

## True or False?

What if the version of the life of Jesus that's found in the Bible isn't the right one? What if there were other accounts of his life and ministry? And what if none of these versions actually represents eyewitness testimony about Jesus? That's precisely what some scholars are teaching, not just on college campuses but in popular literature and on television.

Popular scholars such as Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels, whose books boast titles such as *The Gnostic Gospels*, *Lost Scriptures*, and *Lost Christianities*, make claims such as this one: "Many years passed before Christians agreed concerning which books should comprise their sacred scriptures. . . . In part this was because other books were available, also written by Christians, many of their authors claiming to be the original apostles of Jesus, yet advocating points of view quite different from those later embodied in the canon."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the viewpoints found in these writings, many of which are called "Gospels," do differ from the New Testament Gospels. In fact, many include descriptions of Jesus that directly contradict the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Most significantly, the "lost Gospels" consistently depict the *nature of Jesus* in ways that disagree with the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. For example, the New Testament writings describe Jesus as fully divine and yet fully human (see, for example, Philippians 2:5-11). But, according to other writings, Jesus Christ was a spirit who merely *seemed* human. In others, such as *Gospel of Philip*, Jesus of Nazareth—a human being—was possessed by a Christ-spirit; then on the cross, this Christ-spirit abandoned the human Jesus.

**So what's at stake when it comes to the lost Gospels? Nothing less than the nature of Jesus Christ, the essence of Christian faith!** Simply put, if the authors of the lost Gospels were telling the truth, the perspective on Jesus that's found in the New Testament Gospels is false. Let's look together at the historical evidence, though, and see what we actually find.



(Courtesy of the Schøyen Collection, Oslo and London)

Earliest known fragment of Acts of Paul. When it was discovered that Acts of Paul was a fictional text, Christians rejected its authority.

### ■ What are the "lost Gospels"?

The term "lost Gospels" usually refers to ancient writings that were excluded from the New Testament, even though they included *supposed* recollections of events and teachings from the life of Jesus. A few of these "lost Gospels" have lasted throughout the centuries. Others survive only in tiny fragments of papyrus or in brief quotations found in the writings of early Christian scholars. Several "lost Gospels" were discovered anew in the past 100 years. Copies of some texts—such as *Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Truth*, and *Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians*—were unearthed in 1945 in Egypt, near a village known as Nag Hammadi.

## Truth about the New Testament Gospels

### ■ Why were the "lost Gospels" excluded from the New Testament?

The lost Gospels were excluded because they did not include reliable, eyewitness testimony about Jesus. Some scholars today depict this decision as having been made by powerful church leaders in the fourth century, three centuries after the books in the New Testament were written. One such scholar claims that a letter from a powerful bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria, established the list of authoritative books in AD 367. He claims, "Athanasius wrote his annual pastoral letter to the Egyptian churches under his jurisdiction, and in it he included advice concerning which books should be read as Scripture in the churches. He lists our twenty-seven books, excluding all others. This is the first surviving instance of anyone affirming our set of books as the New Testament. And even Athanasius did not settle the matter. Debates continued for decades, even centuries."<sup>2</sup>

Each fact in this summary is *technically* correct, but it leaves out several key truths, leaving readers with false impressions—such as, (1) until the late fourth century, there was no consensus about which Christian writings were authoritative and true, and (2) even then the church's standard was simply the authoritative statement of a powerful bishop.

So when *did* Christians agree on which writings were authoritative in their congregations? And what was the standard for these decisions? Hints of this standard can be found in first-century Christian writings. The basic idea was something like this: *Testimony that could be connected to eyewitnesses of the risen Lord was uniquely authoritative among early Christians.*<sup>3</sup> It was *not* one specific person or a powerful group in the early church that decided to include certain books in the New Testament. *From the beginning, authoritative testimony about Jesus Christ had to have its source in eyewitnesses of the risen Lord.* The lost Gospels were excluded by the fact that they could not be clearly connected to persons who walked and talked with Jesus; therefore, their testimony could not be considered authoritative or reliable.



