

FALSE GOSPELS:
AN APPROACH TO STUDYING
THE NEW TESTAMENT
APOCRYPHA

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Unfortunately, the term *apocrypha* is not used consistently to describe one body of material or collection of texts. Generally, the designation *the Pseudepigrapha* describes Old Testament noncanonical writings, whereas the term *New Testament Apocrypha* usually indicates noncanonical writings authored after the New Testament period. Even though these designations are arbitrary, they have become the most common means of differentiating between Old and New Testament–period noncanonical texts. More specifically, the term *the Apocrypha* has been used to describe a collection of books contained today in Catholic Bibles, and during Joseph Smith’s day in most printings of the King James Version. Among those books are 1–2 Esdras, the Wisdom of Solomon, and additions to Esther and Daniel. To add to the confusion, all of the books are written pseudepigraphically (written in someone else’s name) and have been designated as apocryphal (purportedly containing hidden or secret materials). The focus of this chapter will be on the collection of New

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Testament apocryphal materials that have not previously been included in the Bible.

The confusion in terminology is due in part to the recent discovery or rediscovery of many texts from antiquity which added to the originally small number of apocryphal texts. But these discoveries are not alone to blame for the imprecision in our terminology. Indeed, our earliest surviving index or list of canonical books, the Muratorian Canon (named after L. Muratori, who discovered the list in an eighth-century manuscript), includes the names of books that are now deemed apocryphal.¹ Presumably, the canon list is a copy of a similar list from about AD 200, although it could be as late as the beginning of the fourth century AD.²

In the list, the author enumerates all of the canonical books of scripture, which are very similar to the twenty-seven-book canon of the modern New Testament. However, toward the end of the list, the author differentiates between genuine writings of the Apostles and writings that were forged in the Apostles' names: "There is current also (an epistle) to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, forged in Paul's name for the sect of Marcion, and several others, which cannot be received in the catholic Church."³ Interestingly, the author of the list recognizes several other books as authoritative that have in our day been excluded from the canon. He lists the Wisdom of Solomon, the Revelation of Peter, and the Shepherd of Hermas, with the understanding that the latter is a recent composition.

The Muratorian Canon speaks to the heart of the debate over the New Testament apocrypha's value because it shows that books were included in the scriptural canon even though a work was written in the postapostolic era. At times, scholars imply that including the apocrypha in modern Bibles or collecting extrabiblical materials is a modern practice.⁴ However, nearly all canon lists from the first centuries after the Apostles include texts that are not part of our modern New Testament.⁵ The simple fact that the early Church leaders could differentiate between canonical texts and others that were written for various purposes is encouraging, because it demonstrates a living doctrinal trajectory within the Church. Leaders were not deceived by many of these works but rather may have viewed them much as we do today: "There

are many things contained therein that are true, and it is mostly translated correctly; there are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men” (D&C 91:1–2).

Comparatively, there are likely three or four apocryphal texts for every book of scripture in the New Testament. They are not all of a single genre; they include gospels, collections of sayings, acts of individual Apostles, collections of apostolic teachings, revelatory dialogues, and apocalypses. Within these general categories are subcategories, such as infancy gospels and Gnostic gospels, for example. We sometimes treat this vast body of literature, which was composed over several centuries in places as diverse as Europe and North Africa, as a single unit. To properly understand any document within the collection of New Testament apocrypha, we must place it in its proper compositional setting, understand who used it and why, and seek to discern its impact on those who used it.

The value in exerting effort to understand apocryphal literature is twofold: first, once we understand the compositional situation surrounding an apocryphal text, we can then ascertain its potential to preserve credible information about Jesus or the Church that He founded. Second, once we understand how the document impacted Christian communities, we can begin to discern the historical development of the Apostasy within those communities. For example, it is easy to pick up a Gnostic document and read about the journey of the soul from its pre-mortal existence through its heavenly progression without realizing that the text actually presents a significant Gnostic corruption of Christian doctrine.⁶ And even though the doctrine might initially resonate with us today, it preserves traces of the Apostasy in action. The following categories, developed to encourage study into the apocrypha in light of the Restoration of the gospel, may perhaps help us use this body of literature in new and meaningful ways.

