

REDEMPTIVE HISTORY
AND THE
NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES

Formerly
THE AUTHORITY
OF THE
NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES

By
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ABBREVIATIONS

ET	English Translation
EvT	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
GThT	<i>Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift</i>
NedTT	<i>Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift</i>
RE	<i>Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche</i>
RGG	<i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i>
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
Str-B	H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament</i>
TBl	<i>Theologische Blätter</i>
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TLZ	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
TR	<i>Theologische Rundschau</i>
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

FOREWORD TO THE REVISED TRANSLATION

The original translation has been carefully reviewed, corrected, and smoothed out in numerous places. Citations in foreign languages other than Dutch have been translated or, where possible, cited from existing English translations. Bibliographical references have been standardized.

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Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.
October 1987

1. Introduction

Any scientific investigation of Scripture repeatedly confronts the issue of the character of the Bible's authority. Most contemporary biblical scholars believe that no special divine authority can be ascribed to Scripture as such and that its authority can be spoken of only in connection with its content. Proponents of that position do not deny all revelation or every form of special revelation; instead they distinguish in principle between revelation and Scripture. According to them, the Scripture is only the human record of divine revelation or a human witness to revelation. Scripture as such does not have any revelatory quality, and so in spite of the sublime nature of the subject matter, biblical writings are thought to be no different from ordinary human literature. Therefore the Bible is to be investigated and judged by the same standards that we apply to all other human documents.¹

Of course, the question of the nature of Scripture's authority cannot be answered so simply, for we are still faced with the problem of *biblical criticism*.² If Scripture is not itself divine revelation, if it is simply a faulty, human medium, then what standards shall we use to establish the authority of its content? Must that be left to the faith of those who read the Bible? Does science have anything to say? Or must a person abandon himself to the voice of the Spirit, who makes the fallible human word His instrument? In the midst of such divergent views about its revelatory content, is it still possible to appeal to Scripture as an authority? Can we continue to base doctrine on the Bible? What is the significance of the expression "obedience to Scripture?" Is there any principal reason to distinguish as canonical the Bible's writings from other human documents?³

Although such questions can easily be multiplied, one thing is clear: the problem of biblical criticism, no matter how illuminating, does not legitimate faith in Scripture. Certainty cannot result from uncertainty, nor can biblical criticism pronounce Scripture to be authoritative. Rather, the tenuous character of biblical criticism once more raises the question of the

basis and nature of the Bible's authority. Involved here are not only matters for scientific discussion; no less at stake is the tie that binds churches in the Reformation tradition to their heritage—the unequivocal confession of the revelatory character and authority of Scripture. The *Belgic Confession* (Article 5), for example, after listing the canonical writings, states:

We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God.

Those who believe that such a personally expressed confession is not a dead letter will insist that the scientific study of the Bible may not evade the force of those words. Human life is a unity. Both the head and the heart are involved in our faith as well as in our scientific study of the Bible. To confess Scripture as canonical and authoritative raises special questions for the biblical scholar. It is not that such a confession becomes less of a joy and more of a burden to the degree that one approaches Scripture scientifically or more of a joy and less of a burden to the extent that one approaches the Bible as a simple believer. The allegedly simple believer's faith in Scripture is confronted with questions, conflicts, and temptations that are just as difficult as any encountered by his presumably more sophisticated counterpart. Theology, like every other scientific endeavor, is an expression of life—life that struggles for deliverance and only triumphs in God's light. For that reason, there is a close connection between the church and theology. On the one hand, the church confronts biblical scholars with its confession and follows their scientific investigation of Scripture with great interest. The church's motivation is not the mistaken and conceited idea that it is the guardian of science but an awareness that its own interests are at stake. On the other hand, its relation to the church, the living people of God, should impart to theology a deep awareness of the nature of its own object.

The manner in which the scientific investigation of Scripture proceeds brings its own joy and problems. Biblical scholars have tools and techniques at their disposal that in many respects facilitate a clearer understanding of Scripture. They are also better equipped to discern the questions raised by its character as Scripture. They investigate the historical background of the different books of the Bible and seek to learn how the various writings were brought together into a single canon. In that inves-

tigation they encounter analogies and similarities with other writings and with other religious concepts and practices. They discover the different literary forms and varying content of the Bible—a diversity that often appears to be a function of Scripture's humanity. Thus biblical scholars are confronted with the necessity of attempting to formulate the relationship between revelation and Scripture, between the Bible as the Word of God and the Bible as the word of man.

