ON THE FORMATION OF THE BIBLICAL CANON. AN EXTENDED REVIEW OF L.M. MCDONALD'S BOOK

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SUMMARY: I. *Introduction*. II. *The book*. III. *The notion of Scripture*. IV. *The notion of Church*. V. *Appendix*.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE *Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Hendrickson, Peabody 2007, xlii, 564 pp.) is the third edition of *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, first published in 1988 (205 pp.), expanded and revised in a second edition in 1995 (340 pp.), and republished in 2003. The author, Lee Martin McDonald, Minister of the Baptist Church, was president and professor of New Testament Studies at Acadia Divinity College and Dean of Theology for Acadia University (Nova Scotia, Canada).[1]

Up to April 2010, I have found more than forty reviews of *The Biblical Canon* in scientific journals (including those of the first and the second editions). When a book has been the object of numerous reviews, it means that scholars are considering it an important contribution about a subject of common interest. As a matter of fact, in the last two decades the works of synthesis have been exiguous, although the history of canon has continued to be at the center of biblical research. This helps to explain why McDonald's book has received so much attention.

When a book has been the object of several dozens reviews, one wonders if it is worth adding yet another. I have chosen, nonetheless, to attempt an extended review in order to supplement the existing literature. In what follows, I intend to offer a general evaluation of the book and some critical remarks on two concepts, "Scripture" and "Church".

A previous version of this review was read by professor McDonald himself,

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[1] In association with James A. Sanders, he edited *The Canon Debate: On the Origins and Formation of the Bible* (Hendrickson, Peabody 2002), an essential book for anyone interested in recent discussions on biblical canon. The *curriculum vitae* of Prof. McDonald up to 2007 can be seen in W.H. BRACKNEY, C.A. EVANS (eds.), *From Biblical Criticism to Biblical Faith: Essays in Honor of Lee Martin McDonald,* Mercer University Press, Macon 2007, xiii-xviii.

who sent me a detailed response. I sincerely thank him for his observations, many of which have been taken into consideration.

II. THE BOOK

The book contents are divided into three parts. Part 1, «Scripture and Canon» (1-69), is an explanation of some concepts. Part 2, «Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Canon» (71-240), includes an excursus about the use of the Septuagint in the NT, written by R. Timothy McLay (225-240). Part 3, «New Testament Canon» (241-429), is the longest one. The book ends with five Appendices, a select bibliography and indices (431-546).

One of the biggest merits of *The Biblical Canon* is certainly the attention to scholars' opinions – to the point of being defined as a «digest of canon scholarship».[1] Every section can be consulted as a brief and helpful *status quaestionis* on these matters.

In consequence, knowing this book helps to appreciate the trends of today's efforts on this issue at least within English-speaking scholarship. In fact, in the last two decades, in parallel to the canon debate in the English-speaking world, there has been another one among German authors, such as R. Rendtorff, C. Dohmen, N. Lohfink and E. Zenger. McDonald quotes some of them, but he clearly belongs to the American tradition, more centered on the historical aspects of canon than on the theological ones.[2]

Anyway, McDonald is to be praised for utilizing a large amount of non-English research. Considering the diversity of themes, the bibliography employed is excellent. All of the expected English literature is included, with few exceptions.[3] There are, however, some more conspicuous absences with regard to non-English titles.[4]

The exposition is usually clear, although McDonald repeats some information throughout the book and the reader would have been grateful if there had been internal references. For instance, on page 27 McDonald explains that «among the Jews the word Torah ("Law"), which refers specifically to the Pentateuch, was a frequent designation for all of the Scriptures of the Bible.» On support of

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[1] J. NOLLAND, review of *The Biblical Canon*, «Expository Times» 120/3 (2008) 153-154.

[2] For a critical overview of both debates: B.S. CHILDS, *The Canon in Recent Biblical Studies: Reflections on an Era*, «Pro Ecclesia» 14 (2005) 26-45.

[3] The bibliography on 4QMMT is «extremely outdated» according to A. JASSEN, review of *The Biblical Canon*, «Journal of Hebrew Scriptures» 8 (2008) on the *JHS* web-page. I miss two articles on the idea of the cessation of prophecy: B.D. SOMMER, *Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation*, «Journal of Biblical Literature» 115 (1996) 31-47 and J.R. LEVISON, *Did the Spirit Withdraw from Israel? An Evaluation of the Earliest Jewish Data*, «New Testament Studies» 43 (1997) 35-57.

