David L. Dungan’s provocatively titled book, *Constantine’s Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament*, promises a fresh approach to the vexing historical questions surrounding the canonization of the texts that would become Christianity’s New Testament. In particular, as the subtitle indicates, Dungan argues that the process by which a larger set of revered texts became a fixed smaller set of canonical texts is inextricably bound up in a variety of political realities, in both a broad and narrow sense. As the title suggests, the decisive moment is the reign of Constantine, the protector and patron of the Catholic Church, whose activist engagement with the Church’s theology and polity extended to the determination of the New Testament canon, forever altering the status of those texts and with them the future of the Christian religion. It is a thesis as bold as the title, and the book is sure to arouse the interest of many readers.

In the introductory first chapter, “What a ‘Canon’ of Scripture Is—and Is Not,” Dungan insists that *canon* not be confused with *scripture* as if the terms were simply synonymous. From the perspective of comparative religion, it is evident that religions might have scripture but without a notion of canon of the sort one finds within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Dungan explains: “As we shall see, 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’.” Thus, “[i]n terms of the history of Christianity, a canon of scripture, properly so called, did not appear until church officials, acting under the guidance of the highest levels of the Roman government, met together on several specific occasions to create a rigid boundary around the approved texts, forever separating them from the larger ‘cloud of sacred texts’” (3). This distinction thus also clarifies what Dungan will mean by “canonization,” not a gradual process of collection, debate, and consensus-building but the decisive final moments of a process when the canonical boundaries are fixed.

With the second chapter, “The Greek Polis and the Demand for Accuracy,” Dungan initiates an argument that locates the impetus of the New Testament canon in the larger cultural ethos of the Greek polis rather than merely as an intrareligious response to second-century sectarianism and heresy (e.g., Marcionism, Montanism, Gnosticism). Canvassing vast terrain in short compass, Dungan traces the revolutionary ideology of polis in Greek civilization. More pointedly, he shows that the metaphor of kanōn as measuring stick or ruler is applied in the context of an interest in accuracy and precision that characterizes the ethos of the polis.

In the third chapter, “Greek Polis Ideology within Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity,” Dungan seeks to demonstrate that the Jewish and Christian communities also very much participated in and aspired toward the ideals of the polis outlined in the previous chapter. The claim with respect to Second Temple Judaism is substantiated with less than a page of argument (although with some substantial appeal to secondary literature), but more attention is given to the ideology of polis in the Christian ekklesia, which now provides the backdrop for understanding the early Christian uses of kanōn. Dungan notes that, although the term is used widely in the sense of a rule or standard, it also refers in diverse contexts to normative lists of various kinds. Nonetheless, kanōn is not used to refer to an authoritative list of early Christian books until the later fourth century. “The reason” for this linguistic phenomenon, according to Dungan, “appears to be that so far no official ecclesiastical body had met to determine which writings to accept and which to reject in Holy Scripture.” Only after the “Roman emperor [Constantine] stepped in and … took de facto charge of aspects of the Catholic church’s doctrine, polity, and scripture selection” does the term canon of scripture appear (30).

With the fourth chapter Dungan extends further his reflection on the controverted matter (more controverted than this chapter would lead us to believe) of “The Influence of Greek Philosophy upon Early Christianity.” The discussion begins, as might be expected, with a quick survey of the philosophical orientation of second-century apologists, including their rhetorical use of the term philosophy as though synonymous with religion. The remainder of the argument consists in an illuminating demonstration of parallels between
Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* and the deliberations concerning scripture of second- and third-century figures such as Marcion, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen. Like Laertius’s engagement with his philosophical sources, these early Christians likewise show an interest in demonstrations of the authenticity and accuracy of the texts, in assessing the genuineness of succession, and in reporting the “state of the question” objectively and dispassionately, without prematurely foreclosing the discussion.

