

## Review Article

# PERSPECTIVES ON CANON HISTORY AND CANONICAL CRITICISM IN THE LIGHT OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

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### Abstract

*This essay discusses various aspects of a recent publication in the light of the study of canon history and canonical criticism. It first provides an overview of the reasons for the renewed interest in canon history and criticism, with special attention to the social reading of canonical books. It then analyses the continuity between canonical and historical readings, before focussing on the issue of diversity in the canon. It concludes by reflecting on this in the light of existing trends towards Biblical Theology and especially Biblical Spirituality as its natural complement.*

**Key Words:** Biblical Spirituality, Canon History

### Renewed Interest in Studying Canon History

The long established study of the history of the canon researches texts that were included in the Christian Bible as normative and regulative for the church. In modern Biblical scholarship, the field has produced important works by respected scholars like Harnack (e.g. 1925), Von Campenhausen (e.g. esp. 1972) and Metzger (e.g. esp. 1987). In recent decades, this study has been expanded by what has become known as canonical criticism. It is a reading strategy that aims at determining the meaning of a text as a Biblical book – that is, the meaning that accrues to a book because it was taken up in the canon. Canonical criticism is a recent development, mostly associated with the provocative work of Sanders (1984) and Childs (1994). As most standard introductory works already reveal, though (cf. e.g. Brown 1997:42), it has now entered mainstream scholarship, a mere decade or two after its origins.

Several developments explain the growing interest in this field. In a global world, aware of and often appreciative of diversity, there is growing interest in world religions and their sacred scriptures. At the same time, democratization and egalitarianism in a postmodern era question authoritarian homogeneity that is sometimes regarded as being too facilely and too ideologically imposed on social institutions, demanding investigation of the canon as authoritative scripture.

More mundanely, the interest within Christianity for its foundation texts is also the result of the rediscovery of a vast number of ancient non-canonical texts in the twentieth century – like, for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls, pseudepigraphical books and particularly the Nag Hammadi texts. The latter, for example, revealed the existence of a completely unknown, forgotten or neglected part of Christianity that were mostly objects or victims of exclusion through the process of canonization (cf. Robinson 1977, esp. 1-10). These texts further challenge modern researchers to evaluate decisions of earlier leaders to accept or reject certain texts as part of the Christian canon. When Charlesworth edited his impressive

volume on the Old Testament pseudepigrapha, in which some were made available in English for the first time (cf. the introduction by Charlesworth 1983:xxi-xxiii), he, not surprisingly, found it necessary to spell out the implications of his volume almost immediately in terms of the canon (Charlesworth 1983:xxiii-xxiv).

In a recent short, but illuminating publication of Smith (2002), he discusses canon history and canonical criticism in the light of the question why the book of Acts in the New Testament was recognized as canonical throughout most of the Christian world by the early third century. Smith (2002:12) points to some of the above and other developments that played a role in the resurgence of canon scholarship in recent years. Thus, he notes, there has been progress on issues that impact on the understanding of New Testament canon such as new studies on the Hebrew canon,<sup>1</sup> Septuagintal studies in general, the better understanding of early Christian conflicts and of diversity in the New Testament itself and modern ecumenical discussions. They all provide results that improve or change our perceptions about the canon.

Smith's book is worthy of discussion because of the way in which he provides important insights and points out further research possibilities in a field that is of special importance to Biblical Studies as a discipline. Though his work concentrates on Acts, it addresses issues that are relevant for all books of the Bible and offers insights that are worthy of more reflection and further research generally. In the following discussion, some of these possibilities and some important issues in terms of his book will be discussed and the contribution of this interesting work to the field spelled out in more detail.

### **The Present State of Scholarship on the History of the Canon**

The research on the canon has been hotly debated, focussing, for example, on the seminal question when canonization took place and what the reasons were for it. It is a research area that is producing learned and extensive studies, so that it is always good to take stock of what is happening. Smith's publication does this, since he wants to fit his work into this bigger picture of scholarship on the canon and provides a helpful guide to the present state of research.

He does not only survey the field, though, but develops it in a meaningful manner (2002:14-18). Modifying Von Harnack and Von Campenhausen who argued that the canon was created by the year 200 and positioning himself against Sundberg who claimed it only happened in the fourth century, Smith agrees with Ferguson and Childs that canon formation is to be dated earlier in the second century and, with Metzger, that the process took place gradually with significant growth by the end of the second century until the final determination by the end of the fourth century.