DOCUMENTS COMPOSED TO REDIRECT CHRISTIAN BEHAVIOR

In a groundbreaking study on the apocrypha from a Latter-day Saint point of view, Stephen E. Robinson looked at the issue of “lying for God” as a means of understanding the purpose and function of

some of the intertestamental apocrypha. In that study, Robinson proposed that deception played a significant part in the production of many apocryphal texts.⁷ The study is a model of careful scholarship, but its limited scope makes it applicable only to a very narrow set of apocryphal texts: those that seek to alter normative Christian and Jewish practices.

A considerable body of New Testament apocryphal texts originates from a period when the divergence between mainstream Christianity and its many branches was still quite recent, enough so to cause confusion between the various Christian communities. At the end of the first century, and particularly into the second and third centuries, a variety of Christianities—or groups professing divergent beliefs about Christ and His gospel—sought for converts among both Gentiles and other Christian communities.⁸ In their efforts to win converts, Christian communities were faced, much as they are today, with conflicting arguments based on the same Christian texts. To help differentiate themselves, some circles of Christians, particularly Gnostic and other marginalized Christian communities, forged documents to further their claims. Some excellent examples of this type of writing survive today, including the recently published Gospel of Judas, a late-second-century forgery which appears to have been written in an effort to validate and promote Gnostic doctrines.⁹

Another example is the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, which contains a subtle correction of apostolic traditions as they are preserved in the canonical accounts, while at the same time it advances new beliefs and ideas in the name of the Apostle Thomas. In logia (“saying”) 13, Jesus says, “Compare me, tell me whom I am like. Simon Peter said to him: You are like a righteous angel. Matthew said to him: . . . You are like a wise philosopher. Thomas said to him: Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like.”¹⁰ The passage is built upon the canonical account found in Matthew 16:13–19, but the rephrasing of what transpired both denigrates Peter and Matthew, whose names were associated with the first Gospels quite early, and elevates Thomas.¹¹ Moreover, the Gospel of Thomas endorses the literary figure of the Apostle Thomas through a claim that he received special esoteric knowledge: “These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke,

and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down. . . . And he said: He who shall find the interpretation of these words shall not taste of death."¹²

Some of the salient features of this type of document are (1) a subtle correction of the Synoptic or Johannine accounts; (2) the elevation of a single person, usually an Apostle; (3) preservation of the sayings of Jesus, almost always in new forms or contexts; (4) the preservation and transmission of secret teachings; and (5) a suppression of the humanity of Jesus or His mortal traits as they appear in the scriptural Gospels. A short list of documents that fall into this category are the Gospel of Thomas, the Dialogue of the Savior (although late), the Gospel of the Egyptians, Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 840, the Apocryphon of James, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Judas, the Freer Logion, and many other texts that circulated under the names of the Apostles.¹³

This tradition is characterized by an effort to promote previously unknown teachings and sayings about Jesus because the authors needed to present a credible argument in order to effect changes in what came to be considered orthodox positions.¹⁴ If their works were immediately recognized as forgeries, they would be readily dismissed. However, through careful manipulation of already established sayings of Jesus and the possible discovery and codification of oral traditions, these authors were able to present a seemingly valid contribution. It is not impossible that these texts preserve some lost sayings and traditions about Jesus, yet they must certainly be used with care and with a distinct methodologically proven approach for discerning early and late traditions. In order to make these forged texts more credible, authors sought out forgotten or esoteric traditions about Jesus that preserved an air of familiarity or truth.

