

# Jot & Tittle

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## **The Hidden Gospels**

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A popular notion currently in vogue is the idea that the New Testament is an incomplete collection of biblical writings. There were, after all, many other Christian writings dating back to the early church. Shouldn't the New Testament include these other writings? This idea of missing material has become even more popular in recent years through the Jesus Seminar's *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*<sup>1</sup> and through the adventure novel, *The Da Vinci Code*<sup>2</sup>, by Dan Brown. These, along with other contemporary writings, seem to be enamored with the extra-biblical literature of the early church. So we must ask ourselves the question, is the New Testament complete? There are good reasons to answer this question with a resounding "yes," and to regard the so-called "hidden" writings as inferior to the inspired New Testament text.

### ***Gnosticism and Gnostic Beliefs***

Gnosticism was a heretical religious movement that may have begun in the first century, but had its most prominent expression in the second century after the birth of Jesus Christ. "The term 'gnosticism' designates a variety of religious movements in the early Christian centuries that held that salvation came through a secret 'knowledge' (Greek *gnosis*) of one's origins. It was characterized by a cosmological dualism that opposed the spiritual to the material

world and distinguished between the transcendent God and the foolish creator of the material world."<sup>3</sup> Yamauchi describes the anti-physical beliefs of the Gnostics this way:

The material creation, including the body, was regarded as inherently evil. Sparks of divinity, however, had been encapsulated in the bodies of certain pneumatic or spiritual individuals, who were ignorant of their celestial origins. The transcendent God sent down a redeemer, who brought them salvation in the form of secret *gnosis*. Gnostics hoped to escape from the prison of their bodies at death and to traverse the planetary spheres of hostile demons to be reunited with God. There was for them, of course, no reason to believe in the resurrection of the body.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of relying on the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross for salvation, the Gnostics depended on their elite, philosophical knowledge. In fact, Jesus' physical death ran contrary to their dualistic belief system. One Gnostic writer "held a docetic view of Christ that denied the incarnation" and "taught that marriage and procreation were from Satan."<sup>5</sup> Another, Cerinthus by name, "held that Jesus was but a man upon whom Christ descended as a dove at his baptism" and taught that "Christ could not suffer" but "withdrew from Jesus before the crucifixion."<sup>6</sup> Clearly the Gnostics stood outside the realm of orthodox Christianity, and their writings would support their dualistic, philosophical, heretical beliefs.

### ***The Gnostic Writings***

The Gnostics left behind a fairly extensive body of literature that was lost for centuries. Then, in 1945, a significant collection of Gnostic writings was discovered in Egypt. "In 1945 a cache of eleven Coptic codices and fragments of two others were found by peasants near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, 370 miles south of Cairo, where the Nile bends from west to east."<sup>7</sup> Among the Nag Hammadi manuscripts were Gnostic "gospels" purportedly recording lost teachings of Jesus, most significant among them being *The Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip*. Although both of these gospels claim apostolic authorship, they clearly were written well after the apostolic era. *The Gospel of Thomas* begins by claiming to contain secret teachings of Jesus as recorded by the apostle Thomas:

“These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***An Evaluation of the Gnostic Gospels***

Do the Gnostic gospels deserve a place in the New Testament? There are several sound reasons for dismissing these Gnostic writings as unbiblical, uninspired writings. First, the claim to apostolic authorship of these books discredits their authenticity. “To begin with, not even the most radical liberal scholar seriously believes that *The Gospel of Thomas* was written by the Thomas of the New Testament or that *The Gospel of Philip* was written by the Philip of the New Testament.”<sup>9</sup> Pseudonymous writings are suspect, particularly when it comes to identifying inspired Scripture. “There is no evidence that pseudonymous writing was acceptable within the Christian community. Rather, when such literature later began to appear, it was rejected.”<sup>10</sup>

A second reason for rejecting the Gnostic writings from the New Testament canon relates to their date of composition. While the four New Testament Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—can be dated to within the lifetimes of Jesus’ immediate disciples, the Gnostic gospels were written in the second century or later. They date at least 100 or 150 years after Jesus’ crucifixion and “are not eyewitness accounts of the events of the New Testament.”<sup>11</sup>

A third reason for dismissing the Gnostic writings as unworthy of canonical writings is their content. Lutzer says:

If you read the Gnostic Gospels, you will not be impressed by their similarity to the New Testament but rather by their striking differences. These gospels are nonhistorical, even *antihistorical*; they contain little narrative and have no sense of chronology. They show no interest in research, geography, or historical contexts. These documents make no serious pretense of actually overlapping with the canonical Gospels. They contain some New Testament allusions to and quotations of Jesus, along with many foolish sayings that are attributed to him.<sup>12</sup>

For example, *The Gospel of Thomas* quotes Jesus as saying, “Blessed is the lion which becomes man when consumed by man; and cursed is the man whom the lion consumes, and the lion becomes man.”<sup>13</sup>

Clearly this is an unlikely statement from the lips of the Jesus of the New Testament. Likewise, a cryptic statement in *The Gospel of Philip* has been mistakenly interpreted by some to imply that Jesus was actually married to Mary Magdalene.<sup>14</sup>

### ***A Complete and Reliable New Testament***

Lutzer summarizes the data well, saying, “To put it mildly, there is no reason to accept the Gnostic Gospels as historically worthy; their value lies in telling us what the Gnostics believed, even though the writings shed no new light on Jesus, Mary Magdalene, or early Christianity.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the New Testament truly does give us “everything we need for life and godliness” through God’s “great and precious promises” (2 Peter 1:3-4). We have a complete, and a completely reliable, Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Funk, Robert W., and Hoover, Roy W. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Clouse, Robert G., Pierard, Richard V., and Yamauchi, Edwin M. *Two Kingdoms: The Church and Culture through the Ages*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1993, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Yamauchi, Edwin M. “Gnosticism” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, editors. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, p. 416.

<sup>5</sup> Yamauchi, p. 415.

<sup>6</sup> Yamauchi, p. 415.

<sup>7</sup> Yamauchi, p. 415.

<sup>8</sup> “The Gospel of Thomas.” Translated by Thomas O. Lambdin. In *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Revised Edition. Edited by James M. Robinson. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> Lutzer, Erwin W. *The Da Vinci Deception*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2004, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Barnett, Paul. *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999, p. 341.

<sup>11</sup> Lutzer, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Lutzer, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> “The Gospel of Thomas,” p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> Lutzer, p. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Lutzer, p. 22.