

The Biblical Canon according to Lee McDonald: An Evaluation

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SUMMARY

The Biblical Canon by Lee MacDonald is the most substantial and formative outworking of a position on the canon that has come to dominate the discussion. Nevertheless, there is good reason to question some of his fundamental conclusions. The article examines the piv-

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

The Biblical Canon von Lee MacDonald ist die substantiellste und formativste Darlegung einer Position zum Kanon, die gegenwärtig die Diskussion dominiert. Nichtsdestotrotz gibt es gute Gründe, einige seiner grundlegenden Schlussfolgerungen in Frage zu stellen.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'ouvrage de Lee MacDonald sur le canon biblique constitue la présentation la plus substantielle et la plus élaborée d'une position sur le canon qui a acquis une influence prépondérante dans les études sur cette question. Il y a cependant de bonnes raisons de contester certaines de ses conclusions fondamentales. L'auteur de la recension

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Anyone attempting to delve into the issue of the biblical canon may conclude that the literature on the topic is endless and that study in this area is wearying to the body. So instead of beginning this journey, students, pastors, and even scholars will probably want to turn to a good introductory book that covers all the basics. Lee MacDonald's latest book, which is called a "masterpiece" and hailed as his "magnum opus", meets this need. To date the book is the most substantial and formative outworking of a position on the canon that

otal role played in MacDonald's thesis by his definition of canon, the rabbinic disputes, and LXX tradition, in contrast to the *marginal* role he assigns to Josephus and an important passage from 4 Ezra. This is followed by a look at the *foundational* role of the rule of faith in Irenaeus for MacDonald's project.

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Der Artikel untersucht die *zentrale* Rolle, die die Definition von „Kanon“, die rabbinischen Diskussionen sowie die Septuagintatradition in McDonalds Argumentation spielen – im Gegensatz zu der *marginalen* Rolle von Josephus und einer wichtigen Passage aus dem 4. Buch Esra. Danach folgt ein Blick auf die grundlegende Rolle, die die Glaubensregel bei Irenäus in McDonalds Projekt spielt.

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considère le rôle central joué dans sa thèse par la définition que McDonald donne du canon, son approche des désaccords entre rabbins et la tradition de la Septante, en contraste avec l'attention très marginale qu'il accorde à Josèphe et à un important passage de *IV Esdras*. Il considère ensuite le rôle fondamental du thème de la règle de la foi chez Irénée pour l'approche de McDonald.

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has continued to gain ground over the past forty years as represented by most contributors to *The Canon Debate* (a large volume edition by James Sanders and MacDonald), and the seminal works of Albert Sundberg, James Barr, and John Barton. The breadth of the work is impressive. It is the only up-to-date introduction of its kind that covers both the OT and NT canon in one volume. Before an evaluation can be undertaken it is necessary to summarize the basic position of the book.

Summary of *The Biblical Canon*

In this latest installment McDonald adds 162 pages to the last edition (1995), already a substantial 384 pages, yet maintains that “many of the most important conclusions remain the same” and have “been strengthened considerably.”¹ In the preface he reassures his readers that he did not approach the topic with a thesis that he wanted to prove, but with “a natural curiosity about the truth of canon formation.”² This curiosity has taken McDonald on a twenty-four year investigation into the biblical canon involving, among other things, a PhD thesis at Harvard and two revised and expanded editions of the original work. With the goal of pushing aside “unsubstantiated claims” he attempts to cut through past research on the canon by avoiding assumptions he could not demonstrate from the “primary evidence.”³

McDonald begins his examination of the OT by defining canon as a universally⁴ accepted and closed list of books for a faith tradition. McDonald holds to a three-stage theory in which the Pentateuch is closed in the time of Ezra, the Prophets in the time of Ben Sira, and the Writings much later in rabbinic Judaism – sometime in the second to fourth century CE. He concludes: “The rabbis who shaped the Mishnah and put it into its final form are the same individuals who gave shape to the final form of the Hebrew Bible.”⁵ During the time of Jesus and the early church, however, the Hebrew Bible was “much larger” than it eventually became in the following centuries.⁶ To support this claim he cites the use of *1 Enoch* in Jude, the large collection of texts at Qumran, the citations of Ben Sira in rabbinic Judaism, the use of apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books in the NT and LXX of the early church.⁷ In this model the rabbis *excluded* from their canon many books that had scriptural status in the first century. During the first century CE, however, there is “no evidence” that “the Jews or the followers of Jesus were even remotely interested in the notion of a closed collection of sacred Scriptures...”⁸ Therefore, those scholars who hold to a well-established canon in the first century make an “anachronistic” claim because they cannot show this to be the case.⁹ The Christian church, then, inherited this “much larger” and open collection of Scripture from Judaism. McDonald’s explanation is worth quoting at length:

