

William J. Abraham's *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism*

A Response by Craig A. Blaising

William J. Abraham has a publishing record as a critic of fundamentalist and conservative evangelical doctrines of Scripture, particularly as they impact theological method. His earlier works, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (OUP, 1981), *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (OUP, 1982), and to some extent, *The Coming Great Revival: Recovering the Full Evangelical Tradition* (Harper & Row, 1984) set forth his criticisms of the doctrines of revelation, inspiration, and inerrancy as they have been commonly articulated in conservative evangelicalism. They also present his proposals for a doctrine of revelation and inspiration which are important for understanding his latest work, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*. *Canon and Criterion* is dedicated to James Barr, and I don't think it would be remiss to see Abraham's work as carrying forward Barr's project of restating a doctrine of Scripture, although Abraham is not a biblical scholar but a philosophical theologian whose concern with Scripture is how it is used in theological proposals. In the *Coming Great Revival*, Abraham designates his approach to Scripture and theology as a Wesleyan evangelical approach. This is developed further in a crucial article on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and in *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in the United Methodist Church* (Abingdon, 1995).

Now, turning our attention to *Canon and Criticism*, the thesis of the book is nicely formulated in the first sentence on page 1: 'The fundamental problems which arise in treatments of authority in the Christian faith stem from long-standing misinterpretation of ecclesial canons as epistemic criteria.' The thesis is argued by defending the claim that an ecclesial canon is categorically different from an epistemological criterion (consequently it is wrong to construe a canon as a criterion) and by offering an historical narrative which attempts to delineate a longstanding misinterpretation of these two.

There is a wealth of information in this book. We should all offer our appreciation to Abraham for a rich and detailed history of theological and philosophical epistemology. I believe that Abraham succeeds in providing us

with an illuminating history of problems in epistemology in western Christianity, especially as these problems affected theologians trying to meet the epistemological standards of the modern era. These are problems that arise when trying to pursue the modern project of achieving indubitability, absolute certainty, or as close to it as one can get in philosophical or theological argumentation by appeals to reason or sense experience. Included in this is the problem of trying to justify the authority of Scripture by the same methodology with the same hoped for epistemological result. These problems are well known and are discussed in other publications, but Abraham offers a helpful survey and penetrating analysis not found in other works. It is truly quite a remarkable project, and Abraham should be commended for this contribution which will be so helpful to his colleagues in philosophy and theology who are and will be working on these areas.

The central thesis of the book, however, fails. And it fails for a reason that Abraham is not unaware of but that, it seems to me, he doesn't fully appreciate.

The problem has to do with the distinction that Abraham makes between canon criterion as this applies to Scripture, which is the canon that Abraham is chiefly, though not exclusively, concerned with. (Other canons include: creeds, liturgy, iconography, church fathers, and sacraments.) Abraham says that canon and criterion are categorically distinct. He believes that a canon is a list – a list of items for use by the church as a means of grace. The canon of Scripture is such a list of books. A criterion, on the other hand, is a norm. It is 'a means for demarcating truth from falsehood, reality from illusion, rationality from irrationality, knowledge from opinion'. Obviously, a norm and a list are not the same kind of thing. And to confuse them is 'odd', 'unwise', 'unfortunate', 'straightforwardly wrong', and 'has devastating consequences'. But that is just what happened, according to Abraham. What the church designated as a list of books for use in the church came to be regarded as a norm in theology, and we have been suffering the consequences ever since.¹

Frankly, I think this understanding of Scripture as canon is wrong. I do not think the church meant by the term *canon* simply a list without any reference

1 These points are repeated throughout ch. 1 of *Canon and Criterion*.

to normativity in doctrine. But let's leave that aside for the moment. The obvious thing that Abraham misses, it seems to me, is the criteriological role that Scripture actually had in early Christianity. The reason Scripture was accorded such a role in the history of the church is not because the church mistakenly came to regard the canon as a criterion, but because the church was carrying forward by tradition what had always been the case.

