CHAPTER 29

From Tradition to Canon

The writings that make up the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament are the literary heritage of ancient Israel and Judah. These writings were composed and copied and revised over several hundred years. They are diverse in content as well as in literary form. Themes that are central to some books (e.g., the covenant, in Deuteronomy) are absent from others (Proverbs, Qoheleth). Rather than impose uniformity on this literature, we should recognize its inherent diversity.

The Bible does not preserve all the literature of ancient Judah. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls and from some of the Pseudepigrapha that there were many other writings in circulation. We should like to know more of the principle of selection of the canon. The Torah had been accepted as authoritative since the Persian period, and the Prophets since the beginning of the second century B.C.E. The only area where there was room for debate in the final selection was the Writings. Sectarian writings, such as the books of Enoch or some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, were not widely enough accepted to warrant inclusion. The books included were those that were cherished by the rabbis who laid the foundations of Judaism after the revolt against Rome in 66–70 C.E. The larger collection found in the Greek Bible reflects the more extensive corpus of writings that circulated in the Greek-speaking Diaspora.

The editors who gathered these books together made only very modest efforts to impose a meaningful shape on the collection. The different order of the Greek and Hebrew Bibles is a case in point. The fact that the Prophets are placed at the end of the Septuagint version supports the Christian view of the Old Testament as an essentially prophetic collection that points forward to the fulfillment of revelation in the New Testament. But the editing of the biblical books, like their composition, was a gradual process that went on over several hundred years. The "canonical shape of the text" is largely in the eye of the modern interpreter. The Bible consists of a collection of diverse writings that can be, and always has been, interpreted in various ways.

SACRED SCRIPTURE

On one level, the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament are collections of documents pertinent to the religious history of ancient Israel and Judah. For Jews and Christians over the

centuries they are more than that; they are also sacred scriptures, which are in some way authoritative, even in the modern world. The understanding of these writings as sacred scripture is bound up with claims of inspiration or revelation, and with the status of "canon" which ascribed to the collection.