(Courtesy of the Schøyen Collection, Oslo and London)

Tax collectors were known to use wooden pages covered in wax, which were then rolled into the shape of a scroll.

### ■ When did Christians begin to treat the words of eyewitnesses as the most reliable testimony about Jesus?

Even while the New Testament books were being written, the words of people who saw and followed the risen Lord—specifically, the words and writings of the apostles—carried special weight in the churches (see Acts 1:21-26; 15:6-16:5; 1 Corinthians 4-5; 9:1-12; Galatians 1:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26-27). After the apostles' deaths, Christians continued to cherish the testimony of eyewitnesses and their associates. Around AD 110, Papias of Hierapolis put it this way: "So, if anyone who had served the elders came, I asked about their sayings in detail—what

Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's followers."<sup>4</sup> The people most likely to know the truth about Jesus were the ones who had encountered Jesus personally or the close associates of these witnesses. So, although Christians wrangled for several centuries about *which* writings were authoritative, it was something much greater than political machinations that drove their decisions. Their goal was to determine which books could be clearly connected to eyewitnesses of the risen Lord.

### ■ Why did only four Gospels make it into the New Testament if so many Gospels were available to early Christians?

Only four Gospels—the ones known to us as the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—could be clearly connected to firsthand accounts of the risen Lord. Unlike the “lost Gospels,” each of the New Testament Gospels was written in the first century AD, at a time when the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry were still alive. (The earthly ministry of Jesus began around AD 28 and lasted until AD 30 or so.) What’s more, it’s possible to trace widespread awareness among Christians that these Gospels represented eyewitness testimony back to the late first century, within a few years of the time when the last of the New Testament Gospels was written.

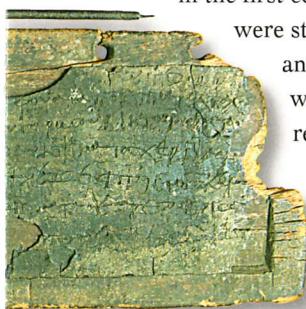
■ Papias of Hierapolis—a church leader in the geographic area known today as Turkey, born about the time the Gospels were being written and a friend of Philip’s four daughters mentioned in Acts 21:9<sup>5</sup>—received his information about the first two New

Testament Gospels from the first generation of Christians. According to Papias, the primary source for Matthew’s Gospel was the testimony of the Matthew, a follower of Jesus and former tax collector (Matthew 9:9).

■ Papias also wrote that the author of Mark’s Gospel had served as Peter’s translator when Peter preached in the early churches. As such, what Mark recorded in his Gospel was the witness of Peter himself.

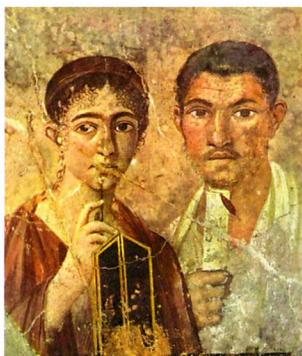
■ About the same time as Papias recorded these recollections, a pastor named Polycarp of Smyrna referred to the words of the apostle Paul as “Scripture.”

■ In a mid-second-century document known as the Muratorian Fragment, an unknown church leader reports that Luke’s Gospel came from Luke, the apostle Paul’s physician, and that this Gospel included eyewitness accounts from people that Luke interviewed.<sup>6</sup>



Shøyen Collection, Oslo and London)

own to carry *pinakes*, books with wax. Notes were scratched wax using styluses.



This painting from the ruins of Pompeii depicts two methods for writing in the first century: The man holds a papyrus scroll while his wife holds a stylus and wax tablet.

■ The Muratorian Fragment also makes it clear that the apostle John was the source for the Gospel that bears John’s name.

