

*The following paper was given by Andrew Casad at the Masters of Theological Studies Colloquium on 2. October 2002 with Professor Eugene Ulrich.*

Professor Ulrich notes that the evidence relating to the process of transforming a narrative from national literature to a definitive canon is linked with “the shift from a religion that was Temple-based to one that was text-based.” “The texts, later so important for a geographically dispersed faith group, did not exercise such a primary function while the Second Temple stood in Jerusalem and while its sacrificial rituals provided the primary focus of the religion.” This indicates that the question of the canon would not even have occurred to the Israelite community so long as the Temple remained the only form of authoritative worship. The concerns of the Israelites were with the correct sacrifice not the correct text. It was only with the removal of the Temple as a central site of worship, for both Christians and Jews, that the question of the canon could arise, as multiple loci for cultic activity arose. It was only at the point that the synagogue and the house church became the *primary* locus of worship that the correctness of such worship became paramount. It is interesting to note a parallel situation within the history of the Israelites: the split between the Samaritans and the Judeans, which resulted in contested centers of sacrificial worship. The only evidence that Professor Ulrich has been able to detect of deliberate altering of the text of sacred writings for sectarian purposes pertains to this matter. In Deuteronomy the Samaritan sources altered the text to reflect the divine selection of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal as the sites for correct cultic worship, as opposed to Jerusalem. Later Judean sources heightened the emphasis placed on Jerusalem as the correct site of worship. This indicates the centrality of the Temple, the primary locus of cultic activity. Furthermore, it is the Temple which was served by the scriptures, not the other way around.

The Swedish biblical scholar Gunnar Östborn argues that the cultic (or as I prefer, liturgical) function of the scriptures is the reason that a canon came to be. This is in response to the assumptions that the canon has authority either because it is law or because it is considered the divinely inspired word of God. While these may come to be accepted as true about sacred writings, they are not the reason that they become canonical. Professor Ulrich notes that “writings can be considered sacred, without necessarily being divinely inspired.” Östborn argues that “a canonical text is one that is allowed to be read in the divine service.” A writing is made authoritative and thus canonical through its use in the life of the community.

In examining the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the cultic elements, Östborn claims that “Yahweh’s activity in the Old Testament may be said to be presented as a divine drama, having struggle and victory as its principal elements.” This is the central theme of the Scriptures according to Östborn, which is replicated in the cultic worship of the Israelite people. “The fundamental motif mentioned is not only ancient on Canaanitic soil, but it has also survived in the Israelite Temple cult as well as in the divine service of the synagogue.” The emphasis of this divine drama changed from the sacrifices in the Temple to the re-presenting of God’s divine intervention through the reading of the scriptures in the synagogue. “In the synagogue Yahweh’s works were essentially visualized through the reading of the Scriptures.” These were not only visualized, but the participants themselves were made present at the divine drama of God, in a process known in Hebrew as *zikkaron* (anamnesis).

Östborn notes that “everything belonging to a cult is sacred. A cult consists of sacred actions or rites. To these actions we may also count the words spoken and recited in the cult.” Following the destruction of the temple when the locus of Jewish worship moved into the synagogue, the very scrolls upon which the sacred writings were written became cultic objects.

It came to be understood that the scrolls “pollute the hands:” a pollution resulting from their holiness, which results from their cultic usage (canonical standing). This same practice of reverence extended to the physical text continued in Christianity with Gospel books being venerated as relics in themselves.

There are many specific examples in the Hebrew Scriptures that are cultic in nature. Several passages that were once liturgical have become part of Scripture: Numbers 6:24-26, Genesis 12:2-3 and Joshua 3-4. Several books were used liturgically wholesale such as Leviticus, Psalms, and Esther. In still other places, such as Second Kings 22 and Nehemiah 8, it is clear that the law is being read in a public, cultic fashion. Östborn expands this basic list and claims with Pedersen for example that Exodus 1-15, which he sees as the central element of the Pentateuch, constitutes the festal narrative of Passover. Both authors see Genesis as the cultic text associated with the Feast of Tabernacles. Many if not most contemporary Biblical scholars would contest these readings of Genesis and Exodus, by which Östborn claims that all the texts of the canon have their origin in the cultic practices, upon which later elements were built. “A cultic story may be regarded as a kind of embryo from which a canon develops.”

