The Many Gospels *of* Jesus

Sorting Out the Story of the Life of Jesus

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PREFACE

It might be said that all scholars make judgment calls about what is orthodox or heretical based on their own prejudices or schools of thought. We each have our own horizon of expectations that we bring to the reading of any text. But what Jason and I hope to accomplish in this volume is simply to explain why some books were included in the Bible and some were not and to allow others the opportunity we have had to examine the evidence. To that end, we have included the text of many significant Gnostic Gospels, as well as other writings that some have put forward as equal in validity and veracity to the four Gospels found in the Bible. Further, we have tried to explain in an even-handed manner the history of these books and why only four Gospels were chosen as Scripture.

To help you understand how I personally approached this study, I think it would be helpful to tell how I came to be interested in the enigmatic subject of ancient writings, the biblical text, and textual criticism. In many ways, this book is the result of a long spiritual search. But it is also the product of extensive academic research.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

In my early days, I rejected Christianity. My faith in Christ came at the end of a long and broad search for spiritual truth.

In many ways, I was a child of the sixties—of that spiritual revolution in America propelled by a rejection of materialism, a longing for world peace and unity, and a quest for spiritual reality. Anyone alive at the time knows it was a time of extreme idealism, experimentation, and exploration.

I shared the aspirations of my peers for a new community. I rejected my heritage, which was rooted in materialism, traditional Christian religion, and good old American conservatism. I wanted to return to nature and make an Eden for myself and others. In that idealistic mind-set, without knowing it, I was seeking God—or rather, God was seeking me.

Perhaps the best place to pick up the story is in the summer of 1967, when I was sixteen. The Beatles had already broken onto the scene, the Rolling Stones were just emerging, and I was home for the summer from my first year at Choate (now the coeducational Choate Rosemary Hall), a preparatory school that John F. Kennedy and other notables had attended.

I didn't fit in at Choate. I wasn't smart, and I wasn't preppy. Fortunately, my roommate, Ray Hitchcock, was of the same ilk, so we got along well with each other. We both struggled with our studies, and we both hated being

away from girls and rock 'n' roll. But we made it through the year and parted ways to enjoy the summer.

In late July, I received a phone call from Ray's mother, who sobbed hysterically as she told me again and again, "Ray was killed—he was killed—in a car accident."

That night as I lay in bed, I told God (whoever he was), "I'm afraid of you. How can someone be alive one moment and then dead the next? What *is* life?" It was the first time I talked to God in a real way and the first time I thought about the meaning of life. I had attended an Episcopal church as a child and was even an acolyte, but I had never really encountered God.

Something strange happened next. When I told my father about Ray and my feelings about God, he talked to me about Jesus. Though at the time I couldn't understand what he was saying, it comforted me. When I woke up the next morning, something was different. I felt that someone or something was with me—a kind of presence. To this day, I believe that it was real. I was different.

I gradually began to lose my taste for the kind of life my friends and I had lived. I became more and more of a loner and a thinker. I began to read poetry and philosophy and to write poetry. I was searching for the meaning of life and of my own existence. Reading let me know what others believed; writing was a way of searching myself to discover what I believed. In a poem in memory of Ray, I wrote that "his death gave life to me." If Ray had not died, I don't know that I would have sought the meaning of life when I did.

Nature became to me the expression of God. He could be seen in every living thing. I used to love taking walks in the woods near our home, contemplating the natural beauty and writing poetry. Sometimes, for a brief moment, I would sense God's presence. I had flashes of realization that there was a God and that he was out there somewhere. I tried not to think about it but would find myself doing just that. *I know that there is a God—but who is he?*

Of the many books I read in those days, I especially enjoyed the poetry of Kahlil Gibran, William Blake, and Dylan Thomas—men who loved nature and seemed to have a mystical relationship with God. And whenever I read the word *Jesus*, my heart felt warm. I really liked Jesus. I liked what I read about him, and I thought it would be wonderful if I could be like him. *But what does Jesus have to do with God?* I wondered. *Is he really God's Son?*

The summer after I graduated from Choate, some of my friends took a trip to the West Coast, and they told me about a Christian commune in Oregon called Living Springs, where they'd had some kind of experience with Jesus. A man named Gar, who had come back from Oregon with my friends, told me something I will never forget.

He pointed to one of those pictures that are meant to look like Jesus said, "That's not Jesus." When I asked how he knew, he said, "Jesus is in me." Startled, I asked, "How could that be?"

Then he told me of his experience, of how he had accepted Christ into his heart—the same thing that had happened to my friends.

This was something new. Up until that point, I had believed that there was a God, I had somehow felt that Jesus had something to do with him, and I had somewhat tried to model my life after his, in spite of all my failures. But I had never heard that Jesus could come and live in me.

Gar told me that it was a matter of faith and that I could never figure it out with my mind. My thinking could take me only so far, and then I would have to take a leap of faith.

I had heard about the "leap of faith" before, from the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. But I never imagined it meant receiving Jesus into my heart. How could I receive someone into myself whom I didn't see or know? And how did I know he was out there? And if he was out there, then that must mean he was alive. I continued to think about this over the summer, even as I hitchhiked to upstate New York to attend what was to become an amazing musical and historical event: the Woodstock Festival.

For me, the Woodstock experience was so powerful that I was reinfused with hope for an alternative society to rise up in this country. I forgot about Jesus for a while and instead tuned in to whatever natural or alternative spiritual ideas were moving around me at the time.

The following autumn, I began attending Kent State University, where I had the opportunity to spend time with a well-known poet from the Beat generation who was also a Buddhist monk. I had been attracted to eastern religions; Buddhism, in particular. But although my mind was obviously open to alternate spiritual routes, the end I sought was still God. And the more I observed and listened to this poet during those few days, the more it became clear that he did not depend on God. It also became clear to me that, contrary to Buddhist teaching, there was no great light within me awaiting discovery. According to my experience, there was nothing within me but darkness. God was outside me, not within me. I needed God to come into me.

My frustration escalated in early May 1970, when our campus became the scene of student riots and the infamous National Guard shootings. Eleven students were shot and four killed. As I saw it, the government was killing the youth movement, which held such promise in the sixties. As the movement was dying, I found myself dying inside as well.

I made a radical decision: I was going to hitchhike to the Christian commune in Oregon and find out for myself if Jesus was real. I took a Bible with

me and read it; and I kept a journal every day of my travels. I remember thinking that I was on my way to meet Jesus. I had a sense that I was leaving my old life behind and was about to begin a new one.

After many days and many rides, I reached my destination: Quines Creek, Oregon. It wasn't much more than a gas station, a general store, and a long road leading up to the Living Springs commune. As I walked up that dusty road, my heart beat faster. I was nervous. Then a pickup truck pulled up and the two men inside asked me where I was going. They turned out to be leaders at Living Springs. When they asked why I had come, I told them, "I want to go on with Jesus."

The farm was lovely, but I was not restful enough to enjoy the idyllic scene. I had come for a purpose. Gar happened to be there, and after we greeted each other, I told him, too, of my desire to go on with Jesus. His reply was strange: "Are you sure?" He warned me that if I received Jesus, I could never go back to my old world. "It's like a fish out of water that can't go back."

