The use and origin of the (Old and) New Testament as Christianity's canon

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Note:
This article is dedicated to Professor Dr P.M. Venter. The article is a reworked version of a paper presented at Scriptorium's day seminar on the theme: 'Which Bible is the normative "Word of God"?', 08 March 2012, Bible Focus Centre for Advancement and the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

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This article explained the valuation of Christian believers with regard to the Christian Bible a 'Holy Scripture'. In the article the notion 'Scriptural authority' was connected with an understanding of both the origin and use of the Christian canon. The article described the origin of the Bible in light of the supposition that the Bible functions as (1) book of theology, as well as (2) book of believers and as (3) book of the church. The article consisted of references to the role of the Old Testament and the New Testament canonical collections and the role of ecclesial synodal decisions. It also obtained a graphical overview of the history and dates of the New Testament writings as a canonical list. The article concluded with a reflection on the relevance for the use and authority of the Bible, seen from the perspective of the use and origin of the Bible as Christianity's canon.

Introduction

This article attempts to transcend binary categories in our academic reflection on the historical origins of the Bible as Christianity's canon. More than a decade ago, Pieter M. Venter (1998:505) asked that 'even traditional studies of the history of the canon have to pay attention to a series of socio-cultural factors'. This 'overview article' is dedicated to Venter who was, during almost the whole period of my professorship in New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria, my Old Testament colleague. In his 1998 contribution 'What does "canon" mean at present?', Venter notes that in 'postmodern society the canon of the Bible works on a multidimensional level, confronting people with the living God who empowers them to live in God's presence' (Venter 1998:505). With this dedication I do not intend to provide 'new' knowledge, but rather would like to confirm and explain Venter's truism by focusing on the New Testament.

The Bible – consisting of both the Old Testament and the New Testament – came historically into existence over a period of thousands of years. My article aims to argue that this literary history is interwoven with the theological use of the Bible and the process of Christianity's canon formation. 'Origin' and 'use' are thus not dichotomous notions that express different processes. The *use* of the Bible is part and parcel of its *origin* and vice versa. Likewise, from hindsight, although canon formation happened afterwards, both the Bible's literary origins and its theological use are not independent from the canonical formation process during which Biblical writings obtained ecclesial authority as the 'Word of God'.

Therefore, with regard to the concept 'the Bible as Word of God', the title of Walter Brueggemann's ([2005] 2011) book, *The Book that breathes new life: Scriptural authority and biblical theology*, quite correctly does not refer to 'biblical authority' without also alluding to 'biblical theology'. Also the World Council of Churches (WCC), 'Faith and Order Paper No. 99' (in Flesseman-van Leer 1980), on the Bible and its authority articulates this two-in-one viewpoint profoundly by stating that 'the contemporary interpretative process is in fact simply the continuation of the interpretative process which begins in the Bible itself' (Flesseman-van Leer 1980:57). The WCC makes it clear that:

> only by the constantly renewed interpretation does the one message remain a living Spirit and not a dead letter. This sheds new light on the problem … between norm and change.

An important questions is:

> How can we interpret the message of the Bible in such a way that, at one and the same time, its authority is respected and it sets us free to understand the demands and opportunities of our present time? (Flesseman-van Leer 1980:57)

As recently as 30 September 2010, Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI addressed in the same vein, ordained and non-ordained believers on the use of the Bible by using similar dialectical categories (Ratzinger 2010). Amongst the many issues in his papal address, Ratzinger referred to the unsound dichotomy in the life of the church which is caused by fundamentalists' use of

the Bible by ignoring the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the historical origins as intertwined with the Bible's theological message. This papal address states:

> On the one hand, the [*Vatican*] Council emphasizes the study of literary genres and historical context as basic elements for understanding the meaning intended by the sacred author. On the other hand, since Scripture must be interpreted in the same Spirit in which it was written. (Ratzinger 2010)

Referring to the growing conservatism amongst believers who demoralise solid biblical scholarship by their foundationalistic stockiness by means of a superficial piety of upholding the so-called plain sense of Scripture, Ratzinger (2010) writes the following (*author's emphasis*):