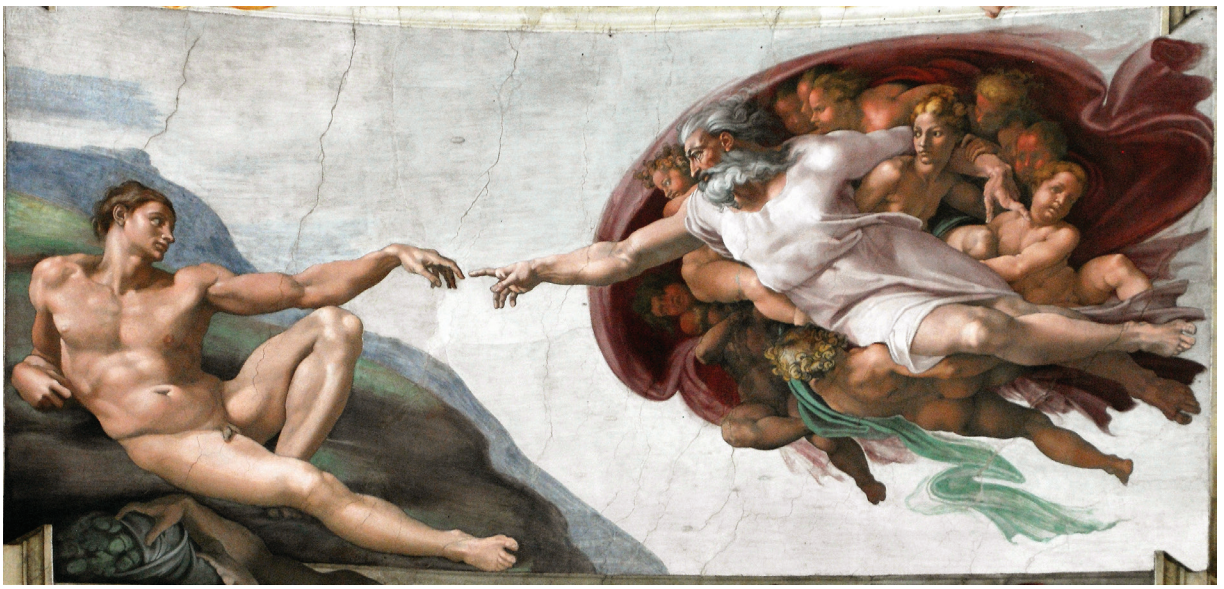
Inspiration and Revelation

Claims of inspiration and revelation can scarcely be discussed profitably in an academic context. It is possible, however, to say something about the way in which such claims arose and what they might entail.

Such claims are made in some biblical books, but by no means all. The laws of the Pentateuch supposedly originated in the revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, although many of them are transparently later. The prophets spoke their oracles in the name of the LORD. There is no claim of divine inspiration in the narrative and historical books, however, and the wisdom literature makes no pretence of being anything but human. Nonetheless, the claim of inspiration was gradually extended to the whole corpus, by analogy with the laws and the prophets.

It is often assumed that an inspired text must be historically accurate, whereas modern scholarship has repeatedly cast doubt on the veracity of biblical stories. (Think, for example, of the book of Joshua.) But the assumption begs questions of genre and intention. Joshua is not an exercise in historiography in the modern sense of the term. There is no reason, in principle, why a work of fiction should not be inspired as easily as a historical chronicle. Again, it is commonly assumed that an inspired text must be morally edifying. Many biblical texts most certainly are not, by any civilized measure. (Think, again, of Joshua, and the alleged wholesale slaughter of Canaanites, with divine approval.) But again, there is no reason in principle why a text that is shocking might not be inspired. Such a text can raise our moral consciousness by forcing us to confront the fact that immoral actions are often carried out in the name of religion. Claims of inspiration and revelation often carry with them assumptions and presuppositions that turn out to be inappropriate to the texts. For this reason, they are problematic. Rather than ask whether a text is revealed (and by what criteria could we possibly decide?) it is better to ask whether a text is revelatory, whether we learn something from it about human nature or about the way the world works. A text that is neither historically reliable nor morally edifying, such as the book of Joshua, may be all too revelatory about human nature.

People who approach the Bible with strong presuppositions about its inspired or revealed character are often at pains to save the appearances of the text, and explain away anything that might conflict with their presuppositions. In the ancient world, this was often done by means of allegory, the interpretation of a text as meaning something other than what it actually says. This method was originally developed by Greek scholars in Alexandria, to explain away the scandalous behavior of the gods in Homer's epics. It was adapted by Jewish scholars in Alexandria around the turn of the era, most notably Philo, who wrote extensive commentaries on the Torah, interpreting it in terms of Platonic philosophy. Later, this method was used by the Christian church fathers, and it was widely accepted as a legitimate method of interpretation in late antiquity. An allegorical interpretation



"Creation of Man" by Michelangelo (1475–1564); fresco from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome.

might, for example, explain the commands to eradicate the Canaanites as commands to root out vice from the soul. Such interpretations have little credibility in the modern world, however, and often seem to smack of dishonesty. (We are reminded of Job's charge that his friends would "lie for God" or distort the evidence to try to make God look good.) It is better to come to terms with the text in its own terms than to allegorize it so that it conforms to our ideas of propriety.

Canon

The term "canon" means "measuring stick," and it was used in the Hellenistic world for the standard or norm by which things were evaluated. It was adapted in early Christianity to refer to "the rule of faith." To speak of the Bible as canon implies that the Bible is the standard by which everything else is judged. This idea has a more central place in Protestant Christianity than in Judaism or in Catholicism. The status of "canon" is not something that is inherent in the biblical text but reflects the kind of authority conferred on the text by a particular community.

