

Canon, Apocrypha, and The Da Vinci Code

The canon of the New Testament is under attack. According to some scholars whose books dot the shelves of Borders and Barnes and Noble stores, there are writings that represent “lost Christianities” and should be considered of equal authority to the 27 traditional books.

Then

The word canon comes from the Greek *kanon*, which literally means a (measuring) rule or a standard. In reference to the Bible, the canon is an authoritative list of the books accepted as Holy Scripture. The New Testament church did not concern itself with a canon—it was, after all, in the process of being developed. Certainly, however, many recognized that some of the documents circulating in the first century churches were inspired by God and therefore considered Scripture. Peter, for example, saw Paul’s letters as Scripture: *“Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things [new heavens and a new earth], be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.”* [2 Peter 3:14-16]

To a degree, acceptance of the canon of the New Testament is a matter of faith—confidence that God is capable of inspiring men to collect the right books. In the best-selling novel, The Da Vinci Code, one of the characters charges that “The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Emperor Constantine the Great.” According to this prevarication, Constantine commissioned a panel to decide what was and was not to be included in the Bible then instituted a campaign to destroy rejected writings.

This suggestion, like The Da Vinci Code, is pure fiction. The canon of the New Testament pre-dates Constantine by many years, and there was no campaign to wipe out competing books. Gnostic texts were condemned by orthodox Christian leaders, but it would have been impossible to destroy their texts. They disappeared for hundreds of years because their theology was thoroughly debunked, not because of some orthodox book-burning.

The canon of the New Testament was determined by God and recognized by the early church. To believe otherwise is to believe in an ineffectual God unable to get His own message across! From the beginning, the church was largely able to sort out fact and fiction, relying primarily upon apostolic standards. Widely accepted writings were either written by apostles or by those directly connected to the apostles. Among the Gospels, for example, two (John and Matthew) were written by Apostles, and two (Mark and Luke) were written by close associates of Apostles Peter and Paul, respectively.

One test of apostlicity became citations by early church fathers, just one generation removed from the Apostles. Quotations by such early second century leaders as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Papias supported the authority of a work.

Even quotations by Gnostic leaders, often used inappropriately, served to validate a document. The first extant list of accepted books dates from about 200 A.D. In the Ambrosian Library in Milan, L.A. Muratori discovered a catalogue of New Testament writings within an 8th century manuscript. This document, known as the Muratorian Canon or Fragment, is so important I quote it in its entirety:

The Muratorian Fragment	Commentary
<p>...at which however he was present and so he has set it down.</p>	<p>The beginning of the list is lost, but it is readily reconstructed since the church historian Eusebius testifies that Mark wrote his Gospel under the authority of Peter.</p>
<p>The third Gospel book, that according to Luke. This physician Luke after Christ's ascension (resurrection?), since Paul had taken him with him as an expert in the way (of the teaching), composed it in his own name according to (his) thinking. Yet neither did he himself see the Lord in the flesh; and therefore, as he was able to ascertain it, so he begins to tell the story from the birth of John.</p>	<p>Since Luke is listed as the third Gospel, it is reasonable to assume that Matthew and Mark were the first two on the list.</p>
<p>The fourth of the Gospels, that of John, (one) of the disciples. When his fellow-disciples and bishops urged him, he said: Fast with me from today for three days, and what will be revealed to each one let us relate to one another. In the same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that, whilst all were to go over (it), John in his own name should write everything down. And therefore, though various rudiments (or: tendencies?) are taught in the several Gospel books, yet that matters nothing for the faith of believers, since by the one and guiding (original?) Spirit everything is declared in all: concerning the birth, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection, concerning the intercourse with his disciples and concerning his two comings, the first despised in lowliness, which has come to pass, the second glorious in kingly power, which is yet to come. What wonder then if John, being thus always true to himself, adduces particular points in his epistles also, where he says of himself: What we have seen with our eyes and have heard with our ears and our hands have handled, that have we written to you. For so he confesses (himself) not merely an eye and ear witness, but also a writer of all the marvels of the Lord in order.</p>	
<p>But the acts of all apostles are written in one book. For the 'most excellent Theophilus' Luke summarizes the several things that in his own presence have come to pass, as also by the omission of the passion of Peter he makes quite clear, and equally by (the omission) of the journey of Paul, who from the city (of Rome) proceeded to Spain.</p>	<p>Some scholars have claimed that Acts was written near the end of the first century, but this description testifies to authorship prior to AD62</p>
<p>The epistles, however, of Paul themselves make clear to those who wish to know it which there are (i.e. from</p>	

