

## ***History, Theology and the Biblical Canon: an Introduction to Basic Issues***

**Eckhard J. Schnabel**

*Dr Schnabel, who specializes in New Testament Studies, is Associate Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.*

[p.16]

It has been claimed that the evangelical approach to the question of the biblical canon was, historically, the weakest link in the evangelical doctrine of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> If this assessment is correct, the reason for this weakness may be twofold. First, the historical questions related to the genesis of the canon of both the OT and the NT are extremely complex. And since the accessible data had been painstakingly collated and evaluated by the turn of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> with little new material surfacing during the last eighty years, it is understandable that the historical evidence was regarded as settled.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the theological issues related to the historical development of the canon may appear rather perplexing to biblical scholars and theologians who would not want to conclude that the biblical canon is a creation of the church. Being committed to the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation and thus to the subordination of tradition to Scripture, evangelicals possibly resigned themselves to the belief (perhaps more a feeling) that the question of the canon was an enigma which defies precise clarifications. Still, important matters remain and newer issues

---

<sup>1</sup> M.J. Sawyer, 'Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament', in *Grace Theological Journal* 11 (1990), pp. 29-52; see the similar remarks of Theo Donner, 'Some Thoughts on the History of the New Testament Canon', in *Themelios* 7 (1982), pp. 23-27; 23 n.1. Older evangelical works on the canon include A. Alexander, *The Canon of the Old and New Testaments Ascertained; or, the Bible Complete without the Apocrypha and Unwritten Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1826, rev. edn. 1851); B.B. Warfield, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1892, reprinted in *idem, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 1948 = 1970), pp. 411-416; L. Gaussen, *The Canon of the Holy Scriptures from the Double Point of View of Science and of Faith* (London, 1862, French original Lausanne, 1860). Newer evangelical studies include H. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia, 1963, Dutch original Kampen, 1955); R.L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible. An Historical and Exegetical Study* (Grand Rapids, 1957, 9th edn 1976).

<sup>2</sup> The more important monographs include J. Kirchofer, *Quellensammlung zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons bis auf Hieronymus* (Zürich, 1844), translated and considerably enlarged by A.H. Charteris as *Canonicity. A Collection of Early Testimonies to the Canonical Books of the New Testament* (Edinburgh/London, 1880); B.F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (London, 1855, 6th edn 1889, reprint Grand Rapids, 1990); T. Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (2 vols., Leipzig, 1888-92); *idem, Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons und der altkirchlichen Literatur* (9 vols., Erlangen, 1881-92); J. Leipoldt, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (2 vols., Leipzig, 1907-8, reprint 1974).

<sup>3</sup> It happens only occasionally that traditional evaluations of the evidence are called into question. For example, the usual dating of the Muratorian Fragment at the end of the second century - the document thus being by far the earliest known list of the NT books - has recently been rejected; cf. G.M. Hahnemann, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford, 1992), confirming the position of A.C. Sundberg, 'Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List', *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973), pp. 1-41. Sundberg's arguments were refuted by E. Ferguson, 'Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance', *Studia Patristica* 18 (1982), pp. 677-683.

need to be discussed. In the wake of renewed interest in the canon,<sup>4</sup> evangelical contributions to the debate have increased, at least in quantity.<sup>5</sup>

The term 'canon' is usually defined as 'rule' or 'norm'. The Greek word, which has a broad range of meanings,<sup>6</sup> was applied to the list of books regarded as authoritative for the churches not before the middle of the fourth century AD. The discussion between Westcott and Zahn whether it was the material content of the apostolic writings or whether it was the formal concept of an 'authoritative list' which prompted the use of the word 'canon' has still not been settled. Some scholars assert that before the fourth century the dominant element was not the text but the content conveyed by the text, both in early rabbinic Judaism and the church.<sup>7</sup> This fact is said to explain the freedom with which the Christians until the time of Irenaeus approached the apostolic texts, notably the gospels which were not yet regarded as unchangeable sacred books.<sup>8</sup>

However, there appears to be no evidence which forces us to decide between these two possibilities. One should perhaps be careful not to construe wrong alternatives: it would be entirely natural for people who regarded the teaching contained in particular books as normative for faith and life to consider the text of these books as possessing critical importance. It should not be disputed, however, that the term 'canon' itself is tied up with diverse historical and theological questions. In the following notes we want to highlight the main phases and problems of canon history and indicate some areas of the current debate.

## History and the Old Testament Canon

The traditional position sees the extant canon of the OT emerge in three stages.<sup>9</sup> (1) The graded 'canonicity' of the three parts of the *tanach* (*TN*"K: Torah, Nebiim, Ketubim, *i.e.* the

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. particularly H.F. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia, 1972; German original Tübingen, 1968); E. Käsemann (ed), *Das Neue Testament als Kanon: Dokumentation und kritische Analyse zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion* (Göttingen, 1970); S.Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of the Hebrew Scripture* (Hamden, 1976); B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1977); J. Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (The Sprunt Lectures, Oxford, 1983); I. Baldermann *et al.* (eds), *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* Vol. 3: Zum Problem des biblischen Kanon (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1988); H. Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments Band 1: Prolegomena* (Göttingen, 1990), ch. 1; G.M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. T. Donner, 'Some Thoughts on the History of the New Testament Canon', *Themelios* 7 (1982), pp. 23-27; R.T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, 1986); D.C. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (WUNT 39, Tübingen, 1986); D.A. Carson, J.D. Woodbridge (eds), *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids, 1986), notably the study of D.C. Dunbar, 'The Biblical Canon', pp. 299-326; F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, 1988); W. Künneth, 'Kanon', *Theologische Realenzyklopladie* 17 (1988), pp. 562-570; C. Maier (ed), *Der Kanon der Bibel* (Giessen/Wuppertal, 1990); E.E. Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity. Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research* (WUNT 54, Tübingen, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> It was used to designate 'a straight rod', a 'level', a 'plumbline' or a 'ruler'; metaphorical usages include 'criterion', 'standard' and 'circumscribed [geographical] area'; cf. SM. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford/New York, 1987 = 1989), pp. 289ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Maier, 'Zur Frage des biblischen Kanons im Fröjudentum im Licht der Qumranfunde', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 135-146: 137f.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. W.-D. Köhler, *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums in der Zeit vor Irenäus* (WUNT 2/24, Tübingen, 1987), for evidence regarding the Gospel of Matthew.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the study of H.E. Ryle, *The Canon of the Old Testament* (2nd edn, London, 1892/1909); R.H. Pfeiffer, 'Canon of the OT', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, 1962, pp. 498-520; R.K. Harrison, 'Canon of

Law, the Prophets and the Writings) in early<sup>10</sup> and rabbinic Judaism must have had definite historical presuppositions in earlier times.<sup>11</sup> The dominance of the law is often used as an argument for the proposition that the Pentateuch was the first segment of the Hebrew Scriptures to be regarded as authoritative. The collection of the law stood under the injunction of Deuteronomy that one may not add anything to it nor take from it (Dt. 4:2; 13:1).

Some scholars emphasize at this point that the concept of 'canon' is related to the concept of the covenant.<sup>12</sup> As God's covenant with his people adapted the (suzerainty) treaty form of Near Eastern society, the 'canonical' elements of the latter are present in the former: the importance of the written form, the reading in a public assembly of the people, the stipulations for the secure deposit of the law and for future public readings, the evoking of a loyal response and the curses which aimed at preventing violations of the normative texts (*cf.* Ex. 24; Dt. 31).<sup>13</sup> If the assumption is plausible that not only Deuteronomy<sup>14</sup> but also the material of Exodus and Leviticus dates to the Mosaic period, the 'canonical principle' was present in Israel's history from early times onwards.

Such a view of the historical roots of the canonization process depends, of course, on one's evaluation of the literary history of the Pentateuch. If the latter is regarded as a long and varied process which ended only after the exile, the date of canonization of these texts is pushed forward.<sup>15</sup> The critical consensus of the nineteenth century, which is still supported by many critics today, regarded the promulgation of the law (whatever its precise content) under Josiah (*cf.* 2 Ki. 22) and the

[p.17]

promulgation of the Torah at the time of Nehemiah (Ne. 8-10; *cf.* 2 Macc. 2:13) as authoritative decisions of the leaders of the Jewish people delineating the basis of religious life. These 'acts of canonization' occurred, then, obviously at a much later date.<sup>16</sup> However, there is no evidence that the discovery of the book of the law in 2 Kings 22 marked the beginning of a canonical process. Rather, the discovery confirmed the already existing authority of the law.<sup>17</sup> Thus the question regarding the earliest stages of canonical

---

the OT', *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, 1979, pp. 591-601. Bruce, *Canon*, p. 36, regards the view which reckons with the formation of the OT canon in three stages as hypothetical with no evidence for it whatsoever. For the novel suggestion of David N. Freedman see below, n. 22.

<sup>10</sup> See the prologue of the grandson of Ben Sira, Sir. § 1,3,7.

<sup>11</sup> *Cf.* J. Maier, 'Zur Frage des biblischen Kanons im Frñjudentum im Licht der Qumranfunde', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 135-146: 138 with regard to rabbinic Judaism.

