

622 Are There Lost Books of the Bible

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

A recent National Geographic special recently revealed about a half dozen pages of the Gospel of Judas, which they say depict the real truth about Judas. They say that Judas didn't really betray Jesus but was doing what the Lord wanted. Recent books and movies suggest that some other ancient gospels found in the 1940s have Jesus married to Mary Magdalene, who was an apostle to the apostles. Are there some "lost" gospels we don't know about? Is the New Testament we have really a cover-up? Did the Roman Emperor Constantine really decide what books were to be in the New Testament? How do we know the Bible we have is the right one?

Books like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Michael Baigent's *The Jesus Papers* suggest that the Roman Emperor Constantine (c. 274-337 AD) "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" (The Da Vinci Code 234). They argue that manuscripts like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene), and the Gospel of Judas are actually earlier and more authoritative than the ones Constantine supposedly chose.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Early church writers long before Constantine had already rejected the gospels which arose out of Gnostic heresy. Origen (c. 185-253 AD) expressed what the majority of Christians believed about what came to be called the New Testament Apocrypha as contrasted with the four gospel accounts we know as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

I know a certain gospel which is called "The Gospel according to Thomas" and a "Gospel according to Matthias," and many others have we read—lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine that they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved solely what the Church has recognized, which is that only the four Gospels should be accepted (*Homily on Luke* 1:11).

Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* ranked books in three categories: those acknowledged as genuine, those that are disputed, and those that are spurious. The twenty-seven books we recognize in the New Testament fit into the first two categories. The first category includes the holy quaternity of the gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul, the first epistle of John, the first epistle of Peter, and Revelation. The disputed books he states are well-known and approved by many. They include the epistles of James and Jude, the second epistle of Peter, and the second and third epistles of John. The epistle to the Hebrews is likely considered an epistle of Paul.

Eusebius considered all of the other books written in the early centuries as spurious. He lists specifically The Acts of Paul, the Shepherd [of Hermas], the Epistle of Barnabas, the Institution of the Apostles, the gospel of Peter, the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Matthew, "and others besides them," Andrew's and John's Acts of the Apostles, and "others, of which no one of those writers in the ecclesiastical succession has condescended to make any mention in his works." Eusebius said,

and indeed, the character and style itself [of the spurious books, ps] is very different from that of the apostles, and the sentiments, and the purport of those things that are advanced in them, deviating as far as possible from sound orthodoxy, evidently proves they are the fictions of heretical men; whence they are to be ranked not only among the spurious writings, but are to be rejected as altogether absurd and impious (3.25).

The four gospels were known quite early in the history of the church. For instance, the *Didache* ("The Teaching of the Twelve," c. 100 AD) quotes the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). Preceding the quotation are the words: "And do not pray as the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his Gospel" (8.2). It should be noted that in the three times the *Didache* refers to the 'Gospel' in the singular, it clearly means the written gospel.

Papias, who wrote at the beginning of the second century, mentions the Gospels of Matthew and Mark by name (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.14-16). Irenaeus (c. 130-202 AD) argued in *Against Heresies* (3.11.8) that the gospels were four in number, neither more or less. Irenaeus also condemned the Gospel of Judas (c. 130-170 AD) as a product of the Cainites, a heretical Gnostic sect that produced a "fictitious history" (*Against Heresies*, 1.31.1). Irenaeus quoted more than 1,000 verses from the four gospels but only condemns the Gnostic writings.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-220 AD) distinguishes the four canonical gospels from the later works in this criticism: "We do not find this saying in our four traditional Gospels, but in the Gospel according to the Egyptians" (*Stromateis* 3.13.93.1).

No early church father ever gave approval to the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, or the Gospel of Judas. Why? Because they believed the promise of Jesus to the apostles. Jesus promised the apostles in John 14:26, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." Jesus further told the first-century apostles in John 16:12-13, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come." If Jesus did not reveal all the truth to them in the first century, then He failed to keep a promise. All truth was to come in the first century. Second-century Gnostic gospels could never fulfill the promise of Jesus.

The apostle Paul was concerned about maintaining the traditions that he had received from the Lord and had taught the churches. In 1 Cor. 11:2 Paul praised the Corinthians, "because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you." He later tells the Corinthians in chapter 15:1-2, "Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain." Paul told the Thessalonians in 2 Thess. 2:15, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of *mouth* or by letter from us." The early church knew what it believed. This is why it could spot and reject false doctrines and heresies when they came along. Peter recognized that they already had all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). Jude urged his readers to contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Early Christians knew when a teacher departed from the faith that they had received. Indeed John tells them, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Because of this, when a writing came along that didn't agree with what they had received from the apostles, they were able to spot the error and reject it as a human product rather than Scripture. While the early church did not record in writing the criteria they used in selecting their books, there are some things they used in the process of distinguishing what belonged in the Bible from what was human.

