

# **Lost Christianities**

**Christian Scriptures and  
The Battles over Authentication**

**Prof. Bart D. Ehrman**



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With a focus on early Christianity in its Greco-Roman environment and a special expertise in the textual criticism of the New Testament, Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and more than 20 scholarly articles for academic journals. He has authored or edited 12 books, including *The Apostolic Fathers* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003); *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 1997; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2004); *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford, 1999); *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2004); and *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993). He is currently at work on a new commentary on several non-canonical Gospels for the *Hermeneia Commentary* series, published by Fortress Press.

Professor Ehrman is a popular lecturer, giving numerous talks each year for such groups as the Carolina Speakers Bureau, the UNC Program for the Humanities, the Biblical Archaeology Society, and select universities across the nation. He has served as the President of the Society of Biblical Literature, SE Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholar's Press Monograph Series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and co-editor of the E.J. Brill series *New Testament Tools and Studies*. Among his administrative responsibilities, he has served on the executive committee of the Southeast Council for the Study of Religion and has chaired the New Testament textual criticism section of the Society of Biblical Religion, as well as serving as Director of Graduate Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC. ■

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# Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles over Authentication

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## Scope:

Christians of the second and third centuries held a remarkably wide range of beliefs. Although some of these beliefs may sound ludicrous today, at the time, they seemed not only sensible but *right*. Some Christians maintained that there were two Gods, or twelve, or thirty, or more. Some Christians claimed that Jesus was not really a human being, or that he was not really divine, or that he was two different beings, one human and one divine. Some Christians believed that this world was not created by the true God but by a malicious deity as a place for punishment for human souls, which had become entrapped here in human bodies. Some Christians believed that Jesus' death and resurrection had no bearing on salvation, and some Christians believed that Jesus had never actually died.

*Lost Christianities* is a course that considers the varieties of belief and practice in the early days of Christianity, before the church had decided what was theologically acceptable and determined which books should be included in its canon of Scripture. Part of the struggle over belief and practice in the early church was over what could be legitimately accepted as "Christian" and what should be condemned as "heresy." This course considers the struggle for *orthodoxy* (that is, right belief) and the attempt to label, spurn, and overthrow *heresy* (that is, false belief). In particular, it tries to understand Christians who were later deemed heretical on their own terms and to explore the writings that were available and could be appealed to in support of their views.

Christians today, of course, typically think of the New Testament as the basis for a correct understanding of the faith. But what was Christianity like *before* there was a New Testament? It is striking that all the ancient Christian groups, with their distinctive views about God, Christ, salvation, and the world, had books that—like those that eventually came into the New Testament—claimed to be written by Jesus' own apostles. Some of these



*pseudepigraphical* (that is, falsely ascribed) books have been discovered by archaeologists and rummaging bedouin in Egypt and the Middle East in modern times, gospels, for example, that claim to be written by Jesus' disciples Peter, Thomas, and Philip. These pseudepigrapha portray a different understanding of Christianity from the one that became dominant in the history of the religion and is familiar to most people today. In this course, we will study these non-canonical books and the forms of Christian belief they represent, from the second and third centuries—that is, from the time soon after the death of Jesus' apostles up to the time when most of these earlier understandings of Christianity had been weeded out of the church, leaving the one form of “orthodoxy” that became triumphant in the early fourth century with the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine.

The course is divided into several components. After an introductory lecture that deals with the wide diversity of Christianity in the modern and ancient worlds, we will launch into a discussion of three forms of Christianity that were highly influential during the second and third Christian centuries: the Ebionites, a group of Christians who insisted on maintaining their Jewish identity while believing in Jesus; the Marcionites, a group that rejected everything Jewish from its understanding of Jesus; and the Gnostics, a wide-ranging group that understood this world to be an evil place of imprisonment from which one could escape by learning the truth of one's identity through the secret teachings of Jesus.

We will then begin to consider, in separate lectures, important books read and revered by each of these groups and by the group that represented the forebears of the kind of Christianity that eventually became dominant in the Empire, a group that we will label “proto-orthodox” (because they held to the views that *eventually* came to be declared orthodox). Many of these books are pseudonymous, forged in the name of one or another of the apostles. Included in our consideration will be “Gnostic Gospels,” such as the Gospel of Thomas; “Infancy Gospels,” which narrate fictional events from Jesus' life as an infant and young boy; Apocryphal Acts, which describe the entertaining escapades of several of Jesus' apostles (including the woman, Thecla) after his death; apocryphal epistles allegedly written by the apostle Paul and others; and one apocryphal apocalypse, a description of a guided tour of heaven and hell given to the apostle Peter by Jesus himself.

After considering these fascinating documents, many of which have come to our knowledge only during the twentieth century, we will turn to consider the conflicts among the various forms of Christianity in the early centuries, to see how it is that one understanding of the faith came to be dominant and to squelch all its opposition. In this final section of the course, we will consider how the proto-orthodox party invested ecclesiastical power in its clergy (forming the structure and hierarchy that became a mainstay of the church through the Middle Ages); developed its canon of Scripture (the New Testament, which was not finalized as a canon until the end of the fourth century); and formulated standard creeds (e.g., the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed) as statements of faith to be adhered to by all believers, thereby eliminating the possibility of alternative understandings of what it might mean to be a follower of Jesus. ■

# The Diversity of Early Christianity

## Lecture 1

**Modern Christianity is widely diverse, in terms of its social structures, beliefs, and practices. But this diversity is mild in comparison with Christianity during the first three centuries.**

**W**hen we speak of Christianity in the modern world we naturally think of one thing. But at the same time, we know that Christianity is, in fact, a wide variety of things. This can be seen in the range of beliefs of different Christians, including such major beliefs as those about God, the nature of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus. Many Christians think of God as a personal being, a kind of superhuman in the sky. Others find it blasphemous to make God in our own image. Still others view God as an impersonal force that lies behind all that lives in the universe. Many Christians place great importance on the belief that Jesus died on the cross for salvation. Others place more emphasis on his life and great moral teachings. For some Christians, the resurrection is an actual, physical reanimation of Jesus' corpse. Others consider the resurrection of Jesus to be a symbolic claim. Hell, for some Christians, is the destiny of those who don't hold the right beliefs. Others consider hell to be a metaphor for life apart from God.

The same can be said of Christian practices, such as baptism and Eucharist (communion), not to mention unusual practices of some Christian communities (snake handling, baptism for the dead). Baptism can mean, for example, a rite that removes original sin, the Christian substitute for circumcision, an outward sign of spiritual cleansing, or a way to salvation. Some Christians believe that in partaking of communion, they are literally eating the body and blood of Christ, whereas, for other Christians, the Eucharist is a symbolic meal. Of particular relevance to this series of lectures are the widely different views of the Scriptures among different Christian groups today—both their content (which books actually belong?) and their character (in what way, if at all, are they inspired?). How were decisions made about which books should be included? Who made those decisions and

on what grounds? Are the Christian Scriptures the literal and precise words of God?

Thus, despite what we might think, Christianity is no monolith. And it never has been. In this lecture, we will consider the varieties of Christianity in the ancient world—varieties that make the modern differences among Christians look tame by comparison. In particular, we will look at the early forms of Christianity that did not survive, that died out, that lost the struggles to win converts and establish dominance, forms of Christianity that then became lost. And we will be especially interested in exploring the Scriptures of these lost Christianities, to see what they urged followers of Jesus to believe and how they expected them to act.

It is important to consider the scope of our inquiry. Our time frame will cover the period immediately after the New Testament and up to the famous Council of Nicea in the early fourth century: roughly the various Christianities of the second and third centuries A.D. A wide variety of beliefs is found in the New Testament—but that subject is covered already in another course of lectures. For this lecture, it is enough to point out that there are several different kinds of books in the New Testament and that they were written by different authors, at different times, to different audiences, and with different messages. In many instances, these messages are not only slightly different, but they appear to represent different understandings of the significance of Jesus, the way of salvation, and the relationship of faith in Jesus to the religion of the Jews.

These differences continued into the second and third centuries. We will end our inquiry at the beginning of the fourth century, around the time of the Council of Nicea, because that is where we find the first official proclamation of “orthodox” Christian belief, which once and for all eliminated, for most Christians, many of the earlier options. Our subject is not the wide range of ancient religions in this period, but only religious groups that claimed to be Christian, that is, claimed to adhere to the religion taught by Jesus and his followers. The range of beliefs among these groups is remarkable, whether with respect to God (was there only one?), the world (was it created by the

true God?), Christ (was he human? divine? both?), his death (did he die for sins? did he even die?), and a variety of other critical doctrines.

This variety of early Christian beliefs raises an important question: Why didn't the various early Christians who held such bizarre ideas simply read the New Testament to see that they were wrong? The answer may be obvious to some but startling to others. These Christians of the second and third centuries did not read the New Testament because the New Testament did not yet exist.

The books themselves, of course, had been written, but they had not yet been collected into a sacred and authoritative canon of Scripture. The term *canon* refers to a collection of authoritative books. One of the points we will learn is that our canon did not yet exist as an officially recognized collection during the second and third centuries.

The twenty-seven books that initially made it into the New Testament canon represent twenty-seven books written by Jesus' followers in the second half of the first century. The canon consists of four types of books: gospels (stories of Jesus' life); the Book of Acts (an account of the life and ministry of the apostles after Jesus' death); Epistles (letters written for Christian individuals or groups); and the Apocalypse (an account of what will transpire at the end of time). Other books were written at the same time, however, also claiming to be by Jesus' followers. Each of the early Christian groups that maintained its own distinctive beliefs and practices had books that were believed to be written by Jesus' own apostles—gospels, for example, allegedly written by his disciples Thomas and Philip, and Mary Magdalene.

To set the context for these questions, it is important to understand some basic features of the spread of Christianity from the time of Jesus up to the early fourth century, as Christian communities sprang up in different parts of the Roman world over time, with distinctive understandings of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus and distinctive written authorities for their views. The existence of these "other" Scriptures leads to other questions.

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**Christians of the second and third centuries did not read the New Testament because the New Testament did not yet exist.**

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If, in the second and third centuries, there were lots of apostolic books read by lots of Christian groups, which ones were right? Which wrong? Which were actually by apostles? How would we know? Better yet, how did the church fathers who finalized our canon of twenty-seven books know? And what happened then to all the other books that did *not* make it in, once these particular Christian struggles were ended?

These will be the issues that we will address in this course, as we look at the other forms of Christianity that did *not* win and the Scriptures that these forms of Christianity could appeal to, some of which we have known about for a long time, others that have been serendipitously discovered in modern times by archaeologists and rummaging bedouins. The following are some of the questions we will ask: What do we know of these various groups? What kind of written authority did they have for their views? Do we have the remains of any of these books? What do they say? How did one group end up winning the struggle? And how did our current New Testament canon emerge from it? ■

### Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, chapters 1, 6–9.

Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*.

Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*.

### Supplementary Reading

Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*.

W. F. C. Freund, *The Rise of Christianity*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Think of some of the clear manifestations of diversity in modern-day Christianity. How do you explain that Christians, who all claim to worship the same God, have so many differences among themselves?
2. In what ways do you think the presence of the canon of Scripture in modern-day Christianity (held to by the vast majority of Christians throughout the world) puts some restraints on theological and ecclesiastical diversity today?

# Christians Who Would Be Jews

## Lecture 2

**Jewish Christian Adoptionists, unlike other Christian groups ... maintained that Jesus was not himself a divine being, but that he was a human being that had been adopted by God to be His son.**

In the last lecture, we discussed the wide range of early Christian belief and practice. In this lecture and the ones that follow, we will look at specific second- and third-century Christian groups that are known. In this lecture, we will consider one of the very earliest Christian groups we know about, the Ebionites, sometimes called Jewish Christians or Jewish Christian Adoptionists. The meaning of their name is obscure, but it possibly derives from the Hebrew word *ebyon*, meaning “the poor.” We know about them only from the writings of the church fathers, who branded them as one of the “heresies” of the church, opponents of orthodoxy. These church fathers were writers in the early church who later came to be embraced as advocates and theologians of the true understanding of Christianity.

These are two important terms. *Orthodoxy* literally means “right belief”; *heresy* literally means “a choice.” Both are problematic terms, given that no one thinks they believe the wrong beliefs (that is, everyone thinks they are orthodox!). Thus, scholars use the terms to refer to the group that came to be dominant (orthodox) and the groups that were eventually excluded because they subscribed to other views (heresies). These other groups are possibly better called *heterodox* (a synonym of heresy but literally meaning “other belief”). It may also be better, for our period, to refer to the groups who held views that were later recognized as being the right beliefs as the *proto-orthodox*.

The Ebionites were later branded heretics by the proto-orthodox. This is ironic, because their beliefs may have been closer to those of Jesus’ own apostles than those that were eventually embedded in the Nicene and other orthodox creeds.



Our sources of information about the Ebionites are limited. We have no writings from any Ebionite author. We must rely on the words of their opponents, who mentioned their views precisely to attack them—obviously a problematic set of sources! Irenaeus, a bishop of Gaul (modern-day France), wrote, around 180 A.D., a five-volume work, *Against Heresies*. Epiphanius, a bishop in Salamis, also wrote a book against heresies, around 340 A.D. Occasionally, some of the Ebionites' own writings are quoted by these authors.

What did it mean to be Jewish in the ancient world? Two thousand years ago, virtually everyone was pagan—polytheists—neither Jewish nor Gentile. Jews stood out because they were monotheists.

Jews maintained that they were chosen by the one god to be his people. God gave Jews his laws so that they could live in ways that were appropriate. Through giving this law to Moses, God made a covenant with the Jews, his chosen people.

The Ebionites were a group of Jewish-Christians who either were born Jewish or converted to Judaism, who kept Jewish customs and strictly followed the Jewish laws (circumcision, sabbath observance, kosher food), but who believed that Jesus was the messiah of God. More specifically, they thought that Jesus had been the most righteous man on earth and, because of his righteousness, was “adopted” by God to be his son when he was baptized by John the Baptist. As God's son, Jesus had a specific task: to fulfill the Jewish expectations of the messiah by dying for the sins of the world. Jesus fulfilled his mission, and as a reward, God raised him from the dead. The Ebionites believed that because Jesus was the *Jewish* messiah, appointed by the Jewish God as the Jewish savior for the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish law, anyone who wanted to be right with God obviously had to become Jewish. As a consequence, they tried to convert other Jews to their faith in Jesus, and if they converted Gentiles, they insisted that the Gentiles also convert to Judaism.

The Ebionites differed from other Jews in believing that Jesus was the messiah. For Jews, the messiah was to be a Jewish savior. Some Jews expected the messiah to be a political figure. Others thought that God would

send a powerful cosmic savior to overthrow the powers of evil. All Jews expected the messiah to be great and powerful, able to overthrow God's enemies. Jesus did not fit the Jews' expectations of a messiah. Further, because Jesus was, for the Ebionites, the perfect sacrifice for all sins, no more sacrifices needed to be made. In the ancient world, most people ate meat only after it had been sacrificed in a religious ceremony; for this reason, the Ebionites became vegetarian.

The Ebionites also differed from other Christians in that they insisted on remaining Jewish. But they also denied that Jesus was himself divine. Instead, he was fully human, born of the sexual union of Joseph and Mary and only adopted to be God's son at baptism. They did not, therefore, hold to the doctrine of the virgin birth or to Jesus' preexistence or to his divinity.

To understand the eventual rejection of the Ebionites as heretics, we need to consider a bit more historical background. Jesus himself was Jewish in every way, as were his earliest followers. From a historical view, the Ebionite understanding of Jesus as Jewish was probably correct. By the second century, most Christian converts were former pagans who converted to believe in one God after worshiping many gods, but who were not interested in becoming Jews.

Starting at least with the apostle Paul, Christianity started appealing to Gentiles by urging that they did not have to become Jews in order to accept the salvation brought by the Jewish God. Paul himself went further: A person



**Baptism of Christ.**

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

is made right with God completely by faith in Christ's death and resurrection alone, not by doing the works prescribed by the Jewish law. Any Gentile who attempted to be right with God by following the law had fallen from grace. The Ebionites did not think highly of Paul. They claimed to follow the teachings of James, Jesus' own brother who became the head of the church in Jerusalem after Jesus' death, and had several controversies with Paul—especially over the need to keep the Jewish law.

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**The Ebionites did not think highly of Paul.**

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How did the Ebionites deal with the fact that Paul's writings were part of the sacred Scriptures, the New Testament? For them, they were *not* part of the New Testament. They had their own sacred writings that they claimed to be derived from the original followers of Jesus. One was a gospel that was very much like our Gospel of Matthew—widely considered the most Jewish of the gospels—but possibly lacking the first two chapters (the chapters describing Jesus being born of a virgin). This lost book is sometimes called the “Gospel of the Nazarenes” (an alternative name of one of the Ebionite groups). It may have been an Aramaic translation of Matthew. Matthew was probably appealing to this group because of its insistence that followers of Jesus must keep the Jewish law (see, for example, Matt. 5:18–20). A second gospel was actually called the Gospel of the Ebionites. This appears to have been some kind of conflation of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But it may have had some interesting modifications, including an emphasis on the importance of being vegetarian: John the Baptist, for example, is said to have had a diet not of locusts and wild honey, but pancakes and wild honey.

The Ebionites may well have represented one of the earliest forms of Christianity. How ironic, then, that this form of Christianity, possibly associated originally with James, Jesus' own brother, should fall out of disfavor and be declared a heresy. But Christian belief has never been stagnant; it moves on and changes. Anyone who maintained the older view, as a result, was left behind. ■

## Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 19–21.

A. F. J. Klijn, *Jewish Christian Gospel Tradition*.

## Supplementary Reading

J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 3–16.

Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*, chapter 4.

H. J. Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Church*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What are the problems with historians defining the terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy* as “right belief” and “wrong belief”?
2. How could a view of religion that coincided in many ways with the understanding of Jesus and his original followers eventually be declared heretical?

# Christians Who Refuse To Be Jews

## Lecture 3

**Marcionites [were] a group of “heretics” that stood diametrically opposed to the Ebionites.**

In the last lecture, we discussed the Ebionites, a group of Jewish Christians who came to be proclaimed as heretics in part because they tied themselves too closely to the Jewish tradition from which Christianity emerged. The wide diversity of early Christianity can be seen by considering a group that stood at the opposite end of the theological spectrum from the Ebionites, who were, in fact, proclaimed heretics because they went too far the other way. Rather than refusing to acknowledge Jesus’ divinity, they emphasized it too much, stressing that Jesus was so much God, he was not really human. Rather than embracing the Jewish tradition as of ongoing importance, they rejected Judaism altogether. This group of second- and third-century Christians maintained, in fact, that the God of the Old Testament could not be the God of Jesus, that there were, therefore, two separate and distinct Gods. This group, the Marcionites, was named after their founder, a second-century philosopher-theologian, Marcion. Once again, none of the writings of this group has survived. We must depend on the writings of the antagonistic church fathers, especially the early third-century Tertullian.

Marcion was evidently raised in a Christian church in Sinope, in northern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). His own father was allegedly the bishop of the church, who eventually deemed his son’s views too heretical to be tolerated. Marcion was independently wealthy and moved to Rome (c. 139 A.D.), where he made a huge donation to the church. In Rome, Marcion devoted himself to study and to writing his two significant literary works. Then, in 144 A.D., he called a council of the leaders of the church of Rome (the first church council meeting of any kind that we know about), in hopes that they would ratify his views. Instead, the Roman church elders found Marcion’s views repugnant, excommunicated him from the church, and returned his donation. Marcion then went into Asia Minor and established churches of people

he had convinced of his views, proving remarkably successful (with Marcionite churches thriving there for centuries).

Marcion's views can be contrasted to those of the Ebionites, who saw Paul as their mortal enemy. Marcion thought that Paul was the one apostle who rightly understood the nature of the Christian message. Paul is, in many ways, the most important Christian figure from the first century. Thirteen books of the New Testament are attributed to him. He was, originally, one of

the principal persecutors of Christianity. Paul had a visionary experience in which Jesus appeared to him, and he converted to Christianity. Paul developed the idea that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection led to the salvation of the world. Paul had differentiated between his gospel message and the Jewish law, maintaining that a person is made right with God by faith in Christ, completely apart from following the requirements of the law.

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**Marcion thought that Paul was the one apostle who rightly understood the nature of the Christian message.**

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Jesus—evidently from a different god. The logical conclusion: The God of Jesus was not at all the God of the Jews. The Jewish God created this world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them his law. Because they could not keep the law, they were condemned by the wrathful justice of their God.



**Saint Paul.**

In contrast, the God of Jesus is a God of mercy and love. Jesus came to save people from the just wrath of the Old Testament God who created this world. Jesus himself could obviously not belong to the creator God or to the material world that he created: Marcion's conclusion was that Jesus was not actually born into this world or part of it. He was not a flesh-and-blood human but a phantasm. Scholars have called this view *docetism*, from the Greek word *dokeo* for "to seem, to appear." The Jewish God required a death penalty for those who sinned; given that Jesus died for others, the Jewish God was compelled to accept his sacrifice for the sake of others (even though it was a deception, because Jesus did not have a real body).

