Any discussion of the meaning of Scripture must begin with a basic assumption about what constitutes the Scriptures, for even within Christendom Protestant and Catholic scholars begin with a different foundational understanding of what comprises their canon. In *The Canon Debate*, editors Lee Martin McDonald and James Sanders have collected thirty-one essays that speak to the issue of canon. As they identify in the introduction, their goal is to discuss the definition and origins of the biblical canon as well as deal with contemporary research on significant issues related to the canon (17). After a brief introduction in Part One, Parts Two and Three deal with the Old (or First) Testament Canon and the New (or Second) Testament Canon respectively.

**Summary**

The first contribution to this volume is by Eugene Ulrich who identifies his goal as considering and attempting “to clarify the notion and definition of ‘canon’” (21). Ulrich contends that a canon does not exist until it meets the requirements of reflective judgment and an exclusively closed list of books (33). The second contribution is by Philip R. Davies, who argues that “the Jewish canon, to be understood culturally, needs to be seen in perspective” (36), this perspective being a proper understanding of canonization as a “common and natural activity of literate societies” (37). In chapter 4, Joseph Blenkinsopp explores the canonization process of Isaiah as a test case for understanding how scriptural canons form in general (53), ultimately determining that “normativity is not at all a straightforward concept” but rather includes tensions that “theological honesty requires us to take seriously” (67). In Albert Sundberg’s chapter on the
Septuagint, he explores the development of the Septuagint, particularly the witness of the *Letter of Aristeas* to demonstrate that Hellenization was an important factor in Jerusalem/Palestine (68).

Chapters six and seven provide alternate views on the open or closed nature of the Hebrew canon. In chapter six, James VanderKam argues on the basis of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* that the Hebrew canon was open during Second Temple Judaism, but Steve Mason’s chapter on Josephus disagrees. Despite arguing that Josephus’ work provides little evidence of the specifics of the canon, Mason does argue that Josephus represents a view that the prophets have long since ceased and the Judean records have been completed (126). Julio Trevolle Barrera’s contribution discusses the origins of the tripartite Old Testament canon. He concludes that the tripartite canon “is a further development of the canon of the Law and the Prophets” (144). He also concludes that the Pentateuch, Isaiah, the Minor Prophets, and Psalms are “nuclear components of the biblical canon” (145). Jack Lewis’ essay provides an alternative to the Jamnia hypothesis, suggesting that the “council” merely discussed Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs in an unofficial manner, rather than the official, almost ecclesiastical type close of the canon often proposed. In chapter ten, Jack Lightstone concludes that “we have not sufficient, reliable evidence to determine with any precision or confidence the ‘how,’ ‘when,’ ‘where,’ ‘who,’ or ‘why,’ of the ‘fixing’ of the rabbis’ Bible” (164). Nevertheless, Lightstone argues that the rabbis’ own view of what constitutes Scripture ruled out anything after the career of Ezra (184).

In chapter eleven, Craig Evans discusses the scriptures of Jesus and his followers. Evans asserts that the canon was not fixed in the day of Jesus, so it is not possible to determine the strict boundaries of Jesus’ (or anyone else at the time) canon. He does, however, identify certain books as more significant to Jesus in shaping his theology and self-understanding (185). Daniel Harrington’s article on the Apocrypha begins with a claim that issue about whether or not to
include the Apocrypha in the Bible has already been determined by each group within Christianity. The question, then, is less about whether they should be included, but more about their complex history and how they can be taken seriously, whether scripture or not (196). Harrington makes his case for taking the Apocrypha seriously on the basis of its literary, historical, and theological contributions, particularly as it relates to one’s understanding of Second Temple Judaism (206-210). In chapter thirteen, William Adler directs his attention at the Pseudepigrapha. After a survey of the Pseudepigrapha, particularly with reference to Origen’s treatment of it and the time after Origen, Adler concludes that the Pseudepigrapha can have value if read with discernment (228).

