

The ongoing Canon debate¹

Flip Schutte (Witbank)

Department of New Testament Studies

University of Pretoria

Abstract

The aim of this review article is to participate in the current “canon debate” among biblical scholars. The collection of essays, The Canon Debate, edited by Lee Martin McDonald and James A Sanders and published in November 2002 serves as point of departure. The thirty-two essays in this volume provide a summary of the most recent research, and as such it provides the necessary background for meaningful participation in the current debate. “The Canon debate” by McDonald & Sanders is probably the most comprehensive collection of essays ever published on canon formation in Judaism and Christianity. This 662-page volume includes essays on both the First Testament and the Second Testament, as well as the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. The essays provide translations of most of the ancient primary sources, as well as meaningful summaries of scholarly debates, in addition to providing a useful guide to the extensive scholarly literature on the subject. The article argues that once you have discovered the canon, you can experience it anywhere, not only in canonical texts.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the past few years, a number of books and articles with the canon and canonicity as topic have seen the light (e.g., Metzger 1987; Mack 1995; McDonald 1995; Funk 1996; Jenner & Wieggers 1998; Sæbo 1998; Van Aarde 2001, 2004). The Leiden Institute for the study of Religions (LISOR) held an international conference in Leiden (the Netherlands) on January 9-10, 1997. The papers presented were published by E J Brill Publishing House as part of the series “Studies in the History of Religions” in 1998 (see Van der Kooij & Van der Toorn 1998). For the reason of this renewed interest in the canon and its authority and validity the editor of *HTS Theological Studies* requested a review article of this book. Indeed, the publication of the collection of thirty-two

¹ Review Article: McDonald, L M & Sanders, J M 2002. *The Canon debate*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers. P J W (Flip) Schutte is a PhD student in the Department of New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, under the supervision of Prof Dr Andries G van Aarde.

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essays, entitled *The Canon debate*, by the New Testament scholar Lee Martin McDonald and the Old Testament scholar James A Sanders in 2002 (Hendrickson Publishers) merits a review article than merely reviewing it. The aim of this article therefore is to unlock the content of the book to readers. The article extends an invitation to readers to form their own opinion on this important and highly debated issue.

What makes *The Canon debate* by editors Lee Martin McDonald and James A Sanders so recommendable is the fact that it is probably the most comprehensive collection of essays ever published on canon formation in Judaism and Christianity. This 662-page volume includes essays on both the First Testament and the Second Testament. The “canon debate” with regard to each Testament is dealt with in an exceptionally thorough manner. The publication does not only deal with the books that form part of the canon, but also those excluded from the canon, namely the Jewish and Christian apocrypha and pseudepigrapha.

More than thirty scholars took part in this enterprise, led by Lee Martin McDonald and James A Sanders. The former is principal and professor of Biblical Studies at Arcadia Divinity College in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and Sanders is founder and president of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center for Preservation and Research in Claremont, California.

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE DEBATE

My opinion is that the existence of a “canon” as such in the life of Christian communities is not an eternal phenomenon as many may think, but it is a phenomenon that came into existence because of certain historical situations. It then fulfilled a certain function in a community and then, as time passes and new situations arrive on the scene, it might disappear again. As Adriaanse (1998:315) puts it: “Canons are historically conditioned things; as a matter of fact, they have their epoch of preparation, their epoch of being established – canonization in the proper sense – their epoch of being operative, their epoch of disintegration and invalidation and, finally, their pluperfect, the epoch of their complete disappearance.” One needs therefore to approach the “canon debate” from a point of view that the existence of canon represents a process of “canonization” and “decanonization”.

Decanonization can occur in various forms. It can be as a result of the dismantling of the canon. Vos (1998:363) puts it as follows:

Historical-critical analysis of the Bible has led to the decomposition and destruction (*viz.* ‘de-construction’) of that which once was considered to form a unity. Such a process of decanonization can develop under the surface, almost accidentally, as a result of the

work of believing Christians. In fact, the very inquiry into the essence of the canon can actually operate to destroy the canon. In this way the canon falls victim to its own pretension.

