

CANONICITY OF THE BIBLE in ROMAN CATHOLICISM and PROTESTANTISM

Dakota-Montana District Conference
Northwestern Lutheran Academy
Mobridge, SD

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Tappen, ND
April 24-25, 1979

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The Catholic Bible has 77 books. Protestants accept only 66. Why? In this paper we will touch separately on the canonicity of each Testament and of the Apocrypha from both viewpoints. Since many modern Protestants are coming to accept the Apocrypha as canonical, present trends will be handled separately at the end. "Protestantism" in this paper includes Lutherans.

The subject at hand is not a mere exercise in theoretical knowledge. Actually, attitudes toward canonicity are symptomatic of the respective doctrinal approaches taken. One of the remarkable facts of history is that Protestants agree that the Bible contains 66 books. No authority told them to, but millions of pastors, teachers, and laymen have separately examined the evidence and independently arrived at the same conclusions. On the other hand, virtually all Roman Catholics accept 77 books as canonical. It would be passing strange had they come to such a different end by way of the same road. But separate examination and independent conclusion was not their method. Conformity came from the top down rather than from the bottom up. The essayist ransacked his library (in vain, sad to say) for a favorite quote from a Roman Catholic source stating proudly that there were four Gospels because the Church said there were four. Although Irenaeus had said only that "Es gibt weder mehr Evangelien als diese vier, noch kann es weniger geben,"¹ the Catholic writer implied that the Church could as easily have canonized

1. Quoted and translated in J P Meyer's NT Isagogics notes (Seminary Mimeo Company, no date).

three or five, had it so chosen. So we see the principles:

^(Jammia)
 Papt: Authority versus independent acknowledgement. Either the authority of the pope or the evidence of history must convince one. We shall see these principles carried out in practice.

WHY DO PROTESTANTS ACCEPT THE CANONICAL OLD TESTAMENT?

Because they are inspired. But one thing we can probably forget is the Council of Jamnia.

It has also been suggested that pronouncements that defined the limits of the Old Testament canon were made by a formal council of Jewish authorities held towards the end of the first century after Christ at Jamnia (Jabneh.) Desirable though such an event might have been, it is far from certain that there ever was a Council or Synod of Jamnia in the strictest sense. To speak of such a body as though it was responsible for closing the Old Testament canon by fixing its limits as they had been arrived at by A.D. 90 is to beg the entire question, as Moore has pointed out. As far as the facts of the situation are concerned, very little is known about the supposed Synod of Jamnia . . . The location soon became an established center of Scriptural study, and from time to time certain discussions took place relating to the canonicity of specific Old Testament books including Ezekiel, Esther, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. . . . It seems probable that nothing of a formal or binding nature was decided in these discussions, even though, as Rowley had indicated, the various debates helped to crystallize and establish the Jewish tradition in this regard more firmly than had been the case previously. . . . It is even more doubtful if the participants in the discussions were actually concerned with the problem as to whether certain books should be included in the canon of Scripture or not, rather, . . . as to whether specific books should be excluded. . . . Esther did not mention the Divine Name; Ecclesiastes seemed partly Epicurean . . . and the Song of Songs . . . nothing more than a composition dealing with the vagaries of human passion.

The fact is that the works under discussion were already accorded canonical status in popular esteem, so that, as Stafford Wright has stated, the "Council" was actually confirming public opinion, not forming it.²

No, Protestants accept the Old Testament rather because there was a generally accepted body of writings called the Scriptures, the Law and the Prophets, or the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Josephus has the earliest ³ delimitation of the canon:

For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from, and contradicting, one another, but only twenty two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine. And of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death.⁴

Josephus records twenty two books rather than our 39 because he counts the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and the Minor Prophets as one scroll each, combines Ruth with Judges, Lamentations with Ezekiel, and Ezra with Nehemiah.

