

THE MODERN ROMAN CANON AND THE BOOK OF ESDRAS A.

IN a series of letters published in the *Academy* some twenty years ago, and subsequently in articles in the *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, I claim to have definitely proved that the text of the Canonical Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah contained in the extant Greek Bibles is not a Septuagint text at all, and ought to have no place in any edition of the Greek Bible professing to represent the Septuagint.

On the contrary, the text represents very faithfully one of the Greek translations from the Hebrew made in the second century A. D. It has no value, therefore, for the *independent* criticism of the Masoretic edition of the Bible, and is merely useful as shewing the state of the text of the three books as they stood in that edition in the second century A. D., when, according to the most competent authorities its archetype was compiled and edited.

This conclusion seems to me to be of the first importance, for it sweeps away all the textual criticism of the three books in question based upon the erroneous postulate that the Masoretic text in them is singularly free from corruption *because* it is so continuously supported by the Septuagint. Inasmuch as profitable criticism of the Old Testament should begin with its latest books, it is supremely important that such a mistake should not be perpetuated by the authorities responsible for the new Cambridge Bible.

The problem to be solved is, however, a bilateral one. It does not mean merely that the texts thus referred to (i.e. the canonical Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah) are in no sense Septuagint texts, but it means the rehabilitation in that character of another text, namely *Ἔσδρας Α* in the Greek Uncials, which until lately has received very scant courtesy among the critics, especially in Germany, who have persistently misapprehended its true character.

It has been treated even worse by the theologians, both by those of the Roman Church, which has always stood by the Septuagint Canon, and by the Reformers whose most potent and far-reaching innovation, theologically speaking, was probably the substitution of the Hebrew or Masoretic Canon of the Bible for that which the Christian world both east and west had clung to for fifteen centuries.

Singularly enough, however, the champions both of the longer and of the shorter Canon have agreed in modern times to treat with despite a document (namely "Εσδρας Α) the true history of which has been misapprehended, and its supreme value overlooked. The fact is peculiarly interesting and important in regard to the Roman position in the matter, and I propose in the following pages to examine how it has come about that a Church with whom the theory of continuous tradition is so dominant should have in fact departed so completely from its own early tradition in regard to this book, and to shew that this departure has been entirely due to a mistake, a very pardonable mistake, and in no sense to prejudice or predetermination.

In order to shew this I must shortly trace the history of the Canon of the Old Testament in the Roman Church. The last authoritative pronouncement on the subject is contained in chapter 2 of the Decree of the Vatican Council, dated April 24, 1870, entitled *Constitutio dogmatica de fide catholica*. In this pronouncement it is affirmed that the doctrine of Supernatural Revelation, according to the faith of the Universal Church as declared at the Council of Trent, consists in written books and in the traditions preserved by the Church. In regard to the former the decisions of Trent are accepted and confirmed in the following sentence of the decree:—

Qui quidem veteris et novi testamenti libri integri cum omnibus suis partibus, prout in eiusdem concilii decreto recensentur, et in veteri vulgata latina editione habentur, pro sacris et canonicis suscipiendi sunt.

The Vatican Council, therefore, in the matter of the Canon merely reiterates and reaffirms, as was in fact alone necessary, the conclusions pronounced by that of Trent. It gives no list of sacred books, and accepts in terms the finding on the subject of the Tridentine fathers.

Let us now turn to the Council of Trent.

On February 8, 1546, a General Congregation of that Council was held, and it was proposed to issue a decree in regard to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, and as to any improvement that might be made in their teaching or interpretation. The Council was divided into three sections, and the second section, which was presided over by Cardinal Marcello Cervini, afterwards Pope Marcellus II, was especially entrusted with an examination of the question, and with the sifting of the evidence from the eighty-fifth of the Apostolical Canons down to the decrees of the Council of Florence. The discussion was prolonged and interesting, and raised many critical points. Various suggestions about the distinction between canonical and deuterocanonical books and about the authority of particular books were made, but the majority were of opinion that the sacred books should be received simply and without discrimination as they had been at other councils, and especially at the Council of Florence. At length the Cardinal reported the results of the discussion to another meeting of the General Congregation, when, in the words of the report preserved by the secretaries,

omnes convenere ut receptio librorum sacrorum fieret simpliciter sicut factum fuit in concilio Florentino . . . De ipsorum autem librorum discrimine, etsi plures rem utilem, minus tamen necessariam iudicarent ; maioris nihilo minus partis sententia praevaluit ut quaestio huiusmodi omitteretur, relinquereturque sicut nobis a sanctis patribus relicta fuit. —Theiner I, 52.

