

What Early Church Leaders Said About New Testament Books and Other Gospels

A. The Four Gospels

1. Irenaeus (Bishop of Lyon, ~AD160-200)

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh... He, who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit.

- *Against Heresies*, Chapter 3.11.8

2. Origen (185-254 AD) of Alexandria/Caesarea

I know a certain gospel which is called the ‘Gospel according to Thomas’ and a ‘Gospel according to Matthias,’ and many others have we read – lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved solely what the church has recognized, which is that only the four gospels should be accepted.

- from a homily on Luke 1:1

B. Gnostic Writings

Irenaeus

“For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to ‘the perfect’ apart and privately from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to the those whom they were also committing the leadership of the churches themselves.”

C. The New Testament

3. Eusebius of Caesarea (260 to 339 AD), the “Father of Church History”

■ Acknowledged Books:

- *Among the first books must be located the holy quaternion of the Gospels, which are followed by the Acts of the Apostles. After this must be reckoned*

the epistles of Paul. Then to be confirmed are the first epistles bearing the name of John and likewise that of Peter. After these are to be placed, if it seems right, the Apocalypse of John; we will set forth other opinions about it at the appropriate time. These then are among the acknowledged books.

■ **Disputed Books**

- *But among the disputed books, which are nonetheless known by many, are found the epistle of James, as it is called, that of Jude, the second epistle of Peter, and those called the second and third epistles of John, whether they come from the evangelists or from someone with the same name.*

■ **Spurious Books**

- *Among the spurious are to be placed the Acts of Paul and the book called the Shepherd [of Hermas], the Apocalypse of Peter, the surviving Epistle of Barnabas, and the book called Teachings [= Didache] of the Apostles, and, as I have said, the Apocalypse of John, if that seems right – a book that some reject but others judge to belong to the acknowledged books.*

■ **Rejected Books**

- *[Books] “set forth by heretics in the names of the apostles, whether Gospels allegedly by Peter, Thomas, Matthias, and of some other than these, or Acts allegedly of Andrew, John, and other apostles. No one standing in the succession of the true churches ever thought it worthwhile to mention any of these in any of his treatises. And their literary character differs greatly from the style characteristically found in the apostolic writings... they should not be counted even among the spurious works, but are to be rejected in every way as absurd and godless.*

4. Athanasius of Alexandria, 295-373 AD

- *And now without hesitation I should speak of the books of the New Testament. For they are as follows: the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then after these the Acts of the Apostles and the seven books by the apostles called the Catholic Epistles: one of James, two of Peter, then three of John, and after them one of Jude. In addition to these are the fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul, written in the following order: first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians, and after these to the Galatians and next to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians and to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians and then to the Hebrews, one to Titus, and finally, one to Philemon. In addition is the Apocalypse of John.*

D. Influence of Two Roman Emperors and Claims of the da Vinci Code

Forming a Canon of Scriptures: Effect of the Diocletian Persecution

- 303 to 313 AD: Emperor Diocletian began an empire-wide persecution of Christians
- Required Christians to turn over their sacred books for burning by the Roman authorities
- Forced Christian communities to decide what books they truly considered sacred Scripture.

Forming a Canon of Scriptures: Influence of Emperor Constantine

- Emperor Constantine asked Eusebius to produce 50 copies of the Sacred Scriptures for use in the Churches in Constantinople (“New Rome”).
- Constantine wanted conformity in Scripture among the Churches in the empire.

Statement from the Da Vinci Code

- *Constantine “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)*

How does the above claim tally with the actual history?