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# THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By the REV. W. J. GRIER, B.A.

THE WORD 'CANON' IS from the Greek *κανων* which in turn comes from a Semitic root which appears in the Hebrew *qaneh*, which means a reed or measuring-rod. Among other meanings which the word came to have, two are of special interest to us. It was used: (1) of a rule or standard that regulates or tests; and (2) of a list or index. In this last sense it was used of the Scriptures as a list of writings which were outstanding above other writings as possessing special authority. The other sense of 'a standard or rule which regulates or tests' was present too, for if these books possess a special authority, they thereby become a standard to regulate faith and conduct. The canon then is a list of authoritative writings which are to be received as the genuine and inspired Scriptures.

The first known application of the word 'canon' to the Scriptures is in Athanasius' 'Decrees of the Synod of Nicaea' (c. 350 A.D.). He speaks of a book known as 'The Shepherd of Hermas' as 'not being in the canon'. But as Dr. Alex. Souter says, 'the idea of a Canon is much older than the use of the word in that sense'.

The idea of a divine norm or rule goes back very far. Adam and Noah and Abraham received commandments from God which were their rule of faith and life. Moses received ten commandments written with the finger of God and they were preserved in the ark of the covenant. In Dt. xxxi we read: 'it came to pass, when Moses had made an end of writing the words of this law in a book, until they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee'. Its position by the side of the ark was an indication of the sacredness and divine authority of this 'book of the law'. It was to be read before all Israel (Dt. xxxi. 11); the king was to have a copy and regulate his decisions according to it (Dt. xvii.

18-20). Joshua was commanded, 'this book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth' (Jos. i. 8). The kings were judged according to their obedience to the law; the people were continually urged to obey it; and for their disobedience to it they were carried away into captivity in Babylon. In fact, the law claims on almost every page to be of divine authority, and these claims are supported in countless places by later Old Testament writers.

The prophets urged deference to the law, but regarded their own words as equally binding. They told the people that the misfortunes and calamities which befell them were divine judgments not only for disobedience to the law, but also for contempt of *their* words. They spoke throughout with a 'Thus saith the Lord'.

## DIVISIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

According to the usual Jewish division, the Old Testament books fall into three groups: (1) the law, (2) the prophets, and (3) the writings. In the first group were the five books of Moses. In the second were the eight books of the prophets — the four former prophets (Joshua, Judges, I-II Samuel, and I-II Kings) and the four latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve). In the third were the eleven 'writings' (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, I-II Chronicles).

There are only eight books of the Old Testament which are not quoted in the New. One may say only five, for three of the eight are Minor Prophets, and the Twelve Minor Prophets were reckoned by the Jews as one book (see Ecclesiastes xlix. 10); so that quotations from any part of 'the Twelve' sanction the whole Twelve.

Our Lord, in Luke xxiv. 44, said: 'all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, con-

cerning Me'. He was referring to the three divisions of the Old Testament. Some take it that 'the Psalms' stands here for the whole of the third division of the Old Testament canon. More likely, our Lord spoke of the Book of Psalms itself as the book of the third division which spoke most of Himself. Still, Prof. E. J. Young seems on solid ground in concluding, 'It would appear then that by His language Christ set the seal of His approval upon the books of the Old Testament which were in use among the Jews of His day, and that His Old Testament consisted of three definite divisions, the Law, the Prophets, and a third division which had as yet probably not received any technical designation'. The contents of this third group were miscellaneous and a definite title would not as readily suggest itself as in the case of the other two groups.

That our Lord had the same Old Testament as we have seems clear from His statement 'that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, son of Barachias'. This is not just equivalent to saying, 'the blood of all the martyrs from the beginning to the end of your history'. Zechariah actually was slain in Joash's day — the ninth century B.C. — far from the end of Israel's history. The true explanation is that in the Hebrew Bible there is a different order of books from that to which we are accustomed. The Hebrew Bible begins as ours with Genesis, but ends with Chronicles. The blood of Abel is mentioned in Gn. iv; the blood of Zechariah in 2 Ch. xxiv. So when our Lord mentioned the martyrs from Abel to Zacharias, it was equivalent, in our parlance, to 'the martyrs from Genesis to Malachi'. The fact that the Old Testament was originally written not in book form but on rolls does not weaken the force of this argument. The rolls would be kept in order with Genesis first and Chronicles last.

