

REVIEW ESSAY

The Septuagint as Christian Scripture

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The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: Its Prehistory and the Problem of Its Canon. By Martin Hengel. Trans. Mark E. Biddle. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002. Pp. 153 + xvi. ISBN 0-567-08737-9. \$37.46.

In this resourceful and thoughtful book Martin Hengel, retired NT professor at Tübingen, shares the results of a lifetime of study of the Septuagint as the variable OT of the early churches. For this reader Hengel's view of the formation and transmission of the Greek OT, with some qualifications, resonates well with his own work over almost fifty years.

Hengel celebrates the translation of the Torah into Greek as "a unique phenomenon in the Greek world and [as] practically unparalleled. No comparable barbarian 'holy book' was translated into Greek" (p. 80). The Septuagint was in fact widely known and respected in the Greco-Roman world. Here Hengel wisely relies in part on the work of Elias Bickerman, my own mentor in this regard as well. And he rightly celebrates the fluidity of both text and canon in Hebrew or Greek in the pre-Masoretic period.¹ In fact, a good bit of the book is spent in describing the varied collections of Jewish literature in Greek which continued to mean a great deal to Christians well after Rabbinic Judaism became the continuing Semitic successor to Early Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism indeed claimed to be the sole or normative heir of the highly diverse ancient Israel. Like the Pharisaic view of God before it, Rabbinic Judaism departed from history and limited the Ketuvim to reflections on God's past involvement in history but

1. See my "Stability and Fluidity in Text and Canon," *Tradition of the Text: Studies Offered to Dominique Barthélemy in Celebration of His 70th Birthday* (ed. C. J. Norton and S. Pisane; OBO 109; Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 203-17.

with none on what God would further do in history, whether to continue as Lord of history, or to bring it to its dramatic close.²

Much of the book focuses on the pervasive importance of the *Letter of Aristeas*, and the importance it had for Hellenistic and Christian Judaism, and on the issue of the cessation of prophecy or revelation in Pharisaic/rabbinic thinking, and when that occurred. The Christian effort to extend the authority of the *Aristeas* legend to all the Greek OT brought vigorous denial from the rabbis, to the point that Origen passed over the legend in silence and Jerome rejected it as a lie (p. 50). Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand, pressed belief in the cessation of revelation (God's withdrawal from history) back as far as the Exile itself in some quarters.³ Hengel leaves little doubt about the importance and effect of the debate between Jews and Christians on issues such as these, and finally on the issue of closure of the canon of the First Testament, whether Jewish or Christian.

Hengel shows his mastery of the field in his treatment of the Greek Jewish literature pertinent to the question of a canon of the Septuagint. Hengel deals in detail with why and how the Christian OT came to include the ten (or eleven) writings not found in the rabbinic canon but which many churches accepted in their canons, "although only slowly and half-heartedly," according to Hengel (pp. 91-103). The eschatological nature of Christianity and its firm belief in God's continuing involvement in "history," meant continuing interest in the literature rejected by Rabbinic Judaism, and this was despite their considerable respect for the rabbis in the debate. Because of and despite that respect, early Christian communities, whether Judaizers or Hellenizers, Petrine or Pauline, or of any stripe, held to two firm beliefs: monotheism (hence, all the struggles to understand the Trinity in monotheistic terms) and supersessionism (hence, the need, despite Marcion and others, to keep the "Old Testament" in the double-testament Christian canon). All forms of Christianity in antiquity believed

2. See my "Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process," in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee McDonald and James Sanders; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 252-63. Daniel read in a Rabbinic Jewish hermeneutic is a book of encouragement to young Jews, set in the Babylonian Exile, to be faithful but not an apocalyptic "prophecy." That had ceased for the rabbis well before the Maccabean Revolt, and the prophetic corpus would have been basically closed by the time of the Revolt in the second century B.C.E. Daniel 7:13, important to the Christian argument, is hardly cited or mentioned in Rabbinic Jewish literature.