<sup>12</sup> *Cf.* P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT, Grand Rapids, 1976 = 1979), p. 33, referring to R.E. Clements, *God's Chosen People. A Theological Interpretation of the Book of Deuteronomy* (London, 1968), pp. 89-105 (who dates the development of the principle of canonicity in relation to Deuteronomy to the late seventh century); *cf.* further R.E. Clements, 'Covenant and Canon in the Old Testament', in *Creation. Christ and Culture* (FS T.F. Torrance, ed. R.W.A. McKinney, Edinburgh, 1976), pp. 1-12.

<sup>13</sup> Emphasized by M.G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, 1972), pp. 27-110.

<sup>14</sup> See Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 24-32; see further G.J. Wenham, 'The Date of Deuteronomy: Linch-Pin of Old Testament Criticism', *Themelios* 10.3 (1985), pp. 15-20; 11.1 (1985), pp. 15-18.

<sup>15</sup> At the same time new questions are being raised which are impossible to answer unless one is prepared to speculate, *e.g.* the problem 'to what extent a canonical force was at work in the uniting of the J and E sources of the Pentateuch or how a consciousness of the canon exerted itself in the process': B.S. Childs, *Introduction*, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Cf.* H. Gese, 'Das biblische Schriftverständnis', *Zur biblischen Theologie* (2nd edn, Tübingen, 1983), pp. 9-30: ii, 25 (in *idem, Essays on Biblical Theology*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981); C. Stemberger, 'Jabne und der Kanon', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 163-174: 164.

<sup>17</sup> Thus B.S. Childs, *Introduction*, p. 63.

consciousness depends, as many other questions, on one's view of the literary history of the Pentateuch.

(2) The closing of the 'prophetic canon' occurred, as some scholars have recently argued, in the first half of the fifth century BC.<sup>18</sup> The main arguments for this date are the silence regarding events after 500 BC, the absence of Chronicles, and the Jewish tradition that prophecy ceased after Malachi (*cf.* 1 Macc. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41; syrBar. 85:3). Others are not convinced by these arguments; some contend that a collection of prophets was still 'open' in the first century AD. Further, many critics today regard the canonical position of prophetic writings or entire prophetic collections as developing side by side with the literary processes which shaped the law.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult, however, to discount the repeated reference to 'the Law and the Prophets and the others [that followed them]' in the prologue of Sirach or the early cognizance of the canonical order of the prophetic books from Joshua to Nehemiah (Sir. 46:1-49:13) and the reference to the 'twelve prophets' after Ezekiel (Sir. 49:10).<sup>20</sup> The beginning of the second century BC is the *terminus ad quem* for the fixed canonical status of the (former and latter) prophets.<sup>21</sup>

As there is no consensus, and indeed no evangelical consensus concerning the literary history of OT books, it is not surprising that there is no agreement regarding the history of the concept of canonicity or even the presence of individual authoritative books and collections. Even if a consensus regarding the origin and the date of OT books could be reached, the lack of concrete historical data demonstrating their (relative?) authoritative status during the history of Israel makes certainty regarding the early history of the OT canon elusive. However, further work on the literary history of the OT books may confirm various aspects of OT canon history, particularly the *terminus a quo* of 'canon consciousness'. This state of affairs makes the question of the closure of the OT canon all the more important, for both the (later) Jewish community as well as for the early Christian church.

It has recently been suggested that the Hebrew Bible is a unity, being the result of deliberate editorial activity which included compilation and consolidation of the 'Primal History' (Torah and the Former Prophets, *i.e.* Genesis to Kings) in the mid-sixth century, the Latter Prophets in the late sixth or early fifth century, the Writings from the time and the hands of Ezra and Nehemiah, with the book of Daniel being added around 165 BC. According to this view, the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of Daniel) 'was put together and arranged in much the shape that it has today by a small group of scholars toward the end of the fifth century BCE. There is good reason to accept the tradition that the Scribe Ezra (and the Provincial Governor Nehemiah) had much to do with the outcome'.<sup>22</sup> If the basic argument of this suggestion could be substantiated, the critical consensus view that 'no one redacted the Bible as a whole'<sup>23</sup> would have to be abandoned.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Cf.* S.Z. Leiman, *Canonization, passim*.

<sup>19</sup> *Cf.* J.C.H. Lebram, 'Aspekte der alttestamentlichen Kanonbildung', *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968), pp. 173-189.

<sup>20</sup> *Cf.* H. Stadelmann, *Ben Sira als Schriftgelehrter* (WUNT 2/6, Tübingen, 1980), p. 190.

<sup>21</sup> This is usually acknowledged; see Gese, 'Schriftverständnis', p. 11, who assumes the closure of the 'second canon' of the prophetic tradition in the third century.

<sup>22</sup> D.N. Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor, 1991), p. vii, *cf.* the conclusion, pp. 98-100.

<sup>23</sup> J. Barr, 'Trends and Prospects in Biblical Theology', *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974), pp. 265-282: 274, quoted approvingly by John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1987), p. 27.

(3) The older critical consensus assigned the final stages of the history of the OT canon, the canonization of the Writings, to definitive rabbinic decisions at the so-called Council of Jabneh/Jamnia after the catastrophe of AD 70 towards the end of the first century. The relevant text is the Mishnah tractate mYad 3, 5. (i) Heinrich Graetz<sup>24</sup> was the first to postulate such a Jewish synod at Jamnia where the synagogue finally fixed the Hebrew canon. The vast majority of scholars adopted this evaluation of the canonical process. Albert Sundberg speaks of a 'Jamnia canon'.<sup>25</sup> Hartmut Gese emphasizes that there was no fixed OT before the NT and thus no normative revelation.<sup>26</sup> Some regard the closure of the third part of the OT canon as linked with the early-rabbinic confrontation with the *minim* which included the (Jewish) Christians.<sup>27</sup>

The Jamnia hypothesis - and it was never more than that, despite the frequent references to it - has recently come under attack.<sup>28</sup> Main arguments against the traditional assumption are the following: (a) rabbinic discussions concerning some canonical books continued into the second century (and in the case of Esther, even longer); (b) our knowledge of what precisely happened at Jamnia is very limited; (c) the discussion was confined to the question whether Ecclesiastes (and probably Song of Songs) 'make the hands unclean' (*metamme' -im eth ha-yadayim*), a phrase which implies divine inspiredness and a particular sacred character but not necessarily canonicity;<sup>29</sup> (d) the so-called apocryphal books were not discussed; (e) there is no indication that any book was excluded from the list of normative books; (f) the rabbinic sources speak of a *beth din*, a *yeshivah* or a *beth ha-midrash* at Jamnia rather than of a 'synod'.

(ii) One argument which has been advanced for the assumption that the OT canon was still 'open' in the first century AD is the Qumran evidence which has invigorated the discussion in recent years. The peculiar profile of the Psalms scroll 11QPS with its inclusion of several non-canonical (*i.e.* non-Masoretic) psalms is regarded by some scholars as evidence for an alternative canonical text.<sup>30</sup> Others have argued that the scroll was produced for liturgical usage and does not reflect canonical status.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> H. Graetz, *Kohelet oder der salomonische Prediger*, Anhang I: Der alttestamentliche Kanon und sein Abschluss (Leipzig, 1871), pp. 147-173; cf. R.T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, 1985), pp. 3, 276; Hübner, 'Vetus Testamentum', p. 149; D.E. Anne, 'On the Origins of the "Council of Yavneh" Myth', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991), pp. 491-493.

<sup>25</sup> A.C. Sundberg, 'The "Old Testament": A Christian Canon', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968), pp. 143-155: 147.

<sup>26</sup> Gese, *op. cit.*; more recently J. Maier, 'Zur Frage des biblischen Kanons im Frühjudentum im Licht der Qumranfunde', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 135-146; H. Hübner, 'Vetus Testamentum und Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum. Die Frage nach dem Kanon des Alten Testaments aus neutestamentlicher Sicht', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 147-162: 149-153.

<sup>27</sup> H.P. Ruger, 'Das Werden des christlichen Alten Testaments', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 175-189: 181-183; similarly H. Hübner, *Biblische Theologie*, pp. 37-70 *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J.P. Lewis, 'What Do We Mean By Jabneh?' [1964] *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible: An Introductory Reader* (ed. S.Z. Leiman, New York, 1974), pp. 254-261; P. Schafer, 'Die sogenannte Synode von Jamnia', *Judaica* 31 (1975), pp. 54-64; J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Downers Grove, 1981), pp. 139f.; J. Maier, *Jüdische Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Christentum in der Antike* (EdF 177, Darmstadt, 1982), pp. 4-9; Beckwith, *Canon, passim*; see also Stemberger, 'Jabne', *passim*; C. Maier, 'Der Abschluss des jüdischen Kanons und das Lehrhaus von Jabne', *Der Kanon der Bibel* (ed. C. Maier, Giessen/Wuppertal, 1990), pp. 1-24.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Stemberger, 'Jabne', pp. 166-170, 173; differently Hübner, 'Vetus Testamentum', pp. 150f.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J.A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca, 1967), pp. 10-14.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Leiman, *Canonization*, pp. 154f. with n. 183; P.W. Skehan, 'Qumran and Old Testament Criticism', *Qumrân: Sa piété, sa théologie et son milieu* (ed. M. Delcor, BETL 46, Leuven, 1978), pp. 163-182.

