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THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

I

FOR nearly two millenniums the Church of Christ has based its claims to authoritative teaching on a certain book called the Bible. This Bible, rightly or wrongly, has been regarded as a standard of faith and practice for the guidance of the Christian world, and has been revered as being, for all practical purposes, the revealed will of Almighty God concerning our salvation in all its aspects of justification, the moulding of character, present well-being and future hope. The main characteristic ascribed to the Bible has been authority. Where the Book has spoken with an unfaltering voice and a consistent witness, its statements have been considered final. There could be no appeal. "What saith the Scripture?" has been the question. If a human teacher varied from the Bible, then the human teacher, be he ever so great, was thereby pronounced to be wrong. "Let God be true and every man a liar" said the Wesleys, and they spoke for many of both before and after their day. This quality of authority was buttressed by another closely-allied quality—completeness. Not only has the Bible message been considered historically to be the last court of appeal in disputed questions but it has been held to be the sufficient guide, to which nothing needed to be added. Many of the Church's great teachers and a countless host of humble believers have held that in the Bible we have a complete revelation of teaching so far as this world is concerned, self-contained in its completeness and final in its authority.

Now this Bible is divided into two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament, and each of these divisions has been regarded in the same light as the Bible as a whole. Our present task is to inquire whether this attitude is justifiable in regard to the Old Testament.

This division of the Scriptures consists, in the English Bible, of thirty-nine books, which range, in date of authorship from the thirteenth to the fifth centuries before Christ according to traditional reckoning, and from the ninth to the second centuries according to many present-day students. These thirty-nine books are therefore a selection from the books of about

seven or eight centuries, or, taking the period down to the time of our Lord, possibly thirteen centuries. The Hebrews do not appear to have been a prolific literary people, but they gave us more than thirty-nine books. Reference is made in the Old Testament itself to other works not now extant, such as the "Book of the Wars of the Lord," and the "Book of Jashar," and in the centuries just before the coming of Christ there were many books written, collectively called the Apocrypha, which are not included in the Old Testament. The Apocryphal books were books of religious wisdom and theocratic patriotism, and were acknowledged by many of the Rabbis to be useful for edification. Their rival claim to canonicity has in more recent times found sponsor in the Church of Rome, and the inquirer is thus brought to doubt whether the distinctive place assigned to the Old Testament can still be held or whether it merely takes its place with the other books of the same historical era.

In investigating this question we are impressed with the obscurity of the subject. Jewish legends and traditions abound, and they appear to be the only material by which the gaps between the testimonies can be filled up. Modern writers theorise to a considerable extent, telling us what was "probably" the case at many points in the history of the Canon, and the inquirer is left in the position of having to decide which are the facts, which are the confident assumptions, and which are the tentative suggestions. We have to extricate the facts from the theories, and in this essay this is what we shall try to do. There are a few big facts which will serve as a framework for our argument, and we shall confine ourselves as much as possible to these facts.

II

The first thing to remember is that the books of the Old Testament were uniformly believed by the Jews to be in three main divisions, the Law, or Torah; the Prophets, or Nebiim; and the Writings, or Kethubim. This tripartite arrangement is referred to in almost every purely Jewish reference to the Scriptures, and it is a testimony to the way in which the Canon was arrived at. The first reference is that of the grandson of Ben Sirach, the author of the book of Ecclesiasticus. In the prologue to the Greek version of the book, the translator says:—

“My grandfather Jesus, seeing he had much given himself to the reading of the law and the prophets, and the other books of the fathers, and had gotten therein sufficient proficiency, was drawn on also himself to write something pertaining to learning and wisdom,” and a little later in the same passage he speaks of “the law and the prophets and the rest of the books” as being difficult to translate while still retaining the force of the original. This phrase, even if it does not imply that the third part of the canon was closed (and an unbiassed reader would come to that conclusion) certainly implies that a threefold division of the sacred books was the basis of their arrangement. The book of Ecclesiasticus dates from 180 B.C. and its Greek Prologue from 132 B.C., so that this triplex division was apparently a well known institution of Biblical criticism for nearly two centuries before the time of Christ.

Another witness to the threefold division of the Canon is the nature of the Septuagint. In this version of the Old Testament it is clear that three levels of excellence in the translation are present. The Law is translated with great care, the Prophets somewhat more loosely, and the Hagiographa, or Sacred Writings most loosely of all, and this fact is an implicit, and hence all the more forceful witness to the Jewish division.

