

**Review of Roger Beckwith,  
'The Old Testament Canon  
of the New Testament Church  
and its Background in Early Judaism'.  
SPCK London, 1985, pp. 13–528**

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885), the King James Version, or are David Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

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## Review of Roger Beckwith, 'The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism'. SPCK London, 1985, pp. 13–528

Roger Beckwith has long since been noted for a series of exceedingly learned articles on such seemingly remote topics as, for example, 'The Significance of the Calendar for Interpreting Essene Chronology and Eschatology', or 'Daniel 9 and the Date of Messiah's Coming in Essene, Hellenistic, Pharisaic, Zealot and Early Christian Computation' or 'The Pre-History and the Relationships of the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes: a Tentative Re-construction'. Valuable as these essays have been as exercises in pure scholarship, they have now led to the production of a *magnum opus* which, while no less a work of massive, painstaking scholarship, presents results which carry far-reaching practical implications.

For almost a century the standard critical view of the Old Testament Canon has been that propounded by H. E. Ryle (*The Canon of the Old Testament*, 1982, 2nd ed. 1909). Ryle's theory maintains that the canonization of the Old Testament took place in three stages:

1. The Pentateuch, recognised as canonical in the fifth century BC;
2. The Prophets, recognised as canonical in the third century BC, too soon for the inclusion of late historical and oracular books like Chronicles and Daniel;
3. The Hagiographa, containing most of the books disputed by the rabbis; and not formally recognised as canonical until the synod of Jamnia, about AD 90.

Beckwith argues that Ryle's theory is fundamentally mistaken. He contends

1. that the three sections of the canon were closed not at three different eras, but at two: at the end of the first era the Law was finally recognised as canonical in its entirety (parts of it had been regarded as canonical right from their first promulgation) and its canon closed. Then at some subsequent time all the remaining books which had come to be recognised as canonical were divided into two separate groups and the canon of each was regarded as closed (p.164–5).
2. that in all likelihood it was Judas Maccabaeus and his associates who divided the non-Mosaic Scriptures into the two groups, the Prophets and the Hagiographa (p. 165).
3. that all three divisions of the Old Testament contain historical books, deliberately arranged so that
  - a. in the Pentateuch, they take us from the creation to the death of Moses;
  - b. in the Prophets, they cover the period from the entry into the Promised Land to the beginning of the Exile;
  - c. in the Hagiographa, Daniel, Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah relate events during the Exile and at the time of the return, while Chronicles is placed last as a recapitulation of the whole biblical story (pp. 158–9).

4. that in addition to historical books (or material) each division contains another major type of literature, thus
  - a. Pentateuch : history plus law-books;
  - b. Prophets : history plus oracular, visionary books by named prophets;
  - c. Hagiographa : history plus lyrical and proverbial, sapiential books (p. 157).
5. that the earliest distribution of the books between the three divisions of the Old Testament, which probably originated in the list drawn up by Judas Maccabaeus, was that of the baraita on the order of the Prophets and Hagiographa in Bab. Baba Bathra 14b (= The Law: Gen, Exod, Lev, Num, Deut; The Prophets: Jos, Jud, Sam, Kgs, Jer, Ezek, Isa, The Twelve Prophets; The Hagiographa: Ruth, Ps, Job, Prov, Eccl, Song, Lam, Dan, Esth, Ezr, Neh, Chr) pp. 153, 157.
6. that the order of books in the third division (as in the others) is determined by a logical plan, which groups Daniel with the historical books—more than half of its chapters relate history; puts Daniel at the head of its group of historical books because its material covers the earliest part of the historical period on which the third division concentrates; and puts Chronicles at the end of the group because, as noted above, it recapitulates virtually the whole of Old Testament history from Adam onwards (pp. 158–164).

From all this it follows 1. that the canon of the Old Testament was finally closed not less than 250 years earlier than AD 90, the date proposed by Ryle's theory; and 2. that books like Daniel and Chronicles were included in the third division of the canon not because they were written too late to be included in the second division before it was closed, but for altogether different reasons. If Beckwith is right, Ryle's theory, and much that has been built on it, must be discarded.