That night, I thought about his words; and the whole next morning, while I was weeding in the garden, as all members of the commune did, I debated with myself. *Should I receive Jesus? Can I still do the things I enjoyed doing before? What will happen?* All the questions and doubts ran through me. *What am I doing? Why did I come all the way from Ohio to Oregon?*

At the same time, something else was moving in me, urging me, persuading me, coaxing me to do something. Finally, I put down my hoe and went up to the lodge. I told the few people sitting there that I had to pray, that I wanted to receive Jesus right then. I was nervous and trembling inside, unsure what I should even say or pray. But as soon as I said, "Jesus, I need you," I was flooded with his Spirit, and I felt an electric flow, like a surge of rushing water, cleansing my being. It was warm and loving and personal. It was Jesus. I knew it.

The person whose presence I had sensed before had now, at long last, come into me. I felt as light as a feather. No burden—I was liberated! Suddenly full of joy, I leaped up and ran past the stream and up the side of the mountain. My smile seemed too big, and the ecstasy too great. It seemed that the whole of the Oregon sky couldn't contain it. And, oh, was that sky blue, and those pine trees green! Oregon smelled to me then like heaven itself. Christ was alive!

ACADEMIC JOURNEY

After this experience, I hitchhiked home and began a new life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This meant finding other Christians and meeting with them, communicating with Jesus through spiritual exercises—such as prayer, Bible

reading, and listening to others explain the Bible—and persisting in these. Within a few years, I had heard so many different notions and was being urged to adopt so many different kinds of spiritual practices that my head was spinning. At the same time, my idealism and longing for unity led me to promote Christian oneness. This, too, was bewildering, because so many Christians were entrenched in teachings and practices that kept them divided from others.

During these early years, I fulfilled my two-year alternative military service (I was a conscientious objector) and then completed a B.A. in English at Cleveland State University, followed by an M.A. in English from Ohio State. My beloved wife, Georgia, and I were married and eventually had our three sons, Jeremy, John, and Peter. I became a schoolteacher, and I also spent several years in full-time Christian ministry, teaching the Bible to college students. As time went on, it became increasingly clear to me that I needed to study Greek so that I could read the New Testament in its original language. I needed it for myself because I was weary and wary of so many teachings that just didn't seem right. And I needed it for those who listened to me teach because I wanted to give them the very words of Jesus.

I completed first-year Greek at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and began graduate studies in the classics department at Ohio State. After taking a few classes in classical Greek, I signed up for a class in the New Testament Gospels. I was so excited to read the Gospels. On the first day of class, the professor told us to purchase a copy of the Greek New Testament[1] and then read the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. I did the reading with great satisfaction: I immediately understood nearly all of it, having already become somewhat fluent in Greek.

What I didn't understand were all the notes at the bottom of the pages, which seemed to list different readings from what was in the text. For example, the very first verse of Mark says, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God," with a marginal note—in Greek, of course—indicating that some manuscripts read, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ." I was baffled. I had thought there was only one Greek New Testament. How could there be different readings of the same verse? I had studied Greek so as to read the text in its original language, but now I was discovering that the original reading could be in any one of several ancient manuscripts.

I discussed my dilemma with the professor, who then briefly explained to me that various editors had decided which readings went into the text and which readings were relegated to the margin. The art and science behind this decision-making process is what is called *textual criticism.*

After that day, I determined not only to read the New Testament in the original language but also to ascertain the original wording through studying

the actual Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. I continued graduate studies in Greek texts and textual criticism at Ohio State, as well as at Case Western Reserve University and John Carroll University. After this, I completed a doctoral degree at the University of South Africa, writing a thesis titled "Scribes as Readers: A New Look at New Testament Textual Criticism according to Reader Reception Theory."

During these years and the decade thereafter, I studied all the early manuscripts of the New Testament. I traveled to several places around the world to examine actual manuscripts, places such as the University of Michigan; the Smithsonian; Harvard University; the Ashmolean Museum and Magdalene College in Oxford, England; the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, France; and the Bodmer Library in Cologny-Geneva, Switzerland (Bibliotheca Bodmeriana).

I collected the best photographs of all the New Testament manuscripts dated prior to the fourth century. I examined all the manuscripts word for word and published a volume (with David Barrett) of the complete, up-to-date transcription of these manuscripts: *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts.* I also wrote several books in the area of textual criticism: *Early Manuscripts and Modern Translations of the New Testament, The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament,* and *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism*. I have also had the privilege of being a member of a group of translators who produced the New Living Translation (NLT); I served as a textual critic and as New Testament Coordinating Editor.

THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE GOSPELS

Having studied every word of the Gospels in the earliest manuscripts, as well as having studied and applied the principles of textual criticism, I can say with confidence that the original wording of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—can be reconstructed with a higher degree of certainty than any other book in antiquity because we have so many ancient source manuscripts and because so many competent scholars have given themselves to this task. For example, scholars know that John did not write the story of the woman caught in adultery (traditionally placed at John 7:53–8:11) because it does not appear in any of the earliest manuscripts. And we know that the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) ends with "deliver us from evil" because it finishes that way in the earliest manuscripts and because there are at least five different appended endings, including the well-known verbiage: "for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, amen." And the list goes on.

It might be tempting to think that Christians are wrong about much of

what Jesus actually said because there are so many differences among the manuscripts. But this simply isn't true. Many scholars know quite accurately nearly everything Jesus said, as recorded in the Gospels.

Where there are significant differences among Jesus' words within the reliable manuscripts, most responsible English translators will note these. This is the case in such versions as the New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, English Standard Version, and New Living Translation, to name a few. As I worked on the NLT New Testament, I kept very close watch on what significant textual variants should be listed in the margin. These notes often inform readers about certain variant readings that have not been accepted into the text of their translation—as, for example, the ending to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:13, noted previously. In other words, translators give readers the courtesy of telling them about certain words that no longer appear in their translation but still do appear in older translations, such as the King James Version. The translators know full well that these readings are not original.

More importantly, there are notes in the margin of most translations, or "textual notes," that indicate variant readings (different wordings) that have equal or nearly equal evidence among the manuscripts. For example, in John 1:34, some very early manuscripts read, "he is the Son of God," whereas other early manuscripts read, "he is the Chosen One of God"—the reading selected for the NLT, in fact. But relative to the volume of material in the Gospels, there are actually very few textual variants that fall into this category. According to current scholarship, there would be some substantial debate on wording in the following verses (see NLT text and marginal notes): Matthew 3:16; 6:33*; 12:47; 13:35*; 16:2-3*; 16:21; 18:15*; 19:9*; 21:44*; 23:38*; 27:16; 27:49.

Mark 1:1; 1:41; 3:14; 6:3; 6:14; 7:4; 10:7*; 14:68; various endings after 16:8*.

Luke 3:22; 4:44; 10:1; 14:5*; 18:11*; 22:19b-20*; 22:43-44*.

John 1:34; 3:13*; 5:44*; 8:57; 9:38-39; 10:8*; 10:29*; 11:25*; 14:7*; 14:17*; 21:18*.