Again, it was the usage in the Temple before the Exile to read from only one portion of the Scriptures, viz., the Law. Later, before the New Testament era, it became the custom to have a reading from the Prophets in the synagogue after the portion from the Law had been read, a custom which is reflected in the action of Jesus in Nazareth as reported by Luke and in that of Paul. (Luke iv. 17 : Acts xiii. 15.) The Hagiographa were never read on the weekly sabbath, the books of Ruth, Lamentations, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther being read at their respective feasts.

We have finally the witness of the New Testament itself. After the walk to Emmaus Jesus drew the attention of the assembled disciples to the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, as speaking of the things concerning Himself. (Luke xxiv. 44.) In the following verse we are told that “the scriptures” were what he expounded, whilst in verse 27, the two men were instructed “in all the scriptures” on the same subject, viz. the sufferings of Christ. The Psalms, then, in this context, denote the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures when the

Law and the Prophets have been subtracted, and this verse is a plain testimony to the Jewish tradition of a threefold compilation.

III

The first section of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Law. Remembering the confines of our subject we shall not debate the thorny question of its age or of the method of its composition. It will suffice for our purpose to note the events of the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. We turn to the evidence of the Samaritan Pentateuch. In 432 B.C. Manasseh, grandson of Eliashib the high priest, was convicted of having married a foreign woman, the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite, and was expelled from the Jewish community. He set up a rival worship on Mount Gerizim, and the sacred book he took with him was none other than a certain recension of the law of Moses, i.e. the Pentateuch. Its only difference from the Pentateuch is in a few of its readings. In substance it is the same, and we may therefore take the first five books of the Old Testament as being settled from 432 B.C. We are also supported in this conclusion by Ecclesiasticus, (xxiv. 23), in which the "law which Moses commanded" is described as the "book of the covenant of the most high God."

The idea of a completed canon of the Torah is also implied in the post-exilic books of Scripture, the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophecy of Malachi, and from the end of the fifth century before Christ the term "law" meant the Pentateuch, and it was divided, so far as the Jewish references tell us, into the five books which we know.

IV

We turn now to the second division, the Prophets. In the Hebrew Canon this division includes what we call the historical books as well as the prophetic. In all there are eight books in this section—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Minors. Samuel, Kings and the Minors count as one book each.

Malachi, the last of the prophets in our English version, was also the last in point of time. He prophesied in the middle of the fifth century before Christ, and the consensus of Jewish opinion is to the effect that from this time the voice of prophecy was silent until John the Baptist appeared. For example, a

Jewish rabbi, writing about A.D. 150 says "Prophecy ceased in Israel from the time of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi." The same is said by Jerome in his commentary on Isaiah, and he puts this forward as the testimony of the Jewish Church. The writer of the first book of the Maccabees tells us that the stones of the heathen-defiled altar were put aside until there should arise a prophet who should give instruction about them. Finally we have the word of Josephus that "since the reign of Artaxerxes there hath not been an exact succession of prophets." (*Contra Apionem*, I, 8.)

There being abundance of evidence, then, that true prophecy ceased in the fifth century B.C., at least according to popular Jewish opinion, we are in a position to understand how the Canon of the prophets came to be established.

The prophets were regarded as being the expounders of the principles of the law, and whilst there was a divinely-ordained succession of living prophets there was no need of any written word. With the passing of Malachi, however, and the dawning of the conclusion that he was not to be succeeded for over four centuries, it would become imperative that the written works of God's spokesmen should be collected and pronounced authoritative. The first step we see in this direction is recorded by the writer of Second Maccabees. Nehemiah, "founding a library gathered together the acts of the kings, and the prophets, and of David, and the epistles of the kings concerning the holy gifts." (ii. 13.) We know of no books except the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) which would answer to the first two divisions of this list of works brought together by Nehemiah. Although we cannot say that this has any direct bearing on the subject of the Canon, it certainly seems to speak of a preparation for the second division of it.

Our first witness is the book of Daniel. For our present purpose it does not matter how we date it—sixth century or second. In the ninth chapter, he speaks of consulting the books, and obtaining information from Jeremiah regarding the duration of the Captivity. We cannot see but that this closes the question as to whether there was a set series of prophetic books. This position is substantiated by another witness whom we have already quoted, the Greek Prologue to Ecclesiasticus. The Prophets are equated with the Law here in a way which shows that they were regarded as just as canonical as the Torah itself, and we

now find the phrase "the Law and the Prophets" used to designate the authoritative word of God. This conclusion is not invalidated by the fact that Ezekiel was questioned regarding its right to be within the limits of the Canon. No name of any note appears in the account of the discussion, and the question seems to have been raised rather with a view to the settlement of obscurities than with a view to having the book eliminated.

