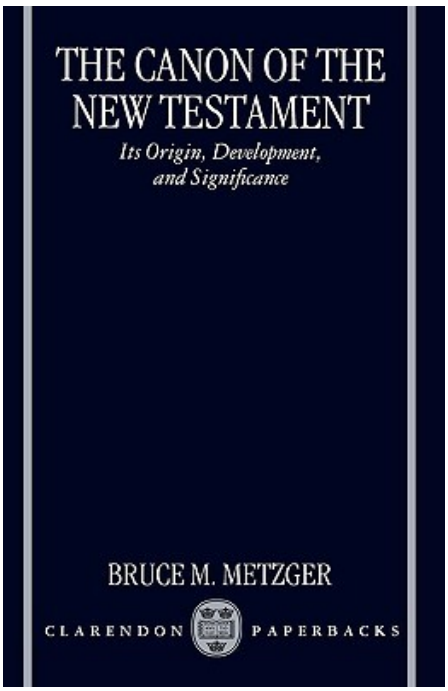

The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance

Bruce M. Metzger

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The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance Bruce M. Metzger Completing his New Testament trilogy, eminent theologian Bruce Metzger provides information from Church history concerning the recognition of the canonical status of the several books of the New Testament. Canonization was a long and gradual process of sifting through scores of gospels, epistles, and other books that enjoyed local and temporary authority--some of which have only recently come to light. Metzger discusses the external pressures that led to the fixing of the limits of the canon as well as Patristic evidence that bears on the development of the canon, not only in the West, but also among the Eastern churches. He also considers differences as to the sequence of the books in the New Testament.

The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance Details

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From Reader Review The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance for online ebook

Danny Daley says

Metzger's book is a classic of the canon genre, incredibly erudite if not a bit tedious because of just how learned it really is. Metzger explores the reception of the NT canon in every corner of the galaxy, even where the evidence yields little helpful information. The final 30 pages are the best part, where Metzger explores a bit of the theology of canon, and provides a basis for its validity. An important book for anyone looking to explore this important topic.

Jacob Aitken says

Metzger traces the historical development of the New Testament canon from apostolic times until the Reformation. Admittedly, there is little in here that is different from the approach of F. F. Bruce. However, Metzger does thoroughly cover much ground in relatively little space. The book is easy to read and follows a strict structure. There is some repetition, but it does not detract from the overall narrative. Metzger ends his book with a balanced and thoughtful discussion on the criteria of the canon.

Metzger begins with a survey of various works on the canon in the last two centuries. Much of this will not be useful to any except those who are working on theses and dissertations, in which case it is very useful because Metzger provides helpful bibliographies and discussions of various works.

Metzger surveys the Church Fathers in how they used various scriptures. While mainline scholars continue to debate the dates of the New Testament, and these debates are highly unsatisfactory, many scholars use the writings of the Church Fathers as a limit for the date of said book. It also clues scholars in to the extent of a book's usage at a certain time period. Metzger uses this methodology and surveys the post-apostolic fathers, the apologists, and the Eastern and Western fathers. The problem with this method, as Metzger notes, is many fathers quoted the Scriptures from memory, and not from looking at a piece of writing. This is particularly problematic concerning quotations from the synoptic gospels. If a father quoted from memory, he probably collapsed a number of "bible verses" into one citation, making it difficult for scholars to tell if he is quoting Matthew, Mark, or Luke, or all three at once.

Metzger gives a helpful survey of the "Gospels according to...", various apocryphal writings of mixed value and spurious authenticity. Metzger notes while many spurious gospels were obviously false because of Gnostic or Docetic tendencies, many did not have these tendencies and authors such as Clement, Jerome, and Athanasius had a neutral opinion on them. This section is valuable because of the "lost gospel" nonsense being perpetrated today. Metzger outlines many of their false teachings, almost all of which are wildly absurd even by feminist standards.
The most valuable part of the book is the discussion of the importance of the canon for the church today: how was it developed, is it still open, and how does it impact discussions of "inspiration?" Metzger gives the standard for determining canonicity of a book: authenticity and orthodoxy (Metzger 1997: 251). Is it written by an apostolic authority and does it conform to the rule of faith? (It is interesting to see that Scripture is being judged by tradition, and not the other way around). The test for apostolicity is a bit more difficult, though. Luke and Mark weren't written by apostles, and Hebrews might not have been, either. However, one can say these books were written under apostolic authority, which then qualifies them for the canon (of

course, the only way one can know this is by consulting tradition; again, tradition determines canon).

