

The Gnostic Gospels: *Are they the real history of Jesus?*

Are there secret writings about Jesus?

In 1945 a discovery was made in Upper Egypt, near the town of Nag Hammadi. Fifty-two copies of ancient writings, called the Gnostic gospels were found in 13 leather-bound papyrus codices (handwritten books). They were written in Coptic and belonged to a library in a monastery.

A few Gnostic scholars have gone so far as to assert that these recently discovered writings are the authentic history of Jesus instead of the New Testament. But does their faith in these documents square with the historical evidence? Let's take a deeper look to see if we can separate truth from fiction.

Secret "Knowers"

The Gnostic gospels are attributed to a group known as (big surprise here) the Gnostics. Their name comes from the Greek word gnosis, meaning "knowledge." These people thought they had secret, special knowledge hidden from ordinary people.

As Christianity spread, the Gnostics mixed some doctrines and elements of Christianity into their beliefs, morphing Gnosticism into a counterfeit Christianity. Perhaps they did it to keep recruitment numbers up and make Jesus a poster child for their cause. However, for their system of thought to fit with Christianity, Jesus needed to be reinvented, stripped of both his humanity and his absolute deity.

In *The Oxford History of Christianity* John McManners wrote of the Gnostics' mixture of Christian and mythical beliefs.

Gnosticism was (and still is) a theosophy with many ingredients. Occultism and oriental mysticism became fused with astrology, magic. ... They collected sayings of Jesus shaped to fit their own interpretation (as in the Gospel of Thomas), and offered their adherents an alternative or rival form of Christianity.¹

Early Critics

A mild strain of Gnostic philosophy was already growing in the first century just decades after the death of Jesus. The apostles, in their teaching and writings, went to great lengths to condemn these beliefs as being opposed to the truth of Jesus, to whom they were eyewitnesses.

Check out, for example, what the apostle John wrote near the end of the first century:

Who is the great liar? The one who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Such people are antichrists, for they have denied the Father and the Son. (1 John 2:22, NIV).

Following the apostles' teaching, the early church leaders unanimously condemned the Gnostics as a cult. Church father Irenaeus, writing 140 years before the Council of Nicaea, confirmed that the Gnostics were condemned by the church as heretics. He also rejected their "gospels." But, referring to the four New Testament Gospels, he said, "It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are."²

Christian theologian Origen wrote this in the early third century, more than a hundred years before Nicaea:

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 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 four gospels should be accepted.³

Mystery Authors

When it comes to the Gnostic gospels, just about every book carries the name of a New Testament character: the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, and so on. But were they even written by their

purported authors? Let's take a look.

The Gnostic gospels are dated about 110 to 300 years after Christ, and no credible scholar believes any of them could have been written by their namesakes. In James M. Robinson's comprehensive *The Nag Hammadi Library*, we learn that the Gnostic gospels were written by "largely unrelated and anonymous authors."⁴

New Testament scholar Norman Geisler writes, "The Gnostic writings were not written by the apostles, but by men in the second century (and later) pretending to use apostolic authority to advance their own teachings. Today we call this fraud and forgery."⁵

Mystery Versus History

The Gnostic gospels are not historical accounts of Jesus' life but instead are largely esoteric sayings, shrouded in mystery, leaving out historical details such as names, places, and events. This is in striking contrast to the New Testament Gospels, which contain innumerable historical facts about Jesus' life, ministry, and words.

Who would you be more likely to believe—someone who says, "Hey, I've got some secret facts that were mysteriously revealed to me," or someone who says, "I've searched all the evidence and history and here it is for you to make up your mind on"? Keeping that question in mind, consider the following two statements, the first from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (c. 110-150 A.D.) and the second from the New Testament's Gospel of Luke (c. 55-70 A.D.).

- These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded.⁶
- Many people have written accounts about the events that took place among us. They used as their source material the reports circulating among us from the early disciples and other eyewitnesses of what God has done in fulfillment of his promises. Having carefully investigated all of these accounts from the beginning, I have decided to write a careful summary for you, to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught. (Luke 1:1-4, NLT)

Do you find the open and aboveboard approach of Luke appealing? And do you find the fact that it was written closer to the original events to be in favor of its reliability? If so, that's what the early church thought as well.

And most scholars concur with the early church's view that the New Testament is the authentic history of Jesus. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has said of the Gnostic gospels, "We learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus' ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his."⁷

Thus, even though the Gnostic writings have impressed some scholars, their late dating and questionable authorship can't compare with the New Testament. Such contrast between the New Testament and the Gnostic writings is devastating to those pushing conspiracy theories. New Testament historian F. F. Bruce wrote, "There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament"⁸

Endnotes

1. John McManners, ed., *The Oxford History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 114.
3. Bock, 119-120.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 156.
6. Quoted in Robinson, 126.
7. Quoted in Lutzer, 32.
8. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1999, 37.)

Permission to reproduce this article: Publisher grants permission to reproduce this material without written approval, but only in its entirety and only for non-profit use. No part of this material may be altered or used out of context without publisher's written permission. Printed copies of Y-Origins and Y-Jesus magazine may be ordered at: www.JesusOnline.com/product_page

© 2007 B&L Publications. This article is a supplement to Y-Jesus magazine by Bright Media Foundation & B&L Publications: Larry Chapman, Chief Editor.