

CANON, NARRATIVE, AND THE OLD TESTAMENT'S LITERAL SENSE

A RESPONSE TO JOHN GOLDINGAY,
'CANON AND OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY'

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It is a pleasure to be asked to respond to this stimulating essay by Professor Goldingay. He has an engaging style and brings considerable background in teaching and publishing to the very important topic of canon and Old Testament Theology. I have had the written text to work from in order to respond orally and have adapted that very little for this setting in the Tyndale Bulletin. The sense of proportion that comes from hearing the full oral presentation, or the printed version of that, may seem disturbed in my response, as my attention was drawn to this or that matter of detail, and of emphasis. That is, I am not attempting to do anything more than call attention to features which struck me as worthy of further reflection and critical evaluation.

Let me proceed, then, by filing by title three questions related to specific assumptions; or the way a matter has been formulated in the course of this stimulating and broad ranging address. There will be some overlap.

1. The form of the canon

I confess I found this section confusing in what was assumed to be clear enough: that on the one hand, there is a Hebrew-Aramaic order, and on the other, a Greek order. Both have a lot of narrative, so the differences between them ought not to matter that much; that seemed to be Goldingay's larger point. I will come back to the matter of narrative as such in a moment.

First: on the assumption of competing orders, whose competition is not so great.

I would argue that it is possible to understand something of the reasons for the emergence of different orderings of biblical books, and further, that it is important for an appraisal of canon and theology that we do so (the topic of the Heyward Lectures, given at Acadia Divinity School, were devoted to this theme). In actual fact, the only order that settles down in the history of the Old Testament's reception is the tripartite of the Hebrew order (with some minor movement in the Writings). Since Goldingay is not interested in arguments which trade heavily in origins, and getting the matter right in terms of original orders—a point I agree with in general—what we find when we look at lists from antiquity is that there simply is no such thing as 'a Greek order' (or 'a Latin order' based upon a Greek order). The so-called 'fourfold order', such as we find in modern printed Bibles, has no single or obvious exemplar in the history of the Bible's reception.

In the Greek-speaking Churches of the earliest centuries (up to the fifth century), in the lists we have from various sources, the historical or narrative books of Ezra-Nehemiah or Esther appear most often in final position.¹ Daniel is the near competitor in these lists. The Minor Prophets are never last (as in the modern convention of printed English-language Bibles). In the West, the prophets are usually in the middle with the Writings last, as in Hilary, Jerome, Rufinus. Augustine has an order with Daniel and Ezekiel in a final position. Of the major uncial manuscripts, Sinaiticus resembles closely the tripartite Hebrew. Alexandrinus ends with the Writings (the 'K' of Tanak) as well (Ps., Job, Prov., Song, Wis., Sir.). Vaticanus follows a practice of having the Minor before the Major Prophets, and it concludes with Daniel. So there is no 'Greek order' as against a Hebrew order, and there is no non-Hebrew order which handles 'narrative' in such and such a way, as Goldingay implies. It is unclear where this view of competing orders—one fourfold and one tripartite—comes from, though it has been popularised and made the subject of theological/historical evaluations by Marvin Sweeney—both in the case of a very minority attested form of the Minor Prophets (carried over into no modern printed conventions in the West), and also in the case of what he sees as

¹ A useful appendix can be found in L. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2007): 439-44.

Christian and Jewish orders for the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible in its entirety.²

The convention of modern printed Bibles, with a fourfold order, is just that: a convention, and it has no known exemplar before the modern period.

This makes the discussion about narrative and its significance for two basic orders confusing. My own instinct is to think about *accomplishments in order*, like the accomplishment of the Deuteronomistic History: its losing its beginning (Deuteronomy) so as to help form a Law and the Prophets grammar or conceptuality.³ Or: what it means that history (Joshua through Kings) and classical prophecy (the Three and the Twelve) are both called Prophecy (*Nebi'im*), and that the Writings are something else altogether. I discuss these issues in detail in the Heyword Lectures mentioned above, especially in the light of important work undertaken in the Minor Prophets which seeks to understand the accomplishment of their present form: The Book of the Twelve.⁴

In Goldingay's appeal to narrative I miss some of the precision that went into older discussions of these issues when categories like Hexateuch, or Deuteronomistic History, or Wisdom were the larger arrangements under analysis—for historical and for theological appraisal. I do not find the generic term 'narrative' very illuminating, by contrast. Much of the interest in canonical formation has looked—not at individual books and the sense of their final form as discrete witnesses—but at things like the formation of the Twelve, or the creation of a Former and Latter Prophets, or the final form of Isaiah or

² Marvin Sweeney, 'Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the Twelve' in J. Nogalski, ed., with M. Sweeney, *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve* [SBLSS 15; Atlanta: SBL, 2000]; *The Twelve Prophets* (Berith Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000): 1:vx-xxix; 'The Book of the Twelve Prophets' in *The Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005): 165-209; and 'Tanak versus Old Testament: Concerning the Foundation for a Jewish Theology of the Bible': 353-72. Sweeney is right to observe at one point that a structure with the prophets last, or as he has it, fourfold, 'appears to have been set only after the widespread use of printed Bibles in the Western world'; but he then backs into a view that cannot be sustained, viz., 'it is based on the order of books in the Vulgate, and prior to that, the order of various Greek traditions' (360). This is incorrect and misleading.