Metzger notes that while the fathers thought the Scripture was inspired, they did not consider that a valid enough reason for canonicity. This is because they did not have the same distinctions about "inspiration" that moderns do. Clement of Alexandria thought numerous non-biblical writings were inspired, yet no one seriously thought they were canonical! Later fathers would acknowledge their predecessors as "inspired," but no one thought St Athanasius should be in the canon (255). Many apologists love to point to the fact that St Paul says the "Scriptures are theopneustos" (God-breathed), but numerous Greek Christians afterwards applied that same adjective to their own theologians (never mind that St Paul said that only qualified the Old Testament, not the new)! Therefore, in the Greek-speaking cultural milieu in which the New Testament canon was formed, the fact that the Old Testament scriptures were designated *theopneustos* does not make them unique. Metzger ends the discussion on inspiration with a very important comment:

"While the fathers again and again use the concept of inspiration in reference to the Scriptures, they seldom describe non-Scriptural writings as non-inspired. When, in fact, such a distinction is made, the designation "non-inspired" is found to be applied to false and heretical writings, not to Orthodox products of the Church's life. In other words, the concept of inspiration was not used in the early Church as a basis of designation between canonical and non-canonical orthodox Christian writings" (256).

Why is a book canonical?, Meztger rhetorically asks, because it is an "extent literary deposit of the direct and indirect apostolic witness on which the later witness of the early church depends" (257).

Metzger asks the popular question, "Is the canon open or closed" (271)? He frames his answer in a thoughtful way: either we believe in a list of authoritative books or in an authoritative list of books (282). From this discussion we see the problems both answers will take: if we say the former we lend credence to the idea that the Church created the canon; if we say the latter we end up with the idea that the church merely recognized the self-authenticating canon. Both answers are highly problematic. The Church did not merely create the canon, but received the Old Testament scriptures and the church did in fact recognize a list of authoritative books over time. On the other hand, it may be true that the canon is self-authenticating and the church simply recognized what was already true, but the fact of the matter is very few (if any) in the early church saw it that way. Further, those who usually claim self-authentication for the canon have to face the fact that their "self-authenticating" canon of 66 books would have been unrecognizable to much of the church. (At the end of the discussion, Metzger opts for the self-authenticating route, not aware of its problems; cf., 286).

At the end of discussion the issues of the canon today, Metzger ends with a few unsatisfactory conclusions, yet if dwelled upon and corrected at points, they offer more satisfactory answers. Metzger quotes St Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "We thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of any human being but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers (I Thess. Ii. 13). Metzger places this "word of God" in some form of Scripture (287), yet it is doubtful that St Paul is referring to written Scripture, but apostolic tradition. Further, as Metzger has noted elsewhere in his writings, the writers of the New Testament did not think they were actually writing inspired Scripture equal to the Old Testament when they sat down to write. Therefore, one must conclude, contra Metzger, that St Paul is either referring to the Old Testament or to the apostolic truth (tradition) he preached.

Conclusion

This is a fine work that summarizes all of the major developments in the canon from earliest times until now. It wrestles with extremely complex issues, but never does the argument get away from the author, nor is the

reader ever lost or confused. The book is helpfully outlined and cross-referenced, and may it be a mandatory text for all introductory New Testament classes. Even when we disagree with some of Professor Metzger's conclusions, we stand in awe of his magnificent scholarship. With regard to the few problems in the books, I think Metzger unconsciously saw himself in a conundrum. Obviously, God did not firebomb Palestine with intact Protestant canons. Metzger realizes, though, that his biblical critical methodology tends to undercut the trustworthiness of the Scriptures. Therefore, in order to still have faith in the inspired Bible and canon, Metzger opts for the self-authenticating route. But this philosophical faux pax is unnecessary. He good have still guaranteed the trustworthiness of the canon by acknowledging that the Church preserved the truth via liturgy and tradition (or just tradition, since that, too, includes liturgy). F. F. Bruce in another work (Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?) notes that the canon was formed out of the process of liturgy, not self-authenticating claims (though I think Bruce does opt for that line in his *The Canon of Scripture*).