Marcion developed his views in two major literary productions, one of which he wrote and the other he edited. His *Antitheses* (= contradictory statements) contrasted the Old Testament God of wrath with Jesus' God of love and mercy. The Old Testament God, for example, tells the Israelites to murder all their enemies in Jericho, but the God of Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies. The God of the Old Testament allowed the prophet Elisha to call out a bear to attack and kill the children who were taunting him; Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me." The God of the Old Testament said "cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree"; the God of Jesus ordered him, the one who was blessed, to be hanged on a tree.

The book Marcion edited was actually the first canon of Scripture known to be devised by an early Christian. It contained eleven books: ten of Paul's letters (all that are now found in the New Testament, except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) and a gospel very much like our Luke. The Old Testament was obviously excluded. But even the books Marcion included refer to the God of the Old Testament and make positive comments about the creation. Marcion maintained that these books had been corrupted by Judaizers; thus, he removed all comments that seemed to contradict the gospel that he believed he inherited from Paul (including, for example, the first two chapters of Luke, which narrate Jesus' birth in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures).

It is interesting to contrast Marcion and the Ebionites because they stood at such opposite ends of the theological spectrum. The Ebionites were strict monotheists (there is only one God); Marcion was a strict ditheist

(two Gods). The Ebionites embraced the Jewish law completely; Marcion completely rejected it. The Ebionites insisted that Jesus was man but not God; Marcion claimed he was God but not man. The Ebionites rejected Paul as an arch-heretic; Marcion revered Paul as the one Christian who had understood Jesus' gospel. The Ebionites accepted a form of the Gospel of Matthew as their Scripture; Marcion accepted a form of the Gospel of Luke. One thing Marcion had in common with the Ebionites is that he was opposed by the proto-orthodox Christians, who declared him a heretic.

For the historian, it is especially important to note the positive effect Marcion had on the development of orthodox Christianity. He led other Christians to stress monotheism and the importance of establishing a canon of Scripture (including the Old Testament). In many ways, Marcion and his teachings live on today among Christians who have never heard his name. Many Christians continue to contrast the Old Testament God of wrath and the New Testament God of mercy; many also think that the law of Moses is for the Jews, not Christians and, thus, relegate the Old Testament to a secondary status. ■

### Essential Reading

John Clabeaux, "Marcion," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. IV, pp. 514–521.

Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*.

### Supplementary Reading

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence*.

H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*.



## Questions to Consider

1. How could such diametrically opposed forms of Christianity as the Ebionites and the Marcionites both claim to represent the original teaching of Jesus and his apostles?
2. Does the Christianity you're familiar with seem more like the Ebionite or the Marcionite version?

# Early Gnostic Christianity—Our Sources

## Lecture 4

**Various religions that are put under the umbrella term Gnosticism all subscribed to the importance of knowledge, *gnosis*, as necessary for salvation. ... But knowledge of what?**

In the past two lectures, we have examined the beliefs of two second-century Christian groups declared heretical: the Ebionites and the Marcionites. The views of these groups were strongly at odds with each other. Not only was each of these groups declared heretical by the other, but both were also attacked by the proto-orthodox who insisted that they were wrong. Of even greater concern to the proto-orthodox, though, were religious movements that historians call Gnostic. In this lecture and the next, we will discuss the nature of the gnostic religions before examining several of the sacred writings revered by individual gnostic groups, writings now known through one of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries of modern times.

Before we begin, we must first define some of our terms. *Gnosticism* is a modern term used to refer to a widely diverse set of ancient religions that shared some key features. The term comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, “knowledge.” The gnostic religions all maintained that salvation comes through knowledge. Knowledge of what? Gnostics did not claim that only the smartest people would be saved. The knowledge involved was secret, esoteric—knowledge available to those who are chosen—although ultimately it was self-knowledge, knowledge of who you really are, where you came from, how you got here, and how you can return.

As we will see more fully in the next lecture, the different gnostic religions maintained that this material world is a place of imprisonment for sparks of the divine, which became entrapped here, in human bodies, because of a cosmic disaster. For the divine element to be liberated from this evil material world, it needs to learn who it really is and how it can escape. These religions have struck a sympathetic note for many people today, who also

feel alienated from this world. In this lecture, we will examine our sources for this ancient worldview.

Until 1945, virtually our only sources of information about the gnostic religions were the lengthy and vitriolic attacks against them in the writings of proto-orthodox church fathers, such as Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul (c. 180 A.D.); Tertullian of Carthage (200 A.D.); and Hippolytus of Rome (c. 200 A.D.). These authors don't hold back in attacking their gnostic opponents, who are ruthlessly denounced for espousing ridiculous myths, being completely self-contradictory, misleading the innocent, and engaging in wild and licentious activities that show their true colors. There was, naturally, some question about how reliable these proto-orthodox accounts could be. With the discovery of original gnostic documents, we can now evaluate the patristic reports—the writings of the church fathers—and get a much clearer picture of what the Gnostics were really like.

The chance discovery of a cache of original gnostic documents in 1945, near the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi, was one of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century. Some details of the find remain sketchy. It occurred in December 1945, when six bedouin camel drivers were digging for fertilizer next to a cliff in the wilderness of Upper Egypt, some 200 miles south of Cairo and 40 miles north of Luxor, near the bend of the Nile, close by the small village of Nag Hammadi. One of them accidentally uncovered a human skeleton with his mattock. Next to the skeleton was buried an earthenware jar, with a bowl over the top, sealed



**Saint Hippolytus.**

Photo by The Teaching Company.

with bitumen. Inside, they found nothing “valuable,” just thirteen leather-bound volumes.

The leader of the group, named, remarkably enough, Mohammed Ali, took these back home with him to his village. That night, his mother used several pages to kindle the fire in her stove. Mohammed Ali came to think that the books might be worth something and wanted to put them somewhere for safekeeping, all the more necessary because of suspicions aroused among authorities for his role in a recent murder. He gave one of the books to a local priest for safekeeping, who showed it to his brother-in-law, a traveling teacher who recognized that it might be of some value. Eventually, word

got out to antiquities dealers and the books were tracked down and sold to the Museum of Antiquities in Cairo.

**A cache of original gnostic documents in 1945, near the Egyptian village of Nag Hammadi, was one of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century.**

Scholars who learned of the discovery were floored by its significance. It was, in fact, a real treasure trove, a collection of original writings by gnostic Christians, including gospels about Jesus that had never before been seen by any Western scholar. These books were known to have existed in antiquity but had been

lost for nearly 1,500 years. Contained within these thirteen leather-bound books were fifty-two tractates (that is, anthologies), written on papyrus. The books themselves were produced some time in the late fourth century (demonstrated by the scrap paper used to strengthen the bindings, with dated receipts, the last of which is from 348 A.D.), but the tractates within them are much older, many of them dating back to the second century or earlier. The books are all written in the Coptic language (= Egyptian), translations of Greek originals. They comprise different kinds of books: gospels allegedly written by Jesus’ own disciples (e.g., Thomas and Philip); apocalypses; mystical reflections about how the divine realm, the world, and humans came into existence; expositions of important religious doctrines, such as the resurrection; and polemical attacks on religious enemies (including proto-orthodox Christians!). Now widely known as the Nag Hammadi library, the

books have been collected, photographed, published in Coptic, and translated into English.

This find is of incalculable value for scholars of antiquity. The books show that much of what the church fathers said about gnostic myths and religion appears to be right. Other things seem to have been somewhat skewed: Much of the gnostic mythology appears to have been metaphysical poetry rather than historical description. An example is the Apocryphon of John, which describes how the divine realm and the human realm came into being. The Gnostics were not the wild profligates they were portrayed to be, but rather, strict ascetics. And above all, the Gnostics were sincere believers and sincerely religious.

On the other hand, even these sources are not problem-free for the historian wanting to know about ancient Gnosticism. They are written by Gnostics for Gnostics and presuppose gnostic beliefs; they do not, therefore, spell out these beliefs. One needs to read these texts carefully to see what they assume and what appears to underlie their various statements. When we engage in a careful reading of these texts, along with and in light of the comments made by the church fathers who opposed the gnostic religions, we can come to a clearer understanding of what these Gnostics stood for. That will be the subject of our next lecture. ■

### Essential Reading

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

Birger Pearson, “Nag Hammadi Codices,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. IV, pp. 984–993.

James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*.

## Supplementary Reading

James M. Robinson, “The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices,” *Biblical Archaeology* 42 (1979): 2–24.

Gérard Vallée, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics*.

Frederick Wisse, “The Nag Hammadi Library and the Heresiologists,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971): 205–223.

## Questions to Consider

1. Scholars speculate about why the books of the Nag Hammadi library were buried in the Egyptian wilderness, just a couple of miles from an orthodox Christian monastery; can you think of some explanation?
2. Taking the modern political scene as an example, why is it difficult to rely on an opponent’s claims to establish what someone actually believes and stands for?

# Early Christian Gnosticism—An Overview

## Lecture 5

In some ways, it is best to consider the gnostic religions as attempts to explain and account for the state of things in this world, how the human race got here, how the material world came into being, how it relates to the realm of God, and how humans can achieve their ultimate salvation.

In the last lecture, we discussed the sources of our information about Christian Gnosticism and said just a few words about its distinctive character. This latter topic will be the focus of the current lecture. First, we will consider the basic tenets of the gnostic religions, as these can be discerned by “reading between the lines” of the gnostic texts themselves and by seeing how their opponents understood them. Then, we will consider how these religions emerged in the history of Judeo-Christian thought.

In a broad sense, these religions insisted that the material world was evil and that human souls had become entrapped here, in matter, and needed to learn how to escape through the secret *gnosis* (= knowledge) brought by a revelation from on high. More specifically, Gnostics ascribed to the following tenets:

- Dualism: Gnostic religions were essentially dualistic, understanding all reality to be divided into two fundamental components of matter (which was evil) and spirit (which was good).
- The true God: The ultimate divine being was completely spirit and, therefore, was not only unknown to humans, who acquire knowledge through their material sense, but unknowable.
- The divine realm: A series of myths—different myths for different gnostic religions—explained how this one spiritual God propagated other spiritual deities, known as *aeons*, which, taken together, constituted the divine realm, the *Pleroma* (meaning “fullness”).

- The fall and creation: Moreover, these myths explain how one of the aeon's disastrous conceptions of an imperfect divine being took place. This imperfect divine being came to be removed from the Pleroma and, as an evil act, created the material world.
- The divine spark: The resultant evil beings captured the mother deity and imprisoned her here in human bodies. Humans have sparks of the divine within them. The gnostic system is designed to show how they can be liberated.
- Redemption: Liberation for the divine sparks comes through acquiring the true knowledge of where the spark came from, how it came to be here, and how it can escape.
- Divine emissary: This knowledge cannot come by natural means, however. It can come only from above if a divine aeon comes down to impart this knowledge (Christ, in the Christian gnostic systems).
- Types of humans: The knowledge is secret; it is not for everyone, because not everyone has the spark. Some people were pure animals. Others had some possibility of an afterlife through faith and good works (the normal Christians). Only some had the possibility of a fantastic afterlife, in the return to the realm of God whence they had come (the Gnostics).
- Ethics: Because the body was a prison to be escaped, Gnostics adopted a particular ascetic approach to life.

To make further sense of the gnostic religions, it may help to consider whence they derived in the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Significantly, many of the gnostic texts are infiltrated with Jewish thought, obsessed with the nature of the Jewish God and his creation. Some of them are symbolic and figurative interpretations of Jewish texts, especially the opening chapters of Genesis. How could Gnosticism emerge from Judaism?



One of the earliest theological beliefs attested in ancient Israel was that God had made Israel his people by saving them from slavery in the land of Egypt. Ancient Jewish theologians maintained that Israel was, therefore, specially chosen by God to be his people. This notion that Israel was God’s special people was challenged in the course of historical realities, however, because the nation of Israel constantly had to fight for its survival against harsh natural conditions and powerful military and political enemies. Ancient Hebrew prophets explained Israel’s suffering by claiming that it came as a punishment from God. This view came to be seen as unsatisfactory when even the righteous were seen to suffer while the wicked prospered. This led to a new religious understanding that emerged about two centuries before Christ in a movement that scholars called *apocalypticism*. Apocalypticism maintained that God’s people suffer because of forces of evil in the world that God would soon overthrow.

**Ancient Hebrew prophets explained Israel’s suffering by claiming that it came as a punishment from God.**

What would it do to people’s thinking if that cataclysmic act of God never occurred? One result might be a religious change, in which God is thought not ultimately to be in charge of this world because he did not create this world and never had anything to do with it. It is an evil place, created by a malevolent deity. Salvation comes, then, not *to* this world but *from* it. This, ultimately, is the view of Gnosticism, as we will see more fully in our consideration of several of the writings of the Nag Hammadi library in the lectures that follow. ■

### Essential Reading

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*.

———, “Gnosticism,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. II, pp. 1033–1040.

## Supplementary Reading

Michael Williams, *Rediscovering Gnosticism*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why do you suppose Gnostics would be enthralled with the Book of Genesis if they believed that the true God did not create this world? What would that make the God of Genesis?
2. Are there any religious or philosophical movements today that strike you as Gnostic in a broad sense, that is, that deny the importance or value of the material world and teach ways to escape it through special kinds of knowledge?

# The Gnostic Gospel of Truth

## Lecture 6

**The title of this gospel comes from the opening line which says, “The Gospel of Truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of Truth the grace of knowing Him, through the power of the word that came forth from the Pleroma,”**

**I**n the last lecture, we saw some of the major tenets of Christian Gnosticism. These religions stressed the importance of knowledge (= *gnosis*) to escape the trappings of this evil material world, a world that, in their belief, was not created by the true God but came into being as a result of a cosmic disaster. Since the nineteenth century, the issue of whether Gnosticism was principally Christian or not has been debated. Based in part on documents from the Nag Hammadi library, scholars have continued to question whether Gnosticism antedated or postdated Christianity. Christ was an aeon (divine being) who revealed the truth necessary for salvation. Salvation came by learning one’s true nature as divine and by acquiring the secret knowledge that can bring liberation from this material world.

The Gospel of Truth is one of those gnostic books we had known about from the writings of Irenaeus but did not have in our possession until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library. Its title comes from its opening line, which reads, in part, “The Gospel of Truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of Truth the grace of knowing him...” This is not, however, a gospel in the way we usually think of one: There is no word about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Instead, it is the “good news” of the salvation he has brought by bringing the truth that can free the soul from its bondage to material things. This is one of the most powerful and moving expositions of the joy of salvation to survive from Christian antiquity. Among other things, it shows that gnostic Christians were not just wild profligates or misguided intellectuals, as their patristic opponents claimed. This is a text filled with heartfelt gratitude to God for the unexpected grace of salvation that has been received.

Many scholars attribute the work to a famous gnostic Christian, Valentinus. Valentinus was from Alexandria, Egypt, but moved to Rome sometime around the year 130 A.D. He was active as a Christian writer, orator, and leader over the course of the next thirty years or so. According to Tertullian, he turned on the church only after his bid to become bishop failed. We have some fragments of his writings. If the Gospel of Truth does go back to him, it shows that his opponents were right to attribute to him unusual poetic powers, as can be seen even in the Coptic translation of this text (it was originally in Greek). The book discusses many central issues for Christians in the second century: the nature of God, the character of this world, the person of Christ, and the work of salvation he brought and how one should respond to it. Strikingly, its views stand diametrically opposed to those that eventually became dominant in Christianity and have been handed down to the present.

Eventually, Christianity maintained that this world was the intentional creation of the one true God and, as such, was made good (even if sin later came into the world). The gnostic Gospel of Truth claims that the material world came about by a conflict in the divine realm, resulting in ignorance, anguish, terror, and error. Christianity also eventually claimed that Christ was the one who died for the sins of the world and that his death and resurrection are what bring salvation. The Gospel of Truth maintains that Jesus brought salvation by delivering the truth that could set the soul free; it was out of anger for his deliverance of this knowledge that the ignorant rulers of this world put him to death, in error. Christianity insisted that people are made right with God by faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. The gnostic Gospel of Truth maintains that people are saved by receiving the correct knowledge of who they really are. When they do so, they are like a drunk person becoming sober or a sleeping person coming awake. Christianity understood that God would redeem this sinful world, creating it anew as a utopian place of eternal life. The Gospel of Truth states that once saving knowledge comes to souls entrapped in this world, the world of ignorance will pass away.

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**The gnostic Gospel of Truth maintains that people are saved by receiving the correct knowledge of who they really are.**

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The book concludes with an exhortation for its hearers to share the true knowledge of salvation to those who seek the truth and not to return to their former (Christian?) beliefs that they have already transcended.

Far more polemical in its attitude toward non-gnostic Christianity is a second tractate from Nag Hammadi, the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (one of three apocalypses allegedly written by Jesus' disciple). This document is the first forgery that we will consider. *Pseudepigrapha* literally means "false writing." The term is applied to documents written under the name of someone who is not the actual author. Modern examples include authors writing under a pen name, as well as forgeries. Forgery was condemned as a practice in antiquity, although it was harder to detect and was, in fact, widely done.

The term *Apocalypse* means a "revelation." In this book, the truth of Jesus' identity is revealed to Peter. Those who fail to understand this message (the proto-orthodox Christian leaders especially!) are castigated for their ignorance. We see that not only were the proto-orthodox opposed to heresy, but so, too, were the people that they claimed were heretics. For them, it was the proto-orthodox who promoted false teaching!

The book begins with the teachings of "The Savior," who informs Peter that there are many false teachers who are blind and deaf and who blaspheme the truth and teach evil. These are those who proclaim a "dead man." Later, we learn that they are leaders of churches who call themselves "bishops" and "deacons." These teachers fail to understand that the material world is to be despised and escaped by the true soul. In particular, they fail to realize that when Jesus was killed, it was only his body that suffered and died; his real self—his immortal soul—was above suffering and death. What was killed, then, was simply a shell; the true Savior stood above the cross laughing at those who thought they could harm him. And he continues to laugh at those who think that the physical world is what is real, when in fact, it is false and transitory.

In short, this book polemicizes against the proto-orthodox leaders of the church who believe that the world was created by the good God, that Jesus

Christ was himself really completely flesh, and that his death was necessary for the forgiveness of sins. ■

## Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 24, 35–36.

## Supplementary Reading

Robert M. Grant, *Jesus after the Gospels: The Christ of the Second Century*.

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*.

James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Are there ways that the views advocated by the Gospel of Truth are embraced by modern Christians today?
2. How does the attack of the Apocalypse of Peter against proto-orthodox believers affect our understanding of the meaning of the terms *orthodoxy* and *heresy*?

# Gnostics Explain Themselves

## Lecture 7

Let's see how two different gnostic teachers tried to convince friendly non-gnostic Christians of their understanding of important aspects of their faith. Both the documents were addressed to proto-orthodox Christians who were, however, genuinely interested in key aspects of the gnostic point of view.

In both cases, the authors appear completely reasonable, trying to convince proto-orthodox Christians of the gnostic perspective by appealing to the teachings of Jesus and his followers. In both cases, however, the perspectives advanced differ significantly from those taken by proto-orthodox Christians. Ptolemy's Letter to Flora is an interesting and compelling explanation of a gnostic understanding of Scripture. Unlike the other gnostic texts we're considering, this one does not come from Nag Hammadi but is preserved for us in the writings of the fourth-century heresiologist Epiphanius. Around 360 A.D., Epiphanius wrote a book called the *Panarion* (= medicine chest). In the book, he catalogs eighty different heresies that had sprouted up over the course of history. Epiphanius likens the heresies to serpents that are trying to bite orthodox Christians and inject them with heresy. His book is meant to provide the antidote. Ptolemy himself was a famous Christian Gnostic of the late second century, best known as the pupil of Valentinus (possibly the author of the Gospel of Truth). Unfortunately, we know nothing further about the woman named Flora, to whom he addresses his letter.

The letter itself, though, is a clear exposition of this particular Gnostic's understanding of the Old Testament. Strikingly, the author does not simply state his views as "gospel truth" but reasons with his hearer, basing his understanding on logic and the words of Jesus, trying to get her to understand the nature of the Scripture. It is important to recall that different early Christians had different views of the nature of the Jewish Scriptures (cf. Marcion and the Ebionites!). Ptolemy's understanding is based on both his gnostic assumptions and the words of Jesus.

Ptolemy begins by indicating views that he thinks are absolutely wrong. The Old Testament could not have been inspired by the one true God because it is not perfect. It has, for instance, commands that are not appropriate to God (such as, when God tells the Israelites to murder the Canaanites). Further, Jesus had to “fulfill” some of the laws of the Old Testament (so that they were imperfect before). But the Old Testament could not have been inspired by the Devil either because it contains laws that are just and good. The Old Testament must, then, have been inspired by some other divine being, neither the one true perfect God nor his nemesis, the Devil, but some deity between the two.

In fact, the Old Testament contains three different kinds of laws: There are laws given by this God (the Ten Commandments); there are laws given by Moses (the law of divorce, which Jesus indicates did not come from God himself), and there are laws given by the elders around Moses (the laws about not honoring one’s father and mother, which Jesus attributes to ungodly traditions). Even the laws given by God are of three kinds. Some are perfect—the Ten Commandments (5:3). Others are tainted by injustice—“an eye for an eye” (5:4). Yet others are purely symbolic, not to be taken literally—the laws about circumcision, Sabbath, and fasting (5:8–13).

Ptolemy concludes that Jesus’ teaching of the law, therefore, presupposes another god, a just divine being who is not the one true perfect God. Ptolemy also concludes that the gnostic understanding of the divine realm is, thus, correct.

