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Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament

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David L. Dungan. *Constantine's Bible:
Politics and the Making of the New Testament.*

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007

Reviewed by Carl W. Griffin

The canon of Christian scripture has received much scrutiny since the rise of historical criticism in post-Enlightenment Europe. Nineteenth-century discoveries of new apocryphal gospels and epistles also fueled academic debate over canonicity, which has reached an even higher pitch since 1945, with the discovery of a corpus of Gnostic Christian “scriptures” at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. More recently, best-selling works by scholars like Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels, as well as Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*, have introduced to a wide nonspecialist audience the historical problems surrounding the formation of Christian scripture.

Into this crowded conversation enters David L. Dungan, former Professor of Religion at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, with a new examination of the formation of the Christian canon, specifically the New Testament. While much past attention has been focused on apocryphal writings and the Bible, Dungan addresses the question of why there is a Christian canon at all and examines the historical and political process that brought it into being. General readers interested in how and why the scriptural books of the New Testament era were eventually selected or excluded from the canon will find useful information and questions in this brief treatment of the subject.

Dungan first makes a careful terminological distinction between *scripture* and *canon*. Scripture “refers to a semidurable, semifluid, *slowly evolving* conglomeration of sacred texts . . . in use by members of a religious tradition over hundreds or even thousands of years” (2, emphasis in original). In contrast, “a canon results when someone seeks to impose a strict boundary around a smaller subset of writings or teachings within the larger, slowly evolving ‘cloud of sacred texts’” (3). Nearly all religions have scripture, but very few religious traditions have canons—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam being the notable exceptions (5).

From here the author begins to explore the history and meaning of the Greek term *kanōn*. While originally describing a carpenter's ruler, with the rise of the Greek city-state (*polis*) *kanōn* began to be "used as a metaphor for accuracy, definiteness, and truth" of democratic law (14). This "Greek *polis* ideology" (19) and the philosophical ideals behind it subsequently influenced Jewish and Christian culture and institutions. Dungan sees great significance, for example, in the term adopted for a Christian congregation, *ekklēsia*. This was also "the name of the popular assembly in the Greek *polis* responsible for all decisions of internal or external policy" (22). This adoption of name correlates with the Christian adoption of the Greek political ideal of unity achieved through the logical ordering and standardization of laws and institutions.

This standardization is seen in the Church regulations issued in the Pastoral Epistles and early Church orders like the *Didache* and *Apostolic Constitutions*, among other texts (23–25). It is perhaps natural, then, that the term *kanōn* (*regula* in Latin) also begins to be used to describe the normative standard of apostolic teaching and tradition, which comes to be called simply "the rule of faith" (*kanōn tēs pisteōs* in Greek; *regula fidei* in Latin) (27). Among its many Christian usages, however, the term *kanōn* is never used specifically for scripture before the fourth century CE (29).

With this (perhaps overly) substantial prologue, the author now arrives at his main topic. Dungan argues that Greek philosophy decisively shaped Christians' attitudes toward their authoritative texts. While anonymity and pseudigraphy were common in early Greece, as in other cultures, the scholar-librarian Callimachus of Cyrene (305–240 BCE) began an enduring critical movement to establish the authorship and authenticity of works in the great library of Alexandria. To illustrate the methodology that was developed, Dungan examines Diogenes Laertius (ca. 230 CE), who authored a study of the lives of the philosophers. Laertius established lists of genuine writings for both the founders of the philosophical schools and their disciples, relying heavily on the opinions of the successive leaders of the schools, as well as on a direct examination and study of the most accurate copies of these texts available. All this was vital to establishing authentic teaching. Laertius's method was substantially paralleled in the writings of early Christian apologists, such as Irenaeus, who "most clearly exemplifies the three-fold philosophical school model: standing in the *true succession of leaders* back to the founder, possession of the only *genuine writings* written by the founder's disciples (with accurate texts), and adhering to the *correct doctrine*" (44, emphasis in original).

Irenaeus (died ca. 200 CE) stood near the beginning of the debate over which Christian books were authentic. Dungan rightly gives Origen of

Alexandria (ca. 185–253 CE) some close attention, but the cardinal figure for him is Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (ca. 265–340 CE). In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius followed in the footsteps of his orthodox predecessors in documenting the succession of bishops in the patriarchal sees (meaning “chairs,” denoting seats of authority) and examining the attribution of various Christian books and their reception in orthodox Christian communities. He arrives at a surprisingly brief list of authoritative books, divided into two or three categories of “accepted” or “disputed” writings (Dungan argues for two categories, the latter bifurcated [72–78]). Dungan evaluates Eusebius’s criteria for inclusion or exclusion from the Christian canon and judges the Bishop of Caesarea favorably. Eusebius’s method was surprisingly impartial, grading the various books according to the philosophical standards previously discussed, and adopting an “open-ended” attitude towards the canon of scripture (91–93).

Dungan’s final chapter provides a history of the conversion of the emperor Constantine (died 337 CE), the adoption of Christianity as the state cult of the Roman Empire (313 CE), and the Council of Nicea (325 CE). This provides plenty of background leading to the central question: How did Constantine influence the selection of Christian scripture? Constantine condemned all heretics and their books, eventually drawing up an index of proscribed writings. He also ordered fifty complete copies of the Bible, which would include all twenty-seven books of the New Testament listed by Eusebius as either “approved” or “disputed.” Constantine’s actions ended “what had been an open, vigorous debate about scripture” (119), which the author believes amounted to a final and formal closing of the canon (122).

This book is not an academic monograph, but rather is intended for a general readership, serving to contextualize the early Christian canonization of the New Testament. Dungan covers much historical and intellectual ground in brief compass. The result is, in places, a broad generalization that may just rehearse common knowledge or, more seriously, a lack of specific evidence. He says, for example, that “Eusebius and his predecessors sifted through more than 100 writings that had been cited or used as supposed apostolic writings” by earlier Christian authors (69), and he provides a list of such in his Appendix B (148–50). But he does not document this vague sifting process (there is, in fact, little historical data for this), and the list of writings he provides includes works postdating Eusebius (such as the Gospel of Nicodemus, dating to about 600 CE). His list includes the New Testament, but for most of the other writings, there is often little evidence to establish how authoritative they were for any specific Christian group.

I am also concerned by the author's overly narrow focus on Eusebius and Constantine in the canonical process. Neither of them clearly or definitively closed the New Testament canon. In fact, the famous Codex Sinaiticus is thought by many to be one of the imperial Bibles ordered by Constantine (it is certainly contemporary), and following the New Testament it contains two of Eusebius's "spurious" works: the Epistle of Barnabas and part of the Shepherd of Hermas. The earliest extant, complete "orthodox" canonical list is in fact the one issued by Athanasius of Alexandria in his thirty-ninth Festal Letter for Easter (367 CE). Several post-Constantinian councils took up this issue; the emperor clearly did not settle it. It should be noted, too, that Eastern Christians outside the Roman Empire were beyond Constantine's authority altogether, and for centuries after him many used a shorter New Testament canon (usually of twenty-two or twenty-six books; the book of Revelation was broadly rejected). These important facts (many more might be noted) are not discussed by Dungan, though they are relevant to his thesis and to any broad discussion of the development of the New Testament canon. While this book is a serviceable general work on its topic, readers should be aware that it is not a complete treatment and, at key points, is potentially misleading.

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