The longest scroll yet published, the Temple Scroll 11QTS, is evidently conceived as law given to Moses by God and thus claiming divine inspiration (achieved through the literary setting with God addressing Moses in the first person, and by a thoroughgoing rewriting of large passages from the Pentateuch).<sup>32</sup> The first editor, Yigael Yadin, was convinced that the document possessed canonical status in the community.<sup>33</sup> It is disputed, however, whether the text had much practical significance for the Qumran community.<sup>34</sup>

Some have argued that whether the Qumran community had a prophetic corpus with a clearly defined authority or not, the Torah's quality of authority was more eminent than the authority of the prophetic books. The evidence is seen in the application of the *peshet* method to the prophetic books, which is said to be unthinkable for the Torah.<sup>35</sup> However, the authority of the prophetic books in the *pesharim* texts as source of new eschatological truth may be compared with the authority of the Pentateuch in the Temple Scroll as source of new legal truth.<sup>36</sup>

The possibility (whether it is a 'fact' can be ascertained only after all texts and fragments have been published) that the Qumran community did not distinctly quote from (later) non-canonical books<sup>37</sup> may not be conclusive. Non-canonical early Jewish writings such as Jubilees and Enoch were of course found at Qumran and highly esteemed, but their status is uncertain. Some arguments which are derived from the Qumran evidence for proving an 'open canon' are rather simplistic.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it is true to say that the evidence is not conclusive for assuming either a 'closed' or an 'open' canon at Qumran.

(iii) There does seem to be enough evidence to warrant the conclusion that there never was a Jewish 'Alexandrian canon' which included the apocrypha.<sup>39</sup> The stronger arguments which can be adduced are the following. The complete codices of the Septuagint (LXX) which contain the apocrypha appear in the fourth century AD and are all of Christian origin; they do not adhere to the threefold division of the Hebrew canon; and they hardly reflect a unanimous canon (*e.g.* Codex Vaticanus omits Maccabees). Further, the assumption that Hellenistic Judaism was largely independent from Palestinian Judaism is erroneous. As many of the apocryphal writings are translations from Hebrew or Aramaic texts written originally in Palestine, this may indicate that the Alexandrian Jews looked to Palestine for guidance, which in turn makes the theory implausible that they added these texts to the Palestinian canon. It is

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. D. Dimant, 'Qumran Sectarian Literature', *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (ed. M.E. Stone, CRINT 2/2, Assen/Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 483-550: 527f.

<sup>33</sup> Y. Yadin, *The Temple Scroll* (Jerusalem, 1983), 1:390-395.

<sup>34</sup> Thus J. Maier, 'Frage', p. 142, following H. Stegemann.

<sup>35</sup> Johann Maier, 'Zur Frage des biblischen Kanons im Frujudentum im Licht der Qumranfunde', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 135-146: 143.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. M. Fishbane, 'Use, Authority and Interpretation of Mikra in Qumran', *Mikra. Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (CRINT 2/1, ed. M.J. Mulder, Assen, 1988), pp. 339-377: 351. Quoted by Hubner, *Biblische Theologie*, p.53 n.126.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. I.H. Eybers, 'Some Light on the Canon of the Qumran Sect' [1962], *The Canon and Masorah of the Hebrew Bible* (ed. S.Z. Leiman, New York, 1974), pp. 23-36: 28-31, followed by Dunbar, 'Canon', p. 311.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. H.P. Rüger, 'Das Werden des christlichen Alten Testaments', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 175-189: 179, who concludes from the fact that the book of Esther is missing in Qumran (relying on a publication of J.T. Milik from 1957!) that the third part of the canon is not yet closed. The fact that the book of Esther seems to be missing in Qumran may be accidental, or might be explained by its affinity to the ideals of the Hasmonaeans when the Qumran community despised. or by its conflict with the Essene calendar (*cf.* Bruce, *Canon*, p. 39; Beckwith, *Canon*, pp. 288-297).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Beckwith, *Canon*, pp. 382-386; Bruce, *Canon*, pp. 44-45; also C. Maier, 'Abschluss', pp. 7-8.

doubtful whether Alexandrian Jews who shared the view that Scripture is prophetic in nature<sup>40</sup> would include a book in a canon which repeatedly asserts that prophecy had long ceased (1 Macc. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41). While it is not possible to indicate the precise content of the canon for Philo, it may be significant that while he occasionally quotes from Gentile authors he does not once quote from the apocrypha.<sup>41</sup>

(iv) There are indications that the present-day tripartite OT canon was finalized in pre-NT times, perhaps as early as the beginning of the second century BC.<sup>42</sup> The relevant evidence is

[p.18]

found (a) in the NT: note the summary of the Holy Scriptures in the singular *he graphe* and the interchange of the formula 'God says' and 'Scripture says' (*cf.* Rom. 9:11-12,15,17, 25-26); the reference to the three divisions of Scripture in Luke 24:44;<sup>43</sup> the reference to the beginning and the end of authoritative Scripture in the saying in Matthew 23:35/Luke 11:51 about all the righteous blood from the blood of Abel (Gn . 4:1-15) to the blood of Zechariah (2 Chr. 29:20-22, in the last book in the Hebrew canon); (b) in Josephus, who affirms that 'our books, those which are justly accredited, are only two and twenty, and contain the record of all time': five written by Moses, thirteen written by prophets<sup>44</sup> and four other books,<sup>45</sup> adding the remark that 'although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured to add, or to remove, or to alter anything' (*Contra Apionem* 1:37-43);<sup>46</sup> (c) in Philo, who refers to 'the Laws, and the Oracles given by inspiration through the Prophets, and the Psalms, and the other books whereby knowledge and piety are increased and completed' (*De vita contemplativa* 25);<sup>47</sup> (d) in a new Qumran text which refers to 'the Law, the Prophets and David' (4QMMT);<sup>48</sup> (e) the reference to Judas Maccabaeus, who 'gathered together for us all those writings that had been scattered by reason of the war that befell' (2 Macc. 2:14) as 300

---

<sup>40</sup> Cf. H. Burkhardt, *Die Inspiration heiliger Schriften bei Philo von Alexandrien* (Giessen, 1988), pp. 145, 152-171 for Philo.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Burkhardt, *Inspiration*, p. 130, referring to C.F. Hornemann, *Observationes ad illustrationem doctrinae de canone Veteris Testamenti en Philone* (Copenhagen, 1775), pp. 28-33.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Beckwith, *Canon*, pp. 110-180, who builds on Leiman, *Canonization, passim*.

<sup>43</sup> Lk. 24:44 speaks of 'the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms', and it is debatable whether 'psalms' refers to the Psalms themselves or to the 'Writings'; *cf.* I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter, 1978), p. 905. J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Garden City/NY, 1985), p. 1583, is sceptical and prefers to interpret in terms of the psalms. At any rate, a third division of prophetic Scripture would be indicated. It has been suggested that Lk. 24:27 contains a similar reference, but this is difficult syntactically (thus Marshall, p. 897).

<sup>44</sup> Probably linking Judges + Ruth, Jeremiah + Lamentations, Ezra + Nehemiah and including Job, Chronicles and Esther.

<sup>45</sup> *I.e.* Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

<sup>46</sup> It is a case of *petitio principii* if it is sometimes claimed that when Josephus indicates that this 'canon' of 22 books is not just his private opinion but the universal conviction of the Jews, he is mistaken since there was no 'closed canon' at the time of Josephus (*cf.* R. Meyer, 'Bemerkungen zur Kanontheorie des Josephus', *Josephus-Studien*, FS O. Michel, ed. O. Betz *et al.*, Göttingen (1974), pp. 285-299: 287); thus C. Maier, 'Abschluss', p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> R.T. Beckwith, 'A Modern Theory of the Old Testament Canon', *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991), pp. 385-395: 388, points to the significance of the fact that in this description of the Therapeutae, a quasi-Essene group, their writings containing 'inspired interpretation' of the Scriptures are not merged with the three standard sections of the (extant) canon.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Beckwith, 'Theory', p. 386. Incidentally, as both Y. Sussmann, 'The History of the Halakha and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Preliminary Observations on Miqsat Ma'aseh Ha-Torah [4QMMT]', [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 59 (1989-1990), pp. 11-76, and L.H. Schiffman, 'Miqsat Ma'aseh ha-Torah and the Temple Scroll', *Revue de Qumran* 14 (1990), pp. 435-457, describe the halakhah of this document as Sadducean, the issue of an assumed particular 'Sadducean canon', limited (probably) to the Pentateuch, is affected.

years earlier Nehemiah had gathered 'the books about the kings and prophets, and the books of David, and letters of kings about sacred gifts [Ezra]' (2 Macc. 2:13); (f) in the prologue to Sirach, with the thrice-repeated reference to threefold Scripture and the implication that this Scripture existed already at the time of Ben Sira, *i.e.* around 190-175 BC.<sup>49</sup> An important question also is the significance of the rivalries between the different Jewish religious parties for the development of the Hebrew canon.<sup>50</sup> Some argue that the silence of the sources regarding differences of opinion in the question of the canon indicates that the process of canonization had come to a close before the emergence of these parties,<sup>51</sup> *i.e.* around or before the middle of the second century BC. But the very scarcity of specific data in the sources does not seem to allow proven assertions.<sup>52</sup>

