

The New Testament Apocrypha and Scripture



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Summary

Gnostic Gospels have been unearthed in Egypt since the nineteenth century. Among other things they contain alternative gospels to the New Testament documents, gospels which give a picture of a Jesus who is unlike the Jesus of the Bible.

The Gnostic Gospels have been presented as a valid alternative to the New Testament as a source of information about Jesus Christ. Many who do not like Biblical Christianity have found the Gnostic documents the perfect reason to reject the biblical Jesus in favour of a politically correct figure. In fact this is a poor picture of the real Jesus, whose message undermines modern political correctness and mainstream churches alike.

This article considers the evidence for both the Gnostic gospels and the New Testament Gospels. It examines the evidence carefully and compares the strength of the case for both types.

The result of the comparison is to show the weakness of the case for the Gnostic Gospels. The New Testament Gospels have their accuracy and reliability guaranteed by the findings of archaeology, of undesigned coincidences and of linguistic fossils which connect them to the time of Jesus, his actions and his teaching. The Gnostic gospels contain no evidence to connect them with the work or sayings of Jesus and there are mistakes in representing the times of the real Gospels.

The Gnostic gospels are strongly connected to the second century, more than a century after the time of Jesus. There is therefore no reason to suppose that they are accurate. The New Testament Gospels, on the other hand have show remarkable accuracy in what they record.

This article summarises the reasons. read on now, but look out for a more detailed investigation later.

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The New Testament is the main source for our knowledge of the life, work and teaching of Jesus Christ, and within the New Testament the Gospels have a particularly important position as they cover the ministry of Jesus in more detail than other books of the Bible. However, many modern critics of Christianity and of the Bible place the New Testament documents on a level with other documents from the early church. This paper considers the two sets of documents and shows the differences between them.

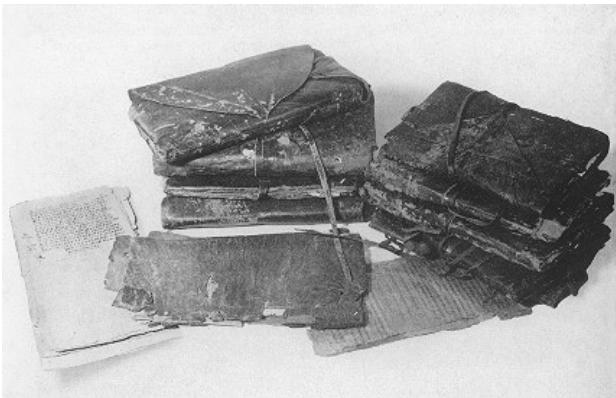
The books in the New Testament will sometimes be referred to as “Canonical” writings, because they are within the canon of scripture. The word “canon” comes from the Greek “*kanon*”, which means a rule or a measure, and hence an approved list.

The New Testament Apocrypha

By the end of the second century a number of additional books had been written describing the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. These are of three kinds:-

- **Early Church Fathers:** In the decades after the completion of the New Testament a number of writers in the new church wrote commentaries on the life of Jesus, letters on the faith and apologetic material (material to explain their faith to those outside Christianity). Some of these (for example Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome) wrote at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have tended to take these writings as authoritative in their own right, but they are not part of scripture.
- **The Traditional Apocrypha:** This consists of books written within the second century under pseudonyms, usually the names of well-known apostles such as James, Thomas or Barnabas. These documents often attempt to fill in gaps in the accounts of the New Testament Gospels. For example, the childhood Gospel of James (*Protevangelion of James*) contains some stories of what is supposed to have happened during the childhood of Jesus, a part of the life of Jesus not covered in the New Testament. Others contain elaborated and fanciful narratives of events which are described more soberly in the canonical Gospels.
- **Recently Discovered Apocrypha:** These consist of documents recovered recently from archaeological finds and researches in ancient libraries. The single largest group of these is the set of Nag Hammadi codices. These were discovered in rural Egypt in 1945 and published in the 1950s. They contain a number of Gnostic writings including some apocryphal Gospels, one of which was the famous “Gospel of Thomas”. A small number of discoveries from elsewhere can be added to this group, including a second, rather incomplete, copy of the Gospel of Thomas from Oxyrhynchus.

