



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Articles

The New Testament Canon: Authoritative Books or Mandated Collection?

Introduction: Why Talk About the New Testament Canon?

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The February 5, 1988 issue of *Christianity Today* included a special supplement consisting of five articles on the canon. Ronald Youngblood began the first of those articles with this story:

"Isn't it great that God has given us some additional sayings of Jesus!" said Jim to the other members of his Bible study group. "Listen to this: 'Jesus said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's, and give to me what is mine.'""

"Wait a minute," Cindy responded. "My Bible leaves out that last clause."

"But that's just the point," Jim insisted. "Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't include it, but it's right here in the Gospel of Thomas, an extra New Testament book found in Egypt over 40 years ago!"¹

That story illustrates why we need to talk about the New Testament canon. This lecture is intended as a brief introduction to two classes I am planning for the on-campus lectures.

Canon: Why Give It More Attention?

Let's acknowledge that, with some exceptions, generally speaking, we have not talked much about the canon in our churches (or perhaps in our programs of study preparing people for service). This is understandable. We have many other important—even urgent—things to talk about and limited time in our group settings to do so. Besides, doesn't everyone already know what the New Testament books are? Wasn't that settled centuries ago?

I am *not* suggesting we should stop talking about other subjects, cut back on our study of Scripture, or spend an excessive amount of time talking about the canon. But I *am* saying that the circumstances we face in today's world require us to at least be aware of the issues involved:

- for the sake of truth;
- to help each other prepare for questions that can undermine faith;
- and to prepare to engage with those in our society who have heard alternate views.

The Canon in Contemporary Culture

The *Christianity Today* story is significant, first, because it alludes to at least one of the reasons we must deal with questions our grandparents never faced regarding the canon: the discoveries in the 1940s of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic documents written in Coptic in upper Egypt at Nag Hamadi. These writings broadened our understanding of the history of the world of Jesus and the apostles and added perspective to our understanding of early church history.

The story is significant, secondly, because the article in which it appears was published in February 1988—not quite 33 years ago. That shows that questions about New Testament canonicity have been in the popular consciousness for some time. The issue may seem new to us, but it's not new to the world around us.

One of the most influential proponents of the alternate views was Dan Brown in his novel (and later movie), *The Da Vinci Code*—which, according to Amazon, has now sold more than 80 million copies. Published in 2003, the novel captured the public's imagination, aided by the book being the subject of an ABC News Special in November 2003 and featured on the front page of *Newsweek* in December the same year. But, as several writers have observed, Brown's claims were not original. He simply popularized ideas that had already been disseminated—in works like 1983's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* which Brown acknowledged influenced his thinking. In other words, the cultural soil was ready for Brown's claims—as the article in *Christianity Today* fifteen years before *Da Vinci* illustrates.

Third, and closely connected, the *Christianity Today* story illustrates the public relations success of proponents of alternate views. For example, I have in my files several newspaper articles from around the country that reported on and shared the views of the Jesus Seminar who, in their 1993 book *The Five Gospels*, elevated the *Gospel of Thomas* to equal status with the four canonical gospels. That group's PR efforts were intentional and masterful. And since their heyday in the 1990s, the internet and social media have grown and helped spread similar views even more widely. Another example is Bart Ehrman, whose challenges regarding the trustworthiness of the New Testament text in popular-level books and multiple interviews have also been influential. These are just a few examples of what evangelical scholar Darrell Bock spoke of in 2004: “a new wave of popular, quasi nonfiction books . . . similar to *The Da Vinci Code*” that had become “almost a genre in itself.”²

Alternate Claims

What arguments are advanced in favor of the alternate claims? At the risk of distortion, we can only briefly summarize some of the most significant of their claims.

First, Brown and others apply a different interpretation to the fact that we have no documentation of a complete list of the 27 New Testament books until more than three centuries after the time of Jesus and the apostles. Their interpretation of the process of canon development fosters skepticism about it. Brown, for example, says it was a fourth century *creation*; others say it was not completed “until the sixth century.”³

Second, and more importantly, they allege the motivation for creating it was political, specifically the Emperor Constantine's desire to expand his power and that of the Roman

Church. Brown echoed claims from *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* to say that the New Testament as we have it is a fourth century creation that was “compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda—to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base.” According to this view, Constantine needed to commission new versions of the New Testament documents because most of them had been destroyed during the Emperor Diocletian’s persecution in the early 300s. In this view, the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD was mandated by Constantine to revise previous views of Jesus and publicize the view that he was divine.⁴

A third component of this scenario is that previously written gospels had to be purposefully and officially discarded at Nicaea because they emphasized the human traits of Jesus and set forth a vision of him that generally that did not align with what had become the orthodox view that would be preserved in the four gospels they were elevating to canonical status.⁵

What Results from These Claims?

What happens if claims such as these can be substantiated? Obviously, our understanding of the nature of the Christian faith—along with what sources we should use to define it—will be altered. The *number* of books in the canon—“the yardstick by which the church’s belief and practice is to be measured”—will be different, as will the writings we accept “as authoritative or binding.”⁶

This will in turn change the way we understand the Christian faith. As Elaine Pagels, a proponent of including Gnostic gospels like *Thomas* and *Judas* wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed upon the publication of the *Gospel of Judas* in 2006, “What is clear is that the *Gospel of Judas* has joined the other spectacular discoveries that are exploding the myth of a monolithic Christianity and showing how diverse and fascinating the early Christian movement really was.” It’s obvious, then, that we will have to face the question evangelical scholars Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace asked in response to Pagels’ argument: “Does it matter if Jesus and the Christian faith are defined by the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—by the *Gospel of Judas*—or by all of them?”⁷ Clearly the answer is “Yes.”

