

Are There Lost Gospels?

David Flatt

Since the fantasy novel, *"The da Vinci Code,"* pop-culture has been obsessed with lost gospels. Biblical scholars and media have prompted various ancient accounts of Jesus that are not included in the New Testament. As a result, people often wonder if the gospels of Thomas, Philip, Peter, Mary Magdalene, or Judas should be part of the Biblical record. Why are only the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John included in the New Testament?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are drastically different from the lost/gnostic gospels. There are valid reasons why the gnostic gospels have never been considered part of the canon of the New Testament. To explain this, consider why Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are unique.

1. The four gospels are the earliest gospels we have. This point alone should be enough to dismiss the gnostic gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written in the 1st century. The gnostic gospels were written between the 2nd and 8th centuries.

The New Testament gospels have generally been considered to have been written 70-100 A.D. Mark has been considered the earliest gospel written and John the latest written. However, two significant historic events are never mentioned in the Gospels: the great fire of Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem (the destruction of Jerusalem is prophesied, but the actual event is not documented).

The great fire of Rome occurred during the reign of Nero in 64 A.D. The destruction of Jerusalem happened in 70 A.D. Scholars are puzzled about why these major events would have been excluded from the four Gospels. If the four Gospels were written after these momentous events, surely they would have been mentioned.

What do the exclusion of the great fire of Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem mean in terms of dating the four gospels? The absence of these events from the four gospels only adds to the case that they may have been written earlier than previously considered. If this is the case, the credibility of the four gospels would only increase.

So, what's the point? Well, if you wanted to know about Jesus, would you rather read something written by His contemporaries during the century in which He lived, or something written between one and seven centuries after He lived? The four gospels were written within the lifetimes of people who knew Jesus. They are the only gospels in our possession which were written in the first century.

2. The four gospels have a credible connection to the apostles. Arguably the most important criteria used to authenticate a book of the New Testament is what scholars refer to as "apostolicity." In laymen's terms, the gospel must have been written by an apostle or a direct associate of an apostle.

Not only are the gnostic gospels written too late, but none were also written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle. Why, then, do some of them bear the names of some of the apostles? If Peter or Mary Magdalene wrote a gospel, shouldn't we include it in the New Testament?

First, as we already stated, the gnostic gospels were written after the deaths of the apostles and their associates. For example, the gospel of Judas is dated to 280 A.D. Second, the contents and style of writing do not match the four gospels. Scholars refer to these gospels as the "Pseudepigrapha." This means "false writings." The books bear the name of an apostle, but were not written by the apostle.

But, why would someone write a gospel under the name of an apostle or someone connected to an apostle? Credibility. People are not likely to read the gospel according to Brooks, but they might read the gospel according to Judas.

3. The four gospels lack embellishments of later gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John give readers factual analysis of people, places, and events. Often, they leave readers wanting more information. Think about this: the actual resurrection is not described in the four gospels. When Mary arrives at the tomb of Jesus, He has already risen from the dead. This is not the case for the gnostic gospels.

For example, in the gnostic gospel of Peter, the author describes the resurrection of Jesus as it occurs. In this account, two radiant males descend from Heaven and enter the tomb of Jesus. The two radiant males emerge supporting Jesus. Then, the cross emerges from the tomb behind them. The head of Jesus reaches to Heaven as if He is a giant. Jesus then ascends to Heaven. A voice from Heaven asks, "*Have you made proclamation to the fallen-asleep?*" Then, the cross speaks and says, "Yes." It is as if an animated cross raises Jesus from the dead.

Also, the four gospels give us little information regarding the childhood of Jesus. The infancy gospel of Thomas attempts to fill in the gaps for us. In this writing, Jesus is mean and scary. He terrorizes his village. He kills a boy for bumping into His shoulder. Villagers ask Joseph to take his family out of town. On another occasion, little Jesus makes a boy blind. When Joseph arrives, he wrings Jesus' ear sore. As a student, Jesus is uncontrollable. He harms and berates His teachers. By the end of the gospel, though, the author records Jesus at twelve-years-old teaching at the Temple.

4. The four gospels were recognized as authoritative early. All evidence suggests the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the most read widely circulated. In every ancient listing of New Testament books, the four gospels always make the list. For example, the Muratorian fragment dates to 175 A.D. and lists most of the books of the New Testament. Irenaeus (130-202 A.D.) quotes from twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Clement (38-99 A.D.) cites from all the books of the New Testament, including the four gospels.

Just the opposite is true regarding the gnostic gospels. The gnostic gospels are never listed together with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The gnostic gospels are always distinguished as different. They do not appear on the Muratorian fragment or any other list indicating authoritative books of the Church.

Also, we have discovered thousands of manuscripts, copies of copies, of the four gospels. This is not the case regarding the gnostic gospels. In some instances, we only have one manuscript. To date, there are three copies of the gospel of Thomas. There are only three copies of the gospel of Mary Magdalene.

Why don't we have thousands of manuscripts of the gnostic gospels? It's not because we are not looking. It is likely due to the reasons identified in this article. The gnostic gospels were never viewed as credible historic documents, much less doctrinally authoritative for the Church. They were not copied or widely circulated.

Conclusion

Our culture ceaselessly attempts to undermine Christianity. Our culture characterizes the faith as morally prejudiced and scientifically ignorant. In addition to these common assaults, the academic community tries to cast doubt on the historic reliability of the Bible. Some of the staunchest critics of the Bible as a historic text are faculty members of religious departments at colleges and universities.

Today, Dr. Bart Ehrman is the face of Biblical skepticism in America. He is a professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is an atheist. Yet, he is considered among the foremost authority on textual criticism of the Bible.

Regardless of what skeptics like Dr. Ehrman think, they cannot change the historic facts supporting the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They contain the earliest records of Jesus. They were written by apostles or associates of the apostles. They do not contain wild, unsubstantiated embellishments. They were the earliest recognized authoritative writings of the Church. The manuscript evidence of the four gospels is incomparable to the gnostic gospels.

Once we establish the validity of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we can then focus on their contents. They document the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. They show readers who He was and how He was used by God to bring salvation to the world. How will we respond to what we read in the Gospels? What will we do with the resurrected Christ?