

RYLE ON THE CANON OF THE OLD
TESTAMENT.*

The word "Canon" as applied to the sacred writings of Christians, is used to designate the collection of books of the Holy Scripture accepted by the Christian Church as containing an authoritative rule of religious faith and practice, and Prof. Ryle's Essay is devoted to the discussion of the question as to the method by which, and the time when, the Books of the Old Covenant were separated from other books and recognized as the standard of life and doctrine. We have here only incidentally to do with the date of the writings themselves, their internal characteristics or their inspiration. Our enquiry is concerning "the process by which the various books of the Old Testament came to be recognized as sacred and authoritative."

The general characteristics of the book before us are a firm adhesion to what is known as the modern critical view of the formation of the Canon, a clear and pleasing style, and a reverential and devout tone which proves Prof. Ryle a true disciple of the Cambridge school of Bible students. There is nevertheless a vigorous outspokenness which leaves us in no manner of doubt as to the author's whereabouts. He writes not as a partizan, but as one convinced not only of the truth, but of the importance of the views he propounds.

Before proceeding to unfold the modern view of the "gradual growth and formation of the Hebrew Canon," Prof. Ryle points out the difficulty involved in the lack of external evidence on the subject. "A couple of legendary allusions, to be found in the Second Book of Maccabees and in the so-called Fourth Book of Esdras, supply all the light which direct external evidence throws on the subject" (p. 3). He relegates to an excursus the examination of the two main traditions about the formation of the Canon, repeated by Jewish and Christian writers respectively. This Excursus is one of the most valuable pieces of work in the whole book, and demands our first attention.

In the fourth book of Esdras we read that the books of the Old Testament having all been destroyed by the Chaldeans at the sack of Jerusalem, Ezra was inspired to recall to memory and re-write them. He dictated ninety-four books, of which twenty-four (viz. the Old Testament) were to be delivered to the people, but the seventy last were to be committed to the wise alone—"for in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the stream of knowledge." This tradition is repeated by many of the fathers, e.g., Ireneus (in connection with his account of the formation of the lxx.), Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, Theodoret and many others, amongst them our own Bede. By the twelfth century the difficulties of such an account were being felt, but it was not until the Reformation, that it was openly rejected.

Its place was taken by another tradition preserved by the Jews, less marvellous, but resting, according to Prof. Ryle, on no more solid historical basis. It is thus set forth by Bishop Walton (1600-1661): "The first and most famous edition of the books of the Old Testament was that of Ezra (whom the Jews call a second Moses), and the Great Sanhedrim, or the men of the Great Synagogue, after the return from Babylon. For as there no longer existed either the Temple or the Tabernacle, where the authentic copies had formerly been deposited, the sacred volumes were negligently kept all through the period of the captivity. This being the case, Ezra and his companions collected the

MSS. from various quarters, arranged them in order, and reduced them to the compass of a single volume. They removed the corruptions from which the text had suffered, and restored it to its former pure state; and thus they established the Canon" (pp. 251, 252). Hottinger (1689) declares that this has been an incontrovertible principle as well with Christians as with Jews, at least with "those who have not a fungus for a brain." Nevertheless a number of scholars pointed out the unsatisfactory character of the testimony to the Great Synagogue, and on the ground of its late date (it is first mentioned in the Talmud, 200-300, A.D.), of a remarkable anachronism in its contents, and of the entire absence of any record of such a council in the older literature, Ryle, in company with most scholars who have recently investigated the question, have come to the conclusion that the Great Synagogue never existed. So Schürer, in his great work "The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ," says of the men of the Great Synagogue:—"They appear here as the depositaries of the tradition of the law between the last prophets and the first scribes known by name. Later Jewish tradition ascribes to them all kinds of legal enactments. Very recent, indeed really modern, is on the other hand, the opinion that they also composed the Canon of the Old Testament.* As no authorities tell us who they really were, there has been the more opportunity for the most varying hypotheses concerning them. The correct one, that they never existed at all in the form which Jewish tradition represents, was already advocated by older Protestant criticism, though it was reserved for the conclusive investigation of Kuenen to fully dissipate the obscurity resting upon this subject" (Part II, i., 354). We conclude then that Prof. Ryle is quite right in making no use of this tradition, which is probably an unauthoritative development of the record of Nehemiah, viii-x, save in so far as it preserves the recollection of the important relation of Ezra to the Law, which is unquestioned by all scholars. For even though on a careful balancing of the evidence, some might feel hesitation in asserting the negative conclusion, there can be no doubt that as we now have it, the testimony of the Great Synagogue to the formation of the Canon is valueless (Cf. Driver, *Int. to Lit. of O. T.*, p. xxxiii., and pes. Robertson Smith's *Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, p. 156.)

It has been necessary to devote a considerable space to the examination of the traditional views of the formation of the Canon, because it is upon the lack of any useful external evidence that the legitimacy of Prof. Ryle's constructive method depends. I therefore venture to recommend to the student the careful perusal of Excursus A, after that of the first chapter, and before proceeding to the second.

HERBERT SYMONDS.

(To be concluded.)

TO R. B. B.

13th April, 1892.

HEAVEN grant thee many a bright return
Of this, dear friend, thy natal day!—
Would I, like you, in unconcern
Of creeping age, austere and stern,
"But twenty-nine" might say.

E. C. M.

MESSRS. C. V. STEVENSON, B.A., Carter Troop, W. L. Baynes-Reed, Chappell and Saunders, have been elected a committee to make arrangements for the annual "At Home," on the afternoon of the Queen's Birthday.

*Elias Levita, a Jewish scholar of great eminence, was the first to promulgate this view in 1538.

*The Canon of the Old Testament, an Essay on the Gradual Growth and Formation of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture, by Herbert Edward Ryle, B.D., Hulsean Professor of Divinity, Professorial Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and Examining Chaplain to the Lord Bishop of Ripon. Macmillan & Co., 1892.)