(4) There are no indications which force us to conclude that the OT canon was 'fixed' by a formal council or by a specific group claiming authority, although one could assume that the Sanhedrin, or the earlier *gerousia*, played an important role. Evidently somebody had to decide sometime which books were 'holy' and could be kept in the sacred archive of Scriptures in the temple.<sup>53</sup> And we may assume that the acceptance of particular books through the pious of the land was a decisive factor in this process.<sup>54</sup>

To conclude, it is rather likely that the 'canon' of the OT was firmly established before the first century AD. Jesus and the apostles accepted 'the Scripture(s)' as word of God possessing normative weight. The authority of the Hebrew Bible was grounded in the conviction that its content, indeed its very words, were divine revelation (*cf.* the classical texts 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

If this is correct, *i.e.* if Christ and the apostles lived and worshipped with a normative list of authoritative books which they regarded as 'holy' (Rom. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:15; *cf.* Rom. 7:12), we may further conclude that it is by no means impossible that the notion of a new and additional set of normative Scripture for the 'new covenant' on a par with the Scriptures of the 'old covenant' was born already in early apostolic times. It would therefore not be necessary to assume that Christians used the term 'Scripture' (*graphe*) for their own normative tradition only after their final break with the synagogue.<sup>55</sup> Besides, the separation from the synagogue was not always the result of a long process but occurred, at least locally, at the earliest stages of church planting (*cf.* Acts 18:5-7). Theological convictions regarding the new covenant and the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit at and since Pentecost were most likely more significant than consideration for the Jewish synagogues. A first hint of such a 'canonical' development towards a new collection of authoritative books may be seen in 2 Peter 3:16,

---

<sup>49</sup> Note the (later) insistence of the Tosefta tractate Yadayim 2,13 that 'Sira and all books which were written from then onwards do not make the hands unclean'.

<sup>50</sup> For this discussion see M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (London/New York, 1971); A. Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'Ancien Testament* (OBO 39, Fribourg/Göttingen, 1981).

<sup>51</sup> Beckwith, *Canon*, p. 406.

<sup>52</sup> Thus J. Maier, 'Frage', pp. 136f.

<sup>53</sup> On the Temple archive, which is attested both by Josephus and by the early rabbinical literature, *cf.* Beckwith, *Canon*, pp. 80-86.

<sup>54</sup> Thus correctly Stemberger, 'Jabne', p. 174, referring to M. Haran, 'Problems of the Canonization of Scripture' [1955-1956], *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (ed. S.Z. Leiman, Hamden, 1976), pp. 227-253.

<sup>55</sup> Thus the suggestion of R. Riesner, 'Ansätze zur Kanonbildung innerhalb des Neuen Testaments', *Der Kanon der Bibel* (ed. C. Maier, Ciessen/Wuppertal, 1990), pp. 153-165: 157.

where Paul's letters are mentioned side by side with 'the other scriptures' (*tas loipas graphas*).<sup>56</sup>

## History and the New Testament Canon

As regards the canon of the NT, the following phases and factors of development can be outlined.<sup>57</sup> (1) The apostolic Fathers (AD 95-150) did not discuss the question of canonicity and they very rarely refer to books which later came to be included in the NT as 'Scripture'. But they expressed their thoughts more frequently than not through formulations drawn from these writings. We find numerous allusions to NT texts but relatively few direct quotations. However, the books now contained in the NT appear to have possessed an implied authority, with the words of Jesus quite evidently possessing supreme authority.

(2) The standard discussions of the history of the canon during the second, third and fourth centuries<sup>58</sup> focus on the status of books which were not recognized as apostolic by various church leaders in the East and in the West. The complicated state of affairs may be illustrated by the evidence of the large literary production of Origen, the fertile biblical scholar from Alexandria and Caesarea. Origen accepts four gospels and fourteen epistles of Paul as canonical, as well as Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation. He expressed or implied reservations concerning James, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John, while at the same time he can designate as 'divinely inspired' the Shepherd of Hermas. However, he seemed to have become more cautious in appealing to non-canonical texts. The conclusion of Bruce Metzger: 'The process of canonization represented by Origen proceeded by way of selection, moving from many candidates for inclusion to fewer,'<sup>59</sup> may be correct, but the evidence is not 'hard'.

By the middle of the fourth century the canonical status of the NT books was still not universally agreed upon. In the West, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude were disputed. In the East, the national Syrian church used the Diatessaron instead of the four gospels, rejected the Epistle to Philemon but accepted a third epistle to the Corinthians, and omitted the four shorter catholic epistles (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude) as well as Revelation.

(3) Thus, when Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria included a list of the canonical books of the OT and NT in his Thirty-Ninth Festal Epistle of AD 367, excluding the OT apocrypha and naming the twenty-seven books of the present NT, this canon can hardly be regarded as a mere confirmation of a canon which was already agreed upon by 'the church'. His inventory should be seen as what it was: a new list of books accepted as canonical.<sup>60</sup>

The Athanasian canon was accepted by the synods of Rome (382), Hippo Regius (393) and Carthage (397). In most Greek churches the Apocalypse was regarded as canonical from the sixth century. The canon of the Syrian churches was closed by the middle of the fifth century,

---

<sup>56</sup> Cf. R.J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50, Waco, 1983), p. 333, who emphasizes that such a recognition of Paul's letters as inspired, authoritative writings does not imply that the author of 2 Peter knew a NT canon as such.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. recently Metzger, *Canon*, pp. 39-247; Bruce, *Canon*, pp. 117-249.

<sup>58</sup> See now the excellent reviews of the evidence by Metzger, *Canon*, pp. 113-247, and Bruce, *Canon*, pp. 158-229.

<sup>59</sup> Metzger, *Canon*, p. 141.

<sup>60</sup> Thus recently U. Swarat, 'Das Werden des neutestamentlichen Kanons', in Maier, *Kanon*, pp. 25-51: 27, 29.

although without the four shorter catholic epistles and Revelation, which are absent from the Peshitta Syriac version of the Nestorians. Thus, the present NT canon of twenty-seven books surfaces for the first time at the end of the fourth century and is accepted, almost generally, from the end of the sixth century. It should be self-evident that one should take care not to speak of 'the church' having closed 'the canon' at a particular date.

(3) The question regarding the factors which influenced the development of the canon between the first and the fourth centuries is being given different answers. (i) A decisive fact of the genesis of the NT canon was the use of the apostolic writings in the liturgy of the churches. Theodor Zahn deduced from an analysis of the apostolic Fathers that the collection of thirteen epistles of Paul came into existence between AD 80-110 in Corinth or Rome, that the collection of four gospels was put together by the aged apostle John in Ephesus around the same time, and that by that time 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation and the Shepherd of Hermas were read in the churches. He concludes that the church had a 'New Testament' (albeit not with exactly the same catalogue of books as our present NT) since the end of the first century - not as a dogmatic theory but as a fact of church life.<sup>61</sup>

(ii) As church leaders had to wrestle with the claims of the Gnostic systems propagated in 'gospels', 'acts' or 'apocalypses' which pretended to be apostolic,<sup>62</sup> they were forced to reflect on the question which books conveyed the true teaching of the gospel, *i.e.* what really constituted a true gospel and a genuine apostolic writing. The role of the church's struggle with Gnosticism was regarded by many scholars as the decisive factor in the genesis of the canon.<sup>63</sup> Others regard the influence of Gnosticism as only one of several factors,<sup>64</sup> while some scholars maintain that the canon came into existence by the end of the first century quite independently of Gnostic claims.<sup>65</sup>

[p.19]

(iii) The influence of Marcion, the Christian ship-owner from Pontus who was expelled from the church by AD 144, is equally disputed. Marcion, whose 'Antitheses' have not been preserved, rejected the OT as Christian Scripture and attempted to purify the NT from the apostles' 'misunderstanding' that Jesus was the messiah of the Jewish God, thus recognizing only ten Pauline epistles and the Gospel of Luke, after having removed what he regarded as Judaizing interpolations.<sup>66</sup> Some scholars believe that Marcion's canon forced the church to establish its own canon of Scripture.<sup>67</sup> Adolf von Harnack maintained that the NT canon was

---

<sup>61</sup> T. Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (2 vols., Leipzig, 1888-92); cf. Swarat, 'Werden', pp. 33, 40f.

<sup>62</sup> For a review of research into Gnosticism see R. van den Broek, 'The Present State of Gnostic Studies', *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983), pp. 41-71. For an edition of Gnostic texts and a general discussion of the major Gnostic systems see B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY, 1987). On the relationship between the Nag Hammadi documents and the gospels see C.M. Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition* (Edinburgh, 1986).

<sup>63</sup> Particularly by Adolf von Harnack, *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200* (Freiburg, 1889); cf. *idem*, *History of Dogma* (London, 1990, reprint New York, 1961), pp. 38-60.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. Metzger, pp. 75-90.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. particularly Theodor Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, vol. 1 (Erlangen/Leipzig, 1888); *idem*, *Grundriss der Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (Leipzig, 1901); see also *idem*, 'The Canon of the New Testament', *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* 2 (1908), pp. 393-400.

<sup>66</sup> Recently D.S. Williams, 'Reconsidering Marcion's Gospel', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989), pp. 477-496, pointed to the difficulties with regard to the traditional idea that Marcion edited the Gospel of Luke based on theological biases.

