

AUGUSTINE AND THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

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IN the autumn of 1954 a conference on Augustinian Thought was conducted on the campus of Wheaton College, Illinois—a liberal arts college well known internationally for its positive evangelical witness. Dr. Schultz, who is Acting Chairman of the Department of Bible and Philosophy at Wheaton College, contributed this paper to the conference. In it he endeavours to assess Augustine's attitude and statements on the Canon of the Old Testament in the light of the differences that exist between Protestants and Roman Catholics in this regard.

THAT Augustine was a great philosopher, theologian, and saint has been disputed by few who have considered his voluminous writings as well as his influence throughout the centuries. What place he has as a critic or how far we may trust his judgment in matters of the extent of the canon needs to be carefully evaluated on the basis of his qualifications as a scholar. Since he has exerted such a wide and lasting influence in Christendom it is indeed fitting and proper that a careful analysis be made of the problem of the canon as related to Augustine.

The most notable discussion of the canon comes to us from the pen of Augustine in his treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*, written in A.D. 397. In this statement it is apparent that his New Testament list of books is identical with our present canon of twenty-seven. The crux of the whole problem is found in his listing of the Old Testament. He writes as follows:—

Now the whole Canon of Scripture on which we say this judgment is to be exercised, is contained in the following books: five books of Moses, that is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; one book of Joshua the son of Nun; one of Judges; one short book called Ruth, which seems rather to belong to the beginning of Kings; and two of Chronicles—these last not following one another but running parallel, so to speak, and going over the same ground. The books now mentioned are history, which contains a connected narrative of the times and follows the order of events. There are other books

which seem to follow no regular order, and are connected neither with the order of the preceding books nor with one another, such as Job, and Tobias, and Esther, and Judith, and the two books of the Maccabees, and two of Ezra, which last look more like a sequel to the continuous regular history which terminates with the books of Kings and Chronicles. Next are the prophets, in which there is one book of the Psalms of David, and three books of Solomon, viz. Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. For two books, one called Wisdom and the other Ecclesiasticus, are ascribed to Solomon from a semblance of style, but the most likely opinion is that they were written by Jesus the son of Sirach. Still they are reckoned among the prophetic books since they have attained recognition as being authoritative. The remainder are the books which are strictly called the prophets: twelve separate books of the prophets which are connected with one another, and having never been disjoined, are reckoned as one book; the names of these prophets are as follows: [the twelve are listed] . . . ; then there are the four greater prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel. The authority of the Old Testament is contained within the limits of these forty-four books.¹

All the Old Testament books commonly enumerated as thirty-nine in number, or as twenty-two or twenty-four in the Jewish canon, are included. The additional books listed create the problem: Tobias, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus. If Baruch is assumed to have been part of Jeremiah at that time, and 1 and 2 Esdras represent Ezra, Nehemiah, and 3 Esdras, then this list of deuterocanonical books is equated with books upon which the Council of Trent placed its seal of approval in 1546. Consequently, the basic difference between the Protestant and Roman Catholic Bibles today apparently dates back to the time of Augustine.

Three church councils in which Augustine participated agreed with this list of books for the Old Testament canon in their declarations: the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393, and two Councils at Carthage in 397 and 419. Furthermore, Augustine never changed his mind on this matter. In A.D. 427 he listed and reviewed all his works, making corrections wherever he considered it necessary. In the above-quoted paragraph he corrects his mistaken idea about the authorship of the book of Wisdom but leaves the enumeration of books as given.

That these deuterocanonical books were not in the canon of the Jews was clearly apparent to Augustine throughout his writings. In chapters 17 and 18 of his book *The City of God*, he points out that no prophets appeared after the time of Malachi, Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra, until Christ came; therefore, "the Lord

¹ Marcus Dods, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, Vol. IX, pp. 42-43 (*On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, Ch. 8).

himself says, "The law and the prophets were until John." As Augustine continues, he quotes the Wisdom of Solomon, concluding that "the things which are not written in the canon of the Jews cannot be quoted against their contradictions with so great validity." When he refers to the Maccabean books he makes it very plain that they are outside the Jewish canon when he says:—

From the time that the temple was built down to the time of Aristobulus, the Jews had not kings but princes; and the reckoning of their dates is found, not in the Holy Scriptures which are called canonical, but in others, among which are also the books of the Maccabees. These are held canonical not by the Jews but by the church, on account of the extreme and wonderful sufferings of certain martyrs who, before Christ had come in the flesh, contended for the law of God even unto death and endured most grievous and horrible evils.

Thus Augustine leaves no doubt as to his recognition that the deutero-canonical books were not recognized in the Jewish canon. It is apparent that the terms "Scriptures", "Holy Scriptures", or "Canon", were loosely used by Augustine as well as other church fathers ever since the days of the apostles. Often they are used to include more than the Jewish Old Testament. Nevertheless, in the heat of the argument, Augustine limits his Old Testament to the Jewish canon when he writes in his tract *On Faith of Things Not Seen*, appealing to the Scriptures as follows:—

Unless haply unbelieving men judge those things to have been written by Christians, in order that those things which they already believed might have greater weight of authority if they should be thought to have been promised before they came.

