

Does the History of the Canon Matter? Contextualizing the Debate over the Authority of the New Testament Canon

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Abstract

The Da Vinci Code created a great popular interest in the question of the history of the canon of the New Testament, arguing for a late date for the establishment of canon, with a suppression of apocryphal gospels. This position has become popular among many scholars, but has been met by protests from Protestant evangelical scholars. The positions on both sides appear to be constrained to a religious context; therefore an attempt is made to place the discussion in a broader context by comparing it to the discussion of the canon in American literature. In that discussion, the issue of the content of the canon could not be separated from the question of the interpretation of canonical literature. I argue in this article that also regarding the New Testament the canon has been challenged by the development of interpretations with focus on e.g. minorities, women and post-colonial situations. The conclusion is that how we read texts, both canonical and extra-canonical ones, is more important than how the canon came into being.

Key words: : Canon, New Testament, Interpretation, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Heath Anthology of American Literature*.

Popular literature is good at taking the temperature of a society, to reveal shifting trends in mentalities and point to concerns that move large groups of people. It often touches the basis of a culture or cultures, although in a popular form. Sometimes a book comes along that does this to such a degree that it shapes public discussion. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* was such a book (Brown). It was not alone, and it was not the first in its genre, but it was exceptional in its enormous success. Several authors have in the same time period hit upon the idea of building mystery plots around the Bible, other holy scriptures and sacred myths. These novels successfully weave together historical facts and fiction, and they have as a common denominator that they challenge the authority of the Bible or other sacred traditions. In *The Da Vinci Code* Brown does this by entering into discussions of the New Testament canon, proclaiming that it was established by a power game involving Constantine and the leaders of the Catholic church. Constantine and the bishops are charged with suppressing a

host of other, equally valuable gospels, in order to withhold the knowledge that Jesus was a human being, with a sexual life. Brown claims that these other, suppressed, texts tell the true story about Jesus—about his relation to Mary Magdalene and about their descendants.

What is it about an alternative position on the development and composition of the New Testament canon that makes it a successful basis for a mystery novel? Historians have dismissed Brown's claim to present historical facts (Ehrman 2004), but

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a group of British and American scholars have suggested that it may be a more fruitful approach to see *The Da Vinci Code* as addressing the human situation in the post-modern world (Bowers). The novel rekindles the desire for truth: How to find truth and connections to the divine in the post-modern world when all authorities are gone? In this world, myths, religion and holy scriptures are only texts, made by men, and devoid of the authority they once commanded. If everything is just a text, where do we find truth? Since also the Bible and the canonical Gospels are just texts, *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that there exist some alternative texts that may have as much or even greater authority than the “Standard Version.”

Canon and “Contrafactual History”

Dan Brown does not get much academic support for the main point of his book: viz. that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a sexual relationship that resulted in descendants. When it comes to his presentation of the history of the canon as a conspiracy plot, however, placing the formation of the canon very late, in the 4th century, as a result of pressure from the Emperor Constantine, the situation is different. Recently many scholars have taken similar positions (McDonald, McDonald & Sanders) and have emphasized that many so-called apocryphal gospels and other scriptures were in use in churches in various parts of the Roman Empire as early as the canonical Gospels. With his many books in this area, Bart Ehrman takes a prominent place among the defenders of a late date for the New Testament canon. But he does not only discuss the establishing of canon as an historical question. In *Lost Christianities. The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (2003) Ehrman presents also what he sees as the importance of the canon for the forms of Christianity that exist today. He speculates as to what would have been different if these other scriptures had made it into the canon.

Ehrman recognizes that this is a matter of imagination; his recurring question is “*What if it had been otherwise? What if some other form of Christianity had become dominant, instead of the one that did?*” This is “contra-factual history”: “IF the form of Christianity that established itself as dominant, had not done so, Christianity would never have become a major world religion within the Roman Empire” (Ehrman 2003, 5–6). And IF that had happened, Ehrman speculates that we might have been polytheists today. But since the “ifs” did not become true, Ehrman can conclude that “... the vic-

tory of one form of Christianity was a significant event both for the internal workings of the religion and for the history of civilization, especially in the West” (Ehrman 2003: 6). And throughout the book Ehrman “will be exploring both what was gained and what was lost” (ibid.). With this express interest, it comes as no surprise that when he sums up the results of his study of the scriptures that did not make it into the New Testament canon, he concludes in a strongly religious mode. He speaks of how the

heightened appreciation for diverse manifestations of religious experience, belief and practice today has contributed to a greater fascination with the diverse expressions of Christianity—perhaps especially in its earliest period [Ehrman 2003: 257].