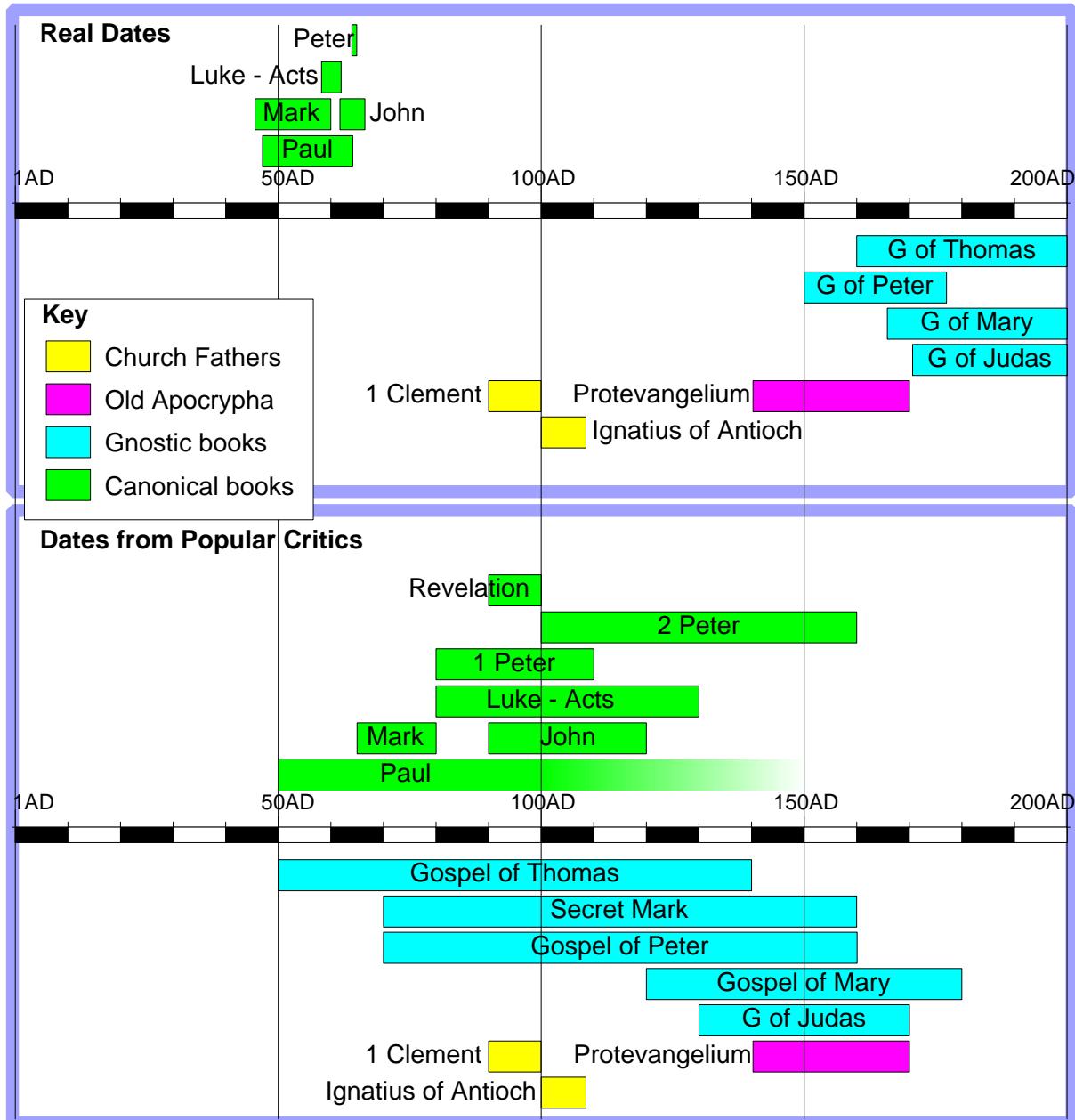
The Nag Hammadi Codices



These documents were discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. They contain a set of fourth century coptic manuscripts from a nearby monastery; these had apparently been buried to prevent them from being destroyed, either by more orthodox monks or by invaders. They contain the text of 52 different documents, including the Gospel of Thomas and of three other Gnostic gospels. Some critical scholars have claimed that these are of similar value to the Gospels of the New Testament.

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Gospel Chronologies



The dates of the New Testament Gospels presumed by popular critics tends to be much later than any reasonable interpretation of the evidence. For example, the epistles of Paul can be dated very closely, often to a period of a two or three months, and never with an uncertainty of more than a year. However, the critics seem to have placed some of these a century later than the time that they were demonstrably written. Dating the Gospels is more difficult, but even here the earlier dates are clear. The Gospels are quoted by church fathers like Clement and Ignatius, which means that they must have been written earlier than the start of the second century. There is even a manuscript fragment of John's Gospel from the early second century.

The gnostic writings all contain elements which indicate that they are much later than the critical dates. Language in them includes terms which were common in the second century but absent in the first and there are errors of archaeological detail which show that the writers were not thoroughly familiar with life in the first century.

The Date of John's Gospel

The Gospel of John was considered by 19th century critics to have been written in the late second century AD or even later. They reached this conclusion because they considered that John's Gospel contained considerable detail of the life of Jesus and they believed that it must have taken time to invent this.

In the 20th century, archaeologists carried out many significant excavations in Jerusalem and discovered that the descriptions of places in John were very accurate. At the same time documents discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls contained phrases similar to those found in John. The obvious conclusion is that the Gospel of John was completed before 70AD when Jerusalem was destroyed. If John was the last of the four Gospels to be written, then all the Gospels must have been completed before this date.

A few critical scholars have claimed that these Gospels are on a level with the canonical Gospels. Some new-age writers have asserted that the gnostic gospels are the original account, and that the canonical Gospels are corrupted accounts which were altered by the mainstream church in the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who adopted Christianity as a major part of the Roman state.

A few extreme critics have attempted to draw up ideas of Jesus based on a mix of parts of the New Testament Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas.

Analysis of the Critical Claims

The claims of the critics concerning the relative values of the apocryphal gospels tend to depend on a faulty system of dating, which puts the New Testament Gospels later than they can reasonably be dated and estimates the dates of the gnostic gospels far too early.

The majority of scholars date the earliest apocryphal gospels in the mid to late second century. Many are even later than this. However, there are a few writers with a vested interest in the authenticity of the gnostic gospels have tended to claim that they have a very early date, in some cases earlier than the dates that the same writers would assign to the New Testament Gospels. This chronology is, of course, faulty.

In spite of the faulty nature of a chronology which places the gnostic gospels early and the canonical Gospels late, this chronology is the most commonly published one on the internet and is commonly reported by New Atheists and Secularist groups.

The evidence, however, indicates that the real dates of the New Testament books is from the middle of the first century AD. For example, most of the books of the New Testament are quoted as scripture by early church documents such as the letters of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp, and in the Didache, written within a decade or so of the end of the first century. The New Testament must therefore have been completed before 100AD. There is strong evidence that the canonical books of the New Testament were completed before 70AD. The letters of the Apostle Paul were written between 48 and 64AD while the Gospels were completed between the mid 40s AD and the Jewish war of 66-73AD.

New Testament Quotations

The New Testament is quoted by various authors who wrote letters and commentaries from the earliest decades after the completion of the New Testament.

Three important writers who quoted from the New Testament are Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna. These quote from almost the whole of the New Testament in books written before 120AD.

- Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Christian congregation in Corinth in 96AD. In this he quotes from Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Titus, Hebrews, James and both of the letters of Peter.
- Ignatius of Antioch was put to death in Rome between 98 and 117AD. On his journey to Rome he wrote letters to various congregations, seven of which survive. These quote from much of the New Testament, including three of the Gospels.
- Polycarp of Smyrna wrote a letter to Philippi in about 120AD. This contains about a hundred quotations from the New Testament, including the all first three Gospels (the Synoptic Gospels).

Impersonation of Paul

Even during his journeys, Paul found that his name had been borrowed and that unscrupulous people were sending out letters purporting to have come from him, but which they had actually written themselves.

