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THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Authoritative Books or Mandated Collection?

CULTURAL CHALLENGE & FIRST CANONS

Introduction

1. The February 5, 1988 issue of *Christianity Today* included a supplement featuring five articles on the New Testament canon. Ronald Youngblood began the first 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!" (Ronald Youngblood, "The Process: How We Got Our Bible," *Christianity Today*, 32, 2 (Feb. 5, 1988): 24)

2. That story illustrates why we need to talk about the New Testament canon. In this and the following lecture, I want to elaborate on this need and then survey the evidence.
3. Since this is the briefest of surveys, I'll share some resources you can use in your study. See the accompanying "Introductory Bibliography."

Body

- I. Apologetics: Personal Observations and History.
 - A. Several former students showed what I hoped students would take away from my high school academic apologetics course: when challenged, remember there is another side.
 - B. Once, while studying the evidence of the Bible's trustworthiness, something I was reading prompted me to think that, to fully make the case for the writings—which are more like an anthology than chapters in a textbook—we need to make a case for each book.
 1. Reading about how the church evaluated the documents validated that thought.¹
 - C. The popularity of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* novel (and movie) accentuated the apologetic need and led me to begin to fill in this gap in my apologetics library and teaching.

¹ Regarding the church's evaluation process for which various gospels should be included see C. E. Hill, "Canon," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., 102; bibliography part 2.

II. Our Cultural Climate.

A. Why talk more about the NT canon?

1. We have not taught much—if at all—about this subject; that's understandable since we have many things to teach and limited time to do so.
2. Don't neglect the other (please!) or go to an extreme re: canon, but today's circumstances require us to at least be aware of the messy history and need to explain.²

B. Why the *Christianity Today* quotation is significant.

1. It reminds us that we may encounter questions our grandparents never faced regarding the canon, prompted by the discoveries in the 1940s of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Coptic Gnostic documents in Egypt at Nag Hammadi.
 - a) The writings broaden our understanding of the history of the world of Jesus and the apostles and add perspective to our understanding of early church history.³
2. The *CT* articles were published in February 1988—almost 34 years ago. Questions about NT canonicity have long been in the popular consciousness.
3. The *CT* story illustrates the ongoing PR success of proponents of alternative views.
 - a) I've mentioned Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*—which has sold more than 80 million copies (note: related sequels, etc., [2021 series, "The Lost Symbol"] are still being produced; movies, TV series, documentaries, and video games).
 - (1) Was the "novel ... taken too literally and too seriously by many"?⁴ Perhaps, but Brown did claim the historical references in the book were fact-based and drew on other sources (notably *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail*) that did not purport to be fiction.
 - b) Darrell Bock took note of "a new wave of popular, quasi nonfiction books ... similar to *The Da Vinci Code*" that by 2004 had become "almost a genre in itself."⁵
 - c) See e.g., the popular level claims, writings, and PR efforts to affirm alternate histories by various scholars (Ehrman, Jesus Seminar, Nag Hammadi scholars, etc.)

III. Summarizing the Alternative Claims.

A. Brown, Ehrman, et. al. interpret differently 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 (367 AD—Athanasius, *39th Festal Letter*).

1. Brown, for example, says it was a 4th century *creation*; others say it was not completed "until the sixth century."⁶

B. More importantly, they allege that the motivation for creating it was political, specifically the 4th century Emperor Constantine's desire to advance and protect the orthodoxy that

² Carl Holladay's summary is typical in the literature: "Even when the church began to decide which writings it considered most authoritative or which ones possessed enduring value, the process was often messier than we sometimes imagine" (*A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, 835; bibliography part 2).

³ See Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament: Background, Growth, Content*, 317; bibliography part 2

⁴ Arthur Patzia, *Making of the New Testament*, 184; bibliography part 1.

⁵ Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 91; bibliography part 4.

⁶ Dan Burstein, *Secrets of the Code*, 166, in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 121; bibliography part 4.

had emerged from the diverse Christian movements that competed in the 2nd-3rd centuries with the goal of solidifying his power and that of the emerging Roman Church.