Ehrman’s fascination with these “diverse expressions of Christianity” is balanced by his criticism of the “proto-orthodox groups” and their intolerance towards pagans, Jews and not least towards the so called heretics. It is this kind of religious intolerance, Ehrman holds, that might “seem intolerable to us today.” And therefore his fascination with the diverse expressions of Christianity in antiquity “is not simply a matter of antiquarian interest.” It has relevance for today, and Ehrman speaks of

the joy of discovery when some of these texts, and the lost Christianities they embody are recovered and restored to us. For our own religious histories encompass not only the forms of belief and practice that emerged as victorious from the conflicts of the past, but also those that were overcome, suppressed and eventually lost [Ehrman 2003: 257].

It is “the diverse expressions of Christianity” in these lost scriptures that can support and give legitimacy to “diverse manifestations of religious experience, belief and practice today” that is Ehrman’s interest. Therefore the history of the scriptures that made up the New Testament and of those that did not make it into that collection is of direct significance for today.

Conservative Criticism of This “Contrafactual History”

Not unexpectedly, the Protestant, evangelical side of New Testament scholarship has voiced a strong criticism of what now seems to be a growing momentum in support of a late dating of the formation of the New Testament canon, with a

large number of writings as potential candidates for inclusion. But they seem to have been taken aback by the strength of this new scholarly position, and especially how it has caught on among lay Christians. Evangelical scholars have been late in entering the debate (Kruger), and have almost been fighting a rearguard action. A good example is Charles E. Hill, a New Testament professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, with an article titled "The New Testament Canon: Deconstructio ad absurdum" (Hill 2009) followed by a book that challenges what he terms "the great gospel conspiracy" (Hill 2010). His main concern is that the new history has devalued the New Testament canon, in that the New Testament writings are seen as "undistinguishable from a larger class of similar texts" (Hill 2009: 104). According to this new history the New Testament writings were not written to be Scripture, but were "selected to be such for us" by people who used "principles of selection now considered indefensible and obsolete" (Hill 2009: 104). As a result, Hill contends, the very existence and authority of the canon are questioned.

To counter this situation, Hill develops an argument to show that the texts actually were written to be Scripture, and that they were not selected by people, but rather accepted as Scripture by the ancient church. To this effect, he uses expressions like "the scriptural self-attestation" and "Recognition of the New Covenant Scriptures" (Hill 2009: 105, 113). The historical arguments that Hill makes may have much to be said for them. For instance, when Ehrman and his colleagues emphasize the widespread references to non-canonical scriptures among early Church leaders, Hill rightly points out that these references make up only a tiny minority compared to those referring to (would be) canonical writings. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215), for instance, quoted from the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Gospel of Hebrews*, but this did not mean that he held them in the same regard as the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Indeed, a comparison shows that Clement quoted from these four Gospels 1672 times over against 11 times from *Egyptians* and *Hebrews* (Hill, 2010: 70–75).

But Hill draws theological inferences that seem to go beyond the evidence from the historical material. He suggests that "the church essentially did not feel it had a choice in the matter! It did not feel it had the right to construct its own canon or set of Scripture" (Hill 2009: 118). From an expression that was commonly used, that Scripture was "handed down to us from the apostles" (Ireneus, *Adv. Her.* 3.11.9), Hill

draws the conclusion that the church received it "as divine revelation." Hill concludes by quoting the grand old man on the history of the texts and the canon of the New Testament, Bruce M. Metzger, who wrote:

neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church [Metzger: 318].

Here the "invisible hand" of God is made visible as an agent in the historical process of the formation of the New Testament canon.

Thus, there are presently two contradictory descriptions of the history of the canon of the New Testament, both of which are used to draw conclusions about the meaning of this canon for today. The two positions seem to be part of an internal religious or theological discussion where one is "orthodox," the other "liberal." In contrast to the discussion of the canon of the Christian Old Testament (Sanders, Brennehan), none of the parties try to place their position on canon and its authority in the broader context of discussions of other literary canons. I will therefore follow the example set by scholars of the Old Testament and compare the controversy over the New Testament canon with the discussions of canon and its meaning within studies of American literature.