One example of this is in 2 Thessalonians, where Paul writes: “*that you should not be soon shaken in mind or troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word or letter, as through us, as if the Day of Christ is at hand.*”

(2 Thessalonians 2:2) Clearly someone else has written a letter and sent it out in the name of the Apostle Paul. Paul is justifiably angry with this and takes steps to ensure that his own letters are distinguished from the imitations by writing part of them in his own handwriting:-

The greeting of Paul by my own hand which is the sign in every letter, so I write. (2 Thessalonians 3:17)

Critics have been known to express the opinion that it was customary in the New Testament world for letters to be written in the name of someone important in order to give them weight and that everyone accepted this. The evidence, however, is that Paul certainly did not accept any such thing, and took steps to avoid it.

When one recognises the correct dates for the books it is clear that there is a clear gap between the New Testament and the apocryphal books. The New Testament Gospels are all written well within the lifetimes of the people whose names they bear, as well as many other eyewitnesses who would have had an interest in correcting any errors in them.

The apocryphal gospels, on the other hand, were all written much later. They claim to be the words of important apostles or companions of Jesus such as Thomas, Peter, Philip or Mary Magdalene. However, the evidence is that they were written in the middle of the second century or later. They could not, therefore, be the words of the characters they claim, people who had lived several generations earlier and died in the previous century.

Evidence of Accuracy in the New Testament Gospels

There are several strands of evidence which show that the New Testament documents are accurate records of the words and actions of Jesus and the Apostles.

Archaeology

One important strand of evidence is the way that the descriptions of places, people and customs in the New Testament match the findings of archaeology. This is not only the case for major elements of geography and important people, but also for minor details of life and architecture.

- **The stones in the Temple:** The description of the temple in the Gospel of Mark includes a comment on the size and magnificence of the stones of which it was made:-

And as he [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” (Mark 13:1)

The temple was destroyed in 70AD and the stones were cast down soon after and buried in general debris. They were not recovered until the 20th century (a few were seen by archaeologists in the 19th century). The writer of the Gospel would not have known about the detail of the stones if he had come from a generation after 70AD.

- **Stone water jars:** John’s Gospel contains a detail of living in Galilee in the time of Jesus:-

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. (John 2:6)

It was unusual for water jars to have been made of stone, as to do so required them to be turned on a lathe, which would be expensive. It was far more common for water jars (and other storage jars) to be made of earthenware, and large earthenware jars are found in quantity in almost every archaeological investigation in the Mediterranean area. However, archaeology shows that

in Galilee and Judea at the time of Jesus it was common for householders to use stone jars to store water (and other things). The reason for this was the Jewish rules of cleanliness; if an earthenware jar became unclean it had to be destroyed whereas a stone jar only needed to be washed. In areas with a preponderance of Gentiles it was not economic for workshops to be set up to produce stone jars and they are not found in excavations. To know about the stone jars the writer of the account would have had to have lived in Judea or Galilee before the Jewish war, and to have had a good memory.

- **House Roofs in Galilee:** Luke's Gospel contains an account which has an incidental description of the roof of a house in Capernaum.

but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. (Luke 5:19)

The usual roof for a house was brushwood packed with clay, but in basalt areas such as Galilee the roofs were made of basalt tiles caulked with clay. The remains of such roofs have been found in Gamla, where the geology is very similar to that in Capernaum.

In 66AD the Jews of Judea and Galilee revolted against Roman rule and a war began. There was fierce fighting until 70AD, by which point most of the towns of Judea and Galilee had been destroyed. The war continued with guerilla action until 73AD, and the area was depopulated as a result. The point about the details recorded in the Gospels and confirmed by archaeology is that they were unusual and would not have been expected by anyone who lived in a different part of the ancient world, or who lived in Judea after the war when it had been resettled by Greeks. The level of accurate detail in the Gospel accounts shows that they are accurate records and that they must have been written close to the time at which the events took place.

Undesigned Coincidences

An undesigned coincidence is a situation where two or more accounts contain minor details which interact with one another. The details are so insignificant that they often pass unnoticed in the narrative and they form no significant part of the action that is taking place or the message of the episode. However, they connect with details in other accounts to produce a minor story behind the main story. This minor story is often insignificant in its own right, but the fact that it exists shows that the account is accurate. A fictional account, or one which is being told after considerable oral tradition, or one told by someone with a poor memory, will not have undesigned coincidences.

For example, Matthew 8:14 tells us that Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. This implies that Peter was married, although the fact is never mentioned explicitly in any of the Gospels. In 1 Corinthians 9:5 we find that Peter travelled in the ancient world with his wife. This is a very minor and unimportant feature of the narrative, but it shows that the accounts of Matthew and Paul are accurate.

Josephus and The Jewish War

In 66AD the Jews of Judea revolted against Roman rule and a war against the Romans began. This spread to Samaria and Galilee and a major conflict erupted. The insurrection was not fully defeated until 73AD and four Roman legions with accompanying auxiliary units were required to do so.

The climax of the war was in 70AD when Jerusalem was stormed by the Romans. The Temple was burned in the course of the capture of the city, but the fighting continued within the city for some time and resulted in an almost complete destruction of the city. Three towers were left for the use of the garrison, but Josephus comments: "All the rest of the fortifications of the city were so completely levelled with the ground that no-one visiting the site would believe that it had once been inhabited".

A detailed description of the geography of Jerusalem would thus have been impossible soon after 70AD.

A second example concerns the servants of Herod Antipas. In Matthew 14:1,2, Herod discusses the doings of Jesus with his servants. This would be unusual behaviour in the ancient world where the class distinction between a king and a servant was so great that the two would normally never converse. However, there were special circumstances with Herod. Luke 8:1-3 tells us that Jesus was sometimes accompanied by women, among whom was Joanna, the wife of Chusa, Herod's steward. Thus Herod had a good reason to discuss matters with at least one of his servants because this man had special information about Jesus.

One list of undesigned coincidences contains 44 of these in the Gospels alone. There are many more in Acts and the Epistles, and probably very many more that have remained undiscovered. These are excellent evidence that the Gospels contain descriptions of events that really happened and that these descriptions are accurate.

Linguistic Fossils

A third type of evidence of the time of writing and the accuracy of reporting in the Gospels is the existence of linguistic fossils within the text. The Gospels were written in Greek, but they report events that took place in a part of the world where the most commonly used language was Aramaic, and where some people used Hebrew. The Gospels thus contain occasional sayings in Aramaic, and there are places where the Greek text of the words of someone in the narrative shows evidence of having been translated from Aramaic.