This totals about forty verses in the Gospels—out of about 3,778 (give or take those few passages whose authenticity are in question), which is about one hundredth of a percent. And more often than not, the textual difference in the verse has to do with only one or two words. Of the verses recording Jesus' speech, only twenty-one (marked above with asterisks) are in some question; and again, most of these pertain to only one- or two-word differences per verse. As in most fields of study, those on either extreme of textual criticism can find much to dispute. But there is very little that Jesus said, as recorded in the canonical Gospel writings, that is debated among centrist, modern textual critics.

The bottom line is that we have an accurate record in the Gospels of all Jesus' words. Responsible translators do their best to put those words in the text of their translations and then footnote any alternative readings in the margins. Either way, whether in the text or the margin, we have the words of Jesus.

Thus far, I have addressed only the issue of textual criticism of the wording in actual manuscripts. There is also what is called *source criticism,* which has encouraged a kind of distrust of the authenticity of the four Gospels. Source critics have set out to determine what Jesus actually said, as distinct from what the four Gospel writers purportedly put in his mouth as they wrote.

But the entire exercise of source criticism is largely theoretical. Because no one knows what Jesus said prior to what is stated in the Gospel writings, what various source critics, such as those in the Jesus Seminar, have done amounts to setting themselves as judges over what statements came from Jesus authentically and what statements were creations of the Gospel writers. Unless there are other documents with Jesus' words that predate or were concurrent with the Gospels, no scholar *can* establish criteria for judgment.

For example, some source critics have tried to date the four canonical Gospels and some noncanonical Gospels—the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary*—all to the second century—thereby gaining two other documents whereby they can pass judgment on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, it is almost universally recognized that the four Gospels were penned in the first century and that all others came in the second century or thereafter (see chapter three). Thus, the authenticity of Jesus' statements in the noncanonical Gospels should be judged by what we see in the canonical Gospels, not vice versa.

My background is not conservative. Even in my biblical studies, I was in an educational context that more than leaned toward a liberal interpretation of the texts. Yet through my studies I have come to believe without question that the four Gospels are authentic, God-inspired, trustworthy records of the life, words, and ministry of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Of the many other Gospels which appear in this volume (see chapter six), I can say that some do seem genuine; namely, the *Egerton Gospel,* the *Gospel of the Nazareans,* the *Gospel of Peter,* and two Gospels of unknown origin (known to Bible scholars as P. Oxyrhynchus 840 and P. Oxyrhynchus 1224). I can also say that some of the words of Jesus recorded in still other Gospels also appear to be authentic—as in the *Gospel of Thomas,* which contains genuine Jesus sayings (as affirmed by the four Gospels) and other statements that have the ring of truth about them. Concerning statements in other Gospels, scholars are divided on which are genuine and which are fabrications. But all who care to take a respectful, responsible look are invited to do so here. On some

of the finer points, we must all decide by careful study and—may we not forget—by prayer.

One final note on the writing of this manuscript: My colleague, Jason Driesbach, has contributed equally to this book in his hours of research and fine writing. Wherever we have used the first person voice, however, we have done so simply to reflect a discovery or conclusion I came to as a result of my personal research.

Philip Comfort

Getting At the Facts: You Decide

Throughout the ages, the identity of Jesus of Nazareth has been scrutinized. Was he a real historical figure, or just the creation of some deluded disciples? Was he just a prophet, or the Son of God? Was he really a miracle worker who raised the dead, walked on water, and rose again after being crucified?

The four Gospels in the Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—have been the main source of our knowledge about Jesus for hundreds of years. Other writings about Jesus were generally considered suspect. But recently, more and more readers, not just scholars, have been delving into other written Gospels about Jesus in an effort to get a different view of him. Most of these other Gospels are known as "Gnostic" Gospels, because they depict Jesus as presenting various secrets to select disciples about knowing deeper spiritual truths (gnostic is Greek for "knowledge"). And, for reasons we will see, these Gnostic Gospels were not accepted into the canon of Scripture—the list of books accepted for inclusion in the Bible.

What was once merely a point of debate among Bible scholars and historians has now come to the forefront in the regular media. When you see different people being interviewed on various talk shows and hear the discussions about some ancient Gospel manuscripts behind *The Da Vinci Code* or *The Jesus Family Tomb,* you will notice that people are now talking about more Gospels than the standard four.

The Da Vinci Code claims that "more than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, yet only four were accepted for inclusion" (p. 231)—which sounds like eighty books were submitted to a panel of critics, who decided that seventy-six of them should be rejected and four accepted! This is a gross exaggeration and a misrepresentation of historical facts. First, there were no more than fifty Gospels; in addition, the number is actually closer to thirty because the other twenty are known only by references in other writings. In other words, there are extant portions of about thirty Gospels. And it should

be noted that only a minority of these Gospels were widespread. Many were not known to Christians in other locales.

Some scholars believe that certain church authorities kept these other Gospels from people, first by labeling them Gnostic Gospels (i.e., Gospels tainted by teachings that differ from orthodoxy), then by banning these Gospels from being read in church gatherings. These same scholars, of whom Elaine Pagels and Helmut Koester are primary advocates, tell us that these other Gospels simply present a different, viable view of Jesus and his teachings. They are glad that recent discoveries of the lost Gospels or apocryphal Gospels (*apocryphal* meaning "hidden") have now brought to light documents that need to be esteemed side by side with the four Gospels.

Without going into too much detail here, it should be said that there was no one ecclesiastical person in the second or the third century who had the power to control what Christians read. Pagels and others like to point to Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (ca. 180), whom they say single-handedly censored all the Gospels other than the four. But, given the fact that apostles John and Paul were not successful in routing out Gnosticism, the idea that Irenaeus finished the job is unlikely at best. Paul attacked a certain early form of Gnosticism in his Epistle to the Colossians, and John attacked another form of it in his letters. Yet Gnosticism continued in various sectors of the church for centuries to come. The point is that churches were local entities exercising autonomy. At most, they answered to a regional bishop. Full-blown, universal church authority, as one sees in the Roman church today, did not exist until the late fourth century, at the earliest.

Contrary to the view of Pagels and others, the Gnostic or apocryphal Gospels were generally rejected by many Christians, not just a powerful figure such as Irenaeus, over a period of from one hundred to two hundred years because they found these Gospels not to be inspired by God, non-authoritative as to authorship, and questionable as to content (contradictory to the earliest apostolic literature). And so Christians stopped reading them. It was as simple as that. The acceptance and rejection happened through a process of what you could call general Christian consumption and discernment.

But we live in an age of pluralism, where giving all religions equal status as pathways to God is thought to be as fair and decent as giving all races equal status as human beings. The same is now happening with the Gospels, in that various scholars and popular writers are trying to promote the notion that all the Gospels provide equally valid presentations of Jesus Christ and so should be treated equally. On one hand, this kind of approach can inspire us beyond the confines of our narrow biases. On the other hand, that particular view could become a bias in itself, making equal every claimant to the term

Gospel and thus draining each true Gospel of its clarity and power. However, it is our belief that the power of the true Gospel prevails, so that readers with discernment would arrive at the same judgments as did our early brothers and sisters: The four Gospels have the flavor of life and truth, whereas the others simply do not.

