

The Canon of the Old Testament

Edward J. Young

[p.155]

What is meant by the "Canon of the Old Testament"? The word, "canon" itself is derived from the Greek, and in that language originally meant a staff or straight rod. In pre-Christian Greek it also bore the connotation "rule," or "standard," and in this sense also is used in the New Testament (cf. II Cor. 10:13, 15, 16; Gal. 6:16). Clement of Rome uses it of a rule possessing authority (I:7:2) and also in the sense of sphere or province of action (cf. I:1:3). Later the word came to designate the rule of faith.

I. IDEA OF THE CANON

The problem we face, however, cannot be limited to the historical significance of the Greek word *kanon*, although its historical significance is a relevant consideration. We do indeed believe that the Canon of the Old Testament is the rule of faith, the standard for judging all controversies of religion. We are compelled to consider, however, why the Old Testament is the rule of faith, and whether in truth it possesses the authority which the Church has traditionally ascribed to it. How did the books of the Old Testament come to receive this authority? When did the Jews and later the Christian Church begin to ascribe divine authority to them? A proper discussion of the question also involves certain subsidiary issues, namely, What is the compass of the Canon? and what is the proper arrangement and division of the books?

At the outset we affirm that the question of the divine authority of the Old Testament has validity only on the grounds of Christian theism. Only if

[p.156]

Christian theism is true can the idea of canonicity itself have validity and meaning. Since this fundamental postulate underlies the following discussion, it will also be incumbent upon us briefly to point out why the concept of canonicity gains its validity from Christian supernaturalism.

In considering the concept of canonicity we must be in every respect Biblical; that is, the Bible alone must be allowed to define canonicity. According to the Bible, the Scriptures of the Old Testament are "God-breathed," breathed forth from the mouth of God (II Tim. 3:16). This verse expresses no isolated thought, but rather succinctly sums up the entire Old Testament concept of saving revelation, namely that God actually spoke his Word to his servants.

The Scriptures are full and explicit in their teaching about special revelation. Such revelation involved the communication of God's words to man. Despite much that is being written today, it was not confined to great acts of God, but rather consisted of both acts and words. The words were essential in order that the acts might be understood. When God's saving

words were written down, this written record was in itself revelation and also an integral element in God's plan of salvation.

When the Word of God was written it became Scripture and, inasmuch as it had been spoken by God, possessed absolute authority. Since it was the Word of God, it was canonical. That which determines the canonicity of a book, therefore, is the fact that the book is inspired of God. Hence a distinction is properly made between the authority which the Old Testament books possess as divinely inspired, and the recognition of that authority on the part of Israel.

We have not yet done full justice, however, to the idea of canonicity. Since more than one book was inspired, we are brought to the questions, "How many books were inspired?" "How large is the list of inspired books?" "What are the precise limits of the rule of faith?" The witness of Jesus Christ is decisive at this point. Without question our Lord believed all the Old Testament books and so the entire Old Testament itself to be the Word of God. Inasmuch as he is the eternal Son of God, his word is final (cf. "The Authority of the Old Testament" in *The Infallible Word*, pp. 54-60). That he regarded the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God is a fact which cannot successfully be denied. Speaking of this Old Testament, he said, "The scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:31-36). On another occasion he remarked, "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44).

II. RECEPTION OF THE CANON

If any book was actually revealed by God, it certainly would follow that

[p.157]

that book was authoritative, and that all books so revealed would constitute an authoritative and final rule of faith and practice, in fact, a canon. At this point, however, a further question intrudes. "How can one recognize which books are divinely inspired and consequently canonical and which are not?" In the very nature of the case, because God is the Creator and man the creature, man can only identify the Word of God if God himself enables man so to identify it. One of the blessings of regeneration is that the Spirit of God opens the eyes of man's understanding to clearly perceive these strong marks of the divine origin of Scripture to which marks he formerly had been blind. This inward testimony of the Holy Spirit enables a man to recognize the Scripture as truly from God.

