

The Christian Bible in Its Final Form*

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By appending the Gospels and Acts to the Hebrew Scriptures, the early Christians reoriented in a dramatic way the world-story related in their canonical history.

How the Hebrew Scriptures were received, retained and supplemented to become the Bible of the Christian Church has been noted earlier, but at that point of our study it had not been ascertained what precisely these Scriptures were, nor how and why they had been initially assembled, nor, overall, what their contents and basic themes were. Now that these matters have been looked at, I want to ask what light this might shed on the nature, purpose and message of the Christian Bible as a whole.

I. THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE AS A WHOLE

At the point when Christianity was born, the Hebrew Scriptures were already a defined and established compendium that was widely known, studied and accepted as an authoritative literature by Jews everywhere, and hence by Christians as well. Not only the *number* of books in this collection was by then firmly fixed but also their chronological sequence and arrangement, so that, taken as a whole, it can be said that “the Law,

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the Prophets and the Writings” convey a story that begins with creation and culminates in the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms. However, these reforms were understood not just as an ending but as a new beginning guided and inspired by words of hope for a transformed Israel and world, words that seemed still far from being realized “seven times seventy” years after the anticipated time of their fulfillment (Dan. 9).

To be more specific, the contents of this corpus may be roughly outlined as follows:

Genesis 1-11

It opens with stories of God’s creation of the universe, the origins of the human family, the rise, corruption and dispersal of the nations.

Genesis 12-Kings

This is followed by a long account of Israel’s origins, enslavement, exodus, and covenant with God (Exodus to Deuteronomy), prefaced by the promise that this people will bring blessings to the nations — to which is attached an even longer record of Israel’s entry into Canaan, rise to nationhood and subsequent decline and destruction because of sin (Joshua to Kings).

Prophets-Nehemiah

However, with this the story is not ended, for attached to this history of the world from creation to Israel’s judgment for sin are the four scrolls of the prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the Twelve), plus Ezra-Nehemiah, which, in addition to relating why this tragedy had occurred, speak eloquently of a new beginning for Israel, and of the coming transformation of both Israel and the world.

The Writings

Much that was anticipated of this new beginning was unrealized. Yet “other books” were added — which testify to the determination of those who lived by “the Law and the Prophets” that these hopes for Israel and the world might yet be activated through witness (Ruth), worship (Psalms), wisdom (Proverbs), and enduring faith and devotion (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther).

Thus, from the prophets onward Israel looked back to creation and the Torah of Moses, and took stock of its history of sin and judgment, while

facing forward toward a future tenaciously believed to be bright with the promise of a universe that would one day be transformed. However, as this library of Hebrew Scriptures was being completed, during the hellenistic persecutions and Maccabean wars, there were mounting perplexities as well. The path to renewal and world redemption seemed blocked and opaque: just when and how would God's plan for Israel and the world witnessed to in "the Law and the Prophets" ever be realized? Intensifying Israel's quandary were unanticipated institutional and theological developments that led to its fragmenting into competing parties (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes) in a manner reminiscent of the period prior to the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms.¹ It was in the midst of this rising tide of fragmentation, conflict, and despair that Jesus of Nazareth appeared with his unique message and vision. Seen in this light the New Testament apostolic writings which reflect the events resulting from his mission may be viewed as a dramatic new development and chapter in the age-old story of creation, fall and redemption recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. The thematic bridge from the one to the other was *eschatology*, the filling in of "gaps" regarding how God's age-old plan for Israel and the world would eventually be fulfilled.²

This apostolic literature was eventually added to the Hebrew Scriptures *after* Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, with the consequence that