■ Also in the mid-second-century, another church leader—Irenaeus of Lyons—reported that he had received these same traditions about the four Gospels from Christians of the first and second centuries.<sup>7</sup>

So, from the first century onward, it seems to have been widely recognized that the Gospels now known by the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John represented eyewitness testimony about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In contrast, *none* of the “lost Gospels” can be connected to firsthand testimony.

### ■ How do we know that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were really the sources of the Gospels that bear their names?

Consistent and reliable traditions have connected the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with these Gospels from the first century onward. Some scholars claim that the New Testament Gospels received their names in the same way that some of the “lost Gospels” received their titles—people wanted these writings to seem authoritative; so, they simply added names of eyewitnesses, even though these people really didn’t write the Gospels at all. For example, one scholar puts it this way: “Sometime in the second century, when [Christians] recognized the need for *apostolic* authorities, they attributed these books to apostles (Matthew and John) and close companions of apostles (Mark, the secretary of Peter; and Luke the traveling companion of Paul).”<sup>8</sup>

The first problem with this skeptical line of thinking is that the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John seem to have been connected with their authors as soon as the Gospels began to circulate widely. At this time, some people who knew the authors would still have been alive; under these circumstances, it would have been difficult to ascribe false names to the Gospels without someone protesting.

But there’s another problem with the skeptics’ claims: By the end of the first century, the four New Testament Gospels had circulated thousands of miles throughout the Roman Empire. In fact, a fragment of John’s Gospel from early years of second century—a portion known as the John Rylands Papyrus or P52—has been found in Egypt, hundreds of miles from the Gospel’s point of origin in Asia Minor! Without rapid communication and without centralized church leadership, what would have happened if second-century Christians began ascribing false, apostolic names to the Gospels that had already spread this far from their places of origin? Most likely, each church would have connected a different author with each Gospel. Churches in Asia Minor might have ascribed a Gospel to the apostle Andrew, for example, while churches in Judea might have connected the same Gospel with Thaddeus or James or Jude. But, *in every titled manuscript copy of the four New Testament Gospels, no matter what part of the world in which it was used, each Gospel is connected to the same author.*

## ■ How did early Christians determine which writings really came from eyewitnesses?

These decisions were informed by a combination of *oral history*, *external* and *internal evidence*.



(Courtesy of CSNTM.org)

Gospel According to John, around the tenth century AD.

■ **Oral history:** Most of the knowledge about the origins of the New Testament books probably passed orally from one generation to another. From the first century onward, the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were connected with the four New Testament Gospels, and the writings of early Christians such as Ignatius of Antioch suggest that it would have been widely known that Paul wrote the epistles attributed to him.

■ **External evidence:** When no clear tradition was available to connect a book to an eyewitness, church members might explore *external evidence* about a book's origins. For example, a generation after the deaths of the apostles, a church leader near Rome considered which Christian writings should be viewed as authoritative. His conclusions can be found in a document known today as "the Muratorian Fragment." After listing the books that he viewed as authoritative, here's what this leader said that he had discovered regarding a popular book known as *The Shepherd*: "Hermas composed *The Shepherd* quite recently—in our times, in the city of Rome, while his brother Pius served as overseer. . . . While it should indeed be read, it cannot be read publicly for the people of the church—it is counted neither among the prophets (for their number has been completed) nor among the apostles (for it is after their time)."<sup>9</sup> Notice the reasons: This writing could not be added to the Old Testament prophets because the time of the Hebrew prophets had passed, and—with the deaths of the apostles—the time of the apostolic eyewitnesses had also ended. This teacher didn't forbid believers to read *The Shepherd*; he simply pointed out that the book should not serve as an authoritative text.