IN-GROUP DIALOGUES AND DISCUSSIONS

Whereas many texts were created with the aim of correcting the established orthodox positions of the Church, some documents were created for the purpose of in-group consumption. As in the orthodox tradition where lectionaries, sermons, and homilies were written and disseminated to teach the truths of the gospel in a coherent system,

nonorthodox communities created new texts for the same purposes. The Nag Hammadi discovery makes it clear that there were texts in circulation with the sole purpose of teaching Valentinian cosmogony, for example, and were not directed at correcting or attacking the New Testament Gospels in any coherent way.¹⁵

These in-group texts derive from both orthodox and nonorthodox communities, who produced them for private edification and parenesis, or personal exhortation. Within nonorthodox traditions, these texts are readily identifiable through their completely divergent doctrines and practices. For example, a text within the apocryphal Thomas tradition can be identified easily through the presence of the five ordinances: baptism, chrism, eucharist, redemption, and bridal chamber. These texts are extremely important for reconstructing the wide diversity of Christian traditions in the second and third centuries, in the context of what Latter-day Saint scholars would associate with the period of apostasy.

However, these in-group texts were also developed within orthodox Christian circles for the same purposes. Early canon lists specifically mention these in-group texts by name, and many of the early Church Fathers recognized that they were not as valuable as the canonical texts.¹⁶ Even the Muratorian Canon discerns between this type of writing and the canonical accounts.

Within the orthodox tradition, some of the most important works in this genre are the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the *Epistula Apostolorum*, the Didache, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Although not comprehensive, this list helps define the parameters of the orthodox in-group apocryphal tradition. On the other hand, nonorthodox communities produced a series of gospels under the names of well-known heretics, such as Apelles, Bardesanes, Basilides, Cerinthus, Marcion, and Mani. Moreover, a host of other documents fall into this genre, such as the Second Treatise of the Great Seth from Nag Hammadi, the revelations of Hermes Trismegistus, the Pistis Sophia, and the Gospel of Truth.

Before texts such as these can be mined for historical deposits of truth or fact, they must be placed accurately within a distinct religious

trajectory, and then we must evaluate that tradition's potential to preserve legitimate historical information.

FICTIONAL TEXTS WRITTEN FOR ENJOYMENT

The modern academic mindset has led us to believe that all or at least a significant part of the apocrypha was believed to be historically reliable and that people generally approached them in antiquity as credible sources. This assumption, however, does not hold up after careful scrutiny. The early Church never elevated the apocryphal texts to a status similar or equal to the canonical texts. Instead, they were able to distinguish between literary fictions and potential nonfiction writings. There was not a large body of fictional works in circulation among first- and second-century Christians, and therefore Christians wrote romances, legendary accounts, and fictional acts of the Apostles to satisfy this need. Perhaps some of them even contained a grain of fact, but for the most part it is impossible to believe that Christians did not recognize texts such as the infancy narratives of Jesus as purely fictional literature.

For example, according to one legend, as Joseph and Mary entered a cave on their way to Egypt, they found that it was inhabited by inhospitable creatures. Jesus' parents, afraid, were about to flee when Jesus stepped forward and said, "Have no fear, and do not think that I am a child; for I have always been and even now am perfect; all wild beasts must be docile before me.' Likewise lions and leopards worshipped him and accompanied them in the desert."¹⁷ To amplify the legendary character of the story, the author notes that previous to His encounter with the wild beasts in the cave, the infant Jesus had been sitting on His mother's lap.

These texts need to be discussed in their own context and evaluated in relationship to other works in the same genre. Some of them are good fiction, such as the Acts of Pilate, while other texts within this genre are sometimes absurd. Indeed, these texts will probably reveal more about the Christian mind-set in the second century than about first-century beliefs and practices. But they can answer important and interesting questions, such as, What types of literature were early Christians interested in? What emotional and spiritual needs did these

documents fill? Did all Christians feel the same about this type of literature?

