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## The Close of the Canon

By Adam Chiappellone and Jeremy Cagle

Dan Brown has written several books of a semi-religious nature in the past ten years. Three of his more popular works have been *Digital Fortress*,<sup>1</sup> *Angels & Demons*,<sup>2</sup> and *Deception Point*.<sup>3</sup> But the book that has made him famous around the world is his 2003 novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>4</sup> This best-seller tells of an international search for the historic Holy Grail<sup>5</sup> that involves Harvard professor, Robert Langdon and Sophie Sauniere, daughter of the curator of the Louvre.<sup>6</sup>

The focus of this story is Langdon's and Sauniere's discovery of the secret marriage of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene and the birth of their child.<sup>7</sup> In presenting this controversial tale, *The Da Vinci Code* makes some rather startling statements about the origin of the Bible and some of its contents. Here are some examples from the fictitious religious historian and millionaire, Sir Leigh Teabing:<sup>8</sup>

The Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.<sup>9</sup>

Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian God Mithras – called *the Son of God* and *the Light of the World* – was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days. By the way, December 25 is also the birthday of Osiris, Adonis, and Dionysus. The newborn Krishna was presented with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Even Christianity's weekly holy day was stolen from the pagans.<sup>10</sup>

The prologue also contains some startling statements about historic secular organizations and present-day Catholic ones:

The Priory of Sion – a European secret society founded in 1099 – is a real organization. In 1975 Paris's Bibliotheque Nationale discovered parchments known as *Les Dossiers Secrets*, identifying numerous members of the Priory of Sion, including Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci.

The Vatican prelature known as Opus Dei is a deeply devout Catholic sect that has been the topic of recent controversy due

to reports of brain-washing, coercion, and a dangerous practice known as "corporal mortification." Opus Dei has just completed construction of a \$47 million National Headquarters at 243 Lexington Avenue in New York City.

All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.<sup>11</sup>

Although Dan Brown's allegations about the beginnings of Christianity and the Bible (as well as his claims about the truth behind secret historical and Catholic societies) are easily discounted,<sup>12</sup> his book does raise some questions: How do we know that Jesus Christ never married? The Bible does not claim that Jesus was married, but could there be other Scriptures<sup>13</sup> that claim He was?

These questions raise other important questions: Why is the canon<sup>14</sup> closed? Why does the Bible only contain 66 books instead of 67 or 68? Is it because the authors of the Bible were trying to hide something scandalous, such as the origin of the Holy Grail?<sup>15</sup> Or is there another reason? Furthermore, when did the writing of the Bible stop? Why are there no Bible books being written today?

It is the purpose of this article to help answer these and other similar questions by looking at the historical close of the canon, the biblical close of the canon, and the implications of the close of the canon.

I. THE HISTORICAL CLOSE OF THE CANON<sup>16</sup>

First, we will examine the historical close of the canon, the divinely directed “process” ancient Christians used to identify and confirm the books of the Bible. Josh McDowell makes an insightful comment regarding this issue:

Many students remark: “Sure, I know about the canons. The leaders got together in a council and decided which books best helped them and then forced the followers to accept them.” This is about as far *away* from the truth as one can get.<sup>17</sup>

Historically, the canon was not *formed* so much as it was *found*. One Old Testament scholar describes it this way:

When a child recognizes his own parent from a multitude of other adults at some public gathering, he does not impart any new quality of parenthood by such an act; he simply recognizes a relationship which already exists. So also with lists of authoritative books drawn up by ecclesiastical synods or councils.<sup>18</sup>

The councils that formed the canon did not arbitrarily choose what to include and what to reject. They simply recognized “a relationship which already exist[ed].” The books of the Bible were already understood to be the books of the Bible before any council or synod met to discuss their inclusion in the canon. With that in mind, the ancient ecclesiastical leaders “recognized” canonical books based on the following criteria:

1. **General Identification.** When it came time to decide which books would be included in the canons of the Old and New testaments, the authorities chose books that had already been identified as divine. The Council of Jamnia (which convened in the first century to discuss which books to include in the Old Testament) provides an excellent example of this.

The books which they (the Council of Jamnia) decided to acknowledge as canonical were already generally accepted, although questions had been raised about them. Those which they refused to admit had never been included. They did not expel from the canon any book which had previously been admitted. “The Council of Jamnia,” as J. S. Wright puts it, “was the confirming of public opinion, not the forming of it.”<sup>19</sup>

2. **Unanimous Approval.** While there was some debate over which books to include in the canon, the conclusions of the canonical councils<sup>20</sup> and the institution of the canon we currently possess were unanimous (and continue to be). The formation of the New Testament canon provides an excellent example of this.