[4] For example, there is no mention of A. Pelletier's edition of the Letter to Aristeas: *Lettre d'Aristée a Philocrate* (SC 89), Cerf, Paris 1962. I would add an old but important article: W.C. VAN UNNIK, *De la règle Μήτε προσθεῖναι μήτε ἀφελεῖν dans l'histoire du canon*, «Vigiliae christianae» 3 (1949) 1-36; and a more recent publication on the canon in Josephus' works: P. HÖFFKEN, *Zum Kanonsbewusstsein des Josephus Flavius in Contra Apionem und in den Antiquitates*, «Journal for the Study of Judaism» 32 (2001) 159-77.

this claim, he mentions two texts of Babylonian Talmud and Mt 22:36. On page 98, he comes again to the same issue and offers two new examples: John 10:34 and 1Cor 14:21. Finally, on page 194, speaking about the New Testament's use of Scripture, he notes the same phenomenon and now the references are John 10:34 (again) and Rom 3:10-19. In none of these pages the reader finds a reference to the other parts of the book where the same phenomenon was explained.[1]

Indeed, the book reflects that it has been written during a long period of time. Knowing the history of its composition helps to understand its structure and contents. As McDonald explains (xxxii) his interest in studying the formation of the biblical canon was born during his ministry in the early eighties, while trying to answer some questions on the subject from the laity of the First Baptist Church of Fremont, Nebraska. The goal of clarifying concepts to readers is clearly present throughout the book, intended for a general audience: McDonald provides basic information to introduce every issue and quotes extensively the sources, always in English translations.

His academic research on the biblical canon began later at Harvard Divinity School. There he wrote a thesis, read and approved in 1985 by Helmut Koester and George MacRae. That dissertation is the basis for the first edition of the book, which was primarily concerned with NT canon and consequently spoke only briefly about OT canon.

Koester, the director of the thesis, wrote a «Foreword to the First and Second Editions» (xxiii-xxv) in which he praises McDonald for «telling a difficult story well» (xxv). Throughout the book, Koester's influence is clearly felt in several points, specially in relation to the NT canon and the importance of some apocryphal books. In addition to Koester, it might be helpful to mention other authors that have been meaningful for McDonald's methodology and conclusions. One of them is Jacob Neusner, not only because of his studies on rabbinic literature, but also because of his methodological axiom «What we cannot show, we do not know» (cfr. xv-xvi and 170). Albert C. Sundberg also plays an important part: he undermined the traditional hypothesis of the existence of an "Alexandrian canon" wider than the "Palestinian canon", he proposed the distinction between "Scripture" and "canon", and he cast doubt on the second century datation of the Muratorian fragment.[2] McDonald takes these three ideas as starting points for his reconstruction of the canon's progressive formation. Other scholars largely influential are James Barr, John Barton, Bruce Manning Metzger,[3] and most of all James A. Sanders.

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[1] Other examples of repetitions can be seen in Jassen's review, quoted above, and in K. SPRONK, review of *The Biblical Canon*, «Journal for the Study of Judaism» 40 (2009) 124-125.

[2] A.C. SUNDBERG, *The Old Testament of the Early Church,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1964; IDEM, *Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List,* «Harvard Theological Review» 66 (1973) 1-41.

[3] «In terms of NT canon, I am deeply indebted to the very capable work of Bruce M. Metzger» (xxviii). B.M. METZGER, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance,* Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987.

For the second edition of the book, the pages on the OT canon were considerably extended. In the preface to the third edition, McDonald says that he has improved his knowledge about rabbinic literature (xvii). However, a reading of Part 2 shows that Klaas Spronk's judgment is precise: McDonald still «appears to be less at home in the field of the Old Testament and seems to be not familiar with the relevant recent discussions about the late dating of big parts of the Old Testaments and its redactions» (Spronk's review, quoted above).

On the contrary, the most valuable pages of the book are found in Part 3. For example, McDonald's discussion of saint Irenaeus' teaching about a canon of faith reflects a direct and deep knowledge of Irenaeus' works (289-301). His way of explaining the phenomenon of pseudepigraphy in NT is both profound and useful (344-349).

On the third edition, the book has been updated, becoming considerably longer, and the contents have been rewritten almost completely (xv). But, as McDonald clearly states, most of his previous conclusions have remained unchanged, specially the central one:

In what follows, I strengthen the case that the first followers of Jesus never received from him either the notion of a closed biblical canon or any listing of the books that belonged to it. I continue to argue that the process of canonization was not complete until the fourth and fifth centuries for most of Christendom. (xvi)

The first half of this thesis can be considered the *pars destruens* of McDonald's book. He insists upon it, because of the preconceived notions he brought to the study of the problem: as he explains, he was taught in seminary that «the early church received from Jesus a closed biblical canon, our present OT, that was later expanded by the Catholics to include noncanonical (and thereby uninspired) apocryphal writings» (5). McDonald successfully shows the anachronism of such a "conservative" view on biblical canon by simply reading ancient sources in a minimalist fashion. The following quotation provides a good example of McDonald's style of arguing:

It is difficult to find a wide acceptance of a fixed Hebrew biblical canon of twenty-two or twenty-four books among the adherents of Judaism before the end of the second century C.E. at the earliest. And even if there is some agreement, this does not necessarily mean that a biblical canon of twenty-two or twenty-four books was universally adopted by all Jews either in Palestine or in the Dispersion. (xxviii)

McDonald writes polemically against those authors who have claimed that the OT canon was established and closed before the time of Jesus, such as Frederick Fyvie Bruce,[1] Edward Earle Ellis,[2] and especially Roger Beckwith.[3] On this

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[1] F.F. BRUCE, *The Canon of Scripture,* IVP Academic, Downers Grove 1988. McDonald qualifies this book as «excellent» (xxviii).

