

THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE AND THE FORGOTTEN BOOKS

By JOHN BARTON

A CLERGYMAN I ONCE KNEW made the unfortunate discovery that the book of Jeremiah contains fifty-two chapters—one for each week of the year. It's easy to imagine that, by the end of the next year, his congregation wished he had not. There is indeed a strong tradition in Anglicanism of 'serial' reading of scripture. But it is not usually taken to the extreme of working through a whole prophetic book (and that the longest of all) in quite such an orderly way. Lectionaries, schemes of preaching, and systems of private devotional reading are usually more selective than this.

Different Christian traditions characteristically select different parts of the bible for these various purposes. One notices, for example, that a bible-study group in an evangelical setting is on the whole more likely to choose a Pauline or deutero-Pauline epistle than any other part of the bible. Even in this setting, however, there are perhaps few Christians who would share the sentiments of a student of mine who told me that he thought the most important book in the whole New Testament was the Epistle to Titus. Improbable though this sounds, it reminded me of the gems there are in that often neglected Epistle:

We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure. (Titus 3, 3-8)

A Catholic selecting a reading either for public liturgy or for bible-study is more likely, I think, to choose something from the Gospels;

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while mainstream Reformed or Lutheran churches may well choose, respectively, something from the Old Testament or a passage from the genuine Pauline epistles. These are only trends, of course, and there are plenty of exceptions. There are now aids to bible reading on the market, such as *The one-year bible*, which take the reader through the entire bible in twelve months. But these are the exception rather than the rule, and most Christians will find such a diet considerably too rich. Selection remains the norm in all traditions, and some books are more or less forgotten: Leviticus, Chronicles, Nahum, Obadiah, 2 Peter, Jude, for example.

What is more, selection always has been the norm; it is nothing new. In proposing a daily lectionary in which virtually the entire bible was read in the liturgy Cranmer, in his Preface to the Book of Common Prayer, maintained that this was a return to primitive practice in the Church. He saw it as the abandonment of the 'corrupt' medieval practice of reading only brief fragments of each biblical book in the Divine Office. But he was almost certainly mistaken. Though there were minority groups in the early Church, especially monastic communities, who read through the entire bible in order, the normal procedure in the early Church was just as selective as ours is now. Protestant churches in some cases adopted a 'whole bible' approach in theory, and one still finds this in series of sermons which take a chapter a week of some book and expound it systematically—though seldom with the single-mindedness of my acquaintance and his 52-week course on Jeremiah. But Lutherans, for example, have a lectionary for Sundays scarcely more full than the eucharistic lectionary of the Book of Common Prayer or the pre-Vatican II Missal. In modern times they have easily been overtaken by the Catholic Church, whose three-year eucharistic lectionary provides a very full diet of biblical material. There is little evidence that so sophisticated a lectionary, containing so much of the bible, has ever existed before at all. Certainly it did not in the earliest Christian centuries. If we think of the biblical canon as containing the books that were read in public liturgy, we shall be fairly wide of the mark; they were, perhaps, the books from which such reading was *permitted*, but a great deal of what is in them would never have been heard in the average early Christian assembly for worship. Just the same may be said, incidentally, of Judaism. From quite early times the entire Torah, the Pentateuch, has been read through in order during the year. But alongside it the second lessons, the *haftaroth*, represent only a tiny selection of material from the second, 'pro-

phetic', section of the canon: almost half of them, for example, are from Isaiah. Even if we then add the five scrolls, Esther, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, and Lamentations—read in their entirety on various occasions—it still remains true that Jews who attend the synagogue regularly will hear only a fraction of the bible read aloud.

Statistics for the use of the bible in the early Church strongly confirm the selectivity of the approach. Early Christian writers quote extensively from the Pentateuch, especially Genesis and Deuteronomy, and from Isaiah and the Psalms. They also, as we should expect, make heavy use of the Gospels and of the major Pauline letters. But Acts, for example, is seldom used; nor are most of the Minor Prophets; nor the Old Testament histories. You can read through great expanses of early Christian writing before you will come across a quotation from Kings, let alone Chronicles. The authority and inspiration of these books is not in doubt; but they are not used in practice. Early Patristic writers have what we might call a 'canon within the canon', a working collection of books they actually use and refer to as opposed to the larger canon which they theoretically revere. But how did they arrive at it; and how should we select our own working 'canon' if indeed we should?