Traditionally, theologians who have acknowledged Scripture's authority in terms of the church's confession cited above have determined that relationship by appealing to the so-called self-attestation, or self-witness, of Scripture. The manner in which the New Testament speaks of the Old is especially important. Since the New Testament canon is not followed by a subsequent canonical addition, there is no such general witness to it. Nevertheless, besides the analogy with the Old Testament, the self-attestation of the individual New Testament writings yields considerable relevant data.⁴ These formal pronouncements of Scripture's authority, however, are valid only to those who already accept the authority of the Bible. Logically speaking, that is a form of circular reasoning. Certainly, *every* appeal to Scripture is ultimately based on its binding authority for faith,⁵ no matter how exactly that authority is understood. Nevertheless, just those who confess that the Scriptures "are of God" feel the need for further reflection on their revelatory character. Obviously, the Bible is not a heavenly gift that arrived all at once as a finished divine, revelatory entity. Scripture has a history. It is a product of God's revelatory activity in the history of redemption. Therefore the revelatory character of the Bible should not be separated in a mechanical fashion from the history of redemption in which it came into being, for its revelatory character is neither an isolated phenomenon nor derived only from formal statements of Scripture concerning its authority. Thus the significance of the Bible and the nature of its authority can properly be understood only by closely relating Scripture to the history of redemption. Again we must reason in a circle since the history of redemption is known solely from Scripture. Thus in this study we are not seeking an extrabiblical basis for faith. Rather, we are seeking to delineate the essence of Scripture and the nature of its authority within the framework of the history of redemption; we are seeking to clarify *the relationship between the history of redemption and Scripture*.

For reasons that will become clear, I shall limit the investigation to the *New Testament* Scriptures. First I will investigate the New Testament canon and then the nature of its authority in the light of New Testament redemptive history, that is, in the light of the coming and work of Jesus

Christ in the fullness of time. In doing so, it is not my purpose to formulate a complete doctrine of Scripture but to offer an exegetical, redemptive-historical contribution to that doctrine.

CHAPTER I

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. QUESTIONS OF PRINCIPLE

2. *Recent Reflections*

Any discussion of principal issues about the New Testament canon and its acceptance by the Christian church¹ must begin by recognizing that current Protestant literature on this topic is scanty and unclear.² Strathmann, a Lutheran exegete who wrote about the crisis of the canon, called the unclear relationship between the church and the canon a “creeping sickness” suffered by modern Protestant Christianity.³ Others, like Kümmel, have added their approval to that type of criticism. According to Kümmel, Christians generally accept the canon without clearly understanding the necessity for a fixed set of early Christian writings and with no concern about the correctness of the present collection.⁴

Such uncertainty is a result of the strong influence of post-Enlightenment biblical criticism on theology and so in the life of the church. The impetus for applying rationalistic criticism to the study of the New Testament canon came from Johann Salomo Semler’s four-volume work, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Kanons* (1771–1775). On the basis of his historical investigations, Semler challenged the beliefs that from the beginning the church had accepted the canon with great unanimity and that the canon bears the marks of divinity. Semler focused attention on the uncertainty, conflict, human strategy, and ecclesiastical policy and tactics that eventually led to the formation of the twenty-seven-book canon as an untouchable ecclesiastical entity. He asked how good Protestants who did not believe in the infallibility of the church could question anyone’s right to criticize the church’s position on the canon. He argued that the history of the canon is in conflict with the authority ascribed to it and that those who assembled the books of the New Testament never intended to establish an absolute, unbreakable norm for faith, thought, and action. According to Semler, the canon was understood simply as the list of books that might be read in public worship, the books that the bishops thought were the most suitable and in the best interests of good order. What individual church members could read did not fall under that regula-

tion. Thus Semler argued that the canon was a matter of ecclesiastical discipline, not personal faith. Semler believed that by its very nature, personal faith is not subject to any external and binding authority because it is grounded inwardly in true religious and moral knowledge. He argued that if it is proper to speak of the witness of the Holy Spirit, that witness has nothing to do with authenticating a certain number of books, much less with their selection. The witness of the Spirit is related solely to religious and moral knowledge, insofar as such knowledge finds expression in the New Testament books.⁵

In the final analysis, Semler's criticism heralded a complete abandonment of Scripture as a canon, as a divine norm for faith and life. Nevertheless, his historical perspectives greatly influenced subsequent New Testament studies and have been used repeatedly to call into question the New Testament's authority as a canon. All secular historical approaches to the authority of the New Testament deny its normative status as canon for the church and theology, and they do so in an *a priori* fashion, as the great historical-critical schools of the last century demonstrated. Accordingly, as time passed, many scholars flatly rejected the church's enduring belief in the authority of the New Testament.⁶ They believed that historical scholarship was the best way to judge the canonicity of the New Testament. F. Chr. Baur, for example, said that the main task of New Testament Introduction is the critical investigation of the principle of the canonical authority of the New Testament documents.⁷ Such an approach clearly resulted in the abandonment of the idea of canon and the subjection of the church's faith to historical scholarship.