> The attention we have been paying to different aspects of the theme of biblical hermeneutics now enables us to consider a subject which came up a number of times during the Synod: that of the fundamentalist interpretation of sacred Scripture. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in its document 'The Interpretation of the Bible' in the Church, has laid down some important guidelines. Here I would like especially to deal with approaches which fail to respect the authenticity of the sacred text, but promote *subjective and arbitrary interpretations*. The 'literalism' championed by the fundamentalist approach actually represents a betrayal of both the literal and the spiritual sense, and opens the way to various forms of manipulation, as, for example, by disseminating anti-ecclesial interpretations of the Scriptures. The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the incarnation itself. As regards relationships with God, fundamentalism seeks to escape any closeness of the divine and the human … for this reason, it tends to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Spirit. It fails to recognize that the word of God has been formulated in language and expression conditioned by various periods. Christianity, on the other hand, perceives *in* the words *the* Word himself, the *Logos* who displays his mystery through this complexity and the reality of human history. The true response to a fundamentalist approach is 'the faith-filled interpretation of sacred Scripture'. This manner of interpretation, practiced from antiquity within the Church's Tradition, seeks saving truth for the life of the individual Christian and for the Church. It recognizes the historical value of the biblical tradition. Precisely because of the tradition's value as an historical witness, this reading seeks to discover the living meaning of the sacred Scriptures for the lives of believers today, while not ignoring the human mediation of the inspired text and its literary genres.

Pope Benedict XVI's reverberation of the words formulated by the Second Vatican Council, especially in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, is also my point of departure in this article which focuses on the use and origin of the Bible as Christianity's canon:

> Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through human beings in human fashion, it follows that the interpreters of sacred Scripture, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words.
>
> In a word, 'where exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology, and conversely, where theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Church's Scripture, such a

theology no longer has a foundation' (quoted sections above taken from Ratzinger 2010).

My basic belief is the almost trivial notion that the Bible is God's word and human word at the same time. For me, it means in brief, that the Bible functions as (1) book of theology, as well as (2) book of believers and as (3) book of the church (see Van Aarde 2004:503–532). An overview of the origin of the Bible should take all three dimensions into account. Towards the end of my article, I shall return to my understanding of the relevance for the use and authority of the Bible in this overview.

History of origin

I begin my cursory overview of the origin of the Bible with an assumption about faith, as I encounter it in the writing of the systematic theologian, John Webster (2003):

> Whatever its institutional location, Christian theology is properly an undertaking of the speaking and hearing church of Jesus Christ. It originates in the church's existence in the Word, and, like the church within which it undertakes its commission; it is governed and wholly referred to the Word or saving self-presence of God. In an important sense, theology is not an academic discipline generated by the pressure of the inquiring intellect; rather, it follows the same rule as all other thought, speech and action in the church, namely that it is brought about by the startling reality of the gospel of reconciliation. The gospel is not just the 'theme' or 'matter' of theology, as if the gospel were simply one more topic to which the inquiring human mind might choose to direct itself; rather, the gospel is that which brings theology into existence and holds it in being. As with the church, so with theology: its ontological ground, its *ratio essendi*, is the divine work of self-manifestation. (p. 123)

As 'book of the church', the Bible is the church's canon. Seeing my antipathy against dichotomous thinking that I emphasised at the beginning of the article, one needs a nuanced differentiation by making it clear that the history of the canon is not the same as the origin of the 'Bible as literature' – although origin and canonical use are intertwined. From a theory of literature perspective, the Bible is a collection of literary corpora and individual writings. Nevertheless, as far as the Old Testament is concerned, three corpora can, in a certain sense, be regarded as 'canonical collections', namely the 'Torah', the 'Prophets' and the 'Hagiographa' (the 'Tanach'). New Testament canonical lists are also found, namely that of Muratori and those in the Paschal Letter of Athanasius. The origin of these corpora pertains to literary genres and we can distinguish between the Pentateuch, die early-prophetic and literary-prophetic writings, the Psalms, the chokmatic writings, the Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters, the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew & Luke) and the Acts of the Apostles, and finally, the Johannine writings and General Letters.

In these literary corpora, we find literary genres such as historical narratives, law codes, poetry, wisdom literature, prophesy, apocalyptic literature, biographic narratives, acta and letters. Some of the 'letters' are known as 'epistles', such as the books of Hebrews and James. The *Sitzen im Leben* – in other words 'settings in life' – within which these literary

genres originated and functioned in the life of the Israelite and Christian faith communities are, amongst others, the cult, propaganda, teaching, controversy and apology.

