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Why Aren't Gnostic Gospels in the New Testament?

There is solid historical and textual evidence to support the New Testament's accounts of Jesus and the apostles. But many wonder why other so-called gospels aren't included. Two of the most discussed writings that people wonder about are the Gnostic Gospels and the Gospel of Barnabas. We'll look at the Gnostic Gospels first.

Are There Secret Writings About Jesus?

In 1945 a discovery was made in Upper Egypt, near the town of Nag Hammadi. Fifty-two copies of ancient writings, called the Gnostic gospels were found in 13 leather-bound papyrus codices (handwritten books). They were written in Coptic and belonged to a library in a monastery.

A few Gnostic scholars have gone so far as to assert that these recently discovered writings are the authentic history of Jesus instead of the New Testament.

But does their faith in these documents square with the historical evidence? Let's take a deeper look to see if we can separate truth from fiction.

Secret "Knowers"

The Gnostic gospels are attributed to a group known as the Gnostics. Their name comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." These people thought they had secret, special knowledge hidden from ordinary people.

As Christianity spread, the Gnostics mixed some doctrines and elements of Christianity into their beliefs, morphing Gnosticism into a counterfeit Christianity. However, for their system of thought to fit with Christianity, Jesus needed to be reinvented, stripped of both his humanity and his absolute deity.

In *The Oxford History of Christianity* John McManners wrote of the Gnostics' mixture of Christian and mythical beliefs.

Gnosticism was (and still is) a theosophy with many ingredients. Occultism and oriental mysticism became fused with astrology... They collected sayings of Jesus shaped to fit their own interpretation (as in the Gospel of Thomas) and offered their

adherents an alternative or rival form of Christianity.¹

Early Critics

A mild strain of Gnostic philosophy was already growing in the first century just decades after the death of Jesus. The apostles, in their teaching and writings, went to great lengths to condemn these beliefs as being opposed to the truth of Jesus, of whom they were eyewitnesses.

Check out, for example, what the apostle John wrote near the end of the first century: “Who is the great liar? The one who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Such people are antichrists, for they have denied the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22, NIV).

Following the apostles’ teaching, the early church leaders unanimously condemned the Gnostics as a cult. Church father Irenaeus, writing 140 years before the Council of Nicaea, confirmed that Gnostics were condemned by the church as heretics. He also rejected their “gospels.” But, referring to the four New Testament Gospels, he said, “It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are.”²

Christian theologian Origen wrote this in the early third century, more than a hundred years before Nicaea:

I know a certain gospel which is called “The Gospel according to Thomas” and a “Gospel according to Matthias,” and many others have we read—lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved solely what the church has recognized, which is that only four gospels should be accepted.³

Mystery Authors

When it comes to the Gnostic gospels, just about every book carries the name of a New Testament character: the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, and so on. But could they have even been written by their purported authors? Let’s take a look.

The Gnostic gospels are dated about 110 to 300 years after Christ, and no credible scholar believes any of them could have been written by their namesakes. In James M. Robinson's comprehensive *The Nag Hammadi Library*, we learn that the Gnostic gospels were written by "largely unrelated and anonymous authors."⁴

New Testament scholar Norman Geisler writes,

The Gnostic writings were not written by the apostles, but by men in the second century (and later) pretending to use apostolic authority to advance their own teachings. Today we call this fraud and forgery.⁵

Mystery Versus History

The Gnostic gospels are not historical accounts of Jesus' life but instead are largely esoteric sayings, shrouded in mystery, leaving out historical details such as names, places, and events. This is in striking contrast to the New Testament Gospels, which contain innumerable historical facts about Jesus' life, ministry, and words.

Consider the following two statements, the first from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (c. AD 110-150), and the second from the New Testament's Gospel of Luke (AD 55-70)

- **Gospel of Thomas:** "These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke, and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded."⁶
- **Gospel of Luke:** "Many people have written accounts about the events that took place among us. They used as their source material the reports circulating among us from the early disciples and other eyewitnesses of what God has done in fulfillment of his promises. Having carefully investigated all of these accounts from the beginning, I have decided to write a careful summary for you, to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught" (Luke 1:1-4, NLT).

Hidden sayings in the Gnostic gospels compared with factual accounts in the New Testament. Noted professor Raymond Brown has said of the Gnostic gospels,

We learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus' ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his.⁷

Such contrast between the New Testament and the Gnostic writings is devastating to those pushing conspiracy theories.

In summary, the Gnostic gospels simply don't meet the high standards required by scholars for inclusion in the New Testament. New Testament historian F. F. Bruce wrote,

There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.⁸

The Gospel of Barnabas: Secret Bible?

A Turkish official discovered a 1,500-year-old ancient leather-bound text, secretly hidden for 12 years, that could be an authentic version of the Gospel of Barnabas.

