

## **“THE CANON OF ISRAEL'S SCRIPTURES”**

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Devotion to the Torah was clearly the unifying force of Judaism, yet within this community was great richness and diversity. Studies of the Qumran community show that "the tree whose trunk was the Old Testament had then many branches which later were lopped off or withered away."<sup>39</sup> This occurred during the terrible ordeals of Judaism in the Roman period, especially the smashing blow struck against Jewish nationalism by the war of 66-70 C.E., when the Temple was destroyed and Jews were scattered or reduced to an insignificant remnant in Palestine. The Sadducees, whose religion was inseparably bound to the Temple, were shorn of their *raison d'être* by this catastrophe. Many of the covenanters of Qumran perished in the conflict, and their community dwellings were destroyed. Only the Pharisees, with their flexible interpretation of the written Torah and their support of synagogue worship, were able to survive and place their stamp on subsequent Judaism.

The crisis of Judaism resulting from the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the second Temple raised in a new way the question of the identity of the people Israel. As our study makes clear, this question had persisted since the formation of the community out of the historical oblivion of slavery in Egypt. In times of social change the question became inescapable; indeed, much of the prophetic message should be understood as response in various theological accents to new situations. In times of political catastrophe, especially the first fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. and the uprooting of many of the people from their homeland, the "identity crisis" was met by priests who demonstrated the deep continuity of the divine purpose, by prophets who announced the "new thing" (Isa. 43:19) that God was about to perform, and by sages who perceived the congruity between Wisdom and Torah.

Our study has also shown that these crises, which called into question both the identity and vocation of Israel and the identity and faithfulness of God, were not faced in a vacuum. The present was understood by appealing to, and reinterpreting, the heritage received from the past. God spoke to the people "in many and various ways" (Heb. 1:1) as inspired spokespersons kept alive and contemporized the sacred tradition, whether in oral or written form, or both.

The new crisis that came upon Judaism in the centuries just before and after the dawn of the Common Era ("A.D." years) provided great impetus for the "stabilization" and "fixation" of the whole tradition. The loss of Judaism's vital center—the Temple in the Holy Land posed the threat that the tradition would be distorted or weakened by various cultural influences and that the scattered Jews would lose their sense of identity and vocation. The result was an increasing concern for "scripture" (what is written) and "canon" (the writings that are normative for Faith and practice).

At one time, great emphasis was placed on the rabbinical discussions held in an academy established at Jabneh, or Jamnia (the name used in Christian circles), on the coast of Palestine. Founded by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, who had escaped from Jerusalem during the bitter siege of the city; the academy attracted some of the ablest and most learned Jewish leaders, making Jamnia an important center of Pharisaic Judaism. Special attention was focused on the "Council of Jamnia" held about 90 C.E. Scholars increasingly recognize, however, that the question of "canonicity" was not decided in conciliar debate in a fashion analogous to early Christian councils that dealt with theological and christological matters (such as Nicea). One Jewish scholar warns against the notion that Jamnia was a kind of modern convention during which rabbis debated an agenda and reached binding decisions by vote. "Canon," he says, "was a matter of the evolution of opinions which converged over a

period of decades, 90 being a likely terminal date, but far from a definite one."<sup>43</sup>

Undoubtedly, rabbinical discussions at Jamnia were influential, but not decisive. Long before this, the main contours of the scriptural "canon" were being determined. The Torah (Pentateuch) was promulgated by Ezra as the authoritative basis of the post-exilic covenant community, and from then on it had a unique place in Jewish life. Moreover, shortly after 200 B.C.E. (the "B.C." years) the collection known as the Prophets (Former and Latter) was regarded as sacred scripture—for instance, in the prologue to Ecclesiasticus (about 130 B.C.E.). By the time of the New Testament, "the Law and the Prophets" was a standing expression for Jewish scripture (Matt, 22:40; Luke 24:27). In addition, a third collection of miscellaneous literature, called the Writings (Hagiographa), was gradually taking shape. One of these books, the Psalms, gained a place of scriptural importance owing to the use of the psalms in worship (see Luke 24:44). Thus well before Jamnia, the community of faith was registering its verdict on the authority of certain books by making them central in its life and worship.

There was considerable fluidity in the boundaries of Jewish scripture, especially beyond the authoritative nucleus of the Torah. Striking evidence of this fluidity has come from the library of the Essene community at Qumran, founded during the period of the Maccabeans. This archive contained not only "biblical" books, such as the famous Isaiah manuscript, and numerous commentaries on biblical books, such as Psalms, Hosea, Habakkuk, and Nahum, but also writings used by the Essene community itself as well as a rich variety of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings, some of which were scarcely known before.<sup>44</sup> This diversity has prompted one scholar to observe that "pluralism is a part of responsible perception of the concept of canon."<sup>45</sup>

Further evidence of fluidity in the understanding of "scripture" appears in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Septuagint) produced by Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria. At the basic level, the student confronts the problem of trying to establish the scriptural text itself (so-called *text criticism*). The many differences between the received Hebrew text and the Greek version have been explained in various ways. According to one hypothesis, there were several textual traditions in the period of biblical Judaism:

- A. Egyptian text that was the basis of the Greek Septuagint
- B. Palestinian text that included the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch
- C. Babylonian text that eventually was adopted as the standard (Masoretic) text, still studied by students of biblical Hebrew

