

February 8, 2009

The Publican and the Pharisee

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

We regard it as normal that the Christian Church includes the ancient books of the Hebrew canon in the same Bible as later works written by the Apostles. Obviously, we have long taken that inclusion for granted. I want to suggest, nonetheless, that its validity is far from self-evident. On the contrary, it rests on a set of assumptions that cry out for theological consideration. Is there a theological principle that warrants the inclusion of all those disparate works in one volume, and, if so, what is it?

Rather than address that question immediately, however, let me propose a prior reflection: Suppose we begin by leaving the apostolic writing aside and posing the identical question--canonical inclusion---about the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. For example, where do we find the principle which warrants the incorporation of the prophetic books into the same Bible as the Torah? Or, again, what elements do Numbers and Job share in such a way as to justify their inclusion in a single canon? And so on. Even within a single section of the Hebrew canon, for instance, what has Jonah to do with Nahum, except that both prophets took a dim view of Nineveh? That is to say, the principle of canonical unity---even if we limit our attention just to the Hebrew Bible---is difficult to discern by a simple examination of the canon.

Among the sundry attempts to address this inquiry about the Hebrew Scriptures, I believe the most reasonable is that which searches for the unity of that canon, not within its disparate components, but in some prior and non-literary principle---namely, the objective continuity of the chosen people of God. The canonical unity of the Hebrew Scriptures is not found in the Scriptures, but in that *quid continuum* called Israel.

What I have in mind to say here was put succinctly several years ago by Remi Brague: "The unity of the Bible does not reside in the text itself, but in the experience of the people of Israel. That experience constitutes the common background upon which and in the light of which the texts have continuously been read and reread" (*The Wisdom of the World*, p. 44). Even in the Old Testament, in other words, ecclesiology is the basis and principle of canonicity.

If this point be granted, what may we say with regard to our original question: the incorporation of the apostolic writings into the same canon as the ancient Hebrew Scriptures? A form of the same argument, I believe, is warranted in this case too. That is to say, the inclusion of the apostolic writings into the Bible is justified---indeed, it is required---by the historical continuity of ancient Israel and the Christian Church. The governing principle of the Bible's table of contents is that single *quid continuum* which is Israel and the Church.

The historical continuity of Israel and the Church---as a single people of God---was described by St. Paul in organic terms. For him, there was just one Israel, a single *quid*

continuum, where certain branches (the Israelite remnant---Romans 11:2-5) are native to the stock, while others have been engrafted, so that they are fed from the same root (11:17). Paul did not say that the Christian Church "branched off" from Israel. On the contrary, it was "branched in"!

There is one Bible, then, because it came forth from the one *ekklesia*, that of the Old Testament and the New. With respect to the Holy Scriptures, it is a matter of historical fact--and should be promoted as a theological principle---that ecclesiology precedes canonicity.

Though there is true theological unity of the two Testaments, Paul's very metaphor of engrafting suggests that the *continuum* between Israel and the Church was far from seamless. When he speaks of the original branches being "broken off" from the stock, the violence of this metaphor well expresses the trauma we find reflected in virtually all the New Testament sources.

Indeed, a sustained preoccupation of the early Christians was how to explain the abrupt breaking off of Israel's native branches. Like other New Testament authors (Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:10; John 12:37-40), St. Paul appealed to Isaiah in order to show that Judaism's rejection of Jesus had been prophesied (Romans 11:8; cf. Acts 28:26-27). His further reflections on that crisis gave birth to the profound study of historical dialectics we find in Romans 9-11.

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