In the second place, the process of decanonization occurs when a situation arises in which the Bible is hardly ever being read. Then the canon ceases to be a canon because it no longer fulfils the function of a directive and a standard for the life of those people who adhere to it as *their* canon. Vos (1998:363) formulates the consequence of such a “freedom” as follows.

Freedom of mind and decanonization go hand in hand because it is this very freedom which stands at odds with the demand that the Bible, by prerogative, must be the directive and standard for the spiritual life. Under the auspices of this freedom, many “enlightened” Christians are receptive to other religions and some atheists reject every form of revelation.

(Vos 1998:367)

One can argue that the Christian canon has been brought into discredit in the last centuries because it clashes with modern ideas on pluralism and freedom of mind. Vos (1998:368) suggests that canon critique and decanonization can be construed as proofs of the advantages of a non-canonical philosophy of life such as humanism.

I am convinced that the Christian canon is currently in its epoch of disintegration, to use the words of Adriaanse, because of the reasons Vos stated above. The paradigm that we think and live in has changed radically, and we don't read the Bible anymore as if it is a divine oracle that speaks first hand of God. It has lost its unconditioned status as “Word of God”.

Against this background and viewpoint I read *The Canon Debate* by McDonald and Sanders (2002).

3. THE CONTENT OF THIS PUBLICATION

Typical questions dealt with include the following: What is meant by speaking of a canon of scripture? How, when, and where did the canon of the Hebrew Bible originate? Why does it have three divisions? What canon was in use among the Jews of the Hellenistic diaspora, at Qumran, in Roman Palestine, and among the rabbis? What Bible did Jesus and his disciples know and use? How was the New Testament canon formed and closed? What role was played by Marcion, the gnostics, and the church fathers? What did the early church make of the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha? By what criteria have questions of canonicity been settled? Are these past decisions still meaningful

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for faith communities today? Are they open to revision? These and other debated questions are addressed in this book. Many of the answers given are the standard and classical answers that don't put anything new on the table, but a few essays contain contributions that give a new stimulus to the debate.

The publication is divided in three parts. Part one serves as an introduction by the editors. Part two contains essays on the Old or First Testament Canon and part three contains essays on the New or Second Testament Canon.

4. DISCUSSING THE CONTENT

McDonald and Sanders (2002:4) begin their *Introduction* with the words: "In the last forty years interest has been growing not only in the origins of the biblical canon but also in its development, continuing viability, and future as a fixed collection of sacred writings." That is indeed the case. More and more scholars enter the debate and they ask difficult, even uncomfortable questions that need to be handled with circumspection.

Much of the recent discussions challenged well-known and widely held views, especially on canon formation. Some of the views challenged include: (1) the view that the Hebrew scriptures achieved canonical acceptance among the Jews in a three-stage development, beginning ca. 400 BCE for the Prophets, and 90-100 CE for the Writings; (2) that the early Christians received from Jesus a closed Old Testament canon; (3) that most of the New Testament canon was settled by the end of the second century CE; and (4) that evidence of the latter is provided by a late second-century canonical list called the Muratorian Fragment. Thus, the debate is again wide open!

A question that is being raised in the first chapter of part two, is that about *canon* itself. Eugene Ulrich addressed the question of precisely what a biblical canon is, also asking how sure we could be that such a notion flourished before, during, or immediately after the time of Jesus. He concluded with the following brief definition, according to which "The canon of scripture ... is the definitive, closed list of the books that constitute the authentic contents of scripture. It should not be confused either with stages in the canonical process or with simply books that are canonical, because books can be, and were, canonical long before there was a canon of scripture" (Ulrich 2002:34).

