Dungan, David

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


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The form and content of this book grew out of a course on the making of the New Testament that Dungan taught at the University of Tennessee for thirty-five years and through various papers he wrote for guest lectures and conferences. This long gestation has contributed several qualities to this volume, such as a holistic point of view on the factors surrounding the formation of the canon of the New Testament, a thorough but not tedious exposition of the evidence, and balanced views of the circumstances of the formation of the canon.

The book is organized into six chapters. The first four of these chapters lay the ground for addressing specifically the phenomenon of the canon of the New Testament. Chapter 1 defines the terms “canon” and “scriptures,” which should not be considered synonymous. Adopting a perspective of world religions, Dungan shows that the canon is a rare phenomenon among the religions of the world, one that grows out of a certain constellation of circumstances. It is found only in Christianity, in Islam, and in a lesser way in rabbinic Judaism. As opposed to scriptures, defined as “a slowly evolving conglomeration of sacred texts (not by any means necessarily all in written form) used by members of a religious tradition over hundred or even thousands of years” (2), the canon should be understood as a strict boundary officially enforced around a subset of writings and/or
teachings already considered sacred. Assuming this definition of the canon, Dungan’s thesis is that “the legal imposition of a kanōn … upon Christian scripture along with a kanōn of the correct summary of doctrine (the creed), and enforcement of both with the full power of the Roman government, was a phenomenon unique to fourth- fifth-century Christianity” (8).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine the accumulation of conditions that made possible the creation of the Christian canon. Dungan devotes chapter 2 to the birth of the Greek polis and to the political model that it made possible, that is, democracy, implemented through assemblies (ekklēsiai) of citizens. Government by the people was different from the sometimes arbitrary rule of a prince, as it demanded accurate laws. In such a society, the term kanōn was used as a metaphor for accuracy, definiteness, and truth. It was also used in the arts and sciences, so it would have been used in reference to canons of astronomical information, canons of appropriate chords in music, and canons of comparative chronologies. The model of the Greek polis, especially its penchant for mathematically based precision in various fields of human relations, was spread by Alexander the Great.

Chapter 3 considers the influence of the Greek polis model within Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. Dungan suggests that the rise of the Pharisaic movement and the development of the synagogue are expressions of the influence of the Greek polis model. The synagogue resembled a Hellenistic association and/or a Greek philosophical school, as it was not under the control of priestly families. The quest for accuracy in interpreting the Torah may have been another sign of the influence of the Greek polis mentality. Early Christian churches adopted the term ekklēsia—found in the Septuagint but common in the Greek polis—to designate their organization. Early church fathers used the word “canon” in reference to a canon of faith, a canon of the holy tradition, or a canon of truth, but never as a canon of scriptures, as no ecclesiastical body had yet met to determine which writings to accept and which to reject.

Greek historiography and “library science” also had some influence on the creation of the canon of Christian scriptures. Chapter 4 explains how Callimachus of Cyrene (305–240 B.C.E.), when appointed chief librarian of the library of Alexandria, set the task of producing a catalog that would bear the title and the author of each book found in the library. In so doing, Callimachus was following an existing trend in Greek philosophy that valued the unique creativity of each individual person. Much later, Laertius’s accounts of Greek philosophical schools made sure to describe summarily the doctrine of each school’s founder, to list his genuine writings, to describe his followers, and to list their genuine writings. The overall rationale for such a practice was to examine the overall control mechanism for the school’s succession of leadership, how scrupulously the writings were transmitted and therefore truly representative of the founder’s thought, and
the correct interpretation of these writings. Such a procedure can be also found in Christian writers such as Irenaeus, whose argument about the superiority of orthodox Christianity emphasized that it stood in a true succession of leaders back to the founder, that it possessed the only genuine writings that originated with the founder’s disciples, and that it adhered to the correct doctrine.