Not only so. If it is true, as many have argued, that Alexandrian Jewry had a different canon from Palestinian Jewry, that the Qumran community had a different canon again, and that the final decision on the extent of the canon was not made even by the Jews themselves until about sixty years after the crucifixion, then one could not claim the authority of Jesus or his apostles for the short (minus the Apocrypha) canon which Judaism eventually adopted. But if, as Beckwith maintains, the canon had long been closed by the time of Jesus and he accepted that canon as Scripture, then his attitude decides the question of the extent of the Old Testament canon for all those who accept his authority. The fact that later many Church Fathers, under the influence of that strange mixture of Greek translations and original compositions popularly known as the Septuagint, held a wider view of the canon than Christ did, cannot be held (by Christians) to confer canonical status on books which were not in the canon which Christ himself regarded as already closed in his day. As an 'Anglican of Protestant sympathies, engaged (as a representative of his Church) in discussion with the Eastern Orthodox' (p. 6), Beckwith is naturally aware of the implications of his findings for a question that has vexed Christendom ever since Jerome and Augustine disagreed so forcefully over the head of it. It is Mr. Beckwith's hope that his findings will at least help to open a way through the present ecumenical (and inter-faith) *impasse* on the subject (pp. 9, 437).

In addition his findings carry important implications for the dating of the composition of Daniel. The majority view is that Daniel was composed in Maccabean times. But if the canon was finally closed in the time of Judas Maccabaeus and Daniel was included in that canon, it is difficult to think that it had not already by that time been generally regarded as canonical. Moreover Beckwith points out that internal evidence (e.g. the type of calendar used, which for the various sects in Judaism was so important) shows that Daniel was not a product of the Essenes, and yet they accepted Daniel as canonical and made great use of it. Now the Essenes

‘seem to have dated their own definite emergence as a party between 171 and 167 BC . . . and any apocalypse produced from then on, if it had not come from the Essenes, would have come from their rivals, and would therefore not have secured Essene acceptance.’ (p. 415)

The conclusion is therefore that Daniel must have been regarded by Judaism in general as canonical and accepted as such by the Essenes before their emergence as a separate sect. If Beckwith is right, here is one more piece of evidence to emerge in recent years, indicating that the Maccabean dating of Daniel is no longer tenable (pp. 355–8 and notes 66–84 pp. 414–417).

Beckwith, of course, is not the first in recent times, as he himself points out, to undermine the bases on which Ryle’s theory of the canon was built. In 1968 J. D. Purvis argued from the Qumran evidence that the Samaritans did not finally break with the Jews until the late second century BC. They must therefore have known a canon which already included the Prophets, and their reason for rejecting the Prophets and retaining only the Pentateuch was not, as Ryle argued, that at the time of their break with Judaism the canon only contained the Pentateuch. A. C. Sundberg in 1964 showed that the idea that there existed a wider Alexandrian canon recognised as such by the Jews is unsubstantiated by the evidence. J. P. Lewis in 1964 questioned whether the so-called Synod of Jamnia was really a synod at all rather than a mere academic discussion: its influence on later rabbinical discussion was certainly limited. And in 1976 S. Z. Leiman already argued that the canon of the Hagiographa was closed not in the late first century AD but in the mid-second century BC.

Now comes Beckwith and argues that the closing of the canon was even earlier. His conclusions are reached not so much by adducing new evidence unavailable to earlier scholars (though there is some of that) but by a much more extensive use of evidence long since available but hitherto neglected, and a much more rigorous analysis of the evidence that has commonly been cited. His exposure of previous fallacies and the exposition of his own methodology (pp. 7ff.) are impressive. His grasp of all the relevant ancient literature is phenomenal, and his analysis of it magisterial. His lucid argumentation therefore is powerfully persuasive.

Are his conclusions correct, then? Agreeable as Mr. Beckwith’s findings are to the present reviewer’s prejudices, it would be impertinent for a review of this size to attempt to analyse the enormously detailed and complex case which he has presented, let alone pronounce a final verdict. But certain it is that this mighty book has raised the discussion of the canon of the Old Testament to new heights of scholarship and sophistication.

Finally, when Mr. Beckwith calls for a new investigation of the dating of Daniel, ‘reviewing all the older evidence, and adding to it all the newer evidence which, especially

since the Qumran discoveries, has been accumulating remarkably', the present reviewer finds it difficult to suppress the hope that Mr. Beckwith himself will answer his own call.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.