³ S. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets* (FAT 27; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

⁴ C. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

the Psalter, or the odd business of the Writings, and of their eventual recasting—none of this having very much to do with narrative.⁵

To conclude: order is a theologically dense and important affair. There are not two. When one looks closely at their differences, it appears that the rule of *lectio difficilior* might be relevant. The Hebrew represents achievements of association. But these are often recast in order to create other categories, precisely because the achievement is not grasped, or different logics of arrangement come into play. I worry that recourse to narrative could unduly loosen theological points made by the present arrangements. If new associations are found (put all the texts that speak of creation together) so as to foreground narrative, and a larger narrative conceptuality, that would be a great loss, measured against sensitive appraisal of the Old Testament in its present canonical form. It is also important, to my mind, to build on the critical findings of earlier scholarship which saw theological significance in the complex ways in which major blocks of material were associated, often by bringing divergent forms of material into relationship.

2. Creeds and Rule of Faith

Here is another place where I could not track well the base line assumptions that seemed to govern the concerns Goldingay raised and the emphasis on *sola scriptura* he wished to guard. Again, this is a concern and an emphasis I would share. For the apostolic fathers and the early users of the phrase ‘canon’ or ‘rule’ of faith (Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian), what is quite clear is that such an appeal is not an appeal to a creed or a baptismal interrogatory. Indeed, as von Campenhausen, Hägglund, and many others rightly see, the rule is what emerges precisely under the conditions of there being no second testament. It is therefore an insistence of the indispensability of the first witness—the law and the prophets; the scriptures—for adjudicating, confirming, and grounding Christian confession. In other words, the

⁵ Heidelberg Professor Rolf Rendtorff is a good example of a scholar who has sought to track interest (at public SBL sessions and in his own writings) in the complex form of Isaiah, the Twelve, and also the Psalter. See his essay on Day of the LORD in the Twelve in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, eds. J. Nogalski and M. Sweeney (Atlanta: SBL, 2000): 75-87. The point is that this fresh development is not interested in a generic narrative category, but in the complex theological accomplishments within the canon that entail very different combinations of traditions.

canon of faith or rule of truth gives complete centrality, in material terms, to the canon of the Old Testament as received by the Church.⁶

This touches on another matter I will speak to in a moment. For the rule reveals that the Old Testament functions both economically and ontologically, in terms of Christ.⁷ That is, it does not just point beyond the literal sense of the Old Testament to an event in history beyond its reporting. Rather, it sees Jesus Christ as active within the work of God in Israel. At creation, giver of promises to the ancestors, giving the law, in the word of the prophets, and so forth (see Tertullian's précis, for example). The Old Testament consists of more than economically unfolding episodes we need to honour for what they are, en route to something we ought to keep distinct (so Goldingay's concern for the *per se* voice of the OT). The Old Testament is also a word about God in Christ in its own prophetic and figural idiom.⁸

So the concern—if I hear it rightly—of creeds giving a balanced view of the entirety of the Bible's story—and especially of the Old Testament, I agree. That is not their purpose, however.⁹ And in any event, the rule of faith is not a creed, and where we can follow its purpose, it appears to be an argument (so Osborne), one exegetically grounded (so Hägglund and von Campenhausen), and one having to do with the centrality of the scriptures of Israel as riveted to the core Christian confession—as against the claims of Gnostics or heretics. The rule, to be sure, is an argument of precedence: what the church believes it believes reliably, because it has a living testimony going back to apostles. This aspect Craig Allert wishes to emphasise in his new book.¹⁰ But this living testimony, as 2 Timothy reminds us, entails as well the scriptures of Israel: stable, clear, having a sense capable of

⁶ For a discussion see my *Prophecy and Hermeneutics* and my forthcoming book, *The Character of Christian Scripture* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic).

⁷ G. Bray, 'The Church Fathers and Biblical Theology, Defining our Terms: The Relevance of the Fathers for Biblical Theology Today: Ontology and Biblical Theology' in eds. C. Bartholomew et al., *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

⁸ Christine Helmer, 'Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament', *Modern Theology* 18 (2002): 49-73; C. Kevin Rowe, 'Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics', *Pro Ecclesia* 11/3 (2002): 295-312.