### BOOKS INCLUDED IN THE CANON

The Bible of Christ was identical with that of the Jews of His time. He had conflicts with them on many points, but

He found no fault with them as to their canon of Scripture. They had indeed made the Word of God of none effect by their tradition, but still they had the true Word of God, the true Canon.

Someone may object, Did not the Council of the Jews at Jamnia in 90 A.D. discuss whether certain Old Testament books should be recognized as canonical? It is true that there was discussion at Jamnia about certain books, as Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther; about Esther, because it did not mention the name of God; about Ecclesiastes because it seemed to conflict with current Jewish philosophy; and about the Song, because it seemed merely a song of human love.

We are not to think, however, of these Bible books as waiting in a queue outside the council-room at Jamnia for recognition. These books were already inside the room. The question which was raised was as to their retention, not as to their admission. They were already generally accepted, and as the Rev. J. Stafford Wright says, 'The Council of Jamnia was the confirming of public opinion, not the forming of it'. The discussion at Jamnia was more or less academic. The rabbis were sturdy disputants and dearly loved to try their skill in debate. It is very questionable if the doubts which they raised about certain books really represented the attitude of the people to any great extent. One of the Books about which they disputed — Ezekiel — must have been accepted long before their day.

The Council at Jamnia actually bears testimony to the fact that the Jews recognized the same Old Testament books as we do today. Josephus, the Jewish historian, who was born in 37 A.D., bears similar testimony. He is explicit as to the authority, the extent and the date of completion of the Old Testament. He speaks of twenty-two books which are the 'commands of God'; he makes a distinction between all other books and these books and says, 'no one has dared to add anything to them or take anything from them or to alter anything in them'. The usual Jewish reckoning had twenty-four books. Josephus had twenty-two. It is known from Origen and other early writers that Ruth

was sometimes reckoned with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah. Josephus probably preferred the number twenty-two to fit in with the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. This number leaves no room for the apocryphal books, and one may conclude with Prof. J. H. Raven that 'the canon of Josephus included all the books we possess and no others'.

There is no record of any change between our Lord's time and the end of the century. So we are on firm ground in asserting that our Lord's canon and that of the Jews and that acknowledged by the Protestant churches today are one and the same. As Bishop Westcott put it, 'the casual testimony of the New Testament harmonizes completely with the direct evidence from other sources both as to the existence of a recognized body of "Scriptures" and as to the books contained in it'.

We have the same Old Testament then as our Lord and His apostles. Can we trace the existence of the complete Old Testament canon farther back still? The answer is, Yes. In the prologue to Ecclesiasticus (written c. 130 B.C.) the writer speaks of 'the law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books'. Indeed he implies that the three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures were in existence in the time of his grandfather, the writer of Ecclesiasticus, c. 190 B.C. So there seems to be no warrant for thinking the canon of the Old Testament to be incomplete in the first half of the second century B.C. Dr. James Orr refers to the frequent assertions that the spirit of prophecy had ceased as a strong proof that books believed to be new were not admitted. The treatment of Ecclesiasticus is evidence of this; it was highly esteemed but not received into the canon.

Josephus, in the famous passage in his book 'Against Apion', speaks of the canon of the Old Testament as closed by the end of the reign of Artaxerxes (before 425 B.C.). A liberal critic, George L. Robinson, discounts the testimony of Josephus as 'partisan'. Partisan or not, it was certainly the opinion of the Jews of the time.