God's people, therefore, recognize his Word. "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27a), said our Lord. As soon as the Old Testament made its appearance, it was recognized as the Word of God both in its parts and in its entirety (*ibid.*, pp. 60-70). The evidence which supports this statement has often been adduced, but it may not be out of place briefly to summarize it. The Book of the Law was to be placed beside the ark of the covenant; the priests were to read it to the people; the king was to possess a copy thereof; and the Exile is said to have come as a punishment for infractions and transgressions of the Law.

The words of the prophets were likewise regarded as authoritative. These prophets demanded obedience to their words as to the very Word of God, and they declared that calamity had

befallen Israel, not only because she had transgressed the Law, but also because she had disobeyed their words. Thus, from many passages of the Old Testament itself we learn that the revelation of God was accepted by God's people as authoritative as soon as it was received.

It is true that in Old Testament times no general council or synod ever declared expressly that the Old Testament was divinely authoritative. What settles the question for Christians, however, is the positive testimony of Jesus Christ himself. And it is interesting to note that between our Lord and the Pharisees there was no controversy respecting the authority of the Old Testament. The controversy entered in because the Pharisees had supplemented that authority by their own tradition. When our Lord, therefore, was on earth, he placed the imprimatur of his infallible authority upon the Old Testament Scriptures in that he recognized them as divine. Thus, in God's providence, the individual books of the Old Testament were recognized as canonical and brought together, so that they formed one organic whole which Jesus Christ accepted as Scripture.

III. ALTERNATE THEORIES OF FORMATION OF THE CANON

Only upon the presuppositions of Christian theism can the above sketch of the nature and formation of the Old Testament Canon be correct. There

[p.158]

are alternate views, and some consideration of them will enable us more clearly to understand the implications of the view we believe to be correct. Some of these alternate views seek to explain the Canon as a purely human conception, and are concerned with questions of how and why and under what conditions certain writings "were thought to" possess religious authority. Such an approach unavoidably raises the question why certain books were chosen and others rejected. In other words, what determining principle governed the "formation" of the Canon?

According to H. E. Ryle, the problem we face is how the books of Holy Scripture came to obtain recognition as a sacred and authoritative Canon (Hebert Edward Ryle, *The Canon of the Old Testament*).¹ He maintained that a Hebrew literature existed before there was any Hebrew Canon. Three stages assertedly must be noted, first, that of the literary antecedents of the Old Testament books; second, the stage of the redaction of these books to their present form; and finally, the selection of these books for a position in the national Canon of Holy Scripture. Ryle expounded these three separate stages in the canonization of the Old Testament somewhat in detail. Our Pentateuch, he said, is the result of a long period of growth and is a compilation of documents which originally existed independent of one another. When Ezra read the Pentateuch in the hearing of the assembled people (Neh. 8) that Law was acknowledged as binding and so was canonized. Hence, the first Hebrew Canon of Scripture consisted of the Pentateuch. This first Canon, however, proved to be insufficient. By

¹ Essentially the same position is expressed in G. Wildeboer, *The Origin of the Canon of the Old Testament* (translated by Benjamin Wisner Bacon), London, 1895: the Law was canonized by Ezra (444 B.C.), the Prophets sometime about 200 B.C. and the Writings were officially canonized by the time of the redaction of the B.C., by Rabbi Judah the Holy (200 AD.). Wellhausen (*Einleitung*, pp. 550 f.) thinks that the Pharisees definitely fixed the extent of the Canon.

the time of Nehemiah a particular interest had been aroused in preserving the writings and sayings of the prophets. The actual period of their canonization, however, falls between 300 B.C. and the beginning of the second century B.C. What led to this canonization presumably at this time is not positively asserted. Possibly it was the spread of Hellenic culture and possibly also a reaction against the spirit of Ezra. Greater difficulty is conceded with respect to the third Canon. When the Canon of the Prophets was closed, other writings existed, such as Ecclesiastes, which belonged neither to the Canon of the Prophets nor to that of the Law, and these served practically as an appendix to the two existing Canons. The enthusiasm of the Jewish patriots at the time of the Maccabees, assertedly, may have originated the movement which sought to expand the Canon by the addition of a third group of writings. The orders of Antiochus to destroy the Jewish national writings simply enhanced their value in the eyes of the Jews. Subsequent popular usage brought about a regard for these books as authoritative. The actual official recognition of the books is probably to be placed about 100 A.D., it is said,

[p.159]

and was the work of the Synod held at Jamnia (Jabney) near Jaffa about 90 A.D.