According to this "secret Bible," Barnabas was one of Jesus' original twelve apostles. However, in the book of Acts, Luke introduces Barnabas as an apostle who came after the original twelve and was a fellow missionary with the apostle Paul. In their travels, Paul and Barnabas boldly declared Jesus' death, resurrection and lordship in the first century.⁹

A Different Jesus?

Although the document entitled the Gospel of Barnabas contains much of the same information as the four New Testament Gospels, it differs greatly about the identity of Jesus Christ. A few of the significant differences are that the Gospel of Barnabas:

- Denies Jesus' deity
- Rejects the Trinity
- Denies Jesus' crucifixion

Let's look at what the Gospel of Barnabas says about Jesus' deity.

Gospel of Barnabas:

I confess before heaven, and call to witness everything that dwells upon the earth, that I am a stranger to all that men have said of me, to wit, that I am more than man. For I am a man, born of a woman, subject to the judgment of God; that live here like as other men, subject to the common miseries.¹⁰

Clearly the Gospel of Barnabas depicts Jesus denying his deity, whereas the apostle John clearly writes of Jesus as God the Son, Creator of the world.

Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory...¹¹

In this passage, John claims he actually saw Jesus. Later he tells us he touched him, traveled with him and heard him teach for three years. He speaks about Jesus as a close companion. But the writer of the Gospel of Barnabas makes no such claim.

Both writings also differ regarding Jesus' crucifixion. The Gospel of Barnabas presents Judas Iscariot as the one who died on the cross instead of Jesus, whereas in the New Testament, Judas betrays Jesus.

Both messages can't be true since the New Testament says Jesus clearly died on the cross and the Gospel of Barnabas states otherwise. So how can we know which Jesus is real?

The best way to know the truth about whether or not Jesus died on the cross is to check the historical record. Even secular historians are convinced that Jesus did truly die on the cross.

Another important way to verify whether the Gospel of Barnabas or the New Testament is portraying events truthfully is to compare the reliability of the two different accounts.

Although scholars use several tests to determine a manuscript's reliability, the most important is whether it is an eyewitness account. In a criminal trial, eyewitness testimony is always considered far superior to the testimony of someone who didn't witness the crime. If either gospel can be traced back to the first century, the likelihood of its reliability greatly increases. So, what does the evidence tell us? Let's begin with the Gospel of Barnabas.

Is The Gospel of Barnabas an Eyewitness Account?

In order for the Gospel of Barnabas to have been an eyewitness account, it would need to have been written during Jesus' lifetime in the first century. Since we don't have the original writings for either the Gospel of Barnabas or the New Testament,

we need to verify their dating by both historical evidence and the evidence from ancient manuscript copies.

There are only two ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Barnabas other than the one discovered in Turkey: an Italian manuscript which dates to the 15th or 16th century, and a Spanish copy from around the same period which has been lost.¹² The text in the newly discovered Turkish manuscript is in Aramaic. None of these copies are in Greek, the language of Barnabas and the apostles.

Two early Christian lists of apocryphal works, one from the 5th century and one from the 7th century, mention “A Gospel of Barnabas.” If these refer to the same Gospel, it would place its writing 400-500 years after Christ or earlier. But that still is several hundred years after the 1st century.

The Acts of Barnabas is a 5th century apocryphal work directed to the church of Cyprus that is sometimes mistakenly confused with the Gospel of Barnabas.

The only book from the 1st century attributed to the apostle Barnabas is the Epistle of Barnabas, which is an apocryphal writing not in the New Testament. This 1st century letter speaks of Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Lord. Scholars believe it was written by Barnabas between AD 70 and 90.

But if Barnabas writes of Jesus as Lord in the 1st century Epistle of Barnabas, why would he then write of Jesus as merely a prophet in the Gospel of Barnabas? Why would he write two contradictory accounts of Jesus?

The Epistle of Barnabas is accepted by scholars as an authentic 1st century account of Jesus that agrees with the New Testament. However, the Gospel of Barnabas is a completely different book with a completely different timeline.

The following evidence suggests that the Gospel of Barnabas wasn't recognized as a 1st century gospel by early Christians or non-Christians:¹³

- No non-Christian writer refers to it until the 15th or 16th century.
- No Christian writer refers to it from the 1st to the 15th century.
- The earliest reference to it was made in the 5th century, but it is in doubt.
- It cites historical facts that didn't exist until hundreds of years later.¹⁴

Medieval Forgery?

Christian writers such as Irenaeus wrote extensively about anti-Christian documents such as the Gnostic gospels, classifying them as heretical. Yet not one of Irenaeus' letters or documents mentions the Gospel of Barnabas. There is simply no mention of it from any early writer.

Perhaps most indicative of its late date is that the Gospel of Barnabas describes medieval life in Western Europe, as well as a 100-year Jubilee, which wasn't declared until the 14th century. How would Barnabas or any 1st century writer know such historical detail hundreds of years before it was declared?