According to Van de Beek (1998:331) the idea of a list of canonical writings was not the invention of the church, or any other religious community. It had already been used in Greek culture to establish the norm for what was good in poetry or literature. "Canon" is thus originally a concept used in a literary context. The church took over the concept of canon from Greek culture

and started to use it as a measure of ecclesiastical acceptability, and so the church became a community of people for whom the canonical books were normative in thought and life. In the hellenized world of early Judaism and the New Testament, the most influential canon was that of the educated Greek speakers. It included the work of Homer, Euripides, Menander, Sophocles and Herodotus. The canon promoted in the schools and libraries, represented the best examples of the fundamental genres of cultural life: philosophy, epic, drama, poetry, and history. It is like the canon of fundamental English works, including Shakespeare, Milton and Dickens (Davies 2002:36). Canon formation is a natural process. A list is the version of what a wider group holds to be its own canon.

Thus, it seems to me that while a canon may come and go, canon as such will not because as a part of this natural process one canon will be followed by another.

However, the question is not only about definitions and stages of development, but also about texts. With the recent advances in the investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Bible, the question about which text would be regarded as the more authoritative by the church and by the Jewish community begs answering. Tov, Epp and Schmidt raise some important issues in this regard. For Tov (2002:251), the text of the Bible is represented by the totality of its textual witnesses and not primarily by one of them. According to him, the text of the Bible can be found everywhere and nowhere, everywhere because all manuscripts, from the Qumran scrolls to the Masoretic manuscripts, attest to it, and nowhere, because we cannot call a single source exact or reconstructed. For Epp (2002:485), it is a matter of the authority given to a text, to which Schmidt (2002:479) adds the proviso "in a believing community".

The papers by Kraft and Sanders also deal with the issue of the text. It appears that the ancient communities of Christianity and Judaism did not set aside one particular text of the Scriptures to be included in their Bible. With this in mind, how could one then determine which would be the most appropriate scripture text? Which text should be authoritative for the church? Would the text in its original and earliest form be the focus of authority, or would it be the canonical text of the Bible? Kraft makes the point that the concept of "canon" as we know it is the product of fourth century technological developments. Before then, things were less fixed, and perceptions less concrete (Kraft 2002:233). Or as Sanders (2002:262) puts it:

A canon is basically a community's paradigm for how to continue the dialogue in ever changing socio-political contexts. Leaders within a community, the scribes, the translators, the teachers, the

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preachers, the midrashists and the commentators, precisely those convinced of its continuing relevance, have been and are tridents of the text, those who bring the text's past into the present in the contemporary terms of their ongoing community.

On this issue of *texts* one should always remember that the assumption is often that a written canon traces its origin directly from supernatural sources or perhaps from those who were close to the supernatural (Goody 1998:3). The written text ensures then that the word of God can be transmitted unchanged over the generations. The "word" is preserved in the canonical text which is faithfully copied because canonization forbids tampering with the text (Goody 1998:4).

The process of canonization derives from the nature of the written text, which encourages boundary-maintaining religions with an approved corpus of holy works (Goody 1998:15). The canonization of written texts is in principle a deliberate process of selection. One can analyse the procedure involved in this process. Therefore canonical texts have to be examined carefully because their preservation and transmission lies securely in the hands of the priesthood or the equivalent religious elite whose interests must be broadly conformed. The selected text thus, may represent only the interest of the selectors and not the interest of the whole community (Goody 1998:5). "This means that the text may give very little attention to the interest of other groups, especially subordinate ones, such as women and the lower classes, the non-elite segments of society. Both the class and the gender aspects are important social factors in this context on account of the fact that the canon obviously stands as a religious "authority" (Goody 1998:4). With regard to gender, Goody (1998:13) says: "Gender is an important factor in the composition, formation and maintenance of a canon. Literacy put great power in the hands of the priesthood, which was almost entirely male." This represented a power of the minority of the literate over the majority of the illiterate who had thus only indirect access to the canonized text.

As such, the canon is a source of law and normative behaviour for all times because the text are to be considered to be ahistorical, God-given, and everlasting. I believe that it was exactly this characteristic of the Christian canon that lead to its decanonization and decline in our postmodern paradigm.

