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Book Review: The Origin of the Bible

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The Origin of the Bible: A Guide for the Perplexed. By Lee Martin McDonald. London: T & T Clark, 2011, 257 pp., \$24.95 paper.

The story of canon formation is often shrouded in mystery, especially in popular-level publications. One of the reasons for the opacity in these accounts is the fragmentary nature of the evidence that must be used and also the fact that no ancient source contains an account of this deeply significant process. What is more, lucid accounts of how the Jewish and Christian Bibles came into being are sometimes wanting, particularly among the churches. In *The Origin of the Bible*, Lee M. McDonald sets out to tell this “untold story” with the conviction that “it matters which books are received into the biblical canon” (p. 1). Drawing on his substantial expertise in the field, McDonald seeks to offer “useful information for the interested nonspecialists” so they might “enter into meaningful discussions of this important topic” (p. 19).

After laying out the way he will use the key terminology in the canon debate, McDonald begins his story of canon formation with the story that generated it. Before there were texts, there were stories about God’s dealings with Israel. Over time, more traditions were added to this core, and after a lengthy process, these traditions were preserved and transmitted in written form. Next, McDonald traces the emergence and then completion of the OT canon. According to McDonald, the writings that eventually make up the OT were always seen in light of and as part of a much wider circulation of other Jewish and Christian literature.

In the next three chapters, McDonald focuses on the emergence of *Christian* Scriptures (a similarly lengthy process) and the roles that “heresy” and “orthodoxy” play in the process. For McDonald, the rule of faith played a bigger part in fending off heresy in the second century than any canon of Scripture. McDonald concludes the volume by outlining what went into the “fixing” of the NT canon in the fourth century. According to McDonald, only after the major Christological debates were settled (regarding who Jesus was) could the NT and Christian canon as a whole (the writings that cohered with these Christological affirmations) be settled.

McDonald makes clear that a good deal of reconstruction and interpretation is necessary in order to tell the story of canon formation in a coherent and understandable way. This element is one of the instructive aspects of McDonald’s work but also one of the most controversial. Indeed, McDonald’s volume represents a well-done articulation of one particular “take” on how the Bible came to be. In McDonald’s narrative, the Christian canon is a product of the political/theological discussions of the fourth century. To speak of “canon” before this period is hopelessly anachronistic since this is when formal lists of biblical books began to appear. He makes a strong distinction between canon and Scripture and argues that “canon” should be understood primarily as a stable list. Thus,

McDonald acknowledges the early presence of authoritative writings (Scripture) but downplays any evidence that might point to a stable and authoritative collection (canon) of these Scriptures prior to the fourth century. In this regard, McDonald denies that there was a clearly defined Hebrew Bible during NT times or a stable NT during the first three centuries of the church.

McDonald also makes a strong and compelling case for the relevance of non-canonical literature in this discussion. For him, the OT and NT apocrypha and pseudepigraphal writings have been wrongly neglected: "Some of the literature that was left behind is not heretical and much can be gleaned from it" (p. 236). Accordingly, McDonald highlights and catalogues a wide-ranging assortment of relevant external evidence (p. 6). He also quotes from these primary sources at length to supplement his analysis. This facet of his work alone makes it a valuable tool for students and researchers of the biblical canon, even among those who would not assign near the interpretive significance on non-canonical material that McDonald does.

This volume is intended to serve as a "guide for the perplexed," and part of McDonald's task is to demonstrate that the process of canon formation is often perplexing (pp. 151, 232). Any account of canon formation that does not acknowledge the complexity of the process has probably precluded a number of important elements.

Inevitably, though, many students of canon history will find some of McDonald's storylines and subplots perplexing as well. For instance, McDonald frequently raises the possibility of revising the contents of the canon. For McDonald, one question that should perhaps remain open is the placement of the boundary markers of the biblical collection. McDonald notes that most communities tend toward certain portions of the Bible to the neglect of others and utilize a kind of functional "canon within a canon" (pp. 46–50). For McDonald, this selective reading is inevitable and should perhaps even be embraced.

In this connection, the author notes that a number of writings that were originally excluded because they did not serve the needs of the church community are now receiving scholarly attention. Thus, McDonald asks whether these writings (e.g. Shepherd of Hermas or 1 Clement) should be included in the Scriptures of the churches and, conversely, whether widely neglected canonical texts (e.g. Leviticus or Jude) should be removed from the biblical canon. In essence, McDonald suggests the viability or possible desirability of having an "open canon" even today (pp. 236–37). This openness to shifting canonical boundaries will seem odd to readers who are expecting an account of how the canon closed.

McDonald also argues that the first moves toward stabilization of the Christian canon as a whole began during the fourth century, and the two main reasons he gives (religious persecution and political pressure)

are external (p. 26). One might ask in response whether any significant internal factors motivated the community to begin thinking of their Scriptures in terms of a limited collection (e.g. for the purpose of discipleship or defense from false teaching). Moreover, McDonald consistently argues that the process of canonization involved the churches *selecting* writings that fit with what they already believed about God and reality (p. 153). Should an understanding of the canonization process not also involve *recognition* of writings already deemed normative or the notion that those beliefs were drawn directly from the texts that were being passed down?

Part of McDonald's purpose in writing this volume for this series is to encourage laymen and potential scholars to participate in the canon formation discussion (p. 19). He achieves this goal by highlighting several critical issues and aiding in a greater understanding of the differences that exist in the history of interpretation and among contemporary scholars. McDonald's work also serves the purpose of encouraging those who would tell the story of canon formation along different plotlines (and with a setting a few centuries earlier!) to nuance the way they speak about which writings were "canonical" and when they became so.

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Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics. By David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011, xvi + 446 pp., \$34.99.

No matter our level of education, approaching the Bible with the intention of interpreting its meaning is a daunting task. David Bauer and Robert Traina's book *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* seeks to make the task of interpretation more manageable.

This book is a sequel to Traina's 1952 work *Methodical Bible Study* (p. xiii). Traina's original work offered a more general description of inductive study. This update offers a specific and ordered process that can be applied directly to any biblical text. The authors view the primary audience as those preparing for vocational Christian ministry.

The inductive approach seeks to force the reader to allow the evidence of the text to be the driving factor for determining the possible meanings of that text. This approach is contrasted with the deductive approach, which is often driven by presuppositions the reader brings to a text. The authors define their approach as "a comprehensive, holistic study of the Bible that takes into account every aspect of the existence of the biblical text and that is intentional in allowing the Bible in its final canonical shape to speak to us on its own terms, thus leading to accurate,