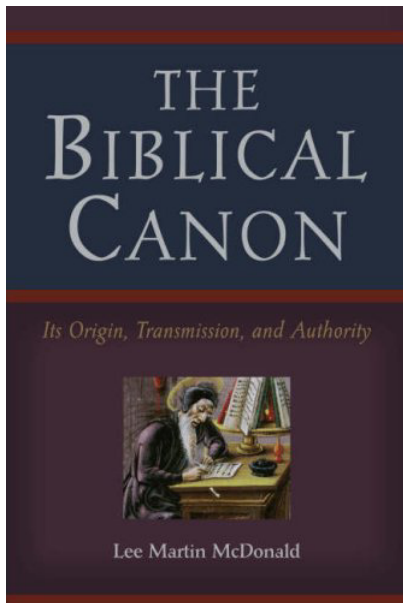


RBL 08/2007



MacDonald, Lee Martin

The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007. Pp. xli + 546.
Paper. \$29.95. ISBN 1565639251.

David W. Chapman
Covenant Theological Seminary
Saint Louis, Missouri

This thorough introduction to the questions concerning the formation of the Christian canon offers a substantial revision of the author's useful previous work. McDonald does not seek to answer every question he asks, but he asks nearly every question one can imagine, and he answers many of the central ones by drawing on his years of reflection on the topic.

Despite the change in title, this is the third edition of McDonald's *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, initially published nearly twenty years ago. Like the second edition, this revision significantly expands on its predecessor (e.g., there are over 170 pages more main text here than in the second edition). McDonald interacts with critiques of his previous work, adds more recent bibliography, and further addresses contemporary issues (such as those concerning the relationship between textual transmission and canon). The section on the Old Testament is substantially reworked. The New Testament section has been expanded as well, including a very helpful listing of citations, allusions, and parallels to New Testament books in later authors. Nonetheless, although some of his opinions have changed, McDonald's central conclusions remain true to his previous editions.

McDonald effectively positions himself in the middle of a spectrum between the traditionalists and those who desire to reopen the question of what belongs in the canon. He identifies the traditionalists as those who claim that Jesus possessed a closed biblical (Old Testament) canon that was adopted by the church and expanded by Catholics, that the early church also recognized the inspired theologically unified New Testament Scriptures based on their apostolicity (being written or authorized by an apostle), and that the ancient canonical status of these biblical writings is supported by their frequent citations in the early church. In response, McDonald robustly argues that the Christian canon (of both the Old and New Testaments) was not closed until the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. Moreover, mere citations of scriptural books in the early church neither prove their scriptural status (since even non-Christian sources receive citations in the New Testament) nor exclude noncanonical books (e.g., Jude cites 1 Enoch).

Nonetheless, McDonald refuses to join those colleagues who contend that works such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary deserve canonical consideration (or that the Apocalypse of John is of dubious worth and should be discarded). The canon, he notes, is not an academic construct; rather, it constitutes the church's book, and the church would not ultimately gain enough from reopening the canon to justify the pain (428). The canon still sufficiently informs one concerning the core of the gospel, even if it contains dispiriting material (such as its *de facto* acceptance of slavery) and even if other ancient literature can also rightly inform the Christian faith. Hence, McDonald suggests that perhaps the greatest benefit to studying the origins of the canon is that such an investigation can help free the church from inappropriate loyalties to the text, forcing it to remember that the Lord Jesus Christ is "the true canon of faith for the church" (429).

It is not possible here to summarize the detailed argumentation of this book, but perhaps a few more central aspects of McDonald's account can be mentioned. For McDonald, a scriptural "canon" consists of a fixed set of authoritative sacred writings. At times McDonald will employ the term "inviolable" to describe the degree of respect such canonical writing must receive to be fully "canonical" in the later use of the term—the very words of the text themselves must become fixed. The Roman (especially the Constantinian) concern for uniformity helped drive the church's desire for a universally defined canon. He suggests that ancient library collections (especially the one at Alexandria) formed the closest cultural analog to (even perhaps spurred the origin of) Jewish and Christian notions of canon. This is a curious view, given the immense size (estimated at 500,000 volumes) of the Alexandrian collection of supposedly canonical texts. McDonald emphasizes that, in order for a biblical book to have survived long enough to be deemed canonical, it must have been "adaptable" to the changing life situations of the early church through at least the fourth century. Concerning the New Testament canon, McDonald insists Eusebius was the first to have listed a closed canon,

and Eusebius's list was highly influential. McDonald believes that this list essentially stated Eusebius's own conclusions rather than having resulted from earlier lists. Hence, according to McDonald, Eusebius himself invented Origen's "list," and the Muratorian Canon was a fourth-century document.

