The Canon Debate (review)

Robert F. Hull

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Book Reviews

Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, editors
The Canon Debate
Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002
Pp. x + 662. $39.95.

The word "debate" well summarizes the character of the vast scholarly output of the past half-century dealing with the Jewish and Christian biblical canons. It is probably not accidental that the burgeoning interest in canonical issues coincided with the discovery (beginning in 1947) and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which "canonical" and "non-canonical" writings appear in great quantity in the same location. Indeed, of the 511 items in the bibliography of this book, 471 were published after 1950. This collection of 32 essays traces the contours of the contemporary debate in admirable detail.

Even the section titles hint at the unsettling of old conventions. Following the introduction, part two is labeled "The Old/First Testament Canon," and part three is "The New/Second Testament Canon." In the essays themselves, however, only James Sanders adopts these neologisms, and he only partially; even the Jewish contributors to the volume continue to use the conventional designations, "Old Testament" and "New Testament."

In the introduction McDonald and Sanders outline eight major questions in the debate, which can be collapsed into five: 1) What is the relationship between "scripture" and "canon"? 2) What is the scope of the respective OT and NT canons? 3) In view of the high profile of some non-canonical gospels in research on the life of Jesus, should the gospel canon be expanded? 4) Which form of the text is canonical, i.e., the most ancient form (as critically reconstructed), the final form (as known at the time of closure), or some other form? 5) What were the criteria for determining canonicity, and how should these criteria be evaluated by contemporary Jewish and Christian communities? These and related questions are central to the 15 essays on the OT canon and the 16 on the NT. The references that follow illustrate how lively and controversial the discussion remains.

Eugene Ulrich ("The Notion and Definition of Canon") claims that three elements are essential to the definition of canon. "First, the canon involves books, not the textual form of the books; secondly, it requires reflective judgment; and thirdly, it denotes a closed list" (34). But Eldon Jay Epp asks, "When two meaningful variants occur in an authoritative writing, which reading

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is canonical, or are both canonical? (512). That is, is the "reflective judgment" that yields canonical authority for a book different somehow from the reflective judgments that have given us variant forms of biblical texts? The status of the Septuagint in both Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity shows that Epp's question goes far beyond the issue of individual variant readings. Essays by Albert Sundberg ("The Septuagint: The Bible of Hellenistic Judaism"), Emmanuel Tov, ("The Status of the Masoretic Text in Modern Text Editions of the Hebrew Bible: The Relevance of Canon"), and Craig Evans ("The Scripture of Jesus and His Earliest Followers") all point to the indissoluble connection between text and canon.

With respect to the criterion of a "closed list," some contributors suggest that the canon is much more about *process* than *product* (James Sanders, "The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process," Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Formation of the Hebrew Bible Canon: Isaiah as a Test Case"). The relevant importance of closure separates those who view the decisive period of canon formation as the second century (Everett Ferguson, "Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon," Peter Balla, "Evidence for an Early Christian Canon [Second and Third Century]) from those who judge the fourth century as the crucial era (Albert Sundberg, "The Septuagint . . . ," Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, "The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon"). In sum, however much we may wish, with Ulrich, to "formulate and agree upon a precise definition of the canon of scripture for the sake of clarity, consistency, and constructive dialogue" (35), this is probably too much to hope for.

Nevertheless, this collection does offer much constructive dialogue and advances the debate about the canon in several particulars: 1) It subjects conventional arguments to fresh and vigorous re-examination (Steve Mason, "Josephus and His Twenty-Two Book Canon," John Barton, "Marcion Revisited"); 2) It underscores the vital relationship between textual criticism, codicology, and canon formation (Robert Kraft, "The Codex and Canon Consciousness," Daryl Schmidt, "The Greek New Testament as a Codex," Eldon Jay Epp, "Issues in the Interrelationship of New Testament Textual Criticism and Canon,"); 3) It provides up-to-date surveys of scholarship on a number of ancillary issues (James VanderKam, "Questions of Canon Viewed through the Dead Sea Scrolls," Pheme Perkins, "Gnosticism and the Christian Bible," Kent Clarke, "The Problem of Pseudonymity in Biblical Literature and Its Implications for Canon Formation"). Best of all, it offers the mature scholarship of the most seasoned veterans of canon research. A good two-thirds of the contributors are either emeritus faculty or senior scholars; and they represent an international, interconfessional, and theologically varied field. They are not only willing to engage each other in dialogue but to respond to and carry forward their own earlier research and reflections (Jack Lewis, "Jamnia Revisited," James Dunn, "Has the Canon a Continuing Function?").

The end matter is almost worth the price of the book. Lee McDonald has assembled appendices in which are collected primary sources for canon study and lists of catalogs for both the OT and NT canons. In addition to the generous

bibliography, there is a subject index, an index of modern authors, and an index of ancient and medieval sources.

Although not a reference work in the usual sense of the term, the range and depth of discussion of canonical concerns assure that this book will be used as a standard reference work for many years to come.

Robert F. Hull, Jr., Emmanuel School of Religion

Walter Ameling, editor
Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten
Altertumswissenschaftliches Colloquium 6
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Pp. 148. €44.

These papers were delivered at a conference held in the University of Jena in 2001. They cover a variety of topics related to the martyrs and the *Acta martyrum*. Klaus Rosen writes very briefly (13–17) about the martyrs' activity on behalf of unity in the faith. I wonder if two of his examples convey quite the meaning which he sees in them: Polycarp's concern for his fellow Christians could be a concern to minimize their physical danger rather than an effort to summon them to gain salvation by martyrdom; the peace offered by the martyrs in prison probably resolved more than theological differences. Detlef Liebs leads his readers through a dozen early accounts of martyrs and highlights the propaganda value that their encounters with the Roman authorities had for the spreading of Christian belief (19–46). Though Jan Willem van Henten does not explicitly refer to Liebs' proposal, his own paper (59–75) takes a contrary position. Arguing from *4 Maccabees*, which "is definitely not a report of a persecution that took place just before the composition of the book" (74), he urges a reconsideration of Christian texts about martyrdom, which may not have arisen from persecution but served other social functions unnamed in the texts themselves.

Victor Saxer (47–58) presents three facets of the early martyr-cult in Rome. The first is the site of Peter's grave. Saxer thinks that initially the victims of Nero's persecution were in a mass grave. Somewhere in the late second century, between 161 and about 200 C.E., the remains came to rest in the place now indicated, next to the grave of a teenage boy and surrounded by the graves of a dozen people buried near the saint over a long period of time. A table used for libations reflects Christian practice in honoring the dead. In the third century a marble niche was constructed, and then under Constantine the huge basilica. Saxer's second source of evidence is the *Depositio martyrum* embedded in the *Chronicle of 354*. The majority view holds that during the persecution of 258 the remains of both Peter and Paul were temporarily moved to the catacomb of St. Sebastian, which requires rewriting a line of the *Depositio*, but Saxer sees no