[2] E.E. ELLIS, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity. Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research,* J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1991.

[3] R. BECKWITH, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early*

field, McDonald's conclusions have been well received by most scholars.[1] His datation of biblical canon can be said to be representative of today's tendency.[2]

At this point I dare say that McDonald makes a little rhetorical mistake in his way of arguing. After presenting different opinions of scholars, he usually takes the one which coincides best with his central thesis. However, in many cases his own position would have been reinforced if he had shown that opposite views do not invalidate his claims. For example, speaking about the Muratorian fragment (369-378), McDonald wants to show that it was written in the fourth century and not in the second, following Albert Sundberg and Geoffrey Hahneman.[3] But his (and their) reasons are not cogent. On the contrary, it is certain (as McDonald himself recognizes) that even in the case that the Muratorian fragment belonged to the second century, as many authors still believe, the examination of other documents reflects that it had no influence in that time. In other words, if it is a second century document, it has scarce relevance for canon's history.[4]

Something similar might be said about other rather extreme opinions, such as considering 180 A.D. a possible dating 2Peter (277);[5] or Zevit's countercurrent hypothesis on the identification of the twenty-two books mentioned by Josephus in *Against Apion* (151-158).[6]

Judaism, SPCK, London 1985. McDonald's comment about this book is worth quoting: Beckwith «draws similar conclusions as those found in Ellis' and Bruce's work, with the exception that he seems to have an axe to grind, which has led him to conclusions beyond those that are called for by his very extensive homework» (xxix).

[1] An exception is T.J. STONE, *The Biblical Canon according to Lee McDonald: An Evaluation*, «European Journal of Theology» 18 (2009) 55-64. Stone tries to defend the position of Beckwith and Ellis. Some of his reasons, especially about the concept of Scripture, are worth considering.

[2] «Much of the material, and the argumentation, assembled here will appear relatively uncontroversial to many (e. g. the fairly fluid nature of both canons until a later date): presumably not many today would want to argue that Jesus himself worked with a closed canon and this was accepted and passed on by the early Church. Nevertheless McDonald does a capable job of assembling the arguments and evidence here», C. TUCKETT, review of *The Biblical Canon*, «Journal of Theological Studies» 2009 (60) 594-596.

[3] G.M. HAHNEMAN, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon,* Clarendon Press, Oxford 1992.

[4] Gamble wisely states that «our knowledge of the history of the canon is little affected by this document, or at any rate by its date», H.Y. GAMBLE, *The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis*, in L.M. McDONALD, J.A. SANDERS (eds.), *The Canon Debate: On the Origins and Formation of the Bible*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts 2002, 267-94 (citation on p. 270).

[5] Recent commentaries mention 160 as the latest date, but continue to prefer an earlier one, because of the dependence of the *Apocalypse of Peter* (c. 110-140) on 2Pet. Cfr. D. SENIOR, D.J. HARRINGTON, *1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter,* Liturgical Press, Collegeville (MN) 2003, 235-237; M. MAZZEO, *Lettere di Pietro; Lettera di Giuda,* Paoline, Milano 2002, 253-256. For more references on 2Peter's date of composition, cfr. R.J. BAUCKHAM, *Jude, 2Peter,* Word Books, Waco 1983, 157-158.

[6] Z. ZEVIT, *The Second-Third Century Canonization of the Hebrew Bible and Its Influence on Christian Canonizing*, in A. VAN DER KOOIJ, K. VAN DER TOORN (eds.), *Canonization and Decanonization. Papers presented to the International Conference of the Leiden Institute for the Study of Religions (LISOR), held at Leiden 9-10 January 1997*, Brill, Leiden 1998, 133-60. In a footnote (p. 140, n. 20), Zevit suggests that the thirteen books which follow the Pentateuch in Josephus' list should be Josh, Judg, Ruth, 1-2Sam, 1-2Kgs, 1-2Chr, Dan, Ezra, Neh and Esth, and that "the other four" could be Pss, Prov, Job and Qoh.

The second half of McDonald's main thesis–i.e., that a Christian canon was complete only in fourth and fifth centuries–implies that he disagrees with Adolf von Harnack and Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, who considered that the closing of the Christian biblical canon took place in the second century, as a reaction to Marcion.[1] After studying the role of heretics on the second century A.D. in the process of formation of the biblical canon, McDonald concludes:

There is no convincing evidence that Marcion, the gnostics, or the Montanists were interested in producing a biblical canon, and likewise, no evidence suggests that the early church responded to their threats by establishing a sacred collection of books. Rather the response of the second-century church was to produce a canon of faith (*regula fidei*), but not a canon of sacred books. (342)

Coming to the positive reconstruction of canon's origins, it must be said that it is much more difficult to identify than the *pars destruens*. McDonald offers suggestions rather than firm conclusions.