⁹ This is my formulation (in discussion with Kendall Soulen's rather different concerns) in "'Our Help is in the Name of the LORD, the Maker of Heaven and Earth': Scripture and Creed in Ecumenical Trust" in *Figured Out* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001): 177-90.

¹⁰ C. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

truthful extension to convictions about God's providential activity with Israel enclosing the work of Jesus Christ. When at another point Goldingay lays emphasis on an 'inherent' sense of the Old Testament, I agree. But Aquinas rightly worried that the literal sense of the Old Testament could be so historicised that it would lose its capacity to speak of Christ, economically *and* ontologically. Literal sense, inherent sense, is a sense that means what it means within Israel's historical frame of reference (as we seek to retrieve that in the modern sense), but which in the providence of God means more than what a single authorial mind could ever totally apprehend, in the nature of the case (Isa. 55:11; Zech. 1:6). That is a reality fully at work inside the witness of the Old Testament itself.

3. Narrative and the integrity of the witness of the Old Testament

This again brings me back to the matter of narrative. One danger in appeal to narrativity is the reduction of the Old Testament to a past story, and the loss of the actual canonical form of the presentation (which is obviously not narrative, but a grand amalgamation of forms rich and diverse). Precisely in its capacity to tell forth Israel's Gospel, does it threaten to become primarily a story of the past, or a story of other people?¹¹ When Walter Brueggemann worries that we need to hear Israel's testimony, I agree. We hear this testimony for its own sake, and not as the material witness of the New Testament displays it—which entails other concerns. In my own writing I have been insistent on the difference between hearing the Old Testament as Christian scripture and hearing the Old Testament as the New receives it in its present material form.

But hearing the Old Testament as Christian Scripture ought not to drain down its foreignness, domesticate its God talk, Jesus-ise it in some attenuating way. The claim that Jesus is in accordance with the scriptures ought to be 'a rising tide that lifts all boats'. It ought to sharpen our concern with historicity. I know Goldingay is very

¹¹ Von Rad senses the problem here in his Genesis commentary revisions shortly before his death (for a discussion, see 'Prophecy and Tradition-History: The Achievement of Gerhard von Rad', *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*: 171-78).

concerned here to guard the integrity of the Old Testament.¹² Yet, when I hear the tradition reading Habakkuk 3 and trying to understand whether its account is concerned with creation, with the work of Christ, with the sovereign work of the Father and the Son both—the danger could of course be that New Testament convictions have begun to intrude. But equally, we might be finding a register that helps us understand what Habakkuk is saying, *because that is simply not all that clear when we operate only with a contextualisation focused on something like a single authorial intention*. Stated in this way, the concern with the literal sense is more than reconstructing an authorial intention within a putative ‘historical context’. It begins there and moves on. Francis Watson has recently argued that the literal sense of Habakkuk, as Paul hears it and as the Old Testament intends it in a canonical sense, builds on the historical and then coordinates this with the larger prophetic witness of the Twelve. That too is an historical sense.¹³

4. Conclusion

These are difficult matters to discuss in a forum like this. But it is to Goldingay’s credit that he has not turned his concern for the Old Testament’s *per se* voice into a matter of historical trivialisation, dating this or that again, counting the Hittites or sorting out Darius the Mede. He has raised the properly theological question. The Old Testament speaks of God as God is. On my view this fundamental concern is both right, and also unburdened by a concern properly continuous with it: correlation with what has traditionally been the domain of systematic

¹² Ironically, in the Psalm commentary of the Antiochene exegete Theodore of Mopsuestia, we see his concern to guard the historical sense of the Psalms and not to read any Christian reflex in them (prophetic or typological), but in the end that is because he believes Christ brought a new Religion discontinuous with the old. Theodore also struggled to find a sense (call it historical) that could be so constrained as to have only one referent, even within Israel’s own grasp of God’s work. He had to eliminate any eschatological force that took up the literal sense and fitted it into a larger providential scheme. One sees Rashi struggle similarly in his Psalm commentary, wishing to preserve a single sense against the larger referential nexus prized by the rabbis (or by the church).

¹³ Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004). He even declares the historicising search for the intention of Habakkuk, in the model of John Barton, ‘hermeneutically perverse’.

theology:¹⁴ that the God of Israel is the Triune God. To my mind, this is the real challenge of handling properly the OT's plain and inherent sense. And I also believe Goldingay sees the properly theological issue as crucial to any account of the Old Testament, and thank him for his stimulating essay.

¹⁴ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (Vol. 1; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 42-60.