A modification of this view of Ryle appears in the work of Oesterley and Robinson who, under the influence of Holscher, find the idea of a canon in the fact that some books are considered more holy than others. Such an idea, they think, could not have arisen all at once, but rather "it was only gradually, and by general consensus, that certain books came to have a special sanctity attached to them" (W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *An Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament*, London, 1934, p. 2; G. Holscher, *Kanonisch and Apocryph*, Naumberg, 1905). At the same time, these authors reject the idea of a threefold canonization. What forced the idea of a canon to arise, in their opinion, were Greek culture and the growth of Greek literature and particularly the spread of Jewish Apocryphal books. The Jewish scribes had to weed out harmful and erroneous literature, and thus the idea of a canon arose. The fixing of the Canon, however, as we know it now, was not accomplished until about A.D. 100. Some Jewish literature, therefore, on this view, underwent a metamorphosis in its nature. The fixing of the Canon was piecemeal, but when once completed, the books of the Old Testament were regarded by the Jews as canonical.

According to Bentzen we are to regard Nehemiah 8-10 as indicating the introduction of that form of the Law which was current in Babylonian Jewish circles of the time. Even as early as Josiah we find the idea of a normative Law Book, and the belief that God could reveal his will by means of a holy book. The seventh century was of particular importance for the formation of the idea of a holy written law. Even earlier, however, is the ancient idea of law as given by a god, and also the ancient Credo of Israel (Deut. 26:5b-9).

Such ideas, however, did not at once lead to a fixed concept of a canon. In the century after the Exile the different strands of tradition were united, and so the oldest part of the Old Testament Canon (the Pentateuch) became an established fact.

The Canon of the Prophets began when Isaiah put upon his disciples the obligation to be the bearers and preservers of the word (Isa. 8:16), and when Jeremiah had Baruch write down his warnings. The Exile gave to the words of the prophets the confirmation of history, and before 200 B.C. the prophetic Canon was essentially finished. The third part of the Canon, thinks Bentzen, is most vaguely defined, as is shown by the different names attributed unto it. The

Edward J. Young, "The Canon of the Old Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.155-168.

Synod of Jamnia, moreover, is also considered important for the definite fixing of the Canon. (Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Copenhagen, 1952, pp. 20-41).

In his influential *Introduction to the Old Testament* (second edition, New York, 1946), Robert H. Pfeiffer presents a modification of the classic liberal view of the Canonization of the Old Testament, the view essentially espoused by Ryle. The first instance of canonization in human history, thinks Pfeiffer,

[p.60]

took place when Deuteronomy, discovered in the temple under the reign of Josiah, was regarded as the word of Jehovah, and its precepts put into practice.

About 650 B.C. other literary works in Israel were combined and edited with the result that a great national epic was formed. About 550 B.C. the canonized Deuteronomy was inserted into the compass of the national epic with the result that the latter also came to be regarded as canonical. At still a later date, around 400 B.C., the so-called priestly document was inserted into this combined work and thus it too achieved canonicity.

Perhaps these views may be regarded as fairly representative of what is held by those who discuss canonicity as though it were merely a human process and nothing more. We cannot hope to subject these theories to exhaustive scrutiny in a brief essay, but a few remarks will be in Order.

IV. REFLECTIONS UPON ALTERNATE THEORIES

The Synod of Jamnia

Some of these views appeal to a Synod of Jamnia as though that body had made pronouncements concerning the extent of the Old Testament Canon. H. H. Rowley, however, seems to be correct when he remarks,

It is, indeed, doubtful, how far it is correct to speak of the Council of Jamnia. We know of discussions that took place there amongst the Rabbis, but we know of no formal or binding decisions that were made, and it is probable that the discussions were informal, though none the less helping to crystallize and to fix more firmly the Jewish tradition (H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament*, London, 1950 p. 170).