To be sure, Abraham acknowledges that Scripture was used in theological argumentation. But he thinks that Scripture *per se* had no criteriological bearing; rather it was revelation, to which Scripture provided access, which functioned normatively.² Perhaps the problem here is that Abraham's own theological assumptions about revelation, divine discourse, and Scripture, which he set forth in his previous works, have clouded his historical perception so that he is not able to see the actual role Scripture had in the early church. Abraham himself believes that Scripture is neither divine speech nor revelation. The Scripture may in part result from acts of revelation, and it may be used to discern revelation, but it is not itself revelation. Neither is it divine discourse, which he thinks would lead to a dictation view of inspiration. He believes divine discourse does exist – God does speak, even today, by the Holy Spirit to the individual believer.³ But this is the crucial point: having removed Scripture from the category of revelation or divine speech, Abraham has deprived it *per se* from normative authority.

Abraham believes that at the beginning of Christian theology, Scripture was viewed in a similar manner. And he is misled not only by his own view of Scripture but also by the tradition of Zahn and Souter on the meaning of *kanōn* in Athanasius and the theological implications which they draw from that perceived meaning. The view is clearly stated by Souter in his discussion of *kanōn* and *kanonizo* in Athanasius *De Decretis* 18 and *Easter Letter* 39:

A *kanōn* is a list of biblical books which may be read in the public services of a church, and, if such be produced with the authority of a synod or council, of the church. The use of the word had in the mind of its first creator no other sense than just this. It is merely by the accident that a list if promulgated by an ecclesiastical body tends thereby to acquire an

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

3 Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 8-24.

ecclesiastical authority that that mixture in sense has been produced which the word *kanōn* has since exhibited. A confusion with the other sense of *rule*...already familiar in church life was naturally produced.⁴

Souter goes on to charge that from the late fourth century onwards, the Latins transliterated the word as *canon* and applied it to the Bible, but were hopelessly confused by the synonym *regula* which had always been a synonym of the Greek *kanōn*. *Regula* came to be used interchangeably with the Latinized *canon* as the latter was used to designate the body of Scripture. He continues:

This caused them to conceive of Scripture as the highest, and in matters of faith the final, authority. The *canon* was closed, complete, and authoritative in the way that the *kanōn* never was, and indeed, never has been. Thus enters in the Latin genius for law and order, and takes a separate course from the Greek freedom.⁵

Here we have the claim that the designation of Scripture as *kanōn* not only simply meant an official listing, implying nothing about its normative status, but that Scripture did not have a normative status at that time, but rather attained that status later through a misconstrual, a confusion over the meaning of *kanōn*. Canon was misconstrued as criterion.

Souter recognized that *kanōn* meant ‘norm’ or ‘rule’ in its usage by earlier Christian writers. But he argued that when Scripture came to be designated as the canon, it did not have this meaning, but simply meant an official listing of books for church use.

4 Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1917), p. 156. Souter acknowledges that he is relying on the authority of Zahn for his views on canon (*ibid.*, viii). See Theodor Zahn, *Grundriss der Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1904), pp. 1-14. Various treatments of the history of the New Testament canon have generally followed Zahn and Souter on this point, although not without reservations. See Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 17-18; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 289-93; F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 17-18. Bruce notes that generally speaking, ‘Theodor von Zahn... was prone to overstate his case...’ *ibid.*, p. 144.

5 Souter, *Text and Canon*, p. 156.

Use – that's the key word! Souter's clear cut distinction between list and norm, which I will argue is incorrect in the Athanasian designation of Scripture as *kanōn* has become the occasion for Abraham's estimate on the function of Scripture in the patristic period. This is a mistake. The normative theological function of Scripture is determined by a study of its *use* in the early church. Such a study shows that the Scripture was prominently viewed as normative for the faith and that normativity was grounded in the fact that Scripture was viewed as God's Word. This is widely recognized in patristic studies. As an example, we can note the comments of Basil Studer and Angelo di Berardino at the beginning of the patristic volume in the series, *History of Theology* (which is not a history of dogma or church history but a history of theological method).

