

The Old Testament Canon Today

Roger Beckwith
Latimer House, Oxford

The extent of the Old Testament canon and the date of its final definition is an issue which has had, and has, immense significance for issues such as biblical authority and the approach to biblical theology. We warmly anticipate the Revd Roger Beckwith's comprehensive book on the subject, shortly to appear, and are glad to print here his delineation of the issues involved.

Strange though it may seem, students of theology who want to go into the subject of the Old Testament canon find that the standard book on the subject was written as long ago as 1892. It is *The Canon of the Old Testament* by H. E. Ryle, who was a son of the great Bishop J. C. Ryle of Liverpool, but lacked almost all his father's positive convictions.

H. E. Ryle had fully absorbed contemporary biblical criticism, and he laid down the lines of what was to be the standard critical account of the development of the Old Testament canon for the next ninety or more years. His concern is not primarily with the composition of the books but with their recognition as sacred and authoritative, and he thinks he can trace the evidence of this in the traditional arrangement of the Hebrew Bible in three sections, Law, Prophets and Hagiographa.

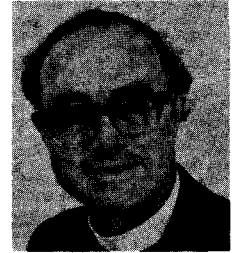
According to his theory, these three groups of Scriptures have no rhyme or reason about them, but were recognised as canonical more or less accidentally, at three different eras in Jewish history, one group at each. The Law, recently given its finished form by Ezra, was recognised as canonical in his own lifetime, which explains why the Samaritans, who broke their links with the Jews in his day (sixth century B.C.), have only the Pentateuch in their Bible. If the Prophets had already been recognised, they would have them in it as well.

The Prophets, Ryle argues, were probably recognised in the third century B.C., separately from the hagiographa, otherwise a history like Chronicles and a prophecy like Daniel (which were written too late) would be in the Prophets. The Hagiographa, which include four books disputed by some of the rabbis, were recognised about A.D. 90, at the synod of Jamnia.

Others have added to Ryle's hypothesis the argument that the Septuagint, including the Greek Apocrypha, was the Bible of the early church, and was taken over from the Alexandrian Jews, who therefore had a wider canon than the Palestinian Jews. Also that the Pseudepigrapha, and now the discoveries at Qumran, show that groups like the Essenes had apocalypses in their canon which are not even in the Apocrypha.

Much of this reconstruction has really been overthrown by recent scholarship. Qumran evidence has enabled J. D. Purvis to show that the Samaritan schism probably did not become absolute until the late second century B.C., so the Samaritans must have known a canon containing the Prophets, though they selected just the Pentateuch for themselves. The Prophets were a problem, because they acknowledged the Jerusalem Temple, which the Samaritans did not.

Roger Beckwith, Warden of Latimer House, Oxford, introduces his recently published, scholarly work on the Old Testament Canon.



The synod of Jamnia has been shown, by J. P. Lewis and others, not to have been a synod at all, and not to have made a binding decision. The decision which was made at the academy there related to only two of the Hagiographa, though two more of the Hagiographa were disputed by certain rabbis, and one of the Prophets (Ezekiel). The dispute about Ezekiel must date from after the recognition of the book as canonical, and some of the other disputes go on far too late for them to mean that the books in question were still outside the canon.

A. C. Sundberg has shown that the wider Alexandrian canon is a mere hypothesis without evidence to support it. The *supposed* evidence was the fourth and fifth century Christian codices, containing the whole of the Septuagint Old Testament, which were supposed to reproduce the contents of older Jewish manuscripts, equally capacious. We now know that Jewish and Christian manuscripts of the first three centuries and earlier were nothing like so capacious, and could only hold a few books each. Moreover, Philo, the great Alexandrian Jewish writer of the first century, never quotes as Scripture any of the Apocrypha. Nor does the New Testament, and it is only gradually that Christian writers start to do so.

It is certain that the Qumran community highly respected some of the uncanonical apocalypses, and the Epistle of Jude in the New Testament reflects a similar opinion, either in its author himself or in those to whom he is writing. (In the latter case, his use of this literature is an *argumentum ad hominem*). However, respectful use is a different thing from recognition as canonical, and it is significant that the Qumran writings, like the New Testament, never quote this literature with the formulas they use for quoting Scripture.

Since the arguments on which the current critical reconstruction rests are so insubstantial, it is time that the real evidence was collected and its implications considered. In a work due for publication in February 1986, the writer has endeavoured to do this, and concludes that the Old Testament canon was closed, in the form in which we find it in the Hebrew Bible, not later than the mid second century B.C.¹

1. The book is published by SPCK and Eerdmans, and is entitled *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church, and its Background in Early Judaism* (525pp., £35).