■ **Internal evidence:** Other times, Christians might conclude on the basis of *internal evidence* that a certain book did not represent eyewitness testimony. For example, in AD 199, a leading pastor named Serapion was told that a certain Gospel was "inscribed with Peter's name."<sup>10</sup> Since it bore the name of an apostolic eyewitness,

Serapion allowed the Gospel to be used in the churches. When Serapion read *Gospel of Peter* for himself, however, he recognized he'd made a mistake. Although *Gospel of Peter* didn't directly contradict the New Testament Gospels, certain phrases in the book could be taken to imply that Jesus wasn't fully human. What's more, Serapion probably knew from oral tradition that John Mark had once served as Peter's translator and that the Gospel According to Mark represented the words of Peter; yet, the *Gospel of Peter* added many fanciful details that never appeared in Mark's Gospel—like a towering, talking cross that accompanied the risen Jesus out of the tomb. After comparing *Gospel of Peter* to "the writings handed down to us"—that was Serapion's term for the New Testament texts that were connected indisputably to eyewitnesses—Serapion concluded that *Gospel of Peter* did *not* represent the eyewitness testimony of Simon Peter, and he reversed his previous decision. As it turns out, Serapion was correct: The language and thought-patterns in *Gospel of Peter* have convinced most scholars today that the book was written a generation after Simon Peter's death.<sup>11</sup>

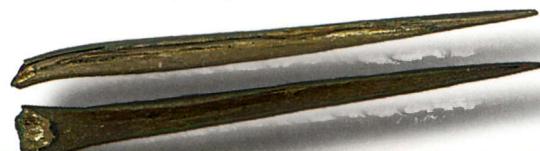
## ■ Why do we call the chosen books of the New Testament a "canon"?

"We, brothers and sisters, receive Peter and the rest of the apostles as we would receive Christ himself. But those writings that are falsely ascribed with their names, we carefully reject, knowing that no such writings have ever been handed down to us."

—Serapion of Antioch, late second century AD<sup>12</sup>

The word "canon" comes from the Greek word *kanon*, which means "measuring stick," and these are the writings that "measure" Christians' faithfulness to Jesus Christ. It was not until the fourth century AD that the authoritative writings about Jesus Christ began to be known as a "canon." The idea of recognizing certain writings as authoritative, however, emerged much earlier, apparently in the first century. Each authoritative writing was expected to be connected to an eyewitness of the risen Lord, to be recognized in churches throughout the known world, and not to contradict other writings about Jesus. Although debates continued into the fourth century about a few writings—including the letters of Peter, John's second and third letters, and the letters of James and Jude—Christians universally agreed at least as early as the second century on the authority of

at least nineteen of the books in the New Testament. From the beginning, Christians unanimously embraced at least the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, and first epistle of John. (See chart on page 15.) Even if this handful of books had been the *only* documents that represented eyewitness testimony about Jesus, every vital truth of Christian faith would remain completely intact.



(continued on page 8)



## The Gospels: "Lost" & Found

The New Testament begins with four accounts of the life of Jesus Christ commonly known as "Gospels," a word that means "good news" or "victorious tidings." The Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have been familiar to Christians for so many centuries that many believers have assumed these Gospels are the only retellings of the life of Jesus that ever existed. But there are more than a *dozen* other "Gospels," plus several supposed accounts of episodes from Jesus' life that aren't known by the name of "Gospel."

Some of these alternative "Gospels" have been familiar among scholars for centuries. Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* popularized several "lost Gospels," including *Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, and *Gospel of Thomas*. A couple of years later the *Gospel of Judas* was reconstructed and translated anew. The media implied that *Gospel of Judas* and other lost Gospels provide information about the historical Jesus that isn't included in the New Testament Gospels. Several writers and entertainment corporations were quick to turn a profit by sensationalizing the news of this reconstructed "Gospel." Indeed, the viewpoints found in the "lost Gospels" *do* differ from the New Testament Gospels.

