

This analysis emerged from a discussion among myself, Terry Kenney, and Daniel Lockwood, all students at DTS. They are not responsible for this write-up.

A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE CANON

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A biblical theology presupposes a Bible. Evangelical Christianity has long assumed that the traditional Old and New Testaments are both a necessary and sufficient revelation of God's to the church of all ages. The completeness of the OT canon and its identity with that traditionally accepted may be proved by statements of the Lord Jesus referring to the Jewish canon by recognizable technical terms and allusions (Luke 24:44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51), and by New Testament citations of particular texts from the Old Testament. But the validation of the NT books has been a debated question. Are they all necessary? That is, are any of them extraneous? And, are they sufficient? That is, could other writings, whether contemporary with the NT books or later, properly lay claim to a place in the canon?

The question has often been answered historically, studying the writings of the early church to determine how they admitted books to canonical status. Compare for instance E.F. Harrison, Introduction to the New Testament, pp. 103-12. The weakness of this approach lies in our inability to guarantee the propriety of the standards used by the early church! Ideally, we must seek a standard from Scripture itself to have any guarantee that the standard itself is divinely endorsed. Such a standard will not necessarily appeal to someone who is not committed to a high view of Scripture. But it will demonstrate to the biblicalist what view of the canon he must hold to be consistent with his devotion to Scripture.

We begin to develop such a theological, rather than historical, theory of the canon by examining in detail the revelatory events which made up the New Testament. We will distinguish three such events.

First, the Son of God became incarnate. The importance of Jesus Christ as the central revelation of God to man cannot be over-emphasized. He is the Word of God (John 1:1-18), the subject of all Old Testament revelation (Luke 24:27), God's chosen way to speak to men in these days (Heb. 1:2). Such an event must supersede all previous revelation. It was, in the truest sense of the word, a Crisis in the total history of God's revelation to man.

Second, this Crisis led to the development of a Corpus of teaching. Jesus indeed promised His disciples that by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, they would come into possession of "all things" (John 14:26), "all things said unto you" (Ibid.), "all truth" (John 16:13). Whether or not the scope of these promises extends to generations beyond the apostles, it at least does extend to them. They were made the recipients, by inspiration, of a body of material concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ that was in some sense complete (cf. the frequent use of "all" in the promises).

Not only was this Corpus complete, but it was also sufficient for Christian growth and maturity. Thus the New Testament writers view the responsibility of the Christian minister as merely passing on the tradition which he has received (II Tim. 2:2). It is all the believer needs for life and godliness (II Pet. 1:2), to abide in Christ (I John 2:24), to become mature (teleios) in Christ (Col. 1:28).

As time passed, parts of this Corpus were committed to writing, forming the New Testament as we know it. But of course the entire Corpus could not be thus preserved, as John 21:25 suggests.

The Old Testament may be analyzed as part of a similar multi-faceted revelation of Crisis, Corpus, and Book. The Book is of course

the OT canon, which by Christ's endorsement was recognized as a completely adequate representation of the OT Corpus. That larger body included the books of writing prophets not preserved (Shemaiah and Iddo, cf. II Chron. 12:15), as well as prophecies uttered by non-writing prophets, such as Nathan, but not recorded. Certainly Moses said far more to the people of Israel than is recorded in the Torah.

Is there a crisis which gave rise to the OT in a way similar to that in which the Incarnation gave rise to the NT? One immediately thinks of the Theophanies, particularly those to Moses (Exod. 3, 19) which led to the giving of Torah. God's revelatory process in the Old Testament, as in the New, was an outgrowth of a meeting with Him. The prophets were significant as preachers of Torah, calling Israel back to the faith which they had left. And that faith, delivered on Sinai, began with the Crisis of a personal revelation of God. Indeed, until the time of Moses all of God's revelation seems to have come to men through Himself directly.

It is significant that the OT Book points the OT believer toward the Crisis which forms the focal point of the NT Corpus and Book. The central message of the Old Testament was the coming of Messiah. Though Hebrew believers may not have anticipated new written revelation at that time, they did expect a change in their knowledge and comprehension of God (Jer. 31:31-34). Until that time, all revelation had to demonstrate its unity with the Corpus which arose after the Crisis of Sinai (Deut. 12).

