

# Why These Books?

## A Study of How We Got the New Testament



### Who Decided what books?

How many of you have ever heard about the conspiracy to hide

some writings so that the Bible would reflect what the rich people wanted? If you have ever watched the Da Vinci code, the tomb of Jesus, or the gospel of Judas on the discovery channel, you have probably heard this argument.

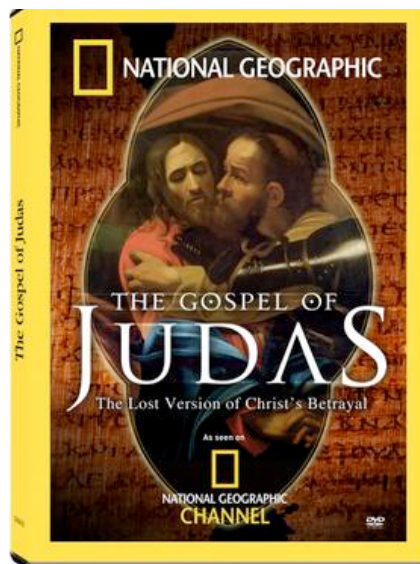
The story goes like this. In the early centuries of Christianity there were all kinds of different Christians who believed all kinds of different things. Some believed Jesus was God, others did not. So, around the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine assembled a council of church leaders and they hashed all this stuff out and decided what books were to be in the Bible and what books were not. It was basically a political power struggle and the winners got to re-write history. If the rich white guys hadn't voted the way they did, Christianity would look shockingly different today.

This kind of thinking is pretty popular today. For example, on pages 233-34 of the *Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown describes Emperor Constantine as though he were a mastermind behind the council of Nicaea, and describes Constantine as "upgrad[ing] Jesus' status [to God] almost four centuries *after* Jesus' death...." (Emphasis is Brown's) While Brown does not, at least not in this place, explicitly claim that the canon settlement was at Nicaea, Brown suggests that Constantine "commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those [i.e. the Gnostic's]

gospels that spoke of Christ's *human* traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike." (Emphasis is Brown's)

Any quick search on the Internet will reveal that this belief about the Bible is widespread. The media loves to push the idea that Scripture is simply the product of human invention.

Unfortunately the historical truth about the Scriptural books is irrelevant to the modern world.



## A POLITICAL POWER STRUGGLE?

Emperor Constantine is usually the one cited as the king who decided to consolidate the Christian Bible and do away with all the other books. Constantine was the first Emperor to embrace Christianity. Christians were persecuted from around 64 A.D. until the early 300s. During this time they were imprisoned, made a spectacle of in the games, and executed for refusing to worship the Roman Emperors. It was during this period that Christians were secretly copying the texts of the New Testament and passing them to other churches. To be caught in possession of these texts meant death.

During the reign of Galerius (305-311) Christian persecution reached a new high. In



addition to death, slavery, and mutilation, their homes and property were confiscated and their books burned. It was during this period where many sacrificed their lives, their property, and their limbs, suffering torture rather than giving up their sacred texts.

When Galerius died, Constantine became emperor in the West and Licinius was emperor in the East. It was only a matter of time before they clashed over who would be sole Emperor.

In 312, Constantine and Licinius met at the battle of Milvian Bridge.



Here is where the story gets interesting. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, before the battle took place, Constantine looked up at the sun and saw a cross in the sky, along with the words, "By this Conquer"

Constantine took this as a sign from the Christian God and commanded all his soldiers to inscribe the first two letters of Christ's name on their shields. Of course, Constantine won the battle and became the sole Emperor of the Roman world.





## Finally, the Church at Peace!

In 313, Constantine issued the "Edict of Milan" which finally legalized Christianity and adopted a mindset of toleration for all religions. Christianity would not be made the state religion of the Roman Empire until the Edict of Thessalonica in 380.

Twelve years later a problem had been developing in Christianity. A man named Arius began teaching that Christ was God but He was not the same God as the Father. He taught that the Son had not existed eternally but had been the first creation of God the Father. He was opposed most strongly by Alexander the Bishop of Alexandria.

We must understand that the council was not deciding whether Jesus was divine or not. Both sides agreed that He was. The discussion was whether Jesus's divinity was "of the same substance as the Father" or "a similar substance as the Father." You can still see the system of Arianism in Jehovah's Witnesses today.

Constantine assembled the council because of the unrest the division between Arius and Alexander was causing. When first informed of the unrest in Alexandria due to the Arian disputes, he was "greatly troubled" and, "rebuked" both Arius and



Bishop Alexander for originating the disturbance and allowing it to become public. Aware also of "the diversity of opinion" regarding the celebration of Easter and hoping to settle both issues, he sent the "honored" Bishop Hosius of Cordova (Hispania) to form a local church council and "reconcile those who were divided". When that embassy failed, he turned to summoning a synod at Nicaea, inviting "the most eminent men of the churches in every country".

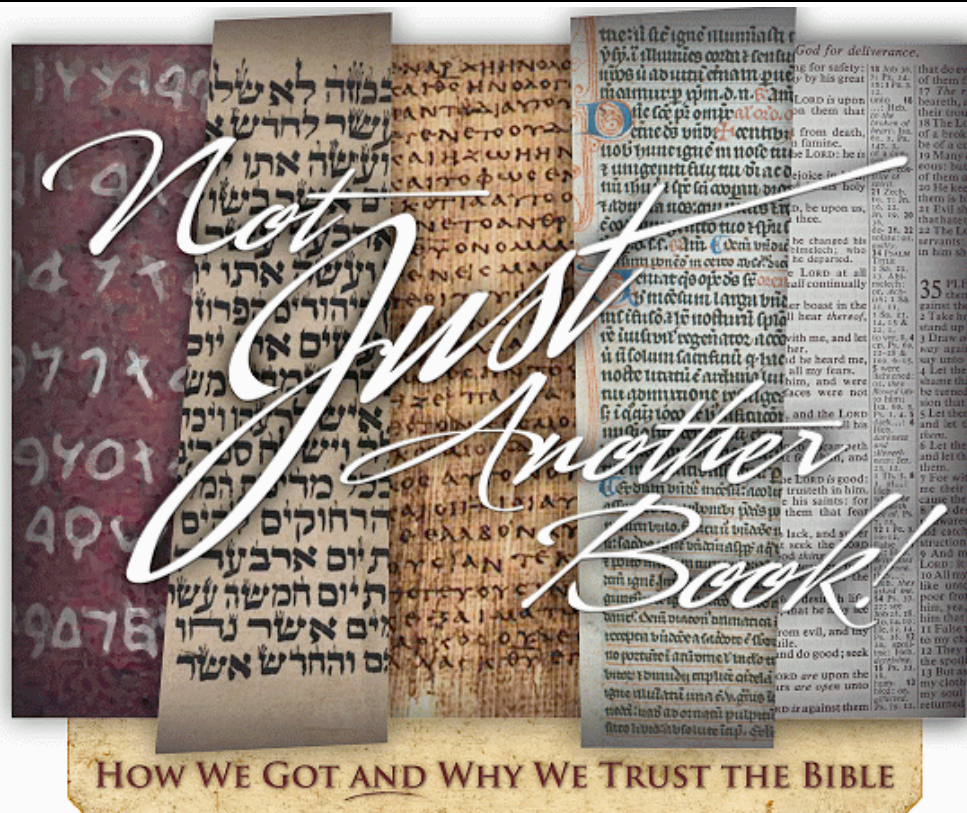
The council consisted of 318 bishops. There is absolutely no record of the bible being discussed. No books were voted in or out. The canon of the Bible was not even mentioned at this council.

Imagine that these 318 bishops, who just twelve years earlier were persecuted and tortured for not handing over their sacred texts, allowed this Roman Emperor to decide what books would be their Bible. That idea simply doesn't make sense.

What is particularly interesting about this council was the fact that they declared Arianism to be a heresy and condemned anyone practicing it. However, church history is clear that for the next fifty years the majority of the church in Imperial Rome were increasingly becoming arian.

In fact, writing later toward the end of the fourth century, Jerome would say, "the world woke one day to find itself Arian." Constantine was persuaded to adopt the Arian view himself after the council. It seemed as if the whole church had caved in on the issue and only Athanasius of Alexandria fought for the biblical doctrine of the trinity.

If the council of Nicea in 325 represents a conspiratorial authority which decided how Christianity would look in the future, it did a very poor job. For their declaration went unheeded for 50 years.



So how did the Bible come to be the Bible? First, we must understand that there was never a central authority voting and deciding on which books would be admitted and which would be rejected. The Scriptural books are not voted in or decided upon by men. They are recognized and discovered because they possess divine qualities and bear the mark of the Apostles.

From 400 years before Christ, the Jews knew that their Old Testament was not the end of the story. The Old Testament ends looking forward to a completion. Jews in the first century were looking for the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament and the completion of God's story. The Jews never assumed that the Old Covenant was the end. They knew that Jeremiah 31:31 announced that God would one day make a new covenant and they were looking for its coming.

The one thing that has always been constant in the biblical record is that every time there is a covenant made (divine or human) there are always covenant documents. (Ex. 17:14; Isa. 38; Jer. 30:2; Heb.

2:2; Rev. 1:11) It would be natural that with a new covenant there would come new covenant documents.

In the Hebrew Bible, the last book is Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles was originally one book). The book of Chronicles begins with a huge genealogy centered on David. Matthew also begins with a genealogy going through David down to Jesus Christ showing that He is the fulfillment of God's plan through the Davidic line. By beginning his gospel with this genealogy, Matthew signifies he is completing the story.

The documents that accompanied the new covenant in Christ's blood would only come from the Apostles of Christ, for they were the "prophets" of the covenant.

This would be a determinative factor in the books that were viewed as Scripture. They were recognized as Scripture by the Church community, but this happened as a natural "grass-roots" acceptance. There was never a central authority or a group of leaders that "voted-in" certain books.





# The Canon of Scripture

The following list might seem a bit like overkill, however it is necessary for you to understand that the writings associated with the Apostles were the only books that were ever considered Scripture. The so-called “lost books” were never lost. Many of the early church fathers knew about them and mentioned them...they rejected them as Scripture.

While there were some books which were “disputed,” we can clearly see that the core New Testament books were accepted as authoritative Scripture from the time they were written.

No conspiracy...No central authority deciding what is true Christianity. In fact, Christianity was a persecuted religion with no central authority for almost four centuries.

By the time there was anything that could be described as a controlling body, many of the early manuscripts had been lost...buried in the desert, waiting to be found by modern scholars.

# Survey of Scripture

**The Apostle's writings were viewed as Scripture from the beginning of the faith.**

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## **I. The Apostle's Writings were Scripture when they were written**

- A. **2 Peter 3:16** - Peter considers Paul's writings ("all his epistles") to be Scripture
  - 1. Notice that Peter gives no hint that this is something new. It was already widely accepted.
  - 2. Notice that Peter speaks of his [Paul's] letters (plural), showing that Paul's epistles had already begun to be collected together.
- B. **1 Timothy 5:18** - Paul quotes Luke 10:7 along side Deuteronomy 25:4, citing them both as Scripture.
  - 1. Paul recognizes Luke's writings as Scripture (which would include Acts).
- C. **2 Peter 3:2** - *"That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour:"*
  - 1. Peter puts the words of the apostles on that same level as the "holy prophets" of the Old Testament.
- D. **2 Corinthians 3:6** - Paul calls the apostles, "ministers of the new testament." He placed the Apostles on the same level as the ministers who delivered the Old Testament writings.
- E. **Hebrews 2:23** - This text compares the "*word spoken by angels*" (which is clearly a reference to the Old Testament) with the message which, "*first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;*"
  - 1. Notice that the message was given from Christ to "us" - a clear reference to the Apostles.

**From these texts, it is clear that Scripture itself places the writings and teachings of the Apostles on the same par as the Old Testament Scriptures.**

## **II. The Scriptures were Publicly Read in Worship**

- A. From the earliest days of the Jewish Synagogues, Scripture reading was part of the worship service. It was seen as God's word and expounded by the reader as an act of worship to God.
- B. **Col. 4:16** - Paul expected his letter to be read in different churches
- C. **1 Thess. 5:27** - Paul commanded that his letter be read to all the brethren.
- D. **2 Corinthians 10:9** - Paul says they church is terrified by the public reading of his letters.
- E. **1 Timothy 4:13** - Paul commanded Timothy to concentrate on public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and doctrine.

