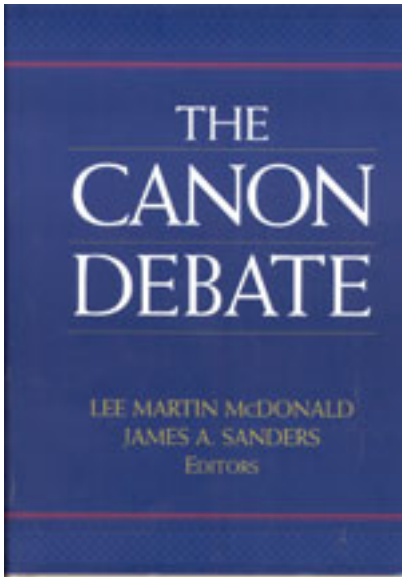


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McDonald, Lee Martin, and James A. Sanders, eds.

The Canon Debate

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002. Pp. x + 662.
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In their introduction (3–17) editors Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders say that their “goal in this project has been to advance the study of the origins of the biblical canon and to deal forthrightly with the significant issues raised by contemporary research” (17). These issues are clearly spelled out in the introduction. As they indicate, many of the most significant scholars in the field of canon research have contributed to the volume (16), although they note the names of some scholars who were unable to participate (17). The wide range and high quality of the thirty-two essays in this volume will very likely bear out the editors’ claim that “the reader will find these chapters to be foundational for the discussion of the origins of the Bible, probably for some time to come” (16).

The introduction forms part 1 of the volume. Part 2 is entitled “The Old/First Testament Canon.” It contains fifteen articles: Eugene Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon” (21–35); Philip R. Davies, “The Jewish Scriptural Canon in Cultural Perspective” (36–52); Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Formation of the Hebrew Bible Canon: Isaiah as a Test Case” (53–67); Albert C. Sundberg Jr., “The Septuagint: The Bible of Hellenistic Judaism” (68–90); James C. VanderKam, “Questions of Canon Viewed through the Dead Sea Scrolls” (91–109); Steve Mason, “Josephus and His Twenty-Two Book Canon” (110–27); Julio C. Treballe Barrera, “Origins of a Tripartite Old Testament Canon” (128–

45); Jack P. Lewis, "Jamnia Revisited" (146–62); Jack N. Lightstone, "The Rabbis' Bible: The Canon of the Hebrew Bible and the Early Rabbinic Guild" (163–84); Craig A. Evans, "The Scriptures of Jesus and His Earliest Followers" (185–95); Daniel J. Harrington, "The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Early Church and Today" (196–210); William Adler, "The Pseudepigrapha in the Early Church" (211–28); Robert A. Kraft, "The Codex and Canon Consciousness" (229–33); Emanuel Tov, "The Status of the Masoretic Text in Modern Text Editions of the Hebrew Bible: The Relevance of Canon" (234–51); and James A. Sanders, "The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process" (252–63).

It is impossible to give a survey of the vast amount and scope of information presented in the book. Therefore, I will focus on one major issue in order to give an indication of the depth of information and scholarly debate that *The Canon Debate* presents. As Sanders notes in his article, there is a division in the field over one of the major questions: the date and circumstances of the canonization of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. As he explains, the passing of the consensus that attributed a decisive role to a late first-century C.E. "Council of Yavneh/Jamnia" led to two different datings: pre-Yavneh and post-Yavneh (254). Both sides of the debate are well represented here.

Sanders himself argues that the focus of the Writings section of the tripartite Hebrew Bible on the past, and wisdom, not on future divine interventions in history, makes most sense after the Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century C.E. (258). Sundberg mentions much evidence of the circulation of apocryphal literature among Jews and Christians and opts for "the closing of the Jewish Canon about the end of the first century CE" (86). VanderKam argues that, while there were authoritative writings in Second Temple period Judaism, the category of revealed literature was not closed or fixed, at least for the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls (92). He points to other authoritative literature at Qumran, in particular the so-called Reworked Pentateuch, the *Temple Scroll*, and the book of *Jubilees*. Trebolle Barrera argues that "[t]he number of writings that make up th[e] third collection [of Scriptures; i.e., the Ketuvim] was not fixed until the rabbinic period, or at least not all Jewish groups accepted the same collection of writings" (143). He points to the apparent canonical status of books such as *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees* at Qumran. Evans begins with the statement that in Jesus' day the canon was not fixed, so he pursues the question simply of which books were important for Jesus (185). Harrington argues that the famous references in Josephus's *Contra Apionem* 1.37–53 and *4 Ezra* 14:45–46 to a definite number of twenty-two/twenty-four scriptural books shows that a movement was underway in "the very late first century" C.E. to include and exclude books from an authoritative canon (198).