<sup>67</sup> First maintained by J.C. Eichhom, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (2 vols., Leipzig, 1804/1912).

the creation of the church fighting against the Gnostic and Marcionite heresies 'fixing' the canon around AD 170 as official-legal norm of the catholic-apostolic church.<sup>68</sup> Other scholars affirm that Marcion merely accelerated a process which had already begun a generation earlier.<sup>69</sup> While Marcion may have been the first actually to draw up a list of canonical books, provoking the church to draw up its own list, he did not thereby create the fundamental idea of canonicity - an idea which had existed since earlier times.<sup>70</sup>

(iv) The significance of Montanism, an enthusiastic movement of Phrygian origin which arose around AD 170, for the development of the canon is generally acknowledged. A few scholars maintain that the movement's claims to the gift of inspiration and prophecy was the determining factor which forced the church to delimit the canon, *i.e.* to close the list of books regarded as apostolic and normative.<sup>71</sup> Others are more cautious,<sup>72</sup> as the Montanist oracles were not seen as possessing equal authority with apostolic Scripture.

(v) Another factor which is sometimes mentioned is the period of persecutions, particularly the Great Persecution under Diocletian between AD 303 and 305.<sup>73</sup> As Christians were willing to die for the possession of their sacred holy books they had to be certain which books were Scripture and which could be handed over to the authorities.

(vi) In view of the scarcity of hard data for the time between the end of the first and the middle of the fourth centuries, and in view of the long process until 'official' canonization, it is wise to conclude with Bruce Metzger that the collection of NT books was, on the historical level, (a) the result of different factors operating 'at different times and in different places', and (b) due to the self-authenticating calibre of the canonical books as 'a clear case of the survival of the fittest'.<sup>74</sup>

## Critical Theological Issues

This conclusion of Bruce Metzger may serve as an adequate explanation of the boundaries of the (OT and) NT canon as they developed in history, but it is hardly a satisfactory rationale for the abiding authority of the books of the biblical canon today. 'The canon' is not simply a

---

<sup>68</sup> A. von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (TU 45, Leipzig, 1921; reprint Darmstadt, 1960), pp. 210-215, and *idem*, *The Origin of the New Testament Canon and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation* (New York, 1925), pp. 30-35, 57-60, calling Marcion 'the creator of the Christian Bible' (Marcion, p. 151); *cf.* more recently Campenhausen, *Formation*, p. 148: 'The idea and the reality of a Christian Bible were the work of Marcion, and the Church which rejected his work, so far from being ahead of him in this field, from a formal point of view simply followed his example'.

<sup>69</sup> Metzger, *Canon*, p. 99, following R.M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (London/New York, 1965), p. 126; also Bruce, *Canon*, p. 144, relying on T. Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, vol. 1, p. 586.

<sup>70</sup> Johannes Wirsching, *Kirche und Pseudokirche. Konturen der Häresie* (Göttingen, 1990), pp. 79, 92, asserts the priority of the church over against the biblical canon: the church existed before a canon of authoritative Scriptures existed, whereas the canon of Scripture never existed without a church which determined its boundaries; this priority is dissolved in the act of canonization in which the church closed the canon - an act which Wirsching describes as an 'act of repentance'. In other words: the theological priority of the canon must be understood in the historical priority of the church. *Cf.* Hübner, *Biblische Theologie*, pp. 68f.

<sup>71</sup> Particularly emphasized by Campenhausen, *Formation*, pp. 230ff.

<sup>72</sup> For a review of the debate see H. Paulsen, 'Die Bedeutung des Montanismus für die Herausbildung des Kanons', *Vigiliae Christianae* 32 (1978), pp. 19-52.

<sup>73</sup> *Cf.* Metzger, *Canon*, pp. 106-108.

<sup>74</sup> Metzger, *Canon*, p. 286.

list of books which are relevant for special consideration on account of the evidence of tradition, but a concept which implies authority binding the faith and the practice of churches and of individual believers.<sup>75</sup> The following issues are particularly relevant in the discussion of the canon. Again, I can give but sketchy hints regarding the various arguments.

(1) Can the criterion of apostolicity be upheld today? The writer of the Muratorian Fragment excluded the Shepherd of Hermas on the grounds that it is too recent and therefore cannot be counted 'among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the apostles'. Historians of the canon traditionally refer to apostolicity as one of the major criteria which developed during the second century for ascertaining which books should be regarded as authoritative.<sup>76</sup> In the case of the anonymous NT writings (the four gospels, Acts, Hebrews), the early tradition either assumed apostolic authorship (Jesus' disciples Matthew and John as authors of the first and the fourth gospels; Paul as author of Hebrews) or close association with apostles (the Gospel of Mark and Luke-Acts with the apostles Peter and Paul respectively). Some argue that doubts about the inclusion of certain books whose authorship was unknown or ambiguous emerged during the second century when the attempt was made to limit the concept of apostolicity to direct apostolic authorship.<sup>77</sup>

Of more immediate interest is the question whether the presence of pseudonymous books in Scripture invalidates the concept of the canon as a binding norm for truth. Some scholars assert that the decision of the Church Fathers cannot be binding as the applied criterion of apostolic origin is manifestly wrong<sup>78</sup> the non-apostolic origin of Ephesians, Colossians, the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and/or 2 Peter, Jude, Revelation and perhaps other NT texts should be regarded as proven. Some critical scholars conclude that the honest thing to do is to abandon the concept of a closed canon of normative writings.<sup>79</sup>

Conservative scholars who accept the critical consensus with respect to pseudonymous books in the canon but who want to remain faithful to a high view of Scripture point to the common practice of the pseudepigraphal device in antiquity and explain 'canonical pseudonymity' specifically in the context of Jewish practice as the actualization of authoritative (Mosaic, or Davidic, or Isaianic, or Pauline, or Petrine) tradition which came from a recognized spokesman for God, a device which was recognized and which therefore did not deceive.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Theo Donner, 'Some Thoughts on the History of the New Testament Canon', *Themelios* 7 (1982), pp. 23-27, who emphasizes that the real issue is not one of canonical listing but one of authority.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Metzger, *Canon*, pp. 253f.

<sup>77</sup> Donner, 'Thought', p. 27.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. W.G. Kümmel, 'Notwendigkeit und Grenze des neutestamentlichen Kanons' [1964], *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, pp. 62-97: 92.

<sup>79</sup> Thus with emphasis Martin Rist, 'Pseudepigraphy and the Early Christians', *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (FS A.P. Wikgren, ed. D.E. Aune, Leiden, 1972), pp. 75-91: 82f. Scholars who work with the premise that the traditional concept of the canon of Scripture is irrelevant include Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity (Philadelphia, 1982), and Heikki Raisanen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London, 1990).

<sup>80</sup> See notably David C. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon: An Investigation into the Relationship of Authorship and Authority in Jewish and Earliest Christian Tradition* (Tübingen, 1987), *passim*, taken up by J.D.G. Dunn, *The Living Word* (London, 1987), pp. 65-85. Cf. also J.E. Coldingay, *Daniel* (WBC 30, Dallas, 1987 = 1991), pp. xxxixf., regarding Daniel; R.J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC 50, Waco, 1983), p. 161, regarding 2 Peter; A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42, Dallas, 1990), pp. lix-lxxiii, regarding Ephesians.

Others are less confident that this is a feasible solution. If it is correct that pseudonymity was practised for a variety of reasons, some of which were unethical and some unobjectionable,<sup>81</sup> it would seem to be necessary to establish with greater care whether 'canonical pseudonymity' would be an unacceptable 'pious fraud' (*pia fraus*) or not. It is not enough to state that 'almost certainly the final readers were not in fact deceived':<sup>82</sup> if there is no certainty, the inclusion of the texts in the canon rests on uncertain grounds as well. It is too facile simply to state that there is not enough evidence to answer the question whether the recipients of the pseudonymous text (if there were any specific recipients in the first place) would have been deceived:<sup>83</sup> if the possibility remains that the recipients or the later church was in fact deceived, one should consider with more seriousness the possibility that the canonical authority of the writing is a fictive authority.

Meade claims that deception on the level of origins was an accepted device and therefore unobjectionable, whereas deception on the level of truth and continuity was condemned as unethical (constituting forgery), and that the biblical authors distinguished between these two levels and did not operate on the second.<sup>84</sup> This subtle and not naturally intelligible distinction appears to be an (apologetic) construct which has no basis in the sources as such, and an investigation of the semantic range of terms for 'deception' in the NT (*apatao ktl.*, the *pseud-* word group) shows that a concept of 'legitimized deception' cannot be demonstrated for the NT.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately Meade does not discuss the question of the validity of the canon to any satisfactory degree.<sup>86</sup>

Critics who regard Scripture not as divine revelation but as human witness to revelation have no difficulty in retaining pseudonymous writings in the canon: they are a fine example of *sola gratia*. Petr Pokorny asserts, however, that if one regarded the canon as direct revelation from God, one would have to remove them from the canon.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, three further arguments should be noticed. First, the device of pseudonymous writings was not as generally accepted as is often assumed: both in the Greek and in the Roman world there was a marked concern for the authenticity of the classical traditions, with specific criteria such as style, word usage, doctrine and anachronisms being applied in order to prove or disprove authenticity.<sup>88</sup> The interest of the biblical tradition in authentic truth as opposed to deception and usurpative presumption can be seen in texts like Leviticus 10; Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:5-6; Jeremiah 23:16, 21, 25; Acts 5:1-11; Revelation 22:18-19. Second, if the device of pseudonymity does not intend to deceive it is not necessary: if the recipients of

---

<sup>81</sup> Thus Goldingay, *Daniel*, p. xl. For a general discussion of pseudonymity see further Wolfgang Speyer, *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum* (Handbuch der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft 1/2, München, 1971).