I am also convinced that there is no authoritative text from which one can say that *this* is the text of the canon. There are older and more genuine copies of an author's literary work available, but *canon* as such, is not something written in a text. The text is only the written witness of the author in which one can find the canon. Canon as such functions on another level. One

discovers the canon in one's experience of and with God. The texts bear only witness to that experience and what one can bring into words of that experience! That is why a text as such can never be canonical in itself. A text is like a stick, it can only point to what we call *the canon*.

According to Epp (2002:514), Schmidt (2002:478), and Kraft (2002:230), it was not until very recently that all twenty-seven writings of the New Testament emerged in the same manuscript. The question then is: if all of the literature that comprises our current biblical canon was important to the Christians in antiquity, why then are there not that many manuscripts that contain all of it (see p. 7)? This question is one of the questions coming to the fore in recent times and it cannot be ignored.

Kent Clarke (2002) makes an important contribution in chapter 26 with regard to the question of whether any pseudonymous writings exist in the Bible. He enquired about the consequences of instances where a biblical writing was attributed to an author who in reality was not the author of that work. Must such a book then be removed from the canon? The actual question however is: Does it matter? "If we view authorship by modern standards, then one cannot help but answer affirmatively. However, if we consider the issue in its historical context, that is, by ancient standards of authorship, it is more difficult to give such an unequivocal response. Perhaps it is better to ask if the authorial complexities of these documents diminished their value for the church. Or was a work's usefulness for faith and praxis unimpaired by questions of authorship?" (Clarke 2002:468).

What has commonly been called the canonisation of scripture was, according to many students, a canonical process which stretched over a long period of time and which involved the various parts of the present Bible. The literature that made it into the Jewish and Christian scripture canons had to be multivalent and adaptable to the conditions and needs of numerous communities for it to survive and to be included in a biblical canon.

Quite a number of lists were in circulation. In a few cases the lists of Christians differed. Athanasius was the first to list the complete 27 books that most Christians now call the New Testament canon (see p. 8). For those who want to study these lists in more detail, they are contained in the publication as Appendix C. I. In their essays Kalin, Balla, Ferguson, and Hahneman have all made significant contributions towards our understanding of this issue.

The church thus inherited from Judaism the notion of sacred scripture, but not a closed canon of scriptures. This was a later development that can be attributed to a variety of influences. According to Sunderberg (2002:72), three stages can be distinguished in the history of the New Testament canon, namely the rise of the New Testament writings to the status of Scripture; the

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conscious grouping of such literature into closed collections; and the formation of a closed list of authoritative literature.

Eusebius (see p 13) employs a threefold classification of the Christian literature that indicated at least a category between authoritative and heretical for literature that was deemed profitable for teaching, but not considered normative in the church. These distinctions are discussed in the chapters written by Kalin, Balla, Hahneman, Ferguson, and McDonald.

All the contributors to this volume in one way or another recognize the remarkable diversity in the canons of Judaism and Christianity and recognize how the same events and stories are sometimes told from different perspectives, thereby differing in message. Epp, Schmidt, Gamble and Sanders note that the plethora of manuscripts for the New Testament now available, may be as helpful in canon studies as ancient extracanonical lists. While some of the contributors assumed that the acceptance or rejection of certain ancient books from canon lists may have been politically motivated, according to McDonald and Sanders (see p 15), we no longer are privy to such supposed ancient debates.

The related issues of how the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature factors into this discussion are dealt within the chapters by Harrington, Adler, and Clarke. Harrington (2002:206) focuses on the renewed attention these works are receiving in recent times. To him these texts are useful insofar as they contribute towards the understanding of the Jewishness of Jesus and that of the earliest Christian movements. This I would call a too narrow perspective on the issue. One must not only read the extra Biblical manuscripts because it is and can be vehicles for *the canon* itself.