There are two possible approaches to delineating a canon within the canon, one practical and the other theoretical. What we have been thinking about so far is really the practical approach. The question faced by church authorities is, How can we get our people familiar with a good portion of the bible, while recognizing that they are never going to hear it in its entirety, at least not in the liturgy? The answer then takes the perfectly sensible form of some scheme of reading that maximizes the texts read as far as possible. In modern terms Catholic and most Protestants have worked with a two- or three-year lectionary so as to make sure that not too much gets omitted; Lutherans in Europe and North America have stuck to their historic Epistles and Gospels, but have greatly enlarged the choice of passages each Sunday for sermon-texts. Omission follows the principle that the bible makes many points more than once, and you don't need to hear every example. On that basis, for example, most of the historical and the prophetic books continue to be excluded. Inclusion asks which books have traditionally been central, and thus ensures that we go on hearing a lot of Genesis and Isaiah.

Already here, however, questions of principle begin to enter the discussion. 'The canon within the canon' is not in origin a description of the books people *happen* to read, or even a shortlist of those

they *ought* to read; it is a statement of deep theological principle, primarily in Lutheran theology. The quest for the canon within the canon in modern Lutheran thought, especially in Germany, has been the attempt to discover which portions of scripture act as the *focal point* of the whole and so enable the bible to hang together coherently. It comes as no great surprise to find that the passages that form this inner canon, from a Lutheran point of view, are from St Paul, and are those in which the doctrine of justification by faith is most clearly set forth. Certain parts of Romans and Galatians are thus the true 'canon', which binds together all the other parts of the bible. From this perspective we can then decide which other parts of scripture especially deserve public reading and exposition. This does not affect the practical liturgical 'canon' of the Lutheran Epistles and Gospels, which are fixed by long tradition, but it does affect the passages chosen for preaching texts. It also influences any other books of biblical selections, the kinds of bible one gives to a child or to a confirmation candidate. The canon within the canon is thus the organizing principle of the bible, which determines what is central and what is marginal, a canon in the light of which, for example, Luther himself relegated James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation to an appendix to the New Testament, much as he relegated the Apocrypha to an appendix to the Old. What is being suggested is that the biblical canon makes sense only if this inner canon is taken as the principle by which to interpret all the rest. If we take any other passages as the centre—say, the Gospel of St Matthew, or the Book of Isaiah—then the bible will fall apart into a collection of disparate works. But if we hold fast to the Pauline inner canon, the passages about justification, the whole bible will make sense, and we shall be able to distinguish between what is at its heart and what at the periphery.

The canon within the canon, in this technical sense, is thus very different from merely a shortlist of the best bits of the bible for this or that purpose; it is a theological model with which to grasp what is going on in the *whole* of scripture. Nevertheless, non-Lutherans have been disinclined to adopt it. Why? Well, sometimes merely because they have not understood it, and have seen it as a proposal to delete certain parts of the bible: Lutheranism generally is not well understood in Britain. But where it has been understood it has been rejected, I think, because it has been rightly seen that there is an element of circularity built into it. How can the bible itself provide the means by which we decide what is at its heart? The problem here

is rather like that which arises when we try to base the bible's authority on its own claims: there is a simple logical fallacy in such a procedure. The bible cannot be authoritative because it says it is, for until we know whether it is authoritative we do not yet know whether its claims are to be believed; this is just an enormous begging of the question. Similarly, as a collection of books it cannot tell us which parts of the collection are most important or central; that must necessarily be a judgement from outside. The canon cannot tell us what is the canon within the canon: only some authority outside can tell us that.

Now this external source, it seems to me, can only be some principle of Christian *doctrine*. Without a doctrinal guide we can indeed read all the books of the bible, but we can never overcome their amorphous quality, taken as a whole collection. We can never know for sure that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels, to take an extreme case, have more authority for the Christian than the aphorisms in Proverbs or the utterances of characters in Numbers. The Lutheran quest for a canon within the canon is an attempt to manage without any external authority of this sort and let the bible itself dictate where its own centre lies; and many theologies of the bible, such as von Rad's *Old Testament theology*, have been inspired by the same impulse. But it fails, for two reasons: first, because the task is inherently impossible, as we have just seen; and secondly, because in practice a doctrinal principle, justification by faith—the doctrine by which, Luther said, the Church stands or falls—is smuggled in to do the work. It would be more satisfactory and also more honest to admit that a doctrinal principle was being invoked as the key to what is central in scripture for a Christian. After all, there are enormously powerful arguments available in favour of this Lutheran belief in justification as central to Christian doctrine, and to pretend these are not really at the heart of the decision about the canon within the canon is to deprive oneself of vital support. Thus in practice Lutherans, just like other Christians, do have a doctrinal system which dictates how the bible is read, but it is rare for them to admit it. Only Catholics are generally willing to acknowledge that doctrine controls the reading of scripture. If only all Christians could acknowledge that the same is really true for them, we might have some fruitful ecumenical dialogue about the bible. The problem, or course, is that acknowledgement of a doctrinal principle which is powerful enough to determine how we read scripture is to fly in the face of that other principle, *sola scriptura*, scripture alone, which most Protestants want to maintain.