<sup>82</sup> Dunn, *Living Word*, p. 84.

<sup>83</sup> Thus Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. lxxii.

<sup>84</sup> Meade, *Pseudonymity*, pp. 120f., 197f.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. E.J. Schnabel, 'Der biblische Kanon und das Phänomen der Pseudonymität', *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 3 (1989), pp. 59-96: 92-95.

<sup>86</sup> Only in an appendix, cf. Meade, *Pseudonymity*, pp. 216-218: 'Addendum: Vergegenwärtigung and the Closure of the Canon'.

<sup>87</sup> P. Pokorny, 'Das theologische Problem der neutestamentlichen Epigraphie', *Evangelische Theologie* 44 (1984), pp. 486-496.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Speyer, *Fälschung*, pp. 16, 88-93, 112-128, 243f.; A. Sint, *Pseudonymität im Altertum. Ihre Formen und ihre Gründe* (Innsbruck, 1960), p. 102.

the pseudonymous writings recognize the device for what it is, the intended effect is lost.<sup>89</sup> Third, the discharge of the author of the early Christian novel Acts of Paul from his office as presbyter as a result of having written this fictitious piece indicates that it is doubtful indeed if a writing known to be pseudonymous would have been included in the canon.<sup>90</sup>

(2) Can the patristic criterion of orthodoxy still be upheld? A basic prerequisite for canonical status in the early church was conformity to the 'rule of faith' (*regula fidei*) or 'rule of truth' (*regula veritatis*). If, however, the evidence of the OT and NT proves that neither Israel nor the early church had a clearly defined doctrinal corpus, *i.e.* if one cannot really distinguish between orthodoxy and heresy,<sup>91</sup> if theological diversity is the foremost characteristic and unity to be found but in an irreducible minimum of doctrine,<sup>92</sup> the 'rule of faith' which was

[p.20]

used as a yardstick for canonical validity is a later ecclesiastical device with no basis in the texts themselves.

If the theological diversity of the NT (and the OT) is not complementary but mutually incompatible, and if there was no consciousness of a fundamental tension between orthodox and heretical, the authority of the NT documents becomes a vague and fluid concept - Scripture canonizes the diversity of Christianity, as James Dunn thinks.<sup>93</sup> It is difficult to see how we should not conclude with Ernst Käsemann that in view of this state of affairs the canon 'legitimizes as such more or less all sects and false teaching'.<sup>94</sup> The canon has no longer an objective validity. As a result, the belief that (the canon of) Scripture *is* the word of God becomes impossible.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Lewis R. Donelson, *Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles* (Tübingen, 1986), pp. 20-22, who argued for the pseudepigraphical character of the Pastoral Epistles (and can therefore not be dismissed as a conservative apologist).

<sup>90</sup> Thus Bruce, *Canon*, p. 261.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (originally published 1934, ET Philadelphia, 1971).

<sup>92</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London, 1977, rev. edn 1990), pp. 374-388, particularly p. 376.

<sup>93</sup> Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, pp. 376-378, 386f., relying on E. Käsemann, 'The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church', *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London, 1964), pp. 48-62, 95-107:103. Dunn quotes twice (*op. cit.*, pp. 122, 376) Käsemann's dictum, contained in a lecture which was held in 1951, that the canon does not constitute the foundation of the unity of the church but, on the contrary, the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions, and deplores the fact that this 'conclusion' 'has not been sufficiently reckoned with' (p. 122). It seems that Dunn has missed Käsemann's explanation of and comment on this thesis 20 years later, when he points out that in the context of the original lecture he was 'tickled' to provoke the audience deliberately while at the same time he indicated that he didn't think it was the 'last word' on the matter; to his amusement everybody pounced upon just this provocative sentence and applauded. Käsemann comments: 'Espieglerie in the theological dialogue at least sets reflection in motion' ('Eulenspiegelei im theologischen Dialog setzt zumindest die Gedanken in Bewegung': E. Käsemann, 'Kritische Analyse', *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, pp. 336-398: 356f.). For a critique of this thesis see Hans-Georg Link, 'Der Kanon in ökumenischer Sicht', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 83-96: 94f. For a trenchant critique of Dunn's *Unity and Diversity* see Don A. Carson, 'Unity and Diversity in the New Testament', in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D.A. Carson, J.D. Woodbridge, Grand Rapids, 1983), pp. 65-95 *passim*.

<sup>94</sup> E. Käsemann, 'Zusammenfassung', in *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, p. 402, quoted (seemingly approvingly) by Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, p. 419 n.9.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Käsemann, 'Canon', p. 105: 'The canon is not the word of God tout simple. It can only become and be the Word of God so long as we do not seek to imprison God within it', quoted by Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, p.419 n. 14.

(3) Can we accept the extant list of OT and NT books as normative canon when various biblical authors rely on the authority of non-canonical texts? It has sometimes been maintained that the fact that NT writers support arguments by appealing to non-biblical texts (e.g. Jude 14-15 referring to the Book of Enoch 1:9) extends the boundaries of the canon. In answering this argument we need to realize that quotation does not constitute the canonicity of the quoted text. This is easily demonstrated by the fact that OT writers could cite secular sources, both of Israelite and non-Israelite origin (e.g. Nu. 21:14ff.; 21:27ff.; Esther 6:1-2), while nobody assumes that quotation from Persian annals elevates these to canonical status.

(4) Can we accept the Hebrew OT as part of the Christian canon if for most NT authors the version of the Septuagint was the determinative text of 'Scripture'?<sup>96</sup> The import of the LXX for the question of the canon has not been adequately researched and one should therefore be wary of quick solutions. A more thorough discussion of this question would need to focus at least on four points.

First, while the NT writers usually quoted according to the LXX, this does not mean that they regarded the LXX as normative but not the Hebrew Bible. The question which we posed has to be answered in the negative only when it can be demonstrated that in the eyes of the apostles the LXX possessed a higher degree of authority than the Hebrew text. As far as I can see such a demonstration has not been forthcoming.

Second, there are instances where the NT writers quote the LXX in a form which has evidently been 'corrected' on the basis of a careful reading (or remembrance) of the Hebrew text (e.g. Rom. 11:35; 1 Cor. 3:19; 2 Cor. 8:15). Even though these cases are relatively rare - and thus cannot be cited in favour of a quick argument for the superior authority of the Hebrew text for the NT authors - they demonstrate that the evidence is complex and that easy answers are not possible.

Third, although the Jews had a high regard for translations of biblical texts - when they can no longer be used they should be hidden (the obligation of *genizah*) and they may be rescued on the Sabbath in case of fire<sup>97</sup> - they still do not 'make the hands unclean'.<sup>98</sup> This indicates that for the later rabbis the authority of a translation was of a lesser kind than the authority of the Hebrew texts.

Fourth, while it is correct to view the Septuagint as the Bible of the Diaspora Jews, it is less evident that the Greek Bible had a high authority status in Palestine. Of course Greek was read and spoken in Judea and Galilee,<sup>99</sup> and Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible were used.<sup>100</sup> As most if not all of the early apostles had their roots in Palestine - including Paul<sup>101</sup> - it needs specific proof that they regarded the Hebrew OT as possessing an authority inferior to the Greek OT.

---

<sup>96</sup> This question is raised by Hans Hübner, 'Vetus Testamentum und Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum. Die Frage nach dem Kanon des Alien Testaments aus neutestamentlicher Sicht', *Jahrbuch für biblisch Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 147-162; *idem*, *Biblische Theologie* (Göttingen, 1990), pp.44-70.

<sup>97</sup> Cf mShab 16, 1; tShabb 13,2; jShab 16,1-2, 15b-c; bShab 115a-b; Sof I, 8.

<sup>98</sup> Johann Maier, *Jüdische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Christentum in der Antike* (Darmstadt, 1982), p. 93.

<sup>99</sup> Cf generally C. Mussies, 'Greek in Palestine and the Diaspora', *The Jewish People in the First Century II* (ed. S. Safrai/M. Stern, Assen, 1976), pp.1040-1064.

<sup>100</sup> Cf the recently published scroll of the Greek Minor Prophets: E. Tov/R.A. Kraft, *The Seiyal Collection* (Vol. 1, DJD 8, Oxford, 1990).

<sup>101</sup> Cf F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter, 1977), pp. 41-52.

A related question is the fact that it is not possible, in view of the present state of research into the history of the Hebrew text of the OT, to speak of a 'fixed' or 'official' or 'stabilized' Hebrew text of the Bible. Harry Orlinski argues that it is therefore not possible 'to take at its face value the rabbinic statement that there were three copies of the Torah on deposit in the Temple'.<sup>102</sup> At the same time we should note, however, that it is equally impossible to speak of a stabilized official Greek text of the Hebrew OT.