The Discussion of the Literary Canon of American Literature

It is impossible here to document the broad and many faceted discussion of the canon of American literature (see Gorak, Bona & Maini); so I will restrict myself to the presentation of one case: the large, two volume *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, which appeared first in 1990, with later editions in 1994 and 1997 (Lauter et al.). This anthology was met with many protests from conservative critics, exemplified by the influential conservative critic and editor Roger Kimball (Kimball), who wanted to keep a "closed" literary canon based on the great American (white) authors from the 19th and 20th centuries and evaluated by aesthetic, not by political standards. It is not without irony that an article that discusses this controversy has the title "Opening the American Mind," obviously a reference to Allan Bloom's criticism of modern American education in his *The Closing of the American Mind*

(Bloom). The reason that this controversy was so bitter is of course that such anthologies shape curricula and studies of American literature at colleges and universities. It is a matter of what young college students shall read. Therefore there are similarities between the discussion about what shall be read in colleges, and the controversies over the New Testament canon and what should be read in churches. In both instances it is a question of what shall be transmitted to the next generation and form the basis of shared information and values of a community, religious or national.

Of course this is not only an American concern. In *The Canonical Debate Today* a group of literary scholars face the challenge of identifying the “common denominators capable of (re)shaping the identity of European culture as a whole” (L. Papadima, D. Damrosch & Th.D’haen). One essay in that collection points out that

canon building is oriented not only towards the past, but also towards the future. Very often canons are rooted in a societal “ideal,” in a collective project, much the same way that ‘imagined communities’ are born [Papadima: 10–11].

It is this concern not only for the past or the present, but for canon as a way to shape the future that gives the discussions such urgency.

In an introduction addressed “to the reader,” the editors of *The Heath Anthology*, a group including women and people of color, said that the intention behind the anthology was to broaden the canon, not to destroy it. The editors situate this broadening in the context of American history after World War II (Lauter: 1764). In just 25 years the optimism and confidence after the war had changed: they were brought down by the losses of the Vietnam war, by conflicts in American society made visible through the civil rights and Black power movements, as well as through feminism. This new situation was first recognized with regard to contemporary literature, by including authors that represented a large diversity with respect to gender, race and class, but it also had repercussions for the canon of literature from previous periods. The editors of *The Heath Anthology* speak of seeking out the “large number of lost, forgotten, or suppressed literary texts which had emerged from and illustrated” the diversity of American life (Lauter: xxx). The anthology broadened what it means to be “American” by including works by or about those who came from the margins of American society: slaves, immigrants or

native Americans.

But it was not sufficient just to find literature written by marginalized or previously excluded groups; the new canon required also “rethinking traditional ideas about what is of value in literature, as well as about intellectual frameworks for studying it” (ibid.). One result was a broadening of the type of questions that were raised, for instance, “how a text engages concerns central to the period in which it was written as well as to the overall development of American culture” (Lauter: xxxi). *The Heath Anthology* represented an effort “to reconnect literature and its study with the society and culture of which it is fundamentally a part” (Lauter: xxxii). The result was a “whole new scholarship . . . that examined the cultural implications of gender, race and class for our understanding and appreciation of literature” (Lauter: xxx). Furthermore, this meant to choose works that treated subjects and themes that had not been part of literature before, for instance poetry or stories that dealt with household labor, child abuse or racial violence in minority communities.

The editors of *the Heath Anthology* contrast this openness to what they had experienced from their critics as censorship and repression of ideas. They describe the conflict in religious terms, as

beliefs set against one another rather than complementing each other. The struggle between open access to diverse voices, and the restriction of expression to one single belief system, might well mean dramatic changes in American philosophy [Lauter: 1765].

At one level the question of an open or closed canon was a conflict between professors, powerful institutions and structures that determine syllabi and courses. But interestingly, the editors also give the individual reader a place and a responsibility, when they say:

The choices a reader makes in literature are more important than they might seem. To choose to read a poem about an abusive relationship is itself a political act. To choose to read a novel by a Native American writer, and thereby learn about the frustrations of living within that culture today, becomes a political act. Similarly for a reader to withdraw—is a different political choice. The same literacy that could open minds through broadening and new information can also be used to narrow the reader’s understanding [Lauter: 1765].