If we return to the early Church, we shall certainly find a great respect for scripture, but we shall equally find a conviction that what matters most in scripture is determined by doctrine—that is, by the teaching which has been handed on in the Church since the days of the apostles. What Irenaeus called the ‘rule of faith’, what we should now call a creed, the kind of summary of the work of our salvation that provides the material, for example, for the first part of Eucharistic Prayers: this is what calls the tune when the Fathers turn to scripture. It is this that places the Gospels and Pauline epistles firmly in the centre of the bible, and de-emphasizes such books as Leviticus or the Old Testament histories. It functions, as I would put it, as a canon outside the canon, ordering material which cannot in the nature of things order itself.

If this perception of the matter is still valid today, it in no way undermines the rigorous study of any part of the bible. But it does firmly assert that in matters of belief the unfolding of the Church’s faith precedes the exposition of scripture. Biblical scholars *qua* biblical scholars are not in a position to decide which parts of the bible are most important for the Christian. Of course, biblical scholars may *also* be teachers of Christian doctrine, and wearing that hat they may well concern themselves with such questions. It is right and inevitable that there shall be a canon within the canon, for not every part of the bible is equally edifying for Christians. But the principle which decides what the inner canon shall be is not itself a scriptural principle, but a doctrinal one. Biblical and doctrinal specialists need to work together more closely than they have generally done in the past if Christians are to receive balanced and appropriate teaching about what matters in the bible.

Where does this leave ‘the forgotten books’? Church tradition has said two things about them: that they are part of canonical scripture, and that they are of secondary importance when it comes to expounding Christian doctrine. In effect, most Christians put them in very much the same position as the deuterocanonical books officially occupy for those churches (Catholic and Orthodox) which accept them as fully scripture: important, yet of a second order of importance. In practice Nahum or 2 Chronicles have for Christians much the same status as 2 Maccabees or Bel and the Dragon; indeed, there are deuterocanonical books that have traditionally been quite a lot more important than the ‘forgotten’ primary ones. The classic example would be the Wisdom of Solomon, used, most scholars think, by St Paul and quoted very frequently in Christian teaching

about human political life, the immortality of the soul, and the nature of the Holy Spirit. Compared with Wisdom, many of the Minor Prophets are forgotten books indeed. What then should be our attitude towards them? Their canonical status means that the Church is telling us we can receive edification and inspiration from them, even though we are unlikely to want to make them our primary food. There can be plenty of happy surprises. I was asked a few years ago to write a set of notes for the Bible Reading Fellowship on Habakkuk, began the project highly sceptical ('Can any good thing come out of Habakkuk?') and was soon discovering that it is one of the main Old Testament *loci* for a discussion of the problem of evil, and is full of other theologically interesting material; not to speak of the ancient psalm in chapter 3 with its wonderful imagery ('the deep uttered its voice, and lifted up its hands on high'). No doubt to some extent this simply illustrates the truth that there are fewer boring books than bored readers. It is true, of course, that the bible does not yield up its treasures to a superficial reading. Whereas there are passages in the 'unforgotten' books where we can feel at once that we are grasping something important (think of most of the Gospels, or of 1 Corinthians 13), with those the tradition has neglected harder work is often needed with aids to study, such as bible-reading notes and commentaries. Often these can have the salutary effect of reminding us how little we actually understand the books we read more often. Working through the Minor Prophets with a commentary or even with a bible (such as the Jerusalem Bible) where there are extensive notes, will indirectly throw unexpected light on Isaiah or Jeremiah, books which the tradition has declared to be more important.