(5) Must we agree with the argument that the authority of Scripture is dependent upon the authority of the church? Taking its cue from the famous dictum of Augustine that 'ego vero Evangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas'<sup>103</sup> ('I will not truly believe the Gospel if the catholic Church does not guarantee its authority for me'), an extreme position inferred the superiority of the church *vis-à-vis* the canon of Scripture. In general, however, the Roman Catholic church defined canonization as an act of respectful deference to the primary authority of Scripture: the Holy Scriptures are canonical *in se* (in themselves) because they are inspired by God, and they are canonical *quoad nos* (with regard to us) because they have been received and accepted by the church.<sup>104</sup>

(6) A related question concerns the OT apocrypha. If those books are to be accepted as canonical which the Christian church regarded as such, and if the so-called OT apocrypha were part of the early Christian canon of Holy Scripture, must we not then accept this particular form of its canon? In other words, as the church had a wider (Alexandrian) canon than the Jewish community, should the church today not follow the church's previous decision and accept the apocrypha, as does the Roman Catholic church? These additional books - Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Tobias, Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Additions to Esther and Daniel, Prayer of Manasse - would provide an important historical link between the old and the new covenants. And they would be witnesses to the development of doctrines such as the resurrection, angelology and eschatology.<sup>105</sup>

Before we opt for a correction of the (narrower) 'Protestant canon' too quickly we should note, first, that in order to have an unbroken history of tradition it would not suffice to include the apocrypha only: other early Jewish writings such as the Enoch texts, the so-called Psalms of Solomon, various apocalyptic texts and the writings of the Qumran community belong to the Jewish history of tradition as well, and they were never part of any 'canon'. The early Christians read Scripture as a set of writings which they regarded as revealed word from God and not as an ongoing tradition process.

Second, as has been indicated in the first part of the article (3.iii), there is good evidence to support the conclusion that there never was a 'wider' Jewish canon which included the apocrypha. This means, third, that the 'narrow' Hebrew canon constitutes that form of the

---

<sup>102</sup> Cf H.M. Orlowski, 'The Septuagint and its Hebrew Text', *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (Vol. 2, Cambridge, 1989), pp. 534-562: 561.

<sup>103</sup> Augustine, *Contra Ep. Man.*, cap. 5 (*Migne PL* 42, 176).

<sup>104</sup> Cf H.-J. Kühne, *Schriftautorität und Kirche: Eine kontroverstheologische Studie zur Begründung der Schriftautorität in der neueren katholischen Theologie* (Göttingen, 1980); more recently Traugott Vogel, 'Evangelium - Schrift - Kirche. Eine Problemanzeige zum reformatorischen Schriftprinzip', *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 115 (1990), pp. 654-666: 659f.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. H. Gese, 'Erwägungen zur Einheit der biblischen Theologie', *Vom Sinai zum Zion: Alttestamentliche Beiträge zur biblischen Theologie* (3rd edn, München, 1990), pp. 11-30; *idem*, 'Tradition and Biblical Theology', in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (ed. D.A. Knight, Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 301-326. Gese argues for the inclusion of the apocrypha in the context of his concern for an (uninterrupted) process of tradition history (e.g. 'Einheit', pp. 16f.).

Scriptures which in all probability Jesus and the apostles used. By accepting the same canon as Judaism the church acknowledges its historical origins and its identification with the people of God united in the divine promise to Abraham.<sup>106</sup>

(7) A similar question pertains to the NT apocrypha. Can we accept a 'closed canon' when the boundaries of the NT canon were determined in the context and as the result of historical processes? Should other texts, such as the (Gnostic) Gospel of Thomas be considered for inclusion in the canon?

If, as we indicated above, the church did not 'create' the canon on account of its own authority but received it, the acceptance of the extant canon is not a matter of subscribing to an ecclesiastical tradition which may well be fallible. Further, we must remind ourselves of the fact that the early church fathers clearly distinguished between the apostolic age and the age of the church. For them this was a qualitative distinction. The most important period of canonical development for the NT was evidently the second century. The church received those writings as normative which it experienced as foundational to its existence: 'This foundation is temporally limited.'<sup>107</sup> This holds true even though it is difficult to give precise dates for the limitation to the present canon or to demonstrate a foundational significance for writings such as 2 or 3 John. The main problem here could be simply the lack of information, however.

If it seems correct not to tie the canonical process proper to Jewish or Christian tradition, further questions ensue.

(8) Is the concept of inspiration as basic category for understanding the canonical nature of Scripture still justifiable today? If the canonical process is regarded as a purely historical question<sup>108</sup> and if we don't hold to the view that it was the community of faith which decreed a set of authoritative books (and subsequently submitted its own authority to the authority of the new collection), the quality of inspiration will be the determining factor in the collection of authoritative books. This position brings us back to the historical issues which we referred to above. On the other hand, if we reckon with divine guidance during the canonical process itself, the inspiredness of the books is at least not the sole 'explanation' for their being in the canon.

[p.21]

It seems that the early Fathers, while agreeing that the authoritative writings of the church were inspired, did not regard inspiration as a criterion for canonicity.<sup>109</sup> They spoke of their own inspiration and of the inspiration of their predecessors and their writings. If by inspiration we understand that operation of the Holy Spirit by which the prophets and the apostles were enabled to utter and to write the word of God,<sup>110</sup> this is no definition which could enable the Fathers to distinguish effectively between inspired and uninspired writings. New personal inspiration of the Spirit would be needed in order to be able to make such a distinction.

---

<sup>106</sup> Cf Goldingay, *Approaches*, p. 144.

<sup>107</sup> Dunbar, 'Biblical Canon', p. 358.

<sup>108</sup> As does R.K. Harrison, 'Canon of the OT', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, 1979, p. 591, with regard to the OT.

<sup>109</sup> Cf Metzger, *Canon*, pp. 255-257.

<sup>110</sup> Cf Bruce, *Canon*, p. 264; for a discussion of inspiration in the context of the canon see *ibid.*, pp. 263-268, 280-283.

Some distinguish between inspired and non-inspired canonical literature: in Tannaitic times all inspired books were regarded as canonical, whereas not all 'canonical' books (e.g. Mishnah) are inspired.<sup>111</sup> Here the category of 'non-inspired canonical writings' corresponds with authoritative tradition.

(9) Can we avoid the conclusion that the authority of Scripture is secondary to the authority of the 'rule of faith' which was the basis for the acceptance of the biblical canon as Scripture? It has been argued that the canon *qua* canon cannot be identified with Scripture since the basic marks of canonicity (the *notae canonicitatis*) are controlled by a specific material centre - a 'canon within the canon', the 'rule of faith', or more aptly, 'the gospel'.<sup>112</sup> This argument is problematic for the following reasons.

First, what scholars describe as the normative 'centre of Scripture' depends upon the respective identifications and definitions of the individual scholar.<sup>113</sup> As scholars have not arrived at a critical consensus regarding the unifying centre of Paul's theology, the search for a 'canon within a canon' which has been going on for 200 years has not been successful. The various suggestions sometimes reveal more about the ecclesiastical affiliation or the doctrinal allegiance of the scholar than about the unifying centre of Scripture. The charge of subjectivity has thus repeatedly been levelled against such attempts.<sup>114</sup> Advocates of a 'canon within the canon' admit that there is an important consequence of such a postulate: the material boundaries of what constitutes normative 'Scripture' have to be redefined again and again.<sup>115</sup> Even advocates of a 'canon within the canon' have emphasized that one ought not to make the canon within the canon into the canon.<sup>116</sup>

Second, the search for a 'canon within the canon', which is a relatively new enterprise, destroys the continuity of Christian history, as the early church did not operate with such a construct.<sup>117</sup>

Third, from a tradition-historical point of view the concept of a 'canon within the canon' completely contradicts the nature of the canon as record of God's revelation, being the result of (salvation-) historical processes which unfolded God's truth.<sup>118</sup> The delineation of a 'canon within the canon' detaches traditions from their larger context upon which they are, however, dependent. Thus the result will always be theological onesidedness to a larger or lesser degree.

---

<sup>111</sup> S.Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, 1976), p. 127.

<sup>112</sup> Cf Gerhard Ebeling, *Die Geschichtlichkeit der Kirche und ihrer Verkündigung als theologisches Problem* (Tübingen, 1954), p. 52; more recently Wolfgang Wiefel, 'Die Autorität der Schrift und die Autorität des Evangeliums', *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 115 (1990), pp. 641-654.

<sup>113</sup> See the helpful presentation in Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, pp.122-127.

<sup>114</sup> Cf Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, 1978), pp. 164-170; Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon. An Introduction* (Philadelphia, 1984 = 1985), p. 44.

<sup>115</sup> Cf Kümmel, 'Notwendigkeit und Grenze', p. 97. For his own description of the 'centre of the NT' see *idem*, *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments nach seinen Hauptzeugen* (Göttingen, 1970), pp. 286-295.

<sup>116</sup> I. Lönning, 'Kanon im Kanon': *Zum dogmatischen Grundlagenproblem des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (München, 1972), p. 271; cf Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, p. 129 with n. 123.

<sup>117</sup> K-H. Ohlig, *Die theologische Begründung des neutestamentlichen Kanons in der alten Kirche* (Düsseldorf, 1972), pp. 12f.