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**Ptolemy concludes that Jesus’ teaching of the law, therefore, presupposes another god.**

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The Treatise on the Resurrection from Nag Hammadi deals with a different issue of interest to a wide range of early Christians. From the earliest of times, there were disputes about the nature of the resurrection, both the resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of believers. Some Christians believed that eternal life was to be a spiritual, disembodied existence. For them, Jesus did not have a real body when he was raised (he could walk through doors and the like), and Christians, too, were “spiritually” raised, not physically. Some insisted that



this spiritual resurrection had already happened to Christians (for example, 2 Tim. 2:18). Other Christians—especially the proto-orthodox—insisted that just as Jesus had been raised in the flesh, so, too, the future resurrection would be a physical one (for example, 1 Cor. 15).

The Treatise on the Resurrection is an anonymous discussion of just this issue. It is addressed to an otherwise unknown proto-orthodox Christian named Rheginos, in answer to questions he had raised about the resurrection (v. 44). It maintains that Jesus was a divine aeon who came down to dwell in the flesh temporarily, but that when he died, he destroyed what was visible by what was invisible. Christians will also be raised, invisible and immortal. Before coming into this world, people were not in the flesh, and once they leave this world, they will leave the flesh behind. Not that which is dead (the body), but only that which is alive (the spirit) will be saved. The author insists that even though it is the invisible that is raised, the resurrection is no illusion! On the contrary, it is this world that is the illusion, falsely lulling people into thinking that it is the ultimate reality. But this material world will pass away, and it is the spirit that will live on. The author urges Rheginos to begin living solely for his spirit and not to be attached to the flesh; by doing so, he will begin to experience the true spiritual resurrection even now.

In sum, we can see from these two treatises that some of the key issues that came to be resolved by orthodox Christianity—the character of Scripture, the nature of the future resurrection—were hotly disputed during the late second century and that the Gnostics, who took alternative views, in fact, had reasonable arguments to support their perspectives. ■

### Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 25 and 28.

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 306–324.

## Supplementary Reading

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How does Ptolemy's understanding of the Old Testament differ from what Christians typically hold today? Is it possible to think that the Old Testament was fully inspired by God, yet not implicate God in the deaths of innocent people (such as in the destruction of the Canaanites) and harsh legislation (an eye for an eye....)?
2. In what ways does the Treatise on the Resurrection seem to reflect the present-day common sense among many religious people that the body passes away but the spirit lives on after death? Is it possible that modern Christianity has actually taken over a gnostic view about the afterlife?

# The Coptic Gospel of Thomas

## Lecture 8

**Because of the importance of this text, I have decided to devote two separate lectures to it.**

**W**e have spent the past several lectures considering some of the intriguing gnostic texts, of various kinds, that have survived from antiquity. In this lecture, we will address the most famous and controversial text discovered at Nag Hammadi: the Coptic Gospel of Thomas. The Gospel of Thomas contains many teachings and sayings of Jesus not found in the New Testament. Scholars question when the text was written and whether it was influenced by Gnosticism. I will take the position that the document is from the second century, to be understood in light of the gnostic religions that were developing at a later period.

One matter of ongoing debate is whether the Gospel of Thomas is Gnostic at all. I contend that even though Thomas does not describe the gnostic mythology, it appears to presuppose it, and that knowing something about the way Gnostics understood the world can help in our interpretation of the sayings of Jesus that are found in the Gospel of Thomas. That will be the subject of the next lecture; in this lecture, I would like to say a few words about the character and layout of the gospel.

The Gospel of Thomas consists of 114 sayings of Jesus. There are no narratives in this account, no stories about anything Jesus did or experienced (including his death and resurrection). The opening statement of the Gospel gives us some clue as to the character of the collection (Saying 1): These are the secret sayings of Jesus, the correct interpretation of which will lead to eternal life. The sayings do not appear to be arranged in any particular thematic order, but more or less at random; they are not numbered in the surviving manuscript (the verse numbers have been assigned by the editors).

Even though the text survives only in Coptic, it was originally composed in Greek—as evidenced in some surviving Greek fragments of its text

(with sayings given in a different sequence)—probably someplace in Syria. The title calls writing the “Gospel of Thomas” and, in the first verse, the author calls himself Didymus Judas Thomas. Who was this person? The word *Didymus* means “twin” in Greek; the word *Thomas* means “twin” in Aramaic. The person’s actual name was Judas or Jude. Here he is called, “Jude, the twin.” The twin of whom?

In the New Testament, Jesus is said to have several brothers, one of whom is called Jude. Interestingly enough, some ancient Syriac traditions (such as the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas) indicate that Jesus and Jude were not just brothers but identical twins. The Syriac texts that preserve this tradition do not indicate how Jesus could have an identical twin if he was miraculously conceived by a virgin. In any event, the Gospel of Thomas appears to claim to be written by the twin brother of Jesus! Who better to know his secret teachings that can lead to eternal life?

The Gospel of Thomas made such a stir when it was discovered, and continues to make such a stir among scholars today, because among these 114 sayings of Jesus are many that were previously unknown, raising a host of questions. When was this gospel written? Did its author make use of the gospels of the New Testament for his sayings? If not, where did he acquire these sayings? Could any of these other sayings actually go back to the historical Jesus? What is one to make of a gospel that does not proclaim the importance of Jesus’ death and resurrection? Finally, how is one to understand the individual sayings of the gospel and the gospel as a whole? Is this a gnostic gospel that presupposes the gnostic understanding of the world, of Christ, of humans, of salvation?

The opening verse of the gospel can tell us a good deal about the nature of this text and may hint at its gnostic character (Saying 1). These sayings are said to be secret (cf. the gnostic emphasis on secret knowledge). And the key to eternal life is interpreting them correctly. One can contrast

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**These sayings are  
said to be secret ...  
and the key to eternal  
life is interpreting  
them correctly.**

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the New Testament gospels and the writings of Paul, for whom Jesus' death and resurrection are the key for eternal life.

One way to approach these sayings is to consider them in relation to the more familiar materials of the New Testament. Some sayings sound like those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels): saying 20, the parable of the mustard seed; cf. Mark 4:30–31; saying 26, removing the speck from your brother's eye; cf. Matt. 7:3–5; saying 34, the blind leading the blind; cf. Matt. 15:14; and saying 54, blessed are the poor; cf. Luke 6:20. Strikingly, some of these sayings are briefer, pithier forms than their New Testament counterparts. Could they be more authentic forms of the sayings? Other sayings start out sounding like what we can find in the Synoptic Gospels but are then given an unfamiliar twist, a twist that may presuppose the gnostic myth; thus, Saying 2 (cf. Matthew 7:7–8), Saying 72 (cf. Luke 12), Saying 113 (cf. Mark 13:4 or, esp., Luke 17:20–21). Other sayings make sense particularly in light of the gnostic myth; thus, Sayings 1, 29, 37, 56, 70, which can be seen as references to the divine spark, trapped in the material world, that needs to be set free.

What, then, is the relationship of Thomas to the New Testament gospels, and, in a related question, when was it written? Because there are so few actual verbal parallels, it does not appear that Thomas used the New Testament gospels as one of its sources. In a general way, Thomas appears very much like the lost source that scholars have long called "Q" (for *Quelle*, the German word for "source," a written account of Jesus' sayings available to Matthew and Luke).

If Thomas did not use the gospels of the New Testament, is it possible that it was written earlier than they were?

Some sayings found in Thomas may have been spoken by Jesus himself (and, thus, were around *before* the New Testament gospels).

Other sayings appear to presuppose the gnostic mythology, which cannot be reliably dated before the second century.

The best guess, then, is that even though Thomas preserves a number of important sayings of Jesus, the book itself, and some of its sayings, originated later, some time during the first half of the second century.

In the next lecture, we'll consider further the character of these sayings and try to unpack some of the overarching emphases of this significant early gospel. ■

## Essential Reading

Ron Cameron, "Thomas, Gospel of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI, pp. 535–540.

John Dart, Ray Rigert, and John Dominic Crossan, *Unearthing the Lost Words of Jesus: The Discovery and Text of the Gospel of Thomas*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, reading 37.

## Supplementary Reading

Risto Uro, ed., *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas*.

Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How do you suppose one could go about establishing that when Thomas and the New Testament gospels preserve a similar saying of Jesus, the form found in Thomas is more authentic?
2. Read through the Gospel of Thomas, and see if it is possible to interpret some of the non-New Testament sayings *without* appealing to the gnostic myth. What kind of interpretations would you come up with?

# Thomas' Gnostic Teachings

## Lecture 9

**Many of these sayings presuppose that the material world is an evil place in which human souls are imprisoned and from which they need to be freed. Jesus provides the knowledge that can bring this salvation.**

**W**e have already begun to consider the Gospel of Thomas, the one gospel outside of the New Testament that has caused the greatest stir among scholars and lay people alike. In the last lecture, we examined Thomas in relation to the gospels of the New Testament. Now, we can move on to consider the overarching message of Thomas on its own terms, to see what it has to say about God, Christ, the world, humans, and salvation.

A good place to start is at the beginning (Saying 1). This appears to foreshadow the gnostic character of the collection at the outset: This gospel will record the *secret* teachings of Jesus, which can bring eternal life to those who come to understand them. Salvation here does not come by the death and resurrection of Jesus, but by the knowledge that he imparts to those who can understand.

It is striking that a number of the sayings of this gospel appear to presuppose various aspects of the gnostic myth. It is by knowing yourselves that you achieve knowledge of salvation. You are a divine being entrapped in an impoverished body (Saying 3b). This entrapment in the material world is portrayed in a variety of ways. It is like one who is drunk and no longer has a sense of himself (Saying 28). It is like being draped with unnecessary clothes (Saying 37). Those with the divine spark have come from the divine realm (Saying 50), and they will return to it (Saying 49). One natural corollary is that this material world, and the human body as part of it, are both portrayed as evil (Sayings 29, 56).

Salvation, then, comes by acquiring the true knowledge that can bring liberation from the body, a liberation that is sometimes portrayed as

awakening from a dream or becoming sober after being drunk (as already seen in Sayings 28, 37, 56). This salvation comes from knowing the sayings of Jesus and interpreting them correctly (Sayings 1b, 108); on the other hand, those who do not accept the true knowledge will face death (Saying 70). Because salvation here is completely spiritual—a matter of the divine spark finding liberation from its prison in the physical world—the Kingdom of God is no longer understood as a physical entity but a spiritual one. Earlier Christians, of course, had imagined that there would be an actual physical salvation of this world. Not so the Gnostics, for whom the material world was the creation of an evil deity and was not to be redeemed but to be escaped. Thus, we find numerous sayings in the Gospel of Thomas in opposition to the world itself and to the idea that the future kingdom would actually be present here (Sayings 3, 113).

Still, though the Gnostics rejected the earlier apocalyptic notion of a future physical kingdom here on earth, they continued the tradition (found in Jesus and other early apocalypticists) of rejecting all social conventions that might tie one to this world. One should have no concern about clothes (Saying 36). One should have no concern for wealth (Sayings 63, 110). One should reject, even hate, one's father, mother, brothers, and sisters (Sayings 99, 55). Or, in the shortest and most pithy of all Thomas' sayings, "Be passers by" (Saying 42). Not even the kind of pious activities that one engages in with one's body are of any use for one to attain salvation, because these simply tie one to the world rather than remove one from it (Saying 14a, against fasting, prayer, giving alms, and food laws).

Salvation, then, comes becoming one—or reunified—with the divine entity from which you have been divided. As Thomas puts it, whoever will be saved must become a solitary, or a single, or a united one (Sayings 4b, 22, 49). And this comes not to everyone, but to the few who have the divine spark within (Sayings 23, 75). This idea can help explain that most knotty of all the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas, Saying 114. The point is that men and women need to transcend the physical boundaries of maleness and femaleness, but that can happen only when women, the female, become more perfect, like males. This notion is rooted in the ancient belief, found



throughout our Greek and Roman sources, that females were not a *different* kind of human from males, but a *lesser* kind, that is, unformed males.

This, then, is the Gospel of Thomas, a remarkable collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, many of which may represent things Jesus actually taught, but many of which may represent later gnostic reflections on the salvation that Jesus has brought. In this gospel, Jesus does not talk about the God of Israel, about sin against God and the need of repentance. In this gospel, it is not Jesus' death and resurrection that bring salvation, and there is no anticipation of a coming Kingdom of God on earth. Instead, this gospel presupposes the gnostic mythology that some humans contain the divine spark that has been separated from the realm of God and entrapped in this evil world of matter, which needs to be delivered by learning the secret teachings from above that Jesus himself brings. It is by learning the truth of this world and, especially, of one's one divine character that one can escape this bodily prison and return to the realm of light whence one came, the Kingdom of God that transcends this evil world and all that is in it. ■

### Is the Gospel of Thomas, a remarkable collection of 114 sayings of Jesus?

#### Essential Reading

Ron Cameron, "Thomas, Gospel of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, VI, 535–540.

John Dart, Ray Rigert, and John Dominic Crossan, *Unearthing the Lost Words of Jesus: The Discovery and Text of the Gospel of Thomas*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, reading 37.

#### Supplementary Reading

Risto Uro, ed., *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas*.

Richard Valantasis, *The Gospel of Thomas*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Pick several of the sayings of the Gospel of Thomas that make sense when interpreted in light of the gnostic myth and see if you can understand them in some other way, without considering them from the gnostic point of view.
2. The Gospel of Thomas seems to understand the importance of Jesus for salvation differently from the writers of the New Testament. What other options could one imagine for how Jesus' life and/or death bring salvation?

# Infancy Gospels

## Lecture 10

The gospels of the New Testament say very little about events surrounding Jesus' life as an infant and young boy (just a couple of stories, such as the visit of the magi in Matthew and Jesus as a twelve-year-old in the Temple in Luke). This "lost period" from Jesus' life is the subject of several early gospels, however, including (a) the Proto-Gospel of James, a narrative of the miraculous birth and holy life of Jesus' mother, Mary, leading up to Jesus' own supernatural appearance in the world and (b) the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, a series of stories of Jesus as a miracle-working but mischievous boy, starting when he was age five.

**W**e have seen a variety of early Christian gospels to this point in our course. All these books have been considered to be early Christian apocrypha. *Apocrypha* literally means hidden, or secret, things. The term refers to a group of books that are somewhat like the books that made it into the New Testament canon and that appear to claim the same kind of authority as the books that made it into the sacred Scripture. These books were, however, excluded. Some are gospels *like* those of the New Testament (Gospel of the Ebionites). Others contain reflections on the significance of salvation (Gospel of Truth), while others focus on the sayings of Jesus (Gospel of Thomas). The gospels we are to consider in this lecture are of a different kind, dealing with events not considered extensively in the New Testament, the events leading up to Jesus' birth and during his young childhood. These are appropriately called "Infancy Gospels." The two earliest and most significant are the Proto-Gospel of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.

In the New Testament, only Matthew and Luke give accounts of Jesus' birth, and these are not completely harmonious with each other. In Luke, Joseph and Mary are from Nazareth and happen to be in Bethlehem only to register for a census; they return home about a month later. In Matthew, they seem to reside in Bethlehem and leave only when Herod, King of the Jews, threatens

to kill the child, Jesus. They escape to Egypt and resettle in Nazareth afterward, for fear of Herod's son. In any event, the only New Testament stories of Jesus as a child come from these accounts (his flight to Egypt and an account in Luke of him as a twelve-year-old, discussing matters of the law in the Temple in Jerusalem).

Christians later began to wonder, though, about the events of his birth and young life. Why was Mary chosen to bear Jesus? How could he be the Son of God if *she* were not someone special? How was she born? How did she maintain her holiness? What was Jesus like as a child? What was he doing then? How did he manifest his power and character as the Son of God in the household of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth? These are the questions that the so-called Infancy Gospels are designed to answer.

One of the most significant gospels in the Middle Ages was the Proto-Gospel of James. It is called a *proto-gospel* because it narrates events leading up to Jesus' birth. It is actually an account of Mary's birth and upbringing, designed to show that she was chosen by God as a worthy vessel for the Son of God she was to bear. We won't be able to consider all of the details of the text here, simply some of its more notable features. According to this account, Mary herself was born supernaturally, in a way similar to and modeled on the account of the birth of the prophet Samuel in the Hebrew Bible. She was completely dedicated to God by her mother Anna and sent at the age of three to live in the Temple, where she was raised in absolute purity and fed by an angel. At twelve, she was given in marriage to Joseph, an elderly widower with grown children. To his initial chagrin, though, she became pregnant (through the Holy Spirit).

The account of the birth of Jesus itself is told in interesting detail. He is born in a grotto outside of Bethlehem. When Jesus is born, Joseph, outside the grotto, sees the time come to a halt (ch. 18). A midwife who comes to assist in the birth performs a postpartum inspection and verifies in amazement that, indeed, Mary is still completely intact. The account ends with the attempt of

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**Christians later began to wonder, though, about the events of [Jesus'] birth and young life.**

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Herod to kill the child and Jesus' cousin John the Baptist, both of whom are supernaturally protected from danger, unlike John's father, Zacharias, who is slain in the Temple. This account claims to have been written by James, Jesus' half-brother (Joseph's son from his previous marriage). Most scholars suppose, though, that it was written pseudonymously some time near the end of the second century.

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas was possibly written a bit earlier. The account claims to be written by "Thomas, the Israelite"—possibly, like the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus' twin brother. It is a narrative of Jesus' miraculous young life, starting at the time he was five years old. The opening stories set the pattern for the narrative, showing the child Jesus to be filled with divine power but a tad mischievous.

He can perform miracles over nature and harm anyone who opposes (or irritates) him (chs. 2–4). He constantly opposes Jews who claim he has defiled the Sabbath and arrogant teachers who assume they have something to teach him (ch. 14). Eventually, though, he begins to use his powers for the good, raising from the dead those he has slain and healing those he has withered. The account ends with Jesus in the temple as a twelve-year-old, discussing matters of the law with the teachers of Israel. It is difficult to know whether this gospel is meant to be taken seriously as an account of what Jesus really was like as a young child, or if it was meant as somewhat humorous entertainment, by Christians imagining what Jesus would have been capable of before he had to shoulder the responsibilities of adulthood.

These then are our earliest Infancy Gospels, accounts of Jesus' life before his baptism as an adult by John the Baptist. They are not only significant in themselves as interesting narratives from the early church. They also became enormously influential in later times, as other authors took these narratives and added stories of their own. These Infancy Gospel accounts, written and read widely in later times, influenced Christian imagination about Jesus' birth and childhood, as is evident in numerous layers of Western culture, especially in the pictorial art of the Middle Ages. ■

## Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 39, 40.

Paul A. Mirecki, “Thomas, Infancy Gospel of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI, pp. 540–544.

Willem S. Vorster, “James, Protevangelium of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. III, pp. 629–633.

## Supplementary Reading

Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

Oscar Cullman, “Infancy Gospels,” in Edgar Hennecke and William Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*, pp. 414–469.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why do you suppose the New Testament gospels contain so little information on Jesus and his family before his appearance to be baptized by John the Baptist as an adult?
2. In your judgment, are these Infancy Gospels to be taken seriously as attempts to narrate real historical events, or are they simply meant as entertaining fictions?

# The Gospel of Peter

## Lecture 11

**One of the most remarkable gospels from antiquity comes to us in only a fragment, discovered near the end of the nineteenth century in a monk's tomb. This is all that remains of the gospel allegedly written by Jesus' disciple Peter.**

**T**o this point in our course, we have considered a number of the non-canonical gospels. We have considered so far a number of gospels that were condemned as heretical. In this lecture, we examine a gospel that was excluded from the canon because it was *suspected* of being heretical and, possibly, Gnostic. As with the other gospels we have considered, this one, too, was known by name to scholars throughout the ages but was discovered only in modern times. Its discovery in the 1880s caused quite a stir, however, because this gospel was written in the first person, allegedly by none other than Jesus' closest disciple, Peter.

The gospel was known to exist as early as the second century, from a discussion in the "Church History" of Eusebius, who discusses an incident from the life of Serapion, a second-century bishop of Antioch. Serapion had discovered that one of his churches, in the town of Rhossus, used a Gospel of Peter in its worship services. He later read the text, saw that it could be used for heretical purposes, and forbade its use.

A fragment of the gospel was discovered in 1886. A French archaeological team digging in Akhmim, Egypt, uncovered a monk's tomb. Buried with the monk was a manuscript that contained several writings, including a fragmentary copy of a gospel. The gospel is incomplete: It begins and ends in mid-sentence and is obviously part of a much larger narrative. The surviving portion consists of an account of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection. Remarkably, it is written in the first person, in the name of Simon Peter. Is this, then, the lost Gospel of Peter mentioned by Eusebius? It is difficult to know for sure, but most scholars have concluded that it is.

The account is remarkable for a number of reasons. It has numerous similarities to the accounts of the New Testament gospels: Jesus is tried before Pilate and crucified with two robbers, he is taken from the cross before the Sabbath and buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea, and on the third day, Jesus is raised from the dead. But far more striking than the similarities with the more familiar gospel accounts are the differences. Some of the differences heighten the responsibility of the Jews in the death of Jesus. These appear to reflect a kind of incipient but already virulent anti-Judaism among the early Christians.