Christians in the first and second centuries may have been offended at the questionable morality contained in some of the fictional literature then circulating in the Roman Empire. Therefore, they may have sought to produce their own texts for private consumption. One defining feature of this genre is that the gaps left in the canonical texts are consistently filled. For example, Mark mentions that Jesus had brothers and sisters, but he does not provide the names of Jesus' sisters. Later apocryphal texts invent the names of these sisters as well as those of Jesus' grandparents and other unnamed disciples.¹⁸

THE CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSE

The genre of apocalyptic literature, as in the book of Revelation, was relatively popular in the first few centuries after the death of Christ. While some Christians struggled to accept the book of Revelation as a canonical text, others received it wholeheartedly. Both the *Stichometry of Nicephorus* (eighth century AD) and the *Catalogue of Sixty Canonical Books* (seventh century AD) omit the book of Revelation from their lists of acceptable books of scripture.¹⁹ These lists, which originate in the Eastern churches, reflect a general malaise about the authenticity of the book of Revelation in the East, even though the Western churches openly accepted the book of Revelation.

Perhaps as a result of the persecutions of Christians in the Western empire, apocalyptic works were written during the second and third centuries which promised the glorious return of the Savior and the ultimate vindication of the Saints. They became a popular form of expressing hope in the Second Coming, promising vindication to the oppressed.²⁰ Much of the literature in this genre is quite colorful, and at times it appears that the authors intended to make explicit reference to civic leaders and officials, the details of which are helpful in dating these apocryphal texts.²¹

It may appear that this body of material could be used to determine specific Christian beliefs and expectations about the Second Coming of the Lord, but experience has shown that its focus is probably aimed at satisfying the needs of an oppressed people rather than preserving

Christian traditions about Jesus' return in glory. This body of literature probably holds the keys to unlocking how Christians viewed the Roman Empire, how they felt about being a persecuted people, and how a marginalized group continued to exist alongside a larger, dominant society.

Some of the most important Christian apocalypses are the Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Ascension of Isaiah. Unfortunately, the line between canonical apocalypses and noncanonical apocalypses is very faint, and no distinct lines have been drawn. The tumultuous history of the book of Revelation perhaps encouraged the breakdown of the boundaries. Further research into the genre of apocalyptic writing will hopefully result in critical methodologies that will enable us to more decisively differentiate the noncanonical apocalypses and determine their origins.

SUMMARY

Unfortunately, many study apocryphal literature hoping to find previously undisclosed secrets of Christian history and practice without realizing that these texts are universally late and secondary. The books of the New Testament are generally decades, if not centuries, older. Therefore, to argue that an apocryphal text contains more reliable information than the canonical texts, we must first determine whether a given text has any claim to preserve historically dependable information. Moreover, some genres of apocryphal literature are more likely to hold such treasures, but when taken out of context, these facts can have only a very limited impact. The apocryphal tradition is not a smorgasbord of historical and legendary information that can be haphazardly drawn from in order to make firm historical conclusions.

It is safe to say, based on current research, that every apocryphal text that claims to preserve the teachings of a New Testament figure was forged. The same cannot be said of the canonical texts, which indicates that the early Church was quite successful at separating the wheat from the chaff. At the same time, however, the apocryphal literature can inform us about the development of the Church in the postapostolic era.

Early Church leaders faced the threat of outsiders, posing as insiders, who attempted to redirect the affairs of the Church through the

creation of forged gospels and letters.²² Without the aid of the Apostles, those early Church leaders had to distinguish between forgeries and the genuine letters and Gospels of Jesus' disciples. Within the Church, regional leaders also wrote circular letters wherein they sought, like the Apostle Paul, to answer questions and settle disputes among the branches. Several of these letters have been preserved, and while they should not be elevated to the status of canonical texts, they do preserve the second or third generation of Christian writings.

Other texts were clearly written as fictional accounts of Jesus' life and the Apostles' later careers. To some, this genre of writing seems foreign, but even in our own day many fictional accounts of Jesus' life have been created. These fictional accounts, written to inspire and uplift without any pretension of historical legitimacy, may survive for future generations who will classify them as twenty-first-century apocrypha. Like their ancient counterparts, these modern fictional accounts supply names and events to an otherwise incomplete biography of Jesus. They were written for the enjoyment of the believers.