Thus, in the first century there was a self-awareness of the apostolic authority of some writings (Smith 2002:20). By the time of Justin Martyr, Acts and the Pauline letters were regarded as canonical in many places, although there was no clearly identifiable canon with fixed boundaries (Smith 2002:30). The canon was finally solidified only in the fourth century, as is evident from the works of Eusebius with its still inconclusive position on the

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<sup>1</sup> Already Charlesworth 1983:xxiii briefly, but succinctly spelled out this new understanding. He notes how parts of Hebrew Scriptures (the Law) were regarded as authoritative – probably even well before the second century BCE and the authority of other parts (Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther) was still debated after 90 CE. He also correctly and importantly observes that this required a revision of the popular thesis that the canon was fixed at Jamnia in 90 CE.

boundaries of the canon and from that of Athanasius who, because of the role and influence of Constantine, listed the canon that is in use in most churches today (Smith 2002:30-31).<sup>2</sup>

Whilst this is the broader historical picture so that one can now speak of a “new model of canon history” (Smith 2002:18), the particularities of this process and especially the situation regarding individual books, require more attention – hence his publication. He thus focusses his attention on Acts, which he regards as a seminal book in the history of the canon. In this regard he takes up a thesis of Harnack about Acts as a “unifying” text – an idea that he regards as needing to be developed in a more nuanced manner. Attention is shifted in this publication from studying the formation of the canon in general, to the canonical fate of a particular book within particular social contexts. More must now be said about this particular new approach since it promises to bring clarity to a confusing number of interpretations.

### **Social Location as Indicator of Canonical Function**

Previous scholarship on the status of canonical books reflects mostly in an abstract, conceptual manner on the link of a particular book with the canonical collection or on historical information regarding canonical books. Brown (1997:14), for example, argued that Acts was included in the canon because it is a logical bridge as a book about Peter (as leader of the twelve apostles) and Paul, to the gospels (representing the teaching of Jesus) and to the letters of Paul. His proposal is done in terms of the list of books in the canon.<sup>3</sup>

Smith (2002:39), similarly, notes two conflicting explanations by Childs and Wall about the canonical function of Acts in order to illustrate the problem that his publication wishes to address and solve.<sup>4</sup> Such conflicting opinions arise because they are based on rather slim and tenuous arguments about the final form of the canon. In an attempt to bring more clarity and to avoid regressive argumentation, one requires harder evidence – like, for example, the Patristic texts with their perspectives on the canonicity of Acts. But for Smith this information gains in weight when it is placed within the social context in which the Patristic texts function. He thus develops the role and function of communities in the canonization process. In doing so, he integrates canon history and canonical criticism with an important trend in the discipline, namely, socio-cultural studies of the New Testament specifically and Biblical Studies generally – increasing the value of his work.

Smith argues from this social perspective that the driving force behind the acceptance of Acts as canonical was catholicism, that is, a theological position that was inclusive of different and varying perspectives (cf. further below). To the early fathers, who argued from this catholic angle, Acts unified the biblical canon. It brought together and legitimized several well known texts or collection of texts. For Smith (2002:48-53) the “structure” of the Christian Bible consists of writings that represent key authoritative figures in biblical history. They are the Israelite prophets (the Old Testament), Jesus (the gospels), Paul (the Pauline letters) and the Jerusalem apostles (the catholic epistles and Revelation). The Book of Acts was inserted among these because it refers and reports on all these characters. Most

<sup>2</sup> For another recent overview on this history, cf. Johnson 1999:596-600. He mentions some important aspects that are lacking in Smith’s description. One of these would be how Christian writings were exchanged between churches to be read in assembly. The dynamics of this practical matter should be developed more, especially since these writings were used next to Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Johnson 1999:213 for another perspective on the place of Luke-Acts in the canon – a matter that is clearly of interest in interpreting these texts properly. The separation of the two books in the canon clearly affects the understanding of both of them. This in itself is an interesting topic for further research.

<sup>4</sup> “The problem lies in the presentation of evidence taken from the final form of the canon alone, rather than from sources outside the canon, especially the writings of the Church Fathers and their theological opponents” Smith 2002:39.

important, though, is that the unifying character of Acts is especially found in the key role of the Holy Spirit described so explicitly in it (cf. on this further below). "All of these canonical authorities are joined together in various ways by the Spirit" (Smith 2002:51). In this way the Spirit becomes the hermeneutical key to the book and its place in the canon.

