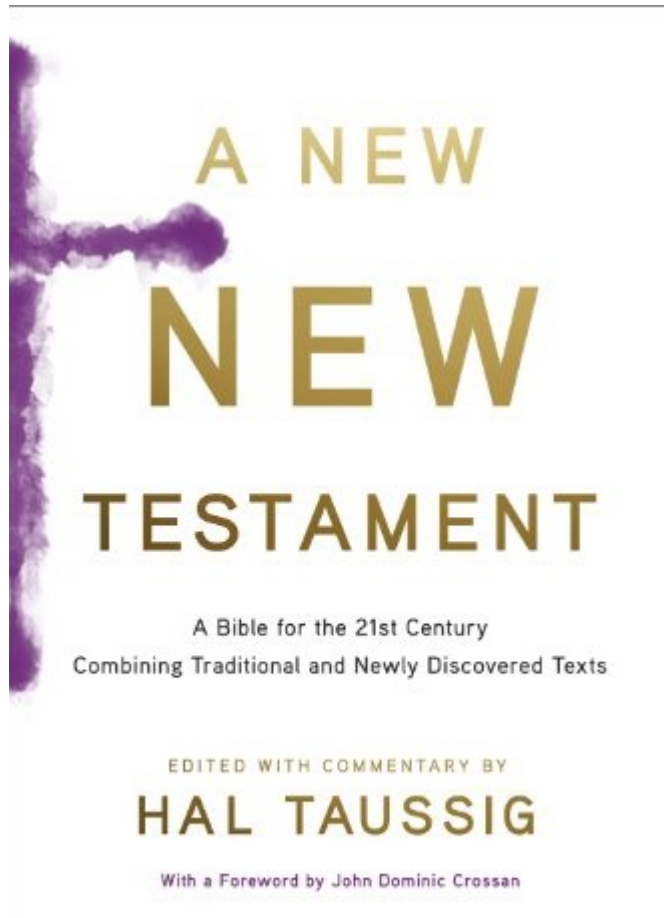


A new canon, created by 19 people

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In Review



A New New Testament

edited with commentary by Hal Taussig
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

In *The Sea and the Mirror*, W.H. Auden audaciously wrote new poems in the voices of each character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, all set after the action of the play

concludes. The result is a work both wonderfully reverent and plainly modern—you might even call it modern in its reverence.

I would have hoped that anyone presuming to put out a book called *A New New Testament* would borrow Auden's approach and give us a genuine literary and theological invention. Instead, the new book Hal Taussig has rather grandiosely published under that title is something both less and more audacious: an edition of the canonical New Testament interleaved with ten "new" scriptures and a commentary on the newly proposed canon.

The ten additions have drawn the most comment, and I'm as struck by the exclusion of the genuinely fascinating and informative *Didache* as I am by the inclusion of the miserably dull *Gospel of Truth*. But tastes will vary, I suppose, and not all the selections are as poor as that.

More striking is the much-touted process by which Taussig established this new canon. A "council" of 19 "scholars and spiritual leaders" was convened to discuss and vote on which texts to add to the New Testament. This assembly of notables was gathered "in honor of" the conciliar practice of early Christianity, as Taussig [explains](#). And it's an admirable group: Karen King, Barbara Brown Taylor, John Dominic Crossan, scholars of spirituality, some former Methodist bishops.

What have they given us, according to Taussig? A "set of new resources" for Christians, and an early Christianity unshackled from the "narrow-minded doctrines of orthodox Christianity" and the "old-fashioned ideas of the traditional New Testament."

I have no doubt that Taussig and his collaborators had the purest and most honest of intentions. But they convened a self-selected, self-authorized "council" of spiritual savants for the purpose of revising a canon along explicitly ideological lines. Shouldn't it have occurred to someone that this amounts to a sort of parody of the conspiracy-theory version of early church history?

Large swathes of the church seem not to have been invited; nor were scholars who might be expected to be rather skeptical of the idea that the canon needs renovation. I don't know of any ancient article of faith that was defined on the say-so of a group so unaccountable and parochial as Taussig's council. Even Dan Brown's fantasized version of Nicaea was more populous and cosmopolitan.

This impulse to re-open the work of the Christian past is very curious. In the church and in the world, we are liable to adopt a stance of instinctive scorn and superiority toward the people from whom we inherit our books and traditions. We even imagine that our mighty critical methods allow us to see the early centuries of the Christian movement with more clarity than Augustine or Athanasius.

It's an unfortunate irony that this temporal imperialism is most evident in those parts of the church that are otherwise highly attuned to the marginalization of oppressed communities. These are the ages in which the most authoritative, central texts became a matter of consensus, however chaotically. Why not allow them to have done their work? Whence this desire to lecture and correct the dead?

That's not to say that these texts shouldn't be read and taught for historical and religious understanding. Indeed they are, as the explosion in "lost Gospel" scholarship and pseudo-scholarship attests. And it actually seems like a good idea to append some key non-canonical texts to the existing canon (though again I'll urge the *Didache* over, say, the *Secret Revelation to John*).

But a canon is not an exhaustive list of "resources" for spiritual or scholarly life. Of the making of spiritual resources there is no end and was never meant to be. After all, if the point of this project is to "bring new relevance to a dynamic tradition," why content ourselves with ancient texts at all? A truly "new" New Testament should have some real, Audenesque literary trajectories. I recommend Augustine's *Confessions*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *On Loving God* and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* for starters. I'd like to see Julian of Norwich in there, too. It wouldn't even require the approval of a council.

This post was corrected on May 30: The council behind this project had 19 members, not 13.