

## **Did Constantine Decide the New Testament Canon?**



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Blaming Constantine, the first Christian emperor, for determining which books would be included in New Testament is hardly new. People have been doing it for a couple of centuries at least. Given how often we hear the charge being made nowadays, on television, in magazines, in the kind of books one finds heaped on display tables at Borders and Barnes & Noble—books of the sort Boston University’s Pheme Perkins describes so wonderfully as “‘religion lite’ for the PBS crowd”<sup>1</sup>—many of us, especially here in America, may be surprised to discover that *no* credible scholars actually credit the charge. So, for example, even the gifted Bart D. Ehrman—who has increasingly established his own credibility with the “religion lite” crowd by famously losing the evangelical faith he feels sure he once had<sup>2</sup>—has correctly pointed out that the “emperor Constantine had nothing to do with the formation of the canon of scripture: he did not choose which books to include or exclude, and he did not order the destruction of the Gospels that were left out of the canon.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pheme Perkins, “Getting Past Orthodox Doctrine,” *America* (July 7-14, 2003): 24.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Christopher Hitchens’s admiring description of Ehrman as “a very serious young man named Barton Ehrman [who] began to examine his own fundamentalist assumptions,” in *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2009), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (New York:

Those inclined to ignore such statements and continue to credit the claim invariable point to two different moments in Constantine's imperial career as significant. Some say Constantine decided the canon in cahoots with the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, others that it was when he sent an order for 50 Bibles to Eusebius of Caesarea in AD 331.

## I. CONTRADICTIONARY SOURCES

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* came in with an impressive bang but went out with a fizzling whimper. As so often happens, what once seemed to engage the attention of the whole world—I remember stepping into a tiny book shop in Ljubljana on a sunny September afternoon back in 2006 only to be confronted by a copy of Brown's novel prominently displayed on the counter, *in Slovenian!*—has now fallen from its former glory and been replaced by a series of sappy novels and movies featuring what I gather is supposed to be a hunky vampire. I recollect Brown's contribution here only as a convenient (and still, hopefully, somewhat familiar) entry point into the subject at hand.

While cobbling together the pseudo-historical underpinnings for his *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown relied on one source, Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's *The Templar Revelation* (1997), that argued for the former moment when the canon was decided, and another, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1983), that argued for the latter. In his novel, Brown lists both these titles as being on the bookshelf the character Leigh Teabing "ran his finger down" while explaining to Sophie Neveu how the "royal bloodline of Jesus Christ has been chronicled in exhaustive detail by scores of historians."<sup>4</sup> Readers of the novel who remember this list might be interested to know that none of the authors mentioned would in any sense be recognized as credible historians by credible historians.

At any rate, when making their case, Picknett and Prince tie the supposed Nicene selection of some books and suppression of others to the early Church's supposed fear of the power of an alternative Christianity led by the followers of Mary Magdalene. In reality, no such issue was discussed at Nicaea. But in any case, here is what Picknett and Prince say:

The Council of Nicaea, when it rejected the many Gnostic Gospels and voted to include only Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament, had no divine mandate for this major act of

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Oxford University Press, 2004), 74.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 253.

ensorship. They acted out of self-preservation, for by that time—the fourth century—the power of the Magdalene and her followers was already too widespread for the patriarchy to cope with.<sup>5</sup>

This was not the view presented by Dan Brown in his novel. It was however the one put forward in the film version, as is seen in the following lines from the movie script:

TEABING

To strengthen the new Christian tradition, Constantine held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea.

*In a cavernous room now behind Teabing, robed men including Constantine SHOUT at each other around a large stone table.*

TEABING (*over*)

And at this council, the many sects of Christianity debated and voted on—everything from the acceptance and rejection of specific gospels to the date of Easter to the administration of sacraments.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the movie, Dan Brown has Teabing say in the book that “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.”<sup>7</sup> The use of the word “commissioned” probably suggests that Brown is following *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which claims that “in AD 331, he [Constantine] commissioned and financed new copies of the Bible. This constituted one of the single most decisive factors in the entire history of Christianity and provided Christian orthodoxy . . . with an unparalleled opportunity.”<sup>8</sup>

If Bart D. Ehrman is right in saying Constantine had nothing to do with the choice of the New Testament books then from whence do these two stories that say he did come from?