We really know very little concerning this supposed Synod. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Titus (70 A.D.) Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai obtained permission to settle in Jamnia, there to carry on his literary activity. The place became a center of Scripture study, and discussions were pursued concerning the canonicity of certain books, namely, Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs and Esther. It may be seriously questioned, however, whether this Synod (known in Jewish sources as the Great Bet Din, literally, house of judgment) actually engaged in discussions as to whether certain books should be included in the Canon. The discussions rather seemed to be centered in the question whether certain books should be excluded therefrom. It cannot legitimately be maintained that formal pronouncement was made at Jamnia concerning the entire Old Testament as such.

Evidence Concerning Ezra and Nehemiah

Nor can it be maintained that the Scriptures or any portion of them were canonized by Ezra or Nehemiah or by their contemporaries. In Ezra 7:6,

[p.161]

Ezra is described as a "ready" (*māhîr*) scribe in the Law of Moses. From this it is apparent that the Law of Moses is regarded as already authoritative inasmuch as it had been given by God. With the permission of Artaxerxes, Ezra went up to Jerusalem with the intention of seeing that the precepts of the Law were carried out. Everything in the seventh chapter of Ezra points to the fact that the Law was already in existence and that its commands were to be obeyed (cf. verses 14, 23, 25, 26). Not a word supports the position that Ezra was to impart to already existing religious writings an authority which they previously lacked.

Nor can appeal be made, as is done, for example, by Ryle, to Nehemiah 8-10 as presenting an account of canonization. It is one of the great merits of Pfeiffer's work that he recognizes this fact and breaks at this point with what might be called the traditional view of negative criticism. According to these chapters, at the people's request Ezra brought the "book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded to Israel" (Neh. 8:1) and read this Law to the people. It was a serious reading, and Ezra sought to explain the Law as he read (cf. Neh. 8:8). When the people heard the reading they wept. On the second day the leaders gathered together with Ezra in order to understand the Law (Neh. 8:13), with the result that they observed the Feast of Tabernacles.

On the 24th day of the month the people were assembled with fasting and with the signs of repentance, sackcloth and earth (Neh. 9:1), and again they read in the Law of their God. The chapter then records the beautiful prayer of Jeshua and others. The result is that, because of God's goodness, they make and write a covenant. The remainder of the people enter into a curse and into an oath to "walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God" (Neh. 10:29). The Law is here regarded not as something new but as something very old, so old in fact that it was believed to have been revealed by God through Moses. And herein lay its authority and effectiveness. The people did not say "We now pronounce these writings to be authoritative." They said rather, "These writings received their authority centuries ago when God made them known to Moses. For that reason we must obey them."

In the book known as Fourth Ezra it is claimed that all of the Holy Scriptures had been burned in the destruction of Jerusalem. This explains the fact that the Law of Moses was not known to the exiles who had just returned from Babylon. To the question, how Ezra happened to have a copy, the answer given is that by special inspiration God made known to him the content of the books which had been lost (4 Ezra 14:18 ff.). This account is, of course, to be rejected as fanciful.

Three points may be noted, however. In the first place, Ezra prays to God for a restoration of the Law that has been burned. He does not "canonize" this Law nor any of the other books, but recognizes that they had already been in existence as authoritative. Secondly, in this account Ezra is said to

[p.162]

have written down 94 books altogether. Twenty-four (i.e., the authoritative Scriptures) are to be published, but 70 are to be kept for the wise. Here a distinction is made between the canonical and non-canonical books, and the assumption of the author is that this distinction was also present in Ezra's time. Lastly, it must be noted that not all of the Old Testament had been written by Ezra's time.

