

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

reviewed by [Charles M. Wood](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

In Review



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

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Constantine's act of "calling himself a Christian and pouring in that flood of wealth and power on the church," John Wesley charged in 1787, "was productive of more evil to the church than all the ten persecutions put together." Judging by *Constantine's Bible*, David L. Dungan might be sympathetic to that claim. Dungan, a student of early Christianity who has published studies on the synoptic problem and on the prehistory of other New Testament texts, turns his attention to the formation of the biblical canon. There was, he claims, no canon of Christian scripture until the Constantinian era, and its establishment then—an event Dungan describes using terms such as *interference* and *imposition*—was a fateful occurrence.

Dungan is certainly not denying the existence of Christian scripture in the first, second and third centuries. But he takes issue with anyone who speaks of the existence of a *canon* of scripture before the fourth century. His account of the early development of a body of Christian scripture is largely in accord with the general consensus of recent scholarship. His claim that no one referred to this material as the canon before the fourth century is also not in dispute. Various other things were called canon or canonical by early Christians (such as principles, understandings of faith and examples of Christian behavior), but not the writings that constituted Christian scripture.

Dungan's objection to any reference to a Christian biblical canon in the earlier period is not merely that such a reference is anachronistic, but that it gives a misleading impression of both the character and the function of Christian scripture during that time. In the first place, it downplays the differences among early Christian communities that regarded each other as orthodox in those early centuries by implying that their collections of scriptural materials—and therefore their ideas of normative Christianity—were virtually the same. Dungan does not want us to lose sight of the varieties of "nonheretical" Christianity in the early centuries, and one way of keeping them in view is to remember that different communities and regions had somewhat different Bibles.

In the second place, to attribute canonical status to early Christian scripture is, in Dungan's judgment, to misrepresent its function. In order to understand this point, we must take a closer look at that aspect of Dungan's account that is implied by the book's subtitle, *Politics and the Making of the New Testament*.

Politics did not enter the picture with Constantine. Dungan points out that Christianity arose in a world in which Greek political ideas had a pervasive influence. When early Christians became concerned about the faithfulness of their transmission of the gospel, and about how to distinguish the genuine gospel from imitations, they adapted a three-factor schema commonly used by the Hellenistic philosophical schools in attending to the integrity of their own teachings, a schema that was itself derived from the practice of the ancient Greek polis.

In this schema, tradition is reliably preserved through an unbroken succession of recognized teachers, the body of authentic texts that form the basis of their teaching, and the correct doctrine or interpretation of those texts. Irenaeus, Tertullian and others brought this pattern into regular Christian use. At this point, Dungan claims, although there was a concern to distinguish authentic from inauthentic writings and teachings, there was no effort to establish uniformity—to insist that all Christian communities use exactly the same writings or derive exactly the same teachings from these sources.

Such was the situation through times of persecution and times of relative peace until Constantine decided (with the active cooperation of church leaders) not only to acknowledge the church as *religio licita*, or legal religion, but to support and promote it exclusively, and eventually to declare one standardized form of Christianity to be the only legitimate religion. In this “rapid enculturation” of the church, as Dungan calls it, we have what Wesley and many others have seen as the fall of Christianity. Whereas in earlier times it had been risky to be a Christian, now it became risky not to be one. The former countercultural movement became a major cultural support.

The church found itself possessing wealth and status, its leaders were honored, and it soon began to imitate the Roman Empire in its structure. There was a growing demand for uniformity, unity and obedience, reinforced by a growing central authority as the church accommodated to Roman patterns of government and social organization and was turned into an instrument of social control. It was during this process of transformation, Dungan observes, that Christian leaders began talking of a canon of scripture—in the double sense of the word *canon* that came to prevail: a standardized set of contents (*canon* as “list”) that could be used as a standard (*canon* as “rule” or “norm”) for judging acceptable belief and conduct across Christendom.

In Dungan's view, the concepts of canon and authority that we still commonly associate with scripture are largely derived from this political context and lend themselves readily to political uses. He laments the loss of the earlier "vibrant, active, free atmosphere" in which different approaches to the mystery of Christ could be explored. He associates the canonization of scripture with repression and with the settling of doctrinal disputes by legal sanction rather than by reasoned argument.

Dungan is to be commended for placing the development of Christian scripture within its sociopolitical context, and especially for reminding us that the symbiosis of church and empire is a continuing reality with which we must deal—that the past, as Faulkner would say, isn't even past. It would be unfortunate, however, if the contrast the book draws between precanonical or noncanonical uses of scripture and canonical uses were to lend support to a false opposition between two major and mutually supportive roles that scripture plays in the life of Christian communities—nurturing the life of faith and aiding the community in distinguishing between genuine and inauthentic teachings. Clearly, New Testament writings played both of those roles and therefore functioned as canon long before the fourth century. Perhaps, then, rather than forswear any application of the term *canon* to early scripture, it would be better to be clear about how its canonical function might best be understood. Dungan's book extends our resources for dealing with such questions.