The point of this is that the Hebrew church fell into serious decline after 70AD when the Temple was destroyed, the land of Judea laid waste and the status of Hebrew and Aramaic speakers was completely eroded. After 70AD the Church was entirely Greek, and if anyone had written a Gospel from invented material after this date there would have been no possibility of their producing a Hebrew/Aramaic linguistic background.

Here are some examples of linguistic fossils:-

- When Jesus is on the cross, he repeats the words of Psalm 22:1, translated from the original Hebrew into Aramaic. His words (*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*) are reported in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. It is not likely that this would have been invented by anyone writing from a Greek linguistic background. Anyone inventing the account would either have produced wording in Greek or in the original Hebrew.
- The Gospels contain phrases which clearly come from a Hebrew/Aramaic background. For example: “*Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.*” (Luke 9:44) This is an obvious phrase from a non-Greek background. It would not have been invented by a writer in the Greek world after 70AD.

Languages in the Roman World

The official language of the Roman World was, of course, Latin, the language spoken in Rome. However, in the Eastern Mediterranean this was largely displaced by Greek which was the language of the earlier empires of the region and was the main language of commerce and culture from Egypt to Dalmatia.

In Galilee the main language spoken by the population would have been Aramaic, although most people would speak Greek to some extent in order to buy and sell goods. In addition, many would also have learned Hebrew, a language related to Aramaic, as a part of their Synagogue education. People would thus be bilingual, or at any rate would have a good working knowledge of at least two out of the three languages. In Jerusalem Hebrew was even more important, although Aramaic was also spoken. Archaeologists have found inscriptions and notices in all three of these languages.

The New Testament shows signs of both Greek and Semitic (Hebrew or Aramaic) language. The Gospels were written in Greek, but the words spoken by some of the people in them are clearly translated from Hebrew or Aramaic or were spoken by people with a strong Hebrew/Aramaic background.

Temple Stones



These excavations in Jerusalem are around the base of the platform on which the Temple was built. The wall was built in the time of Herod the Great, shortly before the birth of Jesus. In 70AD the temple was destroyed and soon after this the area was buried up to the arch spring at the top right of the picture. The masonry in the wall below this arch is from the time of Jesus. The stones are extremely large and are very finely cut to shape.

The pile of stones next to the wall is the remains of the stones of the temple buildings from the platform at the top of the wall. These were thrown down by Roman soldiers after the sack of Jerusalem in 70AD.

Summary

Correspondence with archaeology, undesigned coincidences and linguistic fossils all show that the canonical Gospels were not an invention of the late first or second centuries. Rather they were written by people close to the events with excellent memories of what had happened. They could hardly have been written a generation after the event; they certainly couldn't have been written later than this. Essentially they come from the time and place of the events that they describe.

This picture of an early date is especially important because it means that the real Gospels were written in the lifetime of the people whose names they bear. It is difficult to believe that the real Matthew or John would have found that false gospels had been written in their names without complaining. In addition the first readers of the New Testament Gospels would have included eyewitnesses to the events that they describe, who would have been concerned about any misrepresentation and would have made their feelings known.

Fulfilled Prophecy

Another piece of evidence about the canonical Gospels is the way that they contain predictions of events then future which have since come to pass. For example, consider the Olivet Prophecy, a discourse of Jesus recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. This prophecy begins with a note of the stones in the Temple which was followed by a prediction from Jesus that the temple would be destroyed:-

And answering Jesus said to him, Do you see these great buildings? There shall not be one stone left on another that shall not be thrown down. (Mark 13:2)

This was a fairly unlikely prophecy to make. It is very rare for something to be so completely destroyed that not even one course of stones is left; this is why archaeologists can study ancient buildings which have been ruined. However, in the case of the Temple, this is exactly what happened. The temple was completely destroyed and no course of stones remains. The stones which were used to build the temple have all been removed from the temple platform. Some of them are still at the bottom of the western wall.

It is clear that this prophecy was written earlier than the events it describes. There is no indication

The Test of a Prophet

According to the Book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament there were several tests of a prophet. Their words had to be consistent with earlier revelation, had to give an accurate description of what had already happened, and the prophet had to give a sign in terms of prediction of coming events or a miracle.

And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. (Deuteronomy 18:21,22)

This test is clearly fulfilled by Jesus and the New Testament. The Apocrypha fails the same test.

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of the fulfilment of the prophecy, and details which were well remembered by eyewitnesses are absent from the prophecy. There are also records of some of the Christians of Jerusalem remembering the prophecy and escaping from Jerusalem to Pella when the Romans arrived. This could not have happened if the prophecy had been invented after the event.

In fact the prophecy goes on to predict things that happened many centuries later:-

and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

(NASB'95 Luke 21:24)

The prophecy predicted that Jerusalem would fall under Gentile (non-Jewish) control until the time of Gentile control was over. This means that the prophecy predicted that at some future time Jerusalem would again be controlled by Jews. This happened centuries later, after the Six Day War in 1967.

The existence of fulfilled prophecy in the New Testament is evidence that the message comes from God. Not only do we have an accurate account of the words and doings of Jesus, but we have evidence that his teaching came from God. All of this is absent from the apocryphal books.

The Gospel of Thomas



The Gospel of Thomas is known from three incomplete Greek manuscripts and an almost complete Coptic translation. It contains a series of sayings attributed to Jesus which some critics are prepared to put on a level with the New Testament Gospels. However, it is clear that the document is a late composition written more than a century after the time of Jesus. Its author cannot have been Thomas the disciple.

The Gospel of Thomas contains inaccuracies in its text which show that it is a poor record of the events of Jesus' life. This contrasts with the New Testament Gospels where many texts show a detailed and accurate picture of the life and times of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Thomas

The main interest in the Gnostic gospels came after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi books in 1945 and their subsequent publication in the 1950s. Among the finds here was the Coptic text of the flagship of the Gnostic scriptures, the Gospel of Thomas. This is the document which critics assert to be the best challenger to the real Gospels.

The Gospel of Thomas was referred to by Hippolytus in the third century AD. Three fragmentary Greek manuscripts of it are known; these date from about 200AD. The only more-or-less complete copy is in the Nag Hammadi codices. This was a copy of a translation made in Coptic in about 400AD.

The Gospel of Thomas is unlike other Gospels, either in the New Testament or apocryphal. It consists of a list of 114 sayings, known as *logia* written without context. Critics claim that it is similar to the hypothetical document Q which is said to have predated the New Testament Gospels but is said to have contained

many of the sayings in them. The evidence suggests that the Gospel of Thomas was written in the mid to late second century AD.