This was not the only reason why Acts was canonized, though. Acts, Smith argues, also had some advantages for the positions of these catholic authors as church leaders. In their eyes, through its pneumatology it simultaneously justified their episcopal hermeneutical claim. It was also because of Acts that catholic authors claimed that they had an exclusive right to interpret Scripture vis-à-vis their opponents. In its description of the various texts and their authors as having been given the Spirit, and because of the Spirit being given to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 18-20, a hermeneutical office was sanctioned. Thus originated a post-apostolic ecclesiastical authority, legitimized by Acts, that stood in opposition to the authority that heretics like Marcion claimed.

### **Continuity in Reception of Texts: Historical and Canonical Contexts**

The previous remarks on the reception of Acts in the social context of the Patristic fathers raise the question about the relationship with the original social context of Acts in the time of its author. According to Smith (2002:50-53) the many references to the Holy Spirit drive and determine the key characters and their actions in Acts. The prophets in the Old Testament speak through and about the Holy Spirit Jesus was anointed by and predict the coming of the Spirit, the apostles receive and work through the Spirit and Paul's work is often said to have taken place through the Spirit (Smith 2002:51).

The Holy Spirit is the primary unifying principle in the book of Acts, driving the major figures in biblical salvation history and coordinating the outworking of the divine plan (1:8).

Many scholars have recognized these references, but explain it differently. Johnson (1999), for example, argued that they emphasize the prophetic character of the major figures in order to portray them in terms of the figure of Moses (Johnson 1999:223-225). The Moses story structures both Luke and Acts (e.g. Ac.7:35-37) and illuminates the powerful work of Jesus and his followers in order to illustrate the necessity of suffering before glory (the initial rejection of Moses by Israel) and the authority of their prophetic word that warns that those who reject the prophet will be separated from the people of Israel.

Reading Johnson's exegesis, one could question the legitimacy of both Smith's and the Patristic fathers' understanding of the Spirit as a motif unifying the many groups in Acts. The matter is much more complicated than this.

It may be necessary to distinguish between levels of abstraction on which the exegesis and comparisons are done. On a high level of abstraction, one can say that Johnson's exegesis does not necessarily conflict with the exegesis of the Patristic fathers since, very generally, both recognize the role of the Spirit and the unusual link between all the various figures in Acts. On a level of more detail, though, the differences in reception are obvious. This will become clearer as one investigates Smith's remarks on the Patristic focus on leadership in Acts. He argues that Acts 18:18-20:38 ends with Paul's appointment of Ephesian *episkopous* to heed their flock. Later Patristic fathers used this to legitimize their own leadership. There are obvious problems with this exegesis, since it is clear that the *episkopous* of Acts 20:28 cannot be understood in the sense of the later church office of a bishop. But, on the other hand, the Patristic exegesis indeed recognizes a motif in the book that is not always spelled out in contemporary scholarship. A closer reading of the text will

confirm how Luke and Acts focus on leadership.<sup>5</sup> The new people of God are led by the apostles. Judas need to be replaced so that there will be twelve apostles again. At the same time the twelve replace the unrepentant Jewish authorities in the first chapters of Acts as true leaders of the new people of God. On a general level, the Patristic exegesis recognizes the importance of leadership in Acts. It reminds contemporary scholars of a significant hermeneutical key to the book. We now understand why Patristic authors read their own leadership in line with this verse, even though their understanding of the nature of the office as a bishop represents a new and changed layer of meaning that is added to the original. The problem with Patristic exegesis is not that they underline leadership, but rather that they qualify this leadership anachronistically in terms of their own offices.

Smith's analysis of the Patristic readings of Acts thus opens the eyes of the contemporary reader to unusual or neglected motifs in the text<sup>6</sup> and shows how early receptions of the text can enrich interpretation of the Bible.<sup>7</sup> It also illustrates how complex the link between reception and the original text is. There is implicit, or even explicit, continuity, but there is also clear discontinuity. Reception not only develops but also modifies the text – revealing the dynamics of interpretation and the ever new aspects of creating meaning.