It is important to understand some historical background of what happened between Christians and Jews in the early centuries. Christianity started out as a Jewish sect. Jesus himself was Jewish, as were his followers. After Jesus' death, his followers began to proclaim that Jesus was the Son of God, whose death had brought about salvation for the world.

This rejection of the message of Jesus led to a split between the few Jews who accepted Jesus as messiah and the majority who rejected this claim. Those who accepted Jesus began trying to convert others, and Christianity became a separate religion. All religions in the Roman Empire had been tolerated because all, except Judaism, were polytheistic. Judaism was not considered a problem because it was an ancient tradition.

The new religion of Christianity was seen as dangerous. Christians refused to worship the state gods and did not have an ancient tradition to back up their views. To defend themselves, Christians began to claim that they were the true representatives of Judaism. This led to a serious split, with Christians accusing Jews of being responsible for the death of Jesus. It is the King of the Jews, Herod (not the Roman Pilate), who condemns Jesus to death (v. 2). The Jews realize the evil they have done and fear the wrath of God as a result (v. 25). It became a standard polemic that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. came about because the Jews had executed Jesus. The Jewish people are explicitly condemned for what they did (v. 17).

Other differences point to the possibly "heretical" leanings of the gospel. Jesus is said to have been silent on the cross "as if he felt no pain" (v. 10).



He appears to bemoan the departure of divine nature before he dies (v. 19). Still other differences reflect legendary expansions of the traditions of Jesus' death and resurrection. For example, one of the robbers being crucified is punished (for verbally attacking those executing Jesus) by *not* having his legs broken.

Most striking of all is the detailed narration of Jesus' actual resurrection (that is, his emergence from the tomb, not described in any of the canonical accounts). Two angels descend bodily from heaven and enter the tomb (vv. 35–37). There then emerge three figures from the tomb, tall as skyscrapers (vv. 39–40). Behind them comes the cross, which is asked from heaven if it has preached to those “who had fallen asleep” (that is, those in Hades) and replies, “Yes” (vv. 39, 41–42). The account ends with the women going to the tomb and learning of the resurrection (vv. 50–57) and the firsthand account of a fishing expedition of the disciples, which breaks off abruptly in mid-sentence (v. 60).

The discovery of this remarkable account led to numerous critical questions: When was it originally written? Did it use the canonical gospels as sources for its narratives? Or is it independent of the other known accounts? These questions continue to be debated. Probably, the majority of scholars think that it was written after the canonical accounts (possibly in the early part of the second century), as suggested by its virulent anti-Judaism and legendary character. Because there are very few verbal similarities between it and the others, it may represent an independent account, based on oral traditions that continued to circulate about Jesus for a long time after the New Testament gospels were produced. ■

**Most striking of all is the detailed narration of Jesus' actual resurrection.**

### Essential Reading

John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, reading 38.

Paul Mirecki, “Peter, Gospel of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. V, pp. 278–281.

## Supplementary Reading

Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*.

John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke*.

Christian Maurer and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, “The Gospel of Peter,” in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What about the Gospel of Peter might be taken as “heretical” by a proto-orthodox Christian of the early centuries? Are there ways to interpret the passages in question in a non-heretical way?
2. What kind of argument could be mounted that the Gospel of Peter preserves traditions earlier than those of the New Testament gospels, which were possibly used by these gospels as sources?

# The Secret Gospel of Mark

## Lecture 12

**One of the most controversial “discoveries” of modern times occurred in 1958 at the Mar Saba library near Jerusalem, when Morton Smith came upon the fragment of a letter, which indicates there existed a second edition of Mark’s gospel.**

**T**o this point in our course, we have seen a number of gospels that were known from ancient sources or discovered only in recent times. In this lecture, we will consider one of the most intriguing and controversial discoveries of modern times, a fragmentary account of a secret gospel allegedly written by Mark. Mark is the oldest and shortest gospel. It was not used extensively in the early church. Most of Mark’s stories are also found in Matthew and Luke, leading early Christians to believe that, perhaps, it was a condensed version of Matthew. According to the second-century heresiologist Irenaeus, the Gospel of Mark was used by Gnostics who separated the Jesus from the Christ.

Mark begins with Jesus at his baptism, where the spirit of God comes into him. At the end of his life, Jesus on the cross cries out to God, “Why have you left me behind?” The proto-orthodox Christians accepted Mark as a bonafide canonical gospel. Was there a second version of Mark?

A good deal of intrigue surrounds the circumstances of the discovery of the Secret Gospel of Mark. It was discovered by Morton Smith, one of the most erudite scholars of Christian antiquity of the twentieth century. In 1941, as a Ph.D. student at Harvard, Smith spent time in Israel and visited the monastery of Mar Saba, southeast of Jerusalem. Years later, as a tenured professor at Columbia, Smith decided to spend a sabbatical there, to bring order to its library. While cataloguing the Greek and Latin manuscripts and printed books of the library, he made a remarkable discovery. In the final blank pages of a seventeenth-century edition of the writings of Ignatius (an important second-century church father), he came across a handwritten copy

of a letter allegedly by Clement of Alexandria, another important church father from near the end of the second century.

The letter is a remarkable document. It is allegedly written to an otherwise unknown Theodore. In it, Clement addresses a question Theodore had raised about the existence of a second version of the Gospel of Mark. Clement indicates that Mark had, in fact, produced two versions of his gospel, the one popularly known (that is in our New Testament) and a second more secret one intended only for the spiritual elite. But members of a heretical gnostic sect known as the Carpocratians, notorious for their wild and licentious activities, had gotten hold of this secret version of the gospel and falsified it for their own purposes.

Clement then goes on to narrate two passages found in Mark's secret gospel. One is an account of Jesus raising a young man from the dead who then is said to have loved Jesus and come to him later at night "wearing nothing but a linen robe over his nakedness." Jesus is said to have spent the night with him, teaching him the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. The other account is a shorter and more bland account of Jesus refusing to see several women who had come to see him.

The questions surrounding the text were numerous and momentous: When was the letter copied into this book of Ignatius? Could it have been a forgery? Did the letter actually go back to Clement of Alexandria? If so, was there really a second version of Mark? And if that was so, was Clement right that it was a secret version? Or could it have been the original version of Mark that got changed because of its possibly offensive overtones? If it did go back to Mark, what does that tell us about the practices and activities of the historical Jesus?

Smith was obviously ecstatic about this once-in-a-lifetime discovery. He photographed the relevant pages and spent the next fifteen years of his life analyzing them, getting expert opinions on different aspects of the problem. Companion palaeographers (experts in ancient handwriting) agreed that the letter did, in fact, represent an eighteenth-century style of handwriting. Experts in Clement of Alexandria by and large agreed that the letter

conformed closely with Clement's writing style and vocabulary. Experts on the Gospel of Mark by and large agreed that the quotations from "secret Mark" conformed to the style and vocabulary of Mark. Smith produced two books on the discovery, one for popular audiences and one for scholars, presenting his find and giving his interpretation of it.

Most controversial was his interpretation: He argued that the narrative was not pure fiction but related to the life of the historical Jesus. He concluded that the man had come to Jesus at night to engage in a secret nocturnal baptismal ritual, one that involved a naked baptism that united the person with Jesus in an ecstatic experience of the Kingdom of God. This account, needless to say, had very strong homoerotic overtones. Not all scholars were convinced. And now, some thirty years after these books were published, some scholars have their doubts about the text itself.

Could the whole thing have been forged? Possibly even by Smith himself? Few scholars have been bold enough to say so. If Smith *did* forge it, it is one of the most brilliant works of scholarship in the twentieth century! But there are some intriguing issues. For one thing, no one else has actually seen the manuscript—even though many have tried. The manuscript has evidently been removed to a library in Jerusalem. The monks have not allowed anyone else access to the manuscript. This has raised considerable suspicions. The only way to know if the letter was actually copied into this book of Ignatius in the eighteenth century is to do a full chemical analysis of the ink. But it is unavailable. In addition, some scholars who have explored the matter further have argued that the letter is in fact *more* like Clement's writings than any of Clement's other writings, as if someone were carefully trying to emulate his writing style but went overboard.

There are several other curious considerations, possibly making the whole thing too good to be false. The book of Ignatius that the letter was copied into was a famous 1646 edition, which was the *first* edition ever that printed only the *authentic* letters of Ignatius and excluded the forged letters of

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**Could the whole thing  
have been forged?  
Possibly even by  
Smith himself?**

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Ignatius that had been wrongly accepted as authentic throughout the Middle Ages. Isn't that a bit odd, that it is precisely into that particular book that someone copied a letter that may well itself be forged instead of authentic? On the facing page, the last printed page of this book of Ignatius, the editor is discussing a textual problem, in which he points out that later scribes have incorrectly modified the original text and added considerable dribble that confuses the true historical sense of the text. Isn't that an odd counterpart to this alleged letter? Finally, it is interesting to note how Smith himself dedicated the popular account of his book on the secret gospel. It is dedicated "To the One Who Knows." Who is the one who knows? And what does he know?

In conclusion, it is difficult to say whether this account represents an authentic discovery or a modern forgery. If it is an authentic letter, it may provide us with some valuable information about Christianity in second-century Alexandria during the time of Clement and give us some interesting possibilities for understanding Mark's gospel and the historical Jesus. If it is forged, it provides us with no authentic historical information, but may be of one of the most amazing feats of scholarship, in this case forged scholarship, of modern times. ■

### Essential Reading

J. K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 148–150.

Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel of Mark*.

### Supplementary Reading

John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*.

Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Assume for a moment that the letter was actually penned by Clement and that there really was another edition of Mark available to the church in Alexandria. Is there any way that this other edition was in fact the *first* edition of Mark and that later, certain passages came to be omitted by scribes copying it, possibly because the passages were considered offensive?
2. Assume that someone forged this document. What might have been his or her reasons for doing so?

# The Acts of John

## Lecture 13

**To some extent, the five major surviving accounts of the apostles are modeled on the Book of Acts in the New Testament, but they differ in that each is concerned principally about just one of the major apostles in early Christendom: John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, and Thomas.**

In the past several lectures, we have considered several of the non-canonical gospels that were forged by early Christian writers. We have seen that there are different kinds of apocryphal gospels: collections of Jesus' sayings, accounts of his ministry and passion, narratives of his birth and childhood. These apocryphal gospels derive from a variety of groups of early Christians: Jewish-Christian, Gnostic, and proto-orthodox. But all of them are late and legendary, and most are forged in the name of an apostolic authority. We now move to a different genre of early Christian apocrypha, the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. These, too, are late and legendary, but they are not forged: They are written *about* the apostles, not allegedly *by* them.

Accounts of the lives of Jesus' apostles were common in early Christianity. The first is in the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles. This is an account of what happened to the followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection as they spread the gospel of Jesus throughout the Roman world. The two main characters of the account are Peter, the original head of the early church, and Paul, the greatest missionary of the early church. These two and other apostles are empowered by God to spread the church to different parts of the Roman world, eventually to Rome itself, and among different peoples, both Jew and Gentile. The account narrates miracles performed by the apostles and conversions to the faith (including the conversion of the apostle Paul). The account also details the internal conflicts in Christianity, particularly the conflict over whether Christians must become Jewish before they can convert to faith in Christ.



The theme is that the spread of the gospel comes from God and that nothing can stop this mission. This early account was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, sometime in the latter part of the first century. In the second and third centuries, other accounts of the lives of the apostles were written by anonymous authors. Unlike the Book of Acts, these accounts focused on the lives and exploits of individual apostles—legendary, imaginative, and entertaining accounts of the wondrous activities of Jesus’ closest followers.

Along with lots of smaller fragmentary accounts, we have five fairly complete Apocryphal Acts: the Acts of John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, and Thomas. We will not be able to examine all these apocryphal accounts in this course, but we will look at three of the most interesting ones.

The Acts of John concerns the adventures of John, the son of Zebedee. John was one of Jesus’ closest disciples in the gospels of the New Testament. He is an important figure in the history of the early church, according to the Book of Acts in the New Testament, but he drops out of sight early on in that narrative. Our late-second-century Acts of John gives a fuller account of his activities. Unfortunately, this text has not survived intact but only in fragments that scholars have had to piece together from various manuscripts.

In this account, we learn of many of John’s exploits. His activities are principally in Asia Minor, in and around Ephesus. There, he engages in numerous miraculous activities as he spreads the gospel of Christ, as narrated in entertaining stories. He is portrayed as having a unique ability to raise the dead. This is seen in an account involving Lycomedes, the commander-in-chief of the Ephesians, and his beautiful young wife, Cleopatra, who has died prematurely, but whom John raises to the joy and wonder of the entire city. Later in the account is the even more bizarre narrative of the raising of Drusiana, the chaste and beautiful wife of Andronicus—a narrative that involves almost unheard-of chastity and crass immorality, a tale of attempted necrophilia, supernatural intervention, miraculous resurrection, and conversion to the life of purity. These stories show commitment to Christ as being more important than love or sex.

John's supernatural powers are portrayed in other stories, as well. He is shown to be a superman whose powers can dispel and overthrow all pagan forms of worship, for example, in his powerful destruction of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. He is shown to be superior to all nature, for example, in an amusing anecdote in which he orders the bedbugs to leave him peace for a good night's sleep.

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**The portrayal of John as superhuman is used to show the superiority of his gospel proclamation.**

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This portrayal of John as superhuman is used to show the superiority of his gospel proclamation. It is important to remember that the Acts were being produced in a world where the population was largely pagan.

Christians in the second and third centuries were a small, persecuted minority (only 2 to 3 percent of the population). The author's description of Christ, however, appears to be somewhat suspect in terms of its orthodoxy. In one of the most intriguing passages of the book, he describes Christ as one who did not have a real flesh-and-blood body, who could change appearances at will, who did not leave footprints when he walked, and who was not actually physically present on the cross at the crucifixion. It is difficult to tell whether this lengthy passage was originally part of the book or if it came from a different writing altogether. Its connections are more with gnostic than proto-orthodox writings, whereas the rest of the book, while entertaining and imaginative, appears entirely orthodox.

Most scholars date the Acts of John to some time in the second century. This would make sense of its overarching themes. Christianity is portrayed as superior to all opposition, both pagan (pagans are said to worship demons) and Jewish (the Jews are said to have been misled by evil angels). The apostles are thought of as superhumans, whose miracles seem even greater than those of Jesus recounted in the New Testament. There is a strong emphasis on the need for purity and, especially, sexual chastity, an ascetic view that became increasingly popular in the second century. Overall, there is a stress on "otherworldliness," on rejecting the lure of the material things of this world in exchange for the treasures of heaven. We will see these themes as well in the other Apocryphal Acts in the lectures to come. ■

## Essential Reading

J. K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 303–345.

Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, pp. 152–212.

## Supplementary Reading

Jan N. Bremmer, ed., *The Apocryphal Acts of John*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What are the different ways that a book such as the Acts of John may have functioned in early Christianity? In other words, why was this account written?
2. Why would an entertaining account of one of the apostles that seems otherwise entirely orthodox contain passages that could easily be given a heretical interpretation?

# The Acts of Thomas

## Lecture 14

**The Apocryphal Acts, a Christian genre written ... about the exploits of the apostles, utilize many of the same characteristics of the romance genre and many of the same concerns.**

In our last lecture, we examined one of the most interesting of our surviving non-canonical accounts of the lives of the apostles, the Acts of John. This account of the legendary exploits of an apostle is typical of the genre, Apocryphal Acts, in which we find travels, dangers, controversies, deliverances, thwarted sexual trysts, and miraculous demonstrations of the power of God, all in a single episodic narrative. But this genre is not unrelated to other kinds of literature popular from about the same time, the ancient equivalent of the modern novel, sometimes called *romances*.

We have five complete examples of Greek romances that survive from antiquity and two examples of romances in Latin. These are often named after their leading characters, two star-crossed lovers, such as Chaereas and Callirhoe, Daphnis and Chloe. The plots and narrative structures of these works are remarkably consistent: They are generally about two lovers who are tragically separated before they can consummate their love. The plots involve the lovers' desperate attempts to return to each other's arms, frustrated by pirate abductions, kidnappings, war, shipwreck, and evident death. The books typically climax when the lovers find a way through their suffering to reunite and consummate their love.

In one sense, the books are all about overcoming the tragic fate of this world to consummate the greatest of gifts, the sexual love of a man and a woman. It is a strong feature of these works that this socially sanctified act of love provides the basis for social peace and prosperity, that civilizing forces in the world depend on strong family life embodied in the sexual ties of the rich and beautiful leaders of the city-state. The Apocryphal Acts use many of the same characteristics and concerns of the romance genre—travels, disasters, wealth, beauty, sexual relations, social life—but completely turn them

around. In these books, the wealth and beauty are to be despised for the rewards of heaven. Social life, here, is to be spurned for the life of heaven. Sexual love is to be renounced for the greater love of God, reserved for those who maintain their continent purity.

Nowhere can this paradoxical twisting of the genre be seen more clearly than in possibly the most famous of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the Acts of Thomas. This narrative is well known because it is the first account of the familiar legend that the apostle Thomas became a missionary who spread the gospel of Christ in far-off India. The Acts of Thomas tells the tale of how it happened. The book was originally written in Syria, probably in the third century. There is considerable doubt about the historical accuracy of its tales, even the basic theme that Thomas took the gospel to India. There is little doubt, though, about the entertaining nature of the narrative or its overarching intent to cast aspersions on values of contemporary society: wealth, power, sexual love.

The plot itself is basic: Thomas is portrayed as Jesus' twin brother, who is sold into slavery by his "master" (= Lord), after Jesus' death, to an Indian merchant so that he will be forced to go abroad to spread the gospel among the people and royal family of India (chs. 1–2). The overarching themes of the book can be seen in the series of tales that takes place in the course of its narrative. Some have to do with showing the supernatural nature of the main character, Jesus' twin brother, who has prophetic power (ch. 6, 9). This book stands in direct opposition to the celebration in the Greek romances of marital love as the glue that holds together society. Here, sex of any kind, even within marriage, is seen as foul and to be avoided at all costs (chs. 11–16). Also opposed are other values that seemed so commonsensically good to many ancients: for example, the accumulation of wealth (thus, ch.17, the palace of Gundaphorus). Stressed is the power of God, especially in his sacraments (ch. 51) and in the life to come, where those who commit sins—especially sexual sins—are punished forever (chs. 55–57).

Many of these themes are celebrated in the Hymn of the Pearl, one of the most moving pieces of poetry to come down to us from the ancient world, which is embedded in the Acts of Thomas, perhaps as an illustration of

many of its themes (chs. 108–113). The story is of a lad who is sent by his royal family to retrieve a pearl from a great serpent in Egypt, but who, after arriving in Egypt, forgets who he is and why he has come. His royal parents send him a letter, reminding him of who he is and why he has gone, after which he fulfills his mission and returns to great fanfare and reward. Of the many interpretations of this moving poem, probably the most sensible for its immediate context, is that humans, too, have a heavenly origin and need to recall who they really are and why they have come, rather than be caught up in the trappings of this world, its beauty, riches, and sensual pleasures. This is, in fact, the teaching of many of these Apocryphal Acts, that there is a greater world that cannot be seen, far superior to this one that can be, and that life in this world should be directed entirely toward that other one, lest we become entrapped in the bodily desires of this world and suffer dire consequences in the world to come. ■

### Essential Reading

Harold W. Attridge, “Thomas, Acts of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI, pp. 531–534.

J. K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 439–511.

Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, pp. 322–411.

### Supplementary Reading

Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, pp. 366–370 (on the “Hymn of the Pearl”).

### Questions to Consider

1. In view of the values embraced by the Acts of Thomas, explain why Christianity may have been seen as socially dangerous in the ancient world. In what ways does a tale like this appear to work against “family values” in the modern context?

2. How could the Hymn of the Pearl be explained as a gnostic composition?

# The Acts of Paul and Thecla

## Lecture 15

**The principal reason that Christians forged documents in antiquity: They wanted their views heard, and they wanted their views to be accepted as authoritative, and so they wrote down their views in the names of apostles.**

To this point, we have looked at two of our non-canonical Acts, those of John and of Thomas. In this lecture, we exam a third, one that was possibly the most popular in antiquity and is almost certainly the most popular among scholars of antiquity, the Acts of Paul and Thecla. This is a legendary narrative about the exploits of one of Paul's early converts to Christianity, the aristocratic young woman Thecla, who abandons her home, her family, and her fiancé to follow Paul's teachings of strict sexual renunciation. The account forms a portion of the larger narrative known as the Acts of Paul, a collection of tales already attested to by the late second century. The proto-orthodox church father Tertullian condemned the account for its lax attitude toward the role of women in the Christian church. According to Tertullian, the entire account was, in fact, fabricated by a presbyter in Asia Minor, who was caught red-handed in the act and later confessed to making the forgery.

Why and how did people forge documents? Sometimes, people forged documents as a way to make money. People also forged documents as an act of humility. More commonly, documents were forged in the ancient world because, by claiming to be someone famous, the writer could get a hearing for his views. This appears to be the principal reason that Christians forged documents in antiquity, writing their views in the name of an apostle. Such forgers attempted to inject aspects of verisimilitude into their forgeries, for instance, adding offhand comments presumably made by the author. Forgeries could be recognized by comparing the writing style, vocabulary, and views to those of the author under whose name the forger was writing. This account contains numerous earlier traditions about Paul and his converts, none of which is more riveting than the narrative known as the Acts of Paul



and Thecla, which may have originally circulated independently of the Acts of Paul.