This body of writings was frequently quoted by Jesus and the Apostles. Every book in the collection is cited except Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ezra, Nehemiah, Obadiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah. But none of the unused books is excluded from that body of writings. While an argument from silence is not conclusive, the same Lord who bound us to the Scriptures must have let us know what those Scriptures are. Would He not have told us somehow if He had meant to exclude that handful of books? The books which are not cited do not contradict the books which are, nor do they add any strange new doctrines of their own. Practically speaking, this has been a dead issue

¹ ²R.K.Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp 277-278.

³Harrison, p 261

⁴Josephus, Against Apion, I, 8.

for centuries. This paper is too narrow in scope to raise the issue, since its purpose is to show principles behind selection rather than arguing the merits of each particular book.

WHY DO CATHOLICS ACCEPT THE CANONICAL OLD TESTAMENT?

They accept the same books as we, but their reason is a little different.

According to Rome, the Scriptures receive their authority from the church. The church decides what is canonical and what is not.

Martin Chemnitz, one of the authors of the Formula of Concord, in his deservedly famous Examination of the Council of Trent, summarizes the position of Pighius, a Dutch Catholic theologian who took part in the Diet of Worms, in this way:

The authority of the church is not only not inferior, nor merely equal, but in a certain way even superior to and more excellent than the authority of the Scripture, for it was the church which imparted canonical authority to the chief writings, which they did not possess either of themselves or from their authors.⁵

In other words, the Word is the word of God because the church recognizes it to be. If the church did not recognize it, the Word would cease to be the Word. Or if the church recognized something merely human as the word of God, then that merely human word would be elevated into the canon. This is, in fact, what has happened in the case of the Apocrypha.

⁵W.R.Gawrisch, "How the Canonicity of the Bible was Established, WLQ, Vol 70 #2, quoting Chemnitz, Examen, Part I, p 45 (Concordia: 1971 translation by Fred Kramer,) pp 98-99.

WHY DO PROTESTANTS REJECT THE APOCRYPHA? Because they are not inspired. The Apocrypha are rejected largely because they were never accepted. They don't occur in the corpus recognized by Josephus or the Hebrew Bible used by Jesus.

While certain books were the subject of periodic Jewish discussion in this regard, there was no controversy at all in connection with the books of the Apocrypha, for everyone was agreed that they were non-canonical. The reason appears to have been that the works themselves simply gave no evidence whatever of having been divinely inspired. As Green and others have pointed out, some of these writings contain egregious historical, chronological, and geographical errors, quite apart from justifying falsehood and deception and making salvation dependent upon deeds of merit.⁶

Not only were they not accepted - many of the Apocrypha were positively rejected, book by book. Tobit, for instance, is fairly obviously a piece of religious fiction. Getting zapped by a sparrow and exorcising a demon with a stink bomb are a little too cute to be taken seriously as sacred Scripture. Bel and the Dragon likewise bears all the marks of religious fiction; it has been called the world's first detective story. Susannah may be historical but it reads a little too smoothly to be devoid of art. Sometimes the works don't even try to hide the fact that entertainment is the purpose.

Judith (1:1) begins,

In the twelfth year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar,
who ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of
Nineveh . . .

Every schoolboy knew that Nebuchadnezzar ruled only in Babylon. A "mistake" so readily apparent is as obvious a fictional overture

⁶Harrison, op. cit., p 286

as the phrase "once upon a time."

Other books are rejected for doctrinal reasons. Second Maccabees, though valuable as history, quotes with evident approval the doctrinal aberration of prayer for the dead. Despite the great doctrinal diversity of Protestantism, all Protestants before the advent of liberalism recognized that God is not the author of confusion and that He would not thus contradict Himself. Since the universally accepted Scriptures teach clearly that there is no help for the dead, a disputed book contradicting an undisputed book must be excluded.