If they suspect this let them examine carefully the codices of our enemies the Jews. There let them read those things of which we have made mention. . . .

The question might well be raised as to why Augustine listed books in the Old Testament beyond those which the Jews accepted. Partially this might be answered in a careful examination of his qualifications, interest, and attitudes in the investigation of the problem of the extent of the canon. Augustine knew no Hebrew. This he clearly acknowledges in Book XI, Chapter 3, of his *Confessions* when he says: "And should he [Moses] speak in the Hebrew tongue, in vain would it beat on my senses, nor would ought touch my mind, but if in Latin I should know what he said." As to Greek, he took very little interest in that; linguistically, Latin was his main interest. Consequently, he never had much concern for the original language of the Old Testament.

His lack of critical interest and concern is notably apparent in his attitude toward the Septuagint. The legendary story in the unauthentic letter of Aristeas relative to the translation of the Pen-

tateuch into Greek was fully believed by him without question. Furthermore, he held the LXX to be inspired and regarded it as higher authority than the Hebrew. Quoting from his book *On Christian Doctrine* (Book II, Ch. 15), we read:—

Wherefore, if anything is found in the original Hebrew in a different form from that in which these men have expressed it, I think we must give way to the dispensation of Providence which used these men to bring it about, that books which the Jewish race were unwilling, either from religious scruple or from jealousy, to make known to other nations, were, with the assistance of the power of King Ptolemy, made known so long beforehand to the nations which in the future were to believe in the Lord. And thus it is possible that they translated in such a way as the Holy Spirit, who worked in them and had given them all one voice, thought most suitable for the Gentiles. . . . The Latin texts therefore of the Old Testament are, as I was about to say, to be corrected if necessary by the authority of the Greeks, and especially by that of those who, though they were seventy in number, are said to have translated as with one voice.

About a score of years later, as he was writing more fully on this subject in *The City of God* (Book XVIII, Chapter 43), he clearly states that the LXX is on an equal par with the Hebrew text when he says: "But whatever is in the LXX and not in the Hebrew copies, the same Spirit chose rather to say through the former, thus showing that both were prophets." The original writers were regarded as prophets while the translators prophetically interpreted. Any additional material in the LXX then was considered as being given by men who were equally inspired; the translators, according to him, had the prophetic gift.

Certainly in the light of modern scholarship Augustine would not have a very favourable rating as a trustworthy critic in matters of the text and canon with such attitudes. Not being a real scholar himself on these matters, what influenced Augustine in his decisions when he spoke on the extent of the canon? What carried more weight with him, the opinion or judgment of the learned or the practice and custom of the church?

Contemporary with Augustine lived Jerome. He very carefully studied the Hebrew text, from which he made his translation into the Latin, commonly known as the Vulgate. On the basis of his investigation he clearly excludes the deuterocanonical books, limiting the Old Testament canon to that which the Jews had, consisting of twenty-two or twenty-four books (our present thirty-nine). He was clearly supported in this by Justin Martyr, Melito, and Origen in the eastern churches, and by Tertullian of Carthage, Hilary, bishop of Poitiers in France, and Rufinus of Aquileia, Italy. Prior to that in the Jewish tradition Philo and Josephus bear ex-

cellent witness. From the standpoint of scholarship Jerome's viewpoint was well established. However, this did not seem to settle it for Augustine. Why Jerome did not have more influence on Augustine is debatable. The correspondence between the two was often not on too friendly terms as is evidenced in the letters exchanged. Even though Augustine recognized Jerome as a scholar he never acknowledged that Jerome was better qualified to speak on matters of canonicity.

Augustine likewise disregarded the opinion of Rufinus, an associate of Jerome, who likewise expressed himself clearly in stating that the Jewish Old Testament "was handed down by the churches of Christ". The deutero-canonical books are regarded by him as not canonical but ecclesiastical. Very likely the contemporary church in its influence outweighed that of contemporary scholarship when Augustine spoke on the canon.

How did the authority of the church affect Augustine in his relationship to the Scriptures? Undoubtedly he held the Scriptures to be authoritative. Warfield in his *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* very ably contends that Augustine defends the absolute authority of Scripture down to the very words in the text. Reuter confirms this interpretation that Augustine regarded the Scriptures as infallible. The question might well be asked whether or not he held the church to have a higher authority than the Scriptures. Nowhere does he state that he holds the church to be infallible. Nevertheless, he regarded the church to be the custodian of Scripture and thus may easily have concluded that on matters of the extent of the canon the church had the authority to decide. When Augustine writes against the Manichaeans, "I indeed would not believe the gospel except the authority of the Catholic Church moved me," he undoubtedly appealed to the validity of the testimony of the church and not to the dogmatic authority of the church. He in short argues, according to Warfield, that the church is to be trusted more than the Manichaeans.

