

What It Means To Be Canonical (or, The Traditional Approach to Scripture)

Early Christianity not only inherited the Sacred Scriptures of Judaism; it also inherited beliefs about Sacred Scripture and ways of relating to it. John Barton, in his “The Significance of a Fixed Canon of the Hebrew Bible” (in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*. Ed. Magne Saebø. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996] 1:67-83.) delineates many of the beliefs and often unspoken assumptions of Jews, Christians, and perhaps others, who have a canon of Scripture. What follows are excerpts from Barton’s essay.

The term “canon” is part of the standard vocabulary of religious discourse in Christianity and, to a considerable extent, in Judaism. It denotes a number of the following ideas about Scripture: *that its limits have been fixed, either by God himself or by competent religious authorities; that all the books within it are divinely inspired, authoritative, and edifying; that the books form a unity among themselves, are mutually consistent or mutually illuminating; that there are no generic differences among the different books; that scriptural books are to be interpreted differently from other books...* [italics mine]

...two different kinds of effect or implication that derive from the existence of a Scripture.

1.1 The first implication has to do with the value or importance of the texts that are being accorded “canonical” or “scriptural” status. Such works are perceived, not as human documents arising out of particular historical circumstances that simply happened to move an author to write in a certain way, but instead as divine oracles, deliberately created through the power of God and intended to provide spiritual nourishment to successive generations of his people. “Scriptural” books contain no error, nothing accidental or casual, nothing irrelevant or meaningless. They are not to be read as any other books are read, but require their own special hermeneutic....

1.2. The second implication is likely to operate only when the canon has begun to be in some sense “closed.” It has in turn two aspects. The first is a sense that the texts in the canon are a unique and uniquely authoritative, compendium of the teachings of the religion to which they belong. Any thoughts or ideas that conflict with what is in this authoritative collection must be false. Secondly, and closely linked with this: all the writings that make up this unique Scripture must be consistent with each other. Since they are not an adventitious but a divinely ordained collection, they must create a harmony among themselves. Important truths may even follow from the way in which they are arranged: the *order* of the books, or their grouping into sections, may be seen as significant....

2.1. The recognition that certain books were “Scripture” — not necessarily as part of an exclusively defined “canon,” but at least as belonging to a corpus of writing that ought to be revered — had as one consequence an expectation of meaningfulness and significance. By the end of the Second Temple period, it was not a serious option to read one of the “core” holy books of Judaism as meaningless or incoherent, nor to think of its meaning as trivial or ephemeral. In both Jewish and early Christian interpreters we find an insistence that Scripture can contain no errors, and that any apparent error or self-contradiction must be a pointer to a more profound meaning....

The meaningfulness of the sacred texts did not reside only in the whole sense of large passages, but also in minute details of the verbal form. Pressing precise details of wording in the quest for meaning is, in many cultures, a mark of the interpretation of “official” or authoritative texts over against more everyday writings. Sacred and legal texts are the two sorts of text commonly subjected to such interpretation. Paul famously presses the wording of Gen. 12:7 in Gal. 3:16, where he argues that “the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many; but, referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ which is Christ.” In fact the word in Gen. 12:7 (*zarô*, “his seed”) would normally be taken to imply many descendants; but whether or not Paul knew that, he is not unusual in treating the grammatical form of the word as bearing a theological significance. This helps to undergird something of which he is convinced on other grounds anyway, namely that Christ is the inheritor of the promises to Abraham. Non-Christian Jews would have disputed his interpretation in this case, but the manner of argumentation was not in itself controversial.

Paul also supplies an example of the hermeneutical insistence that biblical texts are not trivial, but always deal with weighty matters. In 1 Cor. 9:9 he cites Deut. 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” This might be hailed today as a rare ancient example of a recognition of the rights of animals; but Paul takes it for granted that God is not particularly interested in oxen. This makes the law *prima facie* trivial. The principle that there is no triviality in Scripture requires the interpreter to find a “deeper” or “higher” meaning in terms of *human* rights, and conveniently allows Paul to argue that the right of ministers of the gospel to be paid by their converts is grounded in the Torah.

None of these examples of exegesis would be found in the case of non-“canonical” texts: it is the texts’ authoritative status that both enables and requires them. At the same time as such interpretations are explained by the canonical status of the biblical books cited, so they are in turn evidence for that status. Where we find interpreters proceeding in this way, we can be sure that the books they are interpreting were seen as holy texts.

2.2. A second feature of sacred texts in most cultures is that they are assumed to be relevant to the concerns of the reader. Perhaps this is true of all texts that are regarded as “classics”: a classic is, precisely, a text whose significance is not exhausted by what it had to say to its original audience, but which goes on illuminating each successive generation. All the books now in the Hebrew canon had this kind of status for the Judaism of their day. The historical books of the Hebrew Bible, for instance, were treated as collections of what in the Middle Ages would be known as *exempla* — stories with a moral. They held up models of good or bad conduct for, respectively, imitation or avoidance; they promised rewards or punishments to those who acted in one way or the other....