V

When we turn to the Hagiographa, we find that there is no external evidence to them alone such as there is to the Law and the Prophets. Where we find evidence to the canonicity of the books of the Hagiographa it is in company with the testimony to the other parts of the Old Testament, or else it is included in the general testimony to the Scriptures. Outside the New Testament, the only witness to the third division is the passage which we have already quoted from Ecclesiasticus. In this passage "the books," which seem to be equated with the Law and the Prophets, are thereby elevated to the rank of Canonical Scripture. The New Testament, as we have already seen, recognises the three divisions, and the third is represented as being as authoritative as the other two. See Luke xxiv. 44.

VI

Looking now for contemporary testimony to the whole of the Old Testament, we find it in Philo, who speaks of the Scriptutes as Holy Scriptures, The Divine Word, The Prophetic Word, and the Inspired Oracle, among many other similar epithets. We find it in many places in the New Testament, where the "Holy Scriptures" are taken to be a perfectly well-defined body of literature. In the twenty-fourth of Luke, there are two evidences of this. The two pilgrims speak of their hearts being warmed while the Stranger opened up the scriptures, and the evangelist himself tells us that this Stranger expounded to them "all the scriptures." When Paul came to Thessalonica as recorded in the seventeenth of Acts, he reasoned with them from the "Scriptures." Later in the same chapter we read how the Bereans "searched the Scriptures." Paul informs his readers that the things which were written before their day were written for their benefit that through comfort of

the scriptures they might have hope, whilst it is according to "the scriptures" that Christ died and rose again. These scriptures were not apparently, a changing, fluid mass of books, but a perfectly well-defined corpus of writings, to which appeal could be made in support of doctrine. Be it observed that we are not appealing to the New Testament as being infallible, but merely as a witness to be treated as trustworthy historical evidence showing the trend of Jewish thought in the middle of the first century A.D., and we think it beyond question that the scriptures were, according to this witness, a finished monument of revelation concerning the pre-Christian covenant, to which nothing could be added, and from which nothing could be taken away.

This conclusion is supported by Josephus. In his work entitled "*Contra Apionem*," Book I, par. 8, he says: "For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from, and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them."

This testimony is of the highest value. In naming the Canon as being of twenty-two books, he gives the number which corresponds to our Old Testament, for, writing to Greeks,

he employs the Alexandrine version, in which Ruth is reckoned with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah. He represents popular Jewish opinion, and speaks authoritatively for the Jews. Thirdly, he wrote just after the Synod of Jamnia, a fact which gains in significance when we remember that this synod was convened to settle certain disputed points regarding the canon of the Old Testament. Whether Ezekiel ought to be kept was one of the things brought forward, and another was the question of Ecclesiastes. This book was recommended for exclusion by Shammai, and for retention by Hillel. The Hillelites won the day, and Ecclesiastes stayed in. Josephus was therefore writing whilst an ex-cathedra statement of canonicity was still fresh in his mind. The dialogue *Contra Apionem* was written in the last decade of the first century A.D., and the Synod was held in the year A.D. 90. It is clear, however, from the testimonies already quoted, that this statement was not an original decision but a ratification of long-standing popular opinion, which had most probably been in existence since the beginning of the first century B.C. It was about that time that the rival schools of the Pharisees and Sadducees began, and after that time any alteration to the Canon would have been attended by great outbursts of protest from the side which did not propose the change. We have no trace of such a state of affairs in the century just before the advent of the Saviour, and we therefore conclude with practical, if not demonstrable certainty, that the list of books was popularly fixed for at least that time before our era.

One problem of historical evidence remains. We pointed out early in this paper that whilst the Roman Catholic Church accepts the Apocryphal books as authoritative and canonical scripture, the Protestant churches do not. Which Church is right? The question is really settled by one fact. When we compare the Palestinian Canon with the Alexandrine (i.e. the Septuagint) we find that the Apocryphal books are only to be found in the latter. The Greek language, in which the Septuagint was written, was much more widely known than the Hebrew, which was the language of the Palestinian, and at least the vast majority of the Western Fathers were in the position of knowing Greek but not Hebrew. Consequently, when they quoted the Scriptures they were unable to differentiate between those which were peculiar to the Alexandrian version and those common to

both versions, and the wider range passed into use as the norm of doctrine in the Western Church. Only one voice, that of Jerome, was uplifted in protest against this practice. The translator of the Vulgate was the only one to insist (in the Western Church) on the distinction between the two sets of books, he being the greatest, if not the only Hebraist of his time. This fact, we venture to affirm, is decisive. The evidence we have considered so far has been concerning the Hebrew Bible alone, and it is in connection with that version that we now bring forward our final consideration.

