THE CANON OF THE BIBLE:
SOME REASONS FOR CONTEMPORARY INTEREST

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A decade ago Theodor H. Gaster published his translation of the distinctive documents from the Dead Sea area. Entitled The Dead Sea Scriptures,1 this paperback has become quite popular. That "Scriptures" instead of "writings" was used may well be the result of considerations of connotation, rather than alliteration. For "Scriptures" suggests that these writings are on a par with the Sacred Scriptures, the Bible.

By appealing to a latent curiosity, publishers in the past have been able to pawn off copies of the Apocrypha by packaging such as "The Lost Books of the Bible." Thanks to the finds of Qumran and Nag Hammadi, publishers can offer some new "Lost Scriptures."

These finds too, are among the factors which have brought the consideration of the canon to the fore. While the cautious, as well as the theologically conservative, scholars will resist urges to consider these new-found "sayings" and "scriptures" canonical contenders, all recognize their importance. What can be learned from the Dead Sea Scrolls concerning the canon of the Old Testament?2 What is the relation of the "Gospel of Thomas" to the canonical gospels?3

But there are other reasons why the question of canon is enjoying a renaissance. Ecumenics is one, New Theology another, and Vatican Two pronouncements on Scripture cannot be overlooked.

The National Council of Churches of Christ, spurred by a constituent denomination which uses the apocrypha in liturgical readings, authorized the revision of the apocrypha by its Standard Bible Committee.4 The Revised Standard Version of the Apocrypha was made in 1957 and last year appeared bound with the Old and New Testaments in the Oxford Annotated Bible.5 Floyd Filson may be revealing the motivation of the

3. R. Mc L. Wilson in "'Thomas' and the Growth of the Gospels," Harvard Theological Review, 53:1960, p. 231 if suggests that certain MSS of the Luke 12 may have been influenced by the "he that hath ears to hear," formula found frequently in the Thomas logia. The "conflated quotation" of I Cor. 2:9, Wilson shows, may have some relation to one of the sayings of Jesus "Thomas" has preserved.
NCCC when he remarks, "this revision will force the Protestant Churches to consider what books they should include in their Bible."

The German New Testament scholar Kurt Aland considers the different canons of the parts of the Christian church, more than a symptom, indeed the cause of the intolerable malady of a divided church! A renewed interest in the Scriptures—what they are and what they say—is bound to have a salutary effect on the church. But the evangelical must challenge those who emphasize present differences at the expense of historical considerations.8

Filson's charge that "Never during the more than nineteen centuries of its history has the church agreed as to just what the Bible should include,"9 is, to say the least, misleading, and begs the question of the relation of the (true) church and the canon. An historical study should be undertaken to show the continuous line of recognition of the canon of Scripture, against which the aberrant views are to be seen.10

Certain views, if reiterated often enough and recognized by a sufficiently large number of "authorities" may be taken as gospel truth. Margolis admits that this is not the failing of traditionalists alone, for "untradition," as he calls that which goes by the name of criticism, "tends to be hardened into a tradition of the critical school unquestioned by its followers."11

A case in point is the critical view of the "council" of Jamnia, ca. 90 A.D. Here, it is asserted the canon of the Old Testament was "formed in one act."12 fixed for all times."13 Even those less dogmatic about the canon-fixing speak of the Synod, or Council of Jamnia, as if it were established beyond doubt that this was a council in the sense in which that term is used in Christian church history.14 In a carefully documented study authored by the German New Testament scholar Kurt Aland considers the different canons of the parts of the Christian church, more than a symptom, indeed the cause of the intolerable malady of a divided church! A renewed interest in the Scriptures—what they are and what they say—is bound to have a salutary effect on the church. But the evangelical must challenge those who emphasize present differences at the expense of historical considerations.8

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faulty human words. For Barth one must expect to find Holy Scripture, Scripture as the witness of divine revelation where the Church itself has found it, "until the church itself is better instructed." There is no "absolute guarantee that the history of the canon is closed!"

Since April 8, 1546, the Roman Catholic Church has had a definite pronouncement on the extent of the canon: "If anyone...should not accept the said books previously listed including Tobia, Judith, Jeremias with Baruch, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, the two books of Maccabees, the first and the second as sacred and canonical, entire with all their parts, as they are wont to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the Old Latin Vulgate edition and if both knowingly and deliberately he should condemn the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema."25

This dogma remains intact, now that Vatican II is history, as indeed do the main dogmas of the Roman church. The position on a closely related matter, the two sources of revelation, viz., Scripture and tradition, was reaffirmed. Despite its negative attitude toward further consideration of the extent of the canon, Vatican II is bound to stimulate theological discussion about this matter. For the Vatican II pronouncements are replete with references to the separated churches—not just the Eastern Churches, but churches of the Reformation as well. The presence of Protestant observers at the Council helped to erase images of the Inquisition and sketch the outlines for a scene of future union. An ecumenical council in an age in which that very term has been lifted from the theologian's thesaurus and re-coined as common currency!

With the pressure of the World Council of Churches on one side, and Rome on the other, may one not expect that issues separating Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches will increasingly receive attention by ecumenical architects and their theologian technicians? And what is more basic to such considerations than the differing concepts of authority—the infallible church or the infallible Bible?

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23. Ibid., "Das alttestamentliche Zeugnis von Gotteshandeln in, mit und unter den geschichtlichen Ereignissen, die die Geschichte Israels gepragt haben, ist ein vielorts gebrochenes, insbesondere deswegen, weil sich das beschriebene und bezeugte Heilshandeln Jahwes, mit dem tatsächlichen Hendeln Gottes nicht deckt."


25. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Volume One, Second Half Volume, tr. by G. T. Thomas and Harold Knight, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Chapter Three, "Holy Scripture."


30. But not without some discussion (especially about the relation of Scripture and tradition) according to observer G. C. Berkouwer. See Berkouwer's The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism, tr. by Lewis B. Smidt, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, p. 50f.
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