What we've said above does not preclude Christians from another idea, which nevertheless might be radical to some. That is, the idea of accepting another Gospel—a fifth one, let's say—if one would present itself as being an eyewitness account of Jesus Christ. There are a few fragmentary Gospels which in our opinion appear to be true accounts of Jesus' teaching and actions. We are thinking of the *Egerton Gospel*, P. Oxyrhynchus 840, and P. Oxyrhynchus 1224, as well as the *Gospel of the Ebionites* and the *Gospel of Peter* (each of these is presented in chapter 6). The obstacle to accepting these writings on equal par with the canonical Gospels is that there is not enough extant text to make a complete judgment. The possibility of another Gospel is not blindly ruled out but carefully considered and, if necessary, just as carefully rejected.

What, then, is the difference between the four canonical Gospels and their fellows? In this book you will discover that the following five differences exist, to the general agreement of biblical scholars. The four Gospels (1) were written on the basis of eyewitness authority; (2) were written in the first century; (3) have substantial second-century manuscript support; (4) were written as memoirs of the apostles in the form of narratives; and (5) ring true and accord with what the apostles taught about Jesus.

On the other hand, the noncanonical Gospels were not eyewitnesses' accounts; in fact, most were *pseudepigrapha* ("falsely inscribed"), pseudonymous or anonymous writings. These Gospels were written in the second century or thereafter; they usually have no manuscript support earlier than the third century or no Greek manuscript support at all. They were written in the form of dialogues or sayings, thereby revealing the authors' lack of credibility as eyewitnesses; and they lacked that ring of truth, failing to accord with what the apostles taught about Jesus. Many of these kinds of Gospels are gnostic in character, as we will explain later in this book.

In recent years the public has been introduced to the *Gospel of Judas*, accompanied by the hype that it provides a brand new look at Jesus and his betrayer, Judas, who now becomes hero rather than villain. This Gospel is a perfect example of those writings the church rejected in that it is not an eyewitness account. It was written in the second century, the earliest manuscript is a Coptic translation of the early fourth century, it is mainly a dialogue between Jesus and Judas, and it does not accord with the truths about Jesus originally presented elsewhere by the apostles. The following pages will

make it very clear that this Gospel—and many others—was rejected by early Christians because its content is false and its presentation is gnostic.

The fact is that the four Gospels were written in the first century, and all other subsequent Gospels were not accepted into the canon because they did not meet the standards of what constitutes "Scripture" for Christians. Some of the most renowned noncanonical Gospels are the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Mary*. Although these Gospels have the name of famous people, there is no serious scholar who actually thinks Mary or the apostles Thomas, Judas, or Philip wrote these Gospels. That is why these Gospels are called pseudepigraphic—that is, having authors' names erroneously ascribed to them. Furthermore, there is not one serious textual scholar who thinks that any of these noncanonical Gospels was written during the first century—which is known as the apostolic age, the time during which the apostles of Jesus were alive.

However, in order to narrow the gap between the time the four Gospels were written and some of the Gnostic Gospels were written (and so further justify claims to those Gospels' equality), there are those who stretch forward the time of the writing of the four Gospels to late first or early second century and then stretch backward the time of the writing of the Gnostic Gospels to early second century. This is the fallacious view, for example, of Michael Baigent in his book *The Jesus Papers,* wherein he tells readers that the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala* "was dated to early in the second century A.D. So, like the *Gospel of Thomas*, it has as much claim to validity as the Gospels in the New Testament."[1] This dating is erroneous, as we will argue in coming pages.

We wrote this book out of our convictions as committed scholars and with these purposes: (1) to explain why the four Gospels were the only writings accepted as authoritative by the early Christians; (2) to give readers some background on what manuscripts have been discovered in the last one hundred years, since these discoveries have brought to light very early copies of the Gospels, as well as some interesting copies of noncanonical Gospels; (3) to explain what Gnosticism is, since many of the noncanonical Gospels were written by gnostic writers; and (4) to present the other important noncanonical Gospels with a description of their content and a brief assessment of their worth.

However, the ultimate critic is you, the reader. *You* need to read the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and then compare the noncanonical Gospels to them. Which ones have the ring of truth? It is not enough for you to just hear from various broadcasts, books, and magazines a few tantalizing quotes from these other Gospels—and then to consent to the view of some who want you to believe that the other Gospels provide

just as valid a testimony to life and deeds of Jesus Christ as do the canonical four Gospels. Our major objective will have been achieved if this book—by providing all the evidence—will assist you in your discernment of this important matter.

In this volume we have provided an English translation of all the books that can be called Gospels, where there are extant manuscripts. Several Gospels are lost, with no manuscript evidence whatsoever, although we have been able to provide excerpts of some of these lost Gospels through the citations of various church fathers. In each case where there are no extant excerpts, we provide a description of the Gospel. We have also given descriptions (but not translations) of the less-known Infancy Gospels and the Passion and Resurrection Gospels.

This volume contains my new translations of three unknown Gospels (P. Oxyrhynchus 406, 840, and 1224), the P. Köln 608 portion of the *Egerton Gospel*, as well as a rendering of two manuscripts of the *Gospel of Mary* (P. Oxyrhynchus 3525 and 4009).

A note on the translations: In all translations, we have used ellipses to indicate gaps in the manuscripts, and we have occasionally added words in brackets to make the English more intelligible.

There is a translation of all excerpts extant in the writings of the church fathers, as well as of extant manuscripts of the following Gospels:

Gospel of Matthew
Gospel of Mark
Gospel of Luke
Gospel of John
Egerton Gospel
Gospel of the Nazareans
Gospel of Peter
Unknown Gospel (P. Oxyrhynchus 840)
Unknown Gospel (P. Oxyrhynchus 1224)
Gospel of the Ebionites
Gospel of the Egyptians
Gospel According to the Hebrews
Gospel of Judas
Gospel of Mary
Gospel of Philip
Gospel of Thomas
Gospel of Truth

PART I

Getting At *the* Facts

What Is a Gospel?

When it comes to writings about Jesus, some professors of religion have promoted the idea that some of the noncanonical writings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary*, are just as valid as the four Gospels that were included in the canon. Thus, the purposes of this chapter are to examine just what a Gospel is, to explain why each of the four Gospels can legitimately be deemed a Gospel, and to see how the four Gospels were accepted into the New Testament canon.

WHAT IS A GOSPEL?

Since this book is about the many Gospels of Jesus, it is important for us to define just what a Gospel is. First of all, we need to understand that Gospels were considered to be "published" books. As recorded by Eusebius, Irenaeus tells us that Mark and Luke "published their Gospels." Irenaeus used the Greek term *ekdosis,* the standard term for the public dissemination of any writing. Similarly, Irenaeus wrote, "John, the disciple of the Lord, he who had leaned on his breast, also published (*exedōke*) the Gospel, while living at Ephesus in Asia."[1] This term was used for the official publication of a book, the master copy (*archetype*) from which other copies would be made. For Mark, Luke, or John to "publish" their Gospels meant that they each made an official publication of their book, a master copy from which further copies would be made for distribution.[2]

Interestingly, the term *gospel* (Greek *euaggelion*) was not used as a descriptor of these written accounts until the middle of the second century.[3] Before these books were called Gospels, they were called narratives and memoirs. A narrative tells a story; a memoir is a narrative composed from personal experience. A memoir could be autobiographical or biographical. The four Gospels are biographical memoirs.