The contents of the LXX have always been elusive, but it is likely that the Greek Bible used by the Christians included writings that were a

part of this collection from the earliest Christian community, before their separation from Judaism in the first century C.E. There is no evidence that their OT Scripture collection got bigger with time.¹⁰

McDonald is not clear when this occurred, yet it appears that the Christian church selected and fixed its OT canon from this “much larger” Jewish collection sometime in the fifth and sixth centuries CE.¹¹

Like the OT discussion, dates for the canonization of the NT are consistently later than traditional understandings of the canon. Focusing on citations of the NT books in the church fathers, McDonald argues that the Gospels and Paul were among the first to be read as Scripture in the second century and then – only at the end of the fourth century – was a “general consensus reached” about the extent of the NT collection.¹² Heretics (e.g. Marcion), the invention of the codex, persecution (the burning of sacred books), Eusebius’ catalogues of canonical lists, and the political activity of Constantine, among other forces, all played a role in the development and closure of the NT canon. But more important than the canon for the early church were the rule of faith and the authority of Jesus. “Irenaeus and others who argued against the Gnostics in the second and third centuries did not combat heresy with a canon of Scripture, but with a canon of faith (*regula fidei*) that had been passed on from the apostles to their successors in the churches.”¹³ Thus the “true canon of faith for the church” is Christ.¹⁴ This means a diminished role for the canon. For instance, “New inquiry into the origins of the biblical canon might permit the church to feel freer to allow other ancient (or modern) voices to inform its understanding of God today.”¹⁵

One cannot help but admire the dogged determination of McDonald’s pursuit of canonical questions; no doubt he has accumulated many scholarly blisters from examining a vast array of primary and secondary literature on a topic so complex as the canon. Certainly this is a learned, painstakingly researched, and formidable account of the biblical canon and the complicated historical process surrounding its formation. In particular, McDonald reminds his readers that the universal church has never agreed exactly upon which books belong in its canon.¹⁶ Finally, his attraction to the rule of faith in Irenaeus is commendable.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to question some of his fundamental conclusions. I do not

think this will be accomplished through another short sound bite in a review that has space only to register a disagreement in the last few lines, but rather through a more substantial and well-deserved engagement with the core of McDonald's thesis. For practical reasons, this must be limited; there is not adequate room to evaluate the entire book. My inquiry will focus on the OT portion of the work. I will examine the *pivotal* role played by McDonald's definition of canon, the rabbinic disputes, and LXX tradition, in contrast to the *marginal* role of Josephus and a very important passage from *4 Ezra*. This will be followed by a look at the *foundational* role of the rule of faith in Irenaeus for the project.

McDonald's Definition of Canon

McDonald's definition of canon is essentially derived from Eugene Ulrich: it is "the final, fixed, and closed list of the books of Scriptures that are officially and permanently accepted as supremely authoritative by a faith tradition, in conscious contradistinction from those books that are not accepted."¹⁷ If left *conceptually* as a fixed collection this is not problematic, but the "closed," "official" and "conscious" elements of the definition bleed over into the *form* of the "closed list" required to support such a definition.¹⁸ Who is the official group that consciously closed the canon by listing each book in a catalogue? For McDonald, absence of canon in this form is absence of canon. He wants direct (not inferential) evidence and claims that scholars relying on "inferences" make anachronistic suppositions by importing notions of canon from the second to fourth century CE.¹⁹

McDonald is certainly right that one cannot find a canon in the *form* of a catalogue, but it does not necessarily follow that the concept is alien and can only be applied via anachronistic suppositions. If this concept were present, where would it be housed in the mental furniture of the Jewish mind? In a word: temple. It is not anachronistic to argue that the temple held a focal point across the diverse groups of Judaism while it stood. McDonald himself affirms this, but stops short of teasing out its symbolic power for the canon.²⁰ Most scholars would agree an archive of sacred literature existed in the temple in Jerusalem.²¹ Famously, Josiah discovers the book of the law in the temple. 1 and 2 Maccabees, Josephus, and later, the rabbis, all bear witness to this reality. Throughout the ancient Near East, societies housed their sacred books in

their temples or cultic centres. Within Judaism, the temple is the only institution with enough authority to determine and set the boundaries of the canon. Thus the sacred space of the temple is the primary vehicle for the collection, preservation, and dissemination of the canon in the Jewish tradition until its destruction. As a result, it is this sacred *space*, and not some sacred *list*, that one would expect to be meaningful in the conceptual world of Judaism. To make lists of the holy books while the temple remained standing would be superfluous and such a demand by McDonald may (ironically) betray an anachronistic appeal to the *formulation* of canons *as* lists in the second to fourth century CE in the church. Within Judaism, however, catalogues of canonical books never occur in the period under investigation. After the temple was destroyed, the synagogue (in all its variety), in so far as it came to symbolically represent the temple, carried on this practice by housing the sacred books in either the Torah shrine or in an adjacent house of study.²² These practices may explain why there was no talk about the number of the canonical books within Judaism before 70 CE, even though the NT and other writings strongly presuppose a relatively limited collection of sacred books. Approximately thirty years after the destruction of the temple, Josephus and *4 Ezra* each record the number of books they consider canonical.

