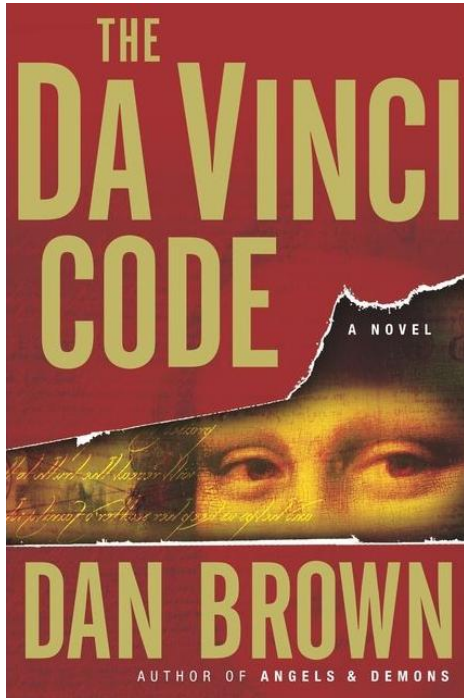


NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Part 1



In 2003, Dan Brown published his now-infamous novel *The Da Vinci Code*. He began with a page labeled “Fact,” claiming that certain secret documents were discovered in 1975 from the Priory of Sion (founded in AD 1099). At the bottom of the page is the statement: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”

While ostensibly fiction, the characters in his novel offered an entire range of historical claims that have since been taken by a good many people to be factual, including that there were “more than 80 gospels considered for the New Testament” (actually there were about 37 texts, not all of them gospels, and none that ever made the final cut), that Emperor Constantine was the moving power behind the reduction of the number of gospels to four (patently false by all accounts; Constantine had nothing whatsoever to do with formation of the New Testament canon), that the Nicene Council under Constantine’s direction decided that

Jesus was God by a “close vote” (the vote was 305 to 2—not especially close), and that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene as documented by thousands of early documents (actually, only two, both Gnostic writings).

So, what actually did happen, and how is it that Christians affirm a New Testament of 27 books, no more and no less?

THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

The documents of the New Testament were written during the first century of the Christian church. Jesus left no extensive blueprints for the community of faith he had begun; rather, he left the disciples with his teachings and the memories of his life, death, and resurrection, and he promised that the Holy Spirit would lead them into the truth, recalling everything he said to them (Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). He did not command his disciples to write documents, and it was not until approximately two decades after his ascension that they formally began this writing process, first in the form of letters to

Dating New Testament Books

While the dating of some New Testament books is still debated, even the widest variation involves less than a hundred years. It is rare for any scholar to date a New Testament document earlier than the mid-1st century, though there may have been preliminary accounts of Jesus’ life which were later incorporated into the gospel narratives (cf. Lk. 1:1-4). The most liberal dating for the latest New Testament documents does not usually extend beyond the first quarter of the 2nd century. Most classical Christian scholars place the earliest New Testament documents at about the late 40s (either Galatians, 1 Thessalonians and/or James) and the latest at about the mid-90s (Revelation).

Christian communities, and later, the accounts of Jesus' life which we call "Gospels." To be sure, the followers of Jesus were not without Holy Scripture. Their Bible was the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), and they quoted it and alluded to it, largely from the LXX version (Greek). However, certain factors were eventually decisive in stimulating these early Christian leaders to write texts and the early Christian communities to collect and preserve their writings. These documents would eventually become what we know as the New Testament.

Why the New Testament Was Written

There is no formal statement as to why the New Testament, at least as a body of literature, was written, though there are some brief indications from individual books. **Luke**, for instance, wrote to give an orderly account of the life of Jesus and to reaffirm his story (Lk. 1:3-4). **John** wrote to instill and to reaffirm faith in Jesus (Jn. 20:30-31). **Paul** wrote to remind his listeners of the Gentile mission (Ro. 15:15-16; Ep. 3:3), and **others** wrote to give exhortation (He. 13:22), to encourage Christians who were under attack (1 Pe. 5:12), and to stimulate wholesome Christian behavior (2 Pe. 3:1). In all this, there is no indication that any New Testament writer envisioned the eventual production of a New Testament on the order of the Old Testament (indeed, the same would have been true for the writers of the Old Testament in their own times). The impetus to write anything at all must have arisen out of some rather common assumptions, and these can be identified with a fair degree of certainty. By the time Peter was composing his second letter, he could refer to the letters of Paul as wise texts to be received alongside "the other Scriptures" (2 Pe. 3:16).