Literary Genre

When Luke mentioned the written accounts about Jesus' life that were current in the first century, he called them narratives.[4] Papias of Hierapolis described the Gospel of Mark as containing "memoirs" (Greek *apomnemoneumata*) drawn from Peter's sayings.[5,6] Justin Martyr, a Christian philosopher by profession, also used the word *memoirs* to describe the Gospels. Significantly, *memoirs* were a recognized literary form. Such writings contained the sayings or actions of specific individuals and were set in narrative framework that was transmitted by memory. Because of the culture's highly developed memory currency, this means that they were reliable.

The description of the Gospels as memoirs would place them in the same literary category as Xenophon's *memorabilia*[7] of Plato's life. Memoirs are not necessarily full-fledged biographies, as modern readers might think. Luke comes closest to presenting the full life story of Jesus Christ, from birth to death; but even so, Luke was ultimately more concerned with presenting what Jesus did and said during his public ministry than in presenting a biography. In fact, when commenting on his own Gospel, Luke told Theophilus, "In my former book . . . I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven."[8]

The fourth Gospel concludes with the same emphasis: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."[9]

Even though the four Gospels are not full-fledged biographies, first-century readers would have been familiar with biographies of great men and likely would have recognized that the four Gospels were in a limited way somewhat like other biographies of their day, such as Xenophon's *Memorabilia* or Plato's *Dialogues*. Other biographies appeared in the Greco-Roman world that were more popular in nature, such as the *Life of Aesop* and the *Life of Homer*. The four Gospels could be included in this category of biography on the basis of structure and style.[10]

The Gospels, as with the popular biographies of the day, have a fundamentally chronological framework that follows the subject's life and is amplified by anecdotes, maxims, speeches, and documents. Most of these biographies were didactic in that they presented the subject as a paradigm of virtue. For example, Plutarch's *Lives,* written at the end of the first century and very popular throughout the Greco-Roman world, is like the Gospels in that the general scheme was to tell of the birth, youth, character, achievements, and circumstances of death of each subject, interspersed with frequent ethical reflections and anecdotes.

So the primary importance of the Gospels is that they are written records of Jesus' speech and actions. Of course, each Gospel is not just a chronological display of what Jesus said and did, as if it were some kind of diary. Each Gospel is a story with a crafted narrative produced to be a work of literature. Gamble elaborates: "The Gospels were written in a literary context with literary skills and a literary view to readership. . . . Each of these authors [Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John] was self-consciously engaged in literary composition and therefore sensible not only of his own compositional techniques and theological aims, but also of the prospects for valuation, circulation, and use of his work."[11]

Literary Style

Each of the four Gospels, as we refer to the canonical Gospels, demonstrates its writer's use of different literary techniques in his individual portrayal of Jesus Christ. Matthew pointed to prophetic fulfillment to move his narrative along; Mark used fast-paced, dramatic action; Luke highlighted historical details to frame the narrative; and John specialized in eyewitness accounts and monologues. What made these Gospels different from any other memoirs or biographies was that they were about Jesus Christ, who was stupendously different from all other men because of his claim to be the Son of God come to earth from heaven. And Jesus' message was radically different from that of other men. For example, his Beatitudes, though similar in form to the Old Testament beatitudes found in Psalms and Proverbs, promise eschatological (ultimate, not temporal) benefits to those who are meek, pure, and poor. Furthermore, the story of Jesus' life is unique: He came from heaven to be born of a virgin; he proclaimed salvation and eternal life for all who believe in him as the Messiah and Son of God; he was crucified as a criminal; he was raised from the dead and appeared to his disciples; and then he ascended to heaven.

The Gospel writers were inspired by witnessing these events, and they were inspired by God himself when they wrote about them. The apostles had not forgotten or misremembered these events when they penned them. Jesus himself guarded against this; he specifically told his disciples that he would send them the Spirit to help them remember everything he had told them.[12] This Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, guided the disciples when they composed their narratives and memoirs. And so the Gospels—that is, those accepted into the canon of Scripture—are inspired by God.

It is no wonder that the early Christians accepted the writings of the four Gospels and generally dismissed the other Gospels. None of these other Gospels were written by other eyewitnesses, nor were they written in the first century. If a fifth Gospel had been written by an apostle or eyewitness,

the early Christians would have been reading it and treasuring it as a sacred text. But there is no such fifth Gospel, or sixth, or seventh, as we shall see in the following chapters.

One of the striking features of nearly all the noncanonical Gospels is that they are not narratives. Rather, they largely consist of so-called sayings of Jesus. The *Gospel of Thomas,* for example, is a composition of 114 sayings, without any narrative. There is no story line because the writers of these Gospels were not there when Jesus spoke and worked his miracles. They were not eyewitnesses, so their writings are not memoirs.

So then, the Gospels that have been accepted as Scripture are—and were from early on—published biographical memoirs of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, as written by his inspired apostles, those who had witnessed his life and ministry.

THE FOUR GOSPELS: EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

The four Gospels are the documents that record Jesus' words and deeds, written by eyewitnesses. Since Jesus himself did not leave any written records that we know of, we must rely on the accounts of those who were his companions for the true accounts of his life and words. By way of analogy, we could consider the writings of Plato and Xenophon about Socrates. As far as we know, Socrates wrote nothing. What we know about Socrates comes from two of his disciples, Plato and Xenophon. Likewise, what we know about Jesus comes from a few of his disciples.

What kept these disciples—whether of Plato or of Jesus—from composing fabrications? The answer is straightforward: the living presence of other disciples who could challenge fabricators on anything they said. One among "the Twelve," Jesus' hand-picked disciples, could have testified against any falsification. Even Matthias, who replaced the traitor Judas Iscariot, had been present for Jesus' earthly ministry.[13] There was also a group of seventy-two other disciples, and even more witnesses than these.[14] According to 1 Corinthians 15:6, Jesus had at least five hundred followers by the time he finished his ministry, all of whom witnessed the risen Christ. Most of these were still alive at the time of Paul's writing. Since 1 Corinthians is usually dated around A.D. 56–57, Paul made this statement just a few years prior to the time the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—were composed. Any of the original witnesses could have exposed false writings concerning Jesus.[†] Of these five hundred disciples, 120 remained in Jerusalem to begin the church.[15] After the church began, the early believers relied on

[†]The synoptics were those that took a distinctly parallel view or "story line," whereas the Gospel of John diverged from the others in its perspective as well as its plot.

the apostles' words to teach them about Jesus' life and ministry.[16] This oral transmission of Jesus' life and teachings, together with the Old Testament, provided the spiritual sustenance for the early Christians.

