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Jeremiah-Ezekiel: Human Failure and Divine Success - A Study in Contrast - Lesson 3

Supplement Five.

God Preserves His Divine Record: The Old Testament Canon.

I. Introduction to Canon, Canonicity, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

In this lesson we will examine more closely canon, canonicity, and the Dead Sea Scrolls as they relate to the Old Testament Scriptures.

II. Canon

The word "canon" came into the English language from the Greek word *kanon*, which in turn is derived from a Semitic root (Assyrian *qanu*, Hebrew *qanech*, Ugaritic *qn*) borrowed from the Sumerian *gi-na*, "reed." From this came the idea of a measuring rod, later a rule or norm of faith, and eventually a catalog or list. The word "canon" was first used as a theological expression in reference to the Holy Scriptures by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter letter to the churches in which he outlined the contents of the New Testament (c. A.D. 367).

Thus, the "canon of Scripture" refers to the collection of biblical books that Christians accept as uniquely authoritative.

A. Formation of the Old Testament Canon.

The idea of a norm or rule for life reaches far back into Hebrew history. Specific commandments from God, which constituted guides for holy living, were given to Adam, Noah, and Abraham. These instructions were enshrined in written form at an early period, and preserved in the family histories that comprise much of the book of Genesis. During the second millennium B.C., collections of legislative material were promulgated by Moses, including the Book of the Covenant (Ex 24:4-8) and the essentials of Deuteronomy (Dt 31:9-13).

Much effort has been expended to discover what it was that led to the establishment of the Old Testament canon. The fact that the Old Testament does not speak of acts of canonization or of motives for canonization has prompted many writers to try to fill in the gaps. The answers scholars have come up with have been varied and no theory is considered totally satisfactory, perhaps because most of the search has been made by those who reject the biblical concept of revelation.

One view about the process of canonization is that the law was the model by which the Israelites decided what was to be regarded as canonical. Josiah's reverence for the Book of the Law (2Ki 22) and Ezra's similar high regard for the Law (Ne 8-9) are held up as examples of this testing procedure in action. Others have pointed back to the claim in the eighteenth century B.C. Babylonian Code of Hammurabi to divine sanction for the law given to the king and then passed on to his subjects. Others are not especially impressed by this view, because the Pentateuch is by no means all law; there are many narratives in its content. The historical books have little law, and the same could be said for the Prophets and for the wisdom literature.

A more popular view has to do with the presence of inspiration, or a belief that inspiration was involved, was the standard that determined which books were considered worthy of canonization (2Ti 3:16; 2Pe 1:21). This may be paired with a belief that authority accompanies inspiration.

Yet another view has been proposed by G. Osborn, who thinks the real standard for canonicity is in the contents of the biblical materials, and the contents were rooted in the cult, for it was recited at its feasts and in its services, whether temple or synagogue. He claims that the underlying cause is a belief in Yahweh's activity in history in relation to central individuals and the nation of Israel. The motif is struggle or distress and God's victory, which brings a new order of peace and goodness. This motif started as a cultic story and expanded to include narrative, hymns, laws, and words of wisdom. All historical, prophetic, and wisdom literature were then appended to the core and must meet the standard of portraying divine activity.

The above theories all have valid points, but unfortunately at the present time there is no way of knowing for sure why certain books were included in the Old Testament canon and others were not.

B. Close of the Canon

We do know, however, that the Hebrew canon was established or fixed by the religious leadership of the Hebrew community. Later rabbinic and church councils did not determine canon, but merely affirmed or stamped their approval on the collection of divinely inspired and authoritative books already acknowledged as the "Word of the Lord" in the Hebrew covenant community.

III. Development of the Old Testament Canon

Although we do not know all the specifics of the formation of the Old Testament canon, we can trace a bit of its history and the subsequent order of the books within the canon.

A. History.

An understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures as the "Old Testament" or "Old Covenant" is distinctly a Christian concept, stemming from Jeremiah's reference to a "new covenant" (Jer 31:31-36) and the comparison made between the "first" and "new" covenant described in the New Testament book of Hebrews (Heb 9:15-28). In Judaism today, the Hebrew Scriptures are known as the Tanak, an acronym reflecting the threefold division of the Hebrew Scriptures: "T" for Torah or Law, "N" for Nebi'im or Prophets, and "K" for Kethubim or Writings.

B. Order.

The order of the books in the Hebrew Scriptures is often called the Palestinian canon and is associated with the Tiberian school of the Masoretes. Before the adoption of the codex (the book form) by the Jews, the Hebrew Bible was written on many scrolls, and because each scroll was independent of the others there was no order per se.