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (New York: Simon & Shuster, A Touchstone Book, 1997), 261.

<sup>6</sup> Akiva Goldsman, *The Da Vinci Code: Illustrated Screenplay* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 116.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, *Code*, 234.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Dell, 1983), 368.

## II. THE *SYNODICON VETUS* AND THE MIRACLE OF THE LEAPING GOSPELS

The claim that the canon of the New Testament was decided at the Council of Nicaea goes back to a fanciful miracle story that was originally intended to give positive support to the New Testament Canon. It derives from a single ninth-century work written in Greek known as the *Synodicon Vetus*, in the following passage:

The canonical and apocryphal books it [the Nicene Council] distinguished in the following manner: in the house of God the books were placed down by the holy altar then the council asked the Lord in prayer that the inspired works be found on top and—as in fact happened—the spurious on the bottom.<sup>9</sup>

What happened according to this story, in other words, was that all of the books that were contenders for canonicity were placed on the floor by the altar, and after prayer, the canonical ones leapt up onto the altar, while the apocryphal ones stayed put on the floor.

But is the *Synodicon Vetus* a reliable source for the history of the Nicene Council? In fact it is not. It is in reality an anonymous history of church councils from the beginnings of Christianity down to the year AD 887, and the value of its testimony, as historian Henry Chadwick aptly remarks, “increases sharply as the author nears his own time.”<sup>10</sup> Both the lateness of the leaping gospels story (it supposedly happened in AD 325 but wasn’t reported until AD 887) and its hokey fancifulness, have caused historians (rightfully I believe) to leave it entirely out of account. So, for example, Benjamin Foss Westcott wrote in the nineteenth century that “neither in this [i.e., the Council of Nicaea] nor the following Councils were the Scriptures themselves ever the subject of discussion.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, New Testament scholar and Jesus Seminar member Roy Hoover more recently writes:

How did the Church decide finally on what to include and what to exclude? Unfortunately, our sources are mute on the issue. The

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<sup>9</sup> John Duffy and John Parker *The Synodicon Vetus* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantine XV; Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1979), 29.

<sup>10</sup> “Review of John Duffy and John Parker *The Synodicon Vetus* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantine XV; Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1979),” *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 33.1 (April 1982): 301.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (6th ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980 [1889]), 430.

Council of Nicea in 325 did not address the question, and neither Eusebius nor Athanasius nor any other writer from the period tells us how this came about.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of this, the story did become popular among writers of dubious credibility in the nineteenth century after Spiritualists and Theosophists, like Andrew Jackson Davis,<sup>13</sup> Laurence Oliphant,<sup>14</sup> and most importantly the colorful, chain-smoking, propheticess from Yekaterinoslav, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky,<sup>15</sup> took it up and promoted it as an authentic ancient account, even perhaps an eyewitness account,<sup>16</sup> of the goings on at the council of Nicaea.

Even today the story continues to be repeated uncritically by Moslem apologists, like Muhammad ‘Ata ur-Rahim and Ahmad Thomson,<sup>17</sup> and “religion lite” writers like Neil Douglas-Klotz.<sup>18</sup>

### III. CONSTANTINE’S 50 BIBLES (AD 331)

The second story rests on a letter Constantine wrote to Eusebius of Caesarea in AD 331 requesting 50 copies of the Scriptures to keep pace with the growth of churches in the emperor’s new capital of Constantinople (modern Istanbul), which he had consecrated the year before. Since the letter has survived, and since so much has been made of it, we reproduce it in its entirety:

(1) Victor Constantinus Maximus Augustus to Eusebius.