¹ When faced with an Aaronite priesthood ready to hellenize Jerusalem and persecute its own Torah-loyal people (1 Macc. 7; 2 Macc. 14-15), the Maccabean leaders themselves took over the high priestly duties, "pending the advent of a genuine prophet" (1 Macc. 14:40; cp. 12:6). It seems that it was in this period that Pharisaism was born, based on the concept of authority stated in Abot 1:1, where it is said that Moses passed his authority to Joshua (not to Aaron), who passed it to the prophets and "the men of the great assembly" (not to the Zadokites). It was from such "a great assembly" that the teachers of Pharisaism emerged; it was such an "assembly" that also authorized the Maccabean takeover of the high priesthood (1 Macc. 14:28). Irving M. Zeitlin, *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 19, believes that the point of view expressed in Abot 1:1 was tantamount to canonizing the books of the Prophets and the Writings ("thus constituting those writings together with the Pentateuch as the Holy Scriptures . . ."), and that it was this that precipitated the split between parties, since neither the Essenes of Qumran nor the Zadokites (Sadducees) were prepared to accept these new interpretations which subverted what the Law itself had to say about who should serve as high priest. For an overview and analysis of these complex developments, see Ellis Rivkin, *A Hidden Revolution: The Pharisees' Search for the Kingdom Within* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), and John Kampen, *The Hasideans and the Origins of Pharisaism*.

² Regarding the importance of this "bridge" for understanding the essence of Christianity and its Scriptures, see I. Howard Marshall, "Is Apocalyptic the Mother

this older collection has now been given a wholly new terminus or ending. Heretofore, great care had been taken by the custodians of this library to make sure that in the arrangement of its books the accounts in Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles of the reforms initiated at that time would always remain at its *end* or apex. When adding the Gospels and Acts in their proper chronological sequence *after* the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms, the Christians of the first three centuries CE disregarded this tradition and reoriented the canonical story and library in a dramatic way. The history recounted in “the Law, the Prophets and the Writings” was now openly and explicitly carried forward into a new time period and given a new chronological focus and thrust. Its framework is thereby changed from being one that encompasses the time from creation to the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms (Genesis to Chronicles), to one extending from creation to the advent of Jesus and the mission of his Church to the nations (as recounted in the Gospels and Acts). As a consequence the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms have a diminished (although still important) role to play in this canon as a way-station in an expanded drama of redemption that extends to a new point of fulfillment in the mission of Jesus and his Church.³

However, even with this expansion, the Christian canon also ends rather abruptly and inconclusively at the end of Acts, with a future-oriented, open-ended horizon that seems also to have “gaps” that need filling out. To be sure, the Christian additions to the Hebrew Scriptures bring a fresh certainty regarding “the way” to prepare for the future now dawning, and also powerful reassurance of the reality of an eternal realm beyond death. Christians are certain now as well about *who* it is who will preside at the world’s consummation, and hence have a greater confidence regarding how the temporal age will *ultimately* end. But still, precisely what can be hoped for in the temporal realm *between* the

of Christian Theology?” *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis, Gerald F. Hawthorne with Otto Betz, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 33-42; also Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 22 (London: SCM Press, 1972), who characterizes “the apocalyptic world of ideas” as representing “the change-over between the Testaments” and that “which, under the impression of the person of Jesus and his destiny, permitted a part of late Israel to merge into early Christianity” (p. 129).

³Northrop Frye, *The Great Code, The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1983), 76, aptly characterizes the total biblical story “as a vision of upward metamorphosis.” On its significance as “world-story,” see also the lucid comments of Amos Wilder, “The World-Story: The Biblical Version,” in *Jesus’ Parables and the War of Myths, Essays on Imagination in the Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 43-70.

present and that ultimate consummation remains clouded and subject to debate even among Christians who cherish this newly fashioned Bible. This poses a challenge for a Christianity that seeks to be guided by Scriptures that are as strongly oriented as these are toward the salvation of both Israel and the world. A canonically based Christianity that lacks either the capacity or the courage to speak authoritatively in the light of these Scriptures to this issue in particular would appear to be flawed at its core.⁴ I do not presume to be able to deal adequately with this matter here, but I do wish to underline several features of the Christian Bible that this study has brought to our attention that do appear to be relevant to a recovery of some greater certainty in this regard.

