

BOOK REVIEWS

McDonald, Lee Martin, and James A. Sanders, eds. *The Canon Debate*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002. 700 pp. Hardcover, \$39.95.

The editors, Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders, are well-known NT scholars whose publications include many works on the canon. They each contributed one chapter and coauthored the Introduction. The book is divided into four parts: Introduction, OT topics, NT topics, and four appendices provided by McDonald.

The purpose of *The Canon Debate* is to advance the study of canon without the need for advocating any one position. The authors' varying positions regarding canon are intended to lead to further dialogue and understanding of the process by which the Bible was produced (17). The introduction clearly identifies the major areas where disagreements remain. Many of the chapters overlap, creating some redundancy, but this is inevitable.

The book is an indirect tribute to Albert C. Sundberg Jr. in that many of the 32 chapters reflect his ground-breaking work that began in the 1960s. Even when credit is given to an author who wrote after Sundberg, Sundberg's influence is nevertheless evident. Sundberg believed that all orthodox writings in the early church were inspired, considered scripture, and were authoritative. Out of this body of literature certain books attained an elevated authority, were considered *more* inspired, took on the same meaning of "scripture" ascribed to the OT, and eventually became canonized.

Authors influenced by the Sundberg terminology (primarily in the interchange of various combinations of "scripture," "authority" and "canon") are Ulrich, McDonald, Gamble, VanderKam, Kalin, Hahneman, and Dunn. Those who have not used Sundberg's terminology (generally by not referring to noncanonical writings as having "authority") are Davis, Berrera, Harrington, Ferguson, Perkins (where she cites Berrera), and Balla. The other authors do not deal specifically with these terms. Thus, the complexity of the canon debate lies in the way scholars define terms, evident throughout the book and discussed in the critique at the end.

Section 1, on the Old/First Testament, contains fifteen chapters on three themes. First, in regard to the content and nature of the canon(s), the place of the LXX and the DSS offer new insights, particularly about the MT, as well as dialogue on the Josephus comments. The second theme addresses the dates for the closing of the three sections of the OT canon (Law, Prophets, and Writings) and the minor impact now accorded to Jamnia on the dates for closure of the third section of the Old/First Testament. The third theme is the issue of terminology, which overlaps with discussions in the second section on the New/Second Testament.

The content of canon varies with different communities of faith (Ulrich 23, Sanders 479). For instance, within Judaism there were several canons, e.g., Mosaic and Prophetic (Davis, 48). Blenkinsopp notes: "Canonicity is generally taken to imply normativity . . . [but] normativity is not at all a straightforward concept" (67). Sundberg, who is supportive of the foregoing views, underscores the complexity of the process of canon formation by drawing attention to the fact that Greek was used in Palestine before Jesus' day and some of the books found at

Qumran were written in Greek (88-89). After stating that Judaism had no canon list before 70 A.D. (91), VanderKam discusses the textual fluidity in the DSS (94-96; cf. 197) and writes that the usage of the term "torah" at Qumran does not have a precise meaning (108-109). Thus, an understanding of canon should be informed by evidence rather than by imposing later views on the Qumran literature (108).

Mason contends that Josephus cannot be used as a source for either the open or closed canon (125-126), while Barrera notes that the earliest use of the terms "tripartite/bipartite" do not reveal which books were included (128). A number of authors are convinced that the fixed list was not finalized at Jamnia (Lewis, 146-162). As Lighthouse observes, there is no evidence for when and how the rabbis' Bible was fixed (164) and Evans adds that the canon of Jesus was open (185-195).

Harrington observes that while late first-century Judaism moved toward a tripartite canon, it was not until the late fourth and early fifth centuries that Christianity moved toward a more inclusive OT canon (203). Early Christians in the East were inclined to follow the Judaic custom of 22 or 24 OT books, whereas the Western church, with the exception of Jerome (whose sojourn in Bethlehem no doubt impacted his thinking) included the Apocryphal books (200). Harrington writes that many of the older positions, such as the influence of Jamnia, Marcion's role, and the Alexandrian canon hypothesis are regarded today as "myths" (204). Sanders and Tov advocate that the terms "stabilization" and "canonical process" should be used rather than "canonization" (254) and that the MT should be seen as "an advanced stage in the stabilization process which began in the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E." (256). Sanders believes that Judaism probably closed the Writings section after the Bar Kochba debacle (258).

