

# Do we have the right books

*Who decided which books should be in the New Testament?*

By Mike Morrison

In Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, one of the main characters says that the Roman Emperor Constantine decided which books should be in the New Testament. He supposedly "commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned" (p. 234).



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*The Da Vinci Code*, despite its claim to be based on fact, is actually fiction—and so is the above claim. It's not hard to find historical blunders in the book. Let's look at one—the question of canonization, or the way in which the New Testament books were collected into one book.

A “cannon” is an old-fashioned weapon; a “canon” (notice the difference in spelling) is a list of authori-

tative books. “Canon” comes from the Greek word *kanon*, meaning measuring stick. A rough definition of canon is “the list of books that can be used in church to teach doctrine.” There were many books and letters written in the early years of the church. So why do we have *these particular books in our present New Testament canon or Bible?*

## A process

Historically, canonization can be seen as a process. It was not achieved by people meeting together to determine which books would be authoritative. The process occurred at different times in different places. No doubt, at first, the apostles and teachers in the early church told stories about Jesus, what he did, what he said, and what his death meant for us. In time, those stories were standardized and written down.

The canonization process, though there was nothing official here in the sense of an approved list, probably began in the first century. For example, some people may have viewed the Gospel of Mark as an authoritative record of the life of Jesus even before the book of Revelation was written. Or they were reading Galatians in church before Romans was written.

As traveling Christians visited different areas, they discovered more writings and said, “That's a good book—can I make a copy?” (Remember, there was no instant and complete communication as there is today and no printing press.) The books that were most useful were copied by hand the most often. “Writings that proved, over time, to be most useful in sustaining, informing, and guiding the church in its worship, preaching, and teaching came to be the most highly valued, and gained a special authority in virtue of their usefulness” (H. Gamble, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 857).

Gradually, various books were accepted as Scripture, and only later did the church begin to draw boundary lines as to which books could be called Scripture and which were part of a collection of authoritative and helpful writings (that is, a canon).

Polycarp, who lived early in the second century, often quoted from the New Testament, but in most

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cases he introduced the quotes with comments like “Jesus said,” “Paul writes,” etc. To Polycarp the words of Jesus had authority *as the words of Jesus*, not because they were recorded in an approved book.

Irenaeus, around the year 180, quoted the New Testament more than 1,000 times. He clearly believed that the books from which he quoted were authoritative for Christian teaching—and Irenaeus was “quoting Scripture” more than a century before Constantine. However, Irenaeus also called other books Scripture, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

Clement of Alexandria, around the year 200, has over 3,000 quotes from the New Testament, but he doesn’t quote several of the non-Pauline, or general epistles; they were apparently not in his canon. Tertullian, who lived in North Africa about the same time, quoted from all New Testament books except 2 Peter, James, and 2-3 John. Similarly, Hippolytus of Rome did not quote from James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude. Cyprian of Carthage (mid third century) quoted almost 900 New Testament verses, but he had nothing from Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, or Jude.

In these writings, well before Constantine, everyone accepted Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and the letters of Paul, but there were some uncertainties about the general epistles.

## Different sections at different times

The four Gospels were accepted early on, although some people were a little troubled that there were four different-but-authoritative versions of the ministry of Jesus. In Syria, Tatian merged all four Gospels together in his Diatesseron, but in the Western Empire, the Gospels were accepted as a group of four. Irenaeus even argued that four is the divinely sanctioned number.

The writings of Paul were accepted early on as definitive for Christian belief and practice. Although there was a little disagreement about which books he actually wrote, it was agreed that those he wrote were authoritative. Acts was also widely accepted, probably because it was written by Luke, the author of an accepted Gospel.

There was widespread agreement about the vast majority (20 out of 27 books) of the New Testament. The disagreements were about a few smaller books—the tail end of the Bible. Specifically, there were some reservations about Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, and this lasted for centuries.

Eusebius recognized only one authentic epistle of Peter, and 2 Peter was rarely used. Second and Third John were little used until the fourth century, and were not in the lists of Origen and Eusebius. The epistle of Jude also had a mixed reception, perhaps because Jude quotes *1 Enoch*, which was rarely considered authoritative.

There were a few additional books that were occasionally counted as authoritative: 3 Corinthians, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the first letter of Clement of Rome, the letters of Ignatius, Barnabas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas. Some of these are now in the collection called the apostolic fathers; others are deemed heretical. Some of these were widely recommended, and the extreme boundaries of the canon were somewhat blurred for many years. Even as late as the sixth century, Codex Claromontanus does not include Hebrews, but it does include Barnabas, Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Peter.

## Criteria

In general, early church leaders looked at three criteria: 1) antiquity and apostolicity—whether a book had been written by an apostle or someone associated with the apostles, such as Mark or Luke, 2) orthodoxy—was the writing in agreement with traditional doctrines accepted from the beginning of the church, and 3) consensus—whether many churches in diverse locations were using the book. Although there was no formula for applying these criteria to various books, these are the kind of norms or principles mentioned when a church leader comments on whether a particular book is to be accepted or rejected.

Often, no reason was given at all for a book to be considered authoritative in a canonical sense—it was simply said that we accept this book, but not this other one. Some books were widely accepted because many people had found them useful from the time they were written; other books were not. The church fathers said little about the determining factors, because the canon developed gradually, rather than being based on one person’s authority.