<sup>118</sup> Cf H. Gese, 'Das biblische Schriftverständnis', *Zur biblischen Theologie* (2nd edn, Tübingen, 1983), pp. 9-30: 29.

(10) Can we concur with the appeal to divine sovereignty in the history and in the life of the church as the boundaries and the binding nature of the canon cannot be demonstrated unambiguously from historical analysis?<sup>119</sup> If this were the only argument left after having stated the impossibility of validating empirically a (traditional) canonical model, it would be of the *deus ex machina* type. If, on the other hand, the historical processes as we outlined them above have a reasonable degree of reliability, if it is correct to say that the early church abstained from being its own norm by accepting and upholding a norm outside its own *magisterium*, and if we reckon with God working out his purposes in the world and in the church, appeal to the guidance of the Spirit in the canonical process is not an argument of last resort but the expression of confidence in God who loves the world.

## Conclusion

Answers given to the questions related to the canon have consequences for the shape of the hermeneutical and the theological task as well as for the pastoral and the evangelistic efforts of the church. This is not always appreciated enough.

As regards the hermeneutical task, the exegete who regards the 'canon' as a mere historical construct will happily engage in *Sachkritik* in historical and also in theological matters.<sup>120</sup> As with all products of historical processes, so the collection of books which we call 'the canon of Scripture' is the result of human endeavour, and as such is intrinsically fallible and thus open to critique and the need for revision. The exegete who retains the traditional view of the canon as the inspired word of God will attempt to find solutions to historical problems by trying to harmonize discrepancies<sup>121</sup> and by accentuating and researching the fundamental theological unity of Scripture.<sup>122</sup>

As regards the theological task, the scholar or the church leader who regards the concept of the canon as irrelevant has difficulties in establishing authority for faith and practice. If 'inspiration' is but a theological theory as opposed to a process in history supporting and guiding the writing of Scripture and the collection of the canon, the locus of authority shifts away from the text of Scripture, despite all protestations to the contrary. Since historical criticism may destroy the 'theological' value of any particular biblical book, passage or assertion, that book or passage or assertion can readily be omitted when the church considers matters of faith and practice. The new locus of authority is either the history of tradition behind Scripture,<sup>123</sup> various levels of redactional-historical development,<sup>124</sup> the final canonical

---

<sup>119</sup> As does Dunbar, 'The Biblical Canon', pp. 359f.; cf Metzger, *Canon*, p.284.

<sup>120</sup> Cf Peter Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments. Eine Hermeneutik* (2nd edn, Göttingen, 1986), pp. 246-250.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. I.H. Marshall, 'Historical Criticism', *New Testament Interpretation. Essays in Principles and Methods* (ed. I.H. Marshall, Exeter, 1977), pp. 126-138: 132; see also Craig L. Blomberg, 'The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (eds D.A. Carson, J.D. Woodbridge, Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 139-174.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Don A. Carson, 'Unity and Diversity in the New Testament', in *Scripture and Truth* (eds D.A. Carson, J.D. Woodbridge, Grand Rapids, 1983), pp. 65-95; cf also Ulrich Wilckens, 'Das historisch ausgelegte Neue Testament als Kanon der Heiligen Schrift', in *Wissenschaft und Kirche* (FS E. Lohse, eds K. Aland, S. Meurer, Bielefeld, 1989), pp. 13-28: 27f.

<sup>123</sup> See the approach of Hartmut Gese; cf. H. Gese, 'Erwagungen zur Einheit der biblischen Theologie', *Vom Sinai zum Zion* (Bevlh 64, 2nd edn, München, 1984), pp. 11-30; and more recently *idem*, 'Hermeneutische

context,<sup>125</sup> ecclesiastical tradition,<sup>126</sup> the experience of the community of faith,<sup>127</sup> or, more elusive, the hermeneutical enterprise with its never-ending effort to ascertain the material centre of Scripture as gospel.<sup>128</sup> These new loci of authority all depend, in the final analysis, on the subjectivity of the individual or the ecclesiastical-corporate interpreter - on his ability to reconstruct the 'true facts' of tradition history, on his inclination to retain venerated views and habits, on his disposition to realize the working of God or on his talent to relate his method(s) to the text.

As regards the pastoral and the evangelistic tasks, the apparent impossibility to communicate a dialectical assessment of the 'canon' as being historically dubious and yet ecclesiastically still memorable and, somehow, normative have disastrous consequences. If preachers follow the suggestion of those who discard the canon altogether, they will regard the Didache or 1 Clement, or a sermon of Martin Luther or John Wesley, as just as relevant for the church as the Epistle to the Ephesians or 1 Peter.<sup>129</sup> Preachers who do not have the time to wade through extended tradition-historical arguments or follow redaction-critical trajectories presented in commentaries, monographs and essays have to rely on the 'truth' of the exegetical consensus or on the specific theological outlook adopted during their student days. And since 'truth' as objective and therefore normative reality has become a rather problematic philosophical concept, they present the standard credal formulations without inner conviction. Or they look for 'power' in movements which promise to have the key to spiritual effectiveness. Or they look for relevance in social-political<sup>130</sup> or in psychological propositions.<sup>131</sup> The Christian audience is made to feel insecure, and from time to time even non-Christian critics deplore the fact that the church at large has no distinctive message to offer as its representatives and its

---

Grundsätze der Exegese biblischer Texte', *Standort und Bedeutung der Hermeneutik in der gegenwertigen Theologie* (eds A.H.J. Gunneweg, H. Schröer, Bonn, 1986), pp. 43-62.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. James D.G. Dunn, 'Levels of Canonical Authority' [1982], *The Living Word*, pp. 141-174.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1977); more recently *idem*, 'Biblische Theologie und christlicher Kanon', *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 3 (1988), pp. 13-28.

<sup>126</sup> Seldom defended theologically but essentially the practice in reality. I don't know of a church which has either revised her creeds regarding the (undifferentiated) authority of Scripture for faith and practice, or which has revised (some would say 'reformed', cf Barr, *Holy Scripture*, p. 74) the canon of Scripture by eliminating 'patently wrong', 'clearly mistaken' or 'disastrous' views and statements. Suggestions like that of Wolfgang Schenk who demands the 'de-canonization' of the Pastoral Epistles as 'TritoPaulines' (W. Schenk, 'Die Briefe an Timotheus I und II und an Titus (Pastoralbriefe) in der neueren Forschung (1945-1985)', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 11/25.4 (1987), pp. 3404-3438: 3428 with note 93) are not being discussed seriously. See further the similarly critical assessment of the canonical process by R.B. Lauren, 'Tradition and Canon', in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament* (ed. D.A. Knight, Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 261-274, and D.A. Knight, 'Revelation through Tradition', *op. cit.*, pp.143-180.

<sup>127</sup> Cf Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture. Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia, 1980), p. 159: 'It is the experience of the community of faith with the Bible which gives the basis for the confession of the authority of that Bible'. Similarly James D.G. Dunn, 'The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture' [1982], *The Living Word*, p. 102: 'The authority of Scripture is ... a power which grasps the hearer, so that conscience, mind and will cry out, "This is the word of God"'.  
<sup>128</sup> Cf Udo Schnelle, 'Sachgemasse Schriftauslegung', *Novum Testamentum* 30 (1988), pp. 115-131.

<sup>129</sup> Thus Willi Marxsen, 'Das Problem des neutestamentlichen Kanons aus der Sicht des Exegeten' [1960], *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, pp. 233-246: 246; and in a similar vein more recently James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, p. 386.

<sup>130</sup> See N.K. Gottwald (ed), *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Maryknoll, 1983), and the numerous studies on liberation theology, contextual theologies and feminist theology.

<sup>131</sup> In Germany most efficiently the now suspended Roman Catholic priest Eugen Drewermann; among his numerous bulky works see particularly *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese* (2 vols, 5th/3rd edn, Olten/Freiburg, 1988/1987). For an incisive critique see C. Lohfink, R. Pesch, *Tiefenpsychologie und keine Exegese. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Eugen Drewermann* (Stuttgart, 1987).

official pronouncements sound just like the political commentators and the feuilletonists in the media.

If, on the other hand, the prophetic and apostolic canon of Scripture is the revealed word of God and truthful and trustworthy in all that it intends to assert, whether pertaining to faith or to fact,<sup>132</sup> independent of human and indeed ecclesiastical convictions, the church and its members can rest assured that they have a dependable foundation for the proclamation of the gospel.

The lack of precise answers for many specific questions, the undeniable human element in the history of the canon, and the time factor in the process of canonization all show the human side of the Bible. The canon of Scripture is not a book which fell from heaven. The canonical process and our knowledge of it reflect the very nature of Scripture. As Scripture is both a human record of Israel's and the apostles' experience in history and the divinely inspired revelation of God's will, so the canon of Scripture is the outcome of human appreciation and evaluation of foundational documents and at the same time the result of God's sovereign will.

---

© Eckhard J. Schnabel 1995. Reproduced by permission.

Converted to PDF by Robert I Bradshaw, September 2004.

e-mail: [rob@biblicalstudies.org.uk](mailto:rob@biblicalstudies.org.uk)

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

---

---

<sup>132</sup> Cf R.T. France, 'Evangelical Disagreements About the Bible', *Churchman* 96 (1982), pp. 226-240: 233.