

# APPENDICES

The two appendices are somewhat more technical in nature. Appendix A is on the canon, the Christ, and the historical Jesus, in which we consider how the authority of the Bible is related to the authority of Jesus. I argue that Jesus the Christ must serve as our “canonical principle,” by which we decide which parts of the Bible are authoritative for us today.

In Appendix B I examine some of the current scholarly opinions about the nature of the resurrection, weighing carefully the arguments of those who I call the “minimalists,” who maintain that nothing extraordinary happened. How persuasive is their reasoning?

## Appendix A: The Canon, the Christ and the Historical Jesus

Since early in the Church's history the Old and New Testament have been recognized as its "canon", as authoritative over all other writings, beliefs and opinions. But in recent decades there has been an increasing tendency to try to go behind this, to reconstruct the traditions and writings as they existed before they were incorporated into the Bible in their present form. This has been encouraged by our knowledge of the different sources of the Bible, by the development of form criticism and its insights and speculations into the early stages of the formation of the Gospels, by questions about the "original" intent of passages before they were set in their present literary context, by questions of "what really happened", and by the attempt to unravel diverse strands of tradition in both Old and New Testaments. This has proceeded to such an extent that it too often seems as if the only alternative to a Scripture that is inerrant, and so not subject to this sort of analytic study, is a Scripture that is so analyzed and picked apart that there is no Scripture left.

Of late a movement has begun to correct this situation. Foremost in this campaign to consider the Scriptures as subject to modern critical analysis but at the same time to treat them *as canon* is Brevard Childs, professor of Old Testament at Yale. In fact he so strongly feels the need to press his point that he has crossed over into the field of New Testament studies to wage his campaign there as well.<sup>1</sup> And indeed Childs has performed a valuable and needed service in reminding us that what we have now is not just individual passages, nor is it just the "books" which as larger units give the individual pieces a place in the larger narrative. What we have now is canon, a body of work recognized as authoritative Scripture in its present complete form. This is a much

---

<sup>1</sup>See Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Fortress Press, 1984), and *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (1985), and *Introduction to the Old Testament as Canon* (1979). (I have one quibble: Childs' writings are not as accessible as one might wish to the non-specialist, a problem which I know he can overcome from my own experience with one of his lecture courses.)

needed corrective to those who have adopted the historical/critical method not only as a tool but also as their principle of interpretation (or “hermeneutic principle”, in theological jargon). That is, some scholars have interpreted passages of the Scripture as we have it by speculating about their origin in oral tradition or by separating them into various earlier strands. But we cannot interpret a present literary passage by showing what it (perhaps) once was. Nor can we take an individual verse or story or “pericope” in isolation. The canon gives these a place in the whole, often balancing them with other elements. And the canon as we have it does not consist of separate historical strands but of the whole of the Bible as it now stands.

But as necessary and salutary as this movement is, this “canonical approach” in turn occasions some very basic questions itself. Childs and the others who promote this approach begin by assuming the fact of the canon. The Church has indeed recognized this particular body of writings as sacred and authoritative, not to be added to or subtracted from or tinkered with. And many people have had this recognition of the Bible’s sacred authority confirmed when their faith was confirmed in their lives.

But we can no longer take this attitude for granted. Even many of those within the faith no longer recognize the whole Bible as authoritative (and even those inerrantists who claim to do this do not do it in fact). It is no longer sufficient to say that because the Church of eighteen or nineteen centuries ago decided that these writings are canon, therefore they are authoritative for us today. We must have more of a reason than this.

This may be due in part to our own democratic traditions. But other factors also give rise to our questioning. Those who established the canon had a common sense different from ours and viewed the Scriptures in a different way. We no longer recognize the apostolic authorship of the Gospels or believe that Moses wrote the Pentateuch; we no longer maintain the doctrine of inerrancy. We are much more aware of the differences among the Gospels, of the influence of editors and the early Church, of the various traditions and literary relationships. So it seems all the more difficult to accept the Bible as authoritative just because somebody—tradition or the early Church—says so, when in fact these somebodies did not know as much about the Bible’s history and background and diverse elements as we do today.

So we recognize the importance of the canonical approach of Childs and others, with its question of “since this is canon, how do we go about interpreting it?” But before this question can even be addressed we have to ask first whether we do in fact accept the Bible as authoritative canon; and if so, why; and if so, do we accept the whole or parts of it; and if parts of it, which parts, and why?