With this, an important challenge faces the interpreter of the Bible. The problem is clear: those who canonized the Bible and reject heretical positions, themselves use the text differently than its original authors signaled to their readers. How should we evaluate this diversity? Are there constraints that can be placed on the creation of such new meanings? But the problem is even more acute: not only are there differences between the Bible and its Patristic interpreters, but the Bible itself is regarded as containing conflicting opinions. This will now be discussed.

### **Diversity**

The issue of the coherence of New Testament documents has been under investigation for a long time, but is also increasingly being studied in terms of the canon. In order to understand how the field of canon history and criticism reflects this trend, but also the dynamics of the discipline in general, the following short overview is necessary.

Smith (2002:35) traces his work within canon history and criticism to previous forms of criticism that characterize New Testament studies as a discipline (source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism) before concluding,

The development of canonical criticism over the past thirty years represents the next logical step in the move from source and form criticism to redaction criticism. The canon critic recognizes the profound but previously unrecognized fact that the history of the text did not end with the work of the redactor. Rather, that history continued as the text was canonized and interpreted by the early Church, and it continues to this day in the communities that value and use the text.

This historical overview, obviously necessary in a publication like this, reveals some weaknesses that ask for more discussion. The developments that Smith outlines, are indeed

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of establishing leadership in the people of God as a consistent motif in both Luke and Acts has been developed by Johnson 1999:232 and 239-242.

<sup>6</sup> Many readings in feminist exegetical works illustrate exactly the same dynamics. They open the eyes for gaps in the text and reveal significant insights in the role of women in Scripture.

<sup>7</sup> It is not possible to work out the issue of diversity in detail here. The matter of continuity and discontinuity is important. In German scholarship debates about this focussed on the continuity between pre- and post-resurrection traditions. Useful insights can be gained from that context for a discussion of continuity in canonical criticism.

standard trends in the field, but the picture is more complex than he suggests. He omits, for example, to mention narratology that investigated how authors produced their texts in a careful, clearly patterned manner in terms of typical literary features (cf. e.g. Brown 1997:20-29). This form of literary criticism regarded authors as creative artists who carefully designed their texts as narratives (cf. the similar description of Smith 2002:35). Linked to this, though, is another form of criticism, generally known as reader's response or reception esthetics,<sup>8</sup> that developed this new phase of literary criticism further, emphasizing that the literary text is never stable. Understanding a text is dynamic, being closely linked with the interpreter and her or his communal setting. Every interpreter creates a new text that then takes on a life of its own as readers incorporate it in their own contexts. This explains why interpretation of Biblical texts necessarily varies, illustrated, for example, by strong differences between Mark and Matthew in their reading of Jesus and their source and, between the Paul of the Pauline letters and the Paul of Luke. It will also account for the way in which the Patristic fathers read Acts in a new manner. A direct result of these insights in reader's reception is that the role of diversity is recognized and developed. In the postmodern discourse as a still later phase, this diversity was celebrated as a fundamental characteristic of interpretation (cf. further below and De Villiers 1991).

The problem of diversity has become acute in Biblical studies in general, but also in canonical history and criticism. Brown (1997:43), for instance, wrote, "Whether consciously or unconsciously, the church has placed side by side in the same canon works that do not share the same outlook." And Johnson (1999:603-4), for example, argued rather strongly that the rejection of Marcionism and Tatian's *Diatesseron* with their unifying readings of the canon, indicates that it is in principle pluralistic. This is confirmed in another way when Smith correctly notes how Sanders, for example, argued that a text is "adapted, represented and resignified" by being incorporated in the canon (Smith 2002:36). In other words, there is already a difference between the canonical meaning ascribed to texts and their historical meaning. Smith also notes the deeper problem that the canon itself contains competing canonical voices. Quoting Brenneman, he refers to Isaiah 2:4 with its remark that "they shall beat their swords into plowshares" which is in conflict with Joel 3:10's "beat your plowshares into swords."<sup>9</sup>

### *Diversity as a Threat*

How should one handle this diversity? This problem has been solved by some through the famous "canon within the canon" principle, that is, solving it by removing elements that disturb the coherence in the text. Luther famously used it in his rejection of James as a letter of straw. In its crudest form the weighing of some books as reflecting more of a canonical status, is represented by the remark of Brown (1997:43) who noted that only a "bizarre interpreter... would attribute to Jude and Romans the same importance."