But the relevance of sacred texts to the reader’s own day may also have a different meaning from this. It may mean, not that sacred writers correctly perceived the whole sweep and shape of divine activity in history, but that they foretold quite specific events, and that these events are about to occur in the reader’s lifetime. Both at Qumran and in the early

Church it was normal to take particular chapters or verses of biblical books and explain them as referring to events which were far distant for the writer, but either imminent or even already discernible for the community reading the text in the light of its own experience. Isaiah had spoken of “an acceptable time,” a “day of salvation” (Isa. 49:8); Paul can reveal that “now is the acceptable time...now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). If the texts Judaism had come to revere as its sacred books were still, indeed were supremely, of relevance to the new Christian community, that might be because these texts revealed very precisely the circumstances in which the first Christians were living.

The community at Qumran, *mutatis mutandis*, felt the same. 1 Peter sums up the matter (1 Pet. 1:10–12): “The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation ... It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you.” The Qumran Habakkuk commentary (1QpHab) registers the same sense every time it takes a piece of the text and alleges that it really refers to events in the life of the Dead Sea community. Such ideas were infinitely remote (as a modern reader would see it) from anything that could have been in the mind of the prophet, but entirely credible, of course, once it was granted that Habakkuk was no more than the mouthpiece of a divine prediction. The more “strained” the interpretation, it may be said, the more “canonical” the text being interpreted must have been — why should people trouble to extract improbable meanings from a text, unless that text is somehow a given for them?

This approach is sometimes called “charismatic exegesis.” It implies that the true meaning of Scripture is hidden except to those who have received a revelation of it — unlike readings that seek to show the relevance of Scripture by pointing to universal features of the text. Where the latter see the text’s meaning as more general than the surface implies — e.g., Abraham stands for all who seek to obey God’s call — charismatic exegesis sees it as more particular: Habakkuk was not generally talking about trends in future Jewish history, but about the Qumran community and its (very specific) troubles. Both approaches are united, however, in believing that the text has a meaning not exhausted by the circumstances of its own day: it is pregnant with future implications. This is a natural consequence of regarding the text as “Scripture,” and a confirmation for us that it was so regarded.

2.3. All the above represents the refusal to see anything contingent, time-bound, or (above all) trivial in texts that have a divine origin. A third aspect of this ascription of supreme value to Scripture is the belief that it contains *mysteries*. It is not surprising that texts like Ezek. 1–2, the chariot-vision, should have been so interpreted, for on any showing it concerns a revelation to the prophet of more about the nature of God than had ever been known before. Even here, though, it would have been possible for the exegetical tradition to treat the text historically, as an account of an experience Ezekiel had happened to have, and which was not significant for anyone else: that, more or less, is how modern critical scholarship treats it. Instead, major exegetical currents in Judaism, which eventually produced the massive tradition of merkabah (chariot) mysticism, saw Ezekiel’s vision as something that could be replicated in the person who meditated on Ezekiel’s description of it. The knowledge which Ezekiel had derived

from his vision could be appropriated by people of alter times by reflecting on the *text* in which that vision was described.

But this development was possible only because the idea that mysteries lay encoded in scriptural texts had become a commonplace of Second Temple Judaism. Philo regularly treats the essential core of scriptural teaching as the communicating of divine mysteries. Though he was greatly influenced by Hellenistic mystagogy, he was not seriously out of step with the way biblical texts were interpreted by other Jews of his day. Taking seriously the scriptural (“canonical”) status of these books meant turning to them for all important knowledge; that in turn encouraged an expectation that the knowledge they communicated was secret and divinely revealed, for Scriptures that communicated obvious or easily accessible information would hardly deserve the name...

The capacity for many layers of meaning is one significant, perhaps indeed defining, characteristic of canonical Scripture. Mysteries lie encoded in its pages.

2.4. There is a fourth, and on face of it surprising, implication of canonicity. A community that acknowledges certain texts as “scriptural” tends to be unwilling, or even unable, to read them as contradicting what it considers to be true or important. One might think that “canonization” would imply that the texts being canonized took on a regulative function which they formerly lacked. Such is, perhaps, the Protestant theory of the subordination of the Church to the canon of Scripture, so that the Church’s beliefs must be adjusted to bring them into line with Scripture. But this does not usually seem to be how matters turn out in practice — not even in Protestant churches with a high doctrine of Scripture. For the most part religious communities interpret their Scriptures in the light of the doctrine and practice they have come, by custom and usage, to regard as correct. Thus any conflict there may be between Scripture and doctrine is masked, and is deprived of its power to threaten.

This can be seen very clearly in early rabbinic judgments, in the Midrash for example. If a scriptural text appeared to forbid what in rabbinic Judaism was not forbidden, or to command what is not part of Jewish practice, the solution is neither to change the custom nor to deny the canonicity of the text, but to *reinterpret* the text so that the conflict is removed. And the higher the status of the text, the more likely it is to be reinterpreted in this way. This in turn provides a test of whether a given text is canonical; if a text is treated in this way, then it is likely to have scriptural status. If the text were less authoritative, people would not bother to reinterpret it.

3.1. If by calling books canonical we mean that they are divinely sanctioned, and so have a high claim on the reader’s attention, then the “closure” of the canon must imply that *no other* books have this status. What is outside the canon is, comparatively, unimportant....