Östborn notes three principal stages of the process of cultic development: transformation, expansion, and exclusion – these parallel the stages of the formation of the Canon. It is interesting to note that Professor Ulrich has observed the cause for the exclusion of the Book of Jubilees from Scripture in that “it claimed and promoted a calendar at odds with the current liturgical calendar.” We can see the cultic practices of the Jewish community shaping not only the core around which the Scriptures developed, but itself functioning as the canon, the maßstab, the measure against which writings were judged to be authoritative or not. It has been noted with regard to the Israelite literature that “the more the ongoing community continued to hear it and

continued to experience some kind of connectedness with God through hearing it, the more they tended to understand it as ‘the Word of God.’” The authority of the correctness of the canon implies that it is correct for some particular context, namely the context of community worship. Canonical texts are not given as the law or the word of God, *a priori*, they are considered canonical since they allow the community to continually reconnect with Yahweh’s victorious activity in the life of the community. The situation was no different for Christians concerned with the formation of the Canon. Jerome harbored doubts about the inspired nature of many of the writings, however, he included them in his translation of the bible since they were being used in worship. With regards to the Psalms Brevard Child’s writes that “Because Israel continues to hear God’s word through the voice of the psalmist’s response, these prayers now function as the divine word itself.” In response to the critique that Östborn credits the Israelite cultic practices with more than he ought, he makes what he would regard as a concession that “we may not definitely be able to claim that everything in the OT was read in the Temple services of Israel. That of the OT which was not recited in the Temple, however, was read in the synagogue, and in consequence of this it served the same cultic purpose.” Östborn lays out in several chapters the manner in which each of the books of the current canon would have been used in a liturgical setting. He sees the book of Job as a practical to the problems that could have been used in synagogue discussions. The historical books are to be heard as the extended drama of Yahweh’s intervention into the struggles of His people. The prophetic books are the records of public presentations by the prophetic figures. This does, however, raise some questions as to how Östborn, or anyone for that matter, can prove what texts were used in the Temple, in early synagogue or early Christian church worship. In conclusion, he argues “that a certain writing has, through its contents, clearly illustrated this activity [of consisting of one extensive cultic

representation where all the individual parts are comprised by the notion of Yahweh's activity], or some element of it, apparently was the fundamental motive for this writing being raised to canonical dignity." In short, Östborn argues that the liturgical use of a text is both a necessary and sufficient criterion for its elevation to the authoritative position we call canonical.

While stated much more forcefully and narrowed only to liturgical practices, this accords well with Ulrich's claim that "just as the community formed the literature, so too the literature formed the ongoing community." I however, would like to expand this to include not only literature, but ritual as well. Ritual embodiment, the process whereby the Israelite people made the past real for themselves predates the literary origins and reaches into what the German literary critic K. Ludwig Pfeiffer has termed the protoliterary. The Israelite ritual elements were not only fashioned by them to enable their 'zikkaron' with past events, but to create a sense of order out of chaos. But once these forms were in place and internalized, they were themselves realities with which the Israelites came face-to-face. These ritual practices gave rise to the texts that would accompany the activity, which in turn became the oral sources that eventually became the national literature of Israel, which by virtue of such authority came to be accepted as canonical Scripture. To paraphrase Pfeiffer, it cannot be assumed that certain oral literature predated embodied activity, as to do so privileges the literary as a media of discourse to the denigration of enacted forms of engagement. Pfeiffer notes that the origins of the Greek epics were in the Greek experiences of war and its ritualized form: sports. Out of these ritual activities grew the epics such as the *Iliad*, by which "sports are transformed into and transfigured by a protoliterary imaginative discourse." The same could be happening with the Israelite encounter with Yahweh, as the rituals defining their relationship with God (cutting a covenant), become entangled in the protoliterary discourse bequeathed to us in the much modified form of sacred scripture. We

know from other Ancient Near Eastern sources that much of the extant literature was used in the setting of cultic activity. The same most certainly was the case for the Israelites as texts were composed for their rituals. As Pfeiffer notes, it is not only literature, but all forms of media, however banal they may seem, that forms a kind of symbolic penetration in the most general sense. This symbolic penetration as embodied in ritual fills the cultural need to impart some coherence, in orderly forms and fashions, to the open spaces of ceaseless social interaction. This order placed on the world is the protoliterary that one may discern as the Israelite cultic practices. As these protoliterary means of symbolic penetration continued to influence the Israelite community, texts were later put with them. This perhaps can best be understood in reference to the Exodus events that Östborn sees as the core of the Passover celebration. Doubtless a celebration in the Spring predated any Exodus event in the thirteenth century BCE, and later the experience of the Exodus was fitted to this preexisting ritual. It was through its association with the cultic that Exodus came to be regarded as the authoritative text of the Israelite religion.

In conclusion I would like to argue that before the destruction of the second Temple the worship in the Temple was itself the measure of correctness – the canon. In the succeeding period it were those texts that were suitable for or derived from public worship that became canonical in that they assumed the measure of correctness and authority once reserved only for Temple worship.