From a literary perspective, the Bible is the product of, amongst other things, historiography and the product of other ways as to how texts were produced and formed, such as narrative-type texts. As far as historiography is concerned, we must bear in mind that in Biblical times 'historical truth' was determined by an ancient world of thinking and that it should not be seen through the lenses of the *Aufklärung*. Then, there are also both 'metaphor' and 'myth' as forms of 'text formation' (see Pokorný [2005] 2011:37–67). A myth is a religious text about the encounter between divine and/or demonic forces and human beings. The Bible also contains sagas (see Dibelius [1919] 1934:164–172; Otzen [1976] 1980:6). A saga is a religious text (usually in the form of a story) about the encounter between divine and/or demonic forces and a person(s), which is presented as a 'historical' event.

We, therefore, have to bear in mind that the Bible originated from a pre-modern, mythological world of thinking. Apart from myths and sagas, the Bible also includes cultic texts, parables and other symbolic texts. The type of myths we encounter in ancient writings (see Heiler 1961:283–286; cf. Honko 1984:50–51), can be described as theogonic myths (narrations about the origin of gods); cosmogonic myths (creation stories, e.g. stories about where the world or a group originates from and the subjugation of chaos); cosmological myths (explanatory stories about 'the order of creation' in nature and the primordial beginning and these include myths about the sun, stars and seasons); anthropological myths (stories about the creation of humans and their relationship with the gods; these include myths about the fall of man and a devastating flood); ancestral myths (stories, often in the form of sagas, about the origin of groups of people such as tribes); cult myths (stories about the primeval beginning of a sanctuary or shrine or a cultic ceremony or rite); soteriological and apocalyptic myths (stories about divine interventions in the human world through the deeds of a salvific figure); transcendental myths (stories about the underworld, heavenly journeys, death and eternal life); end time myths (apocalyptical stories and reports about the end of the world and the catastrophic restoration of the primordial beginning).

Hence, not everything in the Bible is meant to be taken in a 'literal' way. There are parts which were intentionally meant as being figurative and symbolic. Symbolic language is when one thing is said or written, whilst something else is meant, and it can take on various forms, such as a metaphor or a parable. The latter again can take on different forms such as allegory, epiphor or diaphor (see Wheelwright [1962] 1973:72; cf. Scott 1990:61). 'By juxtaposing not only similar (*epiphors*), but contrasting entities (*diaphors*) …, both the metaphor and the parable have the power to create something new' (Reinstorf & Van Aarde 2002:726).

The faith which is encountered in the Bible is meant as 'kerygma' (see Koester 1989:361–381), in other words, in Webster's words, 'divine work of self-manifestation' or the 'Word' as 'the saving self-presence of God'. It, however, does not mean that 'kerygma' as proclamation of 'divine truth', is free from ideological interest or even mystification. Mystification is the act in terms of which own social, human interest (see Adam 1995:15) is legitimised by means of a claim to divine sanction. Positively seen, 'kerygma' can be described as proclamation emanating from faith, which signifies faith in God as its intent, and not by 'a theoretical system' pretended to 'have a privileged relation to the Truth', but actually is 'contaminated' by 'decisions we can attribute to personal interests, unscientific interests, unresolved psychological determinations, or any of dozens of impure, non-universal motivations' (Adam 1995:15). From a 'canonical' perspective, the Bible, as *Old Testament* (see Gunneweg [1977] 1978:9; Ridderbos 1971:193) and *New Testament* (see Metzger 1987:234–236) respectively, developed from early canonical collections and New Testament canonical lists. This development differs from how the New Testament as literary writings came into existence. By focusing on the *origin* of the New Testament (and not on the Old Testament too[1]), it can be graphically depicted (Figure 1).

During the process of canonisation of the New Testament, numerous canon lists – mostly controversial – emerged, such as those of Marcion (135–140), Eusebius (260–340), the Muratorian Fragment Muratori (*c*. 350–375, discovered by Lodovico Antonio Muratori in Milan between 1738 and 1740), and the Easter Letter of Athanasius of Alexandria (*c*. 296–373) (see Smith 1998:297–311; cf. Koester [1980] 1982:8; MacDonald 1995:195; Hennecke 1963:59–60).

Tertullian[2] interchanged the Greek term for 'Bible' (*biblia*) in Latin with the terms *testamentum* and *instrumentum*. Tertullian, born in Carthage in North Africa, who was converted to Christendom around 195 CE used both the terms *testamentum* and *instrumentum*. In Roman law, both these terms refer to a written contract: the former to a testament which comes into effect upon the death of a person, and the latter to a public contract. Tertullian (*Adv. Marc*. 4.2; *Adv. Prax*. 15.20; *De pudic*. 1) preferred the term 'instrumentum' (referring to official *acta* or official documents) when referring to the 'Bible' as canon (Hill 1995:447).

