McDonald, Lee Martin

Formation of the Bible: The Story of the Church’s Canon


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In this volume Lee Martin McDonald explains for lay readers how the church’s canon was formed, an explanation that encourages faith in the Bible’s authority and claims that the early church got the canon right. He wrote that, prior to embarking on this project, he knew of no book to serve such a function. Certain deficiencies in the book, however, may make readers wait longer before this desideratum is fulfilled. In the meantime, the Grove booklet How the New Testament Came Together, by Peter M. Head, would serve a similar purpose on a less-detailed scale.

What so profoundly vitiates this book is this statement with its wide-ranging implications:

As a result of the more recent discovery of many more ancient biblical manuscripts, all early translations, namely those produced before 1993, are essentially out of date—an unfortunate consequence of reassembling a text closer to the biblical original than was possible earlier. (134)

One struggles in vain to think of a significant manuscript discovery or combination of discoveries that happened after 1993 to justify such a statement. The one noteworthy text-critical event of 1993 was the publication of Nestle-Aland’s 27th edition. This, however,
was not a watershed event, for this edition included no textual changes from the 26th edition (1979), but only changes to the apparatus (citations of church fathers were altered significantly). Nothing happened in 1993 to question the validity of well-received translations such as the NASB, NIV, NRSV, and so on, and there is no reason to think that more recent versions such as ESV, NLT, HCSB, and CEV have a more accurate underlying Greek text. One wonders how such an ill-informed statement of such magnitude by someone writing a book on the very topic could be published by Hendrickson Publishers. It certainly does nothing but undermine the confidence of the faithful, the opposite of McDonald’s expressed intention.

The comment becomes stranger when McDonald reinforces the statement, claiming that

since all modern translations of the New Testament depend upon these two modern texts of the Greek New Testament [here McDonald indicates that he is discussing Nestle-Aland 28th edition (2012) and the United Bible Society’s 5th edition], translations dating before these editions are not as reliable or as accurate and do not accurately reflect the latest understanding of what the biblical writers wrote.

Of course, it should go without saying that no Bible translation has yet based its work on NA$^{28}$ or UBS$^5$, but even prior to these new editions, translation committees generally did not strictly follow any critical edition. Rather, they made their own textual decisions in committee on a variant-by-variant basis.

Accordingly, McDonald pushes the lay reader to think that Greek New Testament editions prior to 1993 are radically outdated and that, as a consequence, so are the translations based thereon. Such a conclusion betrays a basic lack of awareness of what has been called “The Twentieth-Century Interlude in NT Textual Criticism,” whereby text critics admit that our latest editions are still very much like the 1881 edition of Westcott and Hort, or better, that of Samuel Tregelles (1857–1858).

The statement assumes further that revisions of the critical text from 1993 and afterward reflect readings closer to the original text. This is not necessarily so. NA$^{28}$ does make a few textual changes in the General Epistles, based upon data gathered from the Coherence Based Genealogical Method, although the jury is still out regarding its methodological validity. The new readings in NA$^{28}$ are likely to be challenged by subsequent critical editions outside the Nestle-Aland brand, and the Nestle-Aland brand’s monopoly on the Greek New Testament text is in the process of being broken (see Michael Holmes’s SBL Greek New Testament and Tyndale House’s forthcoming edition).
The enormity of the erroneousness of these comments makes difficult the appreciation of other good features of the book. If the offending lines could be stricken, the book might be helpful in addressing the needs of university students confronted by skeptical religious professors. Certain features such as the compilation of various canon lists by the major churches and numerous church fathers and other educative charts should be appreciated.

In discussing Old Testament canon, McDonald suggests that the ancient Near Eastern notion of a divine, heavenly book may be the background for the development of the concept of a collection of inspired writings. This seems less likely a background than the tangible ancient Near Eastern covenants as adopted by the biblical idea of a Creator God who sets down the covenant in writing and sends his ambassadors or emissaries (inspired prophets) to issue authoritative warnings about recurring failures to keep covenant stipulations.

Despite considerable treatment of Old Testament canon and its development, McDonald does not discuss the writing prophets’ self-awareness in speaking for God (see, e.g., Mic 3:8), and how they (or later editors) stitched together various oracles delivered at sundry times and diverse manners into literarily coherent books to be preserved and distributed for the benefit of later generations. Such a discussion would have well anticipated and moderated McDonald’s assertions that the apostle Paul “was not consciously aware that he was writing Scripture” (90).