In the City which bears our name by the sustaining providence of the Saviour God a great mass of people has attached itself to the most holy Church, so that with everything there enjoying great growth it is

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<sup>12</sup> Roy W. Hoover, “How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen,” *Bible Review* (April 1993): 47.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Penetralia; Being Harmonial Answers to Important Questions* (rev. and enl. ed.; Boston, MA: Colby & Rich, Banner Publishing House, 1872), 225.

<sup>14</sup> Laurence Oliphant, *Scientific Religion, or Higher Possibilities of Life and Practice through the Operation of Natural Forces* (London, UK: William Blackwood, 1888), 105-106.

<sup>15</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (3 vols.; 6th ed.; New York: J. W. Bouton, 1891 [orig. ed., 1877]), 2:251-52.

<sup>16</sup> As for example, did Madame Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 2:252.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad ‘Ata ur-Rahim and Ahmad Thomson, *Jesus: Prophet of Islam* (rev. ed.; New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 2003), 105.

<sup>18</sup> Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Hidden Gospel: Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus* 1999), 14.

particularly fitting that more churches should be established. (2) Be ready therefore to act urgently on the decision which we have reached. It appeared proper to indicate to your Intelligence that you should order 50 volumes with ornamental leather bindings, easily legible and convenient for portable use to be copied by skilled calligraphists well trained in the art, copies that is of the Divine Scriptures, the provision and use of which you well know to be necessary for reading in church. (3) Written instructions have been sent by our Clemency to the man who is in charge of the diocese that he see to the supply of all the materials needed to produce them. The preparation of the written volumes with utmost speed shall be the task of your Diligence. (4) You are entitled by the authority of this our letter to the use of two public vehicles for transportation. The fine copies may thus most readily be transported to us for inspection; one of the deacons of your own congregation will presumably carry out this task, and when he reaches us he will experience our generosity. God preserve you, dear brother.<sup>19</sup>

Immediately following the letter, Eusebius, who preserved it for us in his biography of Constantine, reports: “These then were the Emperor’s instructions. Immediate action followed upon his word, as we sent him threes and fours in richly wrought bindings.”<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting that in addition to the promotion, this second view gets from the sort of conspiracy mongers Dan Brown turns to for “expert evidence” in writing his novels, we find it being defended as well by, as it were, both the theologically far right (King James Only advocates), and far left (certain members of the Jesus Seminar). Naturally each group advocates it with vastly different ends in view.

#### **IV. CONSTANTINE’S 50 BIBLES AND KING JAMES ONLY**

King James Only advocates look to the letter as proof that Eusebius and Constantine conspired together to foist a corrupted version of the Bible upon the Church, a version that promotes the Arian heresy, which denies the deity of Christ, and that lies behind most modern English translations of the Bible. In addition, they regularly assert that the famous fourth-century biblical manuscripts, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus,

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<sup>19</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4:36 (Clarendon Ancient History Series; trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 166-167.

<sup>20</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4:37 (ET: Cameron & Hall).

were among the 50 Bibles produced for Constantine by Eusebius. For these advocates, it is less a question of which *books* were included in the New Testament than which *passages* are different from the way they appear in the KJV, especially where they seem to diminish emphasis on the deity of Christ or the Trinity.

In general, King James Only advocates praise the Byzantine family of manuscripts, which represents the majority of extant New Testament manuscripts, and unjustly demonize the Alexandrian family, which represents the earliest extant New Testament manuscripts.<sup>21</sup> A striking example of this in relation to the story of Constantine and his 331 Bible order comes from the famous Christian tract writer Jack T. Chick, who includes the following frames in his booklet, "The Attack."<sup>22</sup>

**Satan used the intellectuals in Alexandria, Egypt, to mutilate Old and New Testament manuscripts of God's Word, and the mess they produced is called Alexandrian manuscripts.**



**Satan is using translators today who base their authority on these mutilated manuscripts to cause uncertainty on the validity of God's verbally inspired Word.**

**The Alexandrian Manuscripts down-played the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, salvation by grace through faith, etc.**