3. Much of the life work of Lou Silberman has been given to understanding nascent Rabbinic Judaism's rejection of but continuing fascination with apocalyptic thinking despite Rabbinic Judaism's withdrawal from history after the Bar Kochba Revolt; see my "Identity, Apocalyptic, and Dialogue," in *The Echoes of Many Texts: Reflections on Jewish and Christian Traditions—Essays in Honor of Lou H. Silberman* (ed. W. G. Dever and J. E. Wright; BJS 313; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 159-70.

that the Church of Jesus Christ was the One God's new and true Israel. This crucial point was the main reason for the ongoing acerbic Jewish-Christian debate i to the era of Constantine.

Hengel's discussion of the issue of closure of a First Testament canon is particularly interesting and resonates well indeed with my own work, with the exception that in order to make a clear contrast between the closure of the Jewish canon and the quite different understanding he has of closure of the Greek OT, he offers more clarity than the data suggest about the closure of the former.⁴ His discussion of the contrast between Rabbinic Judaism's departure from history and Christianity's insistence that history had yet to reach its climax and goal in Christ's return to establish God's Kingdom on Earth leads Hengel to see the Jewish canon closed by the time of Josephus. Here Hengel finds himself in agreement with those who see a first-century date for the closure of the Tanakh because it fits his view of the contrast between the closed nature of the one and the open nature of the other (pp. 99-103). He does not ask, however, why Aqiba supported Bar Kochba as messiah. Hengel unfortunately agrees with the editors of 4QMMT (DJD 10, p. 59 n. 10) that a very fragmentary phrase there about the words of David indicates the closure of the Ketuvim, a very thin reed indeed on which to lean. And yet he fortunately does not agree with Beckwith and others that the Tanakh was stabilized in pre-Christian Judaism. He ignores, however, the compelling work of Peter Flint on the psalters at Qumran and the biblical Psalter (pp. 98-99 n. 60), which massively supports the view that 11QPs^a, as well as variant forms of the Psalter, was canonical for the Qumran community, fitting precisely Hengel's own parallel view of the open-endedness of the Septuagint.⁵ But he feels he needs to make the contrast, so his reading of the evidence shows the *Tendenz*.

The greatest value of this very perceptive book is in Hengel's acquaintance with all the Hellenistic Jewish literature pertinent to the

4. See Steve Mason, "Josephus and His Twenty-Two Book Canon," in *The Canon Debate* (ed. L. McDonald and J. Sanders; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 110-27. Mason's arguments against an open canon for Josephus are not compelling, over against those, for example, of Rudolf Meyer, but his perception of the indeterminacy of Josephus in both *Against Apion and Jewish Antiquities* regarding a closed canon is helpful. See my "Spinning the Bible," *Bible Review* 14/3 (1998): 22-29, 44-45.

5. Peter W. Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms* (STD 17; Leiden: Brill, 1997). And see David Carr's argument for there having been multiple tracks in the canonical process up to the upheaval of the two Palestinian revolts against Rome and the choice of the proto-Masoretic form of the text: Carr, "Canonization in the Context of Community: An Outline for the Formation of the Tanakh and the Christian Bible," in *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders* (ed. R. Weis and D. Carr; JSOTSup 225; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 22-64. Carr and Flint are in complete resonance here.

discussion and his perception of its importance. While he deals with the relevant "lists" so prominent in most discussions of the closure of canons in antiquity, he does so only after considering the manuscript evidence now so abundantly available (pp. 60-66). Hengel asked Robert Hanhart to address a seminar that Hengel gave on the subject at Tübingen and to contribute his presentation as the introduction to this book, despite their open disagreement on central issues pertaining to the question of the canonical status and form of the Septuagint as Christian Scripture. This was not only generous on Hengel's part, it was an astute move, for clearly Hengel's position emerges as the wiser and the saner on the core issues involved.