Saying §0 - The Hidden Gospel

The problems with the Gospel of Thomas begin with its first saying:-

These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas recorded.

(Saying §0)

The Gospel of Thomas is described as a hidden Gospel, containing secret sayings. The Greek word for hidden/secret in this saying is *apocryphon*. This is a word which appears in many apocryphal gospels and is responsible for their being known as the apocrypha.

The issue is significant because it is symptomatic of a problem. The Gnostics had to explain how they acquired a gospel of which no-one earlier had heard and which was unknown to the general congregation. The standard four Gospels were known from apostolic times as can be seen by the quotations in the writings of the likes of Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp. However, no-one had heard of any of the Gnostic gospels. The answer of the Gnostics was to claim that this was because a set of gospels had been hidden by some of the Apostles to be revealed only to the wise until later. These were the *apocrypha*, the hidden books. Thus the word “apocryphon” in itself is a guarantee that the book was unknown in Apostolic times.

This is a particularly telling point when one considers the Gospel of Thomas. If this dates from the 50s AD, as some modern Gnostics claim, then it could not possibly have been a hidden work.

The Gnostic message supposes that part of the Gospel of Christ was hidden and that what was contained in the New Testament didn't contain the whole of the Gospel message. This, of course, conflicts with what the New Testament says about itself.

from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesu

(2 Timothy 3:15)

Here Paul points out that the scriptures available to Timothy are sufficient to make him “wise for salvation”. This means that no scripture was required in addition to that of which Timothy knew.

for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

(Acts 20:27)

This is Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders. Again, there is the emphasis that no more is needed than the message that Paul has given publicly, which he describes as “The whole counsel of God”. Nothing is held back, nothing is hidden. There is nothing left over for an apocrypha.

The Scriptures Timothy Knew

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul refers to Scriptures which Timothy has known from childhood. These, of course, would have been the Old Testament, because most of the New Testament was not written 20 years before when Timothy was a child.

However, in his first letter to Timothy Paul quotes from the Gospel of Luke and describes this as scripture:-

For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The labourer deserves his wages.” (1 Timothy 5:18)

The first of the two sayings is from Deuteronomy (in the Old Testament) but the second is from the Gospel of Luke. There are several other references to Luke's Gospel in the same letter. Timothy apparently had the Gospel of Luke as part of his Scriptures.

Timothy would also have access to the letters of the Apostle Paul, which are described as scripture by Peter (2 Peter 3:16)

Saying §5 - Direct Quotation from Luke

Consider another saying from the Gospel of Thomas

Jesus said, “Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed.” (Saying §5)

This saying contains a stretch of text which is directly parallel to the New Testament. To be specific, the text comes from Luke's Gospel.

Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. (Luke 12:2)

This saying appears in parallel texts in Matthew 10 and in Mark 10. However, the original saying was probably made in Aramaic, The Greek text of the three New Testament records of the saying are slightly different; this is expected of translations. The Gospel of Thomas has exactly the same text as the text as the Gospel of Luke. It must therefore be a direct quotation from Luke and not an independent recollection of the original saying. This means that the writer of the Gospel of Thomas had access to a copy of the Gospel of Luke; it was therefore written well after Luke's Gospel.

There are several other similar places where the Gospel of Thomas is directly dependent on the New Testament documents, which shows that it was written significantly after the New Testament was completed. This includes the writings of the Apostle Paul.

Saying §53 - Circumcision

This saying shows that the Gospel of Thomas is dependent on the Epistles of Paul as well as the Gospels. It also shows a certain failure to understand the New Testament.

His disciples said to him, “is circumcision useful or not?” He [Jesus] said to them, “If it were useful, their father would produce children already circumcised from their mother. Rather, the true circumcision in spirit has become profitable in every respect.” (Saying §53)

This logion discusses the question of circumcision, a problem which is discussed by Paul (in Romans 2:29). The Gospel of Thomas takes this saying and mistakes Paul's teaching with that of Jesus. It is clear that Jesus never discussed the question of circumcision during his ministry. Had he done so, this would have provided an unbeatable argument and Paul would certainly have referred to it. Thus we have an obvious error in the Gospel of Thomas.

Saying §100 - The Tax Penny

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings and therefore avoids the comparison with archaeology which occurs in the case of the canonical Gospels. However, it has not completely managed to avoid errors which are exposed by archaeology.

They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, “The Roman emperor's men demand taxes from us.” He said to them, “Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, give God what belongs to God, and give me what is mine.” (Saying §100)

Tax Coinage



In the first century AD taxes to the Roman Emperor were paid in silver coinage like the Denarius above. However, in the second century the rule was changed to allow tax to be paid using the gold “Aureus”, which had the value of 25 denarii. The Gospel of Thomas contains a anachronism when it suggests that tax at the time of Jesus could be paid in gold coin.

This is quite similar to a similar saying in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). However there is a difference in the detail and in this difference there is a clear anachronism. This concerns the coin used to pay taxes.

At the time of Jesus, Roman taxes were paid in Denarii or Sesterces, which were made of silver. In the Gospel of Thomas the taxes are paid in gold coin. It was not until the middle of the second century that the golden aureus became permitted tax currency. The Gospel of Thomas was obviously written after this.

Summary - Problems with the Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas therefore fails some of the tests which are passed by the New Testament Gospels:-

- The Gospel of Thomas contains words and ideas which come from the second century AD. It does not come from the time of Jesus, or from the lifetime of Thomas the disciple.
- It contains discrepancies with archaeology. The sayings in the Gospel of Thomas don't match known details of life in Judea or Galilee at the time of Jesus.
- Some of the reported sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas are obviously corrupted versions of sayings from the canonical Gospels. They contain discrepancies and mistakes which show that the Gospel of Thomas has failed to provide an accurate record of the words and actions of Jesus.
- It confuses the sayings of Jesus with the sayings of Paul.

The failure of the Gospel of Thomas shows two things. First, it means that one can ignore the Gospel of Thomas as a source of information about Jesus. Second, it shows that the tools that are used to decide whether the real Gospels are reliable are sufficiently sensitive to detect a false Gospel. We can therefore be confident that when they support the authenticity of the New Testament they are reliable.