The Talmudic tractate, *Baba Bathra* 14b-15a, asserts that "Ezra wrote his book" and it also mentions the "men of the great synagogue" as the authors of Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets, Daniel and Esther. Whatever be the precise significance of the assertion that the men of the Great Synagogue wrote—possibly it merely means that they arranged the books—it is clear that no warrant exists for the assertion that either this body or Ezra "canonized" the Scriptures.²

A tradition is recorded in II Maccabees 2:13 ff. to the effect that Nehemiah founded a library and collected books "concerning the kings and prophets and those of David and letters of kings concerning offerings [*anathematōn*]." The reference to the letters of kings may signify letters from the Persian kings concerning gifts for the temple (cf. G. Ch. Aalders, *Oudtestamentische Kanoniek*, Kampen, 1952, p. 31).

In his comments on this passage Zeitlin asserts explicitly that the Pentateuch and first books of the prophets were canonized by Ezra and Nehemiah. Very wisely, however, he does not draw this conclusion from the present passage (Solomon Zeitlin, *The Second Book of Maccabees*, English translation by Sidney Tedesche, New York, 1954, p. 113). If appeal be made here to support the view that Ezra and Nehemiah Canonized the Pentateuch, such appeal proves too much. If it proves that they "canonized" the Pentateuch, it proves that they "canonized" other books also, those concerning kings and prophets as well as the Psalms of David and certain letters of kings.

By way of summary, therefore, it may be asserted confidently that the passages invoked to support the idea that Ezra "canonized" any portion of the Old Testament Scriptures do not yield the desired result. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah nor the men of the Great Synagogue nor the Council of Jamnia "canonized" the Old Testament nor any part thereof. Rather, all the evidence supports the position that the books of the Old Testament, being of divine inspiration, were consequently authoritative, and were recognized as such from the time of their first appearance. This evidence consists, first of all, in the absence of record of any council or group which made official pronouncements about the canonicity of the Old Testament books, but more specifically in the express statements of the Old Testament books themselves when taken at face value.

[p.163]

Certain Factors Involved in Canonicity

What is involved in the recognition of a book as canonical? Some scholars apparently contend that a writing might exist for many years before being considered canonical. Pfeiffer, for

² The term "Great Synagogue" may be regarded as a designation of those Jewish teachers who followed Ezra in his exposition of the Law. This "school" of teachers continued to the time of Hillel or possibly Johanan ben Zakkai. Abraham Kuenen showed that the idea of this "Great Synagogue" as an assembly had been based upon Nehemiah 9 and 10.

example, holds that the popularity of the Former Prophets (Joshua-Kings), together with their religious and patriotic appeal, and the fact that they were thought to have been written by prophets, led to their canonization about 200 B.C. (R. H. Pfeiffer, *The Books of the Old Testament*, New York, 1957, p. 15).

Such a position, however, involves a very low conception of the meaning of the word "canon." All the evidence supports the view that the books which the Jews regarded as canonical were those which they believed to be divine and consequently authoritative. There is no evidence that these particular books existed among the ancient Jews for many years before they were recognized as canonical. Indeed, if a book was actually revealed by God, is it conceivable that such a book would circulate for many years before anyone recognized its true nature? The very marks of divinity which the book would exhibit together with the work of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit are sufficient answer to this consideration. At this point it becomes particularly clear that the idea of canonicity can have validity only upon the basis of Christian theism. If a lower connotation be placed upon the concept, justice cannot be done to all the factors involved.

A further consideration arises in connection with certain modern theories of canonization. Some of these theories which we have been considering postulate the position that somewhere along the line in the course of Israelitish history canonical books and non-canonical books were placed together. Thus, to cite an example, Pfeiffer asserts that the book of Deuteronomy, a work containing "canonical" elements, was inserted into another work, a national epic. This theory involves a great psychological difficulty. When people consider a particular writing as possessing divine authority, they treat that writing with a reverence superior to that presupposed by this view. The reason so many Christians today object to the inclusion of the Apocrypha in their copies of the Bible is that they do not want books which they regard (and rightly) as merely human compositions to be placed on a par with writings which are the Word of God. Yet we are asked to believe that canonical writings in Israel were inserted in non-canonical works. But the evidence shows that the Jews actually considered their Scriptures to be God's Word. It is inconceivable that they would have correlated that divine Word with some larger writing, no matter how prominent and popular, which they believed lacking in divine origin and authority.

