FACTORS PROMOTING THE FORMATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

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Extra-Biblical witness to the origin of the Old Testament books is lacking. There are no copies of the Old Testament writings earlier than about 250 B.C. and no parallel ancient literature referring to them. Only two sources are available, therefore, for the present study: the claims of the Old Testament for itself, and the infallible teachings of Jesus Christ who, Christians believe, knew perfectly all the facts.

If the topic concerned the collection of the Old Testament books and the acceptance of the Old Testament canon there would be a bit larger room for the investigation of post-Old Testament literature. Thanks to the Dead Sea discoveries and new knowledge of apocryphal books and similar literature one can trace back the recognition of some of the Old Testament books rather well. Still, the extra-Biblical witness fails to reach back to the Old Testament period.

As to the formation of the Old Testament canon, historic Christianity insists that the Old Testament books were written by special divine inspiration. They therefore came with inherent authority and were accepted by the faithful in Israel at once as the Word of God. In short, the canon was formed over the centuries as the books were written under the inspiration of God.

This view is usually thought of as the Protestant view, but the Roman Catholic Council of Trent and the Vatican Council I are in basic agreement with it. The latter says that the books of the Bible are held by the church to be "sacred and canonical, not because, having been carefully composed by mere human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority, nor merely because they contain revelation, with no mixture of error, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their author, and have been delivered as such to the Church herself." (Chap. II). Observe that the claim is here made that the Scriptures are inherently authoritative because God has written them and the Church merely recognizes this fact. The one factor promoting the formation of the Old Testament canon is therefore, according to this view, the divine authorship of certain books.

It might be said that this answer is too easy. How did men know which books were divinely inspired? It is true, this second question is vital, but it must not minimize the insistence that the Old Testament canon was formed piece by piece as the books were written.

Anti-supernatural thought of course cannot accept these conclusions. By rationalist standards no book can be divinely inspired in the fullest sense, just as no true miracles can be allowed. Like the Sadducees, modern sceptics accept neither resurrection, angel nor spirit and there-

fore to them the matter of canonization necessarily becomes a question of the acceptance of certain books as supernatural by a group of gullible religionists. And because it is thought to be easier to beguile later generations who are somewhat removed from the events concerned, it is thought that the canon slowly grew as regard for ancient writings turned into veneration and then became religious acceptance. Rationalism holds to an historical process of canonization which erroneously dignifies ancient books. Orthodox teaching holds to a set of books which were immediately inspired by God and were therefore authoritative and canonical from their inception.

It is not necessary here to consider extensively the usual three-fold development theory of criticism that has the Pentateuch canonized at about 400 B.C., the 8 Prophetical books at 200 B.C. and the 11 books of Writings at the alleged Council of Jamnia at A.D. 90.[1] This view depends on the Wellhausen theory that the Pentateuch was not completed until post-captivity times. Crucial also for the view are the Maccabean dating of Daniel—too late to be placed among the prophets—and the late date in general of the books called the Writings. Some Psalms were said to be Maccabean, the books of Chronicles were dated shortly before 200 B.C. Proverbs, Job, and others were said to be quite late. Ecclesiastes was even thought by some to be Herodian.

The older criticism is now, however, questioned. Though the recent views are greatly confused and do not approach orthodoxy, yet they bring into question many of these assumptions. The bulk of the Pentateuch is now thought to be old though who knows when it was written down! Some, following Noth, make the Deuteronomist the redactor of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, yet Deuteronomy is thought to have been canonized 200 years earlier than the rest of this redactor's work! The very existence of the Council of Jamnia is called into question[2] and indeed there are few if any facts indicating that there was such a council—yet critics operate as if this Council actually took place. Especially noteworthy is the current willingness to date books of the third Hebrew division before 200 B.C. Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles are now frequently dated around 400 B.C. This is amazing. It carries back the witness of these books to a time almost co-eval with the alleged P document! Also Ecclesiastes is dated to before 250 B.C. There are fragments of a copy of Job in paleo-Hebrew from about 200 B.C. among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Proverbs is quoted, evidently as Scripture, in the Zadokite Document which seems to be second century B.C. These new positions, required by Dead Sea Scroll evidence surely bring into question the crucial date of 200 B.C. for the alleged canonization of the canon of the Prophets. The question now is not why was Daniel in the third