All of this so far serves as background to the fifth chapter, the longest and most detailed of the book (40 pages along with another 11 in the notes): “Against Pagans and Heretics: Eusebius’s Strategy in Defense of the Catholic Scriptures.” Here the author explores those passages in *Ecclesiastical History* where Eusebius engages the question of the church’s scripture, showing how he employs the methods and even specific terminology of his late second- and third-century Christian predecessors, themselves heirs of a philosophical tradition valuing precision, evidence, and rational demonstration. After setting the historical context (e.g., the pagan critiques of Celsus and Porphyry) and describing the rhetorical objectives of *Ecclesiastical History*, Dungan concentrates his discussion on books 1–7, with a particular emphasis on the pivotal passage in 3.25.1–7.

Highlights of Dungan’s exegesis of Eusebius include the following. (1) The twenty (or nineteen, if the Revelation of John is excluded) “genuine” or “acknowledged” (*homologoumenoi*) writings (he seems to think Eusebius excludes Hebrews from the “Epistles of Paul,” so apparently—and curiously—it is never even mentioned in this passage) represent a 100 percent consensus from the “network of orthodox Catholic bishops and scholars” such that a “single ‘no’ vote was sufficient to doom a writing forever” (92, summarizing an earlier discussion). (2) As to the “disputed” writings (*antilegomenoi*), Dungan regards the twofold designation (“those known and approved by many” [James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John] and the “spurious” [*nothoi*; Acts of Paul, the Shepherd, the Revelation of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Institutions of the Apostles]) to be Eusebius’s attempt at a candid account of the state of the question, not an argument for the acceptance or rejection of either set. (3) Ultimately, Dungan maintains, Eusebius operates with three “tests” for canonicity, a “three-layer sieve”: that which is (a) “true,” a theological test; (b) “genuine,” the question of apostolic authorship; and (c) “well authenticated,” the test of ecclesiastical acceptance and use (78–83). To these can be added two subsidiary “corroborative criteria”: “style” and “theological consistency” (85–87). These, Dungan argues, function “as a kind of ‘double-check’ which in principle could validate a genuine, but not well known, writing, however problematic it might be to apply these criteria in practice. (4) Dungan adds to this discussion an “excursus” in which he notes some of the tests and methods not used by the orthodox authorities: divination (such as lot-casting), dreams and visions, an appeal to the texts’ inspiration or to the fact.
that advocates of a text were martyred. In sum, it can be said of Eusebius’s deliberations regarding the New Testament that, consonant with the best scholarship of the day, they were public, dispassionate, and open-ended; no final demarcation of the canon is to be found.

Only with the intervention of Constantine is the story of the New Testament canon brought to closure, with the far-reaching implications detailed in chapter 6, “An Emperor Intervenes: Constantine Reshapes Catholic Christianity and Its Scriptures.” Here Dungan reviews material that will be familiar to many readers, namely, the story of Constantine’s “conversion” (if it should be called that) and his subsequent benefaction and active support of Catholic Christianity. Dungan’s telling of the story is a maximal account of Constantine’s influence on the structures and theology of early Christianity, including what would become the Christian Bible. The chief evidence is to be found in Constantine’s commissioning of the production of “fifty copies of the sacred scriptures,” a task he entrusted to Eusebius (Vit. Const. 4.36). Dungan implies that the ultimate outcome of this event (which he dates prior to the Council of Nicaea) was to fix the boundaries of the New Testament canon, to put to rest any ongoing dispute over the matter, and to shift the language of canon into legal categories (122). Thus, Constantine’s intervention in the canonization of the New Testament had no less “chilling and inflammatory effect” than did his “heavy-handed intervention” with respect to the Council of Nicaea and its aftermath. Dungan concludes the chapter by rueing the glad acquiescence of the church to the “imperial sword” and its devastating results for Christianity and its Bible:

When it began to use the sword against its enemies, the “heresies” (haireseis), the church thus became deeply twisted and lost its way. Power-hungry, greedy politicians began to take over positions of leadership. In this alien atmosphere, how could Jesus of Nazareth or the Apostle Paul or Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the prophets speak? Were not their voices almost snuffed out, encased in heavy leather bindings of the lavishly illustrated codices, lying on cold stone altars in giant stone buildings? How could those voices speak and be heard? (125)