Dr. Norman Geisler concludes, "The evidence that this was not a 1st century gospel, written by a disciple of Christ, is overwhelming."¹⁵

Not only does the evidence argue against it being written by Barnabas in the 1st century, but some scholars believe the Gospel is a forgery. One expert writes, "In my opinion scholarly research has proved absolutely that this 'gospel' is a fake."¹⁶

Is The New Testament an Eyewitness Account?

History provides clues from three primary sources regarding the date of origin for the 27 books of the New Testament:

- Testimony of Church Enemies
- Early Christian Accounts
- Early Manuscript Copies

The first clue is a partial list of New Testament books made by enemies of the Church called heretics. As outlaws of the Church, heretics wouldn't have been concerned about agreeing with Church leaders about the authorship or dating of the New Testament. Yet, two early heretics, Marcion and Valentinus, did attribute the writings of several New Testament books and passages to the apostles.

In AD 140, the heretic Marcion listed 11 of the 27 New Testament books as being the authentic writings of the apostles.

At about the same time, another heretic, Valentinus, alludes to a wide variety of New Testament themes and passages.

What this tells us is that by the middle of the 2nd century many New Testament books had been in circulation for some time. Even heretic “outlaws” accepted these New Testament accounts as the eyewitness reports from the apostles.

Early Christian Accounts

Our second clue is the vast number of early Christian letters, sermons, commentaries, and creeds referring to Jesus as the resurrected Lord. They appeared as early as five years after his crucifixion.

The number of these documents is impressive; more than 36,000 complete or partial writings, some from the 1st century, have been discovered.¹⁷ Their words could replicate virtually the entire New Testament except for a few verses.¹⁸

So how does that compare with the Gospel of Barnabas? We have already noted that there are only two citations of it prior to the 15th century, and it is doubtful those references were to the “Gospel of Barnabas” in question.¹⁹

The earliest writings outside the New Testament were from men who knew and followed Paul, Peter, John and the other apostles. These early church leaders were not eyewitnesses to Jesus but learned about him from those who had actually seen and heard him.

The most important of these early writings outside the New Testament are from Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna.

In AD 96, Clement of Rome wrote a lengthy letter to the church at Corinth in which he cited Matthew, John, and 1 Corinthians. Some believe he is the Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3. Since Clement’s letter was written in AD 96, these three books must have been written earlier.

In about AD 110, Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the apostle John, wrote six letters to churches and one to a fellow bishop, Polycarp, in which he refers to six of Paul’s letters. Polycarp of Smyrna, also a disciple of the apostle John, refers to all 27 New Testament books in his letter to the Philippian church (AD 110-135).

Therefore, the Gospels must have been in existence in the 1st century when eyewitnesses (including John) were still alive. We have seen that no such early reference to the Gospel of Barnabas exists.

Early Manuscript Copies

Our third clue is the abundance of early New Testament manuscripts which have helped scholars determine the approximate time they were originally composed.

Archaeologists have discovered over 5,600 manuscript copies of the New Testament in the original Greek language, some complete books, and some mere fragments. Counting other languages, there are over 24,000.²⁰ However, only three copies of the Gospel of Barnabas have been discovered.

Furthermore, archaeologists have discovered New Testament fragments that date to within a generation or two after Christ, compared with hundreds of years later for the Gospel of Barnabas.

Scholars' Consensus

Prior to these findings, German critical scholars from the late 19th and early 20th centuries had argued that the New Testament was written by unknown authors in the 2nd century. But this new evidence reveals that its books were all written in the 1st century. Historian Paul Johnson writes:

The late nineteenth-early twentieth-century notion that the New Testament was a collection of late and highly imaginative records can no longer be seriously held. No one now doubts that St. Paul's epistles, the earliest Christian records, are authentic or dates them later than the A.D. 50s.²¹

Archaeologist William Albright states the entire New Testament was written at "very probably sometime between about 50 A.D. and 75 A.D."²²

The following chart illustrates the significant difference between the writing of New Testament and the Gospel of Barnabas.

RELIABILITY TESTS	NEW TESTAMENT	GOSPEL OF BARNABAS
Date of Original	AD 40-95	AD 400-1500
Earliest Verified Copies	AD 117-138	AD 400-1500
Gap from Original	22-98 years	Undetermined
Years after Christ	7-30	370-1,470
Number of Manuscripts in Original Language	5,600+	None
Number of Manuscripts in All Languages	24,000+	3
Citations in other Historical Documents	36,000+	2

Conclusion

Whereas the “secret Bible” called the Gospel of Barnabas was written 400-1500 years after Christ, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written in the 1st century, within one generation of his life.

Neither the Gnostic Gospels nor the Gospel of Barnabas meet the stringent standards early church fathers used to determine which books were the authentic eyewitness reports of the apostles. They were excluded for their late dating, fraudulent authorship and inconsistency with the eyewitness accounts of the apostles.

As one reads the New Testament, it becomes apparent that the writers made every attempt to honestly record the life, words and events surrounding Jesus. Luke, the writer of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, puts it this way,

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write a careful account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught.²³

Endnotes