During the days of the early church, various disciples and/or other Christians put together collections of Jesus' deeds and his sayings, or *logia.*[17] Scholars have called this collection "Q," from the German word *Quelle,* meaning "source," because it is thought that the synoptic Gospel writers, especially Matthew and Luke, used it as their source in writing the Gospels.

Papias of Hierapolis (A.D. 60–130) was a scholarly historian who collected oral and written traditions about Jesus. He knew Polycarp, a first-century bishop of Smyrna, and had heard the apostle John preach. In his writing known as *Explanation of the Sayings of the Lord,* Papias said that Matthew had collected the logia of Jesus in the Aramaic or Hebrew languages prior to composing his Gospel.[18] As one of the apostles who accompanied Jesus for three years, Matthew was an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry. As a customs collector, Matthew would have regularly used shorthand to keep track of people's taxes. He could have easily employed this practice in taking notes on Jesus' sermons and then later transferred the shorthand to a fuller, written form. This would not have been unusual in those days. Thus, Matthew's Gospel in limited form may have existed in writing—perhaps originally in Aramaic, a language Jesus spoke—as early as the A.D. 30s.

Later, Matthew composed an entire Gospel narrative built around Jesus' sayings. The importance of this is that, unlike the Gnostic Gospels, most of Matthew's Gospel is based on on-the-spot, eyewitness records. In essence, it was composed concurrently with the history being observed—much like a traveling journalist would do. Papias also described the Gospel of Mark as containing reminiscences or memoirs drawn from Peter's sayings about Jesus' life and ministry.[19] Peter remembered Jesus' words and passed them on to Mark, who then wrote them down as he heard them (see discussion on Mark in chapter 5).

The inspiration for writing the Gospels didn't begin when the authors set pen to papyrus; the inspiration began when the disciples Matthew, Peter (for whom Mark wrote), and John were enlightened by their encounters with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The apostles' experiences with him altered their lives forever, imprinting on their souls' unforgettable images of the revealed God-man, Jesus Christ.

This is what John was speaking of in the prologue to his Gospel when he declared, "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."[20] The "we" refers to those eyewitnesses of Jesus' glory—the apostles, or disciples, who lived with Jesus for more than three years. This reminiscence is expanded upon in John's prologue to his first Epistle, where

he says, "We have heard him, touched him, seen him, and looked upon him."[21] In both the Gospel and this Epistle, the verbs are in the perfect tense, denoting a past action with a present, abiding effect. Those past encounters with Jesus were never forgotten by John; they lived with him and stayed with him as an inspiration until the day—many years later—he wrote of them in his Gospel.

Specific examples of eyewitness remembrances are scattered throughout the Gospels. Take, for example, how both Peter (as recorded by Mark) and John recalled Jesus' emotional condition on certain occasions. Peter recalled how Jesus looked at certain religious leaders with anger, being grieved at their hard-heartedness.[22] Peter also recalled how Jesus sighed deeply in his spirit when the religious leaders asked him for a miraculous sign.[23] John vividly remembered Jesus' emotional condition before raising Lazarus from the dead. John said he groaned in his spirit, he wept, and he was deeply agitated.[24] John noted this same deep spiritual agitation when Jesus proclaimed his coming death and when he told his disciples that one of them would betray him.[25] These descriptions come from those who were with Jesus.

The Gospels of Mark and John also have some other striking examples of eyewitness writing. In Mark's Gospel we are given record of how Peter remembered the actual Aramaic words Jesus used at certain occasions. (Mark did not translate them into Greek.) When Jesus raised a little girl from death, he said, *Talitha, koum*—"Little girl, rise."[26] When Jesus healed a mute person, he sighed and said, *Ephphatha*—"Be opened."[27] Peter was with Jesus when these miracles happened. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was praying to *Abba,* which means "Father."[28] And on the cross Jesus cried out *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*—"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"[29] Mark's Gospel is also full of detailed healing accounts.[30] John's Gospel also includes some colorful details only an eyewitness could provide. John recalled the exact day and hour he first followed Jesus.[31] At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, he remembered that there were six stone water jars, each of which could hold twenty to thirty gallons.[32] He spoke of a particular pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem that had five porches[33]—a statement doubted by many scholars until it was recently affirmed by archaeology. John remembered that Jesus was cooking fish on a charcoal fire when seven of the disciples came to shore, hauling behind them the miraculous catch of fish.[34] John never forgot how many fish were in that net: 153. Such details are the telltale signs of eyewitness writing.

The written Gospels became the fixed form of what had been passed down through the teachings of the disciples for several decades. The early Christians first *heard* about Jesus' words and deeds; in due course, they could *read* about them, as well. Luke told his readers that he wrote his

Gospel narrative to affirm what Theophilus (evidently a new Christian) had already been taught. The Greek expression in Luke 1:4 is very revealing. In an expanded rendering, it could be translated "that you might know the certainty of the words you have been taught by word of mouth" (NIV). Theophilus, typical of most Christians in that era, had received the sayings, or logia, of Jesus by oral recitation. But Luke thought Theophilus would benefit from a written affirmation of what he had been taught orally. It is important to note that Luke didn't say his written account would redact or change the oral account in any way; rather, the written message would affirm or substantiate the oral ("that you might know the certainty/veracity of the things you have been taught"). As such, the written Gospel became an accurate extension and continuation of the oral teaching. Furthermore, Luke's Gospel was based on the testimony of those people who had been "eyewitnesses and servants of the word"[35]—that is, the message of Jesus. They had heard Jesus' teachings, seen his miraculous deeds, and then faithfully passed them on to others.

Before the apostles, who were eyewitnesses of Jesus, made their exodus from this life to the next, they wanted to leave the church a written testimony of Jesus' words and life. Two of the four Gospel writers, Matthew and John, were apostles. John, "the disciple Jesus loved," claims eyewitness authenticity for his Gospel.[36] Matthew makes no such claim for himself, but the testimony of early church history affirms it repeatedly. Mark wrote for the apostle Peter just a short time before Peter was martyred. Luke was not an eyewitness, but he based his Gospel on eyewitness accounts.

So three of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and John—were written by those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus. And Luke wrote his Gospel based on the testimony of those who were eyewitnesses.[37] All four of these Gospels affirmed what the apostles of Jesus had been teaching about Jesus for several decades. The early Christians trusted these writings because of this. Perhaps they had learned this principle from Jesus, who emphasized again and again that the disciples would testify of what they saw and heard.[38] Significantly, the person who would replace Judas as the twelfth apostle had to be someone who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry and had witnessed his resurrection.

The early Christians did not trust the teachings or writings of those who had not been eyewitnesses of Jesus as providing apostolic truth. This is not to say that they didn't appreciate the teachings and writings of others who were Christians but had not seen Jesus—they did. However, they drew the line when it came to eyewitness, apostolic authority behind a teaching or writing. And this, quite simply, is why the early Christians did not accept any other writings—no matter how good—about Jesus' life. Only four written Gospels met the requirement of apostolic authority.

