



# THE BEREA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## Person-Valuing Evangelism

“In light of verses 19-23 [1 Cor 9], it is hard to justify the prevailing pattern of evangelism by formula: using identical tracts, sets of questions, or prepackaged approaches on everyone with whom we want to share Christ. Paul’s model far more closely approximates ‘friendship evangelism’—coming along side and getting to know unbelievers, valuing them as God’s creation in his image in and of themselves, and not just as potential objects of conversion. Then as we become familiar with each person’s unique hopes and fears, we may contextualize the gospel in such a way as to speak more directly to those concerns.”  
~ Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan Academic, 1994), 188

## Ideals That Transcend

“The other test of a religion or system of thought, in addition to its explanation of why idea making matters, is the content of its ideals. If a religion or system of thought is a plausible candidate for truth, it will give rise to moral ideals that hold true in every season—ideals that transcend time and place.”  
~ David Skeel, *True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World* (IVP Books, 2014), 49

## Alternate Views of Canon Identification

David Anguish

How much do you know about the developments that led to identifying the 27 New Testament books as the canon?

1. T/F Other early Christian writings besides the 27 canonical books were read as Scripture in some ancient churches.
2. T/F 20 of the NT writings were generally considered canonical by 130-150 AD, but the other seven (Heb, Jas, 2 Pet, 2-3 John, Jude, and Rev) continued to be debated in the 3rd-4th centuries.
3. T/F There are other writings known as “gospels” that were excluded from the canon by the ancient church.
4. T/F The 27 writings that comprise our New Testament were first listed together as the canon in 367 AD (4th century).

\* \* \* \* \*

All the above are true, as shown from church history; the 1940s discovery of additional writings—including some gospels;<sup>1</sup> and the inclusion of other books and/or omissions of some of the 27 in early manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> This evidence has convinced some that the real story of the canon’s development and composition differs from traditional views. Novelist Dan Brown and New Testament professor Bart Ehrman are probably the best known popular-level advocates of alternate views, but they are not the only proponents.

At the risk of distortion that can result from brevity, I’ll summarize some of the more significant claims.<sup>3</sup> First, that we have no documented list of all 27 books as the canon until the late 4th century—in Athanasius’s *39th Festal Letter* in 367 AD—is taken as evidence that the question of which books should be in the canon remained completely open centuries after the church began. Brown affirms it was a 4th century creation; another writer says it was not complete until the 6th century.<sup>4</sup>

Second, Brown and others contend the reasons for including some books and rejecting others were as much political as theological. The argument centers on the actions of the emperor Constantine, whose Edict of Milan (313 AD) gave Christianity legal status. It is alleged that to consolidate his power with that of the emerging Roman Church, Constantine

## For Canon Study

### Short Studies for Tight Schedules

- D. A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, "The New Testament Canon," *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Zondervan, 2005), 726-743.
- C. E. Hill, "Canon," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., Joel B. Green, Jennine K. Brown, & Nicholas Perrin, eds. (InterVarsity Press, 2013), 101-106.
- Carl R. Holladay, "The Christian Scriptures: Witnesses to Christ and the Christian Faith," *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Abingdon Press, 2005), 571-596.
- Bruce M. Metzger, "The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament," *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, & Content*, 3rd ed. (Abingdon Press, 2003), 309-319.
- Arthur G. Patzia, "Canon," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne & Ralph P. Martin, eds. (InterVarsity Press, 1993), 85-92.
- \_\_\_\_\_, "Part 5: The Making of the New Testament Canon," *The Making of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., (IVP Academic, 2011), 166-191.
- Andrew F. Walls, "The Canon of the New Testament," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, Frank E. Gæbelein, ed. (Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 629-643.

### Responding to Alternate Claims

- Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to Questions Everyone's Asking* (Nelson Books, 2004).
- Darrell L. Bock & Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Thomas Nelson, 2007).
- Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press, 2006).
- J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, & Daniel B. Wallace, "Part 3: Did the Early Church Muzzle the Canon?" *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Kregel Publications, 2006), 119-166.
- Ron Rhodes, "Crash Goes the Da Vinci Code," <https://virtueonline.org/crash-goes-da-vinci-code-ron-rhodes>, Retrieved September 23, 2021.

"influenced" church leaders to protect the orthodoxy that emerged from the "theological diversity"<sup>5</sup> of the 2nd-3rd centuries. According to Brown's protagonist, "the modern Bible 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."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Constantine "commissioned and financed a new Bible," effectively mandating that the Council at Nicaea (325 AD) revise previously held views of a human Jesus and publicize that he was divine. Gospels written prior to 325 had to be officially discarded because they showed Jesus' humanity, a vision of him at odds with what became the orthodox view of the four gospels that were "elevated" to canonical status.<sup>7</sup>

An op-ed at the time of the publication of the *Gospel of Judas* in 2006 points to what's at stake in this discussion.

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.<sup>8</sup>

I'll return to and elaborate on this idea in part 3.

[www.davidanguish.com](http://www.davidanguish.com)

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Coptic Gnostic documents at Hag Hammadi, Egypt; see [part 1](#).
- <sup>2</sup> E.g., the Sinaiticus MS (4th cent.) includes the *Epistle of Barnabas* and part of *Shepherd of Hermas*; the Alexandrinus MS (5th cent.) has *1 Clement* and *2 Clement* 1.1-12.5; the Claromontanus MS (6th cent.) includes *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Acts of Paul*, and *Apocalypse of Peter* (see Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. [IVP Academic, 2011], 175).
- <sup>3</sup> Ehrman, a student of Bruce Metzger, is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina; for a first-person summary of his interests & writings, see <https://religion.unc.edu/people/full-time-faculty/ehrman/> retrieved 3/13/23. For claims relevant to the canon, see *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (HarperOne, 2005), 72-73, 152-155.
- Dan Brown's influence is evident in the sale of 80 million copies of *The Da Vinci Code* (Anchor Books, 2003) (<https://wealthygorilla.com/best-selling-books/> retrieved 3/13/23). His claims echo Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, & Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Dell Doubleday, 1982, 1983).
- <sup>4</sup> Dan Burstein, *Secrets of the Code*, 166; in J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, & Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Kregel Publications, 2006), 121.
- <sup>5</sup> Ehrman, 152.
- <sup>6</sup> Brown, 254-255. A corollary to this claim is that Constantine had to commission new versions of the New Testament writings because most had been destroyed in Diocletian's persecution in the early 300s.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 254. The gnostic gospels actually dehumanize and detach Jesus from history, depicting him as a presenter of disembodied teaching (e.g., *Gospel of Thomas*). In the canonical gospels he is a real person living in history, teaching and interacting with the people and events in his culture.
- <sup>8</sup> Elaine Pagels, "The Gospel Truth," *New York Times*, April 8, 2006; the article remains online as <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/08/opinion/the-gospel-truth.html>. Retrieved 12/8/20. To receive a pdf copy, [email](#) me.

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