In this quite logical and most sensible pronouncement the Church of Rome, putting aside all considerations and arguments which had been urged to the contrary, decided to stand on its own ancient tradition, and in particular upon the pronouncement made on this subject at the Council of Florence. Therefore by a decree issued on April 8, 1546, at the fourth session of the Council, under the heading 'Decretum de Canonicis Scripturis', it was determined *inter alia* as follows :—

Sacrorum vero librorum indicem huic decreto adscribendum censuit, ne cui dubitatio suboriri possit, quinam sint qui ab ipsa synodo suscipiuntur. Sunt vero infra scripti. Testamenti veteris : quinque Moysis, id est : Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri, Deuteronomium ; Iosuae, Iudicum, Ruth, quatuor Regum, duo Paralipomenon, *Esdrae primus et*

secundus, qui dicitur Nehemias, Tobias, Iudith, Esther, Iob, Psalterium Davidicum centum quinquaginta psalmodum, Parabola, Ecclesiastes, Canticum Canticorum, Sapientia, Ecclesiasticus, Isaias, Ieremias cum Baruch, Ezechiel, Daniel, duodecim prophetae minores, id est: Osea, Ioel, Amos, Abdias, Ionas, Michaeas, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonias, Aggaeus, Zacharias, Malachias, duo Macchabaeorum primus et secundus Testamenti novi.

Then follows a list of the books of the New Testament, which is again followed by certain words defining the actual text to be appealed to, and which are very important for our purpose.

It is in fact provided that the text alone authorized as the *ultima lex* of all appeals is the Vulgate. The following are the actual words used in the 'Decretum de editione et usu sacrorum librorum':—

Insuper eadem sacrosancta synodus considerans non parum utilitatis accedere posse ecclesiae Dei, si ex omnibus latinis editionibus, quae circumferuntur, sacrorum librorum, quatenam pro authentica habenda sit, innotescat: statuit et declarat, ut haec ipsa vetus et vulgata editio quae longo tot saeculorum usu in ipsa ecclesia probata est, in publicis lectionibus, disputationibus, praedicationibus et expositionibus pro authentica habeatur, et ut nemo illam reiicere quovis praetextu audeat vel praesumat.

It cannot fail to be noticed that in these pronouncements there is a palpable contradiction. If the books enumerated are alone to be deemed canonical, it seems difficult to understand how the Vulgate edition of the Bible as then received was to be treated as the conclusive authority in all disputes and controversies, since it contained, in very many if not in most existing copies, at least two additional works which were treated in them as of equal and co-ordinate authority with the remaining books, namely those which in the Latin Bibles were called Esdras III (that is *Esdrae A*) and Esdras IV; while some copies of the Vulgate also contained a third book not above enumerated, namely, the Prayer of Manasses, as well as the so-called Third book of Maccabees.

This contradiction between the pronouncement of the Council and the contents of the Vulgate texts which were and had long been current, was apparently ignored by the fathers at Trent. It led, however, to a considerable change in the editions of the Vulgate subsequently printed, by which their contents were in a measure equated with the conciliar list of recognized books. As

is well known, in the famous and authoritative edition of the Vulgate issued by Pope Sixtus V in 1590, the two books Esdras III and IV, together with the so-called Prayer of Manasses, were omitted entirely. This was justified in the preface in the following sentence:—

Nos autem ut haec Vetus editio, quae nunc prodit nostro excusa prelo, eiusdem Synodi [*i.e. Trent*] praescripto modis omnibus responderet non solum veteres, et ab Ecclesia receptos loquendi modos conservavimus, sed etiam apocrypha reiecit, authentica retinimus. Nam tertium et quartum Esdrae libros inscriptos, et tertium Macchabaeorum, quos Synodus inter Canonicos non annumerat, assentientibus etiam in hoc praedictis Cardinalibus Congregationis super Typographia Vaticana deputatae, ab hac editione prorsus explosimus. Orationem etiam Manassae, quae neque in Hebraeo, neque in Graeco textu est, neque in antiquioribus Manuscriptis Latinis exemplaribus reperitur, sed in impressis tantum post Librum secundum Paralipomenon affixa est, tanquam insutam, adiectam et in textu sacrorum librorum locum non habentem repudiavimus.

