Lee Martin McDonald is a prolific author studied at Biola University, then at Harvard, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Heidelberg, and Cambridge University. He served as professor of NT Studies at Acadia Divinity School, and has taught at Princeton, Fuller, and Arizona State University. He has written many journal articles, in addition to writing, editing, and contributing to numerous books. His area of expertise is NT canon (http://samsontours.com/uploads/users/user_639_doc_27554.pdf).

The Biblical Canon is an updated version of his work, The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon (1988, rev. ed. 1995). This book seeks to address the questions that arise when considering the development of the biblical canon. He says, “Since I began this journey of inquiry, I have been guided by a basic premise that has served me well, namely, I have been willing to challenge unsubstantiated claims about the origins of the Bible. . . . We cannot advance our understanding of this or any complex subject with our untested assumptions cluttering the way” (pp. xv–xvi). While this book claims the more general purpose of addressing the various questions related to the biblical canon, the thrust of his argumentation seems to be oriented around clearing the ground of such “untested assumptions.”

Part one discusses the concepts of “Scripture” and “canon.” Part two investigates the OT canon, and Part three examines the NT canon. This review will be concerned with parts one and three. Part one introduces the concepts of “Scripture” and “canon.” Canon, for McDonald, is a “fixed list of Scriptures,” whereas Scripture is a document that functions authoritatively in a religious community (p. 49–50). While Scripture existed before the canon and often became part of the canon, “Scripture,” for McDonald, also includes documents that were later rejected from the canon.

Part three consists of a discussion of the development of the NT canon. He suggests that oral traditions developed into written documents which were subsequently viewed authoritatively. The Gospels were first to be viewed authoritatively because they contained the words of Jesus; Paul’s letters followed. Later these authoritative documents were treated as Scripture. McDonald then traces the development from Scripture to canon in the early church. He claims that the two main players are Irenaeus (who limited the number of Gospels to four), and Eusebius (who not only categorized the books in terms of accepted, rejected, and disputed, but also influenced the canon practically by producing 50 copies of the Bible for Constantine’s churches). McDonald then examines the role of heresies in the formation of the canon, and surprisingly finds that there was no significant influence exerted by the heretics on the development of the canon. He also discusses the manuscript evidence of the early texts and Bibles, the testimony of early lists and citations, and the criteria of canonicity. McDonald concludes with some final reflections which shows the significance for the Christian Bible if his view of the biblical canon should be true. Several helpful appendices follow.
The great strength of this book was the comprehensive discussion of the biblical canon. The fact that he discusses both the OT and NT is helpful. In addition he has an excellent appendix that lists primary sources for canon research and questions to guide the student in further reflection and research on the topic. Another strength is that he seeks to claim only as much as he can show. This is a commendable goal, and he is right to point out that our understanding of a subject cannot increase when unproven assumptions are blocking the way.

However, it is questionable whether he accomplished this goal. First, his conception of canon is problematic since there is, even to this day, no such list that is universally accepted. In addition, it implies that there was a change in status of these books after canonization, whereas many of these books were clearly accepted unanimously and early. Indeed, for McDonald the glass always seems to be “half-empty” as he frequently emphasizes areas of uncertainty while passing over evidence that shows the high level of consensus over much of the early canon.

In addition, there seem to be times when he overlooks evidence that contradicts his view, such as the fact that even though Christians still received authoritative works in the first century, they never added them to the Hebrew Scriptures. In addition, the fact that people objected to Marcion’s rejection of the OT and editing of Luke and Paul’s letters undermines his point that Christians must not have thought of the Scriptures as inviolable (p. 330).

In other places, it seems that his views are directly contradicted by the evidence. For example, the fact that he attempts to lay the canon at the feet of Irenaeus has been decisively refuted by the work of C. E. Hill, for example in his book Who Chose the Gospels? While Hill’s book was not available when The Biblical Canon was written, the evidence that Hill bases his argument on has been long available. Another example is that he repeatedly asserts that canonicity depended on the community continuing to find the texts “relevant” (see especially pp. 12–14). However, it can be argued that the canonical works were not considered Scripture because they were relevant, but considered relevant because they were Scripture. Secondly, some of the works that were later rejected was ultimately rejected in spite of their perceived relevance.

While McDonald concludes that the formation of a new canon would not significantly improve the church’s faith, he raises enough questions to significantly alter the way the church views the Bible. This book is helpfully challenges the reader to wrestle with these issues. However, his book is not finally convincing because it does not match the evidence and seems to have an overly skeptical bias.

Noah W. Kelley
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC