

Is it True that Constantine Determined What Books Were Included in the Bible?

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[Sir Leigh Teabing]: “More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusions—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John among them.”

“Who chose which gospels to include?” Sophie asked.

“Aha!” Teabing burst in with enthusiasm. “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”—Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, p. 231.¹

Is it true that Constantine produced the Bible as we know it today?

We believe that even a quick glance at church history will show the fallacy of this statement. Consider first these statements from F. F. Bruce. Dr. Bruce (1910-1990) was Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester in England. He is the author of many books, among them *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, *A Mind for What Matters*. He also served as general editor of *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. He says:

The historic Christian belief is that the Holy Spirit, who controlled the writing of the individual books, also controlled their selection and collection, thus continuing to fulfil our Lord's promise that He would guide His disciples into all the truth. This, however, is something that is to be discerned by spiritual insight, and not by historical research. Our object is to find out what historical research reveals about the origin of the New Testament canon....

The first steps in the formation of a canon of authoritative Christian books, worthy to stand beside the Old Testament canon, which was the Bible of our Lord and His apostles, appear to have been taken about **the beginning of the second century**, when there is evidence for the circulation of two collections of Christian writings in the Church.

At a very early date it appears that the four Gospels were united in one collection. They must have been brought together very soon after the writing of the Gospel according to John. This fourfold collection was known originally as “The Gospel” in the singular, not “The Gospels” in the plural; there was only one Gospel, narrated in four records, distinguished as “according to Matthew”, “according to Mark”, and so on. About **AD 115** Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, refers to “The Gospel” as an authoritative writing, and as he knew more than one of the four “Gospels” it may well be that by “The Gospel” he means the fourfold collection which went by that name....

One thing must be emphatically stated. **The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired,** recognising their innate worth and general apostolic authority, direct or indirect. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa—at **Hippo Regius** in 393 and at **Carthage** in 397—but what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities. (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (5th ed, Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1959).)²

B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), also makes some important points in his “The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament” (Philadelphia, PA: American Sunday School Union, 1892):

What needs emphasis at present about these facts is that they obviously are not evidences of a gradually-heightening estimate of the New Testament books, originally received on a lower level and just beginning to be tentatively accounted Scripture; they are conclusive evidences rather of the estimation of the New Testament books from the very beginning as Scripture, and of their attachment as Scripture to the other Scriptures already in hand. **The early Christians did not, then, first form a rival “canon” of “new books” which came only gradually to be accounted as of equal divinity and authority with the “old books”; they received new book after new book from the apostolical circle, as equally “Scripture” with the old books, and added them one by one to the collection of old books as additional Scriptures,** until at length the new books thus added were numerous enough to be looked upon as another section of the Scriptures.

The earliest name given to this new section of Scripture was framed on the model of the name by which what we know as the Old Testament was then known. Just as it was called “The Law and the Prophets and the Psalms” (or “the Hagiographa”), or more briefly “The Law and the Prophets,” or even more briefly still “The Law”; so the enlarged Bible was

called “The Law and the Prophets, with the Gospels and the Apostles” (so Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* vi. 11, 88; Tertullian, *De Prms. Men* 36), or most briefly “The Law and the Gospel” (so Claudius Apolinaris, Irenaeus); while the new books apart were called “The Gospel and the Apostles,” or most briefly of all “The Gospel.” This earliest name for the new Bible, with all that it involves as to its relation to the old and briefer Bible, is traceable as far back as Ignatius (A.D. 115), who makes use of it repeatedly (e.g., *ad Philad.* 5; *ad Smyrn.* 7). In one passage he gives us a hint of the controversies which the enlarged Bible of the Christians aroused among the Judaizers (*ad Philad.* 6). “When I heard some saying,” he writes, “‘Unless I find it in the Old [Books] I will not believe the Gospel’ on my saying, ‘It is written.’ they answered, ‘That is the question.’ To me, however, Jesus Christ is the Old [Books]; his cross and death and resurrection and the faith which is by him, the undefiled Old [Books] — by which I wish, by your prayers, to be justified. The priests indeed are good, but the High Priest better,” etc. Here Ignatius appeals to the “Gospel” as Scripture, and the Judaizers object, receiving from him the answer in effect which Augustine afterward formulated in the well known saying that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is first made clear in the New. What we need now to observe, however, is that **to Ignatius the New Testament was not a different book from the Old Testament**, but part of the one body of Scripture with it; an accretion, so to speak, which had grown upon it.

This is the testimony of all the early witnesses—even those which speak for the distinctively Jewish-Christian church. ... Let it suffice to say that, **from the evidence of the fragments which alone have been preserved to us of the Christian writings of that very early time**, it appears that **from the beginning of the second century** (and that is from the end of the apostolic age) a collection... of “New Books”..., called the “Gospel and Apostles”..., was already a part of the “Oracles” of God..., or “Scriptures”..., or the “Holy Books” or “Bible”...³

Further, Warfield points out an important principle to be considered when determining canonicity for any book:

Let it, however, be clearly understood that it was not exactly apostolic authorship which in the estimation of the earliest churches, constituted a book a portion of the “canon.” ... **The principle of canonicity was not apostolic authorship, but imposition by the apostles as “law.”** Hence Tertullian’s name for the “canon” is “instrumentum”; and he speaks of the Old and New Instrument as we would of the Old and New Testament. That the apostles so imposed the Old Testament on the churches which they founded—as their “Instrument,” or “Law,” or “Canon”—can be denied by none. And in imposing new books on the same churches, by the same apostolical authority, they did not confine themselves to books of their own composition. It is the Gospel according to Luke, a man who

was not an apostle, which Paul parallels in I Tim. v. 18 with Deuteronomy as equally “Scripture” with it, in the first extant quotation of a New Testament book as Scripture. The Gospels which constituted the first division of the New Books,—of “The Gospel and the Apostles,”—Justin tells us were “written by the apostles and their companions.” The authority of the apostles, as by divine appointment founders of the church, was embodied in whatever books they imposed on the church as law, not merely in those they themselves had written.

The early churches, in short, received, as we receive, into the New Testament all the books historically evinced to them as given by the apostles to the churches as their code of law; and we must not mistake the historical evidences of the slow circulation and authentication of these books over the widely-extended church, evidence of slowness of the “canonization” of these books by the authority or taste of the church itself.⁴

In conclusion, we have seen that 1.) long before Constantine, the Church Fathers had compiled a list of books that were considered inspired; 2.) the reaction of the apostles to a book was an important factor in determining its canonicity; 3) comparison to the teachings of the Old Testament and Jesus Himself were important factors in determining inspiration and canonicity.

Not all books on the list were equally accepted by the Early Church. Some continued to be disputed for centuries. In that regard, Constantine may well have played a role in how quickly the church in the East accepted which books should be considered inspired, and therefore included in the canon,⁵ but that is as far as his influence went.

(In a companion article, Dr. Norman Geisler explains more about the process by which the canon was formed.)

Notes)

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 231.

² Online at: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/bruce1.html> Emphasis added.

³ Online at: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/warfield2.html> Emphasis added.

⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁵ “Canon of the New Testament,” International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, <http://www.studylight.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T1834>.