There can, in fact, be no doubt that Christian writers based their theological thinking on the Sacred Scriptures and even regarded the Scriptures as for practical purposes a sufficient basis for any deeper grasp of the Christian faith. The truth of this crucial claim is already clear from the fact that the Fathers without exception regard the Bible as the Word of God and identify it more or less with divine revelation.... The fundamental fact remains – patristic theology was first and foremost biblical.⁶

If we compare Irenaeus, whose expression *kanōn* of faith or *kanōn* of truth is admitted by everyone to mean rule of faith or rule of truth,⁷ to Athanasius, who was the first to clearly use the word *kanōn* to refer to the collection of Scripture, giving us a listing of the same, we see that their *use* of Scripture in theological argumentation was practically the same. Scripture was the requisite norm for establishing theology. Both saw it as the Word or Words of God and saw its normative bearing in theological argumentation in a variety of ways. Typically, Irenaeus in *Adversus haereses* and Athanasius in *Contra Arianos* and *De decretis*, argue for theological points from biblical vocabulary, biblical grammar and syntax, biblical imagery, as well as biblical teachings. All these aspects 'norm' orthodox theology. And this in itself disproves the Souter-Abraham thesis that Scripture was simply a list of books

6 Angeol Di Berardino and Basil Studer, eds., *History of Theology*, vol. 1, *The Patristic Period*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 14-15.

7 See for example, Irenaeus *Adversus haereses* 1.9.4 (Harvey, 1.88, where *kanona tēs alētheias* is translated *regulam veritatis*).

without normative bearing. Athanasius speaks of the rule of faith, using the word *kanōn*, in the same way as Irenaeus (cf. *Adversus haereses* 1.9.4 with *Contra Arianos* 3.28-29) as the faith which is germane to and arises from the whole of the Scripture (cf. Irenaeus' use of *hypothesis* to Athanasius use of *skopos* in these passages) and is used (in the manner of a hermeneutical circle) as a rule to interpret Scripture. When we turn to Athanasius' *De decretis*, we find once again that the whole treatise is a defense of Nicene orthodoxy on the basis of Scripture. In *De decretis* 18 he makes the aside that Hermas is not of the *kanōn*. Obviously, canon here refers to the collection of Scripture. But, is it reasonable to think that this designation of Scripture as canon has no sense of normativity when the whole argument of the treatise is that Arian theology is wrong because it is unbiblical? Just before this reference to the *kanōn* Athanasius asks, from what Scriptures did the Arians get their phrases 'he was not before his generation', or 'once he was not?' He asks about the theological grammar by which they apply the descriptions 'out of nothing' and 'changeable' to the Son of God. They did not get this grammar, he says, from Scripture. Of course, the canon here is a collection of books, but to say that that collection carries no normativity is myopic, missing the way that canon is being used in the entire treatise.

When we come to *Easter Letter* 39, there is no doubt that the books which are *kanonizomena* are books which are included in the canon. But is it reasonable to say that being canonical here simply has to do with a list, having no thought of the normativity of these books, of their criteriological bearing on Christian theology? Two features of this short letter link it to *Contra Arianos* 3.38-29, a reference to 2 Timothy 3:16, with the estimation of Scripture as divinely inspired, and a reference to John 5:39, where Jesus challenges his hearers to 'Search the Scriptures for it is they which testify of me'. In *Contra Arianos* these features are the condition for the normative (the word *kanōn* is used) bearing of the scope of Scripture on Scripture's interpretation. Their appearance in the *Easter Letter* indicates the same canonical, that is, normative, function – the Christian faith which is normed by Scripture as it arises out of Scripture is itself a norm in the interpretation of Scripture. It is only the Scripture that functions in this way. And in this letter, whose occasion is the circulation of Gnostic texts in Athanasius' diocese, he makes very clear which texts belong to the *kanōn*.

By misrepresenting the patristic view of Scripture, Abraham's thesis is faulty

from the start. There is no dichotomy between canon of Scripture and its criteriological bearing in the early church. Consequently, the history of theological epistemology cannot be represented as having forgotten this point. There are undoubtedly problems in the way authority has been treated in the history of Christianity, and Abraham documents a good number of them. But they are not due to a misinterpretation of Scripture as a theological norm.

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