1. The author has considered the three-fold development view in his *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, 1957, pp. 138-153.
2. This has been admirably done by Jack P. Lewis, "What do we Mean by Jabneh?" Journal of Bible and Religion, XXXII, 1964, pp. 125-132.

division.[3] The question is why were not Chronicles, Job, Ecclesiastes and others in the second division? It would seem that criticism should start looking for some answers here.

A further and very vulnerable point of the three-fold development view is the question of the contents of the three divisions. Quite uncritically, this view operates with the three-fold division of our present Hebrew Bibles which have been printed in this format since the sixteenth century. This division can be further traced back to the Talmud of about A.D. 400 and to Jerome, a contemporary. This division into 5 books of Law, 8 of Prophets and 11 of Writings can not be established prior to A.D. 400. It is very unsound to assume that this division of later days was original or even early. And yet that assumption is regularly made and this without argument.

This assumption is especially fallacious in view of positive evidence to the contrary. Josephus' well known reference (Against Apion 1:8) divides the Old Testament into three divisions: 5 of Law, 11 of Prophets and 4 of "hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life." The implication is that this division of Josephus is long established and common in Jewish circles. There is more reason to believe that Josephus' division is earlier than the division witnessed to in the Talmud. First, this evidence antedates the Talmud by about 300 years. Second, Philo who lived about A.D. 40 uses a description for the third division remarkably like Josephus: "hymns and the others which foster and perfect knowledge and piety."[4] Third, the four books usually thought to be associated in the third division by Josephus (Ps. Pro., Eccles., Song of Sol.) are grouped together also in almost every Christian listing of Old Testament books during the first 4 centuries A.D. Finally, Josephus' listing of Old Testament books totals 22 which is the figure given by Origen, probably intended by Melito of Sardis in A.D. 170 and stated by Eusebius, Athanasius and Jerome. The Talmud figure is 24 books which is followed by IV Ezra and Tertullian. The two reckonings rather clearly refer to the same books, namely our 39.

For some unknown reason the early arrangement or arrangements of books became in Hebrew circles the familiar later Talmudic division. This is the view developed by Moses Stuart[5] and Robert Dick Wilson. Dr. Allan A. MacRae has long taught this view and has further suggested that the change into the Talmudic division may have been for liturgical reasons.

The threefold divisions of Josephus or of the Talmud are not the only ones to consider. There are many early references to a twofold division, the Law of Moses and the Prophets. This terminology is of considerable importance in questions of authorship of the Old Testament books. It is the standard designation used in the New Testament though

3. Daniel, of course, was *not* in the third division according to Josephus' listing.
4. De Vita Contemplativa iii,25 quoted in Albert Sundberg, Jr., *The Old Testament of the Early Church*, p. 68.
5. Moses Stuart, *Old Testament Canon*, pp. 248ff.

the Psalms are called "law" in John 10:34 and 15:25, and in Luke 24:44 there is a single reference to the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Of interest is the new fact that the Dead Sea Scrolls use such a terminology three times and never use the threefold designation.[6] In II Maccabees 15:9 there is a reference to the law and the prophets.[7] At about this same time there are three references in the prologue to Ecclesiasticus in which the sacred books are referred to in three divisions. As mentioned already, Melito of Sardis in A.D. 170 refers to the law and the prophets listing all of our Old Testament books except Esther and alleging that he got his information from the Jews of Palestine. The usual listings of the Greek Septuagint are very instructive. They all differ among themselves. But all assemble together the five books of Moses at the beginning and then place the other books in widely varying positions. It should be noted that the Septuagint does not list first the five books of Moses, then the eight books of Prophets and then the rest in varying order. Rather it places the books found in the Law first and then there follow books of history, poetry, prophecy and the apocrypha in various sequences. In short the Septuagint is compatible with an early twofold division, but not with either known threefold division.

