

## **The Da Vinci Code and Caesar Constantine: What Happened in October 312 in Rome?**

In his thriller *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown makes two assertions about Caesar Constantine. First, Constantine defined the profile and scope of the New Testament as we know it today at the council of Nicea. Second, his “conversion” was only part of his power politics, and he was not really a Christian. How should we evaluate these claims?

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### **I. Brown’s Claims about Constantine**

- A. Constantine was not a Christian** rather was baptised against his will, just before his death.
- B. He made Christianity the state religion in order to secure his power**, since he expected it to become the strongest religion, outnumbering the adherents of pagan religions within short time.
- C. He destroyed thousands of manuscripts and around eighty uncorrupted, old Gospels which portrayed the original Jesus, a mere mortal man.**
- D. He only allowed those Gospels to become “canonical” which presented Jesus as God.**
- E. The form of the New Testament as we know it today goes back to Emperor Constantine.**

### **II. The Truth about Constantine**

Constantine (the Great) was born between 272 and 285. After his father, the Emperor Constantius Chlorus, died he was declared to be emperor over a part of the Western Roman Empire by his soldiers in York in the year 306. On 28<sup>th</sup> October 312 he defeated Maxentius, an opposing emperor in the Western Roman Empire, who reigned in Rome.

**A. After his victory over Maxentius, and until his death in 337, Constantine understood himself as a Christian.**

1. Rejection of pagan religion
2. Letters
3. Coins
4. Baptism

**B. Christianity did not become the state religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, but under Theodosius in the year 380.**

1. In the year 312, only 5-10% of the population were Christians, most of whom lived in the Eastern half of the Empire, and they had just undergone severe persecution. There were almost no Christians in the senate, civil service and the army – although the emperor was dependent upon the support of these three “pillars” to stay in power.
2. Constantine confessed the Christian faith, but didn’t ban pagan religion. During his term of mandate, many key positions in the Empire were held by non-Christians.
3. It was 43 years after Constantine’s death that the Emperor Theodosius turned Christianity into the state-religion and banned all pagan religions.

**C. Biblical manuscripts were destroyed during the persecution of the Christians in the Roman Empire from 303-311 except in those regions, in which Constantine was responsible.**

**D. Jesus didn’t become divine on the basis of a vote at the council of Nicea.**

**E. The canon of the New Testament was agreed upon at the latest around 160 AD.**

1. Muratorian Canon, published around 160, twenty-two of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were already defined to be canonical (“rule” = “measuring stick”).
2. Between 160 and 170, Tatian from Syria published a work which summarised the events of the four Gospels and presented a unified report without contradictions.
3. In the year 180, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, argued that there were *four* Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
4. **Criteria which led to the canonization** are named in the Muratorian Canon:
  - a. The texts had to be as old as possible, that means as close as possible to the events of Jesus life. According to the traditions of the ancient church traditions, two of the Gospels were written by disciples of Jesus – Matthew and John -, one by Mark, the assistant of Peter, and one by Luke, the assistant of Paul.
  - b. The canonical texts of the New Testament had been already accepted in the churches as being trustworthy. The canon was therefore not decided by an individual or a church council.
  - c. Apart from this, the teaching of the Gospels had to correspond with the teaching of the apostles.

#### **Recommended Resources:**

Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, Nashville 2004

Klaus M. Girardet, *Der Kaiser und sein Gott*, Berlin-New York 2010

Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, 1997