At the end of Part 2, in order to explain the formation of the Hebrew canon, he mentions a possible Babylonian influence arrived in Palestine through Rabbi Hillel in first century A.D. He suggests that «the current canon of the HB and the Protestant OT reflects a Babylonian flavor that was not current or popular in the time of Jesus in the land of Israel» (223). When Hillel came from Babylon, he probably did not know the more recent books and then he could have thought that any inspired book belonged as earliest to the times of Ezra and Nehemiah (223). McDonald speaks in this conclusion about something that he has not developed before. Earlier, on pages 157-158, he had tried to explain Josephus' canon following Frank Moore Cross, who suggests that Hillel brought from Babylon biblical texts and so he started the process of fixing both text and canon.[2] The hypothesis is certainly interesting, but it deserved more discussion.

In the brief «Summary and Conclusion» of this part of the book, McDonald makes no reference to other historical factors that he had mentioned before and which probably played an important role in the closing of the canon by the rabbis, such as the two Jewish wars against Rome, the destruction of the Temple, the refusal of apocalyptic and messianic literature and the contrast between Jews and Christians.

On the factors that led to the closing of the Christian canon, McDonald's contribution is more developed. As we have seen, he dates canon fixation between the fourth and fifth centuries, mainly because of the appearance during

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By several reasons, this identification is highly improbable: cfr. J.C. Ossandón, *Flavio Josefo y los veintidós libros. Nuevas preguntas en torno a Contra Apionem I,37-45*, «Estudios bíblicos» 67 (2009) 653-94.

[1] A. von Harnack, *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche: neue Studien zu Marcion,* Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1996 (original edition: 1924); H.F. von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel,* J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1968.

[2] Cfr. F.M. Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel,* John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1998, 213-229.

this period of the first lists of canonical books. At the end of Chapter 10, «From Scripture to Canon: Tracing the Origins of the New Testament Canon» (285-322), McDonald summarizes this process in seven points. The most original are the last three: the edict of Diocletian, by which all Christian Scriptures ought to be burned, compelled the churches to clarify which of their books were sacred and could not be turned over; the role of Eusebius, the first Christian who tried to fix a catalogue; and Constantine's desire of uniformity in the Church.

After excluding the influence of heretics on the formation of canon (323-349; cfr. the negative conclusion quoted above), McDonald adds an important factor: the development of the codex (350-363; cfr. also 211-214). Only in the fourth century did it become possible to put many books together in only one codex and this technical progress surely fostered the birth of a canonical consciousness.

As can be seen, McDonald gives a special weight to external influences in the formation of the Christian canon. However, in the last chapter, after studying the criteria employed to distinguish canonical and non canonical books, he recognizes the importance of internal criteria. His conclusion is worth quoting:

The historical circumstances that led to the canonization of the NT literature are not completely clear today, since no surviving literature identifies the canonical process. […] Ultimately, it appears that the writings that were accorded scriptural status were the ones that best conveyed the earliest Christian proclamation and that also best met the growing needs of local churches in the third and fourth centuries. […] The key to understanding the preservation and canonization of the books that make up our current NT is probably usage, especially usage in the larger churches during the third through the fifth centuries. (421)

The last phrase is almost identical to the criterion proposed by saint Augustine to discern canonical Scriptures (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.8.12), which McDonald may have passed over too quickly on page 415. Indeed, the usage of books, above all in liturgy, is a key concept in order to understand canon's determination,[1] because liturgical usage is one of the clearest manifestations of apostolic tradition, which I think is the definitive criterion of the *regula fidei* and consequently of the biblical canon too. About this and other problems I will speak in the following pages.

III. The notion of Scripture

To understand the origin of a canon of Scriptures in the Church, two concepts deserve a close analysis: Scripture and Church. The former is defined by McDonald in Part 1, but with an insufficient degree of precision, as I will try to show. The latter is very often referred to, but is never explicitly discussed.

In Part 1, McDonald insists on the difference between Scripture and canon. His words are clear enough:

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[1] W. VOGELS, review of *The Biblical Canon*, «Theoforum» 38 (2007) 244-246, notes McDonald's scarse attention to the liturgical use of books as a signal of scriptural or canonical status.