When at last a Church Council – The Synod of Hippo in A.D. 393 – listed the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.<sup>21</sup>

Since this time (since A. D. 393), there has been no serious questioning of the twenty-seven accepted books of the New Testament by either Roman Catholics or Protestants.<sup>22</sup>

3. **Unanimous Usage.** Throughout the history of the church (before and after the canonical councils), no body of literature has carried the influence or authority of the Old and New Testament canons. The councils presiding over the canonization process recognized this. (See the above quotation concerning the Synod of Hippo.)
4. **Timing.** From the beginnings of Christianity until A. D. 313 (at the signing of the Edict of Milan), the church was under heavy persecution.<sup>23</sup> When the persecutions ceased, church leaders met to canonize the Old and New testaments. This meant that the books they considered for canonization were written before A. D. 313, only 300 years after the life of Jesus and His followers.

Some fathers and canons recognized almost all of the books before the end of the second century, and the church universal was in agreement before the end of the fourth century . . . Eusebius summed up the situation in the early fourth century by acknowledging all twenty-seven books, but stating that James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude were “spoken against.” Nevertheless, whatever doubts existed in his day gradually faded during the next fifty years, when Athanasius (c. 367), the “Father

of Orthodoxy” clearly and emphatically listed all twenty-seven books as canonical.”<sup>24</sup>

5. **Authorship.** One test for the inclusion of books into the canon was whether these books were written under divine inspiration or not. While the particulars of how Old Testament books were tested remains a mystery,<sup>25</sup> the New Testament test for canonicity was apostolic authorship.

The basic factor for determining New Testament canonicity was inspiration by God and its chief test, apostolicity.<sup>26</sup>

6. **Quotations from the Early Church Fathers.** After the last apostle died, several godly men took leadership of the church. Due to their influence, they are now called “church fathers.”<sup>27</sup> Their usage of the Old and New testaments gives us an indication of the early canonization of these two testaments. Considering their usage of the New Testament,

The number of quotations of the Fathers is overwhelming, so much so that, if every other source for the New Testament (Greek manuscripts, versions) were destroyed, the text could be reconstructed merely on the writings of the Fathers.<sup>28</sup>

The canonical councils for the Old Testament considered Malachi to be the last book of the Old Testament canon. This final recognition took place sometime before the life of Jesus Christ.

There is confirmation from the intertestamental period that there were indeed no prophets after Malachi. In the Maccabean period the people were waiting “until a prophet should arise” (1 Mac 4:45, 9:27, 14:41).<sup>29</sup>

The canonical council for the New Testament considered Revelation to be the last book. The final recognition took place in A. D. 367,<sup>30</sup> but the 66 books of the Bible were not compiled into one volume until the completion of the Latin Vulgate.

By A. D. 404 the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible was complete. It was the earliest known translation of all the sixty-six books of the Bible.

They were the same books we still have in our English Bible.<sup>31</sup>

## II. THE BIBLICAL CLOSE OF THE CANON

The Bible itself has some enlightening things to say regarding the close of the canon.

**1 Corinthians 13:8-10** – “Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophecy in part; but when the perfection comes, the partial will be done away.”

Here, in the “love chapter,” the apostle Paul describes the cessation of some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. The gift that holds particular interest regarding the close of the canon is the gift of prophecy.

Prophecies are defined as “special messages from God, often uttered through human spokesmen, which indicate the divine will for mankind on earth and in heaven.”<sup>32</sup> With the cessation of prophecy comes the cessation of these “special messages from God” and the discontinuance of the writing of Scripture (since Scripture is a record of these prophecies or “special messages”). The question we must answer now is, When will this ending take place?

1 Corinthians 13:10 tells us, “But when the perfection comes, the partial will be done away.” In other words, prophecy will cease “when the perfection comes.”

The Scriptures do not tell us what “the perfection” refers to. It is clear from history, however, that the gift of prophecy (along with the gifts of tongues and knowledge) ceased after the time of the apostles.

Just as the close of the OT canon was followed by silence, so the close of the New Testament canon was followed by the utter absence of new revelation in any form. Since the book of Revelation was completed, no new written or verbal prophecy has ever been universally recognized by Christians as divine truth from God.<sup>33</sup>

When the apostle John died, the gift of prophecy ceased

and the canon closed.