Other scholars saw the absurdity of that result. They believed that their historical investigation should (and could!) detach itself from every *a priori* of faith. They sought to resolve the difficulty by strictly separating what they called the historical and the dogmatic approaches to the New Testament. To canonics (scientific introduction) they ascribed an exclusively historical significance. According to Jülicher-Fascher, canonics limits itself to the twenty-seven books simply because of their acquired historic significance, which has given them the status of a unique historical entity.⁸ The task of New Testament Introduction, therefore, consists neither in the defense of the divine character of these writings nor in their criticism.⁹ New Testament Introduction is concerned solely with a critical description of the origin of the canon. Questions concerning *a priori* views that have been or might be held about the origin and collection of these writings should be left entirely to the study of the history of dogma and to

dogmatic theology. New Testament Introduction itself has nothing at all to do with such questions.

This method, which has been followed in most recent Introductions to the New Testament, is preferable to the method of Baur and his school because its descriptive approach seeks to avoid passing judgment on what is and what is not canonical and authoritative for the church. Clearly, however, separating the theological and historical perspectives can neither cure the creeping sickness suffered by the church because of uncertainty about its foundation nor remedy the situation that divorces the study of the canon from Christian faith, thereby completely robbing such study of its theological character. Therefore it is not surprising that New Testament scholars have been dissatisfied with this dichotomy and have sought to unite the historical study of the formation of the canon with a theological appraisal of its significance. That the canon was formed after a long ecclesiastical development is not necessarily incompatible with the special authority that the church has ascribed to it. The most important question in that regard is simply this: "What is the basis for the church's recognition both of the canon as such and of the twenty-seven books in particular, and what light does careful investigation of the history of the canon shed on this recognition of the canon as Holy Scripture?"

3. Appeals to Luther's Standpoint

Appeal to Luther's view of the canon has played a significant role in recent historical criticism of the New Testament. With the other Reformers, Luther opposed the Roman Catholic doctrine of tradition by forcefully proclaiming that Scripture is the only accessible source of special revelation. Nevertheless, Luther was sharply critical of various New Testament books. His criticism was not limited to James (which in the preface to his 1522 edition of the New Testament he compared to the main books of the New Testament as "really an epistle of straw, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel in it"), but extended as well to Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation, though later he changed his mind about some of those writings.¹⁰

Luther's critique was not primarily motivated by historical-critical considerations but by material concerns. In his judgment, the questionable books did not speak of Christ in the manner of the "right, certain chief books of the New Testament," especially in the manner of the main Pauline Epistles. "What preaches and urges Christ" was for Luther the criterion of apostolicity and canonicity. Undoubtedly, he did not intend to

make the content of revelation subjective; rather he sought to emphasize as forcefully as possible what he regarded as the central message of the gospel. Defining canonicity in terms of "what urges Christ," however, introduced the principle of *a canon within the canon*. This principle not only focuses attention on the heart of the gospel but also has a critical, discriminating significance.

Orthodox Lutherans later rejected this standpoint and affirmed the canonicity of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament without reservation, but many people, especially in reaction to the skepticism of the Enlightenment, appealed (and continue to appeal) to Luther. Such appeal, on the one hand, is made to justify historical or theological criticism of the canon, and on the other hand to support the canon as the only rule and guide of the church. The great Lutheran exegete Th. Zahn, for example, wrote in an infrequently cited but rich monograph on the abiding significance of the New Testament canon¹¹ that the reserve with which the Lutheran confessions speak of the biblical canon ought not to be regarded as a deficiency but as a blessing, as "a gracious protection of God."¹²