Finally, perhaps the least understood category of apocryphal writing is the early Christian apocalypse. Filled with fantastic imagery and intentionally difficult symbolism, these apocalypses filled a need in the early Christian communities. They likely reveal an era of suffering and marginalization among the churches. To satisfy the human need to feel or expect vindication, some well-meaning Christian authors forged texts that promised the ultimate triumph of the Saints when Jesus Christ returns in His glory.

NOTES

1. See Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 1:34.

2. The manuscript in which the canon list was found was written much later than AD 200, but the author refers to the Shepherd of Hermas as a recent composition. Most scholars, therefore, date the Shepherd of Hermas to the end of the second century AD.

3. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:36.

4. See the brief history of the discussion in J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), ix–xxv.

5. This list currently includes the Muratorian Canon (c. AD 200), Codex Claromontanus (fourth century AD), the Decretum Gelasianum (sixth century AD), which enumerates books that should be avoided, and the Stichometry of Nicephorus (c. AD 850).

6. The Hymn of the Pearl, a distinct section within the Gnostic Acts of Thomas, is an excellent example. The document derives from the third century AD in Syria and almost certainly contains no credible historical information about the Apostle Thomas or first-century Christianity. Even if the Hymn of the Pearl, which describes the soul's descent from premortal glory, predates the Acts of Thomas, it is still almost certainly a piece of Gnostic propaganda to promote the belief of the divine eternal spark as opposed to the seed of man who is fallen, according to the Gnostic worldview (see Han J. W. Drijvers, "The Acts of Thomas," in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:380–85; cf. John W. Welch, "The Hymn of the Pearl: An Ancient Counterpart to 'O My Father,'" *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 [1996–97]: 127–38).

7. Other scholars had certainly recognized Pseudepigraphical and pseudonymous writing, but Robinson looked at the phenomenon in the context of Latter-day Saint scholarship (see Stephen E. Robinson, "Lying for God: The Uses of Apocrypha," in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs [Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986], 133–54).

8. This is the thesis of Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

9. See Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, eds., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006).

10. Beate Blatz, "The Coptic Gospel of Thomas," in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:119. A convenient English translation is John S. Kloppenborg, and others, *Q Thomas Reader* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1990).

11. See Thomas A. Wayment, "Christian Teachers in Matthew and Thomas: The Possibility of Becoming a Master," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004): 289–311.

12. Blatz, "The Coptic Gospel of Thomas," 1:117.

13. Ron Cameron sees a similar division of texts, which he uses to establish the dating of the sayings traditions about Jesus (see *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982]).

14. I used the term *orthodox* to describe only that branch of Christianity that came to dominate all others, and I do not intend to make any value statement on the accuracy of their traditions.

15. The Nag Hammadi codices were discovered near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. Twelve codices were found, including fragments of a thirteenth codex, that contained Gnostic Christian writings. The Valentinians were a radical Gnostic sect that advocated the belief that the creator god (the God of the Old Testament) was wicked, and therefore the material realm was fallen and perverse.

16. See Origen, as quoted in Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 6.25, as well as Eusebius' own thoughts on the subject of the canon in *History of the Church*, 2.23–24; 3.3, 25.

17. Oscar Cullmann, "Infancy Gospels," in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:462.

18. Bruce M. Metzger, "Names for the Nameless in the New Testament: A Study in the Growth of Christian Tradition," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, ed. Patrick Granfield and Josef A. Jungmann (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), 79–99.

19. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:41–43.

20. Pliny's letter to Trajan (*Epistles*, 10), which documents regional persecution of Christians in Bythinia, offers a counter to the thesis that suppression of Christianity in the west helped promote interest in apocalyptic literature.

21. Philipp Vielhauer and Georg Strecker, "Apocalypses and Related Subjects," in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:542–68.

22. See 2 Thessalonians 2:2, "That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, *nor by letter as from us*, as that the day of Christ is at hand" (emphasis added), which indicates that forgery was already a problem in Paul's day.