**Jude 1:3** – “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.”

At first glance, it does not seem that this passage has much to do with the close of the canon. However, Jude’s phrase “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” is quite telling. John MacArthur explains

*Hapax* (once for all) refers to something that is accomplished or completed one time, with lasting results and no need of repetition. Through the Holy Spirit, God revealed the Christian faith (cf. Rom. 16:26; 2 Tim. 3:16) to the apostles and their associates in the first century. Their New Testament writings, in conjunction with the Old Testament Scriptures, make up the “true knowledge” of Jesus Christ, and all that believers need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3; cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17).<sup>34</sup>

“The faith handed down to the saints” refers to a faith that has been “accomplished or completed.” The word Jude uses for the phrase “once for all” is the Greek word *hapax*. It can also be translated “the whole” or “altogether.”<sup>35</sup> In Jude 1:3, Jude is not describing a faith that is continually being revealed, but a faith that is “whole” or finished, without need of further addition.

In describing the faith that was handed down to the saints, Jude uses a word that describes wholeness or completion. This faith was complete. It was complete because Jude thought the canon was closed (or coming to a close).<sup>36</sup>

**Revelation 22:18-19** – “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.”

The apostle John’s words here compose two of the last four verses in Revelation and, consequently, the entire Bible. What do they mean?

Prophecies concerning the end of the world were prevalent in John’s day. To protect his listeners, the apostle gave a strong exhortation – a warning – that if anyone adds or takes away from his prophecies written down in the book of Revelation, “God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city.”

John was coping with a growing wave of false prophecy . . . Opposing ideologies had arisen, all of which supported their positions by alleged prophetic utterances. The author of the Apocalypse represented only one of those who sought to prevail against the others. His warning in 22:18 as well as the strong emphasis on his prophetic call in 1:19–20 was an attempt to settle this authority crisis once for all.<sup>37</sup>

John’s words have major implications for the close of the canon. “It was not change that was forbidden in verse 18 but addition – the warning of 22:19 deals with change.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, John’s phrase “if anyone adds to them” shows that there were to be no more additional prophecies.<sup>39</sup> The close of the book of Revelation brought the close and cessation of prophecy in the New Testament. Under the apostolic authority of the apostle John, further revelation from God was not allowed and the canon was closed.

### III. IMPLICATIONS OF THE CLOSE OF THE CANON

1. **Scripture is finished.** With the death of the last apostle came the end of the writing of God’s Word. The Bible is now finished. There were no biblical books written after A. D. 90.<sup>40</sup>

Apocryphal books such as Bel and the Dragon and The Gospel of Thomas do not belong alongside the book of Daniel and the Gospel of Luke because these apocryphal books were rejected from the canon.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, there are no new books being added to the canon today because, according to Revelation 22:18, there can be no more additions to the Word of God – it is finished.

2. **Scripture is complete.** With the close of the canon came the completion of Scripture. Second Peter 1:3 says, “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness.” The Bible is a complete revelation of the words

of God, and as a complete revelation, it contains “everything pertaining to life and godliness.” This completion should give believers confidence that, when a new idea arises, they have a standard by which to judge that idea. That standard is Scripture

For example, in answering the question, “Did Jesus and Mary have a child Together?” all a Christian has to do is search the Bible. Does *the Bible*, the completed Word of God, say that Jesus and Mary had a child together? Since the obvious answer is no, then the answer to the question is no. Nothing more needs to be said or discussed.

3. **Scripture is the highest authority for the Christian.** Since the Bible is the finished and complete Word of God, it is the highest authority in the life of a believer. All of life should

be examined through its pages. Experience, emotions, and desires should be assessed through the eyes of the Bible. Worship, church services, and sermons should be evaluated through the pages of God’s Word. Christians are not to trust their hearts<sup>42</sup> or their neighbors first;<sup>43</sup> their first trust should be in the Bible. Along these same lines, Jay Adams writes, “The first, and absolutely fundamental, fact to zealously maintain is that there is no way to know God’s will and to receive His guidance apart from the Scriptures.”<sup>44</sup>

God’s will is revealed in the Scriptures and nowhere else. The Lord no longer reveals Himself in dreams, visions, and revelations.<sup>45</sup> Because of this, the Bible is the only source that teaches us what pleases God, what honors His name, and what He expects from mankind. The more a Christian honors the commands of Scripture, the more he will honor the commands of God.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Digital Fortress: A Thriller* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> *Angels & Demons* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2000).

<sup>3</sup> *Deception Point* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2001).