First, was it apostolic? Writings had to be written by an apostle or those close to an apostle. As you look through the books of the New Testament, Matthew, John, Paul and Peter were indeed apostles. John Mark, who wrote the book of Mark, was a companion of both Paul and Peter.

Luke who wrote Luke and Acts was a traveling companion of Paul. James and Jude were brothers of the Lord Jesus. So the 27 books of the New Testament were written either by apostles or people close to the apostles.

Second, was the writing consistent with the teaching of the Lord handed down to them? Was it orthodox? Writings had to be consistent with the core of teaching passed on to the churches by the apostles. If they varied from the truth of the gospel, they could not be trusted. This belief in a fixed tradition helped Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen to refute and reject the Gnostic heresy. Because they knew the truth, they could refute error. They wanted the true Scripture of Jesus Christ, not some writing that taught error.

Third, was it the right age? Early church fathers rejected books that were not written in the age of the apostles. To be regarded as authoritative the documents had to be as old as the apostles. Books that came along in the second and third century were from the beginning questioned and considered spurious, because all the truth had been promised to the apostles in the first century. All meant all; there would be nothing more.

Fourth, was it used in the churches? Did churches read it in their worship and use it to teach the members from the earliest days? Whether a book was widely read and taught in the churches showed that the churches regarded it as authoritative Scripture. Books that had no place in the churches could never be regarded as Scripture.

Most scholars realize that books like the Gospel of Thomas, of Philip, of Mary, or Judas are the products of second-century Gnostics. They were neither ancient nor apostolic; they were not used widely in the churches. Such books contradicted the accepted gospels and were never considered orthodox by anyone but heretics.

In contrast, as early as 67 AD, Peter called Paul's writings Scripture in 2 Peter 3:16. Peter said, "regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." Peter was saying that though some things were hard to understand, Paul's writings were Scripture—Bible! Further, Peter is condemning those who try to twist Paul's words into their own doctrines.

In the same way, Paul in 66-67 AD recognized the writings of Luke as Scripture. In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul said, "For the Scripture says, 'YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,' and 'The laborer is worthy of his wages.'" The first quote is from Moses in Deut. 25:4. The second quote, "The laborer is worthy of his wages," is a direct quote of Luke 10:7. Paul regarded the writings of Luke as much Scripture as the writings of Moses. We should not think that the Christians of the first century were unaware of the authority of their own apostolic writings. They knew what their Christian Scriptures were!

Constantine had nothing to do with any of this. Peter and Paul knew what their Scriptures were long before Constantine was born! Even as powerful as he was as the Roman Emperor, Constantine could not change the Scriptures. Jesus said in Matthew 24:35, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away." Peter said of the gospel in 1 Peter 1:23-25, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER.' And this is the word which was preached to you." God's word, the Scriptures, were imperishable. God Himself would see that they would never perish. The Scriptures are His book, with His power, and with His blessing. Nothing and no one can change that.

Nor should we think that Athanasius in 367 AD, the Council of Hippo in 393, or the Synod of Carthage in 397 determined the books of the New Testament. The church did not determine what was Scripture but merely recognized what churches had believed for centuries. It was a process of investigation of genuineness, not a process of choosing what one liked. F. F. Bruce observed in his book, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?*

One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect" (27).

The Early Church Fathers of the first three centuries laid the groundwork for the fourth century canon. By reading their works, one can see which works they considered authoritative by the number of times they quoted from them. And, likewise, which works they did not consider authoritative, because they either did not refer to them, or specifically called them spurious (for instance, the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mary Magdalene, Gospel of Philip, or Gospel of Judas.) Just seven of the early church fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Eusebius) quoted from the New Testament a total of 36,289 times!

If there are other gospels that should be considered authoritative, why did the early church not quote them in the same way? The other so-called gospels never met the criteria for canonization. They were not apostolic, orthodox, aged, or used widely in the churches. Instead, they were second-century fabrications of heretics. They were not lost or hidden; they were rejected and deserved to pass away into obscurity.

What is important for us to remember is the promise of Jesus that the apostles of the first century would be guided into *all* the truth. Jesus keeps His promises, and we have that promise fulfilled in the gifts He gave to the apostles and in the writings of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. From the very beginning Jesus gave the great commission to "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). That good news (gospel) was that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and on the third day rose again according to the Scriptures. That's what the true Scriptures teach. The Gnostic writings of the second century deny the death of Jesus, which means you have no sacrifice for your sins. They deny the resurrection of Jesus, which means you have no hope beyond this life. The idea that there are Scriptures missing is not just a lie; it is a destructive lie. Anyone who places their hope in writings like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, or the Gospel of Judas actually forsakes the hope of the Scriptures for a terrible lie. I hope you will believe the gospel and out of love repent of your sins, confess the name of Jesus as Lord and the Son of God, and that you'll be baptized in water for the forgiveness of your sins. By obeying the gospel you can become a child of God with all the precious blessings and promises that God wants to give to you. The truth is always so much better than a lie. Why not give yourself to God today!

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