When the codex form became popular, it was necessary to place the books in a sequence, and it is believed the order of books in the early codices probably reflects an earlier tradition. One indication of this tradition is a reference to the books of the Old Testament made by Josephus of the first century A.D. He held that there were twenty-two books, but seems to have appended Ruth to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah.

C. Divisions: Torah, Nebi'im, and Kethubim.

The tripartite division of the Hebrew Scriptures is attested as early as the second century B.C. in the prologue of Ben Sirach, and later on by Jesus in Luke 24:44. But it is also affirmed in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Bathra 14b-15a) and by a series of Jewish and Christian writers during the first four centuries after Christ (e.g., Philo, Josephus, Melito, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, and Augustine).

The earliest codices of the Middle Ages (Codex Leningradensis is the oldest complete Old Testament and is dated A.D. 1008) have twenty-four books. The order of the contents is: (1) the Torah, which is comprised of the five books of the Pentateuch (Ge, Ex, Lev, Nu, Dt); (2) the Prophets (Nebi'im), which is divided into two sections, the Former Prophets comprised of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; and the Latter Prophets, made up of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (Minor Prophets); and (3) the Writings (Kethubim) or Hagiographa. This has three subdivisions, which are the poetical, Psalms, Proverbs, and Job; the five scrolls or Megilloth, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther; and the historical, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

Later in the Middle Ages, Jews began to divide Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into two books each, as they are printed in the Hebrew Scriptures today. The names or titles for the books of the Hebrew Bible were usually taken from the first line or verse of the text, whereas the English titles were derived from the book headings in the later Greek and Latin versions of the Old Testament.

D. Witness of Christ and the Early Church.

How Jesus and the apostles understood the extent of the Old Testament in the first century is uncertain. On the one hand, Jesus spoke of the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5:17; Lk 16:16) as though there were only two sections of the Old Testament, but then He spoke of the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms (the first book of the Writings) in Luke 24:44, which may indicate three sections.

In Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11 :51, Jesus mentions the death of Abel and Zechariah in a way that may allude to an understanding of Chronicles as the last book of the Old Testament. Again this would suggest a threefold division of the later Hebrew manuscripts. The apostles quoted from all sections of the Old Testament; but other noncanonical literature is never cited by name, though there are statements in the New Testament that point to that body of writings (Jude 14-15).

IV. Canonicity.

When we speak of "canonicity" we mean the acceptance by religious communities (Jewish or Christian) of certain authoritative documents cardinal to the shaping of their faith, practice, and doctrine. The reason for this acceptance was the widespread conviction that such literature was divinely inspired, and not just inspirational. Many religious compositions may fall into the second category without falling into the first category, but no composition can fall into the first category without simultaneously falling into the second category.

The question of how we came to have the thirty-nine books known as the Old Testament Scripture is an historical investigation. The question involves who wrote the books, who compiled them into a collection; their origin or contents, their history; God's part, and man's. Our goal then is to trace the process by which these various writings came together as Holy Scripture.

How the ancient Hebrews expressed the concept of canonicity is not known; but it is safe to say that the idea existed long before there was any special phrase invented to express it. In the New Testament, the word "Scriptures" conveys unquestionably the notion of sacredness (Mt 21:42; Jn 5:39; Ac 18:24). From the first century A.D. and following, according to the Talmud, the Jews employed the phrase "defile the hands." Writings that were suitable to be read in the synagogue were designated as books that "defile the hands."

What this very peculiar oriental expression may have originally meant no one can definitely say, but probably Leviticus 16:23-24 gives the best hint of its correct interpretation. According to this passage on the Day of Atonement, the high priest washed not only when he put on the holy garments of his office, but also when he took them off. Quite possibly, therefore, the expression "defile the hands" signified that the hand that had touched the sacred writings must first be washed before touching anything else, in order that conditions of ceremonial purity would be maintained.

Another aspect of canonization was acceptance by the people. This was a ratification of the covenant, but not a human conferral of authority upon the books. Authority was already intrinsic to them. The content of the books correlated with genuine religious experience, but human experience itself did not and does not stamp canonicity upon the books. Overshadowing all human experience is the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Canonicity affirms that, guided by the Holy Spirit through various historical processes over a span of several centuries, the church separated out and accepted certain books, including the Old Testament canon which had been confirmed by the church's Jewish predecessors. These books that compromised the Old and New Testament canons mark the boundaries of what we Christians consider to be God's written revelation to us. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, witnesses to the Old Testament text and canon were principally the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and Jerome's Vulgate.

V. Noncanonical Books.

The noncanonical books of the Protestant Old Testament include the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. We will now examine each of these two groups of literary works individually.