If McDonald's definition of canon is anachronistic to the first century, it has trouble finding solid footing in his investigation of Jewish sources in the second to fourth century CE. Most important in this regard is his discussion of *Baba Bathra 14b-15a*, which records the order of the books in the Prophets and the Writings and then discusses their authorship. *Baba Bathra* "clearly identifies the twenty-four books that make up the Jewish collection of sacred writings," writes McDonald.²³ This is simply not the case because it does not list the books of the Pentateuch. Quibbling about such small matters might seem overly critical, but it is essential for understanding the purposes of the rabbinic discussion. The Pentateuch is probably not listed because its order and authorship are uncontested, which isn't the case for the Prophets and the Writings. Prior to this document within Judaism there is no list of the Pentateuch. Thus *Baba Bathra* is not concerned about establishing the identity or authority of the books in the Prophets and Writings, but rather with questions of order and authorship.

What does this all mean for McDonald's defini-

tion of canon? As we have seen, in the first century CE there is no authoritative list of books, and so there is no canon for McDonald, and all such claims are only based on inferences. In the second century CE *Baba Bathra* is the best candidate to fit McDonald's definition of canon. It is not establishing the authority of these books, but holds their authority as its most basic presupposition. What is lacking, therefore, in the first century is also lacking in the second to fourth century CE and later. There is no time when these books are declared authoritative or even officially acknowledged as such in the form of a list, but there is a time after which they are *conceptually* treated as a fixed and authoritative collection. Thus, McDonald's inability to find something that fits his definition of canon in the first century is rendered problematic since he cannot find anything to match it in the following centuries either.²⁴ No matter when one dates the fixed canon of Judaism, the evidence under investigation requires a degree of inference.

After McDonald squeezes *Baba Bathra* into his definition of canon, he then tries to marginalize its testimony. He argues that this does not reflect the "view of all Jews" because it was not included in the Mishnah. Furthermore, it had little influence on early Christians and probably comes from Babylon, and, as such, does not reflect later rabbinic debates in the land of Israel about the fringes of the canon.²⁵ While each supposition could be questioned, for McDonald, the rabbinic disputes are pivotal in his investigation of the Jewish evidence. He uses these disputes to discredit all earlier signs that there was a fixed canon within Judaism. The weight McDonald gives these disputes requires another look at the primary evidence.

Rabbinic Disputes

McDonald prefaces and concludes his examination of the early evidence for a closed canon with an appeal to rabbinic discussions concerning which books defile the hands or have once been withdrawn.²⁶ If there was a fixed canon in the first century CE, according to McDonald, then "why is there so much discussion among the rabbis of the second through the fifth centuries C.E. about whether books like Ezekiel, Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Sirach 'defile the hands'?"²⁷ The imprecision of this statement is in danger of muffling the distinct nature of the notoriously difficult phrase of the rabbis "to defile the hands." In these discussions there are legitimate concerns only about

Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.²⁸

John Barton, among many other scholars on the canon, has argued (persuasively, in my view) that these and only these three books are singled out because they alone in the Hebrew canon lack the divine Name. Taking his cue from the paradoxical notion that a sacred book can defile the hands, Barton argues that this designation could have begun as a precaution to ensure that people would carefully handle the Scriptures.²⁹ As such the defilement concerns physical contact with these books in ritual situations not their "metaphysical existence."³⁰ The Hebrew Scriptures do not defile the hands if they are translated from Aramaic to Hebrew or Hebrew to Aramaic, while they do defile the hands if they are written in Assyrian characters on parchment and in ink.³¹ Or again, the books in the temple do not defile the hands unless they are removed from the temple.³² Barton argues that the lack of the divine Name in *only* these three books would lead to questions of purification when handling them. If his estimation is accurate, it also explains why some books that were clearly extracanonical, which contained the divine Name, were said to "not defile the hands."³³ This pronouncement was needed for those who came into contact with these texts because of the special status of the divine Name, even though these texts were never considered Scripture.³⁴ This distinction is particularly hard to grasp. All the canonical books defile the hands and at times this designation is equal to their canonical status but it is not equated with it. Canonical books are so sacred that one can only touch them with gloves on, so to speak, but in the case of these three books, the necessity of the gloves was questioned due to the absence of the divine Name. The rabbis concluded that gloves were necessary.