In the first place, there were many theological questions which had to be addressed in the context of a Greco-Roman culture of "many gods and many lords" (1 Co. 8:6). The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth had been a brutal shock to his disciples. They had hoped he would be the Messiah, but they were not prepared for the uncertainty and fear that engulfed them when he was executed on a gibbet as a criminal against the state. His resurrection, of course, reoriented them toward the future and calmed their immediate fears, but a host of questions still remained to be answered. Why did Jesus die? What is resurrection, and what does it mean for the community of faith? How could Jesus be cursed of God (hung on a cross, cf. Dt. 21:23) and anointed of God (the Messiah) at the same time? Who really was/is Jesus? Is he God, and if so, how? How should the teachings of Jesus be used, and what is their relationship to the Old Testament? What is the relationship between the Jesus-Jews and the other Jewish sects? What about the Gentile converts? What forms of worship are appropriate to borrow from Judaism? Who are the leaders of the new community, and how should power be transferred if they should die? What constitutes a Christian? What is the relationship of Christians to the Roman government? All these questions and more cried out for resolution. The documents of the New Testament address just such questions as these. Of course, many of these questions were raised in local church settings, and the answers given have a very practical and immediate end. On the other hand, what was written to these ancient Christians was also written for us, their spiritual children, for the answers to these questions extend beyond merely any local setting in the 1st century.

Another stimulus toward writing and collecting was what is sometimes referred to as the "delay of the *Parousia*,"¹ that is, the fact that Jesus did not return as soon as he was expected. Jesus said he

¹ The Greek word *parousia* (= presence, coming) is the most widely used term in the New Testament to refer to the return of Christ.

would come back, and many early Christians expected Jesus to return in their own lifetimes. Some even believed that Jesus had promised John that he would live to see this event, though this belief was a misconception (Jn. 21:22-23). It is not unlikely that Jesus' statement, "Some standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mk. 9:1//Mt. 16:28/Lk. 9:27), was understood to mean that Jesus would return in the lifetimes of the apostles. The fact that Jesus described the interval between his ascension and his second advent in terms of a "little while" reinforced this belief (Jn. 14:2-3, 18, 28; 16:5, 16-18, 22). The ascension itself, while it was accompanied by a promise of Christ's return, provided no clear information about how lengthy the interval might be before he returned (Ac. 1:9-11). Jesus' own teaching simply ended with the injunction, "Watch" (Mk. 13:32-37). However, by the mid-1st century, Christian leaders began to die, and even more important, apostles also began to die (Ac. 12:2; 1 Co. 15:6). As the number of these 1st generation Christians and leaders began to deplete, it was only natural that the surviving community collected and held in high esteem their writings so as to maintain a strong link with those who had actually participated in the historical Christ events.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Christians considered the Old Testament to have ended on an unresolved note. The resolution -- the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises -- they believed came to fruition in Jesus (Lk. 24:44-47). We may assume that the apostles initially shared with their Jewish compatriots the popular Jewish belief that, with the last of the canonical writing prophets, the Holy Spirit's inspiration to write Scripture had been stilled.² Still, God had kept his promises concerning the Messiah, and the resurrected Jesus was now proclaimed as Lord and Christ.

Before the Canon

As Paul began writing letters to Christian congregations, he instructed them to exchange his letters with other congregations (Co. 4:16; 1 Th. 5:27). This immediately suggests that, though he was

An Early Christian Description

"On the day called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits..."