As with the other Apocryphal Acts, this book can be seen as a kind of Christianized version of the popular literature known as romances or novels. It shares many of the generic characteristics and concerns of ancient novels. These books are all about love, magic, danger, escape, and restoration. But the Christian versions of the novels stand against the pagan versions in central and striking ways. The pagan romances are all driven by a concern to set forth the sanctity of marriage and marital love in the context of religion and in relation to an overarching concern for the integrity of the social fabric (strong families and marital institutions work to preserve the good of society). The Apocryphal Acts are concerned to promote strict sexual renunciation and illustrate how the gospel of Christ destroys the social fabric of family and community, all for the sake of the greater truth of heaven and the world above. These similarities and differences can be neatly seen in the gripping tale of the Acts of Paul and Thecla.

The narrative can be divided into four scenes of action. First scene: Thecla's dramatic and socially disruptive conversion to Paul's message of sexual renunciation. The main characters: a wealthy aristocratic young woman, Thecla; Thecla's mother, Theoclia; Thecla's fiancé, Thamyris; and the apostle Paul. The action: Paul arrives in Thecla's city of Iconium to preach his gospel that eternal life will come to those who abstain from sexual activity, even within marriage. Thecla listens to Paul for three days on end from the window of her home and converts to his message, to the severe consternation of her mother and fiancé.

Second scene: Trial by fire in Iconium. The main characters: Thecla, Paul, Thamyris, the governor of Iconium. The action: Thamyris and other men of the city, outraged that Paul's message has taken their wives and fiancées from them, have him arrested. Thecla shows her absolute devotion to Paul by bribing the guards to let her in to see him. Out of frustration, Thamyris and Theoclia hand her over for punishment. The governor condemns her to death by burning. But God miraculously intervenes at the last moment, dousing the fire with a thunderstorm, and Thecla is set free.

Third scene: Thrown to the wild beasts in Antioch. The main characters: Paul, Thecla, Alexander (an influential citizen of Antioch), the governor of Antioch, and the Queen Tryphaena. The action: Paul and Thecla travel to Antioch, where she is accosted by Alexander, who desires her. She publicly humiliates him and, in response, he arranges to have her condemned to the wild beasts. Before her execution, the governor hands her over for safekeeping to an aristocratic woman, Tryphaena, relative of the emperor, who befriends her. When taken to the arena, Thecla is again miraculously protected from the wild beasts by God and eventually throws herself into a vat of wild, ravenous seals and baptizes herself there. When no beast will molest her, she is again set free.

Final scene: Resolution and restoration. The main characters: Thecla and Paul. The action: Thecla longs for Paul, seeks after him and finds him, and receives his blessing to teach the word of God. She finds her mother, Theoclia, is restored to her, and moves to Seleucia, where she lives long and happy as a celibate preacher of the gospel.

Some of the overarching themes of this fascinating account can be taken as representative of all the Apocryphal Acts. Passion and desire are not eliminated here but redirected; their proper objects are not sexual partners but God, Christ, and their earthly representatives. Those who reject this world and its pleasures and trappings are those who have found the truth of the world above and are in a right standing with God, both now and for eternity. Those who accept the gospel of Christ and renounce the pleasures of this world, including sexual love, will be socially disruptive and hated by the rest of the world. But God will protect them and miraculously vindicate the truthfulness of their message.

No wonder that, looking at it from the outside, Christianity was seen to be such a dangerous religion by some pagans in the Roman Empire. It struck at the very heart of what most pagans held dear: social structure, family life, marital love, and the enjoyment of the simple pleasures of this life. Why were these accounts—and the idea of asceticism—so popular among Christian women? Scholars believe that the social structure in the Roman Empire, where women were forced to be subservient to men, played a role in leading

women to this new ideology that denied marriage. Without sex or marriage, women were liberated from a male-dominated society. A cult surrounding Thecla continued into the Middle Ages, and women saw her as a model to be followed in their daily lives. ■

### Essential Reading

J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 364–372.

Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, pp. 220-223.

### Supplementary Reading

Jan Bremmer, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

Stephen Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*.

Dennis McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Some scholars have maintained that the Acts of Thecla may well have been authored by a woman. What arguments can you think of both for and against this theory?
2. Explain why the example of Thecla may have seemed “liberating” to Christian women in the patriarchal societies of the ancient world.

# Forgeries in the Name of Paul

## Lecture 16

**A number of letters survive from Christian antiquity that claim to be written by the apostle Paul but that were, in fact, clearly fabricated at a later time.**

**T**o this point, we have examined two genres of early Christian pseudepigrapha: gospels and acts. These are two of the four genres of writings found in the New Testament and account for most of the surviving early Christian forgeries. The third genre, however, is the most common in the New Testament: epistles (twenty-one of twenty-seven books). Epistles are not widely found among the early Christian pseudepigrapha (even though they are the most common form of pseudepigrapha *within* the New Testament).

A large number of epistles in the New Testament are pseudepigrapha or anonymous. Of the twenty-one epistles in the New Testament, thirteen were allegedly written by Paul. Six of those thirteen are heavily disputed by scholars. There are debates over whether Paul wrote the letters to Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, now labeled the Deutero-Pauline Epistles. Three other letters—the Pastoral Epistles (letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus)—are regarded by scholars as not having been written by Paul. The Book of Hebrews is included in the New Testament but is considered to be anonymous. The Book of James was accepted into the canon because people thought it was written by Jesus' brother, even though the author does not claim to be *that* James. The Books 1 and 2 Peter claim to be written by Simon Peter, but most scholars agreed that 2 Peter was not written by him. The Book of Jude claims to be written by someone named Jude and was brought into the canon because it was thought that Jesus' brother wrote it. The Books 1, 2, and 3 John were included

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**Of the 21 epistles in the New Testament, 13 were allegedly written by Paul; 6 of those thirteen are heavily disputed by scholars.**

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because they were thought to be written by John, the son of Zebedee, even though no such claims had been made.

In this lecture, we will consider several of the most interesting letters, allegedly written to and by the apostle Paul. These are conveniently called 3 Corinthians and the correspondence of Paul and Seneca. Readers of the New Testament are familiar with 1 and 2 Corinthians but have, by and large, never heard of 3 Corinthians. The book is nonetheless found in a number of ancient manuscripts and was part of the New Testament canon accepted by the churches of Syria and Armenia. It is now found in the manuscripts of the “Acts of Paul” (cf. Paul and Thecla).

The letters to the Corinthians in the New Testament are themselves a series of letters that Paul sent (2 Corinthians may represent five different letters sent at different times, later cut and pasted together). These letters show numerous problems in the church in the city of Corinth that Paul tries to deal with, including, prominently, the disunity of the church and the problem of other “apostles” who arrived after Paul, teaching doctrines that he disagreed with, especially that it is the soul, not the body, that is saved. Some of these same problems are evident in the later correspondence of 3 Corinthians, as well.

In the Acts of Paul, the letter is introduced by a letter from the Corinthians to Paul. The Corinthians write that they have been disturbed by the teachings of two teachers, Simon and Cleobius, who maintain that the Old Testament prophets are not valid; that the God of this world is not the true God; that he did not create humans; that there is no future resurrection of the flesh; that Jesus was not really flesh and blood and was not really born of Mary. In other words, the opponents are some kind of docetists, like Marcion, whom we discussed earlier, or possibly, some kind of Gnostic. But for early proto-orthodox Christians (including the forger of 3 Corinthians), it was important to think not only that God created this material world, but also that he would redeem this world, including the human body, which would be raised from the dead, not left to corrupt.

The letter of 3 Corinthians is a response that takes on all these points one by one. “Paul” (that is, the forger writing in Paul’s name to address these second-century heretical views) claims that Jesus really was born of Mary (something the real Paul never mentions); that he was true flesh; and that God was the creator of all there is, who sent the Jewish prophets and Jesus to overcome the Devil, who had corrupted the flesh. He ends the letter with an attempt to demonstrate that the flesh is actually raised from the dead by pointing to three analogies: the sowing of wheat (which goes into the ground naked but emerges as a new plant); Jonah (who appeared again in the flesh after disappearing into the great fish); and an apocryphal tale of the prophet Elisha (whose dead bones could bring bodies back to life). The letter of 3 Corinthians is, then, a mid-second-century forgery in Paul’s name in which a proto-orthodox Christian appealed to the apostle’s authority to counteract doctrinal problems caused by heretical teachers of his own day.

The dispute against heresy was not the only reason to pen letters in Paul’s name, however, as can be seen in the correspondence between Paul and the famous Roman philosopher Seneca. Seneca was probably the most well known and most influential philosopher of Paul’s day: tutor and later political advisor to the Emperor Nero and highly prolific author of moral essays, philosophical tractates, poetical works, and scientific treatises. At a later time (fourth century), Christians were puzzled that the important figures in their religion, especially Jesus and Paul, were completely unknown to major political and intellectual leaders of their day (neither of them, in fact, is ever mentioned by any Roman author of the first century).

The pseudepigraphic correspondence between Paul and Seneca works to redress this situation. There are some fourteen letters that survive, eight allegedly from Seneca to Paul and six from Paul to Seneca. In them, Seneca and Paul are portrayed as close companions, with Seneca expressing admiration and astonishment at Paul’s brilliance and learning, and Paul acting as a teacher who has convinced Seneca of the truth of the Christian message. More than that, in these letters, Seneca indicates that he has read Paul’s writings to the Emperor Nero, who is amazed and moved by Paul’s learning. Several references in these forged letters attempt to provide verisimilitude for their claims to authenticity, especially letter 11, which mentions the fire

in Rome that Nero blamed on the Christians. The point of the letters, then, is to show that Paul was known and acknowledged by one of the greatest and most influential thinkers of his day, that his views were superior to the pagan philosophical traditions, and that his influence reached to the very upper echelons of Roman power and authority. The letters, though, were clearly forged, evidently sometime in the fourth century. In sum, 3 Corinthians and the correspondence between Paul and Seneca are two sets of forged epistles that meet two major items on the proto-orthodox agenda: showing that their points of view are grounded in apostolic authority and that the founders of their faith were recognized for their brilliance and authority by the greatest minds of their day. ■

### Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 46–47.

Bruce Metzger, “Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 3–24.

### Supplementary Reading

Dennis McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*.

### Questions to Consider

1. We have seen a number of forgeries in this course to this point, and some of the forged documents urge their recipients to engage in ethical behavior, but is forgery ethical? How do you explain the irony that authors who were trying to deceive readers about their own identities were also trying to have them behave in morally upright ways?
2. Given the extensive forgeries from early Christianity that are *outside* the New Testament, is there any reason to think that there could not be forgeries *within* the New Testament?

# The Epistle of Barnabas

## Lecture 17

**The Epistle of Barnabas was widely considered to be Scripture in some circles of early Christianity, and it nearly made its way into the New Testament.**

In our previous lecture, we considered non-canonical epistles allegedly written by the apostle Paul. These books of 3 Corinthians and the letters to Seneca were forged by proto-orthodox Christians to promote their own perspectives. This is true of all the early Christian pseudepigrapha, including the one we will examine in this lecture, allegedly written not by the apostle Paul but by his trusted companion, Barnabas. The Epistle of Barnabas was widely considered to be Scripture in some circles of early Christianity and nearly made it into the New Testament (it is still found in one of our earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament). The manuscript, the Codex Sinaiticus, was discovered in the nineteenth century by Constantine von Tischendorf in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai. It is the earliest complete manuscript of the New Testament, but it also contains two other books, one of which is the Epistle of Barnabas. The history of Western civilization may have been drastically changed had the Epistle of Barnabas been included in the canon. It is a virulent attack on historical Judaism, which may well have fanned even further the flames of anti-Semitism.

We must first consider some background to the Epistle of Barnabas. This particular book, written about 130–135 A.D., is not actually forged; the author is anonymous. Only later was the book attributed to Barnabas, a well-known figure from the early church as a traveling companion of Paul. The historical context of the epistle involves the developing relationship of Jews and Christians in the early decades of the second century.

It is important to bear in mind a few features of early Jewish-Christian relations. Jesus and his followers were all Jews; Jesus appears to have wanted to give the right *interpretation* of Judaism, not to set up a new religion in *opposition* to Judaism. His follower Paul advocated the view that even



though Jesus was the Messiah of the Jews, he could be accepted by non-Jews for salvation, *without* their having to become Jewish first. By the end of the first century, most people converting into the Christian church were non-Jewish. This led to natural tensions between Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile, and non-Christian Jews, because both claimed to be the true heirs of the Jewish Scriptures given by God to the Jewish people. That set of arguments is reflected in the Epistle of Barnabas.

According to Barnabas, Jews rejected God and, thus, God rejected them. It is the Christians who are the true heirs of salvation promised to the people of Israel; the Old Testament is *their* book, not the book of the Jews. Barnabas argues that God's promises in the Old Testament are meant for Christians, not Jews. He maintains that Jews were led astray by an evil angel into taking Moses' laws literally. But they were meant figuratively, as indications of how people were to behave. The kosher food laws were not about foods to eat and avoid; they indicate how people should behave toward God and one another. The law of observing sabbath was meant to show that God was soon to bring the entire creation to a period of rest and enjoyment. The law of circumcision was not meant to require Jews to mutilate their baby boys but was a prediction of the coming crucifixion of Jesus. Barnabas explains this point by applying the numerological method of interpretation called *gematria*, by which the letters of a word are given numerical equivalence and interpreted accordingly. For Barnabas, Jews are not God's covenantal people and never have been. They violated the covenant they had with God, already on Mount Sinai while Moses was still receiving the law. And it was never restored. God has now created a new people to replace the disobedient Jews.

This, then, is one of the earliest and most virulent Christian writings in opposition to Jews and Judaism. The opposition makes historical sense, even if it violates our modern moral sense. In order for non-Jewish Christians

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**According to Barnabas  
... it is the Christians  
who are the true heirs  
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the Old Testament is  
*their* book, not the  
book of the Jews.**

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to claim to stand in a special relationship with the God who created the world and chose Israel to be his people, they had to show that the Jews were *not* his people. This point of view became increasingly prominent in the second century. The Christian philosopher Justin Martyr, writing around 150 A.D., claimed that God had given the Jews circumcision so they could easily be recognized by those wanting to persecute them. The Christian apologist Tertullian, writing around 200 A.D., claimed that Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans as punishment for the Jewish rejection of Jesus. The Christian preacher of the late second century Melito of Sardis claimed that by killing Jesus, Jews were guilty of killing their own God. This is the first instance of any Christian charging Jews with the sin of deicide.



**Moses Coming Down from Mount Sinai.**

Dore Bible Illustrations, Courtesy of Dover Pictorial Archive Series.

It is important to place these various accusations against the Jews in their own historical context, without excusing them. Christians making these claims were a tiny minority that felt defenseless against larger Roman society. They wanted to maintain that, in fact, they were not a new and suspect religious sect. They were as old as the law of Moses and the ancient traditions of Judaism. In making these claims, though, they necessarily had to attack Jews, who could rightfully claim these religious traditions for themselves. These attacks may have been simply defensive posturings by Christians in the early years. Problems arose when Christianity acquired more converts and more power and, eventually, complete power, religious and secular. After the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, when Christians could exercise real social, economic, and military force, they took

the anti-Jewish claims that had developed much earlier in such writers as Barnabas and applied them literally, maintaining that Jews were the enemies of their own God and, therefore, had to be punished and destroyed. The ugly, painful, and notorious history of Christian anti-Semitism is in some ways a direct result of writings such as these. One can only imagine how much worse it would have been had the epistle of Barnabas actually succeeded in making it into the canon. ■

### Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, reading 15.

Jay Treat, “Barnabas, Epistle of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. I, pp. 611–614.

### Supplementary Reading

John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*.

Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*.

Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135–425)*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How are Barnabas’s attitudes toward Jews and the Jewish Scriptures still evident among Christians today?
2. To what extent can the horrific acts of anti-Semitism of the twentieth century be traced back to the kind of anti-Jewish polemic that we find in early Christian authors?

# The Apocalypse of Peter

## Lecture 18

**The apocalypse genre originally emerged in Jewish circles, and is closely connected with the Jewish world view known as apocalypticism.**

To this point in the course, we have considered early Christian pseudonymous gospels, acts, and epistles. These are three of the four genres that are also represented in the New Testament. The fourth is the apocalypse genre, represented in the New Testament by only one book, the Revelation of John. There are non-canonical apocalypses, as well, the earliest of which is an apocalypse allegedly written by Jesus' closest disciple, Simon Peter. This is the first surviving Christian account of a guided tour of heaven and hell, a precursor of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

To understand the text, we need to set it in a broader literary and historical context. The *apocalypse* genre originally emerged in Jewish circles and is closely connected with a Jewish worldview (*apocalypticism*) that arose about 200 years before the ministry of Jesus. Many Jews had long held to a theology that indicated that God blessed here on earth those who did his will but punished those who did evil. According to this older view (found throughout much of the Hebrew Bible), people suffer when they oppose God. But incidents arose in which foreign powers oppressed Jews precisely for trying to be Jewish. It was difficult to believe that God caused cruel suffering on Jews for trying to keep his law. Some Jews began to believe, then, that this suffering came not from God but from God's cosmic enemies (especially the Devil), who had been temporarily granted charge of this world and were determined to harm anyone who sided with God.



**Apocalypse of Saint Peter,  
verses 28–32.**

Das Evangelium und die Apokalypse des Petrus  
by Oscar von Gebhardt, 1893.

This new worldview of apocalypticism was dualistic (there are two forces in the world: good and evil, God and the Devil) and pessimistic (things are going to get worse in this world until, literally, all hell breaks out), yet it affirmed the ultimate sovereignty of God (he would soon enter into judgment with the forces of evil to bring in his good kingdom on earth). One of the ways apocalyptic thinkers expressed their views was through a kind of writing called an “apocalypse.” In general, this genre consisted of pseudonymous writings that narrated a revelation given by God through a heavenly mediator (e.g., an angel), in which the mundane realities of earth (e.g., current sufferings and future vindication) were explained in light of the ultimate truths of heaven. In some of these apocalypses, a prophet is shown a symbolic vision that mysteriously describes the future fate of the earth, when the forces of evil will be overthrown and God’s kingdom will come (such as in the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible). In others, a prophet is taken up into heaven to see the heavenly realities that foreshadowed the ultimate triumph of God on earth (such as in the Book of Revelation). Originally, these apocalypses were concerned with the fate of the earth and of people on it. God had created this world, and he would redeem it. These books, in other words, were theodicies, attempts to explain how evil and suffering could exist in a world created and maintained by an all-powerful and loving God.

But Christians who later adopted this apocalyptic worldview became, over time, less concerned with the salvation of this world and more concerned with the salvation of each person’s soul. This is a shift away from the teachings of Jesus, who appears to have thought that there was to be a real physical overturn of the forces of evil here on earth when God brought in a good kingdom for his people. When this never happened, Christians began to transmute the original apocalyptic message of a future kingdom on earth into a spiritual kingdom in heaven. In other words, when the original expectation of the overthrow of forces of evil here in this world never occurred,



**Gospel of Saint Peter.**

Das Evangelium und die Apokalypse des Petrus  
by Oscar von Gebhardt, 1893.

Christians began to emphasize, instead, the salvation of the soul in the world beyond. Heaven and hell then became centrally important categories.

This transformation of emphases can be seen in the *Apocalypse of Peter*. The book was unknown until it was discovered in a monk's tomb in 1886. But it was mentioned by authors of the late second century; thus, it was written possibly within fifty years of the *Revelation of John*. The account begins with Jesus teaching his disciples on the Mount of Olives, and the disciples asking when the end will come. Jesus then describes the future—his return as judge of the earth and the torments and ecstasies awaiting people at his judgment—in such a way that gives one the sense that he is actually taking his followers on a tour of the places of the damned and blessed. The torments are particularly lurid and show that the punishments of the damned match their crimes (blasphemers are hanged by their tongues over eternal fire; adulterers, by other bodily parts; and so on). The blessings are less

graphic but are clearly meant to convey the sense of eternal bliss for those who experience them.

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**The *Apocalypse of Peter*  
... was unknown until  
it was discovered in a  
monk's tomb in 1886.**

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The author of this firsthand narrative (allegedly Peter himself) had several major points to make with his account. Anyone who sides with God will reap a reward; anyone who opposes God will pay an

eternal and horrific price. Ultimately—appearances notwithstanding—God is in control of all that happens in this world. In other words, this account, like other early Christian apocalypses, is not meant merely to scare people into avoiding certain kinds of behavior—lying, committing adultery, blaspheming, relying on wealth, and so on—but also to explain that the evil and suffering of this age will be resolved in the next; that what happens here will be overturned there; that those who succeed by being wicked now will pay an eternal price later. In contrast, those who suffer for doing what is right now will be vindicated forever, as God shows once and for all that he and he alone is sovereign over this world. ■

## Essential Reading

J. K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, pp.593–612.

Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocryphal Form in Jewish and Christian Literature*.

## Supplementary Reading

Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, pp. 620–638.

## Questions to Consider

1. What other kinds of theodicies (explanations of how there can be evil in a world controlled by an all-powerful and all-loving God) have been put forth to make sense of suffering? How does the apocalyptic mode of theodicy compare and contrast with other kinds?
2. Why do you suppose apocalyptic thinking survives in some Christian circles still today but appears, for the most part, to be absent from the “mainstream” churches?