This brief overview should not leave the impression that the road to consensus always ran smooth. The British Bible Society did not finally exclude the Apocrypha from its Bibles until 1827, and there had been sporadic scuffles over the issue all along. However,

There is no instance in the New Testament where any of the writers cited an apocryphal composition as though they recognized it as inspired Scripture or in any way connected with matters of spiritual authority. Even C.C. Torrey, who compiled a substantial list of what he deemed to be New Testament allusions to or quotations from the Apocrypha, was compelled to concede that, in general, the apocalyptic literature was left unnoticed.⁷

WHY DO CATHOLICS ACCEPT THE APOCRYPHA? Especially since accepting the Apocrypha requires acceptance of doctrinal contradiction and the repudiation of well-known historical facts which Scripture itself substantiates? But such considerations

⁷Harrison, op. cit., pp 1187-1188

don't concern the consistent Catholic. He is accustomed to believing what he is told to believe, let reason and Scripture say what they will. The consistent Catholic believes that facts which the church rejects will sooner or later be proved untrue. The long and polemical volume Fifty Years in the Church of Rome by the ex-priest Chiniquy stresses from beginning to end that the church expects to be believed despite the testimony of one's eyes and ears. And the Catholic is told to believe that the Apocrypha are inspired:

If anyone does not accept as sacred and canonical the aforesaid books in their entirety and with all their parts, as they have been accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the Old Latin Vulgate Edition, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema.⁸

But what is their reason for canonizing the Apocrypha?

Goodspeed is simplistic when he implies that the Apocrypha were always in the Bible and were unjustly excluded:

We moderns discredit them [the Apocrypha] because they did not form part of the Hebrew Bible, . . . But they were part of the Bible of the early church, for it used the Greek version of the Jewish Bible which we call the Septuagint and these books were all in that version. They passed from it into Latin and the great Latin Bible edited by St. Jerome about A.D. 400, the Vulgate.⁹

Goodspeed makes it look as though there were 1500 years of blissful ignorance of questions of canonicity. But even before the Council of Trent closed the canon, there was

⁸Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, H.J. Schroeder, translator (St Louis: B. Herder, 1941), p18.

⁹Edgar J. Goodspeed, The Apocrypha: An American Translation (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1938), p vii.

disagreement among Catholics about what books were to be received. Cajetan doubted James, for instance.¹⁰ Acceptance of the Apocrypha was not a cut-and-dried matter of accepting the Septuagint; Rome rejects the Prayer of Manasseh and the two books of Esdras, though both occur in the Septuagint. Nor is their rationale the unanimous agreement of tradition; Jerome himself distinguished between the canonical writings of the Hebrews and those compositions which were merely of value for devotional use.¹¹ Why then are the apocryphal books considered a part of Scripture? Harrison editorializes,

The fact that such a position was adopted at all¹² resulted in the main from dogmatic considerations.

That is to say, so much apocryphal material had already been received within the Roman church that to reject it would have meant far-ranging admissions of error.

OF WHAT IMPORTANCE ARE THE DIFFERING ATTITUDES OF PROTESTANTS

AND CATHOLICS? The essayist heard a Reformation Festival sermon in 1974 by Pastor Fred Fallen of St. Paul's, Arlington, MN, that ranks, in his estimation, as an all-time classic.

It went something like this:

¹⁰Lenski, The Interpretation of James, p 515.

¹¹Harrison, op. cit., p 1188.

¹²Ibid., p 1278.

FINDING GOD'S TRUTH IN THE CATHOLIC BIBLE

- I. Some things you don't find in the Catholic Bible
 - A. Popery
 - B. Purgatory
 - C. Priestly vows
- II. Some things you do find in the Catholic Bible
 - A. Salvation by Scripture alone (with Tridentine anathema)
 - B. Salvation by grace alone (with Tridentine anathema)
 - C. Salvation by faith alone (with Tridentine anathema).
- III. The problem is not with the Catholic Bible.
 - A. All Scriptures in this sermon are from the Catholic Bible.
 - B. No false Catholic doctrines are from the Catholic Bible.
 - C. The Lutheran preacher would be fairly comfortable if he had to preach from the Catholic Bible.
- IV. The problem is that they don't read the Catholic Bible.
 - A. Until the Reformation, they didn't have it.
 - B. If they had it, they couldn't read it (Latin)
 - C. If they had read it, they couldn't understand it (allegorical interpretation).
 - D. Lutherans do have it, can read it, and can understand it. So why don't we?