Undoubtedly in the days of Augustine some of the deutero-canonical and apocryphal books were read in the church. This list of books must have varied in the various localities. None of the codices that have survived from that period agreed in their inclusion of the same list of books. Certainly they do not confirm the identical list that Augustine adds to the Jewish canon. It is certain that even though some of these books were read for edification in the churches the leading scholars in the eastern church rejected them as being on an equal basis with the Jewish canon, as had already been noted. The public reading of some of these

books may very easily have created confusion in the minds of many of the church leaders in the western church.

That confusion or disunity existed in the church on the extent of the canon is reflected in Jerome as well as Rufinus. They were crystal clear on the matter but their reaction to the pressure exerted on them indicates that many leaders thought the additional books ought to be recognized as inspired. Reuss suggests that Jerome could not withdraw himself altogether from the customs of the church. His attachment to tradition was more powerful than his scruples as a scholar, his devotion greater than his logic. In his preface to the book of Tobit, Jerome writes, "The Jews have excluded it from the list of Holy Scriptures and have reduced it to the rank of the hagiographa. Now they reprove me for having translated it against their principles in a Latin Bible. But I have preferred to displease the Pharisees and yield to the invitations of the bishops" who evidently asked that the books should not be left out. Thus we note that Jerome yielded to the popular request in furnishing a translation to the church at large but never permitted his scholarly convictions to yield to the point of recognizing these books as canonical.

Rufinus, a learned monk of Jerusalem, at first shared Jerome's view in his opposition to the deutero-canonical books. After his friendship with Jerome broke over disagreement concerning a blustering sermon delivered against Origen by Epiphanius in 394, a bitter controversy followed. In the following years, Costello contends, Rufinus accepted Augustine's listing of canonical books, blames Jerome for accepting the Hebrew tradition and not accepting the divine Scripture which the apostles entrusted to the church of Christ (Costello, p. 84). This again reflects the pressure of the authority of the church at that time as to the extent of the canon.

Augustine seemed to consider church reception to be sufficient warrant for canonical authority; this he gave as the reason for accepting the Maccabean books as canonical. However, in his book *The City of God* he advocates that these books are held canonical by the church on "account of the extreme and wonderful suffering of certain martyrs". Thus Augustine has the highest respect for the church in matters of the extent of the canon.

A few years after Augustine's conversion he was highly honoured with the privilege of addressing the august assembly of bishops at Hippo in A.D. 393. This council took action to list the deutero-canonical books with the Jewish Old Testament canon. Although this list was lost it has been preserved for us by Augustine. In the Councils of Carthage in 397 and 419, when August-

tine himself was a bishop, these same lists were approved. Being relatively new in the faith and possibly confused by the variation in the books that were currently read in the churches, Augustine undoubtedly had no good reason to take issue with the church leaders. Not having investigated the problems of the extent of the canon himself, he accepted the conclusions of the Council of Hippo. The authority of the existing church outweighed all previous evidence; even in his arrangement of the canon he has an order all his own, as R. D. Wilson says: "It will be seen that he has invented an order for himself differing from all others, following the freedom of his own will without regard to the authorities that preceded him" (Wilson, pp. 57 ff.).

When the existing practice of the church exerted pressure even on a scholar like Jerome, how much more should it be apparent in a man like Augustine who neither by education nor background was equipped to settle these matters on the basis of critical investigation. Often in his writings he reflects some of the facts to which Jerome adhered in his conclusions, but Augustine never integrated them independently of the current authority of the church. Perhaps he never recognized that Paul clearly states that the Jews had the advantage of having the oracles committed to them and consequently the Jews should have been regarded as the custodians of the Old Testament, and not primarily the church (Romans 3: 2). Reuss (*History of the Canon*, p. 200) suggests that Augustine felt the need of settling these problems, and concludes: —

With him the need of putting an end to these eternal hesitations about certain parts of the canon was much more imperious, the authority of any decision much more absolute, the interest in the work of criticism much feebler, and the means of carrying it on much more insufficient than with Jerome. But for want of historical investigations he had to recommend and assert two means of arriving at the end—dogmatic rule and the intervention of authority.

Last but not least, it should be noted that Augustine was constantly engaged in fighting heretics. In refuting them he freely used the Scriptures in the wider sense but was never challenged on the matter of the extent of the canon. He was so preoccupied with the heresies that the limits of the canon never became an issue that he needed to investigate thoroughly. As has been pointed out, he often narrowed his argument to the limits of the Jewish canon but never carried this to its logical conclusion. For him the ruling of the church councils and church practice sufficed. With the prestige and influence he enjoyed as a great church leader he never recognized the need of a thorough investigation as to the

extent of the canon; since the deuterocanonical books were theistic in their emphasis, in harmony with the Jewish Old Testament canon, he permitted them to hold their place in the canon of the church. He undoubtedly assumed that what the church had in the canon now had been approved by Christ and the apostles failing to recognize that they, according to the best witnesses, had accepted only the canon of the Jews.

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