### Why the Bible?

In Chapter 13 we explored the question of “Why Jesus of Nazareth?” We concluded that there are several reasons that could be used to support an argument for choosing Jesus as our compass, for granting him a sacred role as meaning-giver: first, we are not aware of any especially good alternatives; second, his ability to serve in this role has been confirmed in many faithful lives; and third, in choosing him we align ourselves with a compass which is in the public domain, and as such our interpretation is subject to the correction of tradition and public debate. The importance of this in avoiding proprietary religions and perverse, demonic, idiosyncratic interpretations should not be underestimated.

We need also to remember, however, that while these three reasons demonstrate that it makes sense to choose Jesus as our compass, in the final analysis this choice is not one that is reasoned out. It is a question of meaning and value, a choice that each of us must make for ourselves, one that we can make only if we find in Jesus of Nazareth a key to value and to truth that is confirmed in our lives.

The question of “Why the Bible?” can be answered in very much the same way. We can adduce arguments as to why it makes sense to recognize the authority of the Bible—many others have accepted its authority; this approach can give direction to our lives; etc.—but it is ultimately a question of meaning and value. The difficult problem here is in the relationship between choosing Jesus as our focus and recognizing the authority of the Bible. Many people do not even recognize this as a problem: surely if we grant the sacred authority of meaning-giver to Jesus then we must also recognize the authority of the book which tells his story!

But the message of Jesus does *not* agree with all the parts of the Bible, particularly with some of the harsh understandings of God expressed in the Old Testament and implicit in some of its laws. And as we have seen, even in the New Testament there are sayings attributed to Jesus which very probably do not originate with him and there are interpretations of him which are not consistent with what he taught. We have to choose: is our primary authority the Bible? Or is it Jesus of Nazareth? (Those who think they treat the two as one unified authority generally do this by reinterpreting all contradictory passages to fit with their understanding of Jesus. But since not all parts of the Bible fit with Jesus’ message as they stand, this involves a definite subordination of some passages of Scripture. Jesus Christ is in fact the primary authority for these people.)

So the choice is either to recognize the Bible as primary authority, and Jesus of Nazareth as just one aspect of it along with Moses and the prophets and the many Old Testament laws not specifically superceded in the New, or to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as primary authority. We have repeatedly made the point that to be Christian means to choose

Jesus of Nazareth as our compass, our focus. His life and message must be our primary sacred authority.

And if Jesus of Nazareth is the primary authority, the epitome of the sacred for us, then the sacredness of the Bible (as we point out in Chapters 10 and 19) is derivative from the sacredness of Jesus in his role as the Christ. What does this mean for the question of canonicity, that is, the Bible's status as canon?

The fact that its sacredness is derivative constitutes no argument against the Scripture as canon. Literature is always derivative, is always distinct from the reality to which it points. The Gospels were recognized as canonical in the first place because they witnessed to something else: to Jesus the Christ. So the Scriptures have a recognized sacred authority, a canonicity, based on their close association with the sacredness of the Christ. So when we acknowledge that as Christians we recognize primary authority in the Christ, this implies a derivative sacredness in the Bible that makes it our most sacred literature, and thus our canon. But at the same time this recognition of Jesus the Christ as our primary authority sets a limit to the authority of Scripture that raises questions about canonicity. Since it is the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth that are our compass, that by their presence in the Gospels and their relationship to the rest of Scripture give sacredness and canonicity to the Bible for us—what does this mean for those passages which are in conflict with Jesus' teachings and those which are merely irrelevant to his message and apparently unrelated?

### **Jesus as the Christ: Hermeneutic Principle or Canonical Principle?**

Our first option is to adopt the message of Jesus as our hermeneutic principle—that is, the principle by which we interpret the Scriptures. This is essentially the approach used by those people we mentioned above who see no conflict between the Bible as a whole and Jesus' teachings, except that here we recognize the conflicts and consciously try to interpret them away. Certainly there are places where this must be tempting: the ten plagues visited on Egypt by God because God had hardened Pharaoh's heart, the "holy war" instructions to Joshua to kill all the inhabitants of Jericho and Ai, and other passages that reflect an understanding of God that is certainly not consistent with the God of love taught by Jesus of Nazareth. With a Christocentric hermeneutic we would somehow interpret these passages to render them consistent with Jesus' message, so that they reflect a God of love and not a God of vengeance and retribution.