COLLECTIONS OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

Because the Gospels were individual publications from their inception, it took a while for a collection of these four books to be made. During the first and early second centuries, each Gospel primarily had its own independent life. But by the middle of the second century, it appears that churches or individuals began to make codex collections of the Gospels. Various church fathers, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, were speaking of a fourfold Gospel collection in the second century. And various Christians started putting together the four Gospels into one book. This would have been physically impossible with the form of a book known as a scroll, but not so for another form of a book called a codex, which came into use at the end of the first century.

The Codex

A papyrus codex was constructed by folding one or more sheets of papyrus in the middle and sewing them together at the spine. This construction was most advantageous for many reasons. First, it enabled the scribe to write on both sides (most scrolls had writing on one side only), and it facilitated access to particular passages (as opposed to a scroll, which had to be unrolled). A codex also enabled Christians to bind together all four Gospels (or any combination thereof) or all of Paul's Epistles, for instance, and made it easier for any individual or local church to make its own volume of the New Testament or any portion thereof. Christians adopted the codex, just as others did, because it provided the most economical and practical means of publishing the Christian message. To add to the practicality and economy, Christians generally used papyrus codices instead of the more-expensive vellum or parchment. Parchment codices were made for churches during the fourth century and thereafter because churches, no longer persecuted by the Roman government, could afford both to make and to keep such documents.

There were also spiritual reasons for Christians to adopt the codex. First, it gave them a book form that was distinct from that of the Jews, who used scrolls exclusively. Second, it enabled Christians to promote two early Christian volumes in particular: a collection of Paul's Epistles and the four Gospels. Scholars such as T. C. Skeat and Graham Stanton have provided convincing arguments that the Christians' adoption of the codex was motivated by a desire to establish the fourfold Gospel as the authoritative norm for the church.[39]

But during the first century, the separate Gospels were circulated as individual publications. This continued in the following centuries, as well. We can tell this by looking at manuscript evidence, wherein we see individual Gospels. For example, this can be seen in several manuscripts that preserve just the Gospel of John: (1) a second-century papyrus, P66, which was found

as a single bound codex of John's Gospel; (2) another second-century manuscript, P106, in which the extant pagination of this manuscript (gamma [number three] on the recto, or right side, and delta [number four] on the verso, or left side), indicates that this was probably a single codex of John's Gospel; (3) a third-century papyrus, P5 (John), in which the extant folio format makes it clear that this was a single Gospel codex; and (4) another third-century papyrus, P39, where the pagination (od [number 74]) on the recto of the extant sheet and the large sumptuous calligraphy indicate that this was a single-Gospel codex of John.[†]

Early Gospel collections are found in the following second- and third-century manuscripts:

1. P4+P64+P67 (three papyri of one codex), a second-century manuscript that contains Matthew and Luke and that perhaps originally had all four Gospels.[40]
2. P45 (Chester Beatty Papyrus I), an early third-century manuscript with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as Acts.
3. P75 (P. Bodmer XIV–XV), a late second-century codex that contains Luke and John and that may have originally had Matthew and Mark.
4. P53 (P. Michigan 6652), a third-century manuscript that preserves portions of Matthew and Acts. The two fragments were found together; they were part of a codex containing the four Gospels and the book of Acts or else just Matthew and Acts.
5. 0171, a third-century manuscript that contains portions of Matthew and Luke.

Gospel collections (exclusive of any other books) continue in the subsequent centuries, as is evidenced by codex W (the Freer Gospels—all four, ca. A.D. 400), codex N (fifth century), codex Q (fifth century), codex T (fifth century), 042 (sixth century), 043 (sixth century), 067 (sixth century), 070 (sixth century), 078 (sixth century), 087 (sixth century), and 083 (sixth to seventh centuries).

This documentation shows that the Gospels in the second century were being circulated both as individual books and as collected books. The same pattern happened in the third century. By the fourth century, it is likely that

[†]A note on the numbering system: A papyrus is numbered with a capital *p*. A number immediately preceded by "P" indicates a numbered New Testament papyrus manuscript. A number preceded by "P." (capital *p* with a period) indicates all other papyri.

most church codices contained all four Gospels. Such is the case for Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, and the Freer Gospels.

Significantly, not one codex manuscript has been discovered that contains Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John bound together with any other Gospel. Some manuscripts include the *Shepherd of Hermas* or the *Epistle of Clement,* as in Codex Sinaiticus. But not one codex has any of the other Gospels! This tells us that the four Gospels, and only the four Gospels, were held in high esteem by the early Christians. The collection of the four Gospels shows that these works were considered canonized Scripture early in the history of the church. Since the collections were made for use in church meetings, these were the writings that the Christians deemed worthy of apostolic status—that is, they were the writings that formulated the truths of the faith.

The Canon

The collection of various books by the Christian churches for use in worship was an inadvertent way of canonizing them. There is evidence that within thirty years of the apostle Paul's death (A.D. 60s), all the Pauline letters (excluding the Pastoral Epistles) were collected and used in the major churches. It is true that the authority of some of the smaller letters of Paul (as well as those of Peter and John) were being questioned in some quarters for perhaps another fifty years, but this was due to uncertainty about their authorship only in those particular locales. And this, in fact, demonstrates that acceptance was not being imposed by the actions of councils or powerful bishops but was rather happening spontaneously, through a natural response of those who had learned the facts about authorship. In those places where the churches were uncertain about the authorship or apostolic approval of certain books, acceptance was slower.

According to early church writers, the criteria of the selection of New Testament books for use in Christian worship revolved around their "apostolicity." In other words, like those books of the Old Testament, these books were collected and preserved by local churches in the continuing process of their worship and need for authoritative guidance for Christian living. The formation of the canon was a process, rather than an event, and it took several hundred years to reach finality in all parts of the Roman Empire. Local canons were the basis for comparison, and out of them eventually emerged the general canon that exists in Christendom today.

We know that the Gospels and the major epistles of Paul were "canonized" in the minds of many Christians as early as A.D. 90–100; that is, the four Gospels and Paul's Epistles were deemed to be Scripture worthy to be read in church. In fact, in Peter's second Epistle, he puts Paul's letters in the same category as "Scriptures."[41] We also know that the church fathers of the

second century had a high regard for what is now the canonical New Testament text. Indeed, a study of the writings of the first five outstanding church fathers (all writing before A.D. 150)—namely, Clement, Ignatius, Papias, Justin Martyr, and Polycarp—indicates that they used the New Testament writings with the same or nearly the same sacred regard that they attributed to the Old Testament writings. All were considered Scripture. During the second half of the second century, more apostolic fathers were affirming that the New Testament writings were Scripture. This is especially evident in the writings of Irenaeus, who affirmed a fourfold Gospel text.

The twenty-seven books now included in the New Testament canon were first given notice (as far as we know) in what is called the Muratorian Canon, a document dated A.D. 170. An eighth-century copy of this document was discovered and published in 1740 by the librarian L. A. Muratori. The text names twenty-two books of the New Testament, including the four Gospels. The manuscript is mutilated at both ends, but the remaining text makes it evident that Matthew and Mark were included in the now-missing part. The fragment begins with Luke and John (calling the latter the fourth Gospel) and cites Acts, thirteen Pauline letters, Jude, 1 John, 2 John, and Revelation as books that could be read in the church.