The meaning of "canon" is not equal to that of "Scripture" even though there is considerable overlap in definition. Scripture has to do with the divine status of a written document that is accepted as authoritative in the life, mission, worship, and teaching of a community of faith. The term Scripture can be, and often is, used in the most general sense of a document that functions authoritatively in a religious community, that is, it is believed to have its origins in God. The word canon primarily refers to a fixed standard or collection of Scriptures that defines the faith and identity of a particular religious community. In a sense, all Scripture is canon, but a biblical canon is more specifically a fixed or selected collection of Scriptures that comprise the authoritative Scriptures for a religious body. (54)

McDonald employs this distinction to interpret the ancient sources. If an author simply quotes a biblical passage, this only shows that he knows it. When he quotes it as authoritative, as can be seen by the context or by the use of a formula ("it is written" or similar), then this citation witnesses to the divine status he ascribes to that book. Finally, if an author includes a book in a list of canonical Scriptures, only then we can speak of the canonical status of that book.[1]

The problems come when McDonald tries to explain in detail what "Scripture" means. He takes Farley's description:[2] «The basic properties of Scriptures include for both ancient Judaism and early Christianity at least four essential ingredients: (1) they are written, (2) have divine origin, (3) communicate the will and truth of God, and (4) function as an enduring source of regulations for the corporate and individual life of the people» (21-22).

It is difficult to disagree with these four points. But one wonders whether they are sufficient. For example, what does "divine origin" or "people" exactly mean?

The points I want to show are that behind this concept of Scripture there are different notions, hidden by a generic definition, and that the idea of sacred text has some specific features for Christians, which offer a key to understanding the formation of the biblical canon.

To be sure, McDonald does recognize some features typical of the Christian idea of Scriptures, which include their eschatological character and their subordination to Jesus' authority (22-23, 26, 33, and 68), but he fails to make a good use of them. He follows Childs' description, but unfortunately he omits this illuminating paragraph: «The Christian understanding of canon functions theologically in a very different way from Judaism. Although the church adopted from

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[1] McDonald adds another important distinction: the biblical canon refers to the books which are considered sacred, not to the text. He correctly observes that this point divides Jewish and Christians, because the rabbis fixed not only the books, but also their text (the future Massoretic Text). «Christians apparently had no interest in a fixed text and did not attempt to produce one until much later in church history» (17; cfr. also 361-362; 402-405).

[2] E. FARLEY, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method,* Fortress Press, Philadelphia (PA) 1982, 58.

the synagogue a concept of scripture as an authoritative collection of sacred writings, its basic stance toward its canon was shaped by christology».[1]

These words of Childs had been cited by McDonald some years before, in the introduction to *The Canon Debate*.[2] Probably, he later realized that they were in tension with his own description and dropped them. In fact, McDonald works as if there were not relevant differences between the Jewish and the Christian concepts of Scripture. At the beginning of the book, he states that Christians inherited the notion of Scripture from Jews: «Because of their background in Judaism, the early Christians were accustomed to recognizing the authority of written documents as Scripture – that is, the Christians believed that the revelation and will of God were located in a deposit of written materials that served both the cultic and moral needs of the community of faith» (13).

It is then not surprising that when he defines "canon", we find the same generalizations as in the discussion of "Scripture". The only difference between Jewish and Christian ideas of canon is the vocabulary: «The terminology for the notion of canon differs considerably in the Jewish and Christian communities, and in some instances different books are included in each sacred collection, but the notion that lies behind these collections – namely, that God has spoken through a specific collection of sacred literature – is the same» (38).

It is true that both Jews and Christian believe that God has spoken and that he has done it through specific books, but this generalization conceals important distinctions. Later, McDonald comes back to the idea of "divine origin" or "divine status" as the common basis for Jewish and Christian understanding of both Scripture and canon. He says:

While the term canon was not used by the Jews to describe their sacred collection, the notion of canon is clearly present in their understanding of a limited number of sacred books that defile the hands. There is not much difference here between Jews and Christians on the notion of sacred inspired literature that had its origins in God, nor eventually in the notion that a limited collection of books qualified for this status. (63)

Some pages before, he had mentioned the idea of inspiration, as equivalent to that of divine origin: «The corollary to canon formation is the belief that the writings that make up those collections have their origin in God, that is, that they are inspired by God and are consequently sacred and authoritative for worship and contain instruction in core beliefs, mission activity, and religious conduct» (18).

McDonald sees no difference between an authoritative religious document and a book inspired by God. "Divine origin" and "inspiration" can be taken as synonymical expressions. Accordingly, these ideas are applied to authoritative books by Jews and Christians in the same way.

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[1] B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible,* Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993, 64.
[2] McDonald, Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 14.

On the other hand, McDonald repeats several times that the major authority for Christians of every age is Jesus. He must be their first canon (cfr. 32-33; 206-209; 243-245; 271; 408-409; and especially the last chapter: «Final Reflections» 422-429). But if Jesus, his person and his words, is the real canon, is it possible that Jewish and Christian concepts of Scripture and canon have no significant differences?

It is commonly recognized that the idea of inspired Scriptures is not explicitly present in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. I would go further and suggest that a concept of inspiration similar to the Christian one has no parallel in ancient Jewish writers.