By way of conclusion we are compelled to assert that attempts to explain "canonization" as simply a human process, as merely the recognition by the Jews of certain books as "canonical," do not square with the evidence. For the most part, these theories are based upon a view of the dating and nature of the Old Testament writings which is not in accord with the witness of the

[p.164]

New Testament.³ In addition, they do not do justice to the basic question of the inspiration of the Biblical books. They are, therefore, to be rejected. If we follow the evidence of the Bible, we shall maintain that the Old Testament books were truly inspired, and that their inspired

³ Arguments which have exposed the weaknesses of the views of Scripture which negative criticism has advanced have been presented many times. The reader may consult Oswald T. Allis's *The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia, 1943).

character was acknowledged by Israel from the beginning. Finally, the witness of Jesus Christ has settled once and for all time the question of the canonicity of these books.

V. DIVISIONS AND EXTENT OF THE CANON

There are two further questions to which some attention must be paid. First, what were the sections into which the Old Testament was divided, and what were the arrangements of the books within those sections? Secondly, what was the extent of the Canon? Why were certain books, such as the book of Jasher and the Apocryphal books, excluded? These latter questions will lead us to consider in greater detail than hitherto the question, what was the determining principle in the formation of the Old Testament Canon?

Attestation of the Threefold Division

In Luke 24:44 Christ divided the Old Testament into three parts, the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. The Hebrew Bible today, as is well known, also consists of three divisions, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. By the Law of Moses, Christ of course had in mind the five books known as the Pentateuch, and the division known as the "Prophets" would have included the historical books and those of the great writing prophets. Does the order of books in the Hebrew Bible, however, represent the arrangement with which Christ was familiar?

In his writing *Contra Apionem* (I:8) Josephus states that the number of the books which the Jews receive is 22, and these he distinguishes from other books. Josephus enumerates five books of Moses, thirteen prophetic books, and finally, four books of hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life. Here again is evidence of a threefold division. Josephus probably arrives at the number thirteen by including Ruth with Judges, and Lamentations with Jeremiah, and by counting the twelve minor prophets as one book.

Of importance also is the witness found in the *De vita contemplativa* of Philo (around 40 A.D.) wherein reference is made to a threefold division. We may note particularly the Prologue to Ecclesiasticus (after 117 B.C.) in which three times mention is made of the Law and the Prophets (or prophecies) and "the others which follow after them," (the masculine *tōn prophētōn* refers to the authors) or "the other paternal books" and "the remainder of the books." The threefold division is thus attested as early as the Prologue

[p.165]

of Ecclesiasticus. Inasmuch as the writer of the Prologue states that his grandfather (i.e., the author of Ecclesiasticus, Jesus ben Sirach, around 190 B.C.) gave himself largely to the reading of "the law and the prophets and the other books of the fathers," we may assume that this threefold division was as old as the beginning of the second century B.C.

Is it, however, possible to determine what books constituted the second and third divisions of the Old Testament Canon? Among recent expositors the view has been rather prevalent that the order of books in the Hebrew Bible is original, and that this order was later changed in accordance with that of Alexandria. This popular view has recently been subjected to searching criticism by Peter Katz ("The Old Testament Canon in Palestine and Alexandria" in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 47th Vol., 1956, pp. 191-217). He

maintains that the reconstitution of Judaism after the temple's destruction is the earliest attestation of the Hebrew selection of books. As evidence that the present Hebrew order is not original, he claims that the order Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles is artificial, and that evidence for the number 24 as comprising the totality of the Old Testament books is scanty. The number 22, rather, is original. This number is of Palestinian origin. In a footnote Katz quotes from a special communication which he received from Otto Eissfeldt in which Eissfeldt says "In the tradition represented equally by *G* and by the Qumran texts there has survived a type of Canon which, considered as the outcome of a stage of development antecedent to the verdict of Jamnia, is less rigid than the other and accordingly does not display one form, but several; in the way that the *G*-MSS display manifold discrepancies both in the number of the O.T. books which they contain and in the arrangement of them, thereby undoubtedly continuing an older Jewish tradition."