**These texts show that Paul fully expected the public reading of the Apostle's writings in the Christian worship services of the Church. These books were considered Scripture from the time they were written.**

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# The First Century

**The Apostle's writings were viewed as Scripture by the next generation of the church.**

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## I. The Early Church viewed the Apostle's Writings as Scripture

### A. Clement of Rome - **The Epistle of 1 Clement to the Corinthians** -

1. Written around 90-95 A.D.
2. "The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus the Christ was sent from God. The Christ therefore is from God and the Apostles from the Christ." - (1 Clem. 42.1-2)
3. Here we have writings before the end of the first century showing the authority of the Apostle's writings.
4. Clement also makes a large distinction between his authority and the Apostles.

### B. **The Didache** - an early Christian manual of church practice from around the year 100 A.D.

1. The Didache quotes the gospel of Matthew as authoritative Scripture saying it is "what the Lord commanded in the gospel" (Did. 8:2).
2. The Didache also quotes Deut 4:2 (Don't add or take away from the commandments) and applies this to Jesus' commands in the Gospels.

### C. **Ignatius** - Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch and died in 110 A.D.

1. He refers numerous times to the "decrees" and "ordinances" of the apostles. These terms were often used of written texts such as the Old Testament. (To the Magnesians 13:1, and to the Trallians 7:1).
  - a. Notice that Ignatius uses the term Apostles (plural).
2. Ignatius makes allusions to all four canonical gospels

### D. **Polycarp** - wrote around 110 A.D.

1. In his letter to the Philippians, Polycarp writes, "As it is written in these Scriptures, Be angry and do not sin and do not let the sun go down on your anger." This comes from Ephesians 4:26.
2. Polycarp also quotes from many of Paul's other letters and the synoptic gospels as Scripture.

### E. **Epistle of Barnabas** - This was a popular writing among early Christians (130 A.D.)

1. This letter cites Matthew 22:14 as Scripture using the "it has been written" formula which is used for the Old Testament Scripture. (Barnabas 4:14)

### F. **Papias** - He wrote around 125 A.D. (Found in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.4)

1. Papias cites a "four-fold" gospel
  2. He says Mark is received because he records Peter's words
  3. He says Luke is received because he was the companion of Paul.
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# The Second Century

**The Apostle's writings were viewed as Scripture in the second century.**

- I. **Justin Martyr** - Justin wrote between 150-160
  - A. He referred to the "four canonical gospels" (1 Apology 61:4)
    1. He says two were penned by Apostles and 2 by the Apostles companions
    2. He also writes that these gospels were read next to the OT in Sunday Worship
- II. **Irenaeus** - Wrote between 170-180
  - A. He quotes the four gospels, Acts, Paul's epistles, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 & 2 John, and Revelation as Scripture. (*Against Heresy*, 3.11.8)
- III. **Muratorian Fragment** - Written around 180
  - A. This gives a list of 22 of the 27 New Testament books
  - B. It also mentions the book "The Apocalypse of Peter" and says this book is "Not to be read in Church."

## The Muratorian Fragment

discipline scriptas sunt per tunc magis  
 laudatenses alia ad alexandrinum primum  
 mine fincte ad hunc marcionis et alia plu  
 ra quae in catholicam ecclesiam receperunt  
 potest per enim cum melle misceri non con  
 cruit epistolas anelude et superscrip  
 lo hannis duas in catholica habentur (1) sapi  
 entia ab amicis salomonis in honore ipsius  
 scripta apocalypse etiam lo hannis et pe  
 tritantum recipimus quam quidam ex nos  
 tris legi in ecclesia nolunt pastorem vero  
 nuperum est temporibus nostris in urbe  
 roma herma conscripsit sedente cathe  
 dra urbis romae ecclesiae pio eps frater  
 eius et deo legem quidem oportet se pu  
 blicare vero in ecclesia populo neque in ter  
 profestas completum numero neque in ter  
 apostolos in fine temporum potest  
 arsinoi autem seu valentini uel matthei  
 nihil in totum recipimus. Quia nam noui  
 psalmodum librum marcionis conscripse  
 runt unacum basilide assianam cataphry  
 cum conpituorem

The preceding list shows that Christians viewed the Apostle's writings as Holy Scripture long before there was ever a Church council. The first church council, the council of Nicaea, met in 325 A.D. but Christians from the very first years after the Apostles viewed the writings as authoritative.