Again, McDonald supposes that the rabbis are engaged in canonical activity when they discuss why a book was once "stored away" or "withdrawn." The book of Ezekiel was said to have been withdrawn because it appeared to contradict the Torah,³⁵ while Proverbs and Ecclesiastes were said to once be withdrawn because they are self-contradictory.³⁶ Only in the case of Avot of Rabbi Nathan 1:4 does it say that Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs were at one time withdrawn because they were mere parables, and not Scripture. Theodore Swanson has pointed out the late date of this composition and the unlikelihood that it reflects a view held in the Tannaitic period (i.e. 70-200 CE).³⁷ It is likely that this can only

be anachronistically applied to the situation of the first and second century CE. More likely is Roger Beckwith's theory that these quibbles are the result of exegetical efforts to reconcile conflicts within an already established canon.³⁸

In contrast, the discussions about Ben Sira are notably different than those about canonical books. It was withdrawn without question and was not later vindicated; probably due to the rabbis' belief that it is not a prophetic book because it was written after the cessation of prophecy.³⁹ This belief doesn't originate in the rabbinic period – it can be seen as far back as 1 Maccabees 6:46, 24:41 and the writing of Josephus.⁴⁰ These disputes are about books already in the canon, with the possible but unlikely exception of Ben Sira. Where is the evidence showing that the rabbis *excluded* books from a “much larger” collection of sacred scripture? In McDonald's view, the rabbis dispute the status of books in their collection – surely the debates that excluded so many books would have been recorded. Even if one grants, for argument's sake, that these are canonical disputes, they did not change the status of any book. The canon can remain fixed even when certain books are disputed, as Luther demonstrated during the Reformation and McDonald demonstrates today.

The LXX Tradition

Additionally, McDonald argues that the LXX reveals the state of affairs when the church separated from Judaism. According to him there is no evidence that the LXX “got bigger with time.” To prove this, McDonald relies heavily on the citation of these books in the NT, the early church, and their eventual location in canonical lists and codices in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Appendix D of McDonald's book lists 13 pages of apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books cited or alluded to in the NT. At first glance this list is impressive, but apart from the highly debated⁴¹ exception of *1 Enoch* in Jude, none are cited with a scriptural formula and in most cases the connection is extremely tenuous or merely indicates a shared social and historical background.⁴² Jude does treat *1 Enoch* as prophecy from God, but as Richard Bauckham points out, this “need not imply that he regarded the books as canonical Scripture.” He argues that the Enoch literature was valued at Qumran, but was not included in their canon of Scripture.⁴³ On the other hand, if *1 Enoch* were cited authoritatively as Scripture, it would seem best to consider

it the exception that proves the general rule: the number of allusions and citations from books in the Hebrew canon in proportion to those from books outside of it is staggering.⁴⁴ Regardless of one's conclusions about *1 Enoch*, the NT does not support McDonald's basic position. From the NT alone, one would expect a smaller – not a larger – canon. If a larger collection of Scripture existed in the first century, why are none of these books explicitly cited as Scripture in the NT, or again, why are they alluded to so infrequently?⁴⁵

In early church literature, however, some of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books are cited with scriptural formulae. In his analysis of this literature, McDonald relies almost exclusively on citations (inferences), rather than explicit canonical lists, which his definition of canon favors. Retreating from these lists effectively reverses McDonald's criterion for canon. Inferences are played down in the first century, only to then be played off against explicit catalogues of canonical books in the following centuries. This involves the church fathers in contradictions, when they cite a text authoritatively that they have excluded from their canonical list. This tension, at the very least, should be recorded.

McDonald has helpfully summarized most of these lists in Appendix B. A quick glance at them reveals that they were relatively stable at first and then began to *grow* to include more apocryphal books. Melito of Sardis (around 170 CE), the *Bryennios* manuscript (1st or 2nd cent. CE?), Origen (before 231 CE), Eusebius of Caesarea (339 CE), Cyril of Jerusalem (about 350 CE), the Council of Laodicea (363 CE), Athanasius of Alexandria (367 CE), Hilary of Poitiers (367 CE), and Epiphanius of Salamis (376 CE), Gregory of Nazianzus (390 CE), Amphilochius (396 CE), Jerome (about 390 CE), and Rufinus (410 CE), all witness to a relatively stable canon containing the same twenty-two books, although counted and arranged in various ways.⁴⁶ In some of these catalogues, Baruch and the Epistle of Jeremiah are appended to the book of Jeremiah, which for the church fathers does not indicate a different judgment about the number of the books, and in a few Esther is omitted or placed among the apocryphal books. In contrast, only Augustine (395 CE), the Council of Carthage (397 CE), and the great codices – Vaticanus (4th cent. CE), Sinaiticus (4th cent. CE), and Alexandrinus (5th cent. CE) – include a number of apocryphal books. Where is the primary evidence showing that the views of the fourth century were

held in the second or third century?

