

New Testament Apocrypha: Introduction

This issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now* is the first of a five-part series. The remaining installments (over the next few months) will discuss Apocryphal gospels, acts, letters, and apocalypses. I had originally intended to discuss apocryphal gospels in this issue, but it occurred to me that a general introduction was needed first, and I am foregoing the usual Then-Now-Discussion format for this issue.

The New Testament canon (derived from the Greek for *standard* or *measuring stick*) consists of 27 books—four gospels, one history, 21 letters, and one apocalypse. The inclusion of these works in the canon occurred over a period of about 250 years, although all but seven of the canonical books were nearly universally accepted as authoritative at a very early date, as evidenced by a number of lists developed by early church leaders. At least two additional known works would have been included had they survived: Paul's letters to the church at Corinth prior to 1 Corinthians (see 1 Corinthians 5:9) and to Laodicea (see Colossians 4:16). Undoubtedly, there were many other apostolic writings (see Luke 1:1) that did not survive the ages.

There are also many non-canonical writings that have survived—some of these were revered in the church, while others were summarily dismissed as either trivial or heretical. Examples of valued works include the small collection often referred to as the "Apostolic Fathers." [The Shepherd of Hermas](#), for example, was cited as a worthwhile book by a number of early Christians.

This series will deal exclusively with apocryphal books, as opposed to the Apostolic Fathers (works purported to be authored by the immediate successors of the Apostles) and the writings of the [Ante-Nicene Fathers](#).

The term "New Testament Apocrypha" is a fairly recent invention, and it presents several problems:

1. Calling books in this category **New Testament** Apocrypha implies that these works were at some time considered for inclusion in the canon. With very few exceptions, they were not.
2. Calling them **New Testament** Apocryphal also implies that they are all Christian in nature, and this is not the case, as you will see in the future editions.
3. Some of the so-called New Testament Apocryphal books are about Old Testament characters.
4. Calling them New Testament **Apocrypha** (from the Greek for "hidden") implies that these books were deliberately concealed by a powerful orthodox church. This too is incorrect with very few exceptions. The notion that the second or third century church systematically suppressed certain books displays ignorance of the church during that era. There simply was no central authority that could issue worldwide edicts, although there was communication between churches. But for the most part,

the church was too persecuted and too localized for autocratic rule about the myriad of works circulating.

5. It is also important to distinguish the New Testament Apocrypha from the Old Testament Apocrypha, which is a clearly-defined collection of orthodox writing that are part of neither the Jewish Bible nor most modern Christian Bibles. They are included in the Catholic Bible, having been accepted as authoritative at the 1546 Council of Trent. There is, however, no similarly definitive collection of New Testament Apocrypha.

There was no official New Testament canon until the late fourth century, but its development took place in the second and third centuries. A variety of early church leaders weighed in on the subject of authoritative books (primarily using the criteria of clear attribution to the Apostles or their immediate associates). There was by no means unanimous consensus among these leaders, and a number of New Testament books were questioned for years.

Generally speaking, the early fathers used terms like accepted, authoritative, disputed, spurious, and heretical, but the definitions were not always identical. In this series, I will use the following categories:

- Canonical - the 27 books of the New Testament
- Disputed - books which were considered valuable but which failed to be included in the canon (The Gospel of Peter is an example)
- Spurious - books which are clearly legendary or only recapitulations of canonical books (the Letter to Laodicea is an example).
- Heretical - books which teach doctrines very different from the New Testament (the Gospel of Thomas is an example)

As you read some of the legends and heresies of the early church, some of you may be interested in the complete text of some of the apocryphal works. I will not use space on my web server to reproduce these, particularly since others have already done so. I will, however, provide links to complete texts.

In discussing the New Testament Apocrypha, I will be leaning heavily on several ancient sources, including Irenaeus' [Against Heresies](#) and Eusebius' [Ecclesiastical History](#), as well as a number of modern interpretations, including Wilhelm Schneemelcher's [New Testament Apocrypha](#), Bart Ehrman's [Lost Christianities](#), and J.K. Elliott's [The Apocryphal Jesus](#).

Some of today's liberal theologians would like the world to believe that there was some massive orthodox conspiracy to destroy books that challenged the status quo, but that simply is not the case. Early leaders sometimes condemned the ideas in heretical works, particularly those with Gnostic leanings, but they were not destroyed. We can say this with absolute certainty because many of the works have survived! The Nag Hammadi discovery recovered many of them, but others were located mixed in with collections of canonical books. Furthermore, heretical books weren't the only works lost—where is Paul's authentic letter to Laodicea or his first letter to Corinth? Or are we to believe that these too were suppressed because they included something contrary to the dominant orthodoxy?

Several chapters of Tacitus' *Annals* (a history of the early Roman Empire) have been lost, yet no one suggests that establishment historians conspired to destroy those chapters. The works of the first century geographer Thallus are known only from

references, yet no one suggests that one group of geographers conspired to destroy his work. The simple fact is that few ancient documents were preserved.

Furthermore, some liberal theologians, particularly The Jesus Seminar, are determined to change the canon and even Jesus Himself. In their book, *The Five Gospels*, as I've mentioned before, The Jesus Seminar clearly considered the Gospel of Thomas the equal, if not the superior, of the canonical Gospels. This, despite the fact that the Gospel of Thomas includes this exchange between Peter and Jesus:

*Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life."
Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Modern Thomas apologists claim that this statement was added later, but we'll examine that in the next edition of this series.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now*? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Mary, the Mother of God (May 11)

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