In the subsequent and corrected and still more authoritative edition of Clement VIII, published three years later, and in all subsequent editions of the Roman Vulgate the three books just mentioned were reinstated, but instead of being placed in the old position they occupied in the mediaeval Latin Bibles, they were remitted to an appendix. This again was justified in the preface in the following words:—

Porro in hac editione nihil non canonicum, nihil adscititium, nihil extraneum apponere visum est: atque ea causa fuit, cur libri tertius et quartus Esdrae inscripti, quos inter canonicos libros sacra Tridentina Synodus non annumeravit, ipsa etiam Manassae regis Oratio, quae neque hebraice, neque graece quidem exstat, neque in manuscriptis antiquioribus invenitur, neque pars est ullius canonici libri, extra canonicae scripturae seriem posita sunt.

The appendix to which the three books were remitted is headed—

Oratio Manassae, necnon libri duo, qui sub Libri Tertii et Quarti Esdrae nomine circumferuntur, hoc in loco, extra scilicet seriem canonicorum librorum quos sancta Tridentina Synodus suscepit et pro canonicis suscipiendos decrevit, sepositi sunt ne prorsus interirent, quippe qui a nonnullis sanctis Patribus interdum citantur et in aliquibus Bibliis latinis tam manuscriptis quam impressis reperiuntur.

It will be noted that in Clement VIII's edition of the Vulgate, which is the one now authorized, not a word is said of the Third book of Maccabees, which had a place in some of the old copies of the Vulgate.

The removal of the three books above mentioned from the text of the Bible, and the planting of them in a kind of suspense account in an Appendix, while it made the text of the canonical books in the rest of the Bible consistent with the enumeration in the decree of the Tridentine Council, was clearly a tampering with the text of the Vulgate as previously received, though this had been declared by the same Council to be the official and authentic text. Let us, however, turn to the Council of Florence, which was held in 1439, and which the Fathers at Trent professed to follow and to be bound by.

In the Bull published on February 4, 1441, by Eugenius IV affirming the decision of the Florentine Council in regard to the pronouncement which was made in view of the reunion with the Church of Rome of the Jacobites of Egypt, we have an enumeration of the books then recognized as canonical by the Western Church. This list was followed implicitly by the Council of Trent. There are variations, however, of phraseology, and I think it better as the question is one involving polemical issues to transcribe it as it stands in the Bull. The important part for our purpose runs as follows:—

Unum atque eundem Deum veteris et novi testamenti, hoc est Legis et Prophetarum atque Evangelii profitetur auctorem; quoniam, eodem Spiritu Sancto inspirante, utriusque testamenti Sancti locuti sunt, quorum libros suscipit et veneratur, qui titulis sequentibus continentur: Quinque Moysis, id est Genesi, Exodo, Levitico, Numeris, Deuteronomio; Iosue, Iudicum, Ruth; Quatuor Regum; Duobus Paralipomenon: *Esdra, Nehemia*, Tobia, Iudith, Hester, Iob, Psalmis David, Parabolis, Ecclesiaste, Canticis Cantorum, Sapientia, Ecclesiastico, Isaia, Ieremia, Baruch, Ezechiele, Daniele; Duodecim Prophetis minoribus, id est Osee, Ioele, Amos, Abdia, Iona, Michea, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonia, Aggeo, Zacharia, Malachia; Duobus Maccabaeorum.—*Bullarium Rom. Romae 1638, I p. 273*¹.

Then follows a list of the New Testament books.

It will be seen that this enumeration is in substance precisely

¹ In this extract from the Bull, as in the corresponding one from the Tridentine pronouncement, the italics are mine.

that of the Council of Trent, and that here, as at the subsequent Councils of Trent and the Vatican, no distinction whatever is made between proto-canonical and deutero-canonical, canonical and apocryphal, &c., but all the books enumerated were treated as equally canonical. It will also be noted that no mention is here made of the third and fourth books of Esdras, notwithstanding that virtually every copy of the Latin Bible then in use contained them.

