

WHY ARE THERE ONLY FOUR GOSPELS?

# The Gospels: “Lost” & Found



Were other  
“gospels” included in  
the New Testament,  
then later rejected?

How do we know  
the Gospels  
are reliable?



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## True or False?

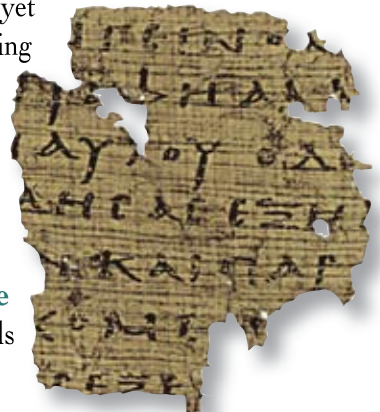
# True or False?

What if the version of the life of Jesus that's found in the Bible isn't the right one? What if there were other accounts of his life and ministry? And what if none of these versions actually represents eyewitness testimony about Jesus? That's precisely what some scholars are teaching, not just on college campuses but in popular literature and on television.

Popular scholars such as Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels, whose books boast titles such as *The Gnostic Gospels*, *Lost Scriptures*, and *Lost Christianities*, make claims such as this one: "Many years passed before Christians agreed concerning which books should comprise their sacred scriptures. . . . In part this was because other books were available, also written by Christians, many of their authors claiming to be the original apostles of Jesus, yet advocating points of view quite different from those later embodied in the canon."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the viewpoints found in these writings, many of which are called "Gospels," do differ from the New Testament Gospels. In fact, many include descriptions of Jesus that directly contradict the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Most significantly, the "lost Gospels" consistently depict the *nature of Jesus* in ways that disagree with the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. For example, the New Testament writings describe Jesus as fully divine and yet fully human (see, for example, Philippians 2:5-11). But, according to other writings, Jesus Christ was a spirit who merely *seemed* human. In others, such as *Gospel of Philip*, Jesus of Nazareth—a human being—was possessed by a Christ-spirit; then on the cross, this Christ-spirit abandoned the human Jesus.

**So what's at stake when it comes to the lost Gospels? Nothing less than the nature of Jesus Christ, the essence of Christian faith!** Simply put, if the authors of the lost Gospels were telling the truth, the perspective on Jesus that's found in the New Testament Gospels is false. Let's look together at the historical evidence, though, and see what we actually find.



(Courtesy of the Schøyen Collection, Oslo and London)

Earliest known fragment of *Acts of Paul*. When it was discovered that *Acts of Paul* was a fictional text, Christians rejected its authority.

### ■ What are the "lost Gospels"?

The term "lost Gospels" usually refers to ancient writings that were excluded from the New Testament, even though they included *supposed* recollections of events and teachings from the life of Jesus. A few of these "lost Gospels" have lasted throughout the centuries. Others survive only in tiny fragments of papyrus or in brief quotations found in the writings of early Christian scholars. Several "lost Gospels" were discovered anew in the past 100 years. Copies of some texts—such as *Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Truth*, and *Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians*—were unearthed in 1945 in Egypt, near a village known as Nag Hammadi.

# Truth about the New Testament Gospels

## ■ Why were the “lost Gospels” excluded from the New Testament?

The lost Gospels were excluded because they did not include reliable, eyewitness testimony about Jesus. Some scholars today depict this decision as having been made by powerful church leaders in the fourth century, three centuries after the books in the New Testament were written. One such scholar claims that a letter from a powerful bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria, established the list of authoritative books in AD 367. He claims, “Athanasius wrote his annual pastoral letter to the Egyptian churches under his jurisdiction, and in it he included advice concerning which books should be read as Scripture in the churches. He lists our twenty-seven books, excluding all others. This is the first surviving instance of anyone affirming our set of books as the New Testament. And even Athanasius did not settle the matter. Debates continued for decades, even centuries.”<sup>2</sup>

Each fact in this summary is *technically* correct, but it leaves out several key truths, leaving readers with false impressions—such as, (1) until the late fourth century, there was no consensus about which Christian writings were authoritative and true, and (2) even then the church’s standard was simply the authoritative statement of a powerful bishop.

So when *did* Christians agree on which writings were authoritative in their congregations? And what was the standard for these decisions? Hints of this standard can be found in first-century Christian writings. The basic idea was something like this: *Testimony that could be connected to eyewitnesses of the risen Lord was uniquely authoritative among early Christians.*<sup>3</sup> It was *not* one specific person or a powerful group in the early church that decided to include certain books in the New Testament. *From the beginning, authoritative testimony about Jesus Christ had to have its source in eyewitnesses of the risen Lord.* The lost Gospels were excluded by the fact that they could not be clearly connected to persons who walked and talked with Jesus; therefore, their testimony could not be considered authoritative or reliable.



(Courtesy of the Schøyen Collection, Oslo and London)

Tax collectors were known to carry *pinakes*, books with wooden pages covered with wax. Notes were scratched into the wax using styluses.

## ■ When did Christians begin to treat the words of eyewitnesses as the most reliable testimony about Jesus?

Even while the New Testament books were being written, the words of people who saw and followed the risen Lord—specifically, the words and writings of the apostles—carried special weight in the churches (see Acts 1:21-26; 15:6–16:5; 1 Corinthians 4–5; 9:1-12; Galatians 1:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26-27). After the apostles’ deaths, Christians continued to cherish the testimony of eyewitnesses and their associates. Around AD 110, Papias of Hierapolis put it this way: “So, if anyone who had served the elders came, I asked about their sayings in detail—what

Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's followers."<sup>4</sup> The people most likely to know the truth about Jesus were the ones who had encountered Jesus personally or the close associates of these witnesses. So, although Christians wrangled for several centuries about *which* writings were authoritative, it was something much greater than political machinations that drove their decisions. Their goal was to determine which books could be clearly connected to eyewitnesses of the risen Lord.

### ■ Why did only four Gospels make it into the New Testament if so many Gospels were available to early Christians?

Only four Gospels—the ones known to us as the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—could be clearly connected to firsthand accounts of the risen Lord. Unlike the “lost Gospels,” each of the New Testament Gospels was written in the first century AD, at a time when the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry were still alive. (The earthly ministry of Jesus began around AD 28 and lasted until AD 30 or so.) What’s more, it’s possible to trace widespread awareness among Christians that these Gospels represented eyewitness testimony back to the late first century, within a few years of the time when the last of the New Testament Gospels was written.



■ Papias of Hierapolis—a church leader in the geographic area known today as Turkey, born about the time the Gospels were being written and a friend of Philip’s four daughters mentioned in Acts 21:9<sup>5</sup>—received his information about the first two New Testament Gospels from the first generation of Christians. According to Papias, the primary source for Matthew’s Gospel was the testimony of the Matthew, a follower of Jesus and former tax collector (Matthew 9:9).

■ Papias also wrote that the author of Mark’s Gospel had served as Peter’s translator when Peter preached in the early churches. As such, what Mark recorded in his Gospel was the witness of Peter himself.

■ About the same time as Papias recorded these recollections, a pastor named Polycarp of Smyrna referred to the words of the apostle Paul as “Scripture.”

■ In a mid-second-century document known as the Muratorian Fragment, an unknown church leader reports that Luke’s Gospel came from Luke, the apostle Paul’s physician, and that this Gospel included eyewitness accounts from people that Luke interviewed.<sup>6</sup>



This painting from the ruins of Pompeii depicts two methods for writing in the first century: The man holds a papyrus scroll while his wife holds a stylus and wax tablet.