Tov asserts that the MT should be known as "Biblia Masoretica," not "Biblia Hebraica" (235). He posits that "our emphasis on the Masoretic Text in modern critical study of the Bible causes problems" (239). "Since the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls, it has become clear that a unified text tradition before the turn of the eras never existed" (239), and "*the Greek Septuagint . . . represents the best complete text of the Hebrew Bible*" (242, emphasis supplied). Therefore, Tov advocates for a critical edition using the MT, LXX, Qumran texts, and Samaritan Pentateuch (250). He argues that "the text of the Bible is represented by the totality of its textual witnesses, not primarily by one of them" (251).

Section 2, on the New/Second Testament, addresses the following areas: external pressures for determining a "fixed" list; dates for the processes; determining *how* or *why* a given list resulted; and dynamics, i.e., What does this all mean? How shall we proceed?

Gamble begins with recent NT research (267-294) and provides a summary of the differences between Zahn and Harnack (267-268). He also evaluates the value of late twentieth-century scholars' contributions to NT canon research (268-273). He, along with Hahneman (405), offers positive assessments of Sundberg's definitions of key terms, as well as his challenge to the second-century dating of the Muratorian Fragment (269). Barton also agrees with Sundberg on its dating (343). An entire chapter by Hahneman on the dating of the Fragment offers strong support for the fourth-century date along with new arguments (405-415).

Further, Gamble concurs with Barton that if there were agreement on the

canon terminology, the canon would be “grasped clearly and coherently as a process comprising these somewhat overlapping steps” (272). He notes “that no Ecumenical council in the ancient church ever ruled for the church as a whole on the question of the contents of the canon” (291). A result of such problems is that NT canon scholars often talk past one another (322).

Barton believes that the NT canon process began as a response to Marcion: “Marcion’s concern was to *exclude* books that he disapproved of from his ‘canon’” (342). “He was not assembling a collection of Christian books, but was *making a [very restricted] selection from the corpus of texts which already existed and which must already have been recognized as sacred by many in the church—otherwise he would not have insisted in abolishing them*” (342-343, emphasis supplied). Bovon, however, argues that the twofold canon of the second century is due to the power of “Gospel” and “Apostle,” rather than the need for a response to Marcion’s canon (516-526).

Balla discusses the use of books by the early Christians that did not get into the canon, and refers to these books as having a “lesser” authority (385). Perkins’s chapter on “Gnosticism and the Christian Bible” gives excellent tables showing which Nag Hammadi codices contain references (and how often) to the Bible books (366-369).

Kalin traces the outlines of canon from the old school to Eusebius (386-404), concluding that Eusebius had a smaller number of books in his NT (22 or 24) due to his belief that apostolic authorship was *the criterion* for evaluating other writings (403). Apostolic authorship is one of several factors that McDonald mentions in his chapter on the criteria for canonization. Other criteria included orthodoxy, antiquity, and use (423-434), as well as the social context, the manner in which scripture is identified, e.g., how it is cited, its claim to holiness, and other features, such as adaptability and inspiration (417, 420-439).

Clarke’s chapter on pseudonymity includes reasons why terminology is problematic (441-442). He lists twelve motives for writing pseudonymously, in which only the first two are obviously negative (448-449). Examples include pseudonymity and its function in antiquity” and modern scholarship’s split on the issue (465); pseudonymity as a common literary device in Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian antiquity (466); and the community, not the prophetically inspired individual, as the focus of canon formation (467).

Schmidt provides two tables on the Greek NT as a Codex (469-484). He chronologically lists all the minuscule manuscripts that contain the entire NT and then provides a similar table for the uncials (479-484).

Epp discusses the interrelationship between textual criticism and canon (485-515), noting that with the discovery of papyri manuscripts the connection between these two areas is much more viable (515). He includes a discussion on the presence of canon content, in which “unexpected” books are found in some instances (491-495) and expected books are absent in other cases (495-505).

Wall expresses the need to go beyond the desire to “hold scripture captive to an academic rather than religious end” (530). “The literal sense of scripture must have contemporary meaning for its current readers before it can function as their scripture” (533). Further, “the whole of scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, when received and read as a textual deposit of the church’s canonical heritage, aims at Christian formation rather than historical reconstruction” (535).

The most radical chapter in the *The Canon Debate* is written by Funk, who wants the scholarly community to consider producing three NT editions: one smaller than the current twenty-seven books to indicate that the quest is always searching for a canon within the canon, and one larger than the current canon because the church fathers unduly narrowed the scope of the founding documents in order to preserve their own definition of the faith and to secure the foundation of their power (555). This larger version should contain the current twenty-seven books plus others such as the Sayings, Gospel Q, and the Gospel of Thomas (557). He suggests that we require a new NT, indeed, a new Bible, that will find its way into bookstores and onto the Internet in a section clearly marked "Bibles" (555). A historical Jesus and a historical faith necessarily give rise to a multiplicity of traditions and interpretations (556). Therefore, no body of tradition can be the final and complete expression. In recognition of that limitation, the canon of scripture should be given a plurality of forms (556).