# The Rise of Early Christian Orthodoxy

## Lecture 19

**It's striking that, despite the fact that there's such a range of Christian beliefs that there was, in the end, only one that emerged as victorious.**

**W**e have covered a wide range of early Christian beliefs and practices in our lectures to this point. We have seen remarkable diversity among the Christian groups that we know of from the second and third centuries. Ebionites thought that Christ was a human being, a righteous man adopted by God at his baptism to be the Son of God (adoptionistic). Marcionites thought that Jesus was completely God and only seemed to be human (docetic). Gnostics thought that Jesus was a man, but Christ was a God (separationist). The proto-orthodox view agreed with the Ebionites that Jesus was a man but disagreed with them when they said that Jesus was not God. They disagreed with Gnostics, believing instead that Jesus was both God and man.

Each of these groups had authoritative books that claimed to represent the views of Jesus and his apostles. Ebionites used the Gospel of Matthew. Those who separated the Jesus from the Christ used the Gospel of Mark. Marcionites used the Gospel of Luke. Followers of Valentinus used the Gospel of John. But only one of these early Christian groups emerged as victorious in the struggle to win converts and to establish the “true” nature of Christianity. This victorious group shaped for all time what Christians would believe and which Scriptures they would accept. How, though, did this one group establish itself as dominant and virtually eliminate all traces of both its opponents and the various Scriptures they revered?

The traditional answer to this question derives from Eusebius, the fourth-century “father of church history.” Eusebius is one of the most important authors of Christian antiquity. He figured prominently in the theological disputes of his own day and was well connected politically. Most significantly, he wrote the first history of Christianity, discussing the course of the Christian religion from the days of Jesus down to his own time.



Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, as the book is called, was written in ten volumes and is still available today. The book is one of the most important writings of antiquity, the source of much of our information about early Christianity. The book discusses numerous topics: the spread of Christianity, the rise of important Christian churches, opposition by Jewish authorities, persecution by governmental officials, and significant early Christian leaders and writers.

We owe our knowledge of numerous Christian writings to Eusebius, which he quotes at length and which otherwise have been lost. And it is to Eusebius that we owe what was to become the classical view of the relationship of diverse Christian groups, or as he would put it, the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy. According to this view, orthodoxy is and always has been the true view advocated by Jesus and his followers and by the vast majority of Christians, the "great church," ever since. Heresy, in this view, is always a corruption of the truth, spawned by a malevolent apostate from the truth with only a small, if occasionally pestiferous, following. Heresy, in other words, is always a late, derivative, corrupt minority view. Orthodoxy involves certain great truths: that there is one God who is the creator of the world; that Jesus is his son who is both God and man; that Jesus died for the sins of the world and was physically raised by God from the dead; that there is also a Holy Spirit who, with God and Jesus, forms one God; and that these views are taught by the books truly written by Jesus' own apostles. Heresies denied or corrupted one or another of these views. This "classical view" of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy held the field for sixteen centuries.

A major shift in thinking came only in modern times, with the discovery of other early Christian writings and a critical appraisal of the biases at work in Eusebius's account. The bombshell was dropped in 1934 by Walter Bauer, a German scholar, in a groundbreaking book, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*. Bauer maintained that Eusebius had not given an objective account of the relationship of early Christian groups but had rewritten the history of Christian internal conflicts to validate the victory of the orthodox party that he represented. As evidence, he cited the letter of 1 Clement, which details the doctrine of apostolic succession. Rather than being the original view always shared by the majority of Christians, what

later came to be known as orthodoxy was just one of the numerous forms of Christianity in the early centuries, the one that ended up acquiring the majority of converts over time, then rewrote the history of the conflict to make it appear that this view had always been the majority one. Writings in support of other views were systematically eliminated from the historical record. But traces of the earlier conflict managed to survive. Bauer's book proceeds by going region by region, examining these surviving traces and showing that virtually everywhere we look—Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor—the *earliest* attested forms of Christianity are in fact non-orthodox, for example, Gnostic or Marcionite.

There were, of course, pockets of believers who held the views that later became dominant, but these were not the majority everywhere. They *were*, though, the majority in the city of Rome. That ended up being significant because, as this group happened to be located in the capital of the empire, it was able to use its vast resources and administrative skill to exert influence on churches in surrounding areas and, then, throughout the world. Thus, by the beginning of the fourth century, it was the *Roman* form of Christianity that was dominant, with the *Roman* church, or the *Roman Catholic Church*, that determined the course of future Christianity.

Today, nearly seventy years after Bauer's breakthrough, no one subscribes to his views wholesale, but his basic understanding of early Christianity is enormously influential. We have since made additional discoveries—most significantly, the Nag Hammadi library—that appear to support his perspective. Early Christianity appears now to be widely diverse, not basically monolithic, as Eusebius would have had us believe. This can be seen in our very earliest sources. The apostle Paul, for example, appears to be fighting *Christian* opponents in virtually every one of his letters—and these are addressed to churches that he himself founded! What of the churches he did not found? We have also become increasingly aware of other forms of Christianity not even dealt with much by Bauer (such as the Ebionites). Moreover—and this is perhaps the most significant point in this discussion for the purposes of this course—each of these groups appears to have had its own literature, books allegedly written by apostles of Jesus (as we have seen throughout this course) authorizing the theological views of the group.

As Bauer recognized, the production and dissemination of literature was extremely important in the struggles between these various Christian groups. Christians on all sides wrote tractates supporting their own perspectives and attacking the perspectives of others. Christians used letters to various churches to urge them to ignore and remove teachers who taught beliefs and practices contrary to those thought to be true. Some Christians forged documents in the names of Jesus' apostles to support their own points of view. Some Christians who were copying the texts of earlier writings (by hand, necessarily) changed what they said to make them appear more orthodox (as we will see in a later lecture). And Christians of all sorts began compiling lists of books that they accepted as canonical authorities and excluded other books as being heretical forgeries.

In conclusion, we can say that the group that won these battles ended up deciding *which* books would be included in the Scriptures and which would be left outside, either as unworthy of canonical status (e.g., the Epistle of Barnabas) or as heretical forgeries (e.g., the Gospel of Peter). How, though, can we be certain that they got it "right" (for example, about which books were actually written by apostles)? And how did the process of forming the orthodox canon take place? Who decided which books should be included? On what grounds? And when? We will address some of these questions in the following lectures. ■

**The group that won these battles ended up deciding *which* books would be included in the Scriptures and which would be left outside.**

### Essential Reading

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, ch. 1.

## Supplementary Reading

Glenn F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Histories*.

Robert M. Grant, *Jesus after the Gospels*.

Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Explain how such discoveries as the Nag Hammadi library might call into question Eusebius's understanding of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy. Then, taking the other position, assume that Eusebius was right; how might you explain the existence of these gnostic books?
2. If the "winners always write the history," how can we *ever* be sure about what happened in the past?

# Beginnings of the Canon

## Lecture 20

**People in the ancient world recognized the need for religion, because they knew that they themselves, as mere mortals, were not able to control the forces of life that could harm them.**

**U**p to this point, we have been exploring the wide diversity of early Christianity. It is out of this context of varying beliefs and practices that the canon of the New Testament emerged. Given the wide range of gospels, epistles, acts, and apocalypses produced by early Christians, how is it that these twenty-seven books, and only these books, came to be recognized as Scripture? This is the question we will begin to address with this lecture. First, we need to consider some fundamental aspects of early Christianity. Christianity, of course, was simply one of many religions in the Roman world. In the Roman Empire, religion was prominent in society. Religion was needed, it was felt, because people knew they could not control the forces of life that could harm them. Religion was a way of getting what people needed that they couldn't provide for themselves.

Ancient religions were almost entirely polytheistic. The only exception was Judaism. As a rule, ancient religions were ways of worshiping the gods. They emphasized cultic acts (sacrifices and prayers) but did not at all emphasize the importance of belief. *Cult*, in this context, meant "care of the gods." What one believed about the gods was a private matter, not a necessary component of religion itself. As odd as it might seem to us, these ancient religions had no beliefs to affirm, theologies to embrace, or creeds to recite. There was no such thing as heresy and orthodoxy in ancient religions. There were no ethics; ethics was a matter for philosophy, not religion. Judaism was partially an exception, in that one needed to believe in only the one true God who called Israel to be his people and instructed them how to live in community and to worship him.

Christianity emerged out of Judaism and was, from the outset, a religion that emphasized belief. It stressed that Jews needed to believe that Jesus was the

messiah promised from God who could save people from their sins. Early on, then, Christianity was structured as a religion not so much of cultic act as of proper belief. Christians believed that Jesus was the sacrifice. Unlike the other religions, Christianity was exclusivistic. Christians insisted that to worship *their* god, you could not worship any other gods. This is probably one of the reasons Christianity spread as far as it did. As it developed and spread, Christianity refined more and more what it meant to believe in Jesus. And as different opinions emerged over who Jesus was and what it meant to believe in him, different theologies developed and came to be embraced, and controversies emerged and creeds came into being, with different Christian groups affirming different things. Each group needed its own authority for what it believed, and each claimed that its beliefs were rooted in the teachings of Jesus' own apostles and, through them, to Jesus himself. In particular, each group stressed that its authorities could be found in its own sacred writings, allegedly produced by the apostles of Jesus. The canonization of the New Testament is the end result of this set of controversies over apostolic authority.

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**The words of Jesus  
were soon taken to  
be authoritative.**

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The Christian idea of having written authority for beliefs about God goes back to Jesus himself because, as a Jew, Jesus himself had a sacred set of authorities, the Hebrew Bible. There was not a universally accepted canon of Jewish Scriptures in Jesus' day, but there was a widely agreed upon group of sacred books, especially the Torah, the Law of Moses, sometimes called the *Pentateuch*. Jesus, as a Jewish rabbi, accepted the authority of these sacred Scriptures and interpreted them for his followers. After his death, his followers continued to accept these Scriptures (although some, including such groups as the Marcionites and some Gnostics, maintained that they were not really inspired by the one true God). But for their particular beliefs about Jesus and the new relationship with God that he had effected, his followers soon started turning to new authorities.

The development of a distinctively Christian set of authorities was under way already during the New Testament period itself. The words of Jesus were soon taken to be authoritative (1 Cor. 7:14; 1 Tim. 5:18). So, too, the writings of his own apostles soon came to be seen as authoritative (2 Pet.

3:16). This movement to consider apostolic writings as sacred authorities makes considerable sense. Christianity was rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus, but Jesus left no writings. His apostles, then, were the link back to Jesus, whether for the Ebionites, the Marcionites, the Gnostics, or the proto-orthodox.

These apostolic links were made more plausible by the existence of written documents allegedly produced by the apostles themselves. There are four kinds of writings that should be differentiated: genuine, anonymous, homonymous, and pseudonymous books. Books that were actually written by apostles. The writings of Paul would be included in this group. Critical scholars are not confident that any of the other books of the New Testament can be placed in this category (and even six of the thirteen letters allegedly written by Paul are debated). Anonymous books that were later attributed to the apostles (e.g., the four gospels of the New Testament). Homonymous books, that is, those written by someone with the same name as an apostle (e.g., the Book of James). Pseudonymous books, that is, those forged in the name of an apostle or group of apostles (e.g., 2 Peter, the Gospel of Peter, and the Apocalypse of Peter).

All four kinds of books were in wide circulation in the early centuries of Christianity. All were claimed as having apostolic authority to settle disputes over what to believe and how to act. But only twenty-seven of them eventually were included in the canon of the New Testament. How did those books eventually acquire sacred status? Who made the decisions? When did they make them? And on what grounds? Those are the questions we will consider in our next lecture. ■

### Essential Reading

Harry Gamble, "Canon: New Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. I, pp. 852–861.

## Supplementary Reading

Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*.

Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*.

Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Many Christians today find it difficult to imagine a religion that is not based on proper “belief.” Can you think of religions in our world of that kind?
2. If all the ancient groups of Christians maintained that they had ties back to Jesus through the apostles, is it possible for us today to decide, historically, which of the groups, if any, was *right* in its claims?



# Formation of the New Testament Canon

## Lecture 21

**Contrary to what many people may imagine, the canon of the New Testament did not emerge at the very beginning of the Christian movement.**

**T**hroughout the course of these lectures, we have seen the wide-ranging beliefs and practices evidenced among various groups of early Christians and looked at some of the sacred authorities different groups appealed to in support of their views. Many, perhaps most, of these books were either anonymous, only later attributed to the apostles, or blatantly forged in the names of the apostles. Why did some of these books finally come to be included in the New Testament canon when the others came to be excluded? Who decided which books to include? On what grounds? And when?

We will begin with the question of when the canon came into being. The formation of the New Testament canon was a long, drawn-out process, involving many long years of hard debates and controversy. The debates, in fact, lasted for centuries. During the first 400 years of Christianity, various Christians argued for different collections of books as “the” New Testament, many of them including some or most of the books we are familiar with as the New Testament, but often, other books, as well. It was not until 367 A.D. that *anyone* put forward our twenty-seven books, and only these twenty-seven books, as the New Testament. This was the list first proposed by Athanasius, the powerful bishop of Alexandria, in a letter written to the churches under his jurisdiction. Even then, the matter was not resolved. Christians in different parts of the world sometimes accepted other books as canonical. Eventually, Athanasius’ view became the almost universally accepted view of Christendom.

What led up to this closure of the canon? Probably the best way to get to the issue is to move back closer to the beginning of the process. We have already seen the leading motivation for the formation of the canon: the conflicts

between various Christian groups over what to believe. Among other factors was the need for Christians to differentiate themselves from Jews, who also had a canon of Scripture. But the need to define “orthodoxy” was, no doubt, the leading motivating factor for the formation of the canon. Strikingly, one of our best attested authors of the mid-second century, Justin Martyr (c. 150 A.D.) speaks at length about the authority for his views but does not cite specific gospels or insist on a closed canon of Scripture. Soon after Justin wrote his books in Rome, Marcion began converting large numbers of people to his understanding of the religion. Only then, did proto-orthodox Christians begin to speak of a fixed canon of Scripture. Thus, the church father Irenaeus (c. 180 A.D.) argues that just as there are four corners of earth and four winds of heaven that have spread the gospel over the earth, so, too, there must be four and only four gospels!

Some of the factors leading to the formation of the canon can be seen by examining the earliest canonical list that we have from earliest Christianity: the Muratorian canon. The Muratorian canon is a list of books that the anonymous author considered to be part of the New Testament Scripture. It is named for the eighteenth-century scholar L. A. Muratori, who discovered the document in a library in Milan in 1740. This is a seventh-century document, written in ungrammatical Latin. It is a translation of a much earlier Greek original. Scholars have debated when and where the document was produced, but the best evidence indicates that it was written in or around Rome sometime near the end of the second century. The document begins in mid-sentence; all we have is a fragment of the earlier work. But the first full sentence is suggestive of how the work actually began: “Now the third book of the gospel is that according to Luke.” Given that the next, and last, gospel it discusses as part of the canon is John, the Muratorian canon appears to have accepted all four of the gospels now in the New Testament. It goes on to indicate the other books that it accepts as canonical, in all, twenty-two of the twenty-seven books of our New Testaments. Not mentioned are Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. But it accepts additional books,

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**For the anonymous author of the Muratorian canon, a book needed to be ancient, apostolic, and orthodox to be accepted as canonical.**

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as well: the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. Moreover, it rejects some books as heretical: Paul's letters to the Alexandrians and the Laodiceans are said to be Marcionite forgeries; other forgeries are attributed to Gnostics. Further, the Muratorian canon rejects the Shepherd of Hermas, because it was written only "recently" by the brother of the bishop of Rome. Clearly, for the anonymous author of the Muratorian canon, a book needed to be ancient, apostolic, and orthodox to be accepted as canonical.

Thus, we can consider the criteria proto-orthodox Christians used in deciding which books to include in their canon. A book needed to be ancient: Nothing written long after the time of Jesus could be accepted. A book needed to be apostolic: written by an apostle or one of their companions. A book needed to be orthodox: Nothing that advocated a false view of the religion could, of course, be accepted into the canon. A book needed to be widely recognized throughout the church.

Using these criteria, the proto-orthodox Christians debated which books should belong in the canon. As we have seen, these debates lasted for centuries. Even after Athanasius' pronouncement of 367, the matter was disputed; eventually, though, it was this canon that came to be accepted, copied, and read. Excluded, then, were all the books that embraced alternative points of view, many of which, including most of the pseudonymous writings that we have looked at in this course, were labeled as heretical and forged. Others were orthodox, but not seen as canonical. One can only imagine what Christianity may have become had some of these other books been included in the canon of Scripture. ■

### Supplementary Reading

Harry Gamble, "Canon: New Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. I, pp. 852–861.

### Essential Reading

Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*.

Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*.

Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In your judgment, should the canon of the New Testament still be considered an open question? That is, should it be possible to include other works in the New Testament (such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Epistle of Barnabas)? And to exclude some that made it in?
2. With the historical information available to us, if we were to apply the criteria used by the proto-orthodox Christians to establish the canon, what books would now be accepted?

# Interpretation of Scripture

## Lecture 22

**Accepting a book is not the same thing as interpreting a book, and as early Christians recognized, there were numerous ways to interpret the books of Scripture.**

**W**e saw in the last lecture that the canon of Scripture was formed in the context of the struggles between orthodoxy and heresy in the first Christian centuries. The New Testament developed as a set of books that proto-orthodox Christians could use to provide them with “apostolic” authorities for their views against the views of other Christian groups. But establishing a list of authoritative books is not the same as establishing their *meaning*. It is one thing to have a book; it is another thing to interpret it. Proto-orthodox Christians from the earliest of times realized that, in addition to promoting authoritative books, they needed to promote authoritative interpretations of those books.

The importance of interpreting texts was recognized at the very beginning of Christianity. Jesus himself was an interpreter of the Hebrew Scriptures. Interestingly, his approach to interpretation became controversial in later centuries. Jesus clearly affirmed that the Hebrew Scriptures came from God. But sometimes he appeared to contradict their teaching: for example, in his claim that God did not really intend the *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth) or the law on divorce (which the Torah allows, but Jesus disallowed). Early Christians also believed that Jesus himself had “fulfilled” the law (Matt. 5:17–20). Does that mean, then, that the law was no longer in force? If it was in force, then don’t Christians have to follow it (even, for example, kosher food laws)? If not, why does Jesus say that his followers need to keep the entire law—even better than the scribes and Pharisees?

The apostle Paul also was an interpreter of Scripture. He again read many texts of Scripture literally. On occasion, however, he would interpret these texts in a figurative sense, making them mean something other than what they said when read literally. An example can be found in the allegory of

Hagar and Sarah in Gal. 4, which he interprets as referring not to the two partners of Abraham, but to Jews (Hagar) and Christians (Sarah).

Later proto-orthodox Christians then had to decide how to interpret their Scriptures, and the matter became increasingly important, with different teachers interpreting the same texts in different ways, then claiming that these texts supported their points of view. Marcion, for example, insisted on a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, which led him to conclude that the God of the Old Testament was inferior to the true God because he was sometimes ignorant, changed his mind on occasion, and was wrathful and full of vengeance. Marcion's proto-orthodox opponent Tertullian insisted that passages speaking about God's ignorance and emotions were to not to be taken literally but figuratively. He took other passages figuratively, as well, to illustrate his own theological system. In this, he was following solid precedent (cf. the use of figurative interpretation to attack Jews in the Epistle of Barnabas). But when proto-orthodox fathers faced opponents like the Gnostics, who interpreted Scripture figuratively, they insisted vehemently that only a literal interpretation of the text would do.

The proto-orthodox attacks on gnostic figurative modes of interpretation are particularly interesting. The second-century church father Irenaeus, bishop of Gaul, is a key figure in these debates. Irenaeus recounts a number of interpretive strategies used by Gnostics to support their points of view and gives specific instances of their interpretations that he finds to be completely willful, in that they overlook the literal meaning of the texts. Gnostics who believed in thirty divine *aeons* appealed to the claim of the Gospel of Luke that Jesus started his ministry when he was thirty. They also found support that these thirty *aeons* were divided into three groups—the final twelve of which were completed with the creation of Sophia, an *aeon* who fell from the divine realm, leading to the creation of the universe—in the fact that Judas Iscariot, the twelfth of the disciples, fell away to become a betrayer.

Irenaeus considered these interpretations ludicrous. In his view, the Gnostics were simply making texts mean what they wanted them to mean and ignoring what the texts actually said. He likened the gnostic approach to interpretation to someone who takes a beautiful mosaic image of a king and

rearranges the stones into the likeness of a mongrel dog, then claims that is what the artist meant all along. The problem, though, is that the proto-orthodox engaged in similar modes of interpretation when it suited their own purposes. For Irenaeus, the kosher food laws of Leviticus refer not to unacceptable foods but to unacceptable kinds of people: Not eating animals that chew the cud but do not have cloven hooves means not being like Jews who have the word of God in their mouths but do not move steadily toward God. Generally, though, the proto-orthodox claimed that literal interpretations were to be primary, with figurative interpretations useful only to support views established by literal interpretation. Thus, Origen of Alexandria widely used figurative modes of interpretation but only when the literal meanings appeared to be contradictory or ridiculous.