A. Old Testament Apocrypha.

Of prime interest related to questions about the extent of the Old Testament canon is a group of books called the Apocrypha. This title comes from the Greek word meaning "hidden" or "concealed," and seems to have had its source in the Apocalypse of Ezra (also known as 2 Esdras or 4 Esdras, or Ezra) 12:37-39; 14:45-47. This book was possibly written in Aramaic during the latter part of the first century A.D. in Jerusalem. Whether it was written by Jews or by Jewish Christians is not known.

Jewish rabbis referred to these extracanonical books as "outside books." Jerome used the term Apocrypha in this sense and so did the Reformers Martin Luther, Carlstadt, and Miles Coverdale. Roman Catholics call these books the Deuterocanon. The Apocrypha is listed as containing writings in five main divisions: (1) didactic or wisdom books, Wisdom of Solomon, dated about 125 B.C., and Ecclesiasticus of Ben Sira, dated about 180 B.C.; (2) historical books, 1 Esdras, dated about 135 B.C., 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees; (3) romantic stories, Tobit and Judith; (4) prophetic literature, Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, and the Apocalypse of Esdras; and (5) legendary additions, The Prayer of Manasseh, Additions to Esther, The Prayer of Azariah and the Hymn of the Three Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. The last three were added to Daniel.

During the early centuries of Christianity, there were conflicting opinions as to the canonicity of the Apocryphal books. For example, Greek and Latin church fathers such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria quoted the Apocrypha in their writings as "Scripture," and the Synod of Hippo (A.D. 393) authorized the use of the Apocrypha as canon. Yet others like Eusebius and Athanasius distinguished Apocrypha from the Hebrew Scriptures. The issue of Apocrypha as Old Testament canon was heightened with the publication of Jerome's Latin Vulgate (A.D. 405). Jerome opposed the recognition of the Apocrypha as Old Testament canon and made careful notations in his Vulgate to that effect. But later recensions failed to retain these clear distinctions, and soon most Latin readers understood no difference between the Old Testament and the Apocrypha.

The Reformation again brought the issue of Apocrypha as canon to the forefront of church discussion. As the Reformers translated the Old Testament into the languages of their constituencies, they discovered that the Hebrew Bible contained no books of the Apocrypha. Thus, in their view these "lesser books" were either excluded from the Old Testament canon or appended as a separate and inferior collection. The Puritans are credited with the removal of the Apocrypha altogether from the covers of the English Bible. Although not widely appreciated or observed today, Martin Luther's assessment of the Apocrypha still has merit. He held that the books of the Apocrypha are not equal to the Holy Scriptures, but are profitable to read and valuable for personal edification.

The Roman Catholic Church responded to the Reformers at the Council of Trent (1545-1564). There the fathers reaffirmed the Vulgate as the Bible of the true church and pronounced the Apocrypha equivalent to canonical material. Today this collection is usually called the Deuterocanon, and was substantiated as such by the Vatican Council of 1870.

B. Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.

Intertestamental Judaism produced a second body of extracanonical literature distinct from the Apocrypha and known as the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (or "books written under a pen name"). The writings that make up this corpus are listed as follows: (1) primitive history, Jubilees, dated about 50 B.C.; (2) apocalyptic writings, 1 Enoch, dated about 95 B.C., Apocalypse of Baruch, Assumption of Moses, Martyrdom of Isaiah, Lives of the Prophets, and Sibylline Oracles, dated about A.D. 138; (3) legendary books, Letter of Aristeas, The Book of Adam and Eve, The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, and the Testament of Job; (4) Poetical, Psalms of Solomon; (5) didactic discourses, magical books of Moses, story of Achiarcharus, and Pirke Aboth; and (6) unclassified, 3 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees.

VI. Dead Sea Scrolls.

The discoveries made at Qumran, northwest of the Dead Sea, in the years following 1947 have greatly increased our knowledge of the history of the Hebrew Scriptures during the two centuries or more preceding A.D. 70. They provided manuscripts of the Old Testament that were 1,000 years older than any previously available. They not only increased the creditability of the Masoretic manuscripts that had been the basis of all current English translations, but also provided important information for understanding the transmission of the text of the Old Testament. The manuscripts discovered appear to represent about 800 separate documents, about 240 of which are copies of books of the Hebrew Bible. A few of these scrolls, about ten or so, are substantially complete, but most consist of a lot of tiny fragments. All the books of the Hebrew Bible are represented among them, with the exception of Esther.

A. Background.

The happenstance discovery in the spring of 1946 of seven ancient scrolls in a cave in the Desert of Judah was followed by similar finds in another ten out of some eighty caves that scholars investigated during the ensuing decade. All eleven caves are situated near a site known by the modern Arabic name Qumran, which is located some ten miles to the south of Jericho and just over one mile to the west of the shores of the Dead Sea. After a decade of no new discoveries, Yigael Yadin retrieved from the cellars of an antique dealer in Bethlehem the Temple Scroll, the largest scroll of all.