For example, Philo speaks of a sort of divine inspiration *to write* only in reference to Moses and the Law. He has no difficulties in extending inspiration to the translators of the Torah into Greek and even to himself, as an exegete. However, he says nothing about inspiration of other books.[1]

The unique time in which Josephus uses the term "inspiration" is in *Against Apion* 1:37. But a closer reading of this passage shows that this divine influence is mentioned only to explain how prophets were able to know about the distant past, which in his presentation of the books correspond only to Moses.[2]

The Christian concepts of sacred book and inspiration seem to be a Jewish heritage only in part. Used by the early Church, these notions suffer a deep transformation, under the authority of Jesus' life and teachings.[3] In fact, the Christian understanding of the sacred literature received from Israel depends strongly on confessing Jesus as the Messiah announced by those Scriptures. According to the gospels, Jesus presented himself as the Servant of the Lord and spoke of the fulfillment of Scriptures in his life and mission, especially in his passion and death. Starting from Jesus' teaching, early Christians developed the idea that Christ's Spirit was present in the old prophets (1Pet 1:10-12), that all the Scriptures were prophetic (2Pet 1:19-20), and consequently that every Scripture was "inspired" (2Tim 3:14-17). Similarly, the apostolic preaching is called "word of God" (Acts 4:31; 6:2,7; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5,7,46; 17:13; 18:11) by analogy with the preaching of Jesus (Lk 5:1), the Word of God (John 1:1-18).[4]

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[1] Cfr. C. Termini, *Spirito e Scrittura in Filone di Alessandria*, «Ricerche Storico Bibliche» 12 (2000) 157-87; N.G. Cohen, *Philo's Scriptures: Citations from the Prophets and Writings: Evidence for a Haftarah Cycle in Second Temple Judaism,* Brill, Leiden 2007; A. Kamesar, *Biblical Interpretation in Philo*, in Idem (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, 65-91.

[2] Cfr. Ossandón, *Flavio Josefo y los veintidós libros*.

[3] From a different point of view, Farmer gets to the same point: «Undoubtedly, the story of Jesus – what he did and said, the church's understanding of his fate, and who they believed he was – was at the heart of what was normative for early Christianity. If this is so, we should expect to uncover relevant connections between Jesus and the church's New Testament canon», W.R. Farmer, *Reflections on Jesus and the New Testament Canon*, in McDonald, Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 321-40 (citation on 322-323).

[4] Cfr. L. Scheffczyk, *Sacred Scripture: God's Word and the Church's Word*, «Communio» 28 (2001) 26-41.

These statements would require a discussion much longer than that allowed by these pages. Qumranic literature should be considered too. The only thesis I would like to state here is that a historical research on biblical canon should start by establishing the foundations at a deeper level than McDonald and many others have done, studying theological notions such as prophecy, inspiration and revelation, and their relation to sacred literature.

Indeed, if McDonald had reflected on the authority of Jesus for Christians, he could have realized that the closing of a canon of books depends in first place on a theological claim: Jesus fulfills the Scriptures of Israel and inaugurates eschatological times. This confession of faith implies, among other consequences, the idea that the era of God's speaking has come to its fullness (Heb 1:1ff.). It also suggests that God has spoken in a certain period of history and then through a limited number of books. (Rabbinic Judaism developed later a parallel justification through the idea of the cessation of prophecy).

Keeping these theological statements in mind helps to understand, for example, the difference between the Christian biblical canon and the ancient canons of literary works. McDonald notes it as something baffling, but he finds no explanation:

Literary canons were widespread in the ancient world and continue to this day, but what appears to be unique to Judaism, and was subsequently adopted by the Christian community, is the notion of a fixed collection of sacred or theological books that defines the will of God, sets forth the identity of God and the people of God, and are considered inviolable (Deut 4:2; Rev 22:18-19). Nothing else quite parallels this focus in antiquity, although special religious significance was given to Homer. (46)

When the theological foundations of the Christian notion of Scripture are not taken into account, the only explanation left belongs to the history of religion, limited to cultural and anthropological categories. In order to explain the origin of Jewish, Christian and Muslim notions of holy books, McDonald speaks about the ancient representation of heavenly Scriptures which contain God's will and human destinies. The sacred Scriptures are considered to be a copy of those tablets placed in heaven. This notion, present in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, can also be found throughout the Bible, in the allusions to the "book of life" or "book of the Lord" (Exod 32:32-33; Ps 139:15-16; Phil 4:3; Rev 20:12,15).[1]

McDonald thinks that, as a development of this idea, «the Jews came to believe that the laws of God were written and preserved in sacred writings, and this belief played a pivotal role in the development of their notion of a revealed and authoritative Scripture» (21). It might be true that the primitive idea of holy Scriptures in ancient Israel was that of heavenly books or tablets. The Torah has been understood that way. This model is clearly used by apocalyptic literature, as *1 Enoch*. But the Christian notion of sacred books takes another path. Scrip-

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[1] On this point, McDonald follows W.A. GRAHAM, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987.

tures are considered prophetic and inspired because they contain the announce-
ment to the people of Israel of the coming of the eschatological/messianic
era. Consequently, they are better understood as books reflecting a historical
preaching than as copies of an eternal book of destinies. The Church preferred
the prophetic model of books to the apocalyptical one.[1]

IV. The notion of Church

Throughout the book, we find many times the asseveration that the Church has
never come to define once and for all the canon (xxxii, 310, 383, 421, 424), because
there is no period in history in which all Christians considered exactly the same
books as sacred. Some authors have criticized this statement for supposing a
too rigorous definition of canon.[2] I think that it has a deeper problem, related
to ecclesiology.