The Lutheran confessions do not list the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments, as many Reformed confessions do. Zahn believed this omission was the result of the influence of Luther's critical attitude, an influence for which we ought to be thankful. He believed that though Luther may not be right in every detail, in principle such a critical acceptance of the New Testament is alone correct, and he appealed to various passages in the New Testament for support, for example where the church is exhorted to "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21) and where the church is told that the spirits of the prophets are subject to criticism (1 Cor. 14:32). According to Zahn, texts like those make it a duty for biblical scholars to investigate even the New Testament critically.¹³ Zahn did not believe that the canon was closed and established with finality, and he was sharply critical of Reformed scholars¹⁴ who, with their doctrines of inspiration and of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, would silence every criticism in an a priori fashion. In opposition to the Reformed viewpoint, Zahn argued that the message of the gospel is determinative of the canon and is the basis, firmly established by faith, on which the church must judge which writings are canonical. Only then can the church effectively withstand criticism that is alien to its faith. Criticism is not defeated simply by forbidding every form of criticism; it is only defeated by scientific criticism that is rooted in the

faith of the church, by criticism that confirms, rather than destroys, the true dimensions of the New Testament.¹⁵

Zahn emphasized the historical development and ecclesiastical character of the canon and the necessity to combat historical criticism with its own weapons. He also attempted to combine Luther's concept of the canon with a subjectively tinged theology: the canon is the canon and Scripture is the Word of God only insofar as that is the church's understanding. This argument, with the idea of canon completely attuned to the perception of faith, is the one used in most contemporary circles to maintain belief in the canon and at the same time to allow for the historical-critical investigation of its content and extent. In fact, this view means that in its concrete form, the canon as a normative principle for the church now functions in a material, not a formal, sense. To support this position, people like to appeal to Luther's statement that the canon is "what urges Christ." But in modern biblical scholarship, this principle is applied far more critically than it was by Luther and involves an increasingly far-reaching emphasis on faith, whether of the church or of the individual, for determining what may still be received as canon in the material sense.

Strathmann, for example, writes that this modern development of Luther's principle allows one to make a "completely unprejudiced appraisal" of the New Testament writings from religious and historical perspectives and that this insures the impossibility of misusing Scripture in a doctrinaire or juridical fashion.¹⁶ H. Faber also appeals to Luther for justification of his liberal view of the canon.¹⁷ In his study of the necessity and limits of the New Testament canon, Kümmel likewise appeals to Luther¹⁸ on the decisive point in question. In fact, Kümmel believes that Luther's critical principle should be extended to the entire content of the canon. According to Kümmel, it makes no sense to continue the sixteenth-century discussion about which books belong in the canon. Instead we should apply Luther's critical principle to the whole canon, that is, we should discern where in the canon witness to Jesus Christ elicits faith.¹⁹ In practice we have to deal with the existing canon for it belongs to the entire church, and changing it would be difficult. But that does not mean that the decisions of the ancient church must bind us. The New Testament writings are canonical only to the extent that each of them measures up to the norm for our faith,²⁰ that is, brings us into a relationship with the historical revelation of Jesus Christ and its significance for faith.²¹ The latter is found, according to Kümmel, in the "central proclamation" of the New Testament, a proclamation that must be es-

tablished by a critical comparison of its various writings. For Kümmel, the canon is a necessity because the historical character of God's definitive revelation in Christ cannot be experienced apart from the New Testament writings. The boundaries of the canon run through the middle of the New Testament and can be defined only by constantly reflecting on its central proclamation of Christ and by studying the entire New Testament and the noncanonical literature of the early church.²²

Other scholars (with a similar understanding of the canon) deny this concept of an *objective canon within the canon*. They define the canonicity of the New Testament in terms of repeatedly encountering *the Word of God* in it as a *contemporary event*. For example, Diem writes that the final basis for Scripture's canonicity is that it "permits itself to be preached,"²³ that is, the church has heard the Word of God in the event of preaching.²⁴ For Diem, the present concrete form of the biblical canon cannot be justified in principle but only *de facto*, that is, by experiencing the self-evidencing nature of Scripture in the context of its proclamation.²⁵ That does not mean, however, where Scripture cannot be preached or where a person encounters open contradictions in it (the existence of which is not to be denied) that the canon may or must be narrowed or that a perpetually valid canon within the canon can be established. The canon must be acknowledged as the place where the church universal has heard the Word of God. Through the canon Christ speaks the word that we need for each situation. His freedom to do so, even through its theological contradictions, must remain unimpaired.²⁶ Consequently, Diem seeks the canonicity of Scripture in the fact that many have heard and continue to hear Christ in the event of preaching. Thus he replaces the ideas of a fixed historical canon and of a canon within a canon with the idea of the present-day self-witness of Christ in the Scriptures.

