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# The formation of the Christian biblical canon

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## **The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon**

Lee M. McDonald

Revised & Expanded Edition

Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995

xxxvi + 340 pp. \$14.95 paper

This is a much enlarged edition of a work first published in 1988, with helpful lists and translations of many primary sources. It is not, however, the work to consult if what is wanted is theological insight into the formation of the core collections of the Christian Bible. Its preoccupying thesis is that the final closing or "fixing" of both Christian and Jewish canons did not occur until the third to fifth centuries CE (and then for largely cultural and political reasons) and that prior to that, while core collections of recognized books existed in both traditions, there was also considerable fluidity. As McDonald sees it, this will explain (among other things) why Christians ended up having more books in their Old Testament canon than Jews have in their canon. These additional writings (later called Apocrypha) were part of an initially larger Jewish scriptural collection which Christians embraced but Jews later narrowed down. To make this point first and second century Jewish sources referring to "accredited" scriptural lists that did not include these books (Baba Bathra 14b, Josephus, *Against Apion*) must be marginalized in favour of Christian sources that he believes give evidence of a less fixed tradition.

McDonald believes this picture of a more open canon during Christianity's early years has implications for the way the canon should be approached today. He would not favour abandoning our present canon altogether, for it provides us with the "core of the Gospel", he writes, but he would like to see a more open attitude toward deleting or adding certain books. Furthermore, he believes Christians have nothing to fear in moving in this direction, for, as he puts it, "Jesus Christ alone is the true and final canon for the child of God" in any case (257). Also, given the early church's greater flexibility in this regard (when the canon was still open), he wonders why we would want to be bound by the decisions on closure made in the churches of the third to fifth centuries. At the same time, McDonald nowhere explains just what "the core of the Gospel" is which presumably

would be important in decisions to add or drop certain books, nor, more precisely, how Jesus Christ might in fact function in decisions of this kind as "true and final canon".

Indeed, much neglected in this volume are the critical theological developments that gave rise to the formation of the agreed upon core collection of Jewish writings in pre-Christian centuries and the agreed upon core collection of Christian writings during the second and third centuries CE. This latter is the period which William Farmer, in *Jesus and the Gospels*, refers to as the "classical phase" in Christian canon history, because of the pivotal role Irenaeus played at this time in defending the church's core convictions about Israel's God and Israel's scriptures against Marcion's radical anti-Judaism. For a proper account of these enormously consequential theological developments older works like that of Hans von Campenhausen (*The Formation of the Christian Bible*) are still indispensable.

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## **Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects**

Ulrich Luz

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994

x + 108 pp.

This book is a revised set of lectures originally given in English at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, by the Swiss New Testament professor Ulrich Luz. Luz is best known for his commentary (still in progress) on the Gospel of Matthew; two tomes of which have already been published in German, the first of which is now also available in English. More specifically, it is the incorporation into this commentary of the history of interpretation or *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text as an integral aspect of the text's meaning that Luz has especially emphasized. The book under review reflects both aspects of this larger work and, indeed, might easily serve as an accessible introduction to the governing concerns behind it.

Despite the title, the book is not really about the Gospel of Matthew, at least not in any comprehensive or overarching fashion. Only two of the book's five chapters have as their principal theme particular aspects of the Gospel of Matthew, and in neither case is the topic discussed a fundamental feature of Matthew's narrative per se. Chapter three treats the so-called "mission instructions" in Matthew 10, while chapter four is essentially a discussion of the figure of Peter in Matthew 16:18. In both