McDonald speaks very often of the "church", but unfortunately he never ad-
vances a definition. Implicitly, he understands the Church as the sum of any
Christian community and individual. In this sense, it is obviously true that today
the church has not a unique canon, because Catholics, Orthodox and Protes-
tants do not agree, such as in fourth century there was not a biblical canon ei-
ther, because the community of Jerusalem did not agree with those of Ethiopia
or Syria. It is coherent to conclude that a unique canon has never existed.[3]

Undoubtedly, this is not the place to develop an ecclesiological theory. But if
it is true that a canon of books depends on the community which uses it, then
a deep study on biblical canon should pay more attention to what a community
is and to how it recognizes its canon. In this sense, sooner or later, one must
face up to another concept: the authority inside a religious community and its
legitimacy. Who can define the canon and why? According to McDonald's view
of the Church, this question has no positive answer. Nobody in the Church has
the right to decide on this matter. So Christians of twenty-first century should
feel free to consider possible changes to the biblical canon:

Although I have questioned the viability of certain works like Ecclesiastes, Esther, Job,
Song of Songs, 2 Peter, and other in our biblical canon, I am not doing anything here
that was not done in the early church and in Judaism, as I will show. Why should the
church of today have less freedom in evaluating the Scriptures that inform its beliefs and
practices than did the churches of the fourth to the sixth centuries? (xxxi)

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[1] Cfr. G. ARANDA, *La «Sagrada Escritura» a la luz del Apocalipsis*, in J. CHAPA (ed.), *Signum et te-
stimonium. Estudios ofrecidos al Profesor Antonio García-Moreno en su 70 cumpleaños*, Eunsa, Pamplona
2003, 201-16.

[2] S.B. CHAPMAN, *The Law and the Prophets. A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation,* J.C.B. Mohr,
Tübingen 2000, 108.

[3] In his personal response to the first version of this review, professor McDonald has clarified that,
in accordance with the evangelical tradition, he believes that the Church is the body of Christ made
up of all believers in Jesus as the Christ and Lord, that is, by all who have experienced God's love,
grace, and forgiveness that comes to us through the merits of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
Christ. If I have understood rightly, this definition does not invalidate my argumentation on this point.

Given the premises, McDonald is right in getting to this conclusion. But he pays a high price. To explain the historical fact of canonical writings and canonical lists, it is necessary to suppose some kind of authority that has fixed the collection. As McDonald cannot find it inside the Church, he looks for it outside. Consequently, he suggests the possible influence of Alexandrian literary canon on the Jewish idea of a canon of Scriptures (39-48) and he stresses Constantine's call for uniformity as an important factor which led in fourth century to the fixation of canon (314-318). Cultural background and political power become the only possible explanation in absence of any ecclesiastical hierarchy. Not strangely, the only authority McDonald seems to recognize for today's communities is that of academic scholars.[1]

I am not suggesting that the biblical canon should be considered simply the fruit of ecclesiastical decisions. I completely agree with McDonald when he limits the role of councils to recognizing the books that already had been accepted by the communities:

Church council decisions reflect what the communities *recognized*, and they subsequently authorized this recognition for the church. If any decisions were made by church councils in such matters, it was only in regard to books *on the fringe* of collections that had already obtained widespread recognition in the majority of churches. These decisions came only at the end of a long process of recognition in the churches, and they were not unilateral decisions issued from the top of an organization. In other words, *church councils did not create biblical canons*, but rather reflected the state of affairs in such matters. (209, similar expressions on pages 298, 310, and 353)

What this description fails to note is that the recognition of books does add something to the process. Church pronouncements contribute to the dissipation of doubts about books «on the fringe», as he says. As long as these decisions are accepted (and they usually were), the situation changes: the canon becomes clearer and, at some point of the process, fixed.