Addendum
Metzger has an interesting story about Reformer Huldrych Zwingli's response to the book of Revelation. Metzger writes, "When he [Zwingli] condemned the invocation of angels, he was shown the angel in the Apocalypse causing the prayers of the faithful to ascend to heaven with the smoke of incense (Rev. viii. 3-4; cf. Metzger 1997: 273). Zwingli's rejection of the Apocalypse is not surprising, nor is one eager to find fault with him for doing so--remember, many Eastern Fathers did the same thing. What is interesting is the reasons why Zwingli rejected it: he agreed with the more liturgical reading that Revelation justifies the invocation of angels. Therefore, Zwingli accepts the premise that if the Apocalypse were allowed into the canon, invocation of angels--at least on some level--would be completely warranted!

Sameh Maher says

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Jimmy says

A helpful work by Bruce Metzger concerning the topic of the New Testament Canon. The chapters in Metzger's work is logically laid out, and he begins with a historical survey of the scholarship concerning canonical criticism. This section is a great reference for those who desire further study, not only of the works out there but the work's place in the academic world of canonical studies. Metzger's massive knowledge and awareness of the patristics, his interaction with the ideas of various critics throughout the centuries, provide his readers valuable information which keen readers will enjoy. Metzger is very detailed. He is also very charitable in a topic that can spark ecclesiastical sparks. After finishing the work, I appreciated the process of New Testament canonicity and the providence of God a lot more in the process. One thing I wish Metzger could have explored more in his work is the implication of theology in canonicity. Superb and

recommended!

Tsun Lu says

REVIEW AND CRITIQUE Metzger, Bruce M. The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987.

In THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: ITS ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT, AND SIGNIFICANCE, the late professor Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary wrestled with a series of complex and difficult issues concerning the canonicity of Scripture: what makes a book canonical? Is the canon still open or close? What is the relationship between inspiration and canonicity? Etc.

As a historian, Metzger trusted in the historical method and traced the development of the canonicity of the New Testament from the Reformation back to the fathers and to the apostolic times; in conclusion, Meztger answered the question of “what makes a book canonical” by the principles of apostolic “authenticity” and “orthodoxy” (251) because it is an "extent literary deposit of the direct and indirect apostolic witness on which the later witness of the early church depends" (257).

Interestingly, Metzger noted that the idea of inspiration was not equal to the idea of canonicity among the fathers, for numerous non-biblical writings were considered “inspired” but not “canonical”--in other words, the concept of inspiration was not used in the early Church as a basis of designation between canonical and non-canonical orthodox Christian writings" (256).

Metzger demonstrated meticulous sensitivity to the organic process of the growth of the NT canon in the long history of the Church. Yet Metzger affirmed the self-authenticating character of the canonical books into Scripture, from the historical point of view, for there were no historical forces that could have stopped them to become so.

Critiques:

It is difficult to critique Metzger's work when he has demonstrated sufficient awareness of his own propensities and mastery of primary sources in the study of history. The only unsatisfactory part of his argument, if there is any, is perhaps his rest on the authority of history while he asserted the self-authenticating character of Scripture. There are unexplained faith assumptions in his argument that may be worthy however not fully told in his book.

Ben says

Metzger's book gives a very detailed and informative look at how and when the books of the New Testament came to be in the New Testament. This is a very technical book, but very much worth reading for those interested in the subject, and it's really not as hard a read as it looks at first.

People interested in this book might also want to take a look at The Text of the New Testament also by Metzger or F. F. Bruce's book on the Old and New Testament Canon The Canon of Scripture.

Brad Kittle says

This type of reading can be dry. For its genre this book is very good. You have all the information you need here, but if you’re looking for information on how we received the biblical text you’ll want to purchase Metzgers other book on that topic.

David says

I wish I had known of Bruce Metzger's works earlier in my Christian life. He is a brilliant scholar and this was a well written, thoroughly researched book that greatly expanded my knowledge of the Christian faith. I've said already that I think all Christians should know about early church history and how the New Testament was formed. Rather than being something we should be fearful of, I found that the more I knew about how the New Testament was formed, the more I GREW in my faith.

