priest. 'Whether then it was I or they', says Paul, referring to others to whom the Lord appeared in resurrection, 'so we preach and so you believed' (1 Cor. 15:11)²⁵—and his 'they' can properly be extended to include all the New Testament writers. With all the diversity of their witness, it is witness to one Lord and one gospel. There is a directness about the authority investing their words which contrasts with the perspective of Clement of Rome and his second-century successors, who look back to the apostolic age as normative. Not that a hard-and-fast line is drawn in this respect between the latest New Testament writings and the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers: the latest New Testament writings urge their readers to 'remember ... the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Jude 17; cf. 2 Pet. 3:2).²⁶ But the reasons which led to the overcoming of doubts once felt about these and other disputed catholic epistles were probably sound: in any case, the majority of the New Testament books, with their self-authenticating authority, can easily carry these, which form part of the same traditional canon.

It is sometimes said that the books which made their way into the New Testament

canon are those which supported the victorious cause in the second-century conflict with the various gnostic schools of thought. There is no reason why the student of this conflict should shrink from making a value-judgment: the gnostic schools lost because they deserved to lose. A comparison of the New Testament writings with the contents of *The Nag Hammadi Library* should be instructive, once the novelty of the latter is not allowed to weigh in its favour against the familiarity of the former. Diverse as the gnostic schools were from one another, they all tended to ascribe creation and redemption to two separate (not to say opposed) powers. They fostered an individualist rather than a social form of religion—‘he travels the fastest who travels alone’. They not only weakened a sense of community with other contemporaries but a sense of continuity with those who went before. True Christianity, like biblical religion in general, looks to one God as Creator and Redeemer, knows nothing of a solitary religion, and encourages among the people of God an appreciation of the heritage received from those who experienced his mighty acts in the past. And the documents which attest this true Christianity can claim, by the normal tests of literary and historical criticism, to be closer in time and perspective to the ministry of Jesus and the witness of his first apostles than the documents of the gnostic schools. Gnosticism was too much bound up with a popular but passing phase of thought to have the survival power of apostolic Christianity.²⁷

The New Testament writings provide incontrovertibly our earliest witness to Christ, presenting him as the one in whom the history of salvation, recorded in the Old Testament, reached its climax.²⁸ What Hans Lietzmann said of the four gospels in the early church may be said of the New Testament writings in general: ‘the reference to their apostolic authority, which can only appear to us as a reminder of sound historical bases, had the deeper meaning that this particular tradition of Jesus—and this alone—had been established and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit working authoritatively in the Church.’²⁹ Within ‘this particular tradition’ different strands of tradition may be recognized, but the church, in earlier and in more recent days, has been more conscious of the overall unity than of the underlying diversity, and has maintained ‘this particular tradition’ over against others which conflict with the New Testament witness but cannot establish a comparable title to apostolic authority.³⁰

WHAT IF ...?

What would happen if a lost document from the apostolic age were to be discovered, which could establish a title to apostolic authority comparable with that of the New Testament writings? Some years ago a piece of writing was discovered in a Palestinian monastery which purported to be a copy of part of a letter written by Clement of Alexandria.³¹ Some well-known students of Clement’s work examined this piece of writing and agreed that it might well be a genuine fragment of his. Suppose a piece of writing were discovered somewhere in the Near East which purported to be part of a letter of Paul’s—say his lost ‘previous’ letter to the Corinthian church (to which he refers in 1 Cor. 5:9). Suppose, too, that students of the Pauline writings who examined it were agreed

for the most part that it was genuine, that it really was what it purported to be.³² What then? Should it be incorporated in the New Testament forthwith?

The criteria which lead scholars to conclusions about the date and authorship of a document are different from the criteria leading to canonical recognition. A newly discovered document could not be treated as something accepted ‘everywhere, always, by all’ and so, initially, could satisfy the criteria neither of catholicity nor of tradition. Moreover, who is there today who could make a pronouncement on its canonicity with such authority as would be universally followed? Even if the Pope, the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Presidents of the World Council of Churches were to issue a joint pronouncement, there are some people of independent temper who would regard such a pronouncement as sufficient cause for rejecting this candidate for canonicity. Unless and until such a discovery is made, it is pointless to speculate. But the precedent of earlier days suggests that it would first be necessary for a consensus to develop among Christians in general; any papal or conciliar pronouncement that might come later would be but a rubber-stamping of that consensus.

ORTHODOXY

The time has long since gone by when the contents of the Bible could be judged by an accepted ‘rule of faith’. No doubt a hypothetical document such as has just been discussed would be judged, among other things, by its consistency with the existing canon—some would add, by its consistency with the ‘inner canon’ (whatever their criteria for the inner canon might be). Oscar Cullmann has maintained that ‘both the idea of a canon and the manner of its realization are *a crucial part* of the salvation history of the Bible’. It is in its recording of the history of salvation that he finds the unity of the biblical message (in Old and New Testaments together); ‘through the *collection together* of the various books of the Bible, the whole history of salvation must be taken into account in understanding any one of the books of the Bible.’³³ The history of salvation was consummated in the once-for-all saving event; but that event can be appreciated only when one considers the process of which it is the fulfilment (documented in the Old Testament) and the unfolding of its significance (in the writings of the New Testament). Cullmann may press his thesis too far, but in his exposition of the principle of salvation history he presents a very attractive account of the coherence of the canon of scripture. This coherence is specially to be found in the witness borne to the author of salvation, the way of salvation, and the heirs of salvation. Even those parts of the Bible in which salvation is not so central as it is in others make their contribution to the context in which the history of salvation can be traced.