If McDonald does not see this, it is because he does not accept any real authority inside the Church and consequently in the Church's tradition. It seems that every generation of Christians must restart practically from zero in its attempt to follow Jesus and the early Church. In the last chapter, McDonald invites us to consider the possibility that the biblical canon has been a fourth century mistake that has longed fifteen centuries:

Is it appropriate to tie the modern church to a canon that emerged out of the historical circumstances in the second to fifth centuries? Are we necessarily supposed to make ab-

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[1] After *The Biblical Canon*, McDonald has published an article with a meaningful title: L.M. MᴄDONALD, *Wherein Lies Authority? A Discussion of Books, Texts, and Translations*, in C.A. EVANS, E. Tov (eds.), *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2008, 203-39. His answer is that the final authority lies in Jesus, not in the books.

solute the experience of that church for all time, even though its historical context is not that of the earliest Christian community or that of the present church? Those who argue for the infallibility or the inerrancy of Scripture logically should also claim the same infallibility for the churches in the fourth and fifth centuries, whose decisions and historical circumstances have left us with our present Bible. This is apparently what would be required if we were to acknowledge only the twenty-seven NT books that were set forth by the church in that context. Did the church in the Nicene and post-Nicene eras make an infallible decision? (427)

These words shed light on McDonald's ecclesiology. Jesus was the canon, but he has gone and nobody has taken his place. The early Church is a model to follow, but it has disappeared. We must jump over twenty centuries to know how the apostolic Church was, instead of discerning it through its continuity in the life of current Church. But this is not the message transmitted by the NT, where we see no rupture between the apostolic and post-apostolic times (cfr. Matt 16:18; 28:20; the Pastoral Epistles, etc.).

I do not see the need to choose between fallibility and infallibility for the churches of any particular century to save the biblical canon. McDonald leaves no space for the possibility of some kind of divine assistance to the Church and her magisterium throughout history. At the end of the book, McDonald claims that we have no right to limit the action of the Holy Spirit within the boundaries of the fixed and traditional canon (426-427). This statement surprises the reader, because the Holy Spirit had never been mentioned in McDonald's historical reconstruction. Of course, believing in his assistance to the church is a confessional or theological claim, not strictly an historical one. But without trying to consider it, canon's history becomes hardly comprehensible.

V. APPENDIX

On the historical data, some mistakes must be noted. They all belong to Part 2, on Hebrew Bible / Old Testament canon.[1]

McDonald says that Melito's OT list (reported by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.26.12-14) includes Wisdom of Solomon (201). It would be more precise to say that Melito might include it, because the text is ambiguous. Melito actually says: Σολομῶνος Παροιμίαι ἢ καὶ Σοφία («Solomon's Proverbs or also Wisdom»), which probably means that he confounds the two works and takes them as one.

Speaking about Origen's account of Hebrew canon reported by Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.25.1-2) McDonald says that he includes 1-2Mac (201-202), but Origen seems to refer only to 1Mac.

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[1] Similar mistakes are noted by C. Tuckett (review quoted above) and by P.M. HEAD, review of *The Biblical Canon*, «Journal for the Study of the New Testament» 30 (2008) 114-115. I have used the second printing of the book. Professor McDonald has made me know that more than one hundred corrections were made for the third printing of the book.

On page 205, we read that «Jerome omits the book of Esther from the canonical collection», which is simply false: Jerome includes it explicitly. In addition, McDonald quotes a text as Jerome's «Prologue to Daniel», but the citation comes from the prologue to the books of Samuel and Kings (the famous *prologus galeatus*). McDonald's description of the Church Fathers and their OT canon (200-206) and especially of Jerome's position (204-205) reflects little acquaintance with the sources.

The same happens with the survey of «Church Council Decisions» (209-210). McDonald omits many important pronouncements. Most strikingly, he ignores the Council of Florence, which in the year 1441 included in a profession of faith the same list of biblical books which the Council of Trent would proclaim a century later. Strangely, McDonald says nothing about Luther and the other reformers, which are the basis of Trent's definition and of Protestant OT canon. About Trent's definition of biblical canon, McDonald correctly says that «it included the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Salomon, Sirach, and 1-2 Maccabees», but he is wrong when adds: «and called them deuterocanonical (secondary) writings» (210). That denomination was not employed by the tridentine decree, which on the contrary insisted on the equal dignity of all the books. "Deuterocanonical" is a term created years later by Sixtus of Siena in a different context.[1]

On page 142 McDonald says that the *Prayer of Manasseh* and 1 Esdras are found among the "deuterocanonical" books accepted by Roman Catholics, which is not true. (The table B-4, on page 443, is precise in the description of Catholic canon).

ABSTRACT

This is an extended review of L.M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (2007). After providing a general evaluation of the book, it focuses on two concepts, "Scripture" and "Church", in relation with the formation of the biblical canon. It is argued that the Christian concept of Scripture has specific features which McDonald does not take into consideration. And although he never offers a definition of the Church, he seems to conceive it simply as the sum of all Christian communities, without space for any kind of tradition, authority, and divine assistance within it. At the end, an appendix contains a list of errors.

[1] Cfr. G. BEDOUELLE, *Le canon de l'Ancien Testament dans la perspective du concile de Trente*, in J.-D. KAESTLI, O. WERMELINGER (eds.), *Le canon de l'Ancien Testament: sa formation et son histoire*, Labor et fides, Genève 1984, 253-74.