

HOW WE ACTUALLY GOT THE BIBLE: A RESPONSE TO BART EHRMAN

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INTRODUCTION

Bart Ehrman is a prominent and influential New Testament scholar and a prolific writer. As an agnostic, he often challenges the traditional, orthodox understanding of Christianity. For instance, in his bestselling *Jesus, Interrupted*, Ehrman tries to undermine the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible. He argues based on the work of Walter Bauer that there were many theologically divergent Christian groups such as the Ebionites, Marcionites, Gnostics, and what he calls proto-orthodox Christians in the first few centuries of the church. Thus, “the problem in the development of the canon of Scripture was that each and every one of the competitive groups of Christians – each of them insisting they were right, each trying to win converts – had sacred books that authorized their points of view. And most of these books claimed to be written by apostles. The canon that emerged from these debates represented the books favored by the group that ended up winning.”¹ Ehrman further notes that “it took at least three hundred years of debate before the question of the canon even began to reach closure. . . . The canon was the result of a slow and often painful process, in which lots of disagreements were aired and different points of view came to be expressed, debated, accepted, and suppressed.”² If Ehrman is correct, it will certainly be devastating for Christians who believe that the Bible is the word of God and undermine the very foundation of their faith. Moreover, how can we confidently proclaim our faith to others if we are not certain that the Bible is trustworthy? This article attempts to assess the validity of the claims made by Ehrman. Specifically, we will consider (1) whether the work of Bauer on which Ehrman based his claims is tenable or not and (2) whether all of the 27 books of the New Testament were debated for centuries before they came to comprise the canon.

APPRAISAL OF WALTER BAUER’S WORK

In 1934, Walter Bauer published a seminal work entitled *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum (Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity)*. His first main thesis was that there existed varieties of Christianities in the beginning, with no single variety having a predominant claim on apostolic roots: “even into the third century,

no separation between orthodoxy and heresy was accomplished in Egypt and the two types of Christianity were not yet at all clearly differentiated from each other. Moreover, until late in the second century, Christianity in this area was decidedly unorthodox.”³ In other words, Bauer argued that orthodoxy was a later construct. His other main thesis was that the Roman church’s dominance over other areas in the late second century eventually led to the development and supremacy of orthodoxy: “supported by the conviction that Rome constituted the church founded in the world capital by the greatest apostles, Rome confidently extends itself eastward, tries to break down resistance and stretches a helping hand to those who are like-minded, drawing everything within reach into the well-knit structure of ecclesiastical organization.”⁴ To be sure, Bauer’s claims are contrary to the traditional understanding of orthodoxy versus heresy: orthodoxy was established upon apostolic roots from the very beginning (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15) and heresy sprang up as an aberrant belief. But is Bauer’s assessment of the first few centuries of Christianity correct?

First of all, it should be noted that Bauer mostly examined the situation of Christianity in the second century, not the first-century New Testament period.⁵ Second, in his *History of New Testament Research* William Baird gives the following appraisal: “Bauer has been sharply criticized. He is accused, for example, of arguing from silence, of overstatement, of forcing the material into the mold of his own hypothesis; some contest the details of his analysis.”⁶ More specifically, it has been proven that heretical varieties of Christianity did not precede orthodoxy in Asia Minor:

Paul Trebilco, in an analysis of Asia Minor, has shown that Bauer’s thesis fails at a number of key points. While Bauer argued that Docetism preceded orthodoxy in Smyrna and that the Judaizers preceded orthodoxy in Philadelphia, Trebilco points out that Bauer overlooks key pieces of earlier evidence that suggests otherwise, namely the letters in Revelation to these same cities (2.8-11; 3.7-13). As for Hierapolis, Trebilco

3. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), 91, https://www.sacrificiodelreysagrado.com/wpcontent/uploads/2021/04/walter_bauer_orthodoxy_and_heresy_in_earliest_chris.pdf.

4. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 306.

5. Coleman A. Baker, “Early Christian Identity Formation: From Ethnicity and Theology to Socio-Narrative Criticism,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9, no. 2 (2011): 231.

6. William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2, *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 454.

1. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know about Them)* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 191.

2. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 221.

shows that Bauer is leaning on the argument from silence when he assumes that Ignatius did not write a letter to that city because it was dominated by heresy. On the contrary, the earliest sources for Hierapolis actually indicate an orthodox presence – the daughters of Philip settled there at the end of the first century and Papias was the bishop there at the beginning of the second.⁷

What about Egypt? Contrary to Bauer's claim that "until late in the second century, Christianity in this area was decidedly unorthodox," both Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus testify that Valentinianism arose *after* orthodoxy in the second century.⁸ According to Darrell Bock, "Bauer's claims for diversity lack support. Of all the regions he surveyed, only Edessa may be correct. That locale hardly represents the center or hub of Christian development. For all that Bauer claimed with his book and all he gained in clarifying method, Bauer failed to show the extensive, early nature of alternative views."⁹