The Gospel of Peter

A similar picture can be seen with various other documents, for example the apocryphal Gospel of Peter. This was discovered in 1886 by a French archaeological mission in Upper Egypt. It was in the grave of a Coptic monk, and was found in the excavation of his monastery. The manuscript is from the eighth century AD, but some smaller fragments of the same document from the early third century were found in Oxyrhynchus. The Gospel of Peter is mentioned by Serapion, bishop of Antioch, writing in about 190AD. Only a part of the whole work still exists, the part which refers to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The Gnostics

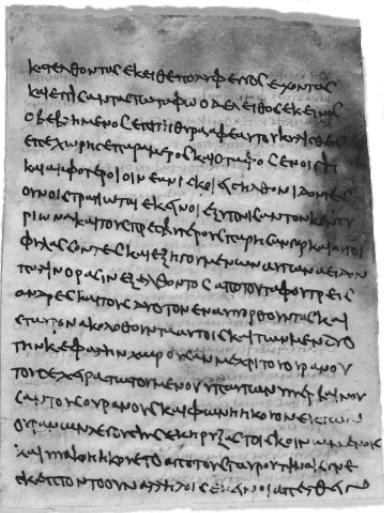
The Gnostics flourished from the second century to the fourth century and then faded gradually out. They were an alternative to the more mainstream elements of Christianity, but lost ground in the third century and were already a very small minority when the church was adopted as a central element of the Roman state by Constantine in the fourth century.

Gnosticism presented the route to salvation as being by knowledge - *gnosis*. This involved the acceptance of esoteric doctrines, such as the idea of the evil of matter, the idea that there were multiple layers of divine and semi-divine beings between God and the material world to preserve the purity of God. The purpose of the *gnosis* is to allow the spark of divine spirit, which gnostics teach is present in every man, to escape back to God.

The teachings of Gnosticism are generally syncretistic. They contain major elements of Greek philosophy and of both Greek and Syrian mystery religion. The contact with the Christianity of Jesus and the Apostles is very slight.

Most gnostics were very ascetic in behaviour, renouncing the flesh as evil and living celibate and monastic lives away from mankind.

The Gospel of Peter



The Gospel of Peter is a section of a longer gospel written in Greek and discovered in 1886 by French archaeologists excavating an early Coptic monastery at Akhmim in Upper Egypt. Other fragments found later at Oxyrhynchus may be parts of the same work. The text of the fragments was published in 1892. The length of the known text is about equivalent to a middle-sized chapter of one of the New Testament Gospels.

The Gospel of Peter contains an embellished account of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, in which the cross speaks, the earth shakes when the body of Jesus is laid on it and Jesus ascends to heaven from the cross. The introduction of these additional elements leads to matters which are anachronisms, contradictory to one another or just obviously wrong. There is no doubt that this document is not authentic.

Some critics (for example Dominic Crossan) have stated that the Gospel of Peter is one of the earliest of the Gospel records. One can only assume that they have not read it very well.

Again one can soon see discrepancies in the text which indicate a late date and show a general inaccuracy of the document. For example, early on in the extant portion of the Gospel we have:-

And standing there was Joseph the friend of Pilate and of the Lord, and knowing that they were about to crucify him he came to Pilate and asked the body of the Lord for burial. And Pilate sent to Herod and asked for his body. And Herod said, "Brother Pilate, even if no-one had asked for him we would have buried him, especially as the Sabbath is drawing on, for it is written in the Law that the sun should not set on someone who has been executed. (v2)

This contains several errors. Some, for example the idea that Joseph or Arimathea was a friend of Herod and Pilate, are different from the accounts in the New Testament, but there is little by way of separate evidence to show that the New Testament is correct. However, there are several issues in it which do have co-lateral proof.

The first obvious error is that it is Herod who has the body of Jesus. As Herod had no jurisdiction in Jerusalem (he was tetrarch of Galilee, but not of Judea) there was no possibility that he would have had authority over either the crucifixion or the body of Jesus.

A second clear error is that Joseph goes for the body *before* the crucifixion. However, during the process Pilate comments that "The sabbath is drawing on". This means that the conversation has suddenly jumped by more than six hours.

The Gospel of Peter also has problems in the timing it presents. Verse 2 says that the Sabbath was drawing on - in other words it was only a short time to the point where the Sabbath would occur. However, in v7 we read:-

And following these things we fasted and sat mourning and weeping night and day, until the Sabbath.

This is a problem, as the Sabbath was immediately after the end of the crucifixion according to verse 2 of the Gospel of Peter (and according to the canonical Gospels). It would not therefore have been possible for them to have wept "night and day" between the crucifixion and the Sabbath.

There is also a major geographical error in the last verse of the portion of the Gospel of Peter that still remains: v14 has Peter say “*But I, Simon Peter, and Andrew my brother took our nets and went to the sea...*” The sea was a considerable distance from Jerusalem, where the action of the verse takes place. The nearest sea, a matter of a day or so’s journey, was the dead sea, which has no fish. The Sea of Galilee, where Peter did go fishing, is several days’ walk away.

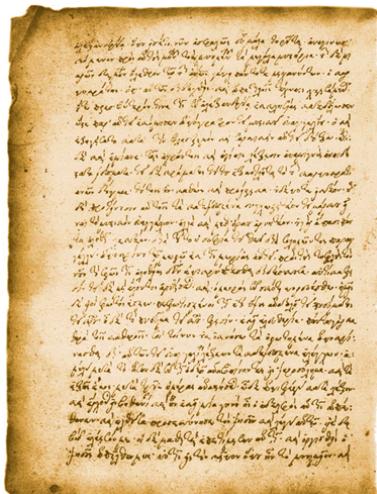
The Gospel of Peter is certainly more anti-semitic than the canonical Gospels and places the entire blame for the crucifixion on the people of Jerusalem. Pilate becomes a sympathetic figure, a friend of Joseph of Arimathea.

One can conclude that there is very little of any accuracy in the Gospel of Peter, and one can see why it is not accepted as a part of the New Testament.

The Secret Gospel of Mark

The Secret Gospel of Mark is problematical because no copy of it has ever been seen since the time of antiquity (if it ever existed at all). The information we have on it comes from a minor American scholar by the name of Morton Smith. Smith travelled around much of the Eastern Mediterranean in search of unpublished ancient manuscripts in monastery libraries, but with little success. However, after a visit to Palestine he claimed to have found evidence of an unknown Gospel in the library of the Monastery of Mar Saba on the West Bank.