Some speak of the books of the Bible as if they had come to acquire authority

for us by their being placed in the list of authoritative writings — the Jews in the case of the Old Testament, and the Christian Church in the case of the New Testament, placed them in the canon, and so they acquired their authority. This is altogether astray from the truth. They are in the canon because they possess a special authority, or inspired quality, and it is not a man or Church or Council which gave them this quality, it is GOD. In other words, their being placed in the canon is not a conferring of authority upon them, it is a recognition of authority they already possess.

## THE APOCRYPHA

It is often said that the Jews of Alexandria in the time of our Lord had a larger canon, that is, that their sacred Scriptures included the Apocrypha. The ground of this assertion is that the apocryphal books occur in the MSS of the Septuagint mingled with the books of the Old Testament. (The Septuagint was a translation of the Old Testament into Greek, made in Alexandria for Greek-speaking Jews, c. 250-150 B.C.). But our MSS of the Septuagint date from the fourth century A.D. and are all from Christian sources. There are not in existence any Jewish MSS of the Septuagint, and there is no proof whatever that the Jews of the first century A.D. accepted the Apocrypha as part of their sacred Scriptures. Philo, an Alexandrian Jew, who lived 20 B.C. to 50 A.D., quotes from many books of the Old Testament, but never from the Apocrypha. The Rev. J. Stafford Wright rightly concludes; 'Their inclusion (in the Septuagint) may well be due to the uncritical judgment of certain Christians who felt that everything Jewish should be taken at its face value'.

There is one book which might seem to have New Testament support for admittance into the canon — the apocryphal Book of Enoch. In Jude 14 there seems to be a quotation from this book. The first question, however, is not whether Jude is quoting the apocryphal book, but whether the genuine Enoch who walked with God and was raptured into heaven pronounced that God would one day break into history and judge

the ungodly. Quite possibly this pronouncement was handed down from age to age, and found a place in the apocryphal book of Enoch. A parallel case of the survival of a genuine and accurate tradition is the case of Jannes and Jambres, who are not mentioned in Exodus but are mentioned in 2 Tim. iii as having withstood Moses. It may well be that Jude was putting the seal of approval, not on the apocryphal book of Enoch, but rather on the testimony of the patriarch, the seventh from Adam, which had been handed down through the centuries and of which an accurate record had been preserved in the apocryphal book.

It seems clear that our Lord and His apostles quote from practically every book in the Old Testament in a way which recognizes their authority, but never from the Apocrypha in the same way.

### THE CRITICAL VIEW OF THE FORMATION OF THE CANON

Within the last 150 years a new view of the formation of the canon has gained currency. This critical view usually assumes that there were three successive collections of the canon as follows:—

(1) What we call the five books of Moses were not by Moses; they were a process of growth over many centuries and the work of men centuries removed from one another. Only when this growing mass of matter was finally combined and edited did the Pentateuch come into being in the form in which we now have it. It is suggested by many critics that the first step in canonization took place in Josiah's time (2 Ch. xxxiv) and that the final editing and public recognition was in Ezra's time (Ne. viii). This was the first great step (begun under Josiah, completed under Ezra) in the formation of the Old Testament canon.

(2) The books of the prophets were circulated for a period of time and thus their religious value was tested. Their canonization was the work of scribes and was a gradual process generally regarded by the critics as not complete till about 200 B.C.

(3) The critics differ as to the date of

the final closing of the third group of Old Testament 'writings'. Some take it as complete by the time of Christ; some wilder spirits have taken it as only complete in the first century A.D.