To sum up, it was not just the *content* of the canon of American literature that changed; equally important were the changes in the *interpretation* of literature, raising new questions and reading it within new intellectual frameworks. No longer was literature read merely for its aesthetic value; political, social and moral issues became part of an interpretation that "examined the cultural implications of gender, race and class for our understanding and appreciation of literature" (Lauter: xxx). Thus, the question of what should be included in canon was organically linked to the question of the moral and social responsibility of interpretation. *The transformation of canon also transformed the canon of interpretation.*

The Context of Canon and Canonical Interpretation of the New Testament

It is this issue of a *canon of interpretation* that I would like to bring into the debate on the New Testament canon. Here it may be useful to look at an earlier discussion, going back to the 1960s in Germany. This was a time when Protestant Germany still held the hegemony of New Testament interpretation, and German and other North European New Testament scholars were eagerly recruited by North American universities (for instance Hans Dieter Betz at Chicago, Helmut Köster and Krister Stendahl at Harvard, and Nils A. Dahl at Yale). Therefore the German discussion is of interest as a backdrop for the American scene. This debate was gathered in a collection of essays with the title *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (The New Testament as Canon), published by the Tübingen professor Ernst Käsemann (Käsemann). The title signals that the history of the canon was not at issue in this debate. This question was regarded as resolved, with the authoritative account by Hans von Campenhausen in *The Formation of the Bible* (Campenhausen). Campenhausen held the idea of "the rule of truth" (going back to Paul), as the criterion in the process towards the acceptance of a canon. The question under discussion in the 1960s was instead the theological relevance of the canon. It was this relevance that was questioned, and both the challenge and the solution were deemed to be a result of the historical critical method.

This term requires some explanation. At this time the historical critical method, that is, studying the intention of the author and the historical meaning of texts for their first addressees, was *the* accepted and acceptable method in New Testament studies. When I started my study of the New Tes-

tament in the mid-1960s, we used a textbook on method with the simple subtitle: *The Historical Critical Method* (Zimmermann). In its German form the historical critical method was considered to have its roots in the Reformation, with repercussions particularly for the study of Paul's letters. For Käsemann the answer to the question of the relevance of the canon, based on historical critical study, was *justification by faith*. This, Käsemann argued, was the true canonical term that summed up the meaning of many diverse New Testament texts. Justification by faith was so to speak "the canon within the canon" (Lønning), the central point shared by the diverse writings united within the New Testament.

But it was not long before this commonly accepted history of the canon as well as the authority of the canonical interpretation was shattered. It was partly done from within the authoritative scholarly (male) community, interestingly by two Europeans with their academic life at Harvard. Krister Stendahl challenged justification by faith as the canonical interpretation of Paul by claiming that the center of his letter to the Romans was not chapters 1–8, on justification by faith, but chapters 9–11, which discussed the continuing role of Israel in God's history with the world. Moreover, with his extremely influential essay on "Paul and the introspective conscience of the West," Stendahl opened up for the "new Paul" a new approach in Pauline studies that emphasized Paul's Jewish perspectives.

At the same time the accepted view on the unity of the Christian church in antiquity had been challenged by a book written in German by Walter Bauer in 1934, but brought to broader attention by its translation into English as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* in 1971 (Bauer). Bauer argued that Early Christianity had been much more diverse than hitherto recognized. Furthermore, the consensus on the history of the canon of the New Testament was questioned by Helmut Köster's two-volume work with the innocently phrased title: *Introduction to the New Testament* (Köster). However, Köster's work was not a traditional introduction to the New Testament. The first volume dealt with the historical context of the Roman empire. And the second volume was not an introduction to the canonical writings of the New Testament, as the title would suggest, but a history of all early Christian writings and of the groups behind them and their geographical locations. Thus Köster started a process that pointed forward, towards the present discussion of the history of the canon within the context of the diversity of early Christian groups.

But more important, in my opinion, were the developments

in the interpretation of the New Testament inspired by the same events and movements that affected the opening of the American literary canon (Brueggeman: 117–132): the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the Vietnam war, and, important for Biblical studies, the belated impact of the Holocaust. These events and movements de-centered the previously dominant powers of New Testament interpretation: viz. Western, male hegemonies, religious authorities, and enhanced the influence of minorities and local communities. These events have slowly and gradually created space for approaches exemplified by *Reading from This Place* (Segovia & Tolbert); a two-volume work that features interpretations of Biblical texts by authors from around the world and addresses issues relevant for their contexts. Recent interpretations have focused on women, minorities of various kinds: ethnic, religious, sexual, or persons challenged by disabilities. Likewise, oppressed majorities in Africa, Latin America and Asia have also read the New Testament from their perspectives, from post-colonial situations, and thereby they have brought their own voices into the reading of texts (Sugirtharajah).