But this is not so easy because of two reasons. Firstly, once one seeks for reasons why Romans is more important than Jude, the problem is clear. There are, as Johnson (1999:605) noted, no clear intrinsic qualities that come to the fore. Johnson lists the emphasis on the incarnation and crucifixion and death of Jesus as possible qualities, but immediately notes that works in which they do appear in a manner that reminds one of canonical books, were not always accepted as canonical.

<sup>8</sup> This is mentioned explicitly by Smith 2002:37 in his discussion of Brenneman and forms the practical point of departure for his investigation, but is not developed theoretically.

<sup>9</sup> Brown (1997:42-3) in this regard mentions the well known examples of the letters of Peter and James that appear in one collection – though they differ so strongly.

Secondly, scholars should not repeat the mistakes of the past in which the integrity of Biblical texts was neglected in order to study genetical issues like source criticism without accounting for the final form of the text. Literary theory requires us to accept and explain integrity and meaning of the canon as given fact. This simply means that no book can be cut out of the canon, but must retain its place and be explained. The solution cannot be found in eliminating books from the canon that the church found necessary to include and to retain in the canon for centuries.

### **The Positive Character of Diversity**

Diversity, as canon history indicated, has not been experienced in this negative way. In an interesting move and worthy of further reflection, Smith points to positive implications of diversity when he observes,

The diversity of texts found within the Bible – texts implicitly endorsed by the presence of Acts in the canon – would seem to legitimize a measure of diversity within the community that canonized these texts and which continues to affirm their canonicity, namely the *various manifestations of catholic Christianity today*. On the other hand, the canonization of Acts would seem to reinforce the need for all of the canonical voices to be heard and somehow incorporated into the consciousness of the Church (Smith 2002:119; secondary italics).<sup>10</sup>

Two points are important here: Such remarks confirm to some extent the postmodern discourse that rejects modernist understanding of an absolute truth and the notion of one “correct” meaning of a text – in this case then of the canon (as text).

But there is another significant issue here: Postmodern reading strategies point to reading communities as the locality where texts and their meaning should be placed. Smith (2002:37), in his appreciation for the unifying function of Acts, for example, quotes Brennehan who argues that the canon provides an example of intracanonial debates that are inherently communal. The reading communities must finally decide which parts of the canon have the regulatory power to decide answers to problems (e.g. pacifist readings that are superior to readings with a violent nature).<sup>11</sup>

Though the remarks of Smith make sense in our present discourse, they do not really solve the problem. We still need to be told what it is in the canonization of these texts that caused them to be “incorporated into the consciousness of the Church?” Why must all these differing voices be heard? What would guide the communities in their readings of the text to decide on what voice to listen to?

The answers should be sought in that which identifies communities and is foundational for the communal. Johnson (1999:606-7) spells out in more detail a possible answer that has to do with this aspect. He notes that the best possible explanation for the process in which the church accepted these texts into the canon is to be found in the *sensus ecclesiae* (the sense of the church) as a theological category. For the church the writings in their totality spoke about her identity and her task as a community. They also “reshape that identity and regenerate that life for succeeding generations of the church.” The church will handle the diversity in terms of what benefits the communal.

<sup>10</sup> “Can it be that by uniting the canonical authorities pneumatologically Luke has unwittingly sanctioned diversity? It may be that the patristic use of Acts can be expanded in the contemporary world to include and sanction the real diversity that exists in the Bible and which has always existed within Christianity” (Smith 2002:121).

<sup>11</sup> How important this is, is illustrated by the fact that books were canonized because of their appeal to a larger community of churches (cf. Johnson 1999:605).

The canon does not include writings that dissolve the difference between Christ and Christians into mystical unity, that cut the bond of this people with their Jewish ancestors, that systematically distinguish between the elite and the herd, or that make the denial of creation the mark of authentic holiness. Such tendencies work precisely to destroy community (Johnson 1999:607).

What Johnson spells out here through categories of the community and identity, is nothing but spirituality. The canon in its diversity makes sense within the *experience of faith that has a transformative and healing character*. Thus the church retained all the books in the canon, despite their diversity, because it recognized that all of them in some way or other promote the experience of faith that is transformative in nature and that permeates every aspect of what it means to be a church.