Justin Martyr (d. 166)
Apology 1.67
Mid-2nd Century

writing to specific people in specific situations, he considered his letters to be widely applicable. This copying and distribution of early Christian writings seems to have been generally practiced, and the public reading of such material became a constituent part of early Christian worship. The high level of trust in such

texts was surely that they were composed within the living memory of people who had seen and known Jesus personally. By the mid-2nd century, however, a later group of writers, called Gnostics (based on their claim of secret knowledge), also began to compose texts about Jesus. In them, they attempted to blend Christian thought with Greek concepts of metaphysical dualism. It is to the point, of course, that none of these later writings were produced during the period of living witnesses to the life of Jesus, and these more recent texts raised the all-important question, "Who gets to tell the

² It was traditionally believed among the Jews that when the last of the prophets died, the Holy Spirit (in terms of inspiring Holy Scripture) had become silent, cf. D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964). pp. 80-82; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971), pp. 80-82; E. Schweizer, *TDNT* (1968) Vi.332-455. See also 1 Mac. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41.

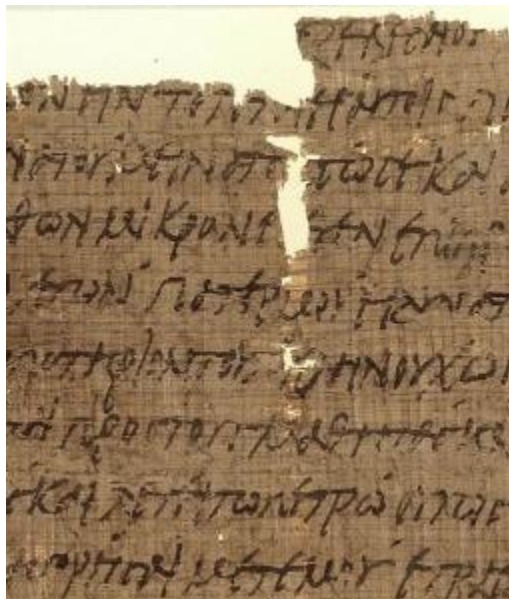
story of Jesus?" The consensus of the early church was that the story of Jesus must be told by those who knew him best, his apostles and disciples and those close to them in that first generation of Christians. Anything later would almost certainly have included alien notions, and nothing produced later would have the corroboration of those who had known Jesus personally. Hence, while as yet there was no formal canon, already there was a distinction between what was apostolic and what was sub-apostolic.

Early Canon Lists

By the late-2nd century, the early Christians began to produce lists of writings that were considered acceptable for public reading in the churches. The earliest of these, called the Muratorian Fragment (ca. 170-200), was written in Latin, though it seems to have been translated from Greek. The beginning of the text has been damaged (which is why it is a "fragment"), and it accepts four gospels. Though Matthew



Gnostic texts like the Apocryphon (above) sometimes contain sayings of Jesus that sound very much like the canonical gospels (and were probably borrowed from them). Other sayings are highly esoteric and strange, such as, Logion 37 in the so-called Gospel of Thomas: "His disciples said, 'When will you be revealed to us and when will we see you?' Jesus said, 'When you take off your clothing without being ashamed, and take your clothes and put them under your feet as the little children and tread on them, then [you shall behold] the Son of the Living One and you shall not fear.'"



Opening of the Muratorian Fragment

and Mark are missing in the damaged opening, Luke and John are listed as the 3rd and 4th Gospels. The list also includes the 13 letters of Paul, the Letter of Jude, the letters of John, and the Book of Revelation.

Also in the mid-2nd century, a certain Marcion in Rome decided that Christians should reject the Old Testament, since in his view the God of the Old Testament, a God of laws, could not be the God of Christ Jesus, a God of love. He also rejected any books in the New Testament that sounded too favorable toward the Old Testament. He created his own canon, which consisted of 10 letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. While Marcion was expelled as a heretic, in an indirect sense his radical claims forced the early church to wrestle with the task of deciding which Christian writings should belong to the canon.