In contrast, Davies pays close attention to the claim in Josephus and *4 Ezra* that the Jews had a fixed number of holy books and asks who was in a position to decree this. His answer is the Hasmonean dynasty in the second century B.C.E.. His solution to the varying Christian Old Testaments is that the Christians did not inherit a definitive Old Testament, since a Greek Jewish scriptural canon was never fixed (49–50). Lewis also points out the significance of Josephus’s comments (160). Lightstone likewise refers to *4 Ezra* and Josephus while admitting that “we cannot conclude that the notion of a canon limited to twenty-two or twenty-four books was universally accepted” in view of evidence of use of books outside the twenty-four by both Jewish and Christian communities (174). Mason’s article is particularly important. Josephus claims that there had been a fixed number of Jewish holy books for a long time, held in common by all Judeans—a claim Mason points out would have been easily open to refutation if it were not true. Mason concludes: “It would accordingly be hard to argue from Josephus for an open canon or for one that had been recently settled” (125–26).

There are thus two solid bodies of evidence, apparently contradictory, on the issue of the closing of the canon of the Hebrew Bible. The two sides in the debate have commonly stressed one to the detriment of the other. On the one hand, it is hard to overcome the clear testimony of *4 Ezra* and Josephus that a fixed number of holy books were acknowledged widely by Jews and that this situation was not a recent development. On the other hand, it is hard to deny the common use, by both Jews and Christians, of extra books in a way difficult to distinguish from those in the core list of twenty-four. My own solution to this apparent impasse (*DSD* 9 [2002]: 388–90) is to point out that clearly for people such as the author of *4 Ezra* 14, having a defined group of twenty-four books was not the same thing as a closed canon, if we agree with Eugene Ulrich that “reflexive judgement and an exclusively closed list of books . . . are essential elements in the concept of canon” (33), since *4 Ezra* recommends seventy extra books on top of the twenty-four. The twenty-four books, I suggest, were marked out as special for common Judaism of the Second Temple period by being the books held in the temple, but that recognition certainly did not lead many or most Jews to consider that therefore they were the *only* books of scripture. Rabbinic Judaism, with its exclusive twenty-four-book canon of scripture, therefore reflects a distinct position on canon, not by decreeing what books are in the canon (e.g., at a Council of Yavneh) but by deciding not to classify its own literature (Mishnah, etc.), or indeed anything beyond the twenty-four, as scripture, in contrast to the position eventually taken by the Christian church both in regard to the New Testament and to the various Christian Old Testaments that incorporate extra books.

Part 3 of the book is entitled “The New/Second Testament Canon.” It contains sixteen articles: Harry Y. Gamble, “The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis” (267–94); Everett Ferguson, “Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure

of the New Testament Canon: A Survey of Some Recent Studies” (295–320); William R. Farmer, “Reflections on Jesus and the New Testament Canon” (321–40); John Barton, “Marcion Revisited” (341–54); Pheme Perkins, “Gnosticism and the Christian Bible” (355–71); Peter Balla, “Evidence for an Early Christian Canon (Second and Third Century)” (372–85); Everett R. Kalin, “The New Testament Canon of Eusebius” (386–404); Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, “The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon” (405–15); Lee Martin McDonald, “Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question” (416–39); Kent D. Clarke, “The Problem of Pseudonymity in Biblical Literature and Its Implications for Canon Formation” (440–68); Daryl D. Schmidt, “The Greek New Testament as a Codex” (469–84); Eldon J. Epp, “Issues in the Interrelation of New Testament Textual Criticism and Canon” (485–515); François Bovon, “The Canonical Structure of Gospel and Apostle” (516–27); Robert W. Wall, “The Significance of a Canonical Perspective of the Church’s Scripture” (528–40); Robert W. Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament” (541–57); and James D. G. Dunn, “Has the Canon a Continuing Function?” (558–79).

Gamble’s excellent survey article indicates that, in contrast to the division relating to the chronology of the origin of the Old Testament canon, there is a substantial amount of agreement about fundamental facts relating to the New Testament canon.

It is recognized by all that (1) by the end of the second century the four gospels, the letters of Paul and 1 Peter and 1 John had acquired very broad use and high authority in almost all regions of early Christianity, (2) that the status and use of other writings continued to be variable through the third and well into the fourth century, and (3) that lists that strictly delimit the scope of authoritative writings clearly belong mainly, perhaps exclusively, to the fourth and fifth centuries. (271)

The rest of the articles in this section, even the least conservative ones, such as that by Funk, do not challenge this statement by Gamble but provide a detailed discussion of its nuances.

The final three articles, by Wall, Funk, and Dunn, deal with the theological and practical issues of having a canon of scriptures. Both Funk and Dunn deal with the issue of whether and how the current New Testament canon can function in the modern age. The volume concludes with helpful appendices by Lee Martin McDonald providing an annotated list of primary sources for the study of both Old and New Testament canons (580–84) and lists and catalogues of Old and New Testament collections (585–97); a select but still extensive bibliography (599–623); and subject, author, and ancient and medieval source indices (625–62).