It may seem to us today that the proto-orthodox view is fairly obvious, that the way one should read a sacred text is the same way one should read any text, taking the literal meaning as primary. But we should always remember that the ways of reading texts that we ourselves have inherited and learned are not necessarily “obvious” or “right” or “commonsensical.” We should be especially aware of the circumstance that our commonsensical ways of reading texts are now common sense because of these ancient debates over interpretation, which proto-orthodox Christians won. ■

**In [Irenaeus’s] view, the Gnostics were simply making texts mean what they wanted them to mean and ignoring what the texts actually said.**

### Essential Reading

Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*.

Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*.

### Supplementary Reading

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Explain how insisting on a “literal” approach to interpretation could both help and hinder the proto-orthodox Christians in their struggles with alternative forms of early Christianity.
2. If “literal” interpretations of a text were simply a matter of letting the text speak for itself, why is there such an enormous range of different interpretations of any given text (for example, the Bible, Shakespeare, the Constitution)?



# Orthodox Corruption of Scripture

## Lecture 23

Early Christian disputes involved not merely knowing how to interpret the words of Scripture, but even knowing what the words actually were.

In previous lectures, we have seen that proto-orthodox Christians who were engaged in theological controversies decided which books to include in their sacred Scriptures and which to exclude. Many other kinds of Christians—Jewish Christian Ebionites, Gnostics, and Marcionites—had other sacred books, but also used these books that made it into the canon. Thus, the proto-orthodox developed ways of interpreting these books that provided some assurance that they would be understood as promoting explicitly proto-orthodox Christianity. Some of the early theological controversies, however, were not simply over how to interpret these books but, on a more basic level, were about what was actually *in* these books. That is to say, there were disputes not just about how to interpret the words of these texts but also about which words actually were found in these texts.

Christians on all sides of these debates accused their opponents of changing the words of the texts they were arguing about, modifying the wording of important passages to make them say what they wanted them to say. This is not a kind of argument that happens nearly as much today in religious or political disputations, but it was common in antiquity. There was no such thing as electronic distribution of texts, desktop publishing, photocopy machines, typewriters, or moveable type; books had to be produced by hand, by human scribes who created copies of a text by copying its words, one letter at a time. Unlike our world, where every copy of a book is exactly the same, in the ancient world, every copy of a book was different. They were different because the copyists who produced the books made mistakes—different mistakes by different copyists in different places. And sometimes the mistakes were not accidental slips of the pen but intentional alterations, affecting the very meaning of a text. In this lecture, we will be looking at some of the intentional alterations created by scribes who were invested in the

theological disputes waging over the meaning of their texts, who sometimes changed their texts to make them say what they wanted them to mean.

We do not have the original texts of any early Christian book (or of any literary work from antiquity). Instead, we have copies made much later—not the first copies or the copies of the copies—but copies from hundreds of years after the fact. At present, we have nearly 5,400 copies (or manuscripts) of the New Testament (in Greek), from extremely small fragments to entire massive tomes containing all the books. The earliest copy of any book of the New Testament is called P52 and is the size of a credit card. A fragment, written on both sides on papyrus, it dates to around 125 A.D. and preserves some words from John 18. The first full manuscript of the entire New Testament is the Codex Sinaiticus, dating from the second half of the fourth century. Most of the manuscripts we have date from the Middle Ages. These copies date from the second to the sixteenth centuries.

The New Testament is also preserved in different versions (for example, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Old Georgian, Armenian). Strikingly, no two of these copies, except for the smallest fragments, are exactly alike in their wording. No one knows how many differences of wording there are among these manuscripts. It is safest to put it in comparative terms: There are more differences among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

Most of these differences are pure accidents, misspelled words, words or lines accidentally dropped out or accidentally written twice. But some of the changes appear to have been made intentionally, as scribes tried to make sense of the texts they were copying and sometimes changed the text to change the sense.

Textual critics decide what the original text said and what changes have been made. They look at what kinds of manuscripts have a particular passage and the wording of the passage. They consider whether the writing style, vocabulary, and theology are consistent with the presumed author. Textual

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**Strikingly, no two of these copies, except for the smallest fragments, are exactly alike in their wording.**

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critics tend to prefer a reading that is more difficult, as an easier reading could have been “corrected” by a scribe. There are very few instances in our surviving manuscripts in which Gnostic or Marcionite scribes altered a text to make it coincide with their point of view. If such alterations *were* made, they did not survive the copying practices of orthodox scribes over the centuries.

There are numerous proto-orthodox changes of the text, where the text has been changed in line with its orthodox interpretation, making it harder to be used in support of other views. Examples of this kind of scribal change can be readily categorized and illustrated. Some texts copied by proto-orthodox scribes were changed to counter the Jewish-Christian adoptionist claim that Jesus was a man but not divine. For example, Luke 2:33, which calls Joseph Jesus’ father, was occasionally changed (because, for the proto-orthodox, Jesus was not Joseph’s son). Or Luke 3:22, where the voice of God at Jesus’ baptism was changed so that it no longer said to Jesus, “today I have begotten you.” Other texts were changed to counter the idea among Marcion and other docetists that Jesus was fully God, but not a human, and that he could not, therefore, really suffer. For example, a famous scene was inserted into Luke’s account of Jesus’ final prayer before being arrested, in which he is shown really to suffer, sweating great drops of blood in agony before his coming fate (Luke 22:43–44). Other texts were changed to counter the gnostic idea that the divine Christ came into Jesus before his baptism and left him before his death (because the divine cannot suffer); for example, in Mark 15:34, where Jesus’ cry “My God, my God why have you forsaken me” (literally: left me behind) was altered to “My God, my God, why have you mocked me?”

Proto-orthodox scribes concerned about the use (or abuse) of their scriptural texts occasionally changed them to make them more useful for the orthodox cause and less available to non-orthodox Christians. This kind of alteration of the text sometimes had a permanent affect on Christian interpretation of these texts, because in some cases, it was the altered text that came to be copied more than the original text. Even today, people sometimes base their understandings of the New Testament on passages that we do not have in the original wording. ■

## Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.

David Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels*.

## Supplementary Reading

Eldon Jay Epp, “Textual Criticism, New Testament,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI, pp. 412–435.

Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In what ways is the scribal alteration of a text like and unlike the forgery of a text?
2. If there are so many changes in the surviving manuscripts of the New Testament, how do you suppose we can discern, in every case, what the New Testament authors actually wrote?

# Early Christian Creeds

## Lecture 24

**The struggles to establish orthodoxy ... involved issues of the canon, which books should be included; the clergy, who should be in charge; and the creed, what should be believed.**

To begin this final lecture in our course, we might do well to consider the big picture of what we have seen with respect to Christianity in the second and third centuries. Different groups of Christians had different beliefs: about the nature of God and about how many gods there were; about who Jesus was, whether he was human, or divine, or something else; about the world we live in, whether it was inherently good, the creation of God, or inherently evil, the creation of a malevolent deity; about what humans are, about how they can understand the world and be right with God; about the nature and extent of the Scriptures; and so on. There were, in fact, so many different groups of early Christians, who believed so many different things, that many scholars have come to prefer to speak not of early Christianity but of early *Christianities*.

As we have seen, one of these groups of early Christians eventually emerged as victorious in the struggles to acquire dominance and to determine once and for all the nature of Christianity as it was to evolve in a variety of ways down to the present day. This struggle involved, among other things, deciding which books should be counted as sacred Scripture and how these books ought to be interpreted. It also involved deciding who should be in control of the churches and make major decisions about church life, worship, and belief. As we will see further in this lecture, on a very basic level, the struggles involved what it was that should and must be believed by those who converted to this faith. In short, the struggles to establish orthodoxy by the fourth Christian century involved issues of the canon (which books should be included), the clergy (who should be in charge), and the creed (what should be believed). We will consider this final aspect of the struggle, the development of a creed, in this last lecture.

One of the things that made Christianity so unusual in the ancient world was its insistence, from the outset, that what a person believed mattered religiously. In none of the other religions in the Greco-Roman world did theology or proper belief figure at all prominently. Pagan religiosity was almost entirely a matter of cultic activity. Judaism is a partial, but only partial, exception. Being Jewish was far more about doing God's will than belief. Christianity was different from the beginning in stressing the importance not only of belief but of correct belief. This insistence was rooted in two major factors. Christianity was, from the beginning, a religion as focused on cognition as on action, in that it insisted that a person was put into a right standing with God by accepting what God had done by having his son die on the cross. This was not a religion of cultic act to appease God but of accepting in faith what God had done. Moreover, Christianity uniquely insisted that its understanding of the relationship with God was the only true one; there was no other way to salvation. Both of these aspects—the stress on an act of cognition and an exclusivistic claim—made Christianity virtually unique among the religions of the Greco-Roman world in stressing the possibility of false belief (heresy) or correct belief (orthodoxy).

It is no surprise that different groups developed statements of what proper and improper beliefs were. Already in the Letter to the Galatians, Paul stresses that anyone adhering to a form of Christianity

different from the one he proclaimed stands under God's curse. It became important, then, to know what counted as proper belief. Even before Paul, creed-like statements were developed to affirm the true beliefs (Rom. 1:3–4; 1 Cor. 15:3–5). In the second century, proto-orthodox leaders devised more elaborate statements of faith, indicating not only positive statements of what was to be believed, but also negative statements of what must not be believed (cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ign Eph.* 18:2).

In the second century, a set of beliefs called the *regula fidei*, “the rule of faith,” developed, which included the “basics” that all Christians were to believe, as taught, according to the proponents of the rule, by the apostles

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**It is no surprise that different groups developed statements of what proper and improper beliefs were.**

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themselves. There were various proto-orthodox authors who propounded the *regula fidei* (such as Irenaeus and Tertullian). It was not in a set form. But it was always clearly directed against those (such as Marcion or the Gnostics) who opposed one or another aspect of it. Typically, it included belief in only one God, the creator of the world, who created everything out of nothing; belief in his Son, Jesus Christ, predicted by the prophets and born through the Virgin Mary; belief in Jesus' miraculous life, death, resurrection, and ascension; and belief in the Holy Spirit, who is present on earth until the end, when there would be a final judgment in which the righteous would be rewarded and the unrighteous, condemned to eternal torment.

In addition to the *regula fidei*, there developed early on, actual creeds that were to be recited, possibly by the convert at the time of baptism. These began as catechetical questioning in three parts, in conformity with the threefold immersion under the water, as suggested by Matthew 28:19–20 (“baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”). The creeds then became tripartite, stressing proper doctrines about Father, Son, and Spirit. They were directed against the improper doctrines espoused by other groups.

Thus, we have the creeds that have come down to us today, most notably the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, both of which reached something like their modern-day form in the fourth century. Noting that these are formulated against specific heretical views; for example, “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in his one Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” These formulations were made not simply because they sounded good, but because there were other groups of Christians that disagreed with them (who thought, for example, that there was more than one God, that the true God was not the creator, that Jesus was not the creator's son, that Jesus Christ was two beings, not one, and so on). Moreover, it is worth noting that the views that ultimately developed were necessarily paradoxical in nature. Is Jesus God or man? Both! If Jesus is God and his father is God, are there two Gods? No, there's one! Why the paradoxes? Because proto-orthodox Christians had to fight adoptionists on one side and docetists on the other, Marcion on one side and Gnostics on the other, and so on. The result is the highly paradoxical affirmations of faith that have come down to

the present day, about God who is the creator of all things but not of the evil and suffering found in all things; of Jesus who is both completely human and completely divine, not half of one or the other, but who is only one being, not two; of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as three separate beings that make up only one God.

By its very nature, then, orthodox belief has to claim cognitive truth, but the way that truth developed and evolved over the centuries means that it needs to defy cognitive categories. This is why Christian theologians from the earliest of times have insisted that the ultimate truths of the faith are to be understood as divine mysteries, mysteries that must be acknowledged as true, but that defy full understanding as wrapped in the mystery of God himself, who must be known, but who is beyond all knowledge.

Despite the development of these creeds, Christianity, of course, has continued to be wildly diverse. The differences among denominations is still mind-boggling, between the Pentecostals and the Greek Orthodox, the Mormons and the Southern Baptists, the Roman Catholics and the Plymouth Brethren. But these are differences that all emerged from the triumphs of orthodox Christianity of the fourth century. We can only imagine what might have happened if things had turned out differently; if different books, such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Apocalypse of Peter, had made it into the Bible; if different groups, such as the Valentinian Gnostics or the Marcionites, had won more converts than their proto-orthodox contemporaries. But whether we like it or not, for the most part, these other views became marginalized, castigated as heresies, then destroyed, along with their sacred books. Now, rather than being a matter of interest for the religious claims they made, they are interesting only historically, as we think not only on how Christianity developed but also on how it might have developed differently if these other forms of faith had not been so effectively countered and, for all practical purposes, lost. ■



## Essential Reading

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, readings 73–76.

Jeroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1.

## Supplementary Reading

Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

Richard Norris, *The Christological Controversy*.

William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What might be seen as the difference between “faith” in God and having the right “beliefs” about God?
2. If the later creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, were products of their own time, developed over a long period of conflict, why is it that mainstream Christian churches today continue to affirm *those* creeds instead of devising ones appropriate to the conflicts of their own time?

# Timeline

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- 333–323 B.C. .... Conquests of Alexander the Great.
- 145 B.C. .... Book of Daniel, final book of Hebrew Bible.
- 140 B.C. .... Rise of Jewish Sects: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Fourth Philosophy.
- 63 B.C. .... Conquest of Palestine by Romans.
- 44 B.C. .... Assassination of Julius Caesar.
- 40–4 B.C. .... Herod, King of the Jews.
- 27 B.C.–A.D. 14 .... Octavian Caesar Augustus as emperor.
- 4 B.C.? .... Jesus' birth.
- 4 B.C.–A.D. 65 .... Seneca.
- A.D. 14–37 .... Emperor Tiberius.
- A.D. 26–36 .... Pilate as governor of Judea.
- A.D. 30? .... Jesus' death.
- A.D. 33? .... Conversion of Paul.
- A.D. 37–41 .... Emperor Caligula.
- A.D. 41–54 .... Emperor Claudius.

- A.D. 50–60? ..... Pauline epistles.
- A.D. 50–60? ..... Q source.
- A.D. 50–70? ..... M and L sources.
- A.D. 50?–110? ..... Ignatius of Antioch.
- A.D. 54–68..... Emperor Nero.
- A.D. 56–117? ..... Tacitus.
- A.D. 61/62–113..... Pliny the Younger.
- A.D. 65? ..... Gospel of Mark.
- A.D. 66–70..... Jewish Revolt and destruction of the Temple.
- A.D. 69–79..... Emperor Vaspasian.
- A.D. 79–81 ..... Emperor Titus.
- A.D. 80–85? ..... Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Book of Acts.
- A.D. 80–100? ..... Deutero-Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, Hebrews, James.
- A.D. 81–96..... Emperor Domitian.
- A.D. 85–105? ..... Pastoral epistles.
- A.D. 90–95? ..... Gospel of John.
- A.D. 95? ..... Book of Revelation.

A.D. 98–117 ..... Emperor Trajan.

A.D. 100–160? ..... Marcion.

A.D. 100–160? ..... Valentinus.

A.D. 100–165 ..... Justin Martyr.

A.D. 110–130? ..... Gospels of Peter and Thomas.

A.D. 120? ..... 2 Peter.

A.D. 130–200 ..... Irenaeus.

A.D. 135? ..... Epistle of Barnabas.

A.D. 150–220? ..... Clement of Alexandria.

A.D. 160–225 ..... Tertullian.

A.D. 170–230? ..... Hippolytus of Rome.

A.D. 185–251 ..... Origen of Alexandria.

A.D. 190 ..... Melito of Sardis.

A.D. 249–251 ..... Emperor Decius.

A.D. 260–340 ..... Eusebius.

A.D. 285–337 ..... Constantine.

A.D. 300–375 ..... Athanasius.

A.D. 312? ..... “Conversion” of Constantine.

A.D. 315–403..... Epiphanius.

A.D. 325..... Council of Nicea.

## Glossary

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**3 Corinthians:** Part of the Apocryphal Acts of John, a letter allegedly by Paul to the Corinthians warning against *docetic* teachers and emphasizing that Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood human being and that there could be a future resurrection of the body.

**Acts of John:** A group of apocryphal tales surrounding the exploits and encounters of John, the son of Zebedee, during his missionary work in Asia Minor.

**Acts of Paul and Thecla:** A tale of Paul and his female convert Thecla, who reneges on her vows to marry and instead adopts an ascetic lifestyle, leading to her condemnation to death by the state authorities but her miraculous deliverance by God.

**Acts of Thomas:** A group of apocryphal tales surrounding the exploits and ascetic preaching of Thomas, allegedly the twin brother of Jesus, during his missionary work in Asia Minor.

**adoptionism:** The view that Jesus was not divine but was a flesh-and-blood human being who had been adopted by God to be his son at his baptism.

**aeons:** Divine beings who make up the *Pleroma* in gnostic religions.

**Apocalypse of Peter:** A pseudepigraphic work in the name of Simon Peter that narrates the blessings of the saved and the torments of the damned in the afterlife, based on what appears to be a tour of the two regions conducted by Jesus.

**Apocalypticism:** A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians maintaining that the present age is controlled by forces of evil, but that these

will be destroyed at the end of time, when God intervenes in history to bring in his kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

**apocrypha:** Literally, “hidden books.” Used to refer to books that are of the same “kind” as those of Scripture (such as gospels, epistles, and so on) but that were not included in the canon.

**apostle:** From a Greek word meaning “one who is sent.” In early Christianity, the term designated special emissaries of the faith who were special representatives of Christ.

**apostolic fathers:** Group of early proto-orthodox church writers whose works were composed soon after the books of the New Testament, including Ignatius, Clement, Polycarp, and Barnabas.

**autograph:** The original manuscript of a document, from a Greek word that means “the writing itself.”

**canon:** From a Greek word that literally means “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term is used to designate a recognized collection of texts; the New Testament canon is, thus, the collection of books that Christians have traditionally accepted as authoritative.

**Carpocratians:** A group of second-century Gnostics known to us, in part, through the writings of Clement of Alexandria; they were thought to engage in wild, licentious activities as part of their religious practices.

**church fathers:** Christian authors of the early centuries, normally seen as significant for the development of orthodox theology.

**Codex Sinaiticus:** Important fourth-century manuscript of the Bible.

**Council of Nicea:** The first major council of Christian bishops, called by the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 325, in which major doctrinal issues of the church were resolved, resulting in a creed that ultimately formed the basis of the Nicene Creed.

***diatesseron***: Literally means “through the four.” Used as a technical term to refer to a harmonization of the four New Testament gospels into one long narrative, created by a second-century author named Tatian.

**Didymus Judas Thomas**: The alleged author of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, whose exploits are narrated in the Acts of Thomas; in these traditions, he is said to be the (twin) brother of Jesus.

***docetism***: The view that Jesus was not a human being but only “appeared” to be, from a Greek word that means “to seem” or “to appear.”

**Ebionites**: A group of second-century adoptionists who maintained Jewish practices and Jewish forms of worship.

**festal letter**: Annual letter written to establish the date of the Easter feast.

***gematria***: Ancient Jewish practice of interpreting words by determining the numerical values of their letters.

**Gnosticism**: A group of ancient religions, which were closely related to Christianity, that maintained that sparks of a divine being had become entrapped in the present evil world and could escape only by acquiring the appropriate secret *gnosis* (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and of how they could escape. This *gnosis* was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary descended from the divine realm.

**Gospel of Peter**: A gospel mentioned by Eusebius as containing a docetic Christology, a fragment of which was discovered in a monk’s tomb in 1886. The fragment contains an alternative account of Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, notable for its anti-Jewish emphases and its legendary qualities (including a tale of Jesus actually emerging from his tomb on Easter morning).

**Gospel of the Ebionites**: A gospel used by the Ebionites that appears to have been a conflation of stories found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and originally composed in Greek.



**Gospel of the Nazareans:** A gospel used by the Ebionites that appears to have been very much like our Gospel of Matthew, minus the first two chapters, and possibly written in Hebrew (or Aramaic).

**Gospel of Thomas:** The most famous document of the Nag Hammadi library; it contains 114 sayings of Jesus, many of them similar to the sayings of the New Testament, others of them quite different in that they appear to presuppose a gnostic understanding of the world.

**Gospel of Truth:** A gnostic document from the Nag Hammadi library and thought by many scholars to have been written by Valentinus, a prominent Christian Gnostic of the second century (founder of the Valentinian Gnostics), which celebrates the joy of salvation provided by the liberating knowledge brought by Christ.

**heresiologist:** An opponent of heresy; one who engages in literary polemics against heretical groups.

**heresy:** Any worldview or set of beliefs deemed by those in power to be deviant, from a Greek word that means “choice” (because “heretics” have “chosen” to deviate from the “truth”; see **orthodoxy**).

**heterodoxy:** Literally “another belief,” used as a synonym for “heresy.”

**Infancy Gospel of Thomas:** Early Infancy Gospel (first half of second century?) that narrates the miraculous and occasionally mischievous activities of the boy Jesus between the ages of five and twelve.