Governing Principle which Underlies the Threefold Division

It is apposite to ask whether any basic principle underlay the arrangement of the books in a threefold division. The answer to this question, we believe, must be determined from the Bible itself. The first division consists of books written by Moses. In the Old Testament economy Moses occupied the place of pre-eminence as the faithful servant of the Lord (cf. Num. 12:1-7). In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Moses is faithful in God's economy as a servant, but Christ as a Son. It was therefore, above all else, the position which he occupied in the theocracy which distinguished Moses. The books in the first section are Mosaic. They are the Law, the foundation upon which the entire Old Testament economy was based.

The books in the second division are designated by the Jews as "the Prophets." All the evidence would support the accuracy of this designation. The prophets were important men in the Old Testament economy, but they were under Moses. It was right that their writings should be separated from those of Moses. The determining factor in distinguishing between the first

[p.166]

and the second divisions of the Old Testament Canon, therefore, was the position which the writers occupied in the economy.

What may be said about the books which belong to the third division? If the writers of these books were also prophets (i.e., in the technical sense, as were the writers of the books in the second division) it is indeed strange that a third division should be added. We may then well ask what position in the theocracy or economy was held by the writers of the books in the third section.

It goes without saying that these writers were acknowledged to be inspired men. But were they prophets? Surely it would be difficult to show that Solomon and David occupied the status of a prophet. The book of Daniel may assist us in providing an answer to this question. In ancient Israel a prophet served as a mediator between God and the nation, representing God as a spokesman to the people (cf. Deut. 18:15-18; Exod. 4:16; 7:1). It is clear that this was not the position which Daniel occupied. His training rather (cf. Daniel 1) prepared him for service as a statesman at a heathen court, and as such he served throughout his life. While he possessed the prophetic gift (his very book is a prophecy), he did not occupy the technical status of a prophet in Israel. It is true that in some lists Daniel was included among the

prophets, but that in no way militates against the above consideration. A right view of the book of Daniel finally prevailed, and the book stands in our Hebrew Bible where it rightly belongs, namely, in the third division. Books in the third division, it would seem, belong there because they were written by men who were inspired but who were not prophets in the technical sense of the word.

Disputed Books

It is true that in ancient Judaism questions were raised about the Canonicity of certain books. According to statements in the Talmud we learn that the canonical books were said "to defile the hands." This phrase was employed to designate canonical books, although the reason why they were so designated is not clear. Zeitlin may be right when he regards it as a measure directed against the priests so that they could not offer the Terumah (oblation) (Zeitlin, *An Historical Study of the Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures*, 1933, p. 19).

Differences of opinion were held with respect to Ecclesiastes. Rabbi Judah declared that it did not defile the hands (i.e., was not canonical), whereas others held that there was a difference of opinion. In the Tannaitic literature, however, there is apparently no express statement that Ecclesiastes defiles the hands. Zeitlin asserts that at a gathering in the house of Hananiah ben Hezekiah a few years before the destruction of the temple (70 A.D.), the adherents of Hillel maintained that Ecclesiastes was canonical whereas the Shammaites took the opposite position, and apparently won out.

There are also statements in the Talmud that Esther does not defile the

[p.167]

hands. Rabbi Jehuda (Megilla 7a) said that it did not defile the hands. Zeitlin thinks that when the Jews wanted to prove that Purim was a day of rejoicing they inferred that fact from Megillat Taanit,⁴ which would not have been necessary had Esther been recognized as canonical.

While there may have been difference of opinion with respect to the Song of Solomon, no explicit statement is preserved that it does not defile the hands.

There is some question, of course, as to the significance of these discussions. They appear to have been merely academic, a view that is supported by Zeitlin's claim that popular demand led to the canonization of Esther. It may be that such discussions had little to do with the practical usage of religious life.

