The Canon Debate. Edited by Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002, 700 pp. $50.00, Hardcover.

Lee Martin McDonald earned a Ph.D. at the University of Edinburgh. He is ordained in the American Baptist Churches, and served as professor of NT Studies at Acadia Divinity School. He has written prolifically in the area of canon studies (http://samsontours.com/uploads/users/user_639_doc_27554.pdf). James A. Sanders taught Intertestamental and Biblical Studies at Claremont School of Theology. He is accomplished in the area of canon studies, and has written books such as From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm (Fortress, 1987), and Canon and Community: A Guide to Canon Criticism (Fortress, 1984).

The Canon Debate is an edited volume of essays on the subject of the Christian canon, both Old and New Testaments. In the introduction, McDonald and Sanders state that their goal is to “advance the study of the origins of the biblical canon and to deal forthrightly with the significant issues raised by contemporary research” (p. 17). The book has two main parts: the first consists of essays dealing with the OT canon, and the second consists of essays pertaining to the NT canon. This review will address the second part.

The collection of essays in the NT part of the book is wide-ranging, and includes contributions of many of the most prominent scholars in canon studies today. Some of their essays seem to be summaries of positions that they have previously argued for at length (“a distillation of their previous work,” as the editors of the volume say on p. 16).

Harry Y. Gamble appropriately opens the section with an overview of recent research in NT canon studies (chapter 17). Everett Ferguson next discusses internal and external factors that contributed to the development of the canon (chapter 18). William R. Farmer proposes that the NT canon originated with Jesus’s reading of the OT through the suffering servant passage of Isa 53 (chapter 19). John Barton proposes that Marcion was a conservative, rather than an innovator (chapter 20). Pheme Perkins then contrasts gnostic use of Christian and Jewish Scripture (notably Gen 1–11, Matthew, and John), which were focused primarily with finding sources from which to exposit their philosophy, with Christian appropriation of the OT, in which the OT retained its canonical authority, and yet functioned as a witness to Christ (chapter 21). Peter Balla (chapter 22) then argues for an early canon, claiming that “the church recognized as scripture in the fourth century those writings that had guided its life, at least in some regions, in the preceding centuries” (p. 385).

Everett R. Kalin next argues controversially that Eusebius’s NT canon consisted of only 21 or 22 books, and that the “disputed” books, most often assumed to be accepted as canonical by Eusebius, should be interpreted as rejected by Eusebius (chapter 23). Geoffrey Mark Hahneman argues for a late dating of the Muratorian Fragment based on the idea that it fits historically better with fourth century canon lists (chapter 24). Lee Martin McDonald addresses the issue of the criteria that the early church used in determining the canon, adding to the traditional criteria
that of “adaptability” (chapter 25). Kent D. Clarke then discusses the modern divide between those who believe that pseudonymity was considered legitimate in the ancient world and those who do not (chapter 26).

Daryl D. Schmidt examines the contents of the oldest known complete NTs (chapter 27), while Eldon Jay Epp explores the relationship between MSS, variants, and canon (chapter 28). François Bovon proposes that the “gospel-apostle” structure is theologically embedded in the canon based on the “event-proclamation” structure (chapter 29). Robert W. Wall explores a theological-canonical hermeneutic (chapter 30). Robert W. Funk articulates a new vision of canon(s) designed by scholars (chapter 31). Finally James D. G. Dunn discusses the function of the NT in terms of preserving the diversity of Christian theology, as well as the limits of that diversity (chapter 32).

The NT part of the book, as summarized above, is truly wide-ranging. This provides the reader with a helpful view of the breadth of canon studies. The fact that the canon provides a discipline in which historical Jesus studies (Farmer) and hermeneutics (Wall) overlap, is astounding. There was also a breadth of methodological approaches advanced as well. Some of the essays, such as those by Epp, Schmidt, and Perkins, were focused on the material culture dimension of the canon, including MSS and collections. Other essays, such as those by Barton, Kalin, and Hahneman attempted to give fresh appraisals of well-trodden canon topics, such as the role of Marcion, Eusebius’s canon, and the Muratorian Fragment. Still yet other essays, such as those by Farmer, Bovon, Wall, and Dunn explore the theological issues related to canon.

Finally, the essays contained in this section appear to be helpful in giving the student of the canon a realistic taste of the span of scholarly opinions on the formation of the canon. The book seems to be a representative sample, with a few fairly conservative voices (Ferguson and Balla), a more radical voice (Funk), and most in the mainstream of historical-critical scholarship. These diversities help the authors to achieve their goal of making their readers aware of the “significant issues raised by contemporary research.”

While the reader will likely disagree with various proposals or lines of argumentation in the individual essays, this is hardly the fault of the collection as a whole. Of course, whether or not the reader perceives the contribution of this book as an “advance” in canon studies might depend on the perspective of the reader. Faith communities with a more conservative view of Scripture will likely find less in this book that advances their vision of the Christian life. However, the book is a great introduction to the state of the conversation among canon scholars and can profitably be read by those who wish to enter the conversation at this particular juncture.

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