In regard to the decision of the Council of Florence as pronounced by the Pope in his Decretal, we cannot appeal for justification to the minutes of the discussion upon its contents as we can at Trent, since they are not extant, and we must turn elsewhere to find some previous official pronouncement in the same behalf, for we can hardly doubt that on such an occasion the definition of the Biblical Canon would be made with especial care and with consideration for precedent. For such precedent we have to go back a long way. This is to be accounted for by the fact that questions as to the Canon had not disturbed men's minds in the Middle Ages, and there had not, therefore, been any necessity or occasion for an official pronouncement on the subject. We have to go back, in fact, to the famous African Code, which is headed 'The Canons of the 217 blessed fathers who assembled at Carthage', commonly called 'The Code of Canons of the African Church', and which was passed and authorized in the year 419 A.D. Johnson, in his *Clergyman's vade mecum*, London, second edition, 1714, part II, has given an excellent account of them, which has not been improved since. He says:—'Councils were nowhere more frequently called in the Primitive Times than in Africa. In the year 418-419 all Canons formerly made in sixteen Councils held at Carthage, one at Milevis, and one at Hippo, that were approved of were read, and received a new sanction from a great number of bishops then met in Synod at Carthage. This collection is the Code of the African Church, which was always in greatest repute in all churches next after the Code of the Universal Church. This Code was of very great authority in the old English Churches, for many of the exceptions of Egbert were transcribed from it. And though the Code of the Universal Church ends with the Canons of Chalcedon, yet these African Canons are inserted into the Ancient Code both of the Eastern and Western Churches.'

At the Council of Carthage held in 419 the Pope was represented by Faustinus, bishop of Potentia in the Italian province of Picenum, as legate. The Canon there enacted, and headed 'De Scripturis Canonicis' (Labbe iv 430), was a reiteration and reaffirmation of those enacted *inter alia* at the Councils of Hippo in 393 and of Carthage in 397.

The 36th Canon of the Council of Hippo declares that besides the canonical Scriptures nothing is to be read in the Church under the name of Divine Scriptures. It then enumerates what the Canonical Scriptures are, and, so far as I know, there is no conciliar pronouncement on the subject between these African Synods and the Council of Florence. Their enumeration of the Old Testament books is as follows:—

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri, Deuteronomium, Iesu Nave, Iudicum, Ruth, Regnorum libri quatuor, Paralipomenon libri duo, Iob, Psalterium Davidicum, Salomonis libri quinque, Duodecim libri Prophetarum, Esaias, Ieremias, Daniel, Ezechiel, Tobias, Iudith, Hester, *Hesdrae libri duo*¹, Machabaeorum libri duo.

The iteration of this Canon by the African Councils was probably due, as Father Loisy has suggested, to the fear, entertained by many, of the revolutionary ideas of Jerome. Nothing could well be more authoritative, however, and more precise than the position that the list of books above quoted was deemed by these three very important Synods to be the Catholic usage in the Western Church in regard to the contents of the Canon of the Old Testament at the end of the fourth century.

On comparing the list of books authorized as Canonical by the African Synods with those of the Councils of Florence and Trent, there is a superficial and misleading equation in regard to the books of Esdras which we are discussing, that accounts for what was really a mistake made by the latter councils.

In the Canon last quoted we have the phrase *Hesdrae libri duo*. In the Decree of the Council of Florence we have *Esdra, Nehemia*. In that of Trent we have *Esdrae primus et secundus qui dicitur Nehemias*.

The fact is that the phrase *Hesdrae libri duo* in the decree of the earlier Councils does not mean the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah in the Septuagint and in the

¹ These italics are my own.

early Latin prae-Hieronymian translation of the Bible which followed the Septuagint, and was alone recognized as canonical in the Latin Church at the end of the fourth century, formed a single book, which in the early Greek MSS was entitled Ἑσδρας B, and which in the early Latin version was entitled Esdras II.

It was Jerome who altered the nomenclature of these books as he altered many other things (and, as some of us think, not too wisely). It was he who, having accepted the Jewish Canon and tradition, also accepted the Jewish division of the book hitherto known to the Greeks as Ἑσδρας B, which in the old Latin Bibles was called Esdras II, and gave the two sections of it the new titles of Esdras I and Esdras II, equivalent to our Ezra and Nehemiah; and from him the titles passed into the revised Vulgate, of which he was the author, and eventually became dominant everywhere, and was thus dominant when the Council of Florence sat. It was he who poured scorn on two other books of Ezra contained in the earlier Latin Bibles, and refused to have anything to do with them, or to translate them, and gave them an entirely inferior status by numbering them Esdras III and IV, names by which they have since been styled in the Vulgate; and it was his violent and depreciatory language about them which made many doubt their value and authority.

When the fathers at Florence discussed and decided upon their list of authorized and canonical books, finding, no doubt, that the African Councils had only recognized two books of Esdras, they jumped to the conclusion that these two books must be those called Esdras I and Esdras II in their Bibles, namely, Ezra and Nehemiah; which in fact they were not. Hence their mistake, a great but a natural mistake, which is perpetuated in the Roman Canon.