The writer formerly believed that the twofold division of the Old Testament books preceded the threefold. It may have done so in the dim and distant past, but it is a fact that the two designations are found contemporaneously. Beside Josephus' threefold is the New Testament twofold. Beside the twofold listing of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the book of II Maccabees is the threefold division of the prologue to Ecclesiasticus (which, however, gives us no details as to the content of the divisions). It therefore seems more probable that the two (or three) methods of dividing up the Old Testament books are as far as can be told merely sectarian differences. It is of some interest to observe that the practice of the Christian sources is more like that of the Essenes whereas the Talmudic practice follows more in the general stream of Jewish sources. In any case the particular divisions and orders of the books is an arrangement of convenience and is inconsequential.

In serious error is the recent view of Sundberg which the writer has treated elsewhere,[8] that the twofold division of the Old Testament included only the five books of Law and eight books of Prophets because the eleven books of Writings were not canonized prior to the Jewish-

6. Manual of Discipline i,3; viii, 15; and Zadokite Documents, vii, 12ff.
7. Here Zeitlin and Sundberg (*op. cit.* p. 68) declare that II Macc. refers only to the first two parts of the Hebrew canon, the five books of Law and eight of Prophets. There is no evidence for this restriction in Maccabees nor evidence for this classification of these books at so early a time. It is significant that II Macc. 2:13 gives the tradition of Nehemiah founding a library which included "the books of David" and that II Macc. 2:10 refers to heavenly fire consuming Solomon's dedicatory sacrifice—a detail found only in II Chronicles. Surely the canon of II Macc. cannot be limited to thirteen books at a time when the Dead Sea Scrolls recognized even Daniel as canonical!
8. "Was the Law and the Prophets Two-Thirds of the Old Testament Canon?" Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society, Vol. 9, 1966, pp. 163-171.

Christian division of A.D. 70. This view totally by-passes the witness of Josephus supported by Philo that the books of the Prophets included thirteen scrolls. It overlooks the obvious fact that the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament did accept books now in the third division of the Hebrew Bible. It declares that the early church had no fixed canon till the fourth century. It explains away all the early Christian references to a 22 or 24 book canon as merely giving the Jewish opinion and not the Christian position. Interestingly, W. H. Green had long ago noticed this view. He remarks: "It is a mere evasion to say that these fathers did not design to give the Christian, but the Jewish canon. These catalogues were intended for Christian readers, to inform them in regard to the books which properly belonged to the Old Testament. They do in fact give the Jewish canon, but only because that was likewise binding on the Christian Church."[9] How else can we explain the fact that a dozen Christian fathers speak in favor of a 22 or 24 book canon before A.D. 400? Finally Sundberg's view assumes the old critical three-fold development view of canonization of the Old Testament books.

In opposition to such naturalistic views, historic Christianity holds that the Bible books were authoritative when written. But, as remarked above, how did the faithful believers know which books came from God and which did not? There are three main answers. First is the view of W. H. Green, widely held today, that they could tell because some books were written by Moses of obvious authority, others by prophets (and placed in the second division) and others by non-prophets who were yet inspired men.

This view is free from the objection that it is rationalistic, but it suffers from the arguments given above that it proceeds uncritically on the assumption that the divisions of our Hebrew Bible are original. And, as already seen, there is much argument to the contrary. Also, the distinctions of three classes of authorship is unbiblical. Moses was a prophet. He is specifically so called in Hosea 12:13. Therefore Moses and the prophets should constitute one division, not two. Furthermore in the Talmud division Jeremiah is in the second division, Lamentations in the third although one man, obviously a prophet, wrote both. Also the Bible designates as prophets both David and Daniel who are authors of books in the third division. It will not do to say that these men were non-prophets who prophesied. The Bible knows nothing of the distinction between the gift of prophecy and the office of a prophet as given by Green. Furthermore the authors of the Old Testament are indiscriminately and repeatedly called prophets in the New Testament (Heb. 1:1; Mt. 11:13; 26:56; Lk. 18:31; 24:25; Acts 3:21; 13:27; James 5:10; Rom. 16:26; to name only a few). The very designation "Moses and the prophets" emphasizes that all the books were written by Moses the prophet *par excellence* and his prophetic successors. Finally it is to be noted that there

9. W. H. Green, *General Introduction to the Old Testament, Canon*, p. 167.

is no Biblical way to identify a non-prophetic inspired man. The tests given are tests for prophets (Deut. 18, etc.).