ACCORDING TO NEW TESTAMENT GOSPELS	ACCORDING TO "LOST GOSPELS"
Jesus was fully human and fully divine	Jesus was a spirit who seemed human or a mere human uniquely inhabited by a divine spirit (Gnostic gospels)
Judas Iscariot willingly chose to betray Jesus	Jesus told Judas to betray him ( <i>Gospel of Judas</i> )
The first miraculous sign that Jesus performed was turning water to wine at Cana	Jesus performed self-serving miracles throughout his childhood ("infancy Gospels")

How likely is it that the lost Gospels really tell us the truth about Jesus Christ? An open-minded look at the historical record quickly reveals that there is little reason to doubt the New Testament Gospels and great reason to reject the so-called "lost Gospels."



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# Truth about the “Lost Gospels”

## ■ Who wrote the “lost Gospels”?

No one knows for sure. Even though the names of Jesus’ apostles and other companions are attached to several lost Gospels, no evidence exists to suggest that the authors of these texts even *could* have been eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus. In many cases, names such as “Mary” or “Philip” have been attached to these Gospels simply because these individuals are such prominent characters in the book. In a few cases—such as *Gospel of Thomas*, for example—the Gospel does actually claim to come from a prominent apostle or church leader, though it is clear from the language used in the book that the document was written long after the death of its namesake.

## ■ How are these writings different from the New Testament writings?

The “lost Gospels” were primarily fanciful accounts of Jesus’ life, or they were written to promote a theology that contradicts the eyewitness testimony found in the New Testament. A few lost Gospels—for example, *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, *Infancy Gospel of James*, and perhaps *Gospel of Peter*—seem to have been penned by well-meaning Christians who felt compelled to expand stories in the New Testament. Many parts of these writings don’t directly contradict anything in the New Testament, but they tend to expand the New Testament accounts in fanciful and theologically problematic ways. For example, according to these writings, Jesus used his divine powers for his own benefit throughout his childhood. A couple of lost Gospels—such as *Gospel of the Lord* and *Gospel of the Ebionites*—were variations of the New Testament Gospels, edited to fit the theology of certain sects.

The distinct theology of most of the “lost Gospels” was, however, *Gnostic*. From the perspective of most Gnostics, the deity who created the universe was not the true or supreme God; the creator of the physical world was an evil deity, a rebel against a higher and greater deity. Since they understood the cosmos to be the product of an evil deity, most Gnostics viewed everything physical—

especially the role of women in reproduction—as evil; they also claimed that Jesus Christ only *seemed* human. According to Gnostics, Christ came to deliver humanity from the limitations of the physical world. As such, Gnostics were not typically interested in the actual, historical events of the life of Jesus; the Gnostics focused most of their attention on other-worldly sayings and myths, many of which depicted biblical villains as heroes and vice-versa.

## ■ How many lost Gospels are there?

If a Gospel is defined as an ancient retelling of the events and teachings of Jesus’ life, there are fewer than thirty known Gospels. Most texts survive only in incomplete fragments. Here’s a summary of many of the lost Gospels, most of which could not have been written by eyewitnesses:

■ *Gospel of Basilides* (Gnostic writing, mid-second century AD) Gnostic writing, now lost, mentioned by several early Christians.

■ *Gospel of the Ebionites* (Ebionite writing, second century AD) Surviving only in fragmented quotations in the writings of early Christians, *Gospel of the Ebionites* appears to have been a variation of *Gospel of the Hebrews*, edited to fit the theology of a sect known as “Ebionites.” The Ebionites believed Jesus was a human being, adopted by God at his baptism.

■ *Gospel, Egerton* (Fragments from an ancient document, second century AD) Not actually a Gospel but a few fragments from an unknown source, the “Egerton Gospel” includes four stories about Jesus. Three of these stories appear, in varying forms, in the New Testament Gospels (Mk. 1:40–45; 12:13–17; Jn. 5:39–47; 10:33–39).

■ *Gospel of the Egyptians* (Ancient writing, perhaps Gnostic, second century AD) Presented as a dialogue between Jesus and a female disciple named Salome, *Gospel of the Egyptians* encourages all believers to practice celibacy.