Based on information in 2 Esdras xiv (an apocalyptic writing recorded *c*. 100 CE – see Wegner 2004:43) and Josephus (*Contra Apionem* i.8, written in 95 CE – see La Sor, Hubbard & Bush 1983:21), the origin of the Old Testament[3] as canon

1. See David Carr's (2011) suggestion of literary formation of the Hebrew Bible, and Christoph Berner's (2012) critical review thereof (*Review of Biblical Literature*). The important point is that, as in the case with the 'New Testament writings', almost all 'ancient texts, particularly culturally-central literary theological texts like the Hebrew Bible, were revised over time. It happened. We can see it. Moreover, they show *what* sort of changes such texts underwent over time: compositional expansion, occasional conflation/combination, harmonization and coordination within themselves and with other texts' (Carr 2011:145).

2. For example, *Apol* xviii.1; xix.i and *De praesc haer* 38; *Adv Marc* iv.1, as well as *Adv Prax* 20 (see Metzger 1987:159).

3. See James Alfred Loader (2002:1417) who prefers the term 'Old Testament', 'venerated since Melito of Sardes', rather than 'First Testament', as proposed by, among others, James Sanders (1987:47–49) and Erich Zenger (1995:145–148, 152–154).
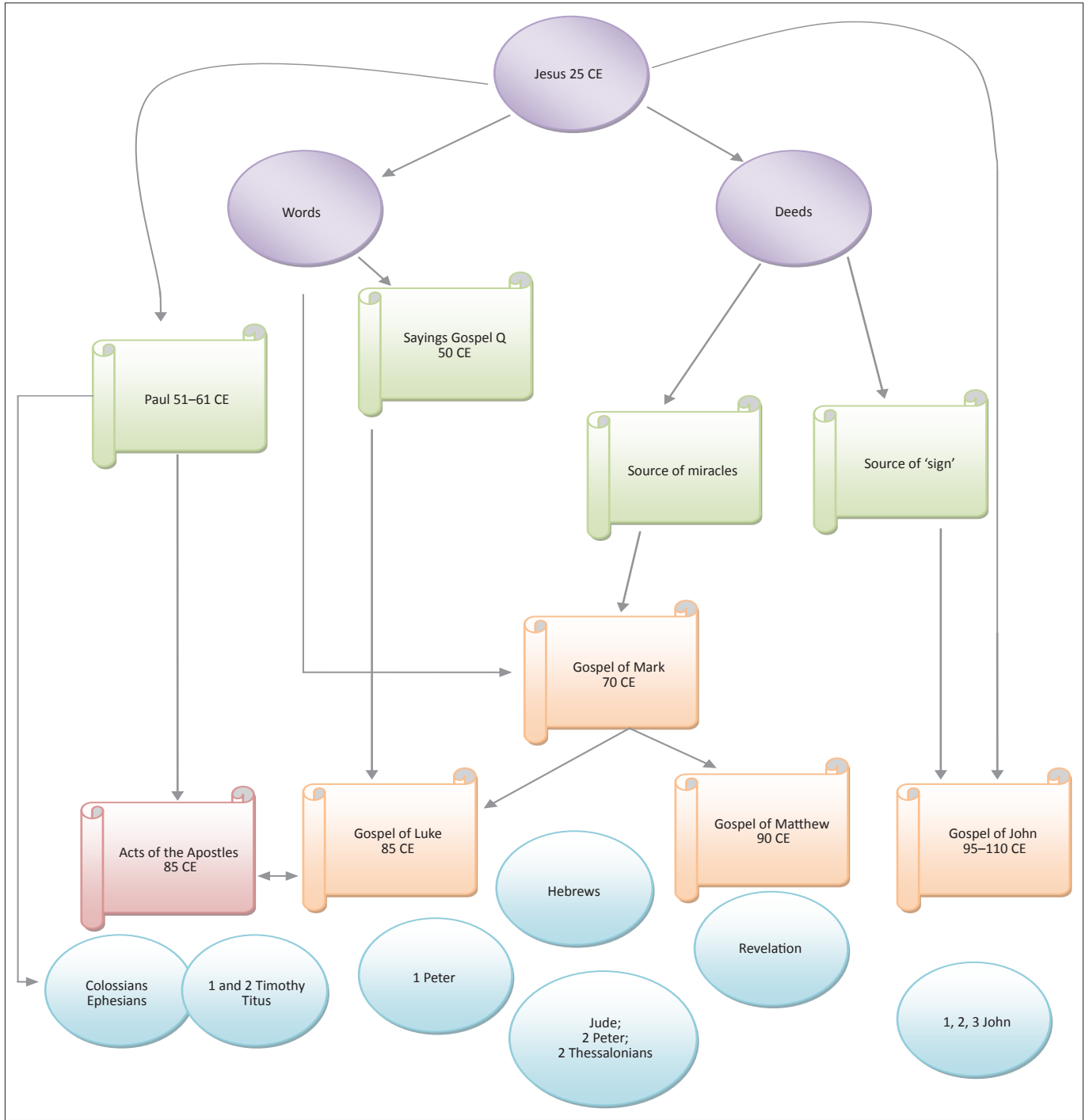
FIGURE 1: Origins of New Testament as literary writings.