**The true Christians rejected these phoney manuscripts as works of the spirit of antichrist.**



**The second attack came when the Roman Emperor Constantine\* (the first pope) ordered 50 Bibles created from the satanic Alexandrian Manuscripts. \*\***

Or again, in two frames Chick produced as illustrations for David W. Daniels, *Babylon Religion: How a Babylonian goddess became the Virgin Mary*, a book also published by Chick in 2006.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> As one can see, for example, in places where more modern translations of the Bible, though giving preference to Alexandrian manuscripts over Byzantine nevertheless offer translations that actually reflect a higher Christology than we find in the parallel passages in the KJV (Compare, for example, the NIV and the KJV translations of John 1:8 and Rom 9:5).

<sup>22</sup> J.T.C. "The Attack," (1985).

<sup>23</sup> David W. Daniels, *Babylon Religion: How a Babylonian [G]oddess became the Virgin Mary*, (illustrated by Jack T. Chick; Ontario, CA. Chick Publications, 2006), 161.



Chick is, of course, incorrect in describing Constantine as the “first Pope,” as indeed Daniels is as well in asserting that the destination of the 50 Bibles was Rome.

In any case, Chick’s and Daniels’s King James Only arguments here, whether the two authors realize it or not, are rooted in a book by Frederick Nolan published in 1815 entitled *An Enquiry into the Integrity of the Greek Vulgate, or Received Text of the Greek*. I say “rooted” because Nolan’s book pre-dates by several decades several important formative events that would contribute significantly to the development of the full-blown King James Only position as we know it today. One of these was, of course, Constantin von Tischendorf’s discovery of the Bible manuscript Sinaiticus at Saint Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, in 1844.

Nolan argued that the letter of the emperor ordering the 50 Bibles actually granted Eusebius “discretionary power” to undertake a new edition of the New Testament in which he was free to make textual excisions and amendments. Eusebius, Nolan said,

removed those parts of Scripture . . . which *he* judged to be neither conducive to use nor doctrine, and which are now marked as probable interpolations in the Received Text. They amount principally to the following; the account of the woman taken in adultery, John vii. 53. — viii. II. and three texts which assert in the strongest manner the mystery of the Trinity, of the Incarnation, and Redemption, i John v.7. i Tim. iii. 16. Acts xx.28.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Nolan, *An Enquiry into the Integrity of the Greek Vulgate, or Received Text of the Greek* (London, UK: For F. C. and J. Rivington, 1815), 26-

Nolan based his argument on an idiosyncratic translation of a single word in Constantine's letter at the place where the emperor had said: "It appeared proper to indicate to your **Intelligence** that you should order 50 volumes." Nolan translated the bolded word "Intelligence" —*synesis* in Greek—as "consideration." As early as 1818, however, Thomas Falconer, the editor of the Oxford Strabo, had already demonstrated from Constantine's usage of *synesis* here and in other letters that it was for him a form of respectful address, like "your Grace," only in this case "your Intelligence."<sup>25</sup> Falconer was right and has been followed by later translators, including Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, whose recent translation for the Oxford University Press's Clarendon Ancient History Series, we have followed here.

Yet beyond this, even if we were generous and granted Nolan his peculiar translation of *synesis*, it would still fall far short of providing him with the support he needed to establish the idiosyncratic thesis he wanted to build upon it.

Despite Nolan's view having been effectively refuted nearly two centuries ago, his argument was afterward picked up in defense of a King James Only position by Seventh Day Adventist author Benjamin G. Wilkinson in the book *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* (1930).<sup>26</sup> From thence, it was mediated to current King James Only circles when David Otis Fuller reprinted Wilkinson's book in the 1970s in the famous King James Only classic *Which Bible?*<sup>27</sup>

After Sinaiticus was discovered in 1844, a possible connection between it and Vaticanus on the one hand and Constantine's 50 Bibles on the other again became a matter of scholarly interest. Scholars wondered whether Vaticanus's three columns per-page and Sinaiticus's four might help explain the very ambiguous statement in Eusebius where he says: "we sent him [Constantine] threes and fours in richly wrought bindings." Could the reference to "threes and fours" be to the number of columns per-page used in the 50 Bibles?<sup>28</sup> If so, the fact that Vaticanus and

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Falconer, *The Case of Eusebius of Caesarea, Bishop, and Historian, Who is said by Mr. Nolan to have Mutilated Fifty Copies of the Scriptures Sent to Constantine; Examined* (Oxford: At the University Press, 1818), 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* (Washington, D.C.: n.p., 1930).