In the course of his chapter on Old Testament canon, McDonald makes the provocative assertion that there is little evidence that the writings of the Law and Prophets “had much of an impact or influence on the Jewish people in the early stages of Old Testament times” (38). While this may be a majority conclusion and would support a late date for the composition of these writings, it is by no means undisputed, and it certainly undermines McDonald’s concern to strengthen lay readers’ faith, leaving them to contemplate the notion of the divine imposition of the law and the formation of a people in accordance with it, without any corresponding impact upon them.

In dating the closing of the Old Testament canon, McDonald tentatively suggests the late second and early third centuries C.E. McDonald invests two lengthy paragraphs developing the argument that the twenty-four books in Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey may have determined the selection and numbering of the Hebrew writings, not to mention the number of elders around the divine throne in Rev 4 and 5 (62–63). McDonald argues well that the Christian canon of the Old Testament was not finalized until after the parting of the ways, stating that that it was largely closed “by no later than the fourth to the sixth centuries, but there was never complete agreement on the matter, and unanimity does not
exist in churches today” (64, emphasis original). Additionally, McDonald points out that the order of books differs in competing canons.

McDonald proceeds to discuss the formation of the New Testament in like manner. He recognizes that Christian writings were preserved to advance Christian mission but denies that they were written as scripture, and he does not venture into the discussion of the New Testament canon reflecting a de facto fourfold mission of the early church (see Paul Barnett Finding the Historical Christ, 12–16). In asserting that the first step in canon formation was the recognition of the usefulness of the Christian writings in worship, instruction, and mission advancement, McDonald may not have given adequate consideration to such issues of an apostolic awareness of both Spirit-fullness and divine calling as God’s spokespersons, as well as an expectation of submission of the churches to the writings addressed to them (1 Cor 5:3–5; 1 Thess 4:8; Col 4:16; cf. 1 Cor 14:32); surely, the Gospel writers perceived themselves as prophetically shouting from the rooftops the eternally authoritative words of Jesus that had been whispered into their ears (Matt 10:27). The chapter concludes with a discussion of Constantine’s role in canon formation and the criteria for canon inclusion (apostolicity, orthodoxy, antiquity, use, and adaptability), along with more charts listing New Testament apocryphal writings.

The next chapter moves from the idea of canon to the mechanics of inscripturation. Overlooked in McDonald’s lengthy discussion of disagreements in canonical order is that there was hardly any practical value in setting down a specific order for the books of the Bible as long as the individual books were preserved in scroll form; one could arrange them in whatever order might seem logical or convenient. It is only with the development of the large multibook codex that book order becomes important, and this is a reasonable explanation as to why book order did not become fixed until the fourth century or so. McDonald writes that “early Christians tended to save time by abbreviating special sacred names, now called nomina sacra,” and makes the improbable inference that “the use of such abbreviations in the early stages of copying the New Testament writings could mean that the earliest copiers were not conscious of copying literary sacred text” (123). More probably, the nomina sacra reflect a devotional awareness by the copyists (see Larry Hurtado’s detailed and insightful discussion in The Earliest Christian Artifacts, 95–134).

In discussing the textual stability of the Greek New Testament, McDonald explains that most of the 200,000–400,000 textual variants are accidental; one might have noted further that a large percent are orthographical variants, such as a dozen attested spellings for Jerusalem. McDonald cites examples of “clearly theologically motivated” changes, although in recent years critics have been more inclined to assume accident rather than to ascribe “intelligent design” to many such variants. McDonald seems unaware of recent skepticism about “textual families,” perpetuating the terms Alexandrian, Western, and
Byzantine, with a map indicating their respective geographical domains, including Caesarean.

The penultimate chapter provides an overview of the various church councils that addressed the canon issue. Given the amount of discussion about the acceptance and rejection of the Apocrypha elsewhere in the book, and considerable discussions about even late councils, one would think that the rationale behind the Apocrypha’s rejection by Reformation Protestants would have been explicated to some degree. This leaves McDonald’s resounding “yes” to the question of whether the church got the canon right a little perplexing, if not hollow.

McDonald is reasonably successful in writing about a complex issue of the Bible’s formation in a simple way and includes numerous charts of considerable value. Unfortunately, it is marred with deficiencies, including one that is insurmountable. The book has a select bibliography and a glossary but no indices.