can be traced back to successive additions of collections, known as the tripartite *Tanach*, namely the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nevi'im*) and the Writings (*Ketuvim*) (see Ridderbos [1962] 1971:186–192). Today, scholars do not consider the view that a 'so-called rabbinic synod in Jamnia fixed the canon' as authentic (Loader 2002:1422, n. 8). Neither is it 'no longer tenable to picture the early church as taking over a fixed canon from the Hellenistic Jewish community in Egypt' (Loader 2002:1421). However, as Loader (2002) notes:

> Even if canonising in both cases [*Jewry and the early church*] came about only gradually, it is important from our perspective that

this process was complete at a certain point. We cannot pin down a moment, but we can say at which point it had already been reached. When, at the end of the first century CE, it was important to Flavius Josephus [*Contra Apionem* 1.37–42] to define the precise number of 22 books (plural!) as accurately as possible, this point had already been passed. (p. 1422 [*Author's emphasis*])

The extent of the Old Testament as canon, which together with the New Testament, the church regards as part of the *one* Holy Book, varied until the time of the Reformation.[4] This

4. This 'one Holy Book' implies 'an Old Testament with Hebrew content but Greek arrangement' (Loader 2002:1428), but does not refer to two 'differently structured book collections' or to a canon, consisting of 'a list or table of contents' (Loader 2002:1426).

variance relates primarily to the pre-eminence of either the 'Hebrew Writings'[5] or the more extensive Septuagint[6] (see Singer [1901–1906]) during different eras in the church.

Based on, amongst other things, the 'canon list' of Melito of Sardes (c.160 CE) and the Easter Letter of Athanasius (c. 296) – as a result of the growing authority of the Western part of the church, the synods of the church in North Africa, the synod of Hippo (393 CE) and the synod of Carthage (397 CE) rather opted for the 'plus of the LXX'. The Reformation, influenced by Calvin, adopted the order of the LXX but not the 'apocryphal plus'. In reaction to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church, during the Council of Trent in 1546, upheld the Old Testament apocrypha, even adding others to it.

Even today, different canons exist within the church. Since the Council of Jerusalem in 1672, the Eastern Church followed a different course to that of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Church in the West, and to this day there is no consensus within the Greek Orthodox Church about the scope of both the Old Testament and New Testament canon.

As far as the scope of the New Testament canon (comprising 27 books) is concerned, the Reformers have not altered the state of affairs that prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church since the Synod of Rome in 382 CE, despite Luther's and Calvin's canon critical pronouncements about, amongst other things, the letter to James, Hebrews, Judah and Revelation. Calvin was convinced that 2 Peter could not have been written by the apostle Paul, and that Paul was not the author of Hebrews (cf. Van Eck 2008:1158, n. 5). Similarly, according to Calvin, Joshua and Samuel were not the authors of the books by the same name (see Labuschagné 2000:20–21).

The Bible itself does not contain declarations about the origin and existence of canon lists. Moreover, the Hebrew 'Old Testament' had not been concluded during the times of Jesus, not even during the late first century. Nor was it the Hebrew 'Old Testament' that became part of the church's canon, but rather the Greek translation (the Septuagint = LXX) thereof. It was Jerome (Hieronymus), the translator of the Old Testament into Latin (known as the Vulgate), who had failed in his attempt in circa 400 CE to have the Hebrew 'Old Testament' recognised as the only written norm for the church (see Sutcliffe 1948:345–352).

Luther classified those books which form part of the Vulgate but were not part of the Hebrew 'Old Testament', as 'apocrypha' – books which did not enjoy the same status as the canonical books, but which nevertheless were deemed

5. In the order of Law, Prophets and Writings – as can be seen in the Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 14b, 15a (see Gunneweg [1977] 1978:9).