According to another view, there was a "central stream" of textual tradition, with variant rivulets running alongside.<sup>46</sup> further, the Greek translation indicates that there was flexibility in regard to the number of books considered as scripture. The Egyptian Jews translated a larger number of books than we find in the received Hebrew Bible. The differing scriptural usage of Jews in Palestine and Jews in Alexandria points to an uncertainty about the extent of the sacred writings. Thus, not surprisingly, theologians of the early Christian church were not clear about the extent of the Old Testament. Jerome (about 342-419 C.E.), the great scholar who translated the Latin Vulgate, was inclined to follow the "Babylonian" tradition and to relegate the "extra" writings found in the Greek Septuagint to a secondary place. But his contemporary Augustine (354-430 C.E.) insisted that the catalog of Old Testament writings also included books found in the Septuagint that had been established in Christian church usage. Uncertainty about the extent of the so-called "Old Testament" continued in the Christian community for a long time.<sup>47</sup>

**In the Jewish community, however, the canonical issue was more or less settled by around 100 C.E., with the academy of Jamnia providing the leadership in rabbinical discussions. To be sure, the rabbinical**

opinions expressed were "unofficial," that is, not "conciliar"; but in the light of further discussion and the needs of the Jewish community, they were accepted as valid.<sup>48</sup> The major uncertainty was over which books belonged to the Writings. There was no question about the authority of the Torah, and by this time there was general agreement on the number of books belonging in the category of Prophets. But since a basic criterion was harmony with the scriptural Torah, the book of Esther posed difficulties—besides its seemingly secular character, it explained a festival (Purim) for which there is no explicit provision in the Torah. Even the book of Ezekiel was questioned by some rabbis, for at points it seems to conflict with prescriptions of the Torah (compare Ezek. 46:6 with Num. 28:11). According to the Talmud, one rabbi filled three hundred jars of oil and literally "burned the midnight oil" until he solved the problems. The Pharisaic freedom of interpretation, based on the oral law, meant that the principle of harmony with the scriptural Torah, could be applied flexibly.

Another rabbinical principle was a doctrine of prophetic inspiration that assumed the cessation of prophecy in the postexilic period, just after the time of Ezra. According to this view, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were the last of the prophets, for with their death "the Holy Spirit departed from Israel." Therefore, only writings coming from the period before the cessation of prophetic inspiration were regarded as having religious authority. This criterion might have been adopted because the rabbis believed that the more recent prophetic (apocalyptic) movement, closely associated with the Maccabean revolt and the war of 66-70 C.E., had finally been proved false by Palestine's tragic history. In any case, it automatically excluded books known to have arisen in the Hellenistic period, like "The Wisdom of Ben Sira" or 1-2 Maccabees. The rabbis had serious questions about the "Song of Songs" and Ecclesiastes, but these books were admitted on the supposition that Solomon had written them. Finally, the rabbis rejected books written in Greek, since that language was not employed in the period of prophetic inspiration. On this basis, writings like "The Wisdom of Solomon" were rejected, even though they had been published under the name of great figures of Israel's tradition.

These criteria might seem arbitrary. It would certainly not have detracted from Jewish scripture if for instance, some reason had been found to include "The Wisdom of Ben Sira" or some of the psalms from the Qumran community. Keep in mind, however, that the question of the authority of most of the writings now found in the Hebrew Bible had been answered before the closure of the canon, especially in the worship practice of the community. Those writings that were preserved and used devotionally spoke authoritatively to the community of faith.

### ISRAEL'S PILGRIMAGE

Pausing to survey the ground we have covered, one point stands out clearly: The Old Testament represents the memories and interpretations of the historical experiences of Israel, from the formation of the community to the time of its great test of faith in the Maccabean period. It is Israel's life story—a story that cannot be told adequately apart from the conviction that God had entered into covenant relationship with a people, separated them from the nations for a special responsibility, and commissioned them with the task of being servants of, and witnesses to, the One who is Creator of the Universe and Ruler of human history. Remembering its sacred past and preserving its traditions, the "pilgrim people" were able to live in the present with their face set toward the future .... The scriptures of Israel end as an unfinished story. According to the Jewish community, Israel's pilgrimage leads through the Jewish Bible (Torah, Prophets, Writings) to the Talmud and a continued

life of messianic hope.

According to the early Christian community, the pilgrimage of the people of God leads through the Old Testament to Jesus Christ, who came not to destroy but to fulfill the Torah and the Prophets. Both communities, however, read essentially the same Bible and are bound together inseparably in witnessing to the God who is Creator of the cosmos and Ruler of history.

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<sup>39</sup>Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York Viking Press, 1955), p. 345.

[Notes 40, 41, and 42 omitted; they referred to an inserted, supplementary block, here eliminated.]

<sup>43</sup>Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures* [62], p. 14, footnote 6. See also Jack P. Lewis, "What Do We Mean by Jabneh?" in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32 (1964), 125-32.

<sup>44</sup>See Frank M. Cross, Jr., *The Ancient Library of Qumran*, [703], pp. 30-47. Geza Vermes has translated the Dead Sea Scrolls in one volume, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 5th ed.; (New York: Penguin, 1997). For a clear, concise overview of their significance, see James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>45</sup>A. Sanders, *Canon and Community* [120], p. 15.

<sup>46</sup>For further discussion, see Emmanuel Tov, *Text Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1992).

<sup>47</sup>The issue came to the fore in the sixteenth century C.E. The Protestant Reformers, insisting on a return to the Bible, called for the elimination of the extra books not found in the Hebrew Bible. The disputed writings were put in a separate section, "Apocrypha," either at the end of the Old Testament or of the entire Bible, with the note that they deserved to be read but were not equal with canonical books. The Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1545-1563 C.E.) officially adopted a larger canon, which included both protocanonical and deuterocanonical books. The acceptance of deuterocanonical books was based on long use of these books in Christian liturgy.

<sup>48</sup>See Alfred C. Sundberg, Jr., *The Old Testament of the Early Church* [711], chap. 8.