One of McDonald's greatest strengths is found in his ability to frame the key questions in the contemporary study of canon (e.g., xviii–xix, 3–9, 426–27). This book also provides a fairly comprehensive collection of translated primary sources. Thus his inclusion of an appendix on "An Outline of Canon Research: Primary Sources and Questions" (431–38) continues to be one of the most helpful summary aspects of this volume.

The expanded length in this third edition on the whole provides room for new useful information. However, it also makes the work more imposing as an introduction for the average student. Occasionally this reader felt that the prose could have been tightened and some conceptual repetition removed.

In some ways the title of the earlier editions more accurately reflected the purposes of this book. Although McDonald has increasingly devoted space in each subsequent edition to the reception of the Hebrew Bible in early Judaism, he remains focused on the formation of the *Christian* Bible. Thus McDonald's central reason for the Old Testament canon being viewed as still in flux well into the centuries *anno Domini* (long after the demise of various Jewish sects) is that the church fathers (and, he would argue, the New Testament authors themselves) continued to debate the extent of their Greek Bibles (especially concerning the Apocrypha and some of the Pseudepigrapha). One might respond that the core of the Old Testament books most frequently employed in the earliest church writings actually appears largely identical to that of the Hebrew Bible (although citations themselves commonly stem from Septuagintal Greek texts) and that even first-century Jewish apocalyptic sectarians apparently also understood this same core to be widely accepted in the various streams of Judaism in their day (as much as they might have also wished for many additional esoteric books to be cherished as well; see 4 Ezra 14:42–48).

McDonald draws upon a helpful distinction (found in G. T. Sheppard and J. A. Sanders) concerning two different meanings of the word "canon." He calls "Canon 1" the set of writings (and oral utterances) deemed to be inspired and authoritative in various local contexts, and "Canon 2" the permanently fixed list of authoritative books (55–58). So, with regard to the New Testament, McDonald readily admits that as early as the second century various groupings of authoritative documents were in use in the early church (i.e., different versions of Canon 1). However, it is the lack of any early Canon 2 that McDonald often emphasizes. In fact, throughout the book, when McDonald writes the word "canon," he usually has in mind Canon 2.

This points to a key question in canon scholarship today, a question that McDonald knows well: Should one stress the final stages of formation, when an inviolable text and an unquestionably closed canon had been achieved? That is, should students principally concern themselves with discovering the assured date for Canon 2? If so, then McDonald can justifiably argue that the ancient synagogue and church debates about books such as Ecclesiastes, Esther, Job, Song of Songs, and 2 Peter point to a lack of established canon until the fourth to sixth centuries. Furthermore, he can also suggest that Canon 2 was achieved quite late in both Jewish and Christian traditions, given the lack of a universal inviolable text, for this lack is testified in Judaism by the textual variations among Qumran manuscripts and in Christianity by the complex textual transmission of the New Testament.

Nonetheless, one could wish McDonald to have reflected more on the question of whether there was in antiquity a historical *via media* between Canons 1 and 2. If one seeks the essential locus of written authority in the early church, then it is striking how ancient and widespread was the early Christian acceptance of (at least) the fourfold Gospel and most of the Pauline Epistles, alongside the majority of the Hebrew Bible. Certainly among the “orthodox” the status of several other early Christian books continued to be debated for some time (hence different versions of Canon 1), but there was still a seemingly fixed core of authoritative books operating in most locales. This is admittedly an oversimplification, and questions here arise even among the ancient orthodox as one considers such matters as the debates over the Old Testament Apocrypha, the Diatessaron obscuring its four Gospel ancestors in certain regions, and the ancient use of works such as the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Gospel of the Hebrews. Yet McDonald rightly at times allows (e.g., 58) that this core, although it was expanded somewhat cautiously over time, itself represented fairly early on something more fixed than a Canon 1, if not quite achieving the rigorous closed inviolability of Canon 2. One should further consider whether such a secure canonical core could have provided in antiquity a sense of stability to the church in the midst of its process of recognizing a fully closed canon.

I certainly commend this introduction to the Christian canon to all biblical scholars and to our most diligent students. McDonald helps frame for us the questions we must continue to ponder, and he thoroughly summarizes for us the fruit of his extensive labors in this important field.