Paul), from what place and for what cause they were written. First of all to the Corinthians (to whom) he forbids the heresy of schism, then to the Galatians (to whom he forbids) circumcision, and then to the Romans, (to whom) he explains that Christ is the rule of the scriptures and moreover their principle, he has written at considerable length.	
We must deal with these severally, since the blessed apostle Paul himself, following the rule of his predecessor John, writes by name only to seven churches in the following order: to the Corinthians the first (epistle), to the Ephesians the second, to the Philippians the third, to the Colossians the fourth, to the Galatians the fifth, to the Thessalonians the sixth, to the Romans the seventh. Although he wrote to the Corinthians and to the Thessalonians once more for their reproof, it is yet clearly recognizable that over the whole earth one church is spread. For John also in the Revelation writes indeed to seven churches, yet speaks to all. But to Philemon one, and to Titus one, and to Timothy two, (written) out of goodwill and love, are yet held sacred to the glory of the catholic Church for the ordering of ecclesiastical discipline.	All of Paul's ecclesiastical letters are listed, as well as the pastorals, which some modern scholars claim are not of Pauline authorship.
There is current also (an epistle) to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, forged in Paul's name for the sect of Marcion, and several others, which cannot be received in the catholic Church; for it will not do to mix gall with honey.	The author here testifies to forged Pauline letters.
Further an epistle of Jude	Despite its presence on this list, Jude is one of the more disputed books of the New Testament
and two with the title (or: two of the above mentioned) John are accepted in the catholic Church,	3 John was disputed for many years, probably about apostolic authorship
and the Wisdom written by friends of Solomon in his honour.	The Book of Wisdom is now part of the Old Testament Apocrypha
Also of the revelations we accept only those of John	This is the Revelation of the New Testament canon
and Peter, which (latter) some of our people do not want to have read in the Church.	The Revelation of Peter is now generally considered a much later document. It is full of ghastly images of hell.
But Hermas wrote the Shepherd quite lately in our time in the city of Rome, when on the throne of the church of the city of Rome the bishop Pius, his brother, was seated. And therefore it ought indeed to be read, but it cannot be read publicly in the Church to the other people either among the prophets, whose number is settled, or among the apostles to the end of time..	The Shepherd of Hermas is now part of the collection known as The Apostolic Fathers.
But we accept nothing whatever from Arsinous or	The list resoundingly

Valentinus and Miltiades(?), who have also composed a new psalm book for Marcion, together with Basilides of Asia Minor, the founder of the Cataphrygians	rejects Gnostic scriptures.
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On this list, the only missing canonical books are Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John, and the only included non-canonical books are Wisdom and the Revelation of Peter. This testifies to a very early development of church recognition of inspired books—more than 100 years before Constantine.

In about AD 180, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote a lengthy description of Gnostic and other unorthodox doctrines. *Against Heresies* quotes from every New Testament book except Philemon, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude. In addition to the New Testament books, Irenaeus considered 1 Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas valuable books (both are included in *The Apostolic Fathers*).

Tertullian of Carthage was another influential Christian writer of the late second and early third century (until he left the orthodox church for the Montanists). In his writings, Tertullian includes quotes from every canonical book except James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John. He too considers the Shepherd of Hermas valuable.

Origen was probably the most influential Christian writer of the mid-third century. His works included several commentaries and homilies (discourses) and quote from every New Testament book. He did, however, express reservations about James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. In addition, he considered the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Acts of Paul, 1 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabus, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas to be divinely inspired. Divine inspiration does not necessarily imply canonicity—we can probably all cite modern books we would consider inspired (C.S. Lewis' Mere Christianity and Oswald Chambers My Utmost for His Highest come to mind).