6. LXX = The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the 39 books of the Old Testament. According to *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, the 'Septuagint was originally the designation for the Pentateuch translated into Koine Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean from the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE) until the development of Byzantine Greek (c. 600 CE). But in time it came to refer to the Greek translation of the Christian Old Testament, or the "Greek Old Testament", incorporating the translations of all the books of the Hebrew Bible and books later considered apocryphal or deutero-canonical, some composed in Greek and some translations.'

'useful and good' to read (see Hayes 2008:987–990). Unlike Lutheran churches, which never passed a definite synodal pronouncement about this matter, the Calvinist churches made a definitive distinction between canonical and apocryphal books in 1559 with the Belgic Confession, Article 6, declaring that the church may read the latter and learn from it (cf. McClintock & Strong [1868] 1968:80). In the old official Dutch translation (*Statenvertaling*), the apocrypha were included in the form of an appendix to the New Testament, but the appendix was omitted from later editions.

It cannot be historically ascertained whether or not the Vulgate by Jerome (after Athanasius's list) was ratified at all by the decree of the Council of Rome in 382 CE during the period 384–395 CE (as commissioned by Pope Damascus). It is possible that that which is regarded as the 'decree of the Council of Rome' could very well have been the 'expanded edition of the Decretum Gelasianum' (which only reached its final form in the 6th century CE). In all likelihood, the manuscripts of the *Decretum Gelasianum* in phases do revert to Popes Damascus, Hormisdas and Gelasius (see Schneemelcher & Wilson 1991:32).

As far as the 'New Testament' is concerned, the work of Marcion (140 CE) for the first time represents indications of a fixed, written canon. Therefore, Marcion is widely regarded as the 'impetus' or as the 'catalyst' of the canon idea (cf. Gamble 1985:59–62). Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, was probably the first person who referred to a completed list of Holy Scriptures (referring to that which we know as the 'New Testament') as *canon* (*kanōn*).

The canonisation process was completed *de facto* in Western Europe at the Synod of Rome (382 CE), but of this we cannot be completely sure. All doubt was indeed removed by a papal explanation by Pope Innocent I in a letter to Exuperius, bishop of Toulouse, in *circa* 405 CE. The decree of the Synod of Rome was primarily the result of Jerome's influence, who in turn, based his viewpoint on the 39th Easter Letter written by Athanasius in 367 CE. The tradition of the bishop of Alexandria writing an 'Easter Letter', which prevailed during the period 329–373 CE, dates back to the Synod of Nicaea in 325 CE. The Synod wanted to eliminate the conflict in the church regarding the date of the celebration of Easter, and instructed the bishop of Alexandria to annually determine the date of the following year's Easter (see Schaff & Wallace [1891] 2007:xli). In such an 'Easter Letter' the bishop also raised other matters of interest. This particular Easter Letter contained a canon list comprising 27 writings.

The seven 'catholic' letters (James, 2 Peter, 3 John and Jude) were listed by Athanasius before Paul's 14 letters. Hebrews counts amongst these, and was placed between the Thessalonians letters and the Pastoral letters, with Philemon being placed last. The Revelation of John follows after the Pauline corpus and concludes the list. In addition to the list, but clearly separated from the 27 books, the following books were added with the intention of 'oral instruction in the word of true religion' (in Athanasius's Easter Letter): Wisdom of

Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobias, the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas.

The above-mentioned 27 writings encompass the contents of the New Testament as canonical collection decided upon by the Synod of Rome, and these have been included as such in the Belgic Confession, Sections 4 and 5. However, at the Synod of Nicaea in 325 CE, another list of canonic books came to the fore. This list shows great resemblance with Athanasius's list as far as the so-called 'recognised' (*homologoumena*) New Testamentical writings are concerned. This is the copy of the fifty *testamentasized holy writings* which Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, had to make as was commissioned by Emperor Constantine for the sake to educate the church. Eusebius also uses terms such as 'accepted' (*anōmologētai*) (*HE* 3.3.1, 5 – see Eusebius [1932] 1973). The New Testament, in its current form, was not only influenced by actions of Eusebius, but also directly by the Roman Emperor himself.