Robert Kraft’s contribution in chapter fourteen suggests that the codex form generated the possibility of an entire “Bible” in a single book, and this new possibility “effected a major paradigm shift in how Christians henceforth thought about their ‘Bible’ and its canonical cohesiveness” (230). Emanuel Tov posits the thesis that the more he studies the Qumran manuscripts and Greek Septuagint, the less he is drawn to the Masoretic text as the central text (234). Although he admits the excellent reproduction of the early Hebrew texts in the medieval copies, he notes that this still only presents one textual tradition among many (235). He argues that a more helpful source for scholars would be a multi-column edition that lends equal weight to the MT, Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and some Qumran texts. This approach would better capture the variety of textual traditions and textual and interpretive options for the scholar (250). The final contribution to part one is James Sanders essay on closure in the canonical process. Sanders argues that the notion of a canon of Scripture carries with it a particular dialogue, a dialogue with continuing relevance and authority. In the end, he defines canon as “a community’s paradigm for how to continue the dialogue in ever changing socio-political
contexts” (262). And with his final thoughts on closure, Sanders essay, not-coincidentally, provides closure to part on of this work.

**Critical Evaluation**

One of the more helpful aspects and definite strengths in this work are its disparate voices. Few essays merely echo what has been said before, and many essays (one example is below) challenge conclusions defended in another. The reader finds himself an active participant in an ongoing dialogue. With so much emphasis on the open nature of the canon and the discussion of canon as dialogue by Sanders, perhaps this is an appropriate metaphor. The introduction by McDonald and Sanders helps set the stage for these diverse voices while still maintaining clarify for their overall goal.

One minor area where the work falls short is with respect to the final edition of biblical books. Some discussion is given in various essays to the composition and editing of particular books (Blenkinsopp’s essay on Isaiah is a good example), yet certain comments are simply taken for granted. For example, the editors argue for a late date for both Deuteronomy and 2 Peter without providing defense for such a conclusion (9-10). This approach is problematic because it sets the parameters of the canon discussion before it begins. One is predisposed to reject any arguments supporting an early canon of the Pentateuch on account of the late date of Deuteronomy, and one is likewise hindered from early evidence for a New Testament canon on the basis of a late date of 2 Peter. Similarly, Philip Davies mentions the catholic move to accept the Apocrypha but gives no defense or explanation of this move (52). One might expect later contributions to deal with this issue, especially Harrington’s essay on the Apocrypha, but this question is never answered.
Certainly some contributions to this work are stronger than others. One of the weaker contributions in this work is James VanderKam’s contribution on the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. In this essay VanderKam aims to prove the lack of any authoritative, fixed canon prior to Second Temple Judaism. VanderKam demonstrates at several points the way in which the Qumran group, on the basis of what is found in the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, did not hold to a fixed canon. Although providing several helpful points in this respect, the problem lies more in his scope than in his individual arguments. It may very well be that Qumran did not view the Hebrew Bible as a closed canon; however, the Qumran community represented a small portion of the Jewish population. Moreover, many have argued convincingly that the Qumran community was a secluded sect that did not agree with the Judaism of its day. Regardless of their reasons or merit for such seclusion, defending the lack of a closed canon on the basis of a minority, secluded sect of Judaism hardly proves the point that the canon of Second Temple Judaism was open. In opposition to VanderKam’s claim are mainstream Judaism and the New Testament, both of which exhibit a more stable view of the Hebrew canon that suggests a more fixed, if not entirely closed, canon. For example, one has to wonder why both mainstream Judaism and New Testament Christianity excluded the inter-testamental works. Moreover, Steve Mason’s article that follows provides evidence from Josephus for a closed canon, and example which Mason argues “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” (127). Thus, although VanderKam makes some valuable points, limiting his argument to Qumran to argue for the status of the canon for all of Judaism is too narrow and ultimately unsatisfactory.
Conclusion

This work, despite some areas that lack clarity, provides a helpful introduction to the topic of canon. More than anything, this book questions some assumed positions on the Council of Jamnia, the centrality of the MT, and more that need scholarly reassessment. Although not all of the arguments along these lines are convincing, they each provide sufficient evidence to warrant further looks at positions that have come to be assumed without adequate evidence. In this way especially, *The Canon Debate* proves helpful and worthwhile for Old Testament and New Testament scholars alike.