When one understands that politics and authority played an enormous roll in the canonization process, one must ask the question: "Why then didn't this text make it into the canon?" The perspective that the reading of such a text can contribute to our understanding can be enlightened and enriching. See for instance the new perspectives recently opened by the study and reading of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

The often overlooked relevance of the Dead Sea Scrolls is being put on the table with valuable insights being provided in this regard by Tov, VanderKam, and Barrera. Chapter 21, in which Perkins discusses the influence of the Gnostic community on the formation of the canon, marks another important contribution to this volume.

The chapter by Craig Evans on how the early Christians accepted the words of and about Jesus as their final norm, is useful. According to Evans (2002:195) Jesus quoted Scripture freely. He did so, partly because of the pluriform nature of scripture in his day, and partly because of his

paraphrasing, allusive, and conflicting style. Jesus' allusive quotation of scripture did not always distinguish text from interpretation; the two seemingly blended together. Dunn (2002:559) argued in chapter 32 that the New Testament decanonised much of the Old Testament's emphasis on especially the law, because many of those sayings were no longer relevant for the faith. Thus, the Old Testament can never function as canon for Christians in the same way it does for the Jews. For the Christian, the New Testament to some extent always functions as the canon within the biblical canon.

On this point of decanonisation it is important to note that Kurt Aland, more than a generation ago, raised the issue of reducing the biblical canon by omitting works from it considered by some scholars as an embarrassment to the church (see p. 4). Ernst Käsemann also asked whether there should be a "canon within the canon" in order to alleviate concerns over the diversity within the Bible. More recently, some members of the Jesus Seminar have advocated both reducing the current biblical canon by eliminating especially the apocalyptic literature, and expanding the biblical canon to include such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and the "Unknown Gospel" of the Egerton Papyri. Robert Funk (2002:541-557) addresses these and other issues in chapter 31 under the heading *The Once and Future New Testament*.

5. FUNK'S CONTRIBUTION

Up to this point, the volume contains little, if any surprises. The essays provide thorough, but cautious summaries of current issues and raise many questions that are relevant, but not many dare to give answers or dare to actively participate in the current debate. In my opinion, the first thirty chapters serve as an introduction and background to the real debate and the issues that Funk addresses in chapter 31.

According to Funk (2002:541) two factors have been responsible for the re-emergence of the canon in the consciousness of Christian reflection. The first is the steady erosion of canonical claims by the advance of historical-critical scholarship in respect of the Bible, and the second is the collapse of the ancient mythical frame of reference for the Christian gospel and creeds.

The Christian movement was not a religion of the book from the beginning. It was a movement of the spirit (Funk 2002:544). The shift towards a written tradition goes together with a tendency to create something that is stable and that could be handed down with ease. The notion of canon presupposes a written tradition. Canonisation, for its part, was an integral part of the bureaucratisation and politicisation of the tradition (Funk 2002:545).

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The first frontal assault on the reliability of the canon came with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, and it was the renewed quest for the historical Jesus that brought the canonical issue to its current level of crisis. According to Funk (2002:548) it happened when the mythical matrix collapsed. The myth is the story of a redeemer figure that appeared from another world, and who by miraculous birth was identified as such. He performed miracles and then died on a cross to absolve humankind of sin and guilt. After his death, his corpse was resuscitated and he ascended into the heavens, from whence he came and from where he would come again.

The growing conviction that much of the narrative gospel tradition consists of fiction has been used to challenge the theological validity of the canonical gospels. For many the New Testament has long since ceased to be a canon. To many in our society, it lacks authority (Funk 2002:553). Funk (2002:555) suggests that we need not one new New Testament, but several New Testaments. In the first instance, we need one that would have less than the current twenty-seven books to indicate that the quest always is for a canon within the canon. Secondly, we need at least one that would contain more than the current New Testament, because the church fathers unduly narrowed the scope of the founding documents in order to preserve their own definition of the faith and secure the foundation of their power. And in the third place, we need a new New Testament that would be ordered in a different way to which the traditional canon is ordered and which reflects many mistaken judgments about the rise of the traditional canon, both chronologically and theologically.