II. THE CHRISTIAN CANONICAL WITNESS TO THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD

Our summary of how the Hebrew Scriptures were compiled, taken up and supplemented by the Christian movement to become the Bible of the Church has served to highlight the revolutionary way in which the biblical story begun in Genesis was thereby brought to a new apex of fulfillment with the story recounted in the Gospels and Acts. What I now wish to emphasize is that it is in truth this new pentateuch of books at the *opening* of the apostolic Scriptures (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts) which do in fact bring the biblical story recounted in the Hebrew Scriptures to their climax and close, and *not* the *final* volume of these Scriptures, Revelation, for this end-book of the Christian canon does not purport to be a history of the same genre as Acts. Rather, it offers the reader a symbolically complex, visionary sketch of history's ultimate future like that of its canonical counterpart Daniel. Put another way, Revelation suggests (but only suggests) what Christians hope for in the *ultimate* sense, but does not displace the Gospels or Acts as the *historical* terminus to their canon. It is these latter volumes, therefore, that supersede and replace Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles as the new chronological end-point of the canon for Christians. Thus, these are the Scriptures we look to as Christians with that special care and attention with which Jewish believers look to the events culminating in the Ezra-Nehemiah

⁴ For a similar assessment of the importance (yet neglect) of this theme, see Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962); Arend Theodoor van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History, The Meeting of the Faiths of East and West* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1964); Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*.

reforms. It is here that *our* history and *our* future as Christians is related and configured.⁵

What then is it that we are told about what Christians can hope for, and how does this relate to the expectations for Israel and the world earlier enunciated in the Hebrew Scriptures? These are the kinds of questions Christians ought to be asking when searching for light regarding their future and the future of the world — and the question that should be *first* addressed is the one regarding the expectations engendered by the older Hebrew Scriptures, for it is in them that the hopes for Israel and the world were originally expressed that form the vocabulary and reference point for the reconfiguration of those hopes in the Gospels and Acts.⁶ On the basis of a survey of prophetic expectations as these are set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures, I wager the proposal that two somewhat differing scenarios present themselves there: in the one, Israel is envisioned as being reconstituted and renewed as the people of God in such a spectacular manner that the nations of the world either stand in awe, convert and are saved, or, if rebellious, are judged and destroyed (Ezek. 36-39); in the other, Israel is renewed and reconstituted as a missionary community that witnesses to the world in the less spectacular (less militant) manner of the prophets — that is, through upright living and by the “sword of the mouth” and martyrdom (Isa. 42:1-9; 45:14-25; 49:1-7; 53; Jonah).⁷

The history related in the Gospels and Acts does not even try to hide the fact that a similar conflict of visions flared up between Jesus and his own innermost circle of disciples over precisely these issues — that is, over who *he* thought himself to be and what *he* expected would happen, versus *their* expectations. Certain that Jesus was the long-awaited

⁵ One way of thinking of those apostolic writings which were added to the four Gospels and Acts would be as teachings for a people caught up in the ongoing drama of a history whose beginnings and character are traced in these opening volumes. In this sense, the New Testament letters (including John’s Apocalypse) would have a similar relationship to Matthew through Acts as do “the Writings” to “the Law and the Prophets” (plus Ezra-Nehemiah). However, it must never be forgotten that the Gospels and Acts continue the story begun in “the Law and the Prophets” (plus Ezra-Nehemiah), so it is the total history (Genesis through Acts) that forms the background to the apostolic letters and the Apocalypse.

⁶ This point is similarly emphasized by Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, 55, who writes that we simply cannot understand what the New Testament has to say about the world’s future, if we do not first listen intently to the Old Testament witnesses on this subject.

⁷ For a similar analysis, see Joseph Jensen, “Mount Zion and Armageddon,” in *Sin, Salvation, and the Spirit*, Daniel Durken, ed., O.S.B. (Collegeville: The

Messiah, sure that this could only mean that Israel was now about to have its kingdom restored in some spectacular manner that would also involve a simultaneous judgment and redemption of the nations, Jesus' disciples are said to have been devastated when instead he was arrested, tried and crucified.⁸ And their perplexity persisted into the post-resurrection period, when to their question as to whether it was at this time that God would restore the kingdom to Israel, Jesus is depicted as answering that it was not for them to know "times or dates that the Father has decided by his own authority," but that they were to return to Jerusalem and await the promised Holy Spirit, at which point they would be empowered to be his witnesses "not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end" (Acts 1:6-8). These words which echo those at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel (where Jesus is also said to have commissioned his Apostles to begin a mission that would be directed toward making "disciples of all nations") stand at the heart of the story which Christians appended to "the Law, the Prophets and the Writings" to complete their canon of Scriptures.