The idea of a canon has become fashionable in secular literary criticism in recent years, to denote the corpus of classic works that stand as benchmarks of excellence in a field. So one might say that Homer was canonical in ancient Greece, or Shakespeare in English literature. Canonical works are copied over and over again, and they become the standard reference works of their particular field. The biblical books can be said to be canonical in this sense for Judaism and Christianity. They provide a fund of stories and sayings that are the basis for a common discourse. They provide analogies by which new experiences can be understood, and problems addressed. The biblical books are not necessarily benchmarks of literary excellence, although some of them may be, but they provide case studies in

moral and religious reasoning. The case of the Bible, however, is somewhat different from that of a literary canon, because of the claim of divine inspiration, and the religious authority that it implies.

The ways in which the Bible has functioned as canon have varied widely among religious communities. Biblical texts are not always laws to be obeyed or examples to be imitated. There are many more subtle ways in which people may be informed by a canonical book. Some modern approaches to the canon have celebrated that diversity. In the phrase of James A. Sanders, the canon is "adaptable for life." It is not a tightly coherent, systematic collection that imposes one orthodox view of life. Rather, it is a smorgasbord of resources, some of which may be helpful at one time, others at another. From this perspective, what is important about the canon is the process whereby old texts are constantly used to address new situations. From this perspective, the canon is a resource rather than a norm, but the need to refer constantly to the canonical text inevitably places some restraints on the interpreter.

ENDURING VALUES

The importance that the Bible has enjoyed in the Western world is due in large part to its canonical status in Judaism and Christianity and to the widespread belief in its inspiration. The influence of these books on Western culture is enormous. Knowledge of biblical stories is indispensable for the appreciation of Western art and culture. Think, for example, of the Sistine Chapel paintings of Michelangelo, or of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Even apart from its importance as a cultural aid, however, the Old Testament remains vital and engaging literature even from a purely humanistic perspective. Here it may suffice to mention two factors that render the Bible an important resource for humanistic education.

First, no other collection of documents from the ancient world, and scarcely any other documents at all, speak with such passionate urgency on the subject of social justice. The primary voices in this respect are those of the Hebrew prophets, but the law codes of the Pentateuch are also important. Biblical laws are not always satisfactory by modern standards. Biblical attitudes to slaves, women, and foreigners are all mired in the cultural assumptions of the ancient world, with only occasional flickers of enlightenment. Nonetheless, the concern for the unfortunate of society in these books is remarkable, and often stands as a reproach to the modern Western world.

Second, it has been claimed that the biblical authors were the pioneers of prose fiction. Whatever the historical merits of this claim, and it is not without substance, the achievements of the biblical writers are not just a matter of literary form. The biblical narratives offer a warts-and-all picture of human nature that has seldom been surpassed. When the Bible is read without moralistic presuppositions, it gives a picture of human nature that is not comforting, but may well be said to be revelatory.

In the modern world, the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, is often viewed with suspicion, because of its association with religious fundamentalism. There are laws in the Bible that can only be described as narrow-minded and intolerant, but the collection as

a whole cannot be characterized in this way. This is a collection of writings marked by lively internal debate and by a remarkable spirit of self-criticism, directed not only at the people of Israel but sometimes at the myths and certainties of the tradition. Think, for example of Job, or of Jonah's ironic portrayal of prophecy. It is somewhat ironic, then, that fundamentalistic readings of the Bible treat it so often as a bedrock of certainty. The portrayal of the Bible as a source of infallible truth does not arise from a reading of the Bible itself, but is a monstrous imposition upon it.

One of the most persistent themes of the Hebrew Bible is the critique of idolatry. This applies not only to carved or molten statues but also to the human tendency to absolutize things that are merely part of the created order. Perhaps the greatest irony in the history of the Bible is that it itself has so often been treated as an idol, and venerated with a reverential attitude while its message is ignored. Biblical figures from Abraham to Job do not hesitate to argue with the Almighty. The least that might be expected of readers of the Bible is that they bring the same critical spirit to bear on the biblical text.

FOR FURTHER READING

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John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

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Timothy H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon* (Yale Anchor Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

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