We should note that although the NT Corpus was guaranteed completeness within the first or apostolic generation (John 14, 16), the OT corpus had no such guarantee of completeness. Thus it is not surprising that while the church has been satisfied with writings produced within one hundred years of the Crisis, Israel was the recipient of revelation over a thousand year period (1400-400 B.C.).

Is there any evidence that a future triad of Crisis, Corpus, and Book is in the offing, following the pattern of the Old And New Testaments? The New Testament does look forward to the second coming of Jesus Christ in much the same way as the Old Testament did to the Incarnation. And it describes a change in the believer's comprehension of spiritual truth at that time (I Cor. 13:12, I John 3:2). Thus some sort of Corpus will accompany that Crisis. Whether or not a Book will issue, containing the essential substance of that Corpus, is of course a moot point, but not at all impossible.

Thus we have shown that God's revelatory program revolves around three great crises, all being some sort of personal revelation of Himself. These are the Old Testament theophanies (particularly those on Sinai from which the Torah issued), the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and His future advent. As might be expected, each of these yields a corpus of revelation which could not, in the nature of the case, be fully appreciated any earlier than the crisis. In the case of the two corpuses which have already been formed, a portion of each corpus has been preserved in book form. Each book in turn points forward to the next Crisis, alerting the believer to the next turn in God's revelatory program.

Some conclusions may be formulated immediately.

1. Any proposition claiming to be revelatory must be related to the corpus issuing from one of the historical crises. Revelations are not to be expected in this age pertaining to current events, rather than to the crises, for the revelatory crisis predicted by the NT is the Second Coming, and not something antecedent to it.

2. We should expect no revelations in our age from the OT corpus or the corpus of the second coming. For Christ treats the OT Book as

a complete and adequate summary of the OT Corpus. Compare Mt. 15:1-9, and parallels, for Christ's criticism of those who allowed tradition, ostensibly having its origin in the OT extra-Book Corpus, to be on a par with or superior in authority to the OT Book. And if the corpuses of both Old and New Testament are any indication, the Corpus of the second coming will be accessible only after the second coming.

Thus any claimant to revelation in the current age must claim to reveal something contained in the NT Corpus. At the same time, for this "new" revelation to be more than trivial, it must say something vital to Christian life and experience which is not contained in the NT Book.

One reflection of this attitude, which essentially makes the received NT insufficient for Christian life and practice, is the RCC approach to tradition. This approach suggests that the needed part of the NT Corpus which was not preserved graphically was preserved orally, and is accessible today through the appropriate recipient of that tradition. But the Lord's criticism of tradition in Matt. 15:1-9 seems to rule out any consideration of tradition as of equal status with written canon.

If the needed but missing Corpus is not preserved in tradition, then the church has, since the loss of that material, been either deficient in some area, or else non-existent. The lack could then be made up by direct revelation from God to someone in our present age, or by the discovery of a "lost" book of the NT.

Has the church been deficient in doctrine needed for faith and practice for any period of time since the first century? John 17:23, in the Lord's prayer for those who will believe on Him through the witness of the apostles, expresses His purpose in giving them His glory "that they may be perfected into one." This perfection (teleiow) and unity

anticipates Eph. 4:13-14, which associates maturity (andrapoleosion), and unity, with the knowledge of the Son of God, and a stability against being tossed about by variants of doctrine. In other words, the Lord's prayer for His church assures us that the church has never been and will never be without a sufficient portion of the NT Corpus to provide for spiritual maturity.

Certainly this teaches as well that the church has never been out of existence for a period of time, as for instance the Mormons would propose. Indeed, Christ explicitly stated that the gates of Hades would not prevail against His church. (Matt. 16:18)

In conclusion, if any immediate prophecy is to take place today, it must come from the NT Corpus portions not included within the NT Book. But since this would imply the unscriptural assumption that the church has been for a time either deficient in doctrine or completely dead, we must conclude that the NT authors, in the works that we know, did preserve "all things necessary for life and godliness" (II Pet. 1:2).

How do we know that the books which we have are necessary as well as sufficient? Might not one or two of them be extraneous? Arising as they did as the written expression of a widely taught NT Corpus, they were accepted or rejected as Scripture by the early church on the basis of how well they represented that Corpus. Since the Corpus (in the form of the total teaching of the apostles) is no longer accessible to us, we are in no position to challenge the selection made by the early Church.