In the final chapter, an “Epilogue,” Dungan reflects on the history of canon subsequent to the fourth century, not only in Christian history but also with respect to parallel developments within Islam and Judaism. He contends that the conditions under which Islam ratified its canon in the seventh century are parallel to those of fourth century Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism as well. But these three religions are unique among the world’s religions in holding to a defined canon with fixed boundaries rather than a more fluid and boundless collection of sacred texts, a fact having more to do with shared cultural and political realities than with impulses intrinsic to the religions
themselves. Dungan’s treatment of “Developments in Christianity during the Middle Ages Down to the Reformation” concerns only Augustine, who “closed the door, as far as western Christianity was concerned, on any further discussion regarding which books should be in the Bible” (134). Augustine’s commitment to the canon also motivated a novel way of reading the Gospels—harmonization—that eliminated the inconsistencies between the texts that had so often called forth skepticism from Christianity’s critics. Turning then to Luther, Dungan asserts that with his unwillingness to accept the inviolability of the magisterium and his critical regard for certain New Testament writings (e.g., James and Revelation), “the straitjacket of the canon was torn off Christian scripture, and a prodigious religious vitality began to flow through Europe once again” (136). But in the face of subsequent religious violence and, especially, the Enlightenment, the subsequent centuries would see a substantial reevaluation of religion in general and of the concept of canon in particular. As for the contemporary situation, Dungan quotes Robert Funk approvingly when he says that many agree that “the Christian [and Jewish] canon is obsolete.” Nonetheless, untainted by the coercive use of force, Eusebius’s scripture selection process is still to be admired for its “objectivity, honesty, and dedication” (139).

The main text of the book is supplemented by another eighty-five pages of back matter, beginning with three appendices: (A) a helpful index to all of the references to early Christian writings in Ecclesiastical History; (B) a list of “Writings Considered ‘Scripture’ by One or Another Christian Group”; (C) a list of the Nag Hammadi texts. These are followed by a “Timeline of Figures and Events Discussed in the Text”; over fifty pages of endnotes; a select bibliography; and a general index.

As Constantine’s Bible well illustrates, the questions surrounding the canon of Scripture are not easily engaged dispassionately, straddling as they do controverted matters of history and theology. Moreover, the paucity of direct evidence compounded with the abundance of indirect data is such that there are any number of ways in which the story might be told, some complementary, some competing. By concentrating on certain political dynamics, Dungan has offered a novel account that sheds valuable new light on the question. One might read the book as an attempt to fill out the standard account (if there is one) by giving equal time to the political dynamics, in which case it is a useful corrective to the underrepresentation of these factors in the literature. I suspect, however, that this intends to be a more ambitious narrative, beginning with the very definition of “canon” and concluding with an affirmation of the obsolescence of the idea.

In any case, this is a book that needs to be accounted for in future attempts to describe and evaluate the formation of the New Testament canon. I am, however, less persuaded than one of the publisher’s endorsements that this “will be the touchstone in future
discussions of the New Testament canon” (James A. Sanders) nor even that Dungan has satisfactorily demonstrated his thesis. In fairness, given the narrow focus, limited scope, and implied inclusion of a popular readership, it would be churlish to criticize the book for failing to be exhaustive, yet, even so, there is simply too much data that this hypothesis fails to account for and a critical absence of evidence at certain points. Leaving aside numerous points worthy of debate, I will highlight here only two of my most substantive misgivings.

Any evaluation must begin with the definition proffered for *canon*, as it is central to the overall argument of the book. For Dungan, canon is not to be confused with scripture but only applies to the rigid and enforced setting of boundaries around scripture. It is, or at least becomes with respect to Christian scripture after Constantine, a word with strong legal connotations. Thus, there can arise no canon in this sense where the conditions for such are not to be found, namely, an impulse within a religion to demarcate its sacred texts such that some are excluded and the political will and ability to do so. Here, to this reader, it seems that Dungan’s appeal to alleged parallels between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism is counterproductive to his argument, for what stands out are the radical differences in process, timing, and political setting, to say nothing of the phenomenology of the texts themselves. While it is quite right to note that within the broad and evolving semantic range of *kanōn* the meaning *rule* or even *law* is well attested, it is but one of many possibilities, and Dungan fails to demonstrate that, in post-Constantinian uses with reference to scripture, this is the actual or primary semantic contribution rather than *catalog* or even *norm* (if not some happy combination of the two). Dungan may be right, but the linguistic evidence is not marshaled here to make the case. Lacking such substantiation, this move smacks of J. Barr’s notorious “illegitimate totality transfer.”