**Infancy Gospels:** Gospels that narrate events surrounding the birth and early life of Jesus.

**manuscript:** Any handwritten copy of a literary text.

**Marcionites:** Followers of Marcion, the second-century Christian scholar and evangelist, later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods, the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful

loving God of Jesus—views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

**muratorian canon:** A fragmentary list of the books that its anonymous author believed belonged in the New Testament Scriptures; named after the eighteenth-century scholar who discovered the manuscript, L.A. Muratori.

**Nag Hammadi:** Village in Upper (South) Egypt, near the place where a collection of gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, was discovered in 1945.

**orthodoxy:** Literally, “right opinion”; a term used to designate a worldview or set of beliefs acknowledged to be true by the majority of those in power. For its opposite, see **heresy**.

**paleography:** The study of ancient handwriting, used to date manuscripts.

**patristic writings:** Writings of the orthodox church “fathers” (Latin: *patres*), starting with the period after the New Testament.

**pleroma:** Literally, the “fullness,” used in gnostic sources to refer to the divine realm.

**Proto-Gospel of James:** An account allegedly written by James, the brother of Jesus, of the miraculous events surrounding the birth and early life of Mary, who is chosen as the special vessel to bear the Son of God.

**Proto-orthodox Christianity:** A form of Christianity endorsed by some Christians of the second and third centuries (including the apostolic fathers), which promoted doctrines that were declared “orthodox” by the victorious Christian party in the fourth and later centuries, in opposition to such groups as the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics.

**pseudepigrapha:** Literally, “false writings,” commonly used of ancient non-canonical Jewish and Christian literary texts, many of which were written pseudonymously.

**pseudonymity:** The practice of writing under a “false name,” evident in a large number of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings from antiquity.

***Regula Fidei:*** Literally, “the rule of faith.” Used as a technical term to refer to the proto-orthodox doctrines that were understood to lie at the heart of Christian theology.

**Secret Gospel of Mark:** Allegedly, a second edition of Mark’s gospel known to the spiritually elite of Alexandria, quoted in a letter of Clement of Alexandria to an otherwise unknown Theodore, which was discovered in 1958 in the library of the monastery of Mar Saba, southeast of Jerusalem, by Morton Smith.

**Separationist Christology:** Understanding of Christ typical among Gnostics, which maintained that there was a difference between the man Jesus and the divine Christ.

**serapion:** Second-century bishop of Antioch known from the *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius* for his initial acceptance, then ultimate rejection (on theological grounds) of the Gospel of Peter being used in the village of Rhossus under his jurisdiction.

**Synoptic Gospels:** The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which tell many of the same stories, sometimes in the same words, so that they can be placed side by side “to be seen together” (the literal meaning of *synoptic*).

**textual criticism:** An academic discipline that attempts to establish the original wording of a text on the basis of its surviving manuscripts.

**theodicies:** Literally, “the righteousness of God.” The term is used to refer to any explanation of how evil and suffering can exist in the world if God is both all-powerful and loving.

## Biographical Notes

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**Athanasius:** Athanasius was a highly influential and controversial bishop of Alexandria throughout the middle half of the fourth century. Born around 300 A.D., he was active in the large and powerful Alexandrian church already as a young man, appointed as deacon to the then bishop Alexander. He served as secretary at the important Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., which attempted to resolve critical issues concerning the nature of Christ as fully divine, of the same substance as God the father, and co-eternal with the father. As Bishop of Alexandria from 328–375, Athanasius was a staunch defender of this Nicene understanding of Christ and a key player in the development of the orthodox doctrine of the trinity, in which there were three distinct persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) who were nonetheless one God, all of the same substance. This defense created enormous difficulties for Athanasius in the face of powerful opposition, to which he himself reacted with a show of force (even violence). He was sent into exile on several occasions during his bishopric, spending nearly sixteen years away from Alexandria while trying to serve as its bishop. Author of numerous surviving works, Athanasius is most significant for this course for his role in determining which books should be accepted in his churches as sacred Scripture. In 367 A.D., in his thirty-ninth annual “Festal letter,” which like all the others, set the date for the celebration of Easter and included pastoral instruction, he indicated that the twenty-seven books that we now have in the New Testament, and only those twenty-seven, should be regarded as canonical. This decree helped define the shape of the canon for all time and helped lead to the declaration of other books—gnostic gospels and the like—as heretical.

**Barnabas:** We are not well informed about the historical Barnabas. He is mentioned both by the apostle Paul (Gal. 2:13; 1 Cor. 9:6) and the Book of Acts (Acts 9:27; 11:22–26) as one of Paul’s traveling companions, and it appears that he was originally a Hellenistic Jew who converted to faith in Christ, then became, like Paul, a traveling missionary who spread the faith. The Book of Acts goes so far as to consider him one of the “apostles” (Acts

14:4, 14). The Epistle of Barnabas discussed in this course is attributed to him, but modern scholars are reasonably sure that he could not have written it. The book appears to have been written some time around 130 or 135 A.D., some sixty years or so after the historical Barnabas would have died. The book was attributed to him, then, by Christians who wanted to advance its authoritative claims as being rooted in the views of one of the most important figures from the early years of Christianity.

**Walter Bauer:** Walter Bauer was an influential German theological scholar, whose scholarly works have made a permanent impact on the field of early Christian studies. Born in 1877, he had university positions at Marburg, Breslau, and finally, Göttingen, where he spent the majority of his long career. He died in 1960. Bauer is probably best known for a Greek lexicon (dictionary) of the New Testament and other early Christian writings, which he edited and which, after further revision, is still the standard work in the field and is called by his name. For this course, he is most important for his classic book, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, in which he set out to dismantle the classical Eusebian understanding of the relationship of orthodoxy and heresy. Looking at an enormous range of ancient sources and subjecting them to careful and minute analysis, sometimes with inquisitorial zeal, Bauer maintained that orthodoxy was *not* always the oldest and largest form of Christianity, but that what later came to be called heresy was, in many regions of Christendom, the oldest form of the faith and that, in many places, it was difficult to draw hard lines between what was heretical and what was orthodox. In his view, what later came to be crystallized into orthodoxy was the form of Christianity prominent in the early years in Rome; because of its administrative skill and material wealth, the Roman church was able to cast its influence onto other churches of the Mediterranean, until eventually, its understanding of the faith became universal. Once this version of Christianity became dominant, its representatives (such as Eusebius) rewrote the history of the disputes, contending that their perspective had been dominant from the very beginning.

**Clement of Alexandria:** Clement is a shadowy figure from the early days of the Alexandrian church. Born probably around 150 A.D., possibly in Athens, he appears to have come to Alexandria, Egypt, to pursue his theological

training with leading Christian thinkers of his day. Tradition indicates that while there, he became the head of the catechetical school (which provided rudimentary training in the faith for Christian converts) but that he fled Alexandria in 202 A.D. during a persecution there. Clement is the author of several surviving works, including an important *Apology for Christianity*, a book on Christian living and manners, and a book called the *Miscellanies*, which sketches out some of his most important philosophical and theological views. For this course, Clement is most important for a letter that he allegedly wrote—if authentic, it is the only surviving letter from his hand—in which he mentions the existence of a secret gospel produced by Mark and used by the spiritually elite Christians of Alexandria, a gospel that had been stolen by the nefarious gnostic group called the Carpocratians and falsified to their own ends.

**Epiphanius:** Epiphanius was the bishop of Salamis (on Cyprus) in the second half of the fourth century (315–403 A.D.). Known as a rigorous supporter of monasticism, he is most famous for his virulent attacks on anything that struck him as heretical. His most well preserved work is called the *Panarion*, which means “medicine chest.” In it, he intends to provide the orthodox antidote for the bites of the serpents of heresy. The book contains detailed accounts (some of them fabricated) and refutations of eighty different heresies that Epiphanius had come across during his ardent search for falsehood in the church (twenty of the heresies are actually pre-Christian sets of false teaching). For some of the lesser known gnostic groups, Epiphanius is our principle source of information; unfortunately, given his lack of intellectual restraint, many of his claims appear to be unreliable.

**Eusebius:** Eusebius of Caesarea is one of the most important figures in the history of the early church. Born around 260 A.D., he was trained by some of the leading Christian scholars of his day and was to become the first author to produce a full history of Christianity up to his own day, in a book called the *Ecclesiastical [or Church] History*. Eusebius was quite active in the politics of the church and empire. Ordained bishop of the large and important church of Caesarea in 315, he was active at the Council of Nicea and the theological disputes in its aftermath, originally opposing but later accepting the creedal statements about Christ that were to become orthodox. He died around 340

A.D. Eusebius was a prolific writer, but it was his *Ecclesiastical History* in particular that made a huge impact on subsequent generations—down to our own day. This chronological sketch of early Christianity provides us with the majority of our information about the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world, the persecution of the early Christians, the conflicts between what Eusebius considered to be orthodoxy and heresies, the development of church offices and structures, and so on. Of particular value in this ten-volume work is Eusebius’s frequent citation, often lengthy, of his actual sources; through his account, we have access to the writings of his Christian predecessors that otherwise have been lost to history. Thus, even though Eusebius puts his own slant on the history that he tells, it is possible to use the sources that he cites to gain significant insight into the conflicts and developments that transpired in the Christian church of the first three centuries, up to his own day.

**Hippolytus:** Hippolytus was a controversial figure in the Roman church in the early third century, most well known today for his ten-volume work against heresies (of which volumes 2 and 3 are still lost). Born around 170 A.D., Hippolytus became a prominent figure in the church in Rome, often taking strong stands against movements within the church that he considered heretical. He is the first known “anti-pope,” that is, one who allowed himself to be elected as the true pope on the grounds that the reigning pope (in this case, a man named Callistus; pope from 217–222) was, in fact, a heretic and had no right to claim the papal office. Probably because of his schismatic activities (and partly because he wrote in Greek, rather than Latin), Hippolytus was largely forgotten in the Western church until modern times, when some of his writings were discovered. The most important writing is called the *Refutation of All Heresies*, which explains the various heresies of the Christian church and tries to show how each of them is rooted not in the Christian revelation but in secular (and, therefore, erroneous) philosophical traditions. Despite the bias against the views he attacks, Hippolytus’s work is still considered a valuable source of information on alternative forms of Christianity of the second and early third centuries.

**Ignatius:** Ignatius is one of the most interesting figures from the early second century. We know little of his life, except that he was bishop of the

major church in Antioch, Syria; was arrested for Christian activities; and was sent to Rome under armed guard to face execution by being thrown to the wild beasts in the Roman arena. En route to his martyrdom, Ignatius wrote seven surviving letters to churches that had sent representatives to greet him. In these letters, he warns against false teachers, urges the churches to strive for unity, stresses the need for the churches to adhere to the teachings and policies of the one bishop residing over each of them, and emphasizes that he is eager to face his violent death so that he might be a true disciple of Christ. One of the letters that he wrote was to the bishop of the city of Smyrna, Polycarp, who may have been the one who collected the other letters together. Within a couple of centuries, other Christian authors forged other letters allegedly by Ignatius; throughout the Middle Ages, these forgeries were circulated with the authentic letters and were not recognized for what they were until scholars undertook an assiduous examination of them in the seventeenth century.

**Irenaeus:** Irenaeus was an important theologian and heresiologist of the late second century. Born probably around 130 A.D., he may have been raised in the city of Smyrna and educated, eventually, at Rome. He ended up in the Christian church of Lyon, Gaul (modern-day France), where he was made bishop around 178 A.D. He died around the year 200 A.D.

Irenaeus is our best patristic source for the gnostic sects of the second century. His most well known book is a five-volume attack on heresy, which he entitled *Refutation and Overthrow of What Is Falsely Called Gnosis*, frequently called simply *Against Heresies*. In it, he gives considerable detail concerning various heretical groups (not simply Gnostics) and, based on his understanding of Scripture and using a full panoply of rhetorical ploys and strategems, refutes them one by one. This book was used as a source for many of the later heresiologists, including Tertullian and Epiphanius.

**Justin Martyr:** Justin was an important figure in the church of Rome in the mid-second century. Born of pagan parents (c. 100 A.D.), evidently in Samaria, he undertook secular philosophical training before converting to Christianity when he was about thirty. He began to teach the philosophical superiority of Christianity to secular learning, first in Ephesus, then in



Rome, where he established a kind of Christian philosophical school in mid-century.

Justin is the first prominent Christian *apologist*, that is, one who defended the Christian faith against the charges of its cultured (pagan) despisers and strove to show its intellectual and moral superiority to anything that the pagan (or Jewish) world could offer. Three of his major works survive, usually known as his *First Apology* (a defense of Christianity addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius and his sons, including Marcus Aurelius, around 155 A.D.), his *Second Apology* (addressed to the Roman senate around 160 A.D.), and his *Dialogue with Trypho*. This last is an account of his conversion and subsequent debate with a (possibly fictitious) Jewish rabbi, Trypho, over the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, based largely on an exposition of key passages in the Old Testament. Justin's defense of Christianity led to political opposition; he was martyred on charges of being a Christian around 165 C.E.

**Marcion:** Marcion was one of the most infamous "heretics" of the second century. Tradition indicates that he was born and raised in Sinope, on the southern shore of the Black Sea, where as a young man, he acquired considerable wealth as a shipping merchant. His father was allegedly the bishop of the Christian church there, who excommunicated his son for his false teachings. In 139 A.D., Marcion went to Rome, where he spent five years developing his theological views, before presenting them to a specially called council of the church leaders. Rather than accepting Marcion's understanding of the gospel, however, the church expelled him for false teaching. Marcion then journeyed into Asia Minor, where he proved remarkably successful in converting others to his understanding of the Christian message. "Marcionite" churches were in existence for centuries after his death, around 160 A.D.

Marcion's understanding of the gospel was rooted in his interpretation of the writings of the apostle Paul, whose differentiation between the "law" (of the Old Testament) and the "gospel" (of Christ) Marcion took to an extreme, claiming that the old and new were fundamentally different, so much so that they represented the religions of different Gods. Marcion, in

other words, was a *ditheist*, who thought that the Old Testament God—who had created the world, called Israel to be his people, and gave them his law—was a different god from the God of Jesus, who came into the world in the “appearance” of human flesh (because he was not actually part of the material world of the creator-God) to save people from the just but wrathful God of the Jews. Marcion’s views were based on his canon of Scripture, the first canon known to be formally advanced by a Christian. Marcion’s canon did not, obviously, contain anything from the Old Testament, but comprised a form of the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul’s letters (all those in the present New Testament except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).

**Melito of Sardis:** Little is known of the life of Melito, apart from the facts that he was bishop of the city of Sardis near the end of the second century (died around 190 A.D.); that at some point in his life, he made a pilgrimage to the Christian sites of the holy land; and that he was a staunch advocate of proto-orthodox Christianity. The one literary work of his to survive, discovered in the twentieth century, is a homily apparently delivered at an Easter celebration, in which Melito explicates the Old Testament account of the Passover in a way that shows that the Passover lamb represents Christ. In Melito’s view, because Christ has fulfilled the foreshadowings and predictions of the Jewish Scriptures, the laws of the Jews are no longer in force. The old has passed away with the appearance of the new. In the course of this highly rhetorical exposition, Melito takes the occasion to lambaste the people of Israel for rejecting their own messiah, and his language at times is vitriolic in its anti-Judaic claims. This sermon represents the first known instance of a Christian charging the Jewish people with *deicide*, the murder of God.

**Origen:** Origen was the most brilliant and prolific Christian author of the first three centuries. A lengthy account of his life is provided by Eusebius in Book 6 of his *Ecclesiastical History*. Born in 185 A.D. in Alexandria, Egypt, of Christian parents, Origen was trained by some of the leading scholars of his day. Tradition claims that after a severe persecution in Alexandria in 202 A.D., in which his father was martyred, the highly precocious Origen was appointed to be head of the “catechetical school,” which trained Christian converts in the rudiments of the faith. But he periodically came into conflict

with the bishop of the Alexandrian church, named Demetrius, and eventually (230 A.D.) left Alexandria to settle in Caesarea, where he devoted himself to teaching, research, and writing. He was imprisoned during the persecution of the Roman Emperor Decius in 250 A.D. and died two years later as a result of prolonged torture. Origen's literary output was immense, aided by a literary patron, Ambrose, who provided him with extensive secretarial help (stenographers, copyists, and so on). He is thought to have produced nearly 2,000 volumes, including biblical commentaries, volumes of homilies, theological treatises, polemical tractates (against heresies), apologies, and practical and pastoral works. Most of his works are lost, but those that survive still fill many volumes. As a theologian, Origen developed many ideas that later became highly debated in disputes over the trinity, the person of Christ, and the nature of the soul. As a biblical scholar, he developed and refined methods of interpretation, including the extensive use of figurative modes of exegesis that proved highly influential in interpretive methods used down through the Middle Ages.

**Ptolemy:** Ptolemy was a second-century gnostic Christian from Italy. Almost nothing is known of his life, even though his teachings proved notorious among the proto-orthodox heresiologists, such as Irenaeus. He was a disciple of Valentinus and developed Valentinian teaching in distinctive ways. The only work to survive from his hand, the Letter to Flora, represents an understanding of the Old Testament that differs in some significant ways from that of his proto-orthodox opponents. He believes that the God who inspired parts of the Old Testament cannot be the one true God, because some laws, such as the *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—are harsh and not worthy of the ultimate divinity, whereas other laws had to be “fulfilled” by Christ and, thus, were not in themselves perfect. The letter is, however, irenic in tone and, in many ways, reflects widespread understandings of the Old Testament among Christians (that it anticipates Christ, for example, who brought it to completion).

**Morton Smith:** Morton Smith (1915–1991), professor of ancient history at Columbia University, was a controversial but highly erudite scholar of antiquity. Author of numerous books and articles, he is most important for this course for his remarkable discovery made while cataloguing the

manuscripts and books of the library of the monastery of Mar Saba, in the wilderness southwest of Jerusalem. There, in the blank pages in the back of a seventeenth-century edition of the letters of Ignatius, Smith found copied a portion of a letter allegedly written by Clement of Alexandria, the late second-century church father, in which he discusses and partially quotes a “second” edition of the Gospel of Mark that was not in general circulation but that was available to the spiritually elite Christians of his home city of Alexandria, Egypt. This so-called Secret Gospel of Mark, Clement claims, had been illicitly obtained by a heretical group of Gnostics, the Carpocratians, and falsified in view of their libertine doctrines. Clement goes on to quote two portions of the secret gospel, one of which appears to have homoerotic overtones. Smith maintains that this secret gospel represents clues about how to understand the historical Jesus himself, who, he says, practiced a baptismal rite that involved a mystical experience in which the person being baptized would experience a physical union with Jesus himself. Smith spent fifteen years working to authenticate and analyze this letter of Clement and published the results of his research in two books, an impressively learned account for scholars (*Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*) and a fascinating popular account for general audiences (*The Secret Gospel of Mark*). Scholars continue to study and speculate about this letter, in particular about whether it may represent a forgery; if so, what may have motivated it and, if not, how should we evaluate its significance for understanding the historical Jesus and the history of early Christianity.

**Tertullian:** Tertullian, from Carthage (North Africa), was one of the most influential authors of early Christianity. Much of his life is shrouded in obscurity, but it appears that he was born into a relatively affluent family of pagans, around 160 A.D. and received extensive training in (pagan) literature and rhetoric. He converted to Christianity some time in his mid-thirties and became an outspoken, even vitriolic, proponent of the Christian faith, writing numerous works defending the faith against its cultured despisers (apologies), scathing criticisms of heretics and their beliefs, and severe tractates concerning Christian morality. At some point in his life, he joined a group of schismatics known to history as the Montanists (named after their founder, Montanus), an ethically rigorous, ascetic group that anticipated the imminent end of the world as we know it. For this course, Tertullian is most

important for his anti-heretical writings. A bitter opponent of both Gnostics and Marcionites, he is one of our best sources of information concerning what these groups, especially the latter, believed. His five-volume attack on Marcion, for example, still survives and is our principal means of access to Marcion's life and teaching.

**Thecla:** It is difficult to know whether Thecla was a historical person or a legendary figure. The earliest references to her are in the Apocryphal Acts of Paul, which provide a highly fictionalized account of her conversion, based on the ascetic preaching of the apostle Paul, and her subsequent escapades, as she travels, sometimes in Paul's company, on Christian mission. In these accounts, she twice escapes execution ordered on the grounds of her refusal to participate in the social life of her pagan world, for example, when her fiancé, whom she spurns to devote herself to the gospel, hands her over to the authorities on charges of being a Christian. Thecla became venerated as a sacred virgin in Christian tradition, and tales of her life were in wide circulation throughout the Middle Ages.

**Valentinus:** Valentinus was probably the best known gnostic Christian of the second century. Born in Egypt, he was educated in Alexandria before coming to Rome around 136 A.D. Valentinus was a rhetorically powerful and charismatic person, who developed his theological views in light of Platonic and other philosophical traditions dominant in the world at the time. Tradition indicates that he wanted to receive a high office in the church of Rome (aspiring to be its bishop), but that he was spurned by the church leadership and broke off from it to start churches of disciples who accepted his gnosticized understanding of the faith. Valentinian Gnosticism developed in a variety of ways among his followers after his death and became one of the primary targets for attack by heresiologists, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. We have few writings that survive from Valentinus himself, but many scholars think that the Gospel of Truth discovered at Nag Hammadi may derive directly from him. If it does, then it shows Valentinus at his best, rhetorically effective and filled with joy at the thought of the salvation that had been graciously given by the true God.

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