(Courtesy of the Schøyen Collection, Oslo and London)  
Inkwell discovered near the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were copied.

“*Matthew* composed his Gospel among the Hebrews in their language, while Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome, building up the church there. After their deaths, Mark—Peter’s follower and interpreter—handed down Peter’s proclamation in written form. Luke, the companion of Paul, wrote in a book the Gospel proclaimed by Paul. Finally, John—the Lord’s own follower, the one who leaned against his chest—composed the Gospel while living in Ephesus, in Asia.”

—Irenaeus of Lyons, mid- to late second century

■ THE NEW TESTAMENT/ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY ■ GNOSTIC (“SECRET”) DOCUMENTS

AD50

AD100

AD150

28–30 Jesus’ death and resurrection.

110 The Rylands fragment. The oldest New Testament fragment (from John 18) that we have today. It is dated from 90–120.

107 Ignatius of Antioch refers to “Jesus as God.”

49–96 The books of the New Testament are written.

110 Papias mentions the authors of the four Gospels.

130 The four Gospels and thirteen of Paul’s letters are accepted as authoritative by many churches.

125–150 Gnosticism begins to spread.

140 Marcion tries to eliminate Matthew, Mark, John, Acts, and three of Paul’s letters from his church’s Bible.

150 Clement refers to Jesus as God.

178 A pagan philosopher and writer named Celsus says that Jesus had declared himself divine.

180? The Gnostic Gospel of Judas is written.

150 The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas is written.

■ *Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians* (Gnostic writing, late third century AD) *Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians* recounts a Gnostic myth in which Jesus is presented as a reincarnation of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve.

■ *Gospel of Eve* (Gnostic writing, probably third century AD) Lost Gnostic writing, quoted by Epiphanius of Salamis. *Gospel of Eve* was written at least a century after the time of Jesus. Seemingly also known as *Gospel of Perfection*.

■ *Gospel of the Hebrews* (Christian writing, first century AD) *Gospel of the Hebrews* is truly a “lost Gospel”; it survives only in quotations found in the writings of early Christians. Many scholars believe *Gospel of the Hebrews* represents an early, Aramaic summary of Jesus’ life from the apostle Matthew—a summary that eventually became part of the document that now known as the Gospel According to Matthew. Also known as *Gospel of the Nazoreans*.

■ *Infancy Gospel of James* (Christian writing, late second century AD) An account, supposedly written by James, of the life of Mary. According to this document, Mary the mother of Jesus remained a virgin throughout her life.

■ *Acts of John* (Docetic writing, late second century AD) Supposed retelling of events from the life of the apostle John. Some copies of this text include comments that are *Docetic*—that is, they imply that Jesus Christ was not fully human—but these comments are not present in every version. It is possible that they were added later.

■ *Gospel of Judas* (Gnostic writing, late second century AD) Supposed account of the life of Jesus in which Judas Iscariot is portrayed as a heroic figure, commanded by Jesus to act as the betrayer.

■ *Gospel of the Lord* (Marcionite writing, mid-second century AD) Alteration of the Gospel According to Luke, edited to fit Marcion’s theology.

■ *Gospel of Mary* (Gnostic writing, late second or early third century AD) Although frequently called *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, the text of this document never indicates which biblical Mary is the story’s central character.



Beginning after the fire in Rome in AD 64, the Emperor Nero harshly persecuted Christians, killing significant leaders such as Peter and Paul. One of the motivations for writing the Gospels may have been the deaths—because of Nero’s persecution—of key eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus.

■ *Gospel of Matthias* (Ancient writing, perhaps Gnostic, second century AD) Lost document, known to many early Christians. This writing seems to have passed out of usage among Christians because (1) no clear evidence was available to suggest that the apostle Matthias actually wrote the book and (2) the book was used by heretical sects including the Gnostics.

■ *Gospel of Nicodemus* (Forgery, fourth century AD) Forgery that claimed to include Pontius Pilate’s report to the emperor about Jesus. Also known as *Acts of Pilate*.