A short digression is needed at this point to understand this better: Within New Testament as discipline, there is renewed interest in the theology of the New Testament. It follows after long decades of strong and highly specialized historical research in the field.<sup>12</sup> Provocative studies on theological issues raised the issue of canonicity and the role of Scripture in hermeneutics quite strongly, as is clear from the much discussed works by Watson (1994) and Perdue (1994), both appearing in the same year and both evoking strong conflict (cf. Watson 1998 and Riches 1998). These works challenged historical scholarship to account for the canon as collection, as book of the church that claims a unique status.

One immediately recognizes the same shift in Canonical criticism (in the works of Childs and Sanders) from mostly historical work to theological questions about the Biblical texts as part of the church's canon. Thus, Smith's book continues the debate about the canon and its special claims when he points out that Acts essentially brings together all the different traditions into a catholic synthesis. With this, he reaffirms that the church is the natural and even the primary social location for the ongoing reception of these texts. The notion of canon finds its starting point in the fact that a book or some books were being collected by the church to provide in its needs (Johnson 1994:597-600).

Every historical analysis of these texts at some point therefore should be related to their canonical function. In fact, reflecting on the canon does not mean abandoning historical critical scholarship, but logically extending it. Historically nuanced reflections on the canon could lead to surprising possibilities and perspectives in this regard.

The important issue now is that all this points towards an ongoing, dialogical discussion with and search in the canon for what makes sense to the church at a particular point of its spiritual journey. The diversity in the canon is not a matter of intellectual decisions that produces neat solutions, but has to do with an existential confrontation and meeting. This is evident when Johnson (1999:611), having noted how the canon consists of a disparate collection of writings, writes that because of this diversity:

the canon opens the possibilities for doing theology in the church, which is quite another sort of enterprise. In the enterprise, the articulation of the experience of God in the lives of contemporary persons and events is brought into a faithful and critical

<sup>12</sup> As a result of this historical scholarship and the intense specialization that developed especially in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, fragmentation of the field became a real threat. Towards the end of the previous century, as a need for synthesis and evaluation of research findings became stronger, a spate of new theologies suddenly reappeared on the scene after a long period in which few were published. The great silence that followed such popular theologies on the New Testament as that of Büchsel (1935), Bultmann (1952), Conzelmann (1969), Kümmel (1972), Goppelt (1981) and even Cullmann (1965) and Ridderbos (1966) was broken by such new theologies as that of Räisänen (1990 and 2000), Gnlika (1994), Stuhlmacher (1997) and others. For a general discussion of the dynamics of this process, cf. Stendahl's famous article of 1962, Strecker (1975), Schwarz (1990a), Richards (1998), Watson (1998) and Hurtado (1999).



dialogue with all the writings of the OT and NT, not in an attempt to fix their meaning but to engage in a living conversation that ranges freely, opening up new, sometimes surprising, avenues for life.<sup>13</sup>

How do we handle diversity then? We allow diversity to accompany us in our living conversation about faith, about who we are in God's creation in the light of our experience of God. Doing this, the study of the canon in all its complexities ultimately takes spirituality seriously, since it involves seminal issues like the faith of the church, experience of God, transformation, community, liturgy, the work of the Holy Spirit and other spirituality issues. In this way, the canon journeys with us, not because we allow it to speak to us as long as it fulfills certain conditions and criteria we laid down. It remains with us, because we believe that it constantly and dynamically involves us in a journey that is meaningful and life creating. As the church continues its spiritual journey, diversity is something that is tolerated, but is a grace that is embraced. The spiritual journey takes the church over the valleys and the peaks, the deserts and the paradises. In each of these very different scenarios, the text will provide the proper light. Though the answers may be conflicting from time to time, spirituality binds them together in surprisingly meaningful ways.

### Conclusion

The publication of Smith is modest, comprising a mere 136 pages. It is, however, a book that reflects and uses new, interesting trends in the field of New Testaments studies in general and the history of the canon and canonical criticism in particular. Of special interest is the merging of the popular and dominant trend of social approaches with the work on the canon and the obvious advantages for an understanding of particular books in the canon. His work on Acts is an illustration of this. It is a fruitful enterprise that produces valuable insights and is thus exemplary of what can be done in terms of other books in the canon. But, ultimately his book is interesting because it challenges the modern, critical mind to account for the meaning of the canon – something that is not easy because of the complicated relationships of the different books of the canon with each other, with the original communication setting and with contemporary research.

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<sup>13</sup> On the relationship between the Bible and Spirituality, cf. e.g. De Villiers 1999. I hope to publish more on this elsewhere.

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