<sup>27</sup> David Otis Fuller, *Which Bible?* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1972).

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Kirsopp Lake "The Sinaitic and Vatican Manuscripts and the

Sinaiticus belong to the Alexandrian family of biblical manuscripts rather than the Byzantine family (i.e., those manuscripts especially associated with Constantinople as the capital of the Byzantine empire) would seem to rule out our making more of the fact than that Vaticanus and Sinaiticus are *like* the manuscripts Eusebius delivered to Constantine, in terms of their having the same number of columns. They would, however, likely have been *unlike* them in terms of the form of their respective texts, i.e., the manuscript families they followed.<sup>29</sup> In other words, we should not really think these two manuscripts were produced as part of Constantine's 50 Bibles.

## V. CONSTANTINE'S 50 BIBLES AND THE SCHOLARS

The occasional use of the 331 argument by scholars focuses once again on the list of New Testament books rather than on the form of the New Testament text. My friend Robert M. Price, one of the most radical members of the Jesus Seminar, says in his book *The Pre-Nicene New Testament* (2006):

Eusebius tells us how Constantine had 50 deluxe vellum copies of the New Testament manufactured and sent to prelates all over the empire, this of course implying a fixed text. We cannot help thinking of the Islamic tradition that, to stifle theological debates in which opponents appealed to different texts of the Koran, the Caliph Uthman called in all known variant copies, had his scholars standardize an official text, and burned the earlier ones. The distribution of a New Testament codex from the home office by Constantine must have had the same effect of establishing an official list.<sup>30</sup>

Roy Hoover, whom we have already quoted against the claim that the New Testament was decided at the Council of Nicaea, writes somewhat more modestly:

Eusebius . . . knew that these new bibles prepared for the capital city would play an important role in the unity of the church . . . the New

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Copies sent by Eusebius to Constantine," *Harvard Theological Review* 11 (1918): 32-35.

<sup>29</sup> A point made, for example, by F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 204.

<sup>30</sup> Robert M. Price, *The Pre-Nicene New Testament: Fifty-four Formative Texts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2006), xv-xvi.

Testament canon was settled for all practical purposes when Constantine gave the order to create 50 bibles. Their publication was palpable evidence of the unity of the church and hence the unity of the empire.<sup>31</sup>

More recently David L. Dungan wrote an entire book promoting this idea:

After Constantine's Bible had been produced, and in the tense atmosphere that followed the Council of Nicaea, what bishop would dare to use a Bible in his cathedral that differed in content from one used by the bishops in Constantinople? He would likely be informed upon and investigated. He could lose his office or worse!"<sup>32</sup>

All three scholars' assertions overreach the evidence. Price is simply wrong in saying that Constantine had Bibles "sent to prelates all over the empire." Constantine speaks in the letter only of ordering bibles for the churches of the city of Constantinople. Nothing is said about Bibles being sent anywhere else. In addition, several features of the supposed parallel with the incident where Caliph Uthman is supposed to have "called in all known variant copies [of the Koran], had his scholars standardize an official text, and burned the earlier ones," are not supported by anything in Constantine's letter, which is the *only* evidence relating to the 50 Bible order. The letter says nothing whatever of calling in variant copies or of burning anything! Nor does it even speak of which New Testament books the 50 Bibles were to contain. It speaks only to the quality of writing and materials from which they were to be produced.

In contrast to Price, Hoover gets it right about the destination of the 50 Bibles, i.e., Constantinople. Still, he too transgresses the boundaries set by the evidence when he asserts that "the New Testament canon was settled for all practical purposes when Constantine gave the order to create 50 bibles."