There are, however, two serious problems to such an approach: First, it is difficult to see how some of these passages could possibly be inter-

preted in a way that is in keeping with Jesus of Nazareth; and second, even if this could be done, the process would necessarily do damage to the original intent and to the established scriptural meaning of these passages. We would be reinterpreting them so radically as to show no respect for their meaning or their context. I for one view this as a dishonest and unacceptable method of interpretation.

If we are to take seriously the fact that the sacredness of the Bible is derived from the sacred function of Jesus as the Christ, and if we cannot use Jesus' message as our hermeneutic principle to interpret everything in the Bible, then our only other option is to use Jesus' message as our canonical principle. We cannot and need not reinterpret everything in the Scriptures to agree with Jesus, which is what would be required if we claimed the Christ as our principle of interpretation. But we can and must use the Christ as our principle of canonicity: not to make everything agree with his message, but to rule as authoritative (canonical) those portions which agree and to rule as unauthoritative (non-canonical) those portions which are inconsistent with his teachings. We do not interpret the ten plagues in a way that enables them to fit with a loving God; instead we say that our belief in a loving God as understood through Jesus the Christ renders the ten plagues without authority for us.

If the canonicity of the Scriptures depends on Jesus' role as compass for us, on the fact that they contain the writings which gave us this compass, then it would follow that only those portions of the Bible that contain, support, cohere to or elaborate on this compass can in fact be granted the authoritative status of canon. Canonicity depends on a positive relationship to the Christ. Therefore those portions of Scripture which are not so related cannot be recognized as canonical. The Bible is not a monolith, and recognizing canonicity in one part does not automatically imbue the rest of it with this status.

We could then say that those parts of the Old Testament which show a primitive misunderstanding of God are just that: primitive misunderstandings that do not have canonical authority for us. But we also might find much of the Old Testament included as canonical. After all, it was the Scripture for Jesus; he grew out of this tradition and saw himself in continuity with the law and the prophets. There is much in these books that constitutes the foundation on which he built: the story of this people's search for understanding of God and the notable calls for justice and righteousness. Other parts of the Old Testament need to be retained as historical and literary background—but this needn't make them canonical.

Of course, the New Testament is not exempt from this same kind of examination. It is doubtful that all the theologizing in Hebrews, the remarks by Paul about women and slaves, or the apocalyptic horrors of Revelation will be found to be consistent with Jesus' message.

Even now I can hear outraged voices protesting that this is profaning the sacred. But it is not. If the principle that makes these writings canon for us—the message of Jesus the Christ—also rules out certain writings which we have considered “Scripture”, this is not to profane the sacred but to uphold it, to defend it. To say that God really did slay the first-born in Egypt and really did need the blood of an innocent victim on the cross before we could be forgiven—in direct contradiction to the teachings of Jesus—*this* would be to profane the sacred.

And in reality, most of us already proclaim a lack of canonicity of certain Biblical passages in the way we treat them. When we confront the ten plagues or the massacre at Jericho or the laws in Leviticus we may find them to be of historical interest. But we do not say that God actually did these or ordered these. We do not treat them as authoritative.

But then what do we do with the Bible? Go at it with scissors? Recognize a reduced portion as canon and put the remainder in a much-enlarged appendix with the Apocrypha? This is the direction in which this reasoning seems to lead us, but the dangers of this are both obvious and overwhelming. We would end up with a fractured canon, with bits and pieces taken out of their Scriptural context, with a different body of canon for each theological point of view, and with those portions of Scripture which we find uncomfortable not only ignored but disposed of altogether.

### The Canon and the Canonical

There is an alternative to this which both recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as our canonical principle and yet also preserves the canon intact. This is to recognize the Bible as it stands, Old and New Testaments, as our canon, but to recognize that only portions of it are in fact canonical.

What does this mean? How can the whole be “canon” but only parts be “canonical”?

The whole of the Bible is “canon” in the traditional sense that it constitutes our sacred Scriptures. It cannot be added to or subtracted from. It is that body of writings which contains the message of Jesus of Nazareth, who fills for us the sacred role of the Christ.

But not all of these Scriptures are “canonical” in the sense of being authoritative for us. The canon carries within it the principle that makes it sacred for us—the meaning-giving testimony of Jesus, which we as Christians recognize as primary authority. Therefore, to be true to this principle within the canon, we must consider as non-canonical (i.e., non-authoritative) those portions of the canon which are not in keeping with it.

In fact we find that this is what we do. Once we have grasped Jesus’ message of God’s love, those Biblical passages about divine plagues or