<sup>4</sup> *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: DoubleDay, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 230–259. The “Holy Grail” is the cup that Jesus drank from at the Last Supper. In *The Da Vinci Code*, however, this cup is used as a symbol depicting the child of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene.

<sup>6</sup> The Louvre is an art museum in Paris, France.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 230–259.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Leigh Teabing is a fictitious character.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 231. This statement is objectionable not for its denial of the Bible’s “magical” origin, but for its denial of the Bible’s origin with God (the reference to the “evolution” of the Bible and the statement that “history has never had a definitive version of the book,” are equally objectionable). The apostle Paul would certainly disagree with Sir Leigh Teabing on this account (2 Tim 3:16).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Brown never gives the source of his “information” in *The Da Vinci Code*. Although he states that “all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate,” (p. 1), he never proves or supports it. This novel contains no citation or reference to any historical book, journal, or specialist in any of its 449 pages. Brown’s statement that “all descriptions . . . in this novel are accurate,” is merely an empty assertion.

<sup>13</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). Scripture is “God’s word in written form” (1253).

<sup>14</sup> The word “canon” refers to “the list of all the books that belong in the Bible” (Grudem, 1237). The canon is a completed list of books that the Christian church regarded as Holy Scripture. For more information on the canon, see “What Is the Canon?”

<sup>15</sup> Brown, 230–259.

<sup>16</sup> For dates and events that led to the close of the Old and New Testament canons, see “What is the Canon?”

<sup>17</sup> *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, Cal.: Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., 1972) 36.

<sup>18</sup> Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) 85.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce, 98.

<sup>20</sup> “Canonical councils” meaning those councils which finalized the Old and New Testament canons, see “What Is the Canon?”

<sup>21</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984) 113.

<sup>22</sup> McDowell, 42. There may be “serious questioning” about the *nature* of these twenty-seven accepted books from Roman Catholics or Protestants, but there has been no “serious questioning” regarding the list itself.

*The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments: translated from the Latin Vulgate* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons) 5. For those interested, the Roman Catholic canon contains more than 66 books, but the additions do not pertain to the New Testament. The “extra” books include 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, Tobias, Judith, Baruch, 1 Machabees, and 2 Machabees.

<sup>23</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1984) 106–107.

<sup>24</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986) 291, 293.

<sup>25</sup> H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament* (London, 1950). Scholars have no knowledge of the canonical tests given to Old Testament books. Apparently, the Council of Jamnia played some part in this process.

It is indeed, doubtful, how far it is correct to speak of the Council of Jamnia. We know of no discussions that took place there amongst the Rabbis, but we know of no formal or binding decisions that were made, and it is probable that the discussions were informal, though none the less helping to crystallize and to fix more firmly the Jewish tradition (170).

Scholars do know that the Old Testament “canon was completed no later than the second century B. C. and possibly as early as the fourth century B. C. In fact, a completed canon of the Hebrew Scriptures is evident from the testimony of the ‘Prologue of Ecclesiasticus’ (c. 132 B. C.), Jesus, Philo, and Josephus well before A. D. 100” (Geisler, 237).

<sup>26</sup> McDowell, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Among these godly men were Polycarp, Ignatius, Eusibius, Origen, and Tertullian.

<sup>28</sup> Josh McDowell, *Josh McDowell Answers Five Tough Questions* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 36.

<sup>29</sup> Geisler, 243.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>31</sup> John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) 75.

<sup>32</sup> *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. by Ronald F. Youngblood (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996) 1033.

<sup>33</sup> MacArthur, 72.

<sup>34</sup> *2 Peter & Jude* in The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2005) 156.

<sup>35</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark, 2001) 45.

<sup>36</sup> The canon could not have been closed when Jude wrote, since his writings were placed into the canon. He must have understood that

it was closing or drawing to a close and, therefore, it was “altogether” and “whole.”

<sup>37</sup> Robert Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts: A Verse-by-Verse Study of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999) 148.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>40</sup> The Book of Revelation was written in A. D. 90.

<sup>41</sup> For more information on these apocryphal books, see “What Is the Canon?”

<sup>42</sup> Jer 17:9.

<sup>43</sup> That is, if those neighbors (fellow Christians) contradict Scripture in their advice or guidance. Proverbs 11:14 says, “Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.” It is wise to ask for guidance from neighbors, but that guidance – along with any other guidance – should be screened through the Bible.

<sup>44</sup> *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 25.

<sup>45</sup> See discussion on 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 above.