Yet the implications of this definition are far-reaching, for if “canon” means what Dungan suggests, then “canonization” can only refer to the (bitter?) end of the process and can only happen under the aegis of political patronage. Even supposing one were persuaded that this is the best way to use the words, it is a truncated account of the origins of the New Testament to leave aside discussion of the well-attested processes of sharing, collecting, using, and debating over those texts. In other words, this way of defining the terms leaves little room for reflection on the function of these texts in an organic social history of early Christian communities.

There is, second, an apparent non sequitur in the argument between chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 5 Eusebius’s scholarship, temperate deliberations, and candid open-endedness is lauded as exemplary, as indeed it is again at the very end of the book. With the entrance of Constantine there is a decisive shift, fixed boundaries enforceable by no less than the emperor himself. But we are given no indication how it is that Eusebius’s open-ended
state of the question, with only twenty (or nineteen) confirmed books became a twenty- seven-book canon. According to Dungan, by the time Constantine commissioned the fifty Bibles, “Eusebius had just published his *Ecclesiastical History*, a most impressive demonstration of which books belonged in the Catholic New Testament and which did not” and that “Eusebius’ masterful analysis of the intricacies of the scripture selection process was widely regarded as the ‘last word’ on the subject” (122). But, in fact, Dungan had just concluded in the preceding chapter, rightly, that Eusebius had done no such thing but instead left the matter open. Did Constantine interpose and insist on twenty-seven books? Did Eusebius himself determine that the Christian Bible should include both the *homologoumenoi* and the subset of *antilegomenoi* that “were known and approved by many,” excluding the *nothoi*? Did the Constantinian edition of the Bible even have twenty-seven New Testament books, fewer, or more? In fact, we do not know, and to his credit, Dungan resists even making a guess.

At the same time, that we lack the data to confirm that Constantine commissioned a twenty-seven-book New Testament renders dubious, or at least inconclusive, a central tenet of the book’s argument. It is notable that in the climactic moment of the argument, “Constantine’s Influence on the Selection of Scripture” (118–25), only some three pages are actually given to a discussion of the matter, and there is no discussion at all of which books were likely to have been included—rather disappointing for a book so titled. The reader is left to assume that they were the twenty-seven of our New Testament. As for the argument on behalf of Constantine’s activism in the determination of the New Testament canon, it is largely one of insinuation: if the emperor was willing to use his powers of enforcement in other ecclesiastical matters, surely he would do the same with regard to the canon. The fact that Constantine’s edict against heretics directs that “search be made for their books” might well support such a claim, but as Eusebius’s own discussion demonstrates so clearly, heretical texts could have been identified as such without a definitive closure to the canon or any canon at all.

Moreover, there is simply too much data that suggest that the New Testament question was not settled with Constantine. For starters, there are the numerous canon lists that postdate Constantine (nearly a dozen extant), even as late as the sixth century, but that are more or less inclusive than the twenty-seven-book canon of Athanasius’s Festal Letter of 367. Likewise, none of the several complete extant fourth- and fifth-century manuscripts (e.g., Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Claromantanus; cf. the Peshitta), matches the twenty-seven-book canon. This sort of evidence gives lie to the claim that “it is possible to say exactly when a canon of scripture was created in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but not in any of the other religion of the world” (3). In fact, for Christianity it is not possible, not exactly at any rate. The fact that the question of the canon carried on with some fluidity and with regional variations for centuries beyond Constantine does not well
accord with the claim that Constantine's intervention was the decisive factor in the closing of the New Testament canon. While it is not unreasonable to suppose that Constantine's patronage of Catholic Christianity, especially the “mass production” of fifty Bibles, had some hastening and clarifying effect on the ultimate shape of the New Testament, the evidence does not support the claim that it was the decisive factor. Even if the subsequent evidence of “messiness” is given an optimistic interpretation, as a kind of mop-up operation that consolidates a virtual consensus, the fact that such was necessary does not corroborate an account of the New Testament canon that reduces the question to political factors alone.