Taken together these testimonies by leaders across the Christian world (France, Rome, Asia, Egypt) display remarkable consistency. Only 2 Peter and 3 John are unanimously disputed.

In Constantine's day, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, wrote a history of the church from Christ to Constantine, the latest edition dated to 324. In it, he denotes four categories of Christian writing and assigns the works known to him to one of these:

Accepted: 4 Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John); 14 letters of Paul (he attributes Hebrews to Paul); 1 John; 1 Peter; the Revelation of John

Disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John

Spurious: Acts of Paul, The Shepherd, Revelation of Peter, Epistle of Barnabus, Didache, Gospel of Hebrews

Heretical: Gospels of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Matthias, Acts of Andrew, Acts of ohn

The suggestion that Constantine determined the canon of the New Testament is simply wrong. Constantine own historian, Eusebius, still lists canonical books as disputed or spurious. The oldest known list which matches the New Testament comes from Athanasius of Alexandria and dates to 367. In his 39th Festal Letter, he states: *"Continuing, I must without hesitation mention the scriptures of the New Testament; they are the following: the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after them the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so-called catholic epistles of the apostles -- namely, one of James, two of Peter, then three of John and after these*

one of Jude. In addition there are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians and then after these the one to the Galatians, following it the one to the Ephesians, thereafter the one to the Philippians and the one to the Colossians and two to the Thessalonians and the epistle to the Hebrews and then immediately two to Timothy , one to Titus and lastly the one to Philemon. Yet further the Revelation of John."

The Vulgate, Jerome's translation of the Scriptures into Latin and the official Catholic Bible for centuries to follow, includes the 27 present New Testament books. It is curious that the Epistle to the Laodiceans, though never recognized by earlier leaders, somehow found its way into at least 100 copies of the Vulgate. It was never declared authoritative by the Catholic Church.

In summary, the canon of the New Testament was not determined by some arbitrary process by a group of church experts. The canon developed over a 300 year period during which the ekklesia came to recognize those writings that were inspired and edifying. The unwritten standard that was most important became a writings consistency with apostolic tradition. In this way, **the New Testament canon was determined by God and recognized by the church.**

Now

Some years ago, my wife encountered a Catholic priest while visiting a shrine in the foothills of the Colorado Rockies. As part of that conversation, he suggested to her that Protestants didn't even have the complete Bible, that they had thrown several books out. That priest was referring to the Apocrypha, which consists of seven books (Tobit Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, I and II Machabees) as well as additions to Esther and Daniel. Are these in fact books that were discarded during the Reformation?

Absolutely not! The truth is that these books were added to the Catholic Bible on April 8, 1546 at the Council of Trent. Prior to then, the Catholic Church had considered not considered these books canonical, which is not surprising since Jerome, translator of the Vulgate, which is the historical basis of the Catholic Bible, adamantly denied the authority of the Apocryphal books.

So tampering with the canon of the Bible is not without precedence. But the kind of assault that is beginning to build is categorically different from including the Apocrypha in the Old Testament. I have mentioned The Jesus Seminar in other issues of Ekklesia Then & Now. These are (mostly) men seemingly bent on tearing down the foundations of orthodox Christianity in order to build a church based on second century Gnosticism and eastern mysticism.

Overlaying such ancient names such as Valentinus, Basilides, Marcion, Cerinthus, Montanus, Paul of Samosata, Sabellius, Noetus, and Praxeaus are the modern heretics: Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, Marcus Borg, and Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar, renegade Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong, and liberal theologians Elaine Pagels and Bart D. Ehrman.

They litter the Christian shelves of the major book chains with seductive titles such as Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, Jesus: A New Vision, and The God We Never Know: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith (Borg); Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography. Who Killed Jesus?: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus (Crossan); A Credible Jesus

and Honest to Jesus (Funk); Profiles of Jesus (Hoover); Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas (Pagels); Why Christianity Must Change or Die and Liberating the Gospels (Spong); and Lost Christianities (Ehrman).