These rather uniform lists, which witness to a smaller canon well before the larger, are marginalized and sometimes misrepresented in his analysis of the early church. For instance, in his discussion of Origen he does not list his catalogue of canonical books (except of course in Appendix B), but notes that 1-2 Maccabees are included in it. This omits that Origen counted the Maccabees as “outside” of the twenty-two books. It is also not surprising that Origen would recommend, as McDonald observes, the reading of Judith, Tobith, and Wisdom of Solomon. For, as Earle Ellis has persuasively argued, most of the early church distinguished between canonical and deuterocanonical books, yet cited both with scriptural formulae. These extra books were good and useful to read, yet still remained outside of the Hebrew canon. While the precise relationship between the LXX tradition and the Hebrew canon is essentially insoluble, Ellis’s conclusion on the matter is possible if not probable. According to him, the pivotal decision of Augustine on this issue – which Jerome opposed – appears to be the result of an unreflective judgment based on the popular use of these extra books.⁴⁷ Finally, most of the books in the LXX tradition, broadly conceived, did exist when the Christians broke off from Judaism, and so in one sense the LXX did not grow (at least not much) over time. What does appear to have changed, however, is the inclusion of more and more of these books into the Christian canon.

Josephus and 4 Ezra

Does any evidence contradict McDonald’s claim that no fixed canon existed in the first century? The two most impressive witnesses are Josephus and 4 Ezra. In *Against Apion*, Josephus lays out a twenty-two-book canon adhered to by all Jews for “long ages.” First, McDonald rightly stresses that Josephus had access to the sacred books stored in the temple, of which we have noted the importance; then, strangely, he moves on to argue that his list probably came from Babylon and, as such, Josephus is “ahead of his time in terms of limiting the books of the Jewish sacred collection.”⁴⁸ Here even Josephus is accused of being anachronistic! To support his accusation, McDonald appeals to the polemical context of Josephus’s writings, the freedom at Qumran to add and subtract from the biblical text, and the lack of any clear parallel. All of this suggests that there was no “universally accepted

closed biblical canon in the first century C.E.”⁴⁹ There may be no universally accepted canon, but one would need to prove first that Qumran had a larger or different canon, which is not clear, and then, that this collection is not sectarian. One might ask what type of totality McDonald is loading into the term ‘universal.’ At this point a helpful distinction that McDonald himself adheres to is needed: scholars often fail “to distinguish disagreements about the canon between different parties from uncertainty about the canon within those parties.”⁵⁰ If Qumran had a different or an unfixed canon, it does not necessarily follow that mainstream Judaism in all its variety had an unfixed canon.

In any case, McDonald attempts to marginalize Josephus by quoting Steve Mason’s conclusion: “Further, Mason suggests that Josephus’s fixed collection was ‘an inner-Pharisaic view that could only have gradually come to prominence with the emergence of the rabbinic coalition after 70 [C.E.]; it cannot reflect a common first-century Jewish view.”⁵¹ It is no doubt unconsciously done, but this is the view of Rudolf Meyer, whom Mason is refuting in the context. Mason suggests, however, that it is hard to justify isolating Josephus as “idiosyncratic.” Josephus strongly adheres to a “closed canon,” yet treats other works, like Pseudo-Aristeas and 1 Maccabees, similarly to texts within his fixed canon. From this Mason concludes: “This willingness to alter the biblical text in manifold ways proves nothing about his formal view of the canon. His example removes the force from appeals to circumstantial evidence as proof that the Dead Sea Scrolls’ authors or Philo or Ben Sira had an open canon.”⁵² In other words, the mere use of canonical and noncanonical works side by side and the freedom to alter the canonical text to fit Josephus’s own ‘historical’ agendas does not indicate that he believed the canon was open for the Jewish people or for himself. If Mason is correct, it negates the validity of the circumstantial evidence McDonald cites to establish his distrust of Josephus.

But what about McDonald’s charge that there are “no other clear parallels” to Josephus’ conception of a fixed canon?⁵³ Indeed, there is no identical parallel to Josephus in the first century, yet in the case of 4 Ezra there is a witness, which reluctantly but nevertheless emphatically testifies to a fixed canon in the first century. 4 Ezra is a Jewish apocalypse written sometime around 100 CE by an unknown Jew who adopts the pseudonym of Ezra and uses the destruction of the temple by