J. Wallace says

Good book that discusses the early collection of the eyewitness accounts and their formation into the New Testament. I also discuss this topic in my book, “Cold Case Christianity” (Chapter 4: Test Your Witnesses)

Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels

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Justin says

How the sausage was made.

Zach says

Great stuff concerning how gradually the books of the new testament came to be regarded as canonical. Also includes a lot of interesting intro material on the various sects of early Christianity that fell outside the catholic (spelled with a small 'c' & not yet "Roman Catholic") church-- Marcion, Montanism, the Gnostics.

Written by a Christian, but handled in an extremely even-handed, scholarly way.

Mike says

Very informative. I found it interesting that the canon was fluid well passed the 4th century but only on the fringes. For the most part, the core books were settled early, by the end of the 2nd century-beginning of the

3rd century. And the canon was primarily a reaction to heresies...these heretical groups were using scriptures to support their message; the church had to attack those sources to repudiate the heretics.

Although this is a scholarly book, it is clearly written in relatively easy to understand language.

Collin says

Metzger isn't making or advancing any arguments here, nor telling any kind of story. He is simply cataloging all the known relevant facts, so it's a thoroughly dry summation of biblical scholarship on the topic of the development of the canon of the New Testament. Kinda boring unless you're super interested.

Cliff Dailey says

At first glance, the page count of this book was intimidating. But, upon finishing it on my Kindle I recognized that about 36% of the book is Index and footnotes. Woot woot! Furthermore, Metzger has clearly done so much research to report on the historical forming of the New Testament many call the "Canon" today. Something to note: this book has a historical focus, not a theological focus. Meaning, Metzger focuses on man's interaction in the forming of the Canon in human history, and not on God's superintending of His Word nor on what it means for God's Word to be "inspired." Metzger provides excellent insight into how the 66 books have formed by the hands of some significant Church Fathers. Lastly, this book has really provoked me to reflect on God's literal Word spoken to man since the beginning of time, and it's such a delight to ponder on. I'll keep coming back to this book as a reference for the forming of the Canon of the New Testament.

Church Fathers I now want to learn more about include: Ignatius, Iraneus, Tatian, Tertullian, Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome Vulgate, Augustine, and Erasmus (Metzger mentioned so many others!).

Codices (collections of texts recognized as authoritative, Holy Scripture) I now want to learn more about include: S codex, Vatican Codex of Rome, Codex Fuldensis, Codex Bezae, codex Washingtoniensis, and Codex Claromontanus.

Because I want to learn more about God's superintending of His Word (as I believe God's inspired Word is the 66 books of the Protestant bible - no more, no less), I'm inclined to read "Canon Revised" by Kruger, next. If you are torn between where to begin, maybe Kruger's book is a better start (and I think it's shorter).

Jon Gill says

History Should Inform Theology
There are *theological* questions we ask about the Bible, such as “Is the Bible the word of God?” which can only be answered with arguments (and decisions) of faith. And then there are *factual* questions such as “What was the first gospel to be written, and when was it written?” The factual questions may also have different levels of theological implications – for example, deducing that Mark was written first may not matter too much, but knowing whether it was written in the first century, second century, or 15th century would definitely have an effect on our theological view of it. *(Note: it wasn’t the 15th century)*

This book is concerned with the most pertinent factual questions, and leaves (most) of the theological implications up to you. Consider the following questions:
--*Where did the New Testament come from?*
--*How certain can we be that today's version reads like the early version(s)?*
--*What about the inconsistencies in the texts, or in the accounts themselves?*
--*Who (most probably) wrote [insert NT book here]?*
--*And most interestingly, why THESE 27 books and not others?*
If these sound like questions you've asked yourself, or have even read about in various apologetics books, or better yet, questions atheists have asked you to challenge the basis of your faith, then this book can answer some of your questions. However, only the serious need apply; this is not written for a popular audience or the casually curious. This is a scholarly synthesis of the most pertinent facts, perspectives, and issues surrounding the formation and extent of the New Testament Canon, and reads more as a Seminary textbook. If that doesn't appeal to you, there are plenty of other books. (Some recommendations below)