Peter had appropriately strong words for such false teachers: "*These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.*" [2 Peter 2:17-19]

The powerful phrase, "springs without water" is a perfect image for the Jesus Seminar and its confederates, for their books draw in the unsuspecting, hoping for meaning and purpose, only to encounter the discouragement of a dry well.

A major irony lies in the practices of the Jesus Seminar. Ultimately, they, like The Da Vinci Code character accuse orthodox Christianity of a massive elitist conspiracy to destroy competing ideas. For example, the description of Ehrman's Lost Christianities suggests that there were many equally-valid ideas about Christ that eventually met "suppression by a powerful 'proto-orthodox' faction." There is no doubt that there are many who have become disillusioned by the legalism and hypocrisy of organized religion, but the 21st century false teachers would lead these people not to the authentic Christ and His *ekklesia*, but to the secret nonsense of second century Gnostics.

The Jesus Seminar has published a number of books, including:

- *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993)
- *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (1998)
- *The Gospel of Jesus: According to the Jesus Seminar* (1999)
- *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (1998)

In *The Five Gospels*, the "fellows" of the Jesus Seminar (dominated by liberal academic theologians) determined who Jesus really said through a voting system. For each gospel saying of Jesus, each fellow dropped one of four colored beads into a box: red for "Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it," pink for "Jesus probably said something like this," gray for "Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own," or black for "Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition."

They then assigned numeric values to each colored bead and mathematically concluded what Jesus really said. Finally, they produced a new translation of the Gospels (*The Scholars Version*) and published it with each saying of Jesus color-coded according to their own conclusions. Oh, and by the way, they added the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* on equal footing with the four canonical Gospels.

Care to guess which Gospel had the most red (That's Jesus) sayings and which had the most black (There must be some mistake) sayings? The Jesus Seminar conclusion: Thomas has the most reliable sayings, and John the least. But given the fact that the seminar started with the premise that the supernatural does not exist, that's hardly surprising.

Consider the Jesus Seminar's methods: a group of elitist academics votes secretly to pass judgment on the Gospels. What would they say if it were discovered that the New Testament canon was determined that way? It's a classic technique: accuse your opponents of exactly what you're doing. As I demonstrated in the Now portion

of this issue, the genuine New Testament canon was recognized by the consensus of hundreds of years of church practice, not by some elitist committee.

Those of us who believe passionately in the reliability of the Bible based on our confidence in a God who is capable of delivering His message must hold tenaciously to the truth and be prepared to express it in the face of this neo-gnostic assault. The [Time](#) article I referred to in the [Re-Inventing Jesus](#) issue of ET&N also reported that church groups are actually reading and discussing books like Ehrman's [Lost Christianities](#) and Pagel's [Beyond Belief](#). That would be fine if these were classes to armor Christians with a defense, but that's often not the case. People are accepting these ideas with enthusiasm—"Finally, a Jesus I can believe in," one participant said about a non-divine version.

And in 2005, the onslaught may well be particularly acute because Ron Howard is producing the film version of [The Da Vinci Code](#) and the conspiratorial, goddess-oriented, profane premise of that popular book will become part of popular culture, just as Oliver Stone's paranoid revisionist historical fictions have. We need to be prepared, not just because [The Da Vinci Code](#) and the Jesus Seminar material threatens genuine Christianity, but also because it represents a major opportunity. With the release of [The Da Vinci Code](#) movie will come a perhaps-unprecedented interest in Jesus. Ron Brown and Ron Howard (what would Andy say?) will present a lie. We can present the truth.

Discussion

Note: if you learn something from reading *Ekklesia Now & Then*, please send it along to a friend!