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<sup>31</sup> Roy W. Hoover, "How The Canon Was Determined," *The Fourth R* 5.1 (Jan 1992): 5, 7. A slightly modified version of this same article is the one we cited earlier: Roy W. Hoover, "How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen," *Bible Review* (April 1993): 44-47. A slightly more modest version of this quote (with *palpable* spelled right) appears on p. 47 of that article.

<sup>32</sup> David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (London: SMC Press, 2006), 122. See further, e.g., Charles Matson Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004), 251.

Finally, Dungan's assertion about the "tense atmosphere" following the Council of Nicaea making it dangerous for bishops to use of Bible manuscripts that in any way differed as to their lists of books from Constantine's 50 Bibles is pure surmise, and besides rings false to the real historical situation, at least as I read it.

Having said that, it is certainly reasonable to suppose that the form of the text and the list of books followed in New Testaments used in the capital of the empire could not help but influence what came to be preferred and used elsewhere. But what exactly was the form of the text Eusebius used in preparing Constantine's Bibles, and which books were included? Actually we have not a clue. The letter says nothing about that. Hoover supposes that the canon list followed there was the same as the one given in the 367 Easter letter of Athanasius of Alexandria, and the same which our New Testaments follow today.<sup>33</sup> But where is his proof? Again he offers none because there is none. Vaticanus and Sinaiticus provide no support for the idea either. Sinaiticus does not agree with Athanasius's list. It includes two additional works, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, the latter of which is explicitly ruled non-canonical by Athanasius's letter. As for Vaticanus, it breaks off at Hebrews 9:14, which, given its adherence to a different, ancient order of books, means that the end of Hebrews, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and the Revelation are missing . . . and what else? If we add for good measure the famous fifth-century uncial, Codex Alexandrinus, things are merely complicated further by the fact that that manuscript includes two other works not approved by Athanasius's list: 1 and 2 Clement, in addition to which, "An ancient table of contents prefixed to the entire manuscript shows that II Clement was followed by the apocryphal Psalms of Solomon, which concluded the volume."<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that all the extra books mentioned were not considered heretical by the early Church, just non-canonical.

All three of these manuscripts are considered Constantinian or early post-Constantinian, which means that if the 50-Bible order had, in fact, established *an* official list of New Testament books, it probably was not our current list. It certainly was not Athanasius's list. By the time the particular extra books were included in Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus, their status in terms of canonicity had already long been a matter of discussion in the Church.<sup>35</sup> It appears that the early Church was not

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<sup>33</sup> Hoover, "How Determined," 5, "How Chosen," 47.

<sup>34</sup> H. J. M. Milne and T. C. Skeat, *The Codex Sinaiticus and The Codex Alexandrinus* (London, UK: Trustees of the British Museum, 1955), 35.

<sup>35</sup> On the Shepherd of Hermas, see the Muratorian Canon 73-76 (c. 200) and Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.4 (prior to 325). On the

particularly bothered when disputed books appeared in the Biblical manuscripts alongside canonical ones. In addition to this, the debate over which books should or should not be included in the New Testament continued to be an issue even after Constantine. So, for example, when Cyril of Jerusalem provides a list of canonical books in his *Catechetical Lectures* (c. 350), it does not include the book of Revelation.<sup>36</sup>

Given these facts, the idea that a particular selection of books in Constantine's 50 Bibles would effectively lead to the closing of the New Testament canon seems highly improbable.

## VI. CONCLUSION

All of the attempts to make Constantine out to be the father of our New Testament canon turn out to be quite baseless. The leaping Bibles story of the ninth-century *Synodicon Vetus* is both too late and too fanciful to credit. In addition, both the form of text used in Constantine's 50 Bibles and the list of books included are entirely unknown. We can say, however, that Vaticanus and Sinaiticus probably do *not* reflect either.

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Epistle of Barnabas, see again Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.4.

<sup>36</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 4.36 in Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1987), 311.