1. Echoing *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, Brown asserted that our NT is a 4th 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.”⁷
2. Why? 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.
3. Thus, the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) was mandated by Constantine to revise previous views of Jesus and publicize the view that he was divine.⁸

C. In this scenario, previously written gospels had to be purposefully and officially discarded at Nicaea because they emphasized Jesus’s human traits and presented a vision of him that did not align with what had become the orthodox view to be preserved in the four gospels they were “elevating” to canonical status.⁹

IV. What’s At Stake?

A. If the canon is different, our understanding of the faith must change.

1. 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.”¹⁰
2. In response, Bock and Wallace wrote, “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?” Clearly the answer is “Yes.”¹¹

B. The church’s credibility in declaring what is genuinely part of the Christian faith; truth matters, but people must be persuaded and have it confirmed (John 8.32; Acts 17.1-4; Phil 1.7; etc.).

C. A corollary: we should prepare people in our churches to give an answer to this particular challenge (see 1 Pet 3.15).

1. It is telling that some proponents of the alternate views attribute the fact that church people don’t know the history of the canonical texts to the failure of church leaders

⁷ It is important to note that, contrary to Brown’s assertion, the gnostic gospels do not humanize Jesus, but dehumanize him. In the canonical gospels, Jesus is a real person living in human history. In the gnostic gospels, Jesus is detached from history; they often depict him as presenting a disembodied teaching (e.g, *Gospel of Thomas*, a collection of Jesus sayings). He is unconnected to the real world and its concerns.

⁸ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, paperback ed. (Anchor Books, 2003), 254-255. See the claims of Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln’s *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Dell Doubleday, 1982, 1983), 368-369, cited in Darrell L. Bock & Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 36; bibliography part 4. For similar claims, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (HarperOne, 2005), 72-73, 152-155.

⁹ Brown, 254.

¹⁰ Elaine Pagels, “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.

¹¹ Bock and Wallace, 81.

to teach about the history of canon development—either from neglect or as an intentional effort to hide the truth.¹²

V. Definition and the First Canons.

- A. “Canon” transliterates the Greek κανών (*kanōn*), originally a Semitic term that referred to a “reed [or] straight rod,” then to a “measuring rule” (see Gal 6.16).¹³
- B. The original and ultimate canon was Christ.
1. The early church considered Jesus to be the authority, in effect, the original canon. See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.33; 4.1.¹⁴
 2. He delegated authority to bind and loose to the apostles—we might call them the second canon—who communicated it in their teaching, first orally, then in writing (see Matt 16.19; 18.18; John 14.26; 16.12-15; Gal 1.11-12; 1 Cor 2.12-13; Eph 3.3-5).
 3. Notice Luke 1.1-2; Hebrews 2.3b-4 (“through the Lord”—NASB).
- C. Why was the move made from oral to written?
1. The witnesses who had personally experienced the events and heard the teaching (cf. 1 John 1.1-3) were dying.
 2. Their writings preserved the teaching, which even in the apostolic age were beginning to be shared (cf. 1 Thess 5.27; Col 4.16).
 3. But, which of the many writings that began to appear, several of which were written in the name of the witnesses,¹⁵ were to be accepted as authoritative?
 - a) That question was especially important since the different writings did not always share the same teaching or exhibit the same quality.
 - b) It was important to determine:
 - (1) Who the true or false teachers were.
 - (2) Which books could be compromised if necessary in the face of persecution.
- D. We will survey the evidence related to the choices made in response to these questions in part 2. For now, we can affirm, with 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.”¹⁶

¹² See Brown, 253-254, and Ehrman, whose assessment is derived from the subtitle and statements in his book, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (HarperOne 2009), 189; cited in Patzia, 190.

¹³ Frederick W. Danker, with Kathryn Krug, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 187.

¹⁴ See Holladay, 843-844.

¹⁵ Often, such attribution was done to honor or respect the person whose name was used.

¹⁶ Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 287; bibliography part 3.