The radical extent to which this principle can be carried is evident in Käsemann's position.²⁷ According to Käsemann, the New Testament is full of contradictions. Rather than providing a foundation for the unity of the church, the New Testament constitutes a basis for the diversity of ecclesiastical confessions.²⁸ If binding authority were ascribed to the canon in its entirety, each different ecclesiastical confession could appeal to it with more or less equal validity. But where one appeals in principle to "it is written," critical scholarship cannot escape the truth of Lessing's story of the three rings in *Nathan the Wise*. Anyone who believes that Scripture in its objectivity is a divine authority abstracts it from the Spirit, who "in an always new and contemporaneous way" will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). In its "naked objectivity" the canon is neither the Word of

God nor is it identical with the gospel. It is the Word of God only insofar as it is and repeatedly becomes the gospel. The question "What is the gospel?" cannot be answered by the historian; it can only be answered by the believer who has been convinced by the Spirit and who has ears to hear. The gospel is not known by the *beati possidentes* ("blessed possessors"); it is recognized by the uncertain and the tempted, in and despite the confessions, with and even in opposition to the New Testament canon.²⁹

The problems raised by such views of the canon are readily apparent. Granting that a principle is not always to be judged by its most extreme consequences, it is nevertheless undeniable that new problems arise whenever the Scriptures are no longer regarded as the exclusive principle of canonicity, when something else is substituted, for example the principle of a canon within the canon or the contemporaneous speaking of God in and through Scripture. This raises the question of how to determine and validate such new principles of canonicity. To what extent can a person use such principles and still speak of the canon as an objective standard and norm? This question is especially relevant for the prevailing view, advanced with such great certainty, that the Word of God in Scripture is a contemporary event and that the New Testament becomes the canon "again and again." This view is undoubtedly a modification of Lutheran theology, which from its inception understood the Word of God to be the gospel as it functions in *preaching*,³⁰ the *viva vox* of Christ³¹ that coincides with the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word.³² But no matter how much truth it may contain, this view is beset with danger. By identifying the Word of God exclusively with the Spirit's operation in preaching, this view continuously risks identifying first the Word of God and then the canon with what the church understands. This position may even result in identifying God's Word with what an individual person experiences when the Scriptures are preached; it leaves the door wide open to a subjective and existentialist view of God's Word and of the canon.

The foregoing remarks are not meant to imply that those who hold to a canon within the canon (whether in an objective or subjective, actualistic sense) no longer ascribe any meaning to the canon of Scripture. Many different steps have been taken to uphold the necessity of the biblical canon³³ and to guard against subjectivism and spiritualism.³⁴ But one fact remains. The final decision as to what the church deems to be holy and unimpeachable does not reside in the biblical canon itself. Human judgment about what is essential and central for Christian faith is the final court of appeal. This judgment may be based on the historical-critical method, on the

church's experience of faith, or on the moment of hearing God's Word in preaching. One thing, however, is certain: such theories diminish in principle the significance of *Scripture* as the canon, no matter how broad the spectrum of differences among the various advocates of this viewpoint may be.

4. *The Reformed View*

From its inception, *Reformed theology* has differed with Luther on the issue of the canon. During the Reformation, Reformed theologians acknowledged the existing canon without reservation. They did not concur with Luther's objections against specific books, and they did not subject the content or the extent of the canon to a new criterion.³⁵ Unlike the Lutheran confessions, the major Reformed confessions list the canonical books by name. As a result, Reformed theology placed a strong emphasis on the objective significance of the Word of God, in distinction from a subjective acceptance of it. Reformed theologians drew a clear distinction between the canon as such and its recognition by the church.

To the degree that Reformed theology has remained faithful to its starting point, it has continually rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of the canon, the belief that faith in the canon rests on the authority of the church. But it has been no less vehement in its protest against any subjectivistic or actualistic view that would define the canon either in terms of the experience of faith or in terms of the church's momentary understanding of the Word of God.

Therefore it is not at all surprising that historical critics subsequently attacked this "objective" and clearly defined understanding of canon. The crucial problem for Reformed theology at this point is to explain why it recognizes only the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as canonical. Reformed theologians do not justify the acceptance of the canon by appealing to a "canon within the canon." Nor do they appeal to its recognition by the church or to the experience of faith or to a recurring, actualistic understanding of the Word of God as canon. And so the question naturally arises, "On what basis does Reformed theology accept the canon?"

The Reformed understanding of the canon was sharply attacked by Zahn.³⁶ He accused Reformed scholars of pretending to have an infallible criterion of canonicity (the witness of the Holy Spirit in their hearts), on the basis of which they believed they could specify in their confessions which books are canonical and which are not. Furthermore, Zahn argued