Secret Mark



According to Morton Smith, evidence of the existence of a secret Gospel of Mark was discovered in 1958 in a letter bound into the end papers of a book in the monastery of Mar Saba in the Judean wilderness. The letter claimed to contain a hand-written copy of a letter by the early church theologian Clement of Alexandria.

According to this letter Secret Mark was a special edition of Mark’s Gospel by the original writer with additions for the benefit of those seeking a higher level of initiation into the faith.

The original of the letter no longer exists, having vanished in the 14 years between discovery and the publication of the find by Morton Smith. Only photographs of the papers still exist.

The document he published purports to be an 18th century letter which contains a copy of an earlier letter from Clement of Alexandria, an important Church Father from the end of the second century AD. The letter of Clement refers to two extracts from a version of Mark’s Gospel held by a schismatic sect of early Christians. These contained links to the canonical version of Mark’s Gospel but contained additional episodes inserted into the text.

The original documents are no longer in existence; maybe they never existed. The letter found by Morton Smith no longer exists; all existence of it is denied by the monks of Mar Saba. This means that it is impossible to date the paper on which the letter was allegedly written. All we have is some photographs by Smith, but these are not especially good and mean that forensic examination is impossible. No other copy of, or reference to, this letter is known.

Even if the letter did exist, it could have been written as a hoax by a eighteenth century author, and even if this writer was describing a real letter of Clement, Clement could have been speaking about a document which was not an original Gospel from the apostles, or he could have been completely

Modern Gnostics

Gnosticism died out in late antiquity and left little trace apart from a few manuscripts and obscure references in books by early Christian theologians. However, in the 19th century a new group arose which claimed to be proclaiming Gnostic teaching.

The earlier modern Gnostics placed a great degree of emphasis on the unconscious and on sexual aspects of ceremonial observances. This is quite different from the original Gnostics.

More recently writers like Elaine Pagels have produced a form of religion by mixing Buddhist ideas with ideas from Roman Catholicism. The result is wildly different from the original Gnosticism, but is popular in the modern world.

mistaken about the existence of any such document. There are too many unverifiable links in the chain to allow any kind of confidence to be placed in the existence of a secret Gospel of Mark

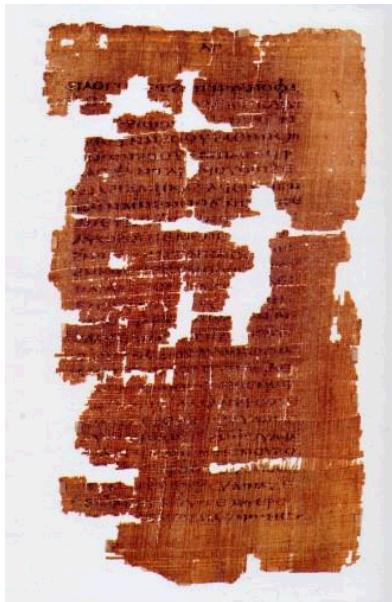
Morton Smith had a theory that the current Gospel of Mark was an abridgement of an earlier, longer, work. He also had theories about the way that people were initiated into the teaching of Jesus; both of these theories were worked into the excerpts described in the letter, in spite of the fact that at least the second of these theories is demonstrably false. The existence of the Secret Gospel of Mark must therefore be considered to be very unlikely, and the principal suspect for having produced a false document remains Morton Smith.

The Gospel of Judas

One recently discovered manuscript contains a document which describes itself as the “Gospel of Judas”. This became the subject of an article in the National Geographic magazine in 2006, with a preliminary translation. The accompanying article picked out the idea, from the translation, that Judas did not betray Jesus, but that he was told to precipitate the crucifixion so that the way of man’s salvation would be assured.

However, since then a second, more considered, translation has been made by a more respected team of translators. This has come up with a more conventional picture, almost a pastiche made from elements of the four canonical Gospels. The document was written in the second half of the second century and shows all the usual failure to match known historical detail. It is not possible for Judas to have written the document; he died immediately after the crucifixion and could not have lived on into the second half of the second century in any case.

The Gospel of Judas



The Gospel of Judas was discovered in a codex bought on the Egyptian antiquities market. The codex was dated by radiocarbon methods and shown to come from the end of the third century, but the wording of the Gospel of Judas suggests that the document comes from the end of the second century.

The Gospel contains a large number of sayings from the canonical Gospels of the New Testament but also contains some ideas that are characteristic of Gnosticism.

According to the original translation, the Gospel of Judas speaks of a single supreme deity who is above everything but also several (twelve?) subordinate deities who interact with the world. Human beings are of two types; the majority are simply physical but some have an immortal soul. The purpose of Jesus was to identify those with the immortal soul and show them how to return to God in heaven.

Eleven of Jesus’ twelve disciples were natural men who did not really understand his teaching. The other one, Judas, was a part of the enlightened race and was able to help Jesus to liberate himself from the world.

While this is very gnostic and very much in line with modern Gnosticism it doesn’t match the second translation.

The story of the Gospel of Judas highlights a typical issue with all apocryphal writings and especially the Gnostic ones. This is the problem that they are frequently misrepresented in order to provide support for the particular presuppositions and doctrinal position of the people who promote them. The Gnostic gospels are often used by a group calling themselves “Modern Gnostics” as a means of promoting their own message. The message of the modern Gnostics, however, has very little in common with the teachings of the original Gnostics. However, translations of Gnostic documents, such as those found at Nag Hammadi, are often doctored to fit in with modern issues.