I received a lot of mail about the last issue (Canon, Aprocrypha, and [The Da Vinci Code](#)). Here's a sample:

From Eric in Delaware: *Great article! These won't be comfortable concepts to swallow for many that wish to see American return to it's "Christian" roots, but your points are good ones and point out to us that our charter in the restoration movement is to restore first century Christianity, not nineteenth century Christianity.*

From Ted in Georgia: *Thanks Dick, for speaking out as a modern day prophet regarding the Satanic views becoming popular within some "Christian" circles.*

From Sam (unknown): *Your commentary is remarkable. I am impressed by your scholarly research of the historical facts. It is unfortunate that so many people will embrace the Gnostic teachings because they don't have the faith that God truly has delivered his message. The nature of man is always searching for more and never being satisfied with the measure that God has given. I would agree that books like [The Da Vinci Code](#), [the Five Gospel's](#), [Reinventing Jesus](#) and the others that you mentioned should be read and studied so that we can prepare our defense against the onslaught of these false teachings. We can't be effective in bringing people to Jesus Christ unless we show our love for them and have a willingness to study with them and to answer their questions.*

From Bill in Mississippi: *Great summary of the canon and the current rise in interest of spurious "biblical" texts. This problem and interest in such texts has been going on at least since the 1970's, when I first ran into Elaine Pagel's, "The Gnostic Gospels." I have*

read Dan Brown's, "The DaVinci Code," (as well as his 'prequel' titled, "Angels and Demons.") Both are based on supposed secret societies, underground conspiracies as well as conspiracies fostered by the Catholic Church. The defense of such books, of course, is that it's a fictional novel. But, the problem is that it suggests that the fictional story is based on historical facts. It's a great literary technique, but for people who do not have a solid grounding in actual history, or the Bible itself, and whose faith may be open to whatever "wind of doctrine" that happens to show up at their doorstep, such books will always serve to open the door to things that are simply false and damaging. Thanks for a very useful issue!

From DeWayne in Colorado: How timely. I am about 2/3 of of the way thru The Da Vinci Code and the skeptic I am caused me to be suspect of several of the "facts" the author uses to support his case. The "novel" is interesting, but it is a novel much like Robert Ludlum's in which liberty is taken by the author to add suspense. If I do not accept this as fact with Ludlum, why would one do such with Brown? People like to make issues of things that attack Christianity!!!

From Daryl in Texas: I started a series of lessons on Jesus yesterday (to conclude on Resurrection Sunday). I began with The Da Vinci Code (I actually read it Monday and Tuesday—that was just to introduce a lesson on the deity of Jesus!—am I crazy or what?). Of course I was not amused at the horrible inaccuracies—especially when he got into preaching about ancient Christianity and Judaism—he actually claimed that YHWH came from Jehovah (which he claims is a combination of the masculine Jah and the "pre-hebraic" name of Eve, Chava—gee, and I always thought Jehovah was a 15th century misreading of the Hebrew YHWH with vowel markings for adonai—silly me!). I nearly dropped my teeth! (and I don't have dentures!). To spout such nonsense as something based on historical fact is almost impossible to conceive for me! He levels the charge of rewriting history upon Constantine when he is obviously the guilty party! (Not only rewriting history but also rewriting basic Hebrew!).

I did some research into the "Priory of Sion." The so-called Les Dossiers Secretes were proved to be forgeries created by Pierre Plantard—a radical right-wing Frenchman who claims ties to the Merovingian dynasty. Leonardo Da Vinci, Victor Hugo, Botticelli, et al never were members of such an organization. That was all Plantard's fabrication. The Catholic order of the Priory of Sion was not in any way related to the Templars nor Plantard's secret organization and it was disbanded centuries ago.

Thanks for the recent issues. While my church seemed out of touch with the NY Times best seller (only about three or four had even read the book or knew of friends who had read it—I told them they need to get out more!)—it is obviously making an impact in our society and people need to be aware of its pseudo-history which resembles Masonic mythology more than actual history!

And, finally, this kind note from Iris in Alabama, which I use to shamelessly promote my novel, Peculiar People: *I just finished your recent book Peculiar People, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I have also read Francine Rivers' Trilogy on the early church and the Roman Empire. Now I am studying Rubel Shelley's Revelation with my Ladies Class. Your book fit in well with this background. I'm so thankful that books are available with such historical content. Thank you for your timely comments on the church then and now. I am interested in knowing all that I can about the early church, its worship, and what Christ wants for me today. I'm convinced that love and a pure heart is what He desires most.*

Amen, sister!

For more information about *Peculiar People*, go to www.dicksoule.com



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Water Baptism (February 3)

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