

The Reformation Canon

In the earliest stages of the early Christian communities only the writings of the Old Testament, that is to say the Greek Septuagint, were recognized as “Holy Scriptures”. The first Christians mainly used the Psalms and prophetic books, and much less the Pentateuch. (In fact, we can see from the sources that the Pentateuch became part of the Christian readings in the Church from the 4th century onward.) Texts from the Psalms and the prophets were used as evidence for Jesus’ Messiahship, his suffering, death and inthronisation. We can see this most clearly in the earliest letters of the New Testament, the letters of Paul. Even though collections of Jesus’ words must already have been put together during Paul’s days, Paul rarely refers to Jesus’ *ipsissima verba*,¹ but mainly uses the writings of the Old Testament to support and underpin his teachings. It was the (Greek) Old Testament that was the background of and breeding ground for the Christian teachings about Jesus.

The formation of the Canon was basically a dogmatically inspired exercise: a Canon was needed both to collect what was considered to be the foundation of the Church’s teaching and to exclude what was not in agreement with the Church’s teaching. The textual fluidity in which the earliest churches had lived, gradually disappeared. A large number of books acquired “canonical” status already early on. The earliest full Bible manuscripts (Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, both 4th century) contain most of the writings which we regard as canonical today. Even though the official decisions on some of the Canons (I use a plural on purpose here) are relatively recent, most collections were already more or less fixed in the earlier stages of the Church’s history (2nd to 4th centuries).

The original function of the Old Testament in the Canon was to support the Christian teachings of the New Testament, and both testaments had one cultural horizon, namely the world of Hellenistic-Judaism. However, in the West this function of the Canon started to change with the rise of humanism. The humanists’ adage “*ad fontes*” gave rise to the idea that the books of the Old and New Testament should no longer be studied in the Latin of the Vulgate but rather in their original languages Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Gradually the scholastic way of Bible interpretation that was practiced at Western European universities was replaced by a philological one.² At first the focus was on the discovery of Greek sources (think of Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus), and from the end of the 16th century onwards the study of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac developed. Both Catholic and Protestant universities began to show a growing interest in the original “Jewishness” of the Old Testament, but the academic training in Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac was best organized at the Protestant universities in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, England, and in Protestant cities in France Saumur and Sedan. “Christian Hebraists” such as Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), Josephus Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), Johannes Drusius (1550-1616), Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614), Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629), Louis Cappel (1585-1658) helped to develop Jewish studies into an

¹ The only times Paul refers to a word of Jesus is in 1Co 7:10, and in 1Co 11:24-25, where he quotes Jesus’ words at the Last Supper.

² Already two centuries before Reuchlin, Roger Bacon (ca 1214-1294) had shown a keen interest in and knowledge of the Hebrew language.

academic enterprise at Western European universities, with Basel and Leiden as most important Hebrew presses.

As a result of this growing interest in the original languages of the Bible, Reformed Protestants opted for the Hebrew canon for their translations of the Old Testament and no longer for a Septuagint (Vulgate) one.³ And this again resulted in a change of the original cultural context and background of the New Testament: the New Testament was not studied as a collection of books that heavily depended on the world of the Greek Old Testament with its deuterocanonical books, and on Greco-Roman culture in general, but as a collection of writings that had to be explained from a Hebrew Canon. The Reformed adage “*sola Scriptura*” resulted in all non-canonical materials being more and more excluded from the historical interpretation into the New Testament. E.g. the first editions the Dutch “States Translation” of 1637 still contained the deuterocanonical books, be it in an appendix with a special warning to the reader, but later editions were printed without the deuterocanonical books. The same happened with the later editions of the Authorized Version of 1611. This development had two negative consequences: the New Testament was explained from a world to which it not really belonged, and “Judaism” was restricted to a Hebrew/Aramaic speaking world. For example: often the Old Testament sacrificial terminology or Isaiah 53 was used as source or background for the idea of the Christ dying for the benefit of others. Instead, it makes more sense to draw upon the tradition of the death of the martyr found in the deuterocanonical books and other Hellenistic-Jewish writings. Another example is the frequent contrast made between a Hebrew/Aramaic speaking “Palestinian Judaism” on the one hand and a Greek speaking “Hellenistic Judaism” as its deviant form on the other. In fact, there was no “normative” Palestinian Judaism: most Jews lived outside Palestine and were influenced in different ways by the Greco-Roman culture around them.

More research is needed to see what exactly the consequences of the combination of the adages “*ad fontes*” and “*sola scriptura*” together with the “truncated” Canon of the Reformed Churches have been for biblical research and Bible translation. But no doubt the Reformed Canon, which had its roots in a truly academically motivated study of the Bible, also lead inadvertently to a number of serious limitations of that same academic enterprise.

One question we can ask is: just as any Old Testament or New Testament “text” is the reconstruction of a text at a certain point in time, “canon” is a reconstruction of a collection of Old and New Testament books at a certain point in time. In their day and age, the Reformers chose for a Hebrew (Masoretic) canon combined with a Greek New Testament: the idea behind it was to present a collection of “most original” texts. But an equally justified choice for the Christian church is to form a collection that represents an early Christian canon: a Greek New Testament combined with a Greek Old Testament.

³ The first to use a Hebrew and Greek text for a translation of a full Bible into a vernacular was Pierre-Robert Olivétan (1506-1538). In the same period Martin Luther (1483-1546) and William Tyndale (1494-1536) worked on their translations of the Old Testament from the Hebrew. Soon other translations followed: the Geneva Bible (1560), the Polish “Brest” Bible (1563), the Czech “Bible of Cralice” (1579-93), etc.

Provisional bibliography

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