As for Bauer's claim that the development of orthodoxy was due to the Roman church's control over other regions, it should be pointed out that there existed orthodox churches in other areas such as Antioch, Ephesus, and Jerusalem in this early period. Note also in this regard that the Johannine materials and some of the Pauline epistles were originally written for Christian communities in Asia Minor.¹⁰ This corroborates the existence of orthodoxy outside of Rome. Furthermore, after investigating the unity and diversity of first-century Christianity, James Dunn concludes that he has "*discovered a fairly clear and consistent unifying strand*":

That unifying element was the unity between the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ, that is to say, the conviction that the wandering charismatic preacher from Nazareth had ministered, died and been raised from the dead to bring God and man finally together, the recognition that the divine power through which they now worshipped and were encountered and accepted by God was one and the same person, Jesus, the man, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the life-giving Spirit. Whether we looked at the proclamation of the first churches, at their confessional formulae, at the role of tradition or their use of the OT, at their concepts of ministry, their practice of worship, their developing sacraments, their spiritual experience – the answer came out consistently in more or less the same terms: the cohesive focal point was Jesus,

the man, the exalted one.¹¹

Thus, whether or not there was Rome's ecclesiastical control over other locales, it seems clear that orthodox views were much more prevalent than Bauer claimed. Thus far we have seen that the research that was spawned following Bauer's pioneering work suggests that his two main theses are problematic upon closer scrutiny. How about Ehrman's claim that "each and every one of the competitive groups of Christians – each of them insisting they were right, each trying to win converts – had sacred books that authorized their points of view"? Interestingly, Ehrman does not mention the early date of composition of the New Testament books as compared with the apocryphal books that heretical groups adhered to even though he does discuss four criteria (antiquity, catholicity, apostolicity, and orthodoxy) to discern whether a given book is authoritative and thus canonical or not.¹² He correctly observes that "*about a hundred fifty years after Jesus' death we find a wide range of different Christian groups claiming to represent the views of Jesus and his disciples but having completely divergent perspectives*" (emphasis added).¹³ Note that all the 27 books that eventually comprised the New Testament were composed by A.D. 100.¹⁴ By contrast, the New Testament Apocrypha and the Gnostic texts cannot be confidently dated prior to the mid-second century.¹⁵ Thus, Christians already possessed some sort of standard or a "measuring stick" (the original meaning of the Greek *kanōn*) with which to evaluate the divergent theological views as they emerged.

DEVELOPMENT TOWARD THE CANON

Let us now move on to Ehrman's other claim that "it took at least three hundred years of debate before the question of the canon even began to reach closure. . . . The canon was the result of a slow and often painful process, in which lots of disagreements were aired and different points of view came to be expressed, debated, accepted, and suppressed." It is true that the totality of the New Testament canon as we know it today was affirmed in the fourth century – in Athanasius' *Festal Letter* (367), through Pope Damasus I's commissioning of the Latin Vulgate (383), and at such local church councils as the Council of Rome (382), the Council of Hippo (393), and the Council of Carthage (397).¹⁶ However, does this mean that *all* the

7. Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 149.

8. Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2006), 52-53.

9. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, 54.

10. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, 50-51.

11. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 403.

12. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 219-220.

13. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 191.

14. Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 208.

15. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 605.

16. Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Biblical Canon, vol. 2, The New Testament: Its Authority and Canonicity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 316-317.

27 books of the New Testament were in dispute for centuries as Ehrman seems to allude to?

According to Lee McDonald, “it appears that when bishops and councils spoke on the matter of canon formation, they were not defining something *new*, but were rather reflecting and selectively sanctioning that which was already a matter of popular practice and circulation in the churches.”¹⁷ In other words, when we scrutinize the first few centuries of Christian history, it becomes apparent that most of the New Testament books were regarded as authoritative from early on. First, with respect to the oral pre-Gospel traditions Dunn argues that “the Jesus tradition was *already*, in the first century, in the decades immediately following Jesus’ mission, exerting the canonical influence which the great church formally acknowledged so many decades later. The Jesus tradition was already providing a ‘rule’ for Christian living.”¹⁸ Second, the writers of the New Testament books recognized each other’s writings as authoritative. Thus, Paul treated Luke’s Gospel on a par with the Old Testament (1 Tim. 5:18; cf. Luke 10:7). Likewise, Peter acknowledged Paul’s writings as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Paul’s letters were also circulated among the churches (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27).¹⁹

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When we turn to the writings of the early church fathers, we notice that they had no reservations to refer to the various New Testament books as Scripture. In fact, Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles observe that “with the exception of 3 John, the early church fathers cited all NT books as Scripture.”²⁰ The earliest nonbiblical Christian document still in existence is 1 Clement (c. 96). In this epistle Clement “referred to the canonical Gospels, the book of Acts, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Titus, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and perhaps James much as he did to the OT.”²¹ Likewise, Polycarp (c. 69 – c. 155) “may have cited as many as 15 NT books” in his letter to the Philippians and “it is more than likely that Polycarp viewed Paul’s letters

in their entirety as Scripture.”²² Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165) treated the Gospels or “the memoirs of the apostles” on a par with the Old Testament when he wrote that “on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”²³ Perhaps the strongest piece of evidence for the canonical status of the four Gospels comes from the writing of Irenaeus (c. 130 – c. 200), who maintained that the Gospels were precisely four in number, as illustrated by his reference to four zones of the world, four-faced cherubim, and four covenants of God:

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. From which fact, it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit. As also David says, when entreating His manifestation, “Thou that sittest between the cherubim, shine forth.” For the cherubim, too, were four-faced, and their faces were images of the dispensation of the Son of God. . . . For the living creatures are quadriform, and the Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord. For this reason were four principal (καθολικαί) covenants given to the human race: one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom.²⁴

Based on the patristic and manuscript evidence, Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles estimate that the four-Gospel arrangement seems to have been established by the mid-second century at the latest.²⁵

How about the collection of Paul’s letters? It seems likely that it actually originated with Paul himself, for “from what is known of ancient letter collections, the author would most likely have made a copy of the letter immediately, kept a copy for himself, and sent a copy to the recipient. . . . Not only was this a

22. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 6-7.

23. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin* 67.

24. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8.

25. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 20.

17. McDonald, *The New Testament*, 316.

18. James D. G. Dunn, “How the New Testament Canon Began,” in *From Biblical Criticism to Biblical Faith: Essays in Honor of Lee Martin McDonald*, eds. William H. Brackney and Craig A. Evans (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 128.

19. Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 172.

20. Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 7.

21. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 6.

known practice, it is unlikely that Paul would have sent a letter and not kept a copy for himself."²⁶ Most likely, the Pauline letter collection began circulating soon after his death in the mid- to late 60s and gained canonical status by the last quarter of the first century.²⁷

Two more church fathers may be added for our discussion of the canonical status of the New Testament books. First, in relation to the confrontation with Marcion, Tertullian (c. 160 – 220) gave clues concerning which texts he viewed as authoritative: "the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), Paul's letters (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Thessalonians), John's Letters, and Revelation."²⁸ Second, in his *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.25 Eusebius (c. 260 – 340) discussed Origen (185 – 253, 254), who regarded the following New Testament books as entirely credible: "Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, an unspecified number of Paul's letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation, Hebrews (with a question of authorship), and Acts."²⁹

Finally, the Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170) deserves a mention. It lists no less than 22 of the 27 books of the New Testament and includes "the four Gospels, at least two of John's letters (and possibly the third), the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's 13 letters, Jude, and Revelation."³⁰ The Muratorian Canon is significant in that it "is likely the earliest extant canonical list that in all probability documents the existence of the concept of canon already toward the end of the second century."³¹

Thus far we have surveyed how Christians in the first few centuries viewed the various New Testament books as authoritative. Specifically, we have seen that the four Gospels seem to have been regarded as canonical by the mid-second century at the latest while the Pauline letter collection appears to have gained canonical status by as early as the last quarter of the first century. At any rate, it is safe to say that "toward the end of the second century, the major contours of the NT had clearly emerged, setting the framework for the subsequent final resolution of the canonical status of several remaining smaller or disputed books."³² Thus, even though the canonicity of several New Testament books may have been questioned for centuries, such major doctrines of the Christian faith as the deity of Christ (John 1:1; 10:30-33; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20), his resurrection (Matt. 28:1-10; 1 Cor. 15:3-8), and salvation by faith (John

26. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 21.

27. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 22.

28. Jordan Scheetz, "The Books of the Bibles in Early Christianity," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 (2012): 6, <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/hts/v68n1/v68n1a27.pdf>.

29. Scheetz, "The Books of the Bibles in Early Christianity," 2.

30. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 8.

31. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 8.

32. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 7.

3:16; Eph. 2:4-9) can be securely established by those books which were deemed canonical by the close of the second century.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have investigated (1) whether the work of Bauer on which Ehrman based his claims is tenable or not and (2) whether all of the 27 books of the New Testament were debated for centuries before they came to comprise the canon. Contrary to Bauer's claims, we have seen that (1) heretical varieties of Christianity did not precede orthodoxy in Asia Minor and Egypt and (2) orthodox views were much more prevalent than Bauer claimed. As for the canonical status of the New Testament books, the available evidence strongly suggests that a majority of the books were regarded as canonical by the end of the second century.

Ehrman states that "whatever Christian theologians and other believers might maintain about the divine impetus and guidance behind the canonization of Scripture, it is also clear that it was a very human process, driven by a large number of historical and cultural factors."³³ Ultimately, herein lies the crucial and fundamental difference between Ehrman, an agnostic, and Christians on their views of canonization. Ehrman attempts to explain the process of canonization purely in terms of human factors. Christians, however, affirm the work of the Holy Spirit in its process.

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33. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, 221.

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