One of the latest critical writers, Prof. Pfeiffer, refuses to believe that Ne. viii is an account of the canonization of the law. He is quite right — there is nothing in Ne. viii about 'canonizing' the law — but he is wrong in denying the historicity of the account in this chapter. Pfeiffer stresses what he looks upon as the canonization of Deuteronomy in the eighteenth year of Josiah (2 Ch. xxxiv). The book of the law was found in the temple in that year (621 B.C.) and it was regarded as the Word of the Lord. Pfeiffer takes this as the canonization of Deuteronomy and says it is the first instance of such canonization in history. The book had actually been written only a few years before by some unknown person. Now it was regarded as the work of Moses and as the Word of Jehovah. But there were other works in ancient Israel which had been combined into a national epic some thirty years before, and about seventy years after the discovery in the temple (i.e., c. 550 B.C.) the canonical Deuteronomy was inserted in this uncanonical national epic. Apparently this insertion imparted canonicity to the whole composition. Later still, in the fifth century B.C., there was composed the priestly portion of the Pentateuch, and about 400 B.C. this was combined with the Deuteronomy-epic amalgam, and so at length (c. 400 B.C.) the whole Pentateuch was complete with its canonical hat!

This theory calls for a number of comments:—

(1) Read afresh the account of the discovery of the book or roll in the temple (2 Ch. xxxiv). It was clearly a re-discovery of an authoritative book of which Hilkiah and Josiah had heard, but which had been lost.

(2) Pfeiffer and the critics as a body have a low view of the meaning of the word 'canonical'. A book could exist for a century (from 650-550 B.C., to be precise) as a mere national epic, and then suddenly become the Word of God!

(3) Pfeiffer assumes that the Jews would incorporate a book which was

non-canonical with one which was canonical. This is to misunderstand the whole Jewish attitude. Philo belonged to the liberal school of Jewry, but even Philo is reported by the church historian Eusebius as saying concerning the laws of Moses: 'They (the Jews) have not changed so much as a single word in them. They would rather die a thousand deaths than detract anything from these laws and statutes'. That is not the attitude of 'incorporation'!

(4) This theory really involves a charge of fraud. Prof. R. Dick Wilson estimated that the critical view involved at least forty different men in a general accusation of forgery and falsehood. Take the book of Deuteronomy, which the critics say was the book discovered in the temple in 621 B.C. It was really, they say, written a few years before by an unknown priest who used the name and authority of Moses to get it accepted. Josiah believed the book's claims to Mosaic authorship. The priest, it is said, was sincere. It still remains true that he was dishonest. Wherever the pure and high morality of the Bible has come, it has outlawed such conduct.

### THE ISSUE AT STAKE

The critical school consciously or unconsciously rejects inspiration as the determining principle of the canon and rejects the high view of the supernatural working of God. According to this high view, God gave to these Scriptures their inspired quality; they are 'God-breathed' and are in the highest and truest sense His creation. The Spirit which inspired the holy writers works also in the hearts of God's people; i.e., there is the testimony of the Spirit in their hearts that these inspired writings are the Word of God. The books as they were written claimed to be the Word of God and were immediately recognized as such by God's people. Under the guidance of the prophets of God, and especially under the guidance of the Spirit of God, they came to see this with increasing clearness, till at last the whole body of Scripture was accepted and the canon was complete. This, we are firmly persuaded, is the true account of the formation of the canon. It places our faith, not in

the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. There alone we stand on firm ground, for God alone can be the source of authority in these matters.

There is a great gulf between this high view and the critical view. In the one, the supernatural working of God is fully recognized; in the other, it is not. Moreover, if the Scriptures of the Old Testament were gathered as the critics say they were, then it is one of the greatest enigmas of the ages how they ever came to be accepted by the Jews as of divine authority.

The critics sometimes say that it was because certain books proved their value in religious use that they secured a place in the canon. The chief objection to this theory is that it makes the canon the work, not of God, but of men. Moreover, certain books like I Maccabees may have been helpful and inspiring, yet they were not admitted.

Another theory takes conformity to the law as the determining factor in the formation of the canon. First of all, however, the canonization of the law must be accounted for. Moreover, on the critical view, the law has in it various and even conflicting strands — hence, partly at least, the documentary theory of the Pentateuch. How could later books conform to a standard which itself speaks with two or more voices? It is almost like trying to draw a straight line with a crooked ruler!

None of the solutions which the critics offer to this problem are at all satisfactory. As Prof. Young says, the critical view leaves us 'in the hopeless abyss of agnosticism'.

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