Thus, voices from the margins, representing a variety with regard to gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexuality have become heard. There has been a similar development with regard to new intellectual frameworks for studying texts, so that titles of papers at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature sound similar to those at the Modern Language Association. These new intellectual frameworks may seem bewildering. Moving from *the* historical-critical method, searching for the intention of the author and the meaning for the first audience, to a list of more than twenty different approaches and methods on the interpretation of the New Testament may leave one quite bewildered (Gooder). The list includes many methods or forms of criticism that we recognize from other areas of study, e.g. narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism from literary studies; feminist criticism and social science criticism as perspectives that encompass many different form of readings, and finally, post-colonial, Jewish and queer approaches that we recognize from cultural studies. These approaches may be viewed as causing a fragmentation of canonical interpretation, understood as a theological enterprise, in which the New Testament was standing aloof from other types of literature, as a sacred text with a self-evident authority.

But another way to see it is that these new approaches have had a similar function as the inclusion of new voices in the

canon of American literature: they represent a broadening of the community that consider themselves as having a share in the New Testament writings. These new readings establish an inclusive community that can use New Testament writings to express their identities. The leading voice of post-colonial biblical criticism, R. S. Sugirtharaja, puts his finger on what is important with this opening up of interpretation: “Postcolonial criticism enabled us for the first time to frame our own questions rather than battling with somebody else’s” (Sugirtharaja: 2).

Some of these readings have of course been highly critical of the canonical texts and their traditional interpretations. Some texts have over centuries had a negative impact, for instance with regard to the situation of women, of slaves, and of queer people, and therefore it is vital that these texts be explored and challenged from minority positions. Feminist and womanist readings have the longest history of challenging texts and their traditional interpretation. They have dealt not only with passages directly about women, but with a rewriting of early Christian history from a feminist perspective.

Therefore it is interesting to see how feminist interpreters have evaluated Dan Brown’s claim to write the truth about Mary Magdalene, and to give her a central place in early Christianity (Perkins: 26–29). Brown claimed that the apocryphal gospels of Mary Magdalene and Philip told the uncomfortable truth, suppressed by the canonical Gospels, that Jesus and Mary had a sexual relationship and that Mary Magdalene bore children. The thrust of this reading is of course to make Jesus and Mary into “ordinary people,” and ordinary people of course have sex. What Brown does is the same as the male author of Luke’s gospel or the author of the Pastoral epistles: he confines women, in this case Mary Magdalene, to the traditional place of women in patriarchal societies. Therefore Brown’s picture of Mary Magdalene is utterly traditional. This is not the picture we find if we read the texts of *the Gospel of Mary* or the *Gospel of Philip*. These writings describe Mary Magdalene as a unique disciple, a person of spiritual perfection. She has an independent role to proclaim the mysteries of faith and she represents a challenge to the male apostles. Moreover, this picture does not stand in contrast to the canonical Gospels; rather, it develops the role she has there as a witness of the resurrection of Jesus, especially in John’s Gospel (John 20:11–18). And the criticism from the male disciples in *the Gospel of Mary*, who did not accept the witness from women, is well known from the canonical Gospels also. So in this case the problem does not lie in a

difference between canonical writings and extra-canonical writings; at issue is the question of interpretation: Will it open the possibility that women can enter into new positions, or will it preserve stereotypes of sexuality and motherhood as the ultimate goal for women?

Conclusion

Does the history of the canon matter? I have argued that *how* we read texts, not just the canonical ones, but also texts outside of the canon, is more important than our view of how the canon came into being. The ultimate question of interpretation is that of being willing to undertake the responsibility that the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* ascribed to the individual reader: to choose to engage or not to engage with texts that are challenging, that make you uncomfortable. The literary approach of reader-response criticism points in the same direction: the meaning of the text is not something external, "out there," apart from you. Rather, the text gets meaning from the encounter with the reader. This is a way of reflecting on interpretation that challenges forms of external authority attributed to a text, and therefore it moves the question of authority from the discussion of the historical origin of canon, to the act of reading, to encounters with the text. This requires that the reader both engage with the text—listen to it—but also enter into dialogue with it, and, if necessary, to voice moral criticism of it. And whether we are reading American Literature or the New Testament, the challenge is to read the texts from within an inclusive community, with awareness that the group of readers includes a wide variety of people in terms of gender, race, class, ethnicities and sexualities.

The responsibility of reading and criticizing misreading of the apocryphal gospels is the same as when reading the canonical Gospels. The history of how the canon of the New Testament came about, whether in the second or the fourth century, cannot solve the problem of authority. If the situation of post-modernity, in which we live, is experienced so that religion, including the New Testament, is rendered as merely "a text"—that is, without external authority—this situation cannot be "fixed" by introducing more esoteric texts. The loss of authority cannot be resolved by external means. The only solution is to start reading the texts; it is in the dialogue between texts and readers that something may happen that readers may recognize as true authority.

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