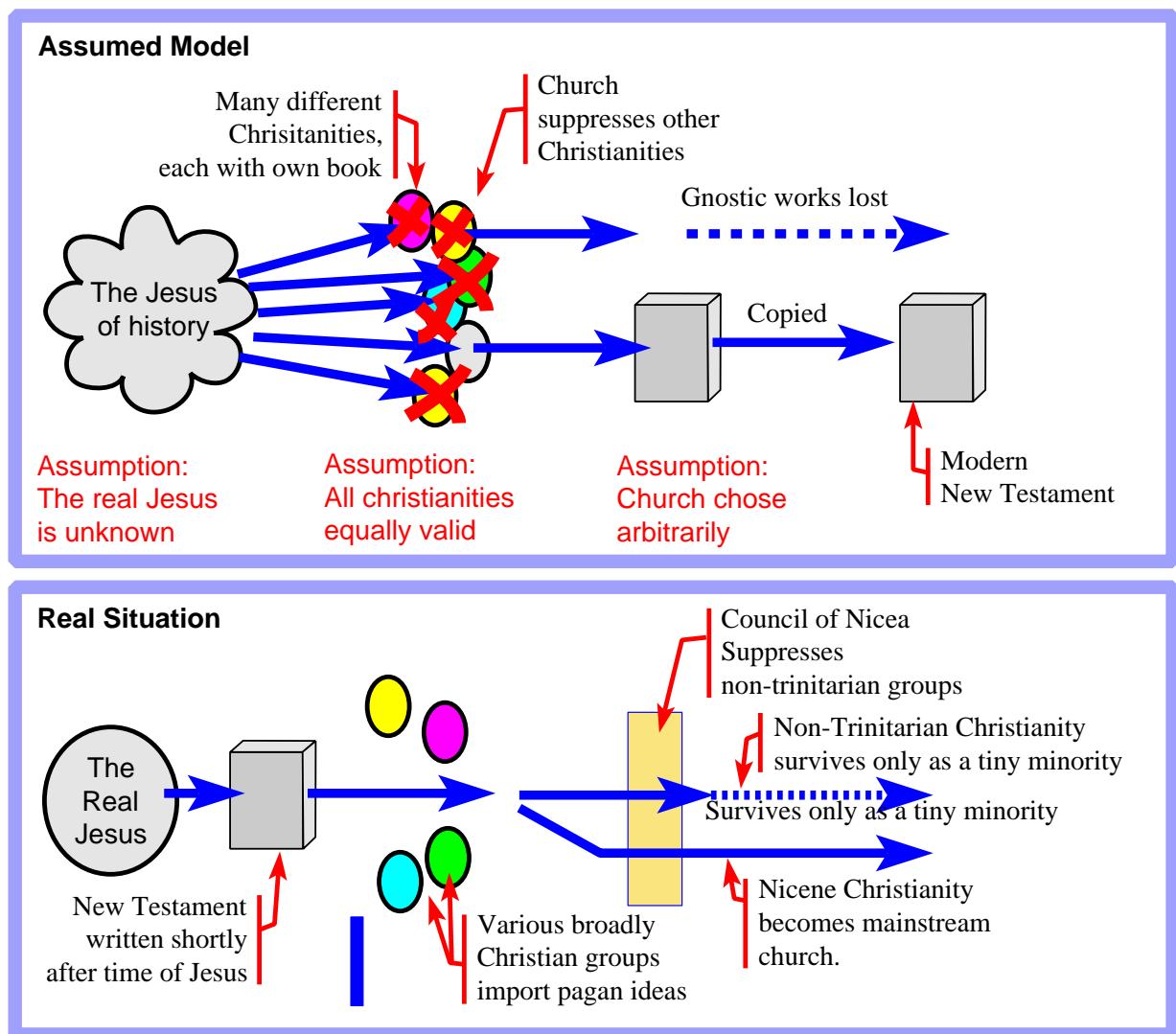
The Gospel of Barnabas

One can hardly discuss apocryphal gospels without mention of the Gospel of Barnabas. This book is often presented by Muslims as an alternative to the New Testament Gospels, with comments to the effect that this gives a much better picture of the life and times of Jesus than the real Gospels.

In fact the Gospel of Barnabas is a very poor forgery indeed. It is full of mistakes of geography, local customs and even technology. It was clearly written in mediaeval times by a Muslim in an attempt to undermine the Bible and hence to embarrass the Christian Church.

The Apocryphal Gospels and World View

The idea that the apocryphal gospels are as useful as the New Testament Gospels is based on a world-view which makes some assumptions which are not only unlikely, but which also conflict with the available evidence.



The post-modern world view suggests that there were many forms of Christianity in the second century, all of them equally valid, but that under Constantine a vicious version of Christianity was produced. Each of the different kinds of Christianity had its own scriptures but the peaceable Gnostic ones were suppressed by Constantine's men and the others became the New Testament.

The real world view is quite different and is strongly supported by evidence. This tells us that the real Gospels are an accurate description of what Jesus said and did. They were written down a few decades after his resurrection and have been preserved effectively ever since. The apocryphal gospels were written in the second century to support the beliefs of people who had combined the teaching of Jesus with those of paganism, but it was clear that they were unsatisfactory and they did not survive. All that remains of them is a small number of copies found by archaeologists.

The New Testament Gospels are the real Gospels, accurate descriptions of Jesus, his life and his teachings. They are worth looking at because they contain the teaching of the one person who has risen from the grave to eternal life.

Conclusion

One could continue to work painstakingly through the apocryphal gospels, noting discrepancies and checking for date of composition. This would be a considerable effort for very little return other than that knowing that the claims of the critics, and of the new-age Gnostics are unfounded.

The evidence indicates the following points:-

- The real Gospels of the New Testament are attested by considerable amounts of evidence. This comes in the form of archaeology, undesigned coincidences and linguistic fossils which show that the accounts describe events from the time of Jesus, and do so with some considerable accuracy. The evidence of fulfilled prophecy in the Gospels shows that the words contained in the Gospels are a message from God, although the main evidence is that of the resurrection of Jesus.
- The new apocrypha has very little contact with Jesus. It is firmly rooted in the second century and thus has little contact with the original events, although sometimes the apocryphal books quote from the real Gospels or include tradition which is correct. The teachings of these books are second century constructions generated by mixing the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles with pagan ideas. We can learn very little from the New Testament Apocrypha.
- Most if not all of the apocryphal gospels are forgeries, written after the time of the Apostles but using their names. The ones which have most appeal in the modern day are the ones with the least contact with the original teaching of Jesus. Some modern Gnostics seem to be prepared to misrepresent the teaching of the Gnostic gospels (and even to mistranslate them) in order to support a message based on new-age thinking rather than on historical teaching.
- The tests that can be applied to the Gospel records are sufficiently discriminating to allow one to detect the difference between real, accurate records and the inventions of a century later. This is a useful conclusion because we can thus conclude that the tests are reliable. We can have confidence in them when they indicate that the New Testament Gospels are trustworthy.