Appropriation

This is the history which reinforces my conviction that canonicity is at most a matter of ecclesial confession. It is decidedly not, like the 'ministry of reconciliation', an evangelical matter, which belongs to the 'well-being' (*Wohlsein*) of the church, as Friedrich Schleiermacher ([1830] 1960:§ 127.2) puts it. Schleiermacher emphasises the inextricable connection between the church and Scripture, which had been 'breathed' (=*beseelt*) by the Holy Spirit. He regards the 'holy Scripture' as something of a more immutable nature and calls it *Grundzüge*. He distinguishes this foundational matter from other ecclesial aspects, which are not so 'fixed', for example the plurality of 'churches' which is transient because it comes and goes as a result of the church's co-existence with the world. With 'Scripture', Schleiermacher implies the 'Christ in Scripture', which the church proclaims, in other words, the 'ministry of the Word'. The specific form in which this ministry came to us in the canonical New Testament, belongs to the church's *being and essence* (*Sein*) but not to the church's well-being (*Wohlsein*).

Historic-chronologically seen, the first writing of the New Testament, namely 1 Thessalonians, was written *circa* 50–52 CE, and the last one, namely 2 Peter, was written about 130–140 CE. In the above-mentioned graphical outlay of the origins of the New Testament as literary writings, it is clear that although Jesus of Nazareth constitutes a nucleus, some documents directly flowed from the memoirs about him, and others were indirectly inspired by those influenced by the traditions about him. Willi Marxsen (1976:45–62), in his book *Die Sache Jesu geht weiter* prefers therefore to refer to Jesus as *Bringer des Evangeliums* rather than *Inhalt des Evangeliums*).

What has become clear is, that it would be anachronistic to turn the canon issue into a New Testament issue. Yet, traces of the canon concept are present in the New Testament itself. With 'traces' I do not mean isolated texts such as 2 Timothy 3:16, namely 'All Scripture is inspired by God', and Revelation 22:18, '… if anyone adds anything to them,

God will add to his punishment the plagues described in this book.' What I have in mind is Schleiermacher's concept of *Grundzüge*. For me, this 'foundational matter' is that which Willi Marxsen describes as the 'canon behind the canon', which is namely the *Sache Jesu* (the 'cause of Jesus') (Marxsen 1968, 1970:233–246; see Van Aarde 2001:148–171).

The 'true canon', the cause of Jesus – however, not denoting the 'New Testament' as such, referred to by N.T. Wright (2005:121–126; cf. Malan 2011:p. 4 of p. 10) as the 'foundation charter' – precedes the fixed canon (both Old Testament and New Testament) qualitatively in principle, and quantitatively in years (cf. Snyman 2007:179). The 'true canon', according to Karl Barth ([1947/1964] 2003:62), is the 'normative Word of God', and is in its Lutheran sense *das in der Bibel sprechende Wort* (= the Word that is speaking in the Bible). To Martin Luther ([1523] 1545, *WADB* 8.12.5 = 1883) the 'treasure' is not the Word *per se*, but 'Christ' who is concealed in Scripture, like a baby wrapped in cloths. Scripture is the *Mutterschoß der Kirche* (= the mother's lap of the church) (see Gloege 1970:13–40). For Karl Barth the formation of the canon is the church's *confession* that God elects and calls people ('prophets and apostles') as God's witnesses. Barth ([1947/1964] 2003:62) expresses these 'confessional events' as follows (my translation):

> Because the church's knowledge about this matter, as is the case with anything else, is limited human knowledge, temporary and possibly in need of expansion and correction, the church's confession about canonicity (as is the case with any other matter) cannot bear the trait of finality, or could purport to be anything but a preliminary finding. (p. 62)

The specific limitations of the canon, in antiquity and in modern times are, as far as the facts are concerned, *de iure* open to the possibility of a better instruction in the future as far as the actual extent of that canon, which the church knows as the unique, normative Word of God, is concerned. Such a canon-critical attitude, however, does not imply that the church may *de facto* resort to any norm other than that of the Word of God.

Interpretation

Human reason and that which reason produced historically, be it movements and decisions of a general worldly philosophy or zeitgeist and tendencies throughout the ages, none of it holds the truth, the power and validity for the church, except the Word of God as the *norma normans*. What is of underlying value are the written or unwritten traditions and church orders; the voices of ancient and more modern church leaders; general or particular convictions which in the past have been embodied in dogma. However, nothing in the church, historically seen and currently, can be regarded by the church as both *pietas* [object of devotion] and *reverentia* [object of respect] in the same way (*pari*) as the Biblical evidence (my paraphrase of Karl Barth ([1947/1964] 2003:60–61).