Finally, the church’s credibility in declaring what is genuinely part of the Christian faith is at stake. On the one hand, if the alternate views are true, as a people who have been called to know, believe, and love the truth (John 8.32; 2 Thess 2.10, 12), we cannot afford to continue speaking and acting as if they are not true. But even if we are convinced—as I think we should be—that the evidence does not support the alternate views, our message will fall on deaf ears if we are unwilling to engage those views that many think are true and dismiss them as a non-issue or as matters unworthy of our consideration. Doing that will lead some to conclude that we are simply doing something comparable to what they believe the ancient church did at Constantine’s behest: ignoring the evidence in the interest of maintaining the status quo, our position, and power. We need to know how the canon was determined and assembled—and why.

Preparing A Response

The first step in crafting a response is taking the challenge seriously and studying the history of canon development. It is complex—and the amount of literature on it is considerable.

In some cases, there are different ways to interpret the historical evidence. More importantly, it's a messier story than many have thought, a fact that can make us uncomfortable. In one respect at least, Dan Brown was right when he had his representative historian say, "the Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven. . . . The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds."⁸

Among other things, we should acknowledge—and be prepared to demonstrate the appropriate context for—several facts about the process of canon formation. For example:

- It was not until 367 AD that the 27 writings that make up our New Testament were first listed together with *all* the writings affirmed as *definitely* canonical.
- Other early Christian writings—such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Epsistle of Barnabas*, and *1 Clement*—were read as Scripture in several ancient churches; some are included in the Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus manuscripts from the 4th and 5th centuries.⁹
- Although 20 of the traditional 27 New Testament writings were generally considered canonical as early as 130-150 AD, the other seven—including Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation—were subjects of dispute in the 3rd and 4th centuries.
- The church in the West accepted all 27 books before the church in the East did.¹⁰

At the same time, we also need to know—and be prepared to show—where the alternate claims need to be challenged and corrected. For example:

- It is incorrect to say or leave the impression that the church generally was uncertain about which books should be considered canonical until the 5th/6th centuries.
- It is incorrect to say or imply that *all* the books were disputed until long after the apostolic era; in fact, "the majority of the . . . books were accepted as authentic from the very beginning. The notion that all the books were disputed is a gross exaggeration."¹¹

The second part of our response involves teaching with the goal of preparing people in our churches to give an answer to this particular challenge. It is telling that some proponents of the alternate views attribute the failure of church people to know the history of the canonical texts to the failure of church leaders to teach about the history of canon development—either as an intentional effort to hide the truth or simply from neglect.¹²

We can and should do better. In the first place, as the saying goes, the truth has nothing to fear from examination. But beyond the question of truth, we need to do all we can to protect church people from being blindsided by the claims. At some point, a student will encounter it in a college class, or a thinking believer will come across the claims on the internet—or as they browse the religious section of their local bookstore where books presenting alternative views of Jesus and the Christian faith have been a staple for years. If nothing else, we need to help our members be informed enough so that, when they do encounter these views, they will at least know that there is another side to the story and the information has not been kept from them.

Related to this is the matter of our witness to the larger world. If we are serious about engaging the people around us regarding the claims of the gospel, chances are good that, at some point, we will encounter someone who is familiar with these alternate views about the origins of the Christian faith and the formation of the list of its authoritative writings. At the

very least, we should do all we can to help potential evangelists be aware of the issue, that there is another side to the story, and where to find the resources (including personal contacts that may be available to them) they need to better understand and respond to their conversation partners.

Conclusion

Obviously, there is much more to be said about the formation of the New Testament canon. If the Lord wills, we will explore at least some of it when the lectures convene on campus in the fall. I hope you can attend the lectures and invite you to consider coming to our class. In the meantime, you may want to explore some of the resources I've found that make the effort to "give an answer" regarding these things (1 Pet 3.15). I've posted a bibliography, along with the text of this lecture, on my website: www.davidanguish.com.

I'll close with this assurance from the renowned New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger: "The Church did not create the canon, but came to recognize, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the Church."¹³

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* See also the articles on "Canon" in other New Testament Dictionaries in this series: *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (article written by Charles E. Hill); *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (written by Lee M. McDonald); and the article on the "Canonical Formation of the New Testament," *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (written by Harry Y. Gamble).

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Notes

¹ Ronald Youngblood, "The Process: How We Got Our Bible," *Christianity Today*. Vol. 32, No. 2 (February 5, 1988): 24.

² Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to Questions Everyone's Asking*, (Nelson Books, 2004), 91.

³ Dan Burstein, *Secrets of the Code*, 166, cited in J. Ed Komoshewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Kregel Publications, 2006), 121.

⁴ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, paperback ed. (Anchor Books, 2003), 254-255. For the claims of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, see Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Dell Doubleday, 1982, 1983), 368-369, as cited in Darrell L. Bock & Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), 36.

⁵ See Brown, 254.

⁶ The quotations in this paragraph are from Andrew F. Walls, "The Canon of the New Testament," in Frank E. Gæbelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 631.

⁷ Bock & Wallace, 81. On pp. 78-79, they cite Pagels's statement from "The Gospel Truth," *New York Times*, April 8, 2006. The article remains online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/08/opinion/the-gospel-truth.html>. Retrieved December 8, 2020.

⁸ Brown, 250-251.

⁹ See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987), 238.

¹⁰ See Metzger, 219, and Komoshewski, et. al., 124, 296 (notes 6 and 7).

¹¹ See Komoszewski, et. al., 148.

¹² See Brown, 253-254. Ehrman's assessment that the information may have been intentionally hidden from the church is derived from the subtitle and statements made in his book, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (HarperOne 2009), 189, as cited and analyzed in Arthur G. Patzia, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, & Content*, Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged (Abingdon Press, 2003), 190.

¹³ Metzger, 287.