■ *Gospel, Oxyrhynchus* (Christian writing, third century AD or earlier) Not actually a Gospel but a tiny papyrus fragment from an unknown source, the “Oxyrhynchus Gospel” describes a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. The events described in this fragment do not contradict any New Testament Gospels and seem to represent an expansion of the events described in Mark 7:1–23.

■ *Gospel of Peter* (Christian writing, second century AD) Although familiar to many early Christians, this text was rejected as an authoritative account of the life of Jesus because (1) it could not be clearly connected to the apostle Peter and (2) some passages in the book could be misconstrued to suggest that Jesus wasn’t fully human.

■ *Apocalypse of Peter* (Christian writing, second century AD) An apocalyptic text that circulated with *Gospel of Peter*, *Apocalypse of Peter* doesn’t directly contradict any New Testament writings, but the book seems to have been written around AD 135, seventy years or so after the death of the apostle Peter.

■ *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* (Gnostic writing, late third century AD) The *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* clearly denied that Jesus had a physical body, declaring that “the one whose hands and feet they nailed to the cross [was] only a fleshly substitute.”

■ *Gospel of Philip* (Gnostic writing, third century AD) Not actually a gospel but a collection of brief excerpts from other Gnostic writings, *Gospel of Philip* summarizes the views of the followers of the Gnostic leader Valentinus.

■ *Gospel of the Savior* (Gnostic writing, early third century AD) Not actually a Gospel but a few fragments from an ancient document known as Papyrus Berlin 22220, *Gospel of the Savior* seems to have been a Gnostic adaptation of *Gospel of Peter*. Also known as *Vision of the Savior*.



(Courtesy of CSNTM.org)

The fir

## AD200

180–188

Irenaeus writes “Against Heresies” in which he condemns Gnosticism and mentions all four Gospels in order and lists twenty New Testament books as authoritative.

180–200

The Gnostic Gospel of Mary Magdalene is written.

10

## AD250

250–450

The rest of the Gnostic Nag Hammadi documents are written and circulated.

## AD300

332

Emperor Constantine orders production of 50 vellum Bibles.

325

The Council of Nicaea condemns Arius and his teachings and produces an early version of the Nicene Creed which clearly defines Jesus as God.

320

Arius claims Jesus is a created being and not God.

11

350

Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest complete Bibles still in existence, were circulated.

337 Constantine dies.



■ *Gospel of Thomas* (Gnostic writing, mid-second century AD)  
 Not actually a Gospel, but a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. Most sayings in *Gospel of Thomas* are similar to statements found in the New Testament Gospels. A few, however, seem to represent an early form of Gnosticism. Although some sayings in the book can be traced to the first century AD, the book did not emerge in its final form until the middle of the second century.

■ *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (Christian writing, mid-second century AD)  
 An account of the childhood of Jesus, supposedly written by the apostle Thomas. In this text, the boy Jesus uses his miraculous powers for his own benefit. The author's style of writing and his lack of knowledge about Jewish traditions suggest that the book was written in the mid-second century AD, long after the death of the apostle Thomas.

■ *Gospel of Truth* (Gnostic writing, late second century AD) Unearthed at Nag Hammadi in the 1940s, *Gospel of Truth* is a Gnostic retelling of the creation story and of the life of Jesus. According to Irenaeus of Lyons, a disciple of a Gnostic teacher named Valentinus wrote *Gospel of Truth*, also known as *Gospel of Valentinus*.

### ■ Why are so many people so enthralled by the "lost Gospels"?

Perhaps people long to believe that there's some knowledge or experience of Jesus Christ that isn't available in the New Testament Gospels—and, in some sense, they're correct. There *is* experience and knowledge of Jesus Christ that isn't available simply by reading the New Testament Gospels. But this knowledge and experience certainly is not available in the unreliable myths found in the "lost Gospels." The full knowledge and experience that our souls crave is available when we not only *read about* Jesus Christ but also *personally commit our lives to* Jesus Christ, the One in whom we can be "made complete" and through whom we can enter into fellowship with the God who gives us his love in "far greater abundance than any of us could ask or think" (Colossians 2:9; Ephesians 3:20).