The two books of Esdras recognized by the African Councils, and by all the Fathers who escaped the influence of Jerome, were the books labelled Ἑσδρας A and Ἑσδρας B in the Greek Bibles, that is to say, the first book of Esdras, which was remitted to the Apocrypha by the Reformers, and the joint work Ezra-Nehemiah. This evidence will not be doubted by any one who will examine the early Greek Bibles, and the Canonical lists of the Fathers who were uninfluenced by Jerome.

It is completely recognized by Roman Catholic theologians of the first rank. Thus Calmet, who wrote a special treatise on Esdras A, says: 'When the Fathers and the Councils of the earlier centuries declared the two books of Esdras to be canonical, they meant, following the current Bibles that First Esdras and Nehemiah formed only one book, while they styled First Esdras the work which is called third in our Bibles' (Calmet *Comm.* iii 250 'Dissert. sur le III livre d'Esdras'). Father Loisy, the most distinguished scholar among the recent writers on the Canon in France, similarly says: 'The two books of Esdras contained in them (i.e. in early copies of the Latin Bible) are not Esdras and Nehemiah; but as in the Greek Bible, the first book of Esdras is that we now call the third, which has been ejected from the Canon; the second comprised Esdras and Nehemiah' (*Histoire du Canon* 92).

It is quite clear, therefore, that the Council of Florence, afterwards followed by that of Trent, gave a decision about the Canon which is inconsistent and contrary to the decisions of the early Councils and the early Fathers of the Latin Church on the same subject, and thus broke the continuity of that Church's teaching on a most important point, namely the contents of the book which it makes the ultimate rule of faith. Thus, again, one book, namely the Esdras A of the Greek Uncials, recognized as canonical by all the early Church, was entirely evicted from Sixtus V's Bible, and remitted to the ignominious position of a suspense account in that of Clement VIII, and is so treated in all authorized Roman Catholic Bibles.

The omission of Esdras A from the modern Roman Canon of the Bible does not stand quite alone. In the same suspense account to which it is now remitted in the Vulgate we also find the Prayer of Manasses. For this treatment there is ample justification if we are to follow the decrees of Latin Councils; but the reason for it given by Clement VIII is incorrect.

The Prayer of Manasses is a canticle which, according to the preface to Clement VIII's Bible, does not occur in the Hebrew Bibles, nor yet in the Greek Bibles. This is not strictly accurate, as Walton long ago shewed by printing a copy of it from a Greek MS. The statement in the preface to Clement VIII's

Bible is not therefore correct. The Prayer occurs in fact in the third volume of the *Codex Alexandrinus* as an appendix to the Psalter, and with the Psalms, as Dr Swete says, it was transferred to that MS from a liturgical Psalter (*The Old Testament in Greek* II viii). It also occurs in the famous purple psalter at Zurich known as T (Turicense) which is of the seventh century and of western origin. It also occurs in the Ethiopic version of the Psalms edited by J. Ludolf. And it is quoted at length in the Apostolical Constitutions; so it has very respectable age and authority.

There is, however, no direct evidence of its having received any conciliar authority, as there is none that it occurred in early Bible texts or in early Canonical lists, and its exclusion from the Canon by the Sixtine and Clementine editors of the Bible is therefore quite defensible, if we are to follow the decisions of Councils as decisive.

There still remains a third book, namely that known as Esdras IV in the Vulgate, which was also excluded from the Bible of Sixtus and remitted to an appendix in that of Clement. This work does not occur in any Greek Bible. It occurs in Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, an Armenian and two Arabic translations; it is found in several important Vulgate MSS, and is quoted in the Apostolical Constitutions; but inasmuch as it is excluded from the early lists of canonical books, and especially from those with conciliar authority, it has with plausibility been remitted to the same appendix as the Prayer of Manasseh in the modern authorized Latin Bibles.

Both these books stand on entirely different ground therefore from what we have described as Esdras A, whose undoubted and rightful presence in the Western Canon before the unfortunate mistake made by the Council of Florence cannot be gainsaid. Jerome, no doubt, coupled it with the apocalyptic book Esdras IV, with which it has nothing in common either in contents or authority, and poured scorn on them both. His action in this matter is an excellent instance of his hasty judgement in biblical matters, and of the prejudice that can be created and sustained against a genuine work by the tempestuous language of a masterful scholar.

It seems to me plain that it was a misfortune as well as

a mistake which excluded Esdras A from the modern Roman Canon, and that its reinstatement there would be a distinct gain to the cause of truth, and it would sustain the consistency of the Latin Church in its treatment of its Bible.

Perhaps I may be permitted in another paper to discuss the Anglican Canon as affected by similar issues.

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