INSPIRATION

Inspiration—more particularly, prophetic inspiration—was identified by many as the distinguishing feature of the Old Testament collection when once it was reckoned to be

complete. The collection was complete in principle, according to Josephus, when ‘the exact succession of prophets’ came to an end in Israel.³⁴ The rabbis assigned prophets as authors for the principal historical books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) as well as for the Pentateuch and the Psalms.³⁵ According to the later books of the New Testament, the whole of Hebrew scripture (whether the original text or the Greek version) ‘is inspired by God’ (2 Tim. 3:16), for ‘men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’ (2 Pet. 2:21).

Christians have been right in discerning the Holy Spirit similarly at work in the New Testament scriptures, although (as has been said) only one book of the New Testament explicitly claims prophetic inspiration. But there has been a tendency to isolate the work of the Spirit in the composition of the individual New Testament scriptures from his subsequent work in relation to them. The Christians of the early centuries did not think that inspiration had ceased with the last book of the New Testament; they continued consciously to enjoy inspiration themselves (albeit not in conjunction with the apostolic authority which puts the New Testament writings on a level all their own). The strong word ‘God-breathed’ (Greek *theopneustos*) which is used in 2 Timothy 3:16 was occasionally used of post-apostolic writings—of the metrical inscription of Avircius, for example (describing his visit to churches between Rome and Mesopotamia),³⁶ and even of the decision of the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) condemning Nestorius!³⁷

It is not the usage of words that is important, however, but the realities of the situation. The theological aspect of canonization has not been the subject of this book, which has been concerned rather with the historical aspect, but for those who receive the scriptures as God’s Word written the theological aspect is the most important. The Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of prophecy; he is also the witnessing and interpreting Spirit. In the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise that the Spirit would be the disciples’ teacher and bring his own words (with their significance) to their remembrance,³⁸ the scriptures have been, and continue to be, one of the chief instruments which the Spirit uses. That the promise was not understood as applying only to those who were actually present with Jesus in the upper room is plain from 1 John 2:20, 27, where Christians of a later generation are assured that the ‘anointing’ which they have received from ‘the Holy One’ teaches them about everything (guides them ‘into all the truth’, in the sense of John 16:13).

The work of the Holy Spirit is not discerned by means of the common tools of the historian’s trade. His inner witness gives the assurance to hearers or readers of scripture that in its words God himself is addressing them; but when one is considering the process by which the canon of scripture took shape it would be wiser to speak of the providence or guidance of the Spirit than of his witness. It is unlikely, for example, that the Spirit’s witness would enable a reader to discern that Ecclesiastes is the word of God while Ecclesiasticus is not: indeed, we have seen how John Bunyan heard the reassuring voice of God in the latter book, although it was not one of the books which he had been taught to receive as ‘holy and canonical’.³⁹ Certainly, as one looks back on the process of canonization in early Christian centuries, and remembers some of the ideas of which certain church writers of that period were capable, it is easy to conclude that in reaching a

conclusion on the limits of the canon they were directed by a wisdom higher than their own. It may be that those whose minds have been largely formed by scripture as canonized find it natural to make a judgment of this kind. But it is not mere hindsight to say, with William Barclay, that ‘the New Testament books became canonical because no one could stop them doing so’⁴⁰ or even, in the exaggerated language of Oscar Cullmann, that ‘the books which were to form the future canon *forced themselves on the Church by their intrinsic apostolic authority*, as they do still, because the *Kyrios* Christ speaks in them’.⁴¹

A further point to be made on the criterion of inspiration is that, in the words of H. L. Ellison, ‘the writing of the Scriptures was only the half-way house in the process of inspiration; it only reaches its goal and conclusion as God is revealed through them to the reader or hearer. In other words, the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit into the reader is as essential for the right understanding of the Scriptures as it was in the original writers for their right production of them.’⁴² If his ‘inbreathing’ into the authors is called inspiration and his ‘inbreathing’ into the hearers or readers is called illumination, this verbal distinction should not obscure the fact that at both stages it is one and the same Spirit who is at work.

The suggestion is made from time to time that the canon of scripture might be augmented by the inclusion of other ‘inspirational’ literature, ancient or modern, from a wider cultural spectrum.⁴³ But this betrays a failure to appreciate what the canon actually is. It is not an anthology of inspired or inspiring literature. If one were considering a collection of writings suitable for reading in church, the suggestion might be more relevant. When a sermon is read in church, the congregation is often treated to what is, in intention at least, inspirational literature; the same may be said of prayers which are read from the prayerbook or of hymns which are sung from the hymnbook. But when the limits of the canon are under consideration, the chief concern is to get as close as possible to the source of the Christian faith.

By an act of faith the Christian reader today may identify the New Testament, as it has been received, with the entire ‘tradition of Christ’. But confidence in such an act of faith will be strengthened if the same faith proves to have been exercised by Christians in other places and at other times—if it is in line with the traditional ‘criteria of canonicity’. And there is no reason to exclude the bearing of other lines of evidence on any position that is accepted by faith.

In the canon, of scripture we have the foundation documents of Christianity, the charter of the church, the title-deeds of faith. For no other literature can such a claim be made. And when the claim is made, it is made not merely for a collection of ancient writings. In the words of scripture the voice of the Spirit of God continues to be heard. Repeatedly new spiritual movements have been launched by the rediscovery of the living power which resides in the canon of scripture—a living power which strengthens and liberates.