### Notes

- 1 See Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 3-5. Hereafter, *Lost Christianities* will be cited as *LC*, followed by the page numbers.
- 2 *MJ* 36.
- 3 Ehrman places the emergence of this principle later and summarizes it in this way: Authoritative texts had to be "ancient" (from the time of Jesus) and "apostolic" (from the first followers of Jesus or their associates) (*LC* 242-243). As Ehrman notes, two other standards came into play later, those of catholicity (widespread usage among Christians) and orthodoxy (agreement with other Scriptures). I would contend, though, that—for the earliest Christians—the categories of *orthodoxy*, *apostolicity*, and *antiquity* were not distinguishable. All three categories were rooted in the assumption that eyewitness testimony was authoritative.
- 4 Quoted in Eusebius, 3:39
- 5 It was, according to Eusebius, from these

- prophetesses that Papias received some stories about the apostles (Eusebius 3:39).
- 6 Muratorian Fragment.
- 7 Eusebius, 5:8.
- 8 *LC* 235.
- 9 Translated from "Muratorian Canon in Latin": Retrieved October 28, 2006, from <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/muratorian-latin.html>.
- 10 Eusebius, 6:12.
- 11 See *LC* 16. The beginnings of blaming the crucifixion on the Jewish people can be seen in the trial before Pontius Pilate in *Gospel of Peter*, suggesting a date after the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues in the late first century AD
- 12 Eusebius, 6:12; cf. Tertullian of Carthage, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 3:20-21: Retrieved October 28, 2006, from [http://www.tertullian.org/latin/de\\_praescriptione\\_haereticorum.html](http://www.tertullian.org/latin/de_praescriptione_haereticorum.html).
- 13 Eusebius, 5:8.

## EARLY LISTS OF AUTHORITATIVE CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

The Fragment of Muratori (mid-second century AD, Rome)	Codex Claromontanus (late third century AD, Egypt or North Africa)	Eusebius of Caesarea's Church History (early fourth century AD, Palestine and Asia Minor)	Letter of Athanasius (AD 367)
<b>Accepted</b> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon 1 John 2 or 3 John (or both letters, counted as one) Jude Revelation Wisdom of Solomon [Epistle to the Hebrews and the letters of Peter not mentioned at all]	<b>Accepted</b> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews* James 1 and 2 Peter 1, 2, and 3 John Jude Revelation	<b>Accepted</b> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews 1 Peter 1 John Revelation*	<b>Accepted</b> Matthew Mark Luke John Acts Romans 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 & 2 Thessalonians 1 & 2 Timothy Titus Philemon Hebrews James 1 and 2 Peter 1, 2, and 3 John Jude Revelation
<b>Recognized but Questioned</b> Apocalypse of Peter	<b>Recognized but Questioned</b> Apocalypse of Peter Epistle of Barnabas The Shepherd of Hermas Acts of Paul	<b>Recognized but Questioned</b> James Jude 2 Peter 2 and 3 John	<b>Recognized but Questioned</b>
<b>Rejected</b> Laodiceans Alexandrians The Shepherd of Hermas	<b>Rejected</b> (All other writings)	<b>Rejected</b> Apocalypse of Peter Acts of Paul The Shepherd of Hermas Epistle of Barnabas Teaching of Twelve Apostles Gospel of Peter Gospel of Thomas Gospel of Matthias Gospel of the Hebrews Acts of Andrew Acts of John	<b>Rejected</b> (All other writings)
<p>This chart shows that early Christians accepted the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John long before the critics claim, and that none of the so-called lost Gospels was ever accepted.</p>			

\* indicates that this listing may have placed this writing in the list of questionable books