

*The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*. By Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Pp. 359. Cloth, \$45.00.

Although modern believers might take for granted the existence of a firmly established biblical canon, or set of authoritative, inspired texts, the collection of books known as the Bible only “took shape over the course of centuries, and still today Christian groups disagree over details of its contents.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the last two millennia, numerous individuals and communities have taken it upon themselves to enumerate the books they believed to be inspired and, therefore, required reading for the faithful. Yet even though their lists are crucial sources for understanding the historical development of the biblical canon, they “have remained relatively inaccessible” to all but the most dedicated scholars.<sup>2</sup> *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*, by Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, brings together in one volume canon lists ranging chronologically from Josephus to Pope Innocent I and linguistically from Hebrew to Syriac. In addition, the authors have sought to contextualize these primary sources—included in their respective original languages and in English translation—with a lengthy historiographical essay and extended introductions to each text. An appendix, a useful inclusion in its own right, briefly summarizes the debates over the most controversial works included in (or excluded from) the biblical canon.

This work is not driven by a single historical argument or devoted to defending a particular thesis. Still, the authors do put forward a number of claims and interpretive guidelines for readers to consider. For instance, Gallagher and Meade observe the fundamental similarities between questions asked by canon scholars today—questions about authenticity, authority, and inspiration—and those asked by the early Christian leaders who first sought to establish the boundaries of divine revelation.<sup>3</sup> Too, they note that for all of the disagreements at the margins of the biblical canon, there was nevertheless “a broad consensus on the majority of the books of the Bible” by the middle of the fourth century CE.<sup>4</sup> And they remind readers that the canon lists reflect a much deeper, richer, and longer theological debate than is always evident from the texts themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The book’s six chapters and appendix (effectively, seven chapters) can be loosely divided into three primary sections. The first, comprising chapter one, is a detailed historical and historiographical overview of the early development of the biblical canon. Even today, of course, there is no single canon accepted by all of Christendom; still, the authors rightly conclude, there was a “basic unity [across] the two dozen early canon lists collected” in the book.<sup>6</sup> This unity was of the utmost importance for those who drew up the lists, not only because it was vital to commend the truly inspired works, but also because it was crucial to mark theologically dangerous works as such. “Athanasius surely did not have to tell anyone,” Gallagher and Meade

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<sup>1</sup> Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, xviii.

<sup>6</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 2.

surmise, “that the fourfold Gospel or the letters of Paul were authoritative, but he did feel it necessary to compose a precise list of canonical books so that his readers could know which writings were not authoritative Scripture.”<sup>7</sup>

The middle section of the book, chapters two through six, contains the texts of the canon lists themselves, as well as thorough introductions to each document. The first of these chapters comprises two canon lists from Jewish authors who attempted to outline the contours of the Hebrew Bible—not the Christian Old and New Testaments. Admittedly, the authors note, there is a slight disjunction created by including these sources in a book which is ostensibly about Christian canon lists; yet, they assert, “it would be even stranger for a book on canon lists to omit a discussion of them.”<sup>8</sup> The following three chapters, which do focus on the Christian canon lists proper, are divided linguistically. Chapter three, devoted to the Greek canon lists, is the longest by far. A number of these lists, Gallagher and Meade note, were compiled as teaching tools for new converts, and some were even “composed as poems for didactic purposes.”<sup>9</sup> The Latin canon lists, found in the fourth chapter, demonstrate strong Eastern influences and illustrate the reality that “Christians from the West were slower than their Eastern counterparts” to start delineating the bounds of revelation.<sup>10</sup> Chapter five includes the earliest available Syriac canon list as a point of comparison, and chapter six contains a short exploration of the extant biblical manuscripts in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Syriac.<sup>11</sup>

Gallagher and Meade shift their approach for the final section of the book (the Appendix), which offers concise summaries—typically two to four paragraphs in length—of a number of works which teetered on the edge of canonicity. Some, known collectively as the “antilegomena,” were ultimately included in the canon despite questions of authorship or authenticity, while other “apocryphal” texts like the Gospel of Thomas were not. The authors do not provide an exhaustive listing of all such works, but the Appendix does include entries for a majority of the “most prominent” texts in each category.<sup>12</sup> For example, the listing for the Books of Enoch briefly describes the extant manuscripts of the four works, summarizes their contents, notes that the canonical Epistle of Jude quotes from 1 Enoch, and explains the reasons for their eventual exclusion from most Christian canons.<sup>13</sup>

*The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity* is a remarkable volume which will be of use to a variety of academic and non-academic audiences. Historians, especially those interested in the development of Christian theological and intellectual traditions, will find much to like in the book’s first chapter, while scholars working in biblical studies will appreciate the compilation of the canon lists into a single, easily accessible collection. Too, readers of faith will find the Appendix particularly useful if they seek insight into why a specific text was or was not incorporated into their tradition’s canon. This volume does have some shortcomings, however. The highly segmented nature of the book means that most readers will find it more productive

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<sup>7</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 174.

<sup>11</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 236, 244.

<sup>12</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 261.

<sup>13</sup> Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists*, 268-269.

to turn directly to their desired list or text rather than to progress straight through from cover to cover. This targeted approach is made more difficult, though, by an unusually organized Ancient Literature Index, which presupposes a fair amount of prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Index entries are separated into thematic categories rather than simply being listed in alphabetic order, and the ordering of entries within categories is inconsistent. The books of the Old and New Testaments are listed in their traditional biblical sequences, but the entries in other categories and subcategories, some fairly arbitrary in nature, are arranged alphabetically. Even so, Gallagher and Meade have done an admirable job of compiling key sources in the history of the biblical canon and of contextualizing those sources with thoughtful and informed discussion. Scholars and lay readers alike will benefit from adding *The Biblical Canon Lists* to their bookshelves as a handy reference and as a helpful introduction to the subject.

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