The Apocryphal Books

Why were the books known as Apocryphal not recognized as canonical? (Cf. William Henry Green, *General Introduction to the Old Testament*, The Canon. At this point I follow Green's discussion.) The answer must be that these books were not regarded as divinely inspired.⁵

⁴ Megillat Taanit (Scroll of Fasts) is an Aramaic document from the Roman period which lists days on which fasting was forbidden. See Zeitlin, *Megillat Taanit, as a Source for Jewish Chronology and History in the Hellenistic and Roman Period*.

⁵ For an up-to-date discussion of the Apocrypha cf. Bruce Metzger's *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York, 1957). Metzger discusses I-II Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon,

This statement, however, involves certain questions. How can one tell that a book is inspired? Is it always possible to discover a book's quality of inspiration? Wherein, one may ask, may it be discerned that the book of Esther or the Song of Solomon was inspired? The answer to these questions is not easy. Had the book of Esther appeared, for example, in a different cultural milieu, would it have been recognized as God's Word? Probably all that can be said by way of answer is that in his providence God brought it about that this particular book was produced in the midst of his people and became intimately associated with their religious life where they would accept it as canonical.

With the Apocryphal books, however, the case was different. There are no marks in these books which would attest a divine origin. As Green has pointed out, both Judith and Tobit contain historical, chronological and geographical errors. The books justify falsehood and deception and make salvation to depend upon works of merit. Almsgiving, for example, is said to deliver from death (Tobit 12: 9; 4: 10; 14: 10, 11).

Judith lives a life of falsehood and deception in which she is represented as assisted by God (9:10, 53). Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon inculcate a morality based upon expediency. Wisdom teaches the creation

[p.168]

of the world out of pre-existent matter (11:17). Ecclesiasticus teaches that the giving of alms makes atonement for sin (3:30). In Baruch it is said that God hears the prayers of the dead (3:4), and in I Maccabees there are historical and geographical errors. This is not to deny many fine and commendable things in the Apocrypha, but the books nonetheless show themselves at points to be at variance with divinely revealed truth. They were consequently never adopted by the Jews as canonical.

Attempts have been made, of course, to discover some other criterion which would have guided the Jews in accepting or rejecting books as canonical. It has been claimed that in order to give the post-exilic temple the advantages of the former one, the national literature of the Hebrews was collected, and so the Canon was formed. But if this were the case, why were books such as the book of Jashar omitted? Nor was language the determining criterion. Nor can it be claimed that the canonical books were chosen because they represent the religion of Israel in its greatest purity. Who was to decide the answer to this question? Nor was agreement with the Pentateuch the necessary criterion. Surely the canonical books do agree with the Pentateuch, but may not such a work as the *Words of Nathan the Prophet* (II Chron. 9:29) have done the same? Was it the intrinsic worth of the books? Why, then, did the Jews omit certain books? Was it because the books taught Christ? Was it because their authors were prophets? If so, why was *The Visions of Jedo the Seer* excluded? Or, was it, as Koole has suggested, because the canonical books speak of a covenant between God and man (J. L. Koole, *Het Probleem Van De Canonisatie van Het Oude Testament*, Kampen, 1955, p. 21)?

To these and other proposed criteria we must reply with a negative. The canonical books of the Old Testament were divinely revealed and their authors were holy men who spoke as they were borne of the Holy Ghost. In his good providence God brought it about that his people

Edward J. Young, "The Canon of the Old Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.155-168.

should recognize and receive his Word. How he planted this conviction in their hearts with respect to the identity of his Word we may not be able fully to understand or explain. We may, however, follow our Lord, who placed the *imprimatur* of his infallible authority upon the books of the Old Testament.

[p.405]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

William Henry Green, *General Introduction to the Old Testament, The Canon*. New York: Scribner's, 1898.

R. Laird Harris, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957.

Edward J. Young, "The Authority of the Old Testament" in *The Infallible Word*, pp. 54 ff.

© 1958, 1986 Carl F.H. Henry. Reproduced by kind permission of Dr Carol Henry Bates.

Prepared for the Web in April 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