Surprisingly, “inspiration” was not a factor at all, since that was a much broader and rather indefinite category. Even sermons were considered “inspired”; the fact that a document was inspired was not proof that it was also canonical. Everything in the canon was considered inspired, but not everything considered inspired was in the canon.

## Attempts to list the canonical books

The earliest undisputed list of books comes from Eusebius, in the 320s. “Even though he reported that some lists preceded his, including lists supposedly from Clement of Alexandria and Origen...these lists were more likely inventions of Eusebius which he constructed from his own tabulation of the references to the New Testament

Scriptures that Clement and Origen cited” (Lee McDonald, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, p. 135).

Eusebius noted that the following books were disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Didache, and possibly Revelation. Eusebius wrote at the time of Constantine, and he gives not even a hint that Constantine had any opinions about which books ought to be accepted. If Constantine did try to settle the question, he was quite unsuccessful. No authoritative list comes from him.

The Cheltenham canon (probably mid-fourth century)



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omitted James, Jude, and Hebrews. Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century) includes all the modern canon plus Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas. The Council of Laodicea (363) omitted some of the general epistles and Revelation. Athanasius of Alexandria gave a list identical to our modern canon in the year 367, but not everyone followed his list.

Canon lists were part of the council of Rome (382), the synod of Hippo (393) and two councils at Carthage (397, 419), but none of these councils represented the church at large. The Trullan synod held in Constantinople in 691-2 ratified the lists of several previous councils, even though they contradicted one another. Carthage had accepted all the general epistles and Revelation, whereas Laodicea had rejected some of them.

Rome did not officially rule on the canon until the Council of Florence (1439-43). The council of Trent

(1546) made the current list of New Testament books an article of faith, but only by a minority vote—24 in favor, 15 against, and 16 abstentions. But the Greek Orthodox Church certainly did not get its canon from Roman authority.

None of the councils *made* a book canonical—the council could merely affirm that a book had already been used from the earliest history of the church and that it could continue, in fact, to be so used.

Some of the Reformers questioned the canon, and “Luther’s lower estimate of four books of the New Testament is disclosed in the Table of Contents, where the first twenty-three books from Matthew to 3 John are each assigned a number, whereas, after a blank space, the column of titles, without numbers, continues with Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation” (Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 242).

### No more and ‘No. More’

What prompted the leaders to draw up a list of books considered to be authoritative for faith? Two factors may have played important roles: 1) heretics such as Marcion had their own list of books, and 2) fourth-century persecutors wanted to burn the Christians’ sacred writings while the Christians wanted to hide them. But exactly which books were they to hide?

Marcion had created his own abridged list of books from those accepted by the general church as being authoritative. In effect, he chose his favorites from an already-existing list of Gospels and epistles. The church

responded to Marcion’s abbreviated canon with, No—*more* than that. But to the Gnostics and Montanists, who wanted to add new books, the church responded with, *No more* than this! The fact

that Marcion felt compelled to create a truncated list or canon speaks to the fact that certain books were already considered authoritative for the church even at this early date—long before Constantine.

When Constantine accepted Christianity, he ordered 50 high-quality copies of the Scriptures to be distributed to ensure teaching uniformity throughout his empire. But he apparently had nothing to say about which books were in those copies. Even well after Constantine, Amphilo-chius of Iconium (in Asia Minor) rejected 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation. If Constantine tried to fix the canon, he failed.

John Chrysostom (c. 400) had 11,000 quotes from the New Testament, but none from 2 Peter, 2 or 3 John, Jude or Revelation. Although he may have seen a list saying that those books were canonical, the list could not make

him use them!

In the West, things were more stable, since there was a central authority telling everyone to accept the Vulgate translation, which contains all the New Testament books accepted today. Even so, more than 100 (out of 8000) manuscripts of the Vulgate include the spurious epistle to the Laodiceans.

## Authority today

Is the canon a list of authoritative books, or an authoritative list of books? Does the authority of each book come from itself, or from the fact that it is included in a list? Is the canon independent of church authority, or dependent on church authority? Probably the best answer is a little of both.

Many of the books were recognized as intrinsically authoritative; the early church leaders recognized that the books were authoritative even before anyone voted on anything. They were merely ratifying what was already customary. That was the case with the Gospels, Acts, and the epistles of Paul—the vast majority of the New Testament. On the other hand, some of the disputed books eventually gained widespread acceptance not so much on

their own, but because they were included in a list by various church leaders and councils.

The canon was determined by long-standing Christian tradition—a tradition that had been shaped by those very books. Practically speaking, we cannot add any more books, nor take any away from our New Testament canon; the vast majority of the church would resist any such changes. We basically have to trust that God has guided his people in such a way that what we have presents a

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faithful witness to the gospel and is an accurate record of God’s revelation to humanity.

As you can see, *The Da Vinci Code* has little connection with the facts of history. Constantine had nothing to do with choosing which books would be in our Bibles. For the vast majority of the New Testament, the churches had already made the decision (based on an existing long-time tradition of use) more than a century before Constantine. And for the areas of uncertainty, Constantine did not settle anything one way or another. ●