the Babylonians to address its destruction by the Romans. In this fictitious context Ezra dictates to five scribes ninety-four books, which had been burned when the 'Babylonians' destroyed the temple. As McDonald notes, *4 Ezra* 14:44 divides these books "between the twenty-four books that everyone can read and the seventy books that are reserved for the 'wise among your people.'"⁵⁴ He concludes that both collections are "held in equally high regard."⁵⁵ Barton's reading of this text, however, in which he argues that the seventy books were considered of greater importance than the twenty-four, suggests a much different conclusion.⁵⁶ More specifically, *4 Ezra* conjures up everything in its power to support the significance of the unidentified seventy books. They are dictated in the same miraculous manner as the twenty-four – the five scribes even wrote "in characters which they did not know." Even the "unworthy" can read the twenty-four while the seventy are reserved exclusively for the wise, for only in the seventy are hidden "the springs of understanding, the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge." Most telling of all, Ezra appears to include his work among this register. In *4 Ezra* 12:36-38, he refers to his own book as revealing the "secrets of the Most High" to the "wise among your people." This is the exact same language with which he refers to the seventy books! *4 Ezra* does not hold both sets of books in "equally high regard" but works rather hard to portray the seventy as having a more distinguished status.

This small but significant distinction tells us two essential things about the canon. First, there exist other holy books that hold some degree of authority for various communities or individuals at this time, but these are *still* differentiated from the twenty-four-books – there can be a fixed, clearly demarcated canon, in the midst of other holy books.⁵⁷ Second, surely *4 Ezra* protests too much in favour of itself and the seventy books. The agenda of this text makes the "involuntary evidence all the stronger."⁵⁸ If there were no fixed canon at this time in mainstream Judaism, why would *4 Ezra* make "this grudging admission" that the twenty-four books are *known to the public*?⁵⁹ Thus, it is better to conclude with Beckwith that *4 Ezra* is "striving for the recognition of his pseudepigrapha against a public opinion which recognizes only the 24 canonical books."⁶⁰ In sum, *4 Ezra* reveals the *traditional* status of a fixed canon in the public square of Judaism by his dismissive use and yet acknowledgment of twenty-four books in support

of a "superior" collection of secret knowledge not transmitted though open tradition.

Yet this has not completely answered McDonald's request for a clear parallel. Can the scheme of twenty-four books be squared with the twenty-two of Josephus? According to the able historian Jerome, some count Judges and Ruth as one book and Jeremiah and Lamentations as one book, thus they count twenty-two books, while others place Ruth and Lamentations in the Writings, as independent books, and end up with a count of twenty-four-books. *Baba Bathra* confirms this within Judaism and Origen within Christianity. McDonald's only objection to this line of reasoning is his continual appeals to rabbinic disputes and his definition of canon. In contrast, it is more economical, reasonable, and probable that Josephus and *4 Ezra* both testify to a fixed canon made up of the same books at the end of the first century CE. From this one should not conclude that there was a fixed canon only at the end of the first century; rather, both witnesses, when explicitly addressing canonical concerns reveal that the canon has been fixed for some time within mainstream Judaism.

The Rule of Faith in Irenaeus

Finally, since McDonald does not find sufficient evidence for a fixed canon, he moves away from Scripture to the rule of faith. He claims that Irenaeus and others "did not combat heresy with a canon of Scripture or a list of books, but with a canon of faith."⁶¹ There simply was no need for Irenaeus to develop the canon against the Gnostics. The argument was not over the borders of the canon, but over the true interpretation of the Scriptures. In *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus sets forth the problem in the preface: "These men falsify the oracles of God and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation."⁶² According to John O'Keefe and Rusty Reno: "The root of the controversy was exegesis."⁶³ The relationship between Scripture, tradition and Christ is complex and probably not entirely consistent in Irenaeus's works; nevertheless, they are inextricable bound up with one another and together are intended to stand in complete harmony.⁶⁴ McDonald presents a false dichotomy when he makes one choose between the rule of faith and the canon of Scripture. Nor does Christ somehow stand in opposition to the canon; rather, he is, as the recapitulation of all things, the decisive and final summary that clarifies the economy or scope of the canon.⁶⁵ In a wonder-

ful metaphor, Irenaeus sums up the hermeneutical activity of his opponents: “their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of the king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should re-arrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox.”⁶⁶ Christ is the image that orients the mosaic and the *raison d’être* of the Scriptures. It is not the identity of the tiles, but their arrangement, that is in question here. Although McDonald is attracted to Irenaeus, one wonders how faithfully he has construed his works.

Conclusion

More could be said, but a few concluding comments about historical methodology and the authority of Christ must suffice. First, much of the disagreement on the canon can be explained by what constitutes sufficient evidence to support a historical claim. For McDonald, the mere use of deuterocanonical books in the NT and elsewhere provides evidence in favour of their scriptural status rather than their social and cultural influence. In my judgment, there is nothing strange about authors who, while holding to a fixed canon, use and allude to books outside their canon. If one wants to say something about the Maccabean period, the best place to go is 1 and 2 Maccabees (i.e. Josephus). It would be odd if *Jubilees* was not alluded to or cited in documents concerned with the Jewish calendar (i.e. Qumran). Nor is the wide influence of Ben Sira both on the NT and rabbinic Judaism (i.e. James) at all peculiar. The book is a deep reflection on the sapiential tradition of the OT and stands in its own right as a book of wisdom. While this is a thorny issue, it appears in McDonald’s work that a type of *sola scriptura* is being wielded to interpret the evidence that is foreign to the tradition, from the first to the twenty-first century. It is no wonder then, when the canon is weighed on these scales, it is found wanting.