The second idea is that the books were all written by prophets and therefore accepted as canonical. This view is in agreement with the frequent exhortation to Israel to give heed to the prophets as God's spokesmen. Penalties were ordered for those who disobeyed the prophets. Tests were given to distinguish a true prophet from an impostor. A succession of prophets was promised to Israel. In the inter-testamentary period the people were conscious that there were no longer any prophets. The apocryphal books do not claim prophetic authorship.

It is objected to this view that some books were not as a matter of fact written by prophets. Actually this cannot be proved except on the basis of critical theories which proceed largely on subjective judgment. But it is true that the contrary cannot be proved either—that all of the Old Testament books were of prophetic authorship. This can be argued for 23 of the 39 books, but not so easily for the remaining 16. Curiously, the objection weighs with equal force against Green's view also because he classes the authors of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel and I and II Kings as prophets without clear warrant. If these six were prophetic, the remaining ten can as easily be so classified. Actually, there is good reason to class several of the debatable 16 as written by prophets. Joshua, many would say, wrote the book that bears his name attaching it to Moses' great volumes. But Joshua is called a prophet in I Kings 16:34. As to Samuel-Kings, one can speak with some confidence. A series of verses in Chronicles cites the works of a succession of writing prophets as its source (I Chron. 29:29; II Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 20:34; 26:22; 32:32; 33:19). The chief source of Chronicles is, as a matter of fact, Samuel-Kings. *Ergo* Samuel-Kings is the work of that series of writing prophets.

The work of Solomon accounts for three more books, according to the traditional opinions. Some feel that Solomon could not be a prophet because of his 1000 wives. It is true that Solomon erred in his later years in compromising with his wives' religions. But in all probability most of his wives were mere hostages received in political treaties. Actually, God spoke to Solomon in vision as truly as He did to Isaiah. And if Solomon were unworthy of being a prophet, how is he worthy of being a non-prophetic author of Scripture? If one allows Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon to be by prophets the debatable 16 books become 8. For these remaining 8 books there is not available all the information we should desire. The authorship of some of them is not reliably known to us and the position of the authors who are known is not entirely clear. Such facts were of course known in antiquity and, we may add, they were all known to Him who by his Spirit inspired them. The New Testament and Christ Himself refers to these books as prophetic and among the prophets, and the Dead Sea community did so long before that. The proof that these books were

written by prophets is not complete, but such evidence as we have points in that direction and no evidence of a positive nature lies against this conclusion.

There is a third answer to the query as to how the Jews knew a particular writing was God's word; that is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. This view is expressed in the French Confession of 1569 and possibly the Belgic Confession, but, it seems, in no other creeds. The view has been revived today. It may be said that this testimony is confirmatory and this third view does not exclude the second view presented above.

Nevertheless, it is significant that the Jews were not given this particular test to apply to a speaking prophet; why should it be thought decisive in judging a prophet's writing? That the Holy Spirit exercised his blessed ministry also in the Old Testament should not be doubted. But the testimony of the Holy Spirit is specifically to the presence of God and that the believer is a son of God saved by believing the doctrines of grace. It is not an external voice saying this particular scroll is God's Word. The testimony of the Holy Spirit could easily show that the story of Ahikar was not God's Word, for it does not agree with previous revelation. In short the Spirit's witness is confirmatory, but it goes along with the tests of a true prophet and agrees with, rather than excludes, the previous proposition: that the writings of prophets given to communicate God's Word were received by believers in Old Testament times and received at once as the word of the living God. In this way in successive ages the Old Testament canon was formed as God spoke at sundry times and in diverse manners by the prophets.

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