When we turn from study to meditation, the direct use of the bible to feed spirituality, it is harder to find a route from some of these books into prayer and Christian reflection. But this is also true of the more central books. If Titus is difficult to use in prayer (for most of us at least!) Romans is not in practice any easier, unless we merely concentrate on purple passages within it. The controversies and predicaments out of which Romans comes are not ours, and a lot of mental work is required to take them and apply them to our own situation. Most of the forgotten books are in no worse case here.

A further problem is presented by the *portions* of books, some of them mainstream books, that are omitted when the books are used in public liturgy. Since as we have seen the use of every scrap of the bible in liturgy is simply impractical, some selection is bound to happen; but there is a difference between selecting the most obviously

'helpful' passages, on the one hand, and actively censoring those judged to be unhelpful on the other. The obvious case of this is the Psalms. In Catholic and Anglican worship, both of which inherit monastic traditions of the use of the Psalms, it is well established that in principle the entire Psalter should be sung in the course of the Church's worship. Even the selection of psalms used responsorially at Mass in the Catholic Church includes some part of almost every psalm in the Psalter. This throws into stronger relief those parts that are omitted. Catholics and Anglicans alike now leave out most of the imprecations against enemies, of which perhaps the extreme example would be Psalm 137(136), 8-9, the blessing on those who take the Babylonians' children and throw them against a rock. Clearly the omission of such verses is not just a matter of having to leave out something or other for reasons (say) of length; it is a policy decision that Christians ought not to utter such sentiments, and it rests on a value-judgement on these portions of the Old Testament in the light of the gospel. It is a classic case of using a 'canon within the canon', the gospel message of salvation and forgiveness, to judge those parts of scripture deemed to fall short of it.

Now from my remarks above it will be clear that I think such a principle correct, and am not at all opposed to applying it to the psalms in this way. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that passages about vengeance on enemies and the uttering of curses are not uniformly removed from the Old Testament when it is read liturgically. For example, parts of the books of Joshua and Judges continue to be read. But it is one thing for a reader to read out a passage in which a sub-Christian attitude is expressed, telling the congregation which book it is from and allowing them to react as critically towards it as they please. It is another for the congregation actually to sing or recite curses and imprecations as though they were using their own words. The problem with the Psalter is that it is a special case, not heard passively but used actively. If we were to use Psalms as lections, I fancy we should be less scandalized by the curses. 'Unsuitable' parts of scripture do have one useful task: they remind us that what we are reading is not exactly what we as Christians should want to say ourselves, but comes from an alien religious culture, whose difference from our own we acknowledge even as we assert our continuity with it.

It may be that our opposition to hearing 'unsuitable' lessons read in church shows that we have in any case too 'high' a view of what is going on when we attend to scripture. One of the values of an

approach based on a 'canon within the canon' is that it makes us realize we are not committed to accepting every word of scripture as binding or exemplary just because it is scripture. Rather we are to see scripture as a *witness*, a witness to a faith which preceded the existence of scripture and which we could continue to hold even if scripture perished—though this would be very difficult. One way of putting this is to say that it is the gospel which claims our allegiance, not the bible. Christians are not those who believe in the bible, but those who believe in the God who brings salvation through Jesus Christ. They differ in how far they think this gospel is detachable from scripture, and of course there are some who would find my way of putting it wholly unacceptable. But my own conviction is that the distinction must be drawn; and if it is, then in reading scripture in the Church's liturgy we are not presenting the congregation with propositions to all of which they must assent, but with the viewpoints of earlier witnesses, more or less imperfect, to the gospel. Indeed, I have heard it ingeniously argued that to delete the imprecatory parts of the Psalms implies a wrong conception of why we use the Psalms anyway, as though when they are read everyone is supposed to assent to everything in them. By retaining bits that no Christian could possibly assent to, we signal very clearly (so it was said) the fact that we stand at one remove from *everything* in them. I said this was ingenious, and I am afraid it would not work in practice: the train of thought required is much too subtle for most of us when we go to church in the expectation of being offered texts we can learn from, not texts from which we have carefully to distance ourselves. But it is true that removing the nasty bits from the psalms encourages the belief that whatever is left is unproblematic, and that is a mistake. In many ways the joyful praise of an ancient Israelite as he offered his ram or his goat in sacrifice is just as alien from us as his curses against his enemies. If this whole discussion helps to remind us that the biblical world is not our world, it will have served a useful purpose.