Yet the historical project is further complicated by the form of the material one presupposes as important to find and the weight or proportion given to that same evidence. Nowhere is this clearer than in our discussion of McDonald’s definition of canon and the inconsistent manner in which it is employed. Moreover, an argument that elevates the citation of *1 Enoch* in Jude over the testimony of the rest of the NT, Josephus, *4 Ezra*, *Baba Bathra*, Melito and Origen lacks proper proportion. Like

McDonald, “I am not convinced that scholarship advances significantly if we do not force ourselves to root our conclusions in the primary literature of antiquity.”⁶⁷ At statements like this, one wonders how McDonald can hold to a definition of canon that finds no support among Jewish sources in antiquity. In my judgment, McDonald has let his “assumptions clutter the way”⁶⁸ with troubling historical and theological results.

Second, at its most basic level, McDonald’s project attempts to dislodge the canon of OT and NT by historically distancing them from the person and work of Christ. It is for this reason that the *when* of canon formation is almost the exclusive concern of the project. The canon is only helpful, according to McDonald, when it bears true testimony to the Christ of history, and it is this Christ who will filter out all the inappropriate parts of the canon. Fracturing the witness of the OT to Christ, however, runs counter to the confessions of the NT. As Stephen Chapman perceptively notes: “Ironically, McDonald’s christological solution also stands on its head a fundamental aspect of the New Testament’s witness to Christ, for in the NT it is not the OT that is professed to be ‘in accordance with’ Christ, but Christ who is confessed to be ‘in accordance with’ the OT Scriptures.”⁶⁹ The *authority* of Christ is bound up with the OT witness to Christ. McDonald’s attempt to distance the canon from Christ undercuts – and on a more basic level, misunderstands – how the early church professed the authority of Christ. No doubt McDonald’s focus on the authority of Christ is an attempt to combat bibliolatry, which is a real problem. Yet his solution does not explain how one would even know Christ, much less how obedience to his authority could be followed apart from the canonical testimony. Far more helpful is N.T. Wright’s formulation of the relationship between God, Scripture and the church: God alone is authoritative, but he exercises his authority for the church in the Scriptures.⁷⁰ Or from a different angle, Brevard Childs: “It is a basic Christian confession that all scripture bear testimony to Jesus Christ,” which means that he is the “one scope of scripture.”⁷¹ Marginalizing the canon will not “free the church from inappropriate loyalties,”⁷² rather, it is through neglect of the word of God that Christ is remade in the image of the age. The church needs to be called again and again through the power of the Spirit and by the grace of God to a consistent and humble engagement with the full canonical witness in all its variety and richness in order to have as its

vision the beautiful image of the King of Kings who is revealed in the New Testament in accordance with the Old.