In the final chapter, Dunn asks: "To sum up then, how meaningful is the concept of a New Testament canon, and has the New Testament canon a continuing function? I have not tried to explain or defend the canon in the traditional terms of apostolicity, for I do not think it can be done" (577). "Nor have I said—or would I want to say—that the New Testament writings are canonical because they were more inspired than other and later Christian writings. Almost every Christian who wrote in an authoritative way during the first two centuries of Christianity claimed the same sort of inspiration for their writing as Paul had for his" (578).

The Canon Debate concludes with several helpful appendices: "Primary Sources for Study of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible Canon," "Primary Sources for Study of the New Testament Canon," "Lists and Catalogues of Old Testament Collections," and "Lists and Catalogues of New Testament Collections." Even a cursory glance at these appendices yields remarkable insights into canon history.

We now turn our attention to some responses. This volume contains valuable discussions on a topic that was, for decades, stuck in the same mold. The editors express interest that the work might elicit further helpful studies. This will indeed occur on a number of fronts, but the most important area, it seems to me, is the need to establish common understandings about such key terms as "canon," "authority," "scripture," and "inspiration." I believe Sundberg has already done this, but until there is consensus, "scholars will continue to talk past one another."

The following are examples of how easy it is to mix the older definitions with the new. First, two illustrations come from the editors themselves in the Introduction. The terms "scripture" and "canon" employed by McDonald and Sanders point to the continuing problem of term definition. They first state: "Most definitions available can be employed to show that there were more *writings acknowledged as scripture* in antiquity than those that were eventually included in the current *canon*" (4, emphasis supplied). At this point, McDonald and Sanders make a distinction between scripture and canon, stating that everything that was considered scripture was not included in the final canon. But then, they note that "some ancient literature functioned in a scripture-like manner, that is, similar to other long-accepted *scriptures* that were normative for a believing

community, long before it was ever called *scripture* and placed in the *canon*" (4, emphasis supplied). In the second statement, *scripture* is equated with *canon*. Why not say: "... long before it was ever called *canon*," and end the sentence there?

Another example is found in the criteria for canonicity used by the early church. McDonald and Sanders observe that "there is little doubt among canon scholars that authorship by an apostle was the most important factor considered by the church leaders of the fourth and following centuries" (7). This view is pervasive throughout current canon scholarship. However, they also state that something written by an apostle was considered "scripture." While true, such a statement is ambiguous because according to their definitions of scripture and canon given above in point 1, nonapostolic writings could also be "scripture."

Thus, these two examples demonstrate that even McDonald's and Sanders's own definitions of "scripture" are much broader than the term "canon." Therefore, it would be more precise for them to state that the authority given to an apostle is the criterion that made it possible for their "scripture" to be elevated to "canon."

In a third example, Berrera writes that the Qumran community seems to have granted at least a degree of canonical value to other books of which multiple copies have been found, such as *I Enoch* and *Jubilees* (143). He cites VanderKam for support. However, VanderKam was making the point that the DSS were "authoritative" and was not stating what Berrera inferred about "canonical value."

One further example of how easily confusion can arise over definitions is found in Balla's chapter: "We have seen that books not in our canon today were widely read by early Christians. However, this does not necessarily mean that they too were regarded as authoritative" (385). Later he uses the words "lesser authority" for the Shepherd of Hermas (385). He notes: "The early church possessed literature edifying as reading matter as well as writings with a *higher* authority" (385, emphasis supplied.). Thus, it appears that Balla prefers the use of "lesser" and "higher" authorities, rather than simply denying authority outright to those books that never became canon.

The book contains some controversial points, e.g., the consistently argued position (with which I agree) that the Old Testament canon was not closed in the days of Jesus. And some readers will find a number of Funk's sentences distasteful. For example, he contends that "we no longer believe that Jesus was born of Mary without the benefit of male sperm" (548).

Finally, there are three small matters. First, it seems that Schmidt should include Vaticanus in his list of uncial manuscripts that contain the NT, even though the codex ends in Hebrews; or a footnote could be given to account for its omission in his table. Second, on page 407, fn. 4, the word "Century" is missing in the article title: "Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List." Third, I agree with the designations "First" and "Second" Testaments.

I highly recommend this volume. While many of the concepts have been in print, some for many years, they have been sharpened, developed, and provide new insights into the canon debate. All future canonical work will be in serious dialogue with this landmark publication and no serious student of the topic should be without it.