We would do well to follow Pastor Fallen's masterly analysis of the issue. Compared to his approach, attacking the canonicity of the Apocrypha is a waste of time.

WHY DO PROTESTANTS ACCEPT THE NEW TESTAMENT? Because it is inspired. It is inspired because it is apostolic. But how do we know whether a New Testament candidate is apostolic?

Apostolicity was considered proved if the following conditions were met:

1. The recipient (individual or congregation) had to be able to vouch for its genuineness;
2. The chief congregations founded by the apostles or nearly associated with them had to accept the book;
3. The book had to receive general assent;
4. The doctrine of the book in question had to agree with that of the undisputed genuine books of Scripture.¹³

As a result of this, Hebrews, James, II Peter, II and III John,

¹³. Frederick Blume, "The Formation of the New Testament Canon," WLQ, Vol 38, pp 272-282; Part IV, paragraphs 1-2.

Jude, and Revelation were spoken against by some. The technical term is antilegomena. The antilegomena were only doubted books. They were not rejected books. In fact, we are mistaken if we think that the antilegomena were widely spoken against. The term only means that some respected churches or churchmen held reservations about their apostolicity. Pros and cons for each book can be found in your commentaries. But it will be instructive to look at Luther's temporary rejection of James, the famous "recht strohern Epistel." We misunderstand Luther if we equate "strohern" with "worthless." The son of a peasant would know that straw is not worthless. It has many uses. But the essential characteristic of straw is that the best part of it has been removed. This was the doctrine of justification by faith, which Luther did not find in James.

If one wants to preach the Gospel, it must, in short, be on the resurrection of Christ. He who does not do that is no apostle; for this is the main part of the Gospel. And these are the right, noblest books, which teach and impress this, as stated above. Hence one can well feel that the Epistle of James is no right apostolic epistle, for there is hardly a thing of this in it.¹⁴

If Luther had rejected James permanently because he didn't approve of its lacking the Gospel kernel, this would put him into the same sectarian class as the Council of Trent and we would be left with a choice of whose opinion we'd rather respect. But Luther's reason for his famous Preface to James (omitted by 1534) was rather that he could not harmonize Romans with James.

14. Quoted in The Interpretation of James by R.C.H. Lenski, p 514.

The canonicity of Romans has never been called into question; that of James was. So it was not a lack of respect for Scripture, but a very healthy respect for Scripture, that led him to this policy. James says,

Ye see, then, that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. (2:24)

Romans, however, affirms that

Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight. (3:20a)

Setting up these statements in parallel terminology, you can see why Luther saw a contradiction:

James: The works of the law, not faith only, declare that a man is righteous.

Paul: The works of the law shall never declare to God that a man is righteous.

Later, as he matured, Luther saw that James was not talking about justification in the sight of God but in the sight of man. Paul was speaking of justification in the sight of God. So there is no internal contradiction. Had there been an internal contradiction, James would have stayed rejected. Roman Catholicism, on the other hand, paid scant attention to internal contradiction; Wisdom of Solomon (3:1) clearly contradicts the well-known passage from II Maccabees which approves the idea of sacrifice for the godly dead.

The souls of the upright are in the hand of God
And no torment can reach them.

However, Catholicism accepted the Apocrypha because rejecting them would cause an external contradiction--contradiction between the canonical writings and the teachings of the church.