Notes

- 1 Lee McDonald, *Biblical Canon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), xv.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., xv-xvi.
- 4 McDonald does not include the term “universal” in his definition, but it comes up enough in connection to what he means by canon in the remainder of the book to warrant its inclusion here.
- 5 Ibid., 187.
- 6 Ibid., 104.
- 7 Ibid., see respectively 105-110, 126-136, 177-178, 195-196, and 200-223.
- 8 Ibid., 18.
- 9 Ibid., 36.
- 10 Ibid., 206.
- 11 Ibid., 438.
- 12 Ibid., 366.
- 13 Ibid., 388.
- 14 Ibid., 429.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Today the differences between the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant canons are still very real. This point, however, is clear and does not require an investigation into the origins of the canon.
- 17 Eugene Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 31.
- 18 Ibid., 31.
- 19 Ibid., 110.
- 20 Ibid., 114.
- 21 For a discussion of the sources in support of a temple collection see Roger T. Beckwith, “Formation of the Hebrew Bible” in *Mikra*, ed. M. J. Mulder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 40-45; Philip Davies, *Scribes and Schools* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 178-182; Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 195-96; Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 236-247. The most important sources are: Exod 25:16, 21; 40:20; Deut 10:5; 31:24-26; 1 Kgs 8:6-9; 2 Kgs 22:8; 23:2, 24; 2 Chr 5:7-10; 34:15, 30; 1 Macc 1:54-57; 2 Macc 2:13-15; *Ant.* 3.38, 4.302-4, 5.61; *B.J.* 7.150; *Vita* 418; *m. Yoma* 1.6-7, 7.1; *m. Sotah* 7.7-8; *m. Mo’ed Qat.* 3.4 (variant text); *m. Kelim* 15.6; *t. B. Mesi’a* 5:8 (variant text); *t. Yoma* 1.9; *bar. y. Yoma* 1.6; and *Sifrie Deut.* 356 (p. 423).
- 22 IDB, Synagogue, 485-88.
- 23 Ibid., 163-64.
- 24 This problem has already been noted by Stephen Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 108, who observed that McDonald’s strict definition of canon “does not seem to have ever [sic] existed.” Cf. Idem, “The Old Testament Canon and Its Authority for the Christian Church”, *Ex Audito* 19 (2003): 135-36. It is unclear to me why McDonald, who acknowledges Chapman’s critique, does not go on to engage with it. The latest edition could have been improved if McDonald had incorporated and/or addressed the insights of Chapman on the definition of canon and other issues as well.
- 25 Ibid., 164-65.
- 26 Ibid., 81, 187-89.
- 27 Ibid., 56.
- 28 There is no rabbinic text, as McDonald claims, where Ezekiel is one of the books that defile the hands. In one text only does it say that Ruth *does* defile the hands, like all Scripture (*b. Meg.* 7a.), while in another text it says that Sirach (Ben Sira) does *not* defile the hands along with other books that are without question uncanonical (*t. Yad.* 2:13).
- 29 Ibid., 114.
- 30 Ibid., 111.
- 31 *m. Yad.* 4:5.
- 32 *m. Kelim* 15:6 and *t. B. Mesi’a* 5:8. In *b. Meg.* 7a physical contact with the scroll of Esther is the point in question.
- 33 *t. Yad.* 2:12-13.
- 34 Barton, *Writings*, 118.
- 35 *b. Sabb.* 13b.
- 36 *b. Sabb.* 30b.
- 37 Theodore Swanson, *The Closing of the Collection of Holy Scriptures* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1970), 286-87. For the problem of dating this text see Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. by Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 226-27. They date the origin sometime in the third century, but the final version between the seventh and ninth centuries.
- 38 Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985), 315.
- 39 E.g. *t. Sotah* 13:2.
- 40 *Ag. Ap.* 1:7f, and 4 *Ezra* 14:44-48. See Beckwith, *OT Canon*, 369-76.
- 41 E.g. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 62.
- 42 E.g. Daniel Harrington, “The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Early Church and Today”, in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 196-210.
- 43 Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 96. Cf. Bauckham’s more detailed

- and well reasoned comments in *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (New York: T and T Clark, 2004), 225-234.
- 44 Christopher R. Seitz, "The Canonical Approach and Theological Interpretation", in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Anthony Thiselton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 95-96.
- 45 While the evidence is ambiguous and as such is debated, the same is true of Qumran, which only provides *compelling* evidence for a smaller, rather than a larger canon. The strained reference to the 'authoritative' citation of Jubilees in support of its scriptural status only strengthens this impression. E.g. Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Brill, 1999), 22, note 17; James VanderKam, "Authoritative Literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls" *DSD* 5, (1998): 398-399. If there was a larger collection of Scripture at Qumran, one would then expect to find those books cited as Scripture since forty-two quotations, introduced by an authoritative formulae, survived at Qumran from books in the Hebrew canon. See Eugene Ulrich, "Qumran and the Canon of the Old Testament," in *The Biblical Canons*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and H. J. De Jonge (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 80.
- 46 For more see E. E. Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1991), 6-36; and Peter Katz, "The Old Testament Canon in Palestine and Alexandria", in *The Canon and the Masorah of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Sid Leiman (New York: Ktav, 1974) 72-98; J. C. H. Lebram, "Aspekte der alttestamentlichen Kanonbildung" *VT* 18 (1968): 173-189.
- 47 Ellis, *Early Christianity*.
- 48 McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 157.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid., 191.
- 51 Ibid., 156-7.
- 52 Steve Mason, "Josephus and His Twenty-Two Book Canon" in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 127.
- 53 McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 157.
- 54 Ibid., 163.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Barton, *Oracles of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), 64, 66.
- 57 Cf. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus*, 230.
- 58 Roger Beckwith, "A Modern Theory of the Old Testament Canon" *VT* 49/4 (1991), 392.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 338.
- 62 Preface, 1, *ANF*, Vol. 1.
- 63 John O'Keefe and Russell Reno, *Sanctified Vision* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 34.
- 64 See Norbert Brox, "Irenaeus and the Bible", in *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis* Vol. 1, ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 483-506.
- 65 O'Keefe, *Sanctified Vision*, 38.
- 66 *Against the Heresies*, 1.8.1. *ANF* Vol. 1.
- 67 McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, xvi.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Chapman, "Old Testament Canon," 130.
- 70 N.T. Wright, "How Can The Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32.
- 71 Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 725.
- 72 McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 429.

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