What follows in Acts is the account of how *this* end-time scenario *began* to unfold: how as the apostolic community waited in Jerusalem, the promised holy Spirit was given, the Church of the now crucified and resurrected Messiah was born, and, as foretold, these disciples were in fact empowered to go forth witnessing from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and outward to the world of nations of that time.⁹ How this finale

Liturgical Press, 1979), 134-145, who suggests that the conversion of the nations in some prophetic scenarios "is possibly compatible with a judgment that is corrective in nature, which it would follow . . . but it is not compatible with a destructive judgment that is conceived [as it sometimes is] as the final act in the eschatological drama, to be succeeded only by the full establishment of God's kingdom" (139). I might add that it was in support of Israel's identity as a light to the nations (or "witness") that most of the writings were fashioned: Ruth, Psalms, Proverbs, even, I think, Daniel and Esther.

⁸ What in general the disciples' expectations actually were (and hence why the crucifixion was such a devastating experience for them initially) may be inferred from Josephus' allusion to the belief of many Jews of his time that "a man from their country would become ruler of the world" (*Jewish War* 6.312). A fuller description of end-time events as commonly anticipated at that time is to be found in Psalms of Solomon 17:23-51 where the coming world-ruler is depicted as one who will purge Jerusalem from unrighteous nations, while gathering a holy people, all this as a prelude to nations coming from the ends of the earth to witness his glory.

⁹ For a credible account of how this early Christian vision of world mission emerged and became central to the eschatological perspectives of early Christianity, see Charles H. H. Scobie, "Jesus or Paul? The Origin of the Universal Mission of the

to the biblical story relates, more concretely, to the expectations alluded to above (those set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures) is open to diverse interpretations. My own belief is that the way to proceed is by determining what in the older prophecies was thereby corrected or superseded by this new and fuller eschatological perspective; what can still rightly be hoped for that is envisioned or alluded to there; and what of that which can be hoped for lies on the temporal horizon of our existence, or belongs, rather, to the realm of the eternal beyond time and history as we know it. Clearly, everything pertaining to life after death and Christ's return (when time will flow into eternity) has to do with our ultimate or eternal hopes. But what are we to make of those prophecies that envision *within time* a reconstituted Davidic commonwealth and temple, for example, or an international judgment and destruction of nations — and where are we to locate that new world order so prominent in prophetic expectations, especially that vision twice repeated of ambassadors of the world's nations meeting to have their disputes adjudicated in the light of God's word and law and, as a consequence, beginning to disarm (Isa. 2; Micah 6; Jer. 3:17)?

I will suggest here no more than this: that the message conveyed by the Gospels and Acts that the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth truly is the long-awaited Messiah and that with his appearance the consummation of the world's history has begun, but that before its completion his followers are to be engaged in a mission aimed at bearing witness to the nations of what he had done and taught — this message has reconfigured Israel's legacy of prophetic hopes *by opening up an extended time period for missionary outreach, repentance and change* within the older eschatological scenarios. That is, between the Messiah's first coming in humble service and love and his second coming to usher in the final consummation, it is now understood that there is going to be ample time for change and discovery and for God's kingdom to dawn more gradually upon the life of the world's many peoples, for God is now clearly understood to be far more patient, loving and ready to forgive than had heretofore been thought, "wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9; James 5:7-11; Rom. 2:4-11). The canonical story, as Christians are privileged to understand it from the perspective of the Gospels and Acts, thus leaves us extremely hopeful

Christian Church," in *From Jesus to Paul, Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare*, Peter Richardson and John C. Hurd, eds. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 47-60.

that over time, through the Spirit-energized mission of the Church of Jesus Christ to the world, much can be accomplished in bringing this world forward toward the goal set for it by God at creation.¹⁰

¹⁰ Further to what Christians might legitimately hope for in the temporal realm, see A.T. van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*, 431-437; J.W. Miller, "Envisioning the World's Future: Neglected Prophetic Insights," *The Conrad Grebel Review*, winter, 1986, 1-21; "Can We Hope for a New World Order?" *The Conrad Grebel Review*, fall, 1991, 309-314; for the relevance of the canonical story for the identity and mission of the Church, see the collected essays in *The Transfiguration of Mission, Biblical, Theological & Historical Foundations*, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1993).