WHY DO CATHOLICS ACCEPT THE NEW TESTAMENT? To sum up the contrast in opinions, Protestants believe the New Testament books are canonical because they are self-evidently the word of God, while Roman Catholics accept them because the church has declared them so. This attitude was certainly in mind when the Synod issued our "Statement on Scripture" (1959 Convention Proceedings):

Scripture being the Word of God, it carries its own authority in itself and does not receive it by the approbation of the Church. The canon, that is, that collection of books which is the authority for the Church, is not the creation of the Church. Rather, the Canon has, by a quiet historical process which took place in the worship life of the Church, imposed itself upon the Church by virtue of its own divine authority.

There you have the two contrasting positions. One is imposed from the top down, one ^{recognized} (developed) from the bottom up. One is an arbitrary decision by an infallible authority, the other a universal acknowledgement of evident truth.

The books that have been excluded from the New Testament are not accepted as fully canonical even by Rome. These are classed as "deuterocanonical" in Rome and are not printed in the Catholic Bible. Our adjective is the more accurate "spurious."

CANONICITY IN MODERN TIMES

WHAT IS THE MODERNIST PROTESTANT ATTITUDE TOWARD CANONICITY?

Dr. R.C.H. Lenski has a real gem in his introduction to James:

Modernists regard the whole Bible as outmoded Jewish literature and pick and choose from its contents what they need for their moralizing lectures.¹⁵

15. Ibid., p 516.

In fact, since the advent of higher criticism, there is a new respect for the Apocrypha. It should not be thought that this represents a raising of the Apocrypha to prophetic or apostolic status. Rather, it represents a lowering of the Scriptures to apocryphal status. More specifically, liberal Protestants consider the New Testament to be neither the word of God nor the work of the Apostles; at best, it is a production of the early church.

WHAT IS THE MODERNIST CATHOLIC ATTITUDE TOWARD CANONICITY?

Brethren, there's bad news on the horizon. You can prepare to scrap most of your old Reformation sermons and relegate such admirable polemics as The Papacy Evaluated to the medieval history shelf. All your laboriously researched diatribes against the use of the church fathers as a norm for doctrine are outdated, or soon will be. Rome no longer does its theology by interpreting Scripture through tradition; and when the older priests die off, the method will be no more. The Roman Catholic Church is now thoroughly committed to the historical critical method. This, in fact, is the prime mover behind the ecumenical movement. Readers of Christian News see at least monthly notices of the growing rapprochement between Rome and modern Lutheranism. And why shouldn't there be? Modern Rome and modern Wittenberg do their theology from the same premises; naturally they arrive at the same conclusions.

But Rome never changes, at least not for the better. Rome has abandoned the old school of theology, in the essayist's

analysis, not because of intellectual revolution but for the coldly logical reason that the new theology is a better means of swallowing up all of Christendom than the old. Historical criticism is taking over as the root of all doctrine in liberal Protestantism and in Rome. Eventually these identical roots will produce compatible fruits, and the Protestants will be grafted right in. As the right wing of Christianity (Pentecostalism and much Evangelicalism) marches more or less directly toward the Vatican through their experience theology, so the left wing goes there by another way--but all roads except one lead to Rome.

However, the more Rome changes, the more she stays the same. You should all be familiar with the fact that historical criticism tells us that the New Testament neither quotes Jesus nor even reflects Him accurately, but rather shows the teachings of the early church. All of liberal Protestantism, therefore, is committing itself to the idea that the source of doctrine is the teaching of the early church. But there is a word for "the teaching of the early church," you know. And that word is Tradition. So in a dialectical fashion that Chairman Mao would have been proud of, Romanism affirms tradition as the source and norm of doctrine by repudiating it. We should not be taken in by their apparent reversal of direction. Rome's apparent retreat is nothing but the backstroke before the next crushing hammerblow . . . and in the meantime, perhaps the great majority of the world's Lutherans and Protestants will find themselves in the Roman camp. May our merciful God prevent this. May our gracious God give these unworthy servants the privilege of

fighting this battle on His side.

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