Eusebius’s writings, to which chapter 5 is devoted, illustrate the pattern found in Laertius and Irenaeus on a greater scale. Dungan suggests viewing Eusebius’s canon of the Gospels (that is, his chart that allows one to find parallel passages in the Gospels), his chronological charts showing the succession of bishops, and his discussion of the genuineness of the various New Testament writings as aspects of a whole enterprise of defense of Christianity by means of greater accuracy. Such accuracy addressed critics such as Celsus, Porphyry, and Hierocles, who pointed to the confusion of Christian writings and groups. When discussing a Christian writing, Eusebius weighed (1) its degree of truth, that is, how accurately and fully it taught the Gospel of Jesus Christ; (2) its genuineness, that is, whether it was written by one Christ’s twelve apostles or Paul; and (3) its authentication, that is, whether it had been used by bishops in churches of apostolic succession, in public worship, and as a source for theology and church governance. Eusebius applied these three criteria individually and collectively and thus sifted through more than one hundred writings to retain twenty that he considered to be indisputably worthy of being part of a canon of scriptures. He also applied two corroborative criteria concerning style (i.e., vocabulary, phraseology, and sophistication of the Greek) and theological consistency. Dungan notes that Eusebius did not appeal to such criteria as divination (not uncommon at that time) or inspiration (often mentioned nowadays), nor to martyrdom (whether people would have been willing to die in support of the position of these writings). In addition, Eusebius’s work produces the impression of a thorough scholarly endeavor: it quotes sources verbatim and at length, some of them fairly ancient, and gives the impression of being part of a public and collaborative inquiry about the value of the Christian writings.

Chapter 6 explains how Constantine contributed to the canon debate by giving additional importance to Eusebius’s work and by making the author even more influential in the elaboration of the canon of Christian scriptures. Indeed, Dungan suggests that Eusebius’s writings could have been used by Constantine to draw the list of banned books. Eusebius himself was commissioned by the emperor to supervise the production of fifty copies of the Bible. Such a commission hastened the closing of the canon of scriptures and helped to preserve a New Testament with twenty-seven books.

The epilogue briefly treats the phenomenon of canonization in Islam and in rabbinic Judaism before moving to later developments concerning the canon. Dungan turns to
Augustine, who established a conception of the Christian faith based on theological virtues, where the knowledge of scriptures was unnecessary and the Gospels were treated as a single harmonized narrative. He thereafter moves to Luther, who reopened the discussion concerning the canon of scriptures, without, however, gaining many followers. Dungan concludes with a reflection on the modern rejection of the scriptural canon, which should however not jettison the valuable methodological results of the original orthodox Christian scripture selection process described by Eusebius.

The book contains three appendices—(A) “References in Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History to Early Christian Writings”; (B) “List of Writings Considered ‘Scripture’ by One or Another Christian Group”; (C) “List of the Writings of the Nag Hammadi Library”—and a timeline of figures and events discussed in the text.

Dungan’s thesis is well demonstrated throughout the book, which is also pleasant to read. Used in a classroom context, its reading would no doubt draw interest and generate great discussions. The work innovates in several regards. For instance, it examines the phenomenon of “canon” through the lenses of world religion, which contributes to a better understanding of its specificity. It also explains well how some aspects of Greek culture, namely, the quest for accuracy in the Greek polis and philosophy, created conditions for the elaboration of the canon. Still, it may give the impression that the twenty-seven-book canon of the New Testament was a done deal after Eusebius and Constantine. In this regard, the reviewer would have liked to see some discussion about manuscript evidence, that is, how some manuscripts would have included noncanonical books (e.g., Sinaiticus) or omitted a book such as Revelation. Similarly, the work gives the impression of a uniform canon throughout the whole of catholic/orthodox Christianity after the fourth century. It could have nuanced this impression by making some comments on the development of the canon in the Syriac and Armenian versions, to name just two traditions. In addition, although the book is otherwise well documented, it is somewhat surprising to see no mention of recent works concerning the canon of the New Testament such as Herman von Lips, Der neutestamentliche Kanon: Seine Geschichte und Bedeutung (Zürich: Theologische Verlag, 2004), or Gabriella Aragione, Eric Junod, and Enrico Norelli, eds., Le canon du Nouveau Testament: Regards nouveaux sur l’histoire de sa formation (Le Monde de la Bible 54; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2005). Finally, if the author wants to emulate the accuracy inherited from the Greek polis, the term America may not be the most appropriate in the following sentence: “We in America have inherited the legacy of that repudiation of religious tyranny and preference for scientific truth” (138) The term United States would be more correct, as the reviewer assumes that the sentence describes the ethos of a single country rather than one of a continent that spreads from Tierra del Fuego to Nunavut.
None of these criticisms detract from the importance of the book, however. It makes a significant contribution to the study of the origins of the canon of the New Testament, and it approaches this in a fresh manner with attention to cultural and political factors.