The seven scrolls recovered from the first cave had been stored in two large earthenware jars of a type not previously found in excavations in Palestine, covered with lids, and made airtight by the application of a layer of bitumen to the gap between the lid and the receptacle. It appears that the vessels had been especially manufactured in two standard sizes to accommodate groups of three or four scrolls of commensurable height. In addition, the cave contained sherds of more jars, which had been broken in antiquity or else were fractured by

the bedouins who made the modern discovery. In contrast to the other caves, the partial scrolls and fragments were found lying on the ground.

B. Classification of the Scrolls.

By content and literary genre, the scrolls can be divided into four major divisions as follows:

1. Hebrew Bible. Copies of books of the Hebrew Bible make up about thirty percent of the find. With the exception of the book of Esther, all books contained in the Hebrew Scriptures are represented at Qumran.
2. Apocryphal Books. Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts of apocryphal books, such as The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Tobit, Jubilees and 1 Enoch as well as hitherto unknown compositions of a similar character, such as the Genesis Apocryphon, the Psalms of Joshua, and others, amount to about twenty-five percent of the find.
3. Previously Unknown Compositions. Another twenty-five percent of the find are copies of previously unknown compositions: wisdom writings, prayers and prayer compilations, etc. They presumably derive from what may be considered the common literary position of Judaism in the late Second Temple Period.
4. Literature of the Community of the Renewed Covenant. Approximately a fifth part of the manuscript assemblage consists of Hebrew compositions of various literary genres that evidently constituted the particular literature of the "community of the renewed covenant." These works are of special interest because they enlighten us as to the Covenanters' conceptual universe and the socio-religious structure of their community. The primary documents include: (a) The Zadokite Documents, or the Damascus Rule, which combines a compressed survey of the history of the community with a selection of legal matters; (b) the Community Rule or Manual of Discipline, which lists precepts that pertain predominantly to the Qumran community; (c) the Messianic Rule, which offers a description of the envisioned "messianic banquet," modeled on the Covenanters' common meals in historical reality; (d) the War Rule, which presents legal and descriptive details of the cataclysmic encounter in which the "sons of light," i.e., the Covenanters, will finally overcome all of the "sons of darkness"; (e) the Temple Scroll, which enlarges on matters pertaining to the future political role of the community and its ritual center, the temple; (f) Pesharim and other works provide information on some aspects of the Covenanters' history through an actualizing interpretation of non-historical parts of the Hebrew Bible; and (g) additional supplementary information.

C. Languages and Material Aspects.

The great majority of the Qumran scrolls were written in Hebrew. A smaller number were couched in Aramaic. Several items were written in Greek. Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts were commonly penned in the square script, which was common at the turn of the era and is still in use to this day. With the exception of a small quantity of papyri, the scrolls were made from animal hides of which the hair had been shaved off. The lettering is on the porous side.

This technique facilitated the penetration of the ink into the leather, and thus made for a better preservation of the writing.

D. Dating the Scrolls.

Personal names mentioned in some fragments designate exclusively historical figures of the Hasmonean period (135-63 B.C.). Paleographical analyses indicate that the documents were mostly penned in the last two centuries B.C., with some stemming from the first century A.D. It follows that the Qumran scrolls, and the community whose members deposited them in the caves, must be dated to the turn of the era, approximately between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. We should bear in mind, however, that dating the scrolls does not establish the time of the authoring of the works preserved in them.

E. Who Were the Covenanters?

The Covenanters are known only from the Qumran writings, and are never explicitly mentioned in any other ancient source. This silence caused a great deal of surprise among the academic community. Scholars have considered it improbable that classical authors who gave attention to the internal diversity of Judaism at the end of the Second Temple period should have left unrecorded such a seemingly substantial community. As a result, attempts have been made to identify the Covenanters with practically all of the known Jewish sects of the Second Temple period. A widely accepted hypothesis equates the Covenanters with the Essenes, but not all scholars agree with this proposal.

VII. Conclusion.

According to Francis Watson in *Text, Church and World*, "If the Old Testament interpretation is to be undertaken on the presupposition of the Lucan Jesus, 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms' (Lk 24:44), then this statement must be understood in a sense broad enough to accommodate the Matthean assertion that the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled in the command, 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you' (Mt 7:12). To see Jesus Christ as the center of a single Christian canon, comprising an Old and New Testament, is not necessarily to impose an artificial unity on an irreducibly heterogeneous body of writings. It is to refuse the insidious Marcionite temptation to think of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings as the Holy Scripture of the Jewish community alone" (p. 279).