So What Does This Book Cover?
Unlike the pop-apologetics or the agnostic critical attacks, which are written to defend a side (and sell copies), this book is written only to present the facts, as best we know them. (That is another issue in dealing with ancient texts and facts – we can only confirm so much; much is left up for debate!) Metzger is well respected for his work on the actual texts, and here he traces several trails that are noteworthy to New Testament scholars:
1. Where did the books we now call the New Testament come from? How were they viewed in the early churches, and what led us to treat these 27 as "canonical"?
2. What about the other early Christian (and possibly Gnostic) writings that we know about? Why were they disputed or excluded? That is, what's so special about these 27, and how do we know they should be the canon?
3. What do we make of the differences of canonical lists (and orders of the lists) in the early centuries? How do these differences affect our view of "canonicity"?

Here is a more detailed summary of his sections:

Part One:
--*The Literature on the Canon,* both before the twentieth century (when textual criticism became a lens with which to investigate ancient texts like this) and since.

Part Two: The Formation of the Canon (this is most of the book)
--*Early use of biblical texts* – the Church Fathers writings and use of apostolic and other early Christian writings
--*Influences on moving toward a Canon:* most of these involve responding to heresies such as Gnosticism (which was producing thousands of competing texts), Marcion (who was purposely forging some documents and rejecting/questioning others), and Montanism (which seemed not to care much about which texts they used or produced).
--*The developments of (somewhat separate) canons,* in the Eastern churches and the Western churches
--*The books that didn't make it in:* the temporarily or locally canonical, or otherwise apocryphal books
--*The varying New Testament lists* (the Muratorian Canon and Eusebius are discussed in detail), and the attempts at closing the canon in the West and East

Part Three: Historical and Theological Problems Concerning the Canon
--*Criteria for determining canonicity, questions of "inspiration," recognitions of authority, the plurality of the gospels, and the particularity of the Pauline epistles*

--*Questions for today: which form(s) of the text are canonical?* (Here is a great question for inerrantists), and the question of whether the Canon is open or closed (he makes the case for "closed," but is not heavy-handed in his position)
--*The idea of a canon-within-a-canon* (which he mostly rejects)

Finally, a question that Metzger leaves until the end, but which is central to the topic itself, he writes this way: *"Is the canon a list of authoritative books, or an authoritative list of books?"* That is, were the books already considered authoritative, and thus were eventually collected into a "canon," or was the collecting of these books into a canon the very thing that made/makes them authoritative? While he does not provide a simple answer to this question (he leans toward the former), it is a central one in the world of canonicity, and one that puts this book within the conversation I mentioned before. My own impression after reading this is that it was a little of both, and different for each book, though it's still an open question for me. Helpful to this idea was the discussion of the very meaning of "canon," "canonicity" as an idea, the history of the word "apocryphal," and the different views on what "scripture" was for, how it was used, and what distinguished some books from others. Certainly, the first few centuries of the Christian church are fascinating to imagine for a Twenty-First Century Christian who has "received" his texts from dozens of generations before him!

Critics and secular scholars (such as Bart D. Ehrman) often attack inerrancy apologists on the fact that the early books were from various and often anonymous sources, had differing texts, different purposes, included or were subjected to later additions and changes, and even contain contradictions in both facts (such as synopses of the gospel stories) and perspectives (such as the nature of the resurrection, or what the deity of Christ means). Clearly, a student of early church history knows (intellectually) that these things were unclear enough to early Christians that various councils were held (later) to discuss them; but the average Evangelical reader still reads the New Testament without much of the context and history present in this book. It's a lot to process, then, if someone who has never questioned where the Bible came from or what it really encounters one of these criticisms and doesn't know what to think anymore. To them I say: study! This book doesn't try to defend the text or attack it, but just to examine it and its history. All perspectives should start from the facts, at least as far as we know them.

Expounding the theological implications of textual development, differences, and canonization is beyond the scope of this book, but the facts Metzger describes can help a true student of the Bible understand what all the fuss is about. Without acknowledging the complexity of the story of our Scriptures, Christians risk making every new revelation from every critic a faith-threatening bombshell ("Did you know the last part of Mark, the earliest gospel, was written later by someone else?" or "Did you know that some/most of the books weren't written by the author listed in the title?", etc.) I know my own reaction to these questions, as a young evangelical novice, was one of denial and pushback; this book helps clear many things up (if only to show that things are more complex than either side tends to admit).