In this last stage we pass from evidence to proof. We have seen that on the whole there is abundant reason for believing that the Old Testament Scriptures which we possess are those which were "justly believed in" at the time of Christ. Their testimony was to the effect that in those Scriptures we have the very word of God to man. What was the value of their testimony? Was it true or false? To settle this question we go back to the attitude of our Lord.

VII

Let the inquirer take a good concordance and work through all the references which Jesus makes to the Law, the Prophets, and the Scriptures. We confidently challenge him to find one in which Jesus says or implies that anything in the Old Testament which purports to come from God did not really do so, but is a creaturely imagination. Every reference at least permits the view that the Old Testament is what the Jews believed it to be, and there are several passages which demand that interpretation, e.g., "How then shall the scriptures be fulfilled that thus it must be?" (Matt. xxvi. 54.) "The scripture cannot be broken" (John x. 35), where scripture is evidently equivalent to "law" in the previous verse, and is thus made to cover the whole of the Old Testament, for the immediate quotation is from Psalm lxxxii. Even if it be objected that "scripture" here is not synonymous with "law," it would be difficult to see why Jesus should single out this one verse to describe as unbreakable. The most natural interpretation is that "scripture," though in the singular, here refers to the whole of the Old Testament.

The word "law" leads to a similar view. There are three instances in which Jesus speaks of the Law as being inviolable.

Luke x. 26 reads, "What is written in the law?" in answer to the question of the lawyer on eternal life. "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fall" is the saying of Jesus in Luke xvi. 17. Finally, we have the weighty saying in the Sermon on the Mount, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law and the prophets; I am not come to destroy but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all things be accomplished." It would be hard to find, or even to invent, a more unequivocal saying than this. It covers the whole of the Pentateuch, if not the whole of the Old Testament, and claims in effect the unique inspiration and authority of the books to which it refers.

It is in the light of this saying that we must read the only apparent exception to our Lord's general attitude. Five times in the course of the same chapter He declares, "Ye have heard that it was said . . . but I say unto you." The first two are easily explained. They merely show that murder and adultery may be committed in thought as well as in deed. The third is a plea for the exclusion of oaths altogether, and not merely their limitation to the Divine Name. A man's word should be his bond. The fourth is a protest against the private revenge of injuries under the cover of a legal enactment which was intended for civil administration. The fifth corrects an entirely illegitimate inference from the command in Deuteronomy, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour." The Jewish commentators had added "and hate thine enemy." Jesus said, "Love your enemies," and His statement was thus an intensification of the principle of love laid down in the law.

One other objection will probably be urged against the position which we are attempting to uphold, the objection based on the theory of the Kenosis. When the Son of God wrapped Him in our clay and became mortal did He lay aside His infallibility? Many will assert that He did, and will produce in support the saying of Jesus disclaiming knowledge concerning the time of His second advent. This shows, they say, that Jesus was not omniscient and that He was on many subjects a man of His own time, with the ideas of His time and countrymen. We agree with the first deduction, but not with the second. The two things are entirely different. To be denied true knowledge does not necessarily involve the holding of error, and it is most

important to distinguish between a disclaiming of knowledge, and the advancement of falsehood on the assumption that it is true. We believe that our Lord disclaimed knowledge on the matter of His own second coming, and it is upon His own confession that we believe what He has stated on that topic. But where does Christ display any ignorance, or even uncertainty, on the matter of Scripture? His assertions here are clear and unwavering. He speaks with authority. Either He was right or else He was wrong. If the latter, then either He was self-deceived in a supreme degree, or else He was a blatant deceiver of His hearers, assuming an authority which He knew He did not possess. In either case, He would be proved to be hopelessly incompetent as a teacher, and a cloud of doubt would be cast over everything that He said. Our infallible Teacher would have gone from us beyond hope of recovery. Our certainties would mock us, and our foundation would be shifting sand. But if He was right in His statements regarding Holy Scripture, then we make bold to say that the Old Testament is, with the exception of the New, the supreme revelation of God and His purposes, and stands vindicated as such by Him Who was God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God.

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