The canon is thus subject to reduction, on one side, and to expansion, on the other. According to Funk (2002:556) the limits of both its inner and outer expressions depend on faith's comprehension of itself – on what it takes to be its trajectory from Jesus of Nazareth to the time and place of its appropriation. The limits of the canonical New Testament are thus in principle entirely arbitrary.

6. THE LAST CHAPTER

In the last chapter of this volume Dunn (2002:558) asks the question: Does the canon have a continuing function? In answering it, he says one has to observe the historical fact that no Christian church or group has treated the New Testament writings as uniformly canonical. All Christians have operated with a canon within the canon. And if the New Testament is to be of any continuing usefulness for Christians today, nothing less than that canon within the canon will do. The continuing function is the belief that it still bears

consistent testimony to the unifying center that Jesus the man now exalted is the canon within the canon (Dunn 2002:561).

But the canon is not only important because it canonises the unity of Christianity, but also because it canonises the diversity of Christianity. According to Dunn (2002:563) it canonises not only the liberalism of Jesus, but also the conservatism of the first Jerusalem Christians, not only the theological sophistication of Paul, but also the uncritical enthusiasm of Luke, not only the institutionalisation of the Pastorals, but also the individualism of John. Therefore, if we take the canon of the New Testament seriously, we must also take seriously the diversity of Christianity. We must not strive for an artificial unity. Thus, only when we recognise the unity in diversity of the New Testament and the diversity in unity of the New Testament, and the ways in which they interact, can the New Testament continue to function as canon (Dunn 2002:579).

This is an exegetical result or a theological remark made by Dunn, which is legitimate but I would like to add that for as long as there are believers, who can relate to the Christian myths, and who can, through these myths experience God, the Christian canon will have a future. One must also have the openness to see the Christian canon as one of many canons. There are other religious traditions which have their own canons. The purpose of them all is just the same namely to point in the direction of God and to bear witness to the experience of God that the author had.

7. EVALUATION

This volume is a lucid and accessible account of the formation of the Christian canon. The various essays explore the main problems and persuasive conclusions are reached. The publication covers testaments, as well as the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. The essays provide translations of most of the ancient primary sources, as well as meaningful summaries of scholarly debates, in addition to providing a useful guide to the extensive scholarly literature on the subject.

But, it is these positive aspects of the book that in my opinion, also constitute its main shortcoming. The title of the book creates an expectation that *the real* issues will be debated, but ultimately the work provides but a summary. Only Funk succeeds in addressing the real issue and as has been pointed out above, he is the only contributor who dares to suggest a revolutionary new viewpoint on canon.

I hold the view that in the current debate one can't deal with the canon without dealing with the issue of decanonisation, one of the main topics in the debate! Yet, this very issue is not addressed by these essays. A second

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shortcoming is that at the moment many scholars agree that neither the texts, nor the different books of the Bible constitute *the canon*. There is something behind, above or beyond the text that is the canon. In line with Willi Marxsen, Van Aarde (2001:149) for example, calls “the cause of Jesus” the “canon behind the canon”. He identifies God’s presence for us as the cause of Jesus, and that is the canon. I am convinced that once you have discovered *the canon*, you can experience it anywhere, not only in canonical texts, but also in apocrypha, and even in so-called profane literature. To me the *canon* is the love of God. The *cause of Jesus* as Van Aarde puts it, is the bottom-line of the Christ myth. But in the end it too boils down to the love of God. We experience this love in God’s care, in nature and in our personal lives.

The texts of the Christian canon helps one thus to discover and to articulate *the canon* that are beyond, behind, somehow and somewhere in it. But once one you have discovered it, one can see and experience it everywhere. The canon thus, goes beyond the boundaries of a list of authoritative books. It fills creation because there are more than just a few texts that bear witness to the love and presence of God.

Therefore, although this volume is a useful reference work and a good summary, it only provides the background to and at most serves as an introduction to the canon debate – a debate that is bound to heat up theological discussion in the near future!

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