As time went on, numerous other Christians commented directly or showed implicitly what books they accepted as authoritative. Irenaeus was privileged to have begun his Christian training under Polycarp, who was a disciple of apostles. Then, as a presbyter in Lyons, Iranaeus had association with Bishop Pothinus, whose own background also included contact with first-generation Christians. Irenaeus quotes from almost all the New Testament on the basis of its authority and asserts that the apostles were endowed with power from on high. They were, he says, "fully informed concerning all things, and had a perfect knowledge . . . having indeed all in equal measure and each one singly the Gospel of God." Irenaeus reveals his trust in the four Gospels when he says, "The Word . . . gave us the Gospel in a fourfold shape, but held together by one Spirit."[42] In addition to the Gospels, he makes reference also to Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, all the letters of Paul except Philemon, and the book of Revelation.

In the third century, many Christian scholars—such as Hippolytus, Novatian, Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Dionysius—affirmed a fourfold, fixed Gospel text. These writers also affirmed the canonical status of most of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, even while recording doubts about such books as 2 Peter, Jude, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation.

In the beginning of the fourth century, Eusebius was the chief proponent of establishing the four Gospels and other recognized books as comprising

the New Testament canon. But it was in the middle of the fourth century that the development of the canon came to its culmination with the Festal Letter for Easter (A.D. 367). Here, Athanasius of Alexandria included information designed to eliminate once and for all the use of certain apocryphal books. This letter, with its admonition, "Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away" (an allusion to Revelation 22:18-19), provides the earliest extant document that specifies the twenty-seven books without qualification. At the close of the century, the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) decreed that "aside from the canonical Scriptures nothing is to be read in church under the name of Divine Scriptures." This decree also listed the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, as we have them today.

aeon
Within gnostic cosmology, an emanation or divinity proceeding from the transcendent Spirit of spirits; also, an indefinite time period of great length.

Aphroditopolis
See map (Appendix C).

apocrypha
A group of Old Testament books, hidden (*apocrypha* means "hidden") from public view. Many of these books were included in the Septuagint and Vulgate (and thus in Orthodox and Roman Catholic editions), but excluded from the Masoretic Text (and thus from Jewish and Protestant editions).

apostolic age
The time period when the apostles of Jesus spread his teachings and planted churches (A.D. 30–100).

apostolicity
The criterion for a manuscript's inclusion in the canon of Scripture concerned with whether or not a particular early-church document was considered to have been written by an apostle.

Aramaic
A Semitic language known since the tenth century B.C., first used as the speech of the Aramaeans and later used extensively in southwest Asia for commercial and governmental purposes. It was adopted by the Jews during their captivity in Babylon (sixth century B.C.) and used up until the time of Jesus.

autograph
The original manuscript of an ancient document; the copy penned by the author or scribe who first wrote the document.

Bodmer
Martin Bodmer, a Swiss bibliophile, purchased large collections of ancient writings from Egypt, including many significant biblical manuscripts. The Bodmer Institute is located in Cologne-Geneva, Switzerland.

canon
The collection of works understood to be authoritative ("the *canon* of Scripture"); a rule or guideline for a particular discipline ("the *canons* of *textual criticism*").

canon, closed
An exclusive list of authoritative works; a canon that is not open for additions or deletions.

Chenoboskeia; Chenoboskion
Village across the Nile from Nag Hammadi; both locations were discovery sites of the Nag Hammadi Codices. Manuscripts discovered here are also referred to as the Chenoboskion manuscripts. See map (Appendix C).

Chester Beatty
Chester Beatty, an Irish bibliophile, purchased large collections of ancient writings from Egypt, including many significant biblical manuscripts. The Chester Beatty Library is located in Dublin, Ireland.

church fathers
Prominent leaders in the early church, from the second to the fifth centuries A.D. (from Ignatius to Augustine).

codex (pl. codices*)*
A manuscript arranged in the form of a book, with separate sheets of *vellum* or *papyrus* bound in a stack at one edge.

collation
The process of comparing and listing the *variant readings* in a particular manuscript or set of manuscripts.

conflation
The scribal technique of resolving a discrepancy between two or more variant readings by including all of them.

Coptic
The final stage of the Egyptian language, which followed Demotic and was written in a specially adapted version of the Greek alphabet.

corpus
A collection of writings.

critical edition
An edition of an ancient text that is based on a *collation* of *variant readings* and that includes editorial decisions about which readings are most likely original.

Dishna
See map (Appendix C).

Dead Sea Scrolls
A collection of very early (100 B.C.—A.D. 100) Old Testament and other Jewish manuscripts found in the late 1940s and early 1950s near the Dead Sea.

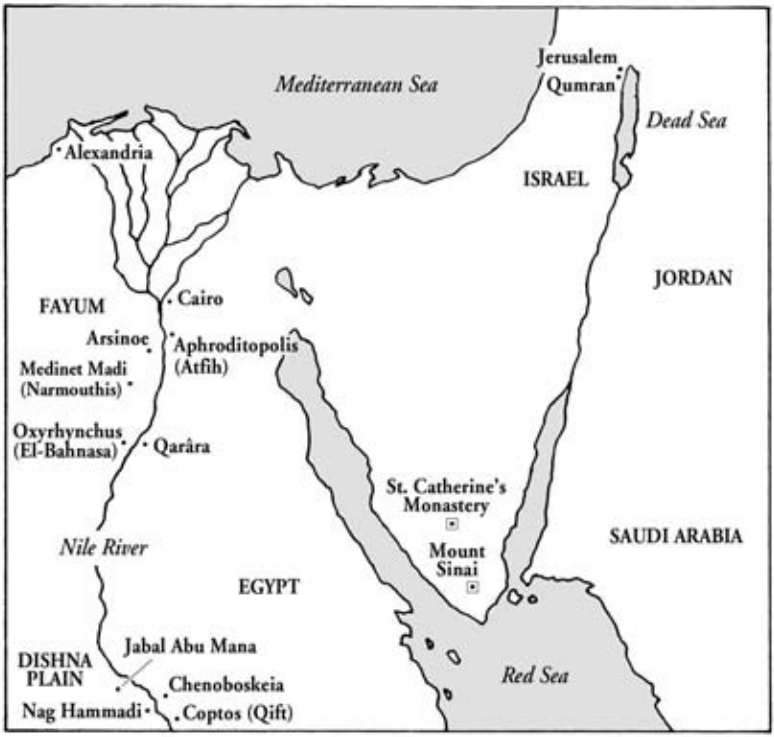
deuterocanonical books
These are the books of Judith, Tobit, Baruch, 1–2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sirach, and the Additions to Daniel and Esther, all of which were affirmed by the Roman Catholic church at the Council of Trent, but are not regarded as Scripture by Judaism or the Protestant church. (See also *apocrypha*.)

Dates and Locations of Significant Gospel Manuscripts

This appendix provides manuscript information for all those texts that have been included in this volume. On the chart below, each place of discovery is in Egypt, and the language of each manuscript is Greek (here, sometimes abbreviated *Gr.*) unless otherwise noted. In a few cases, as we have indicated on the chart, a text is known only through the citations of various church fathers.

MANUSCRIPT	DATE