What (else) to read while you read this book
While this is a textbook, it is not so dense that a non-seminarian couldn't understand it (I am not a seminarian, but I am an academic); the relevant concepts and terminology are explained well enough, and even though you may get distracted by footnotes (most of which are just references), he arranges the book well. Still, if you are just an average reader curious about where the New Testament came from, and aren't accustomed to reading academic texts, I recommend reading this alongside another popular-audience book on a similar topic. I was pleased to be reading this at the same time that I was reading Peter Enns's *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It,* which I highly recommend for Christians skeptical of hardline inerrancy. If you'd like a more secular perspective, I'd still recommend something by Bart Ehrman, though in my opinion he gets a little stuck on the idea that since the New Testament writers wrote with these different perspectives and changed texts and stories, we can't really trust

it to be inerrantly historical. Neither Enns nor Metzger would disagree with most of his scholarly assessments of textual variation and origin, but may disagree with his (somewhat sensational) conclusions. Like Metzger, Ehrman is committed to the facts, but does not take the commitment of faith that it takes to treat the texts as authoritative for Christian belief. (And of course, Ehrman is also writing to sell books) Interestingly, in 2005 Ehrman helped revise and re-release Metzger's 1964 textbook *The Text of the New Testament*, a definitive work on the textual criticism of the New Testament; this is a good sign that people can be in the same scholarly place, even if they take different roads theologically.

In addition to the popular-audience readings, I also added more primary source readings as part of my study, spurred on by Metzger's discussions of their historical merit on this topic: I have been reading various church fathers, such as Polycarp, Ireneaus, Clement, and Ignatius. I plan to continue this, as I find them valuable even beyond the question of what "Bible" they were reading or how authoritative their letters were compared to Paul's or to the more anonymous or pseudonymous Catholic Epistles. While not everyone will enjoy reading 1st-3rd century Christian writers, they provided me yet another area of academic conversation to intersect with the scope of this book. You may likewise be inspired to read these texts, especially ones that once were in various versions of the canon (such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*). And such a context can also give you new eyes for reading the more familiar texts again, too.

Theological Implications of a Scholarly Understanding

I don't know Metzger's views on *inerrancy*, the American Evangelical doctrine which teaches that the Biblical texts are "inerrant" and "infallible" in their original languages, but for me it would be hard to make such a scholarly or historical argument; there is plenty in this book (and much more in Enns's and Ehrman's books) to give reasonable evidence against this position. I don't think there's anything scholarly here to contradict the doctrine of *superintendency* (the theological assertion that God "arranged" exactly what the texts would eventually say), but it would be clear from Metzger's information that this would be a solely *theological* position, not an academic one that is provable or disprovable. He only hints at his views on the *authority* of the texts (since that is for any believer to decide by faith). He is refreshingly fair in his synthesis of the information, in a "just the facts, ma'am" sort of way, and rightly so – he is not writing to sell books or even change minds. He just wants to make sure this valuable information gets into the larger conversations. Make no mistake: learning the who, where, when, and what of the New Testament texts (and the Canon that they subsequently became) can help anyone who is genuinely curious to better inform their understanding of Christian faith in these texts.

The bottom line is this: if you are a Christian, you need to know what your Bible is and where it came from. If you were raised a Christian, and have since left the faith because you doubt the texts you were told were perfectly dictated by God (or whatever you were taught that encouraged you not to question it), you should learn more about them, because that wasn't a fair or informed view. If you're wondering how the New Testament as we have it today fits within its historical context and other early Christian writings, or why it looks and reads the way it does, you'll want to read this book. And if you're wondering, like Ehrman, whether there are Christians who actually know these things about their Bible (and are still Christians), you should read this book.

For me, this book has brought a maturing to my views on the Bible, far more than any biased pop-apologetic or sarcastic secular criticism has before. I highly recommend it for those who just want to know what can be known about our text. I encourage every reader to use this to inform their choices of faith in what they believe about the New Testament.