The *pietas* and *reverentia* a member of the church has for the Bible, is directly linked to the fact that the Bible is the book of

the church. For Barth, the 'intrinsic, fundamental relationship between Bible and church' is a 'given'. The analogy which Barth uses is that of the relationship between children and their mother. If you ask a child why he or she calls a specific woman amongst women 'mother,' the child would only be able to state it repetitively and affirming it without reason: 'but it is my mother!' This *is* the situation and there is no doubt about it. It is, however, not a 'certainty' founded on cognitive rationalisation. For the very reason that the Bible has specific authority and meaning for the faith community, it has authority and meaning for believers. And for this reason the Bible, apart from being book of the church, is also the book of the believer.

Believers' interaction with the Bible takes on many different customs, for example within the family circle (with family worship), in a work context (opening of meetings with readings from Scripture), in a societal context (existentially in ethical life issues, and formally, amongst others, with the opening of social events by reading from Scripture) and in the inner room (meditation). Such use of the Word presumes either a pre-critical or a post-critical approach to the Bible. In certain instances a pre-critical use of the Bible may have traits of meditation. In other instances, we see that believers attribute even magic properties to the Bible with a view to the psychological maintenance of a person's subjective self. Both the pre-critical and the post-critical use of Scripture presuppose a view that the Bible has canonical authority (cf. Nürnberger 2009:84).

As a result of the fundamental relationship between the use of the Bible as book of the church and as book of believers, the temptations of Biblicism and fundamentalism exist. Piety and respect for the Bible can lead to a 'book religion', which could displace belief in God (which is no object), with a belief in the Bible (which is an object). Then, *a direct relation* between God and the Bible develops, whilst Karl Barth reminds us of the (dialectic) givenness of the *indirect relationship* (cf. Smit 2006:225; Van Wyk 2011:p. 7 of p. 7).

One of the characteristics of the 'book religion' is to regard *confession of faith* as fruits of our *dogma* (*teaching*) *on the divine origin and inspiration of the Word*. Schleiermacher ([1830] 1960:§ 127.2) however, helps us to distinguish between *Glaubenssätze* and *Lehrsätze*, whilst Rudolf Bultmann (1932:145–165), after Paul, distinguishes authentic (*pneumatic*) faith existence from objectified (*sarkikos*) life. Christians' 'book religion' is like Israel's 'Torah religion', a life according to the human (*sarkikos*) nature and not according to the Spirit (*pneuma*). 'The written law brings death, but the Spirit gives life' (2 Cor 3:6b). 'Book religion' appears to be commendable, but according to Paul (Rm 10:2–4) it is a futile quest for self-righteousness.

However, from the perspective of a Christ-follower, this does not mean that a hermeneutical congeniality with the life-giving story of the Torah, or for that matter, of the Prophets or the Writings, entails a religious fundamentalism (see Van Eck 2008:1161–1164) implied by the notion of 'book religion'. Finding the 'gospel' is not bound to searching for

God in the New Testament alone. Moreover, the concept 'good tidings' comes also from the Old Testament writing of Isaiah (40:9), and is not found only in the Priene Calendar Inscription with regard to the birth of the 'divine' Roman Emperor Augustus (see Crossan & Reed 2005:241).[7] Pieter Venter (1989:527) is quite correct in saying that the compilers of this section in Isaiah echoed a 'tradition [*which*] became canonical and [*which*] served as paradigm for understanding … the sovereign power of God to chastise as well as redeem'. Therefore, with canon-critical hermeneutics in mind, my intent concurs with Venter (2001:458–478) by doing exegesis and doing theology in such a way that it demonstrates a 'pluralistic' rather than a 'reductionistic' point of view with regard to multifaceted possibilities of meaning of the message that God becomes God-with-us in the 'Jesus-event' which is articulated in the kerygma found in the Christian Bible. The implication is that the Bible does not have an 'intrinsic principle' (Buitendag 2008:1131, 1141–1142) as if it, as canon, is full of magic power to persuade people to be reconciled with God. The canon's referential meaning of being good news evolves from the three-in-one event within the faith community of proclaiming, recognising, and receiving God's Holy Book.

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7.'In the Roman province of Asia, to take just those two Priene inscriptions, the Divine Augustus was not just lord of empire and earth, but also of calendar and time. Lord of history, therefore, since there never was before nor ever would be again good news or gospel (plural euangelia) surpassing that which announced his birth. In every city of rich Roman Asia there was decreed, for all time past, present, and future, but one overwhelming gospel, the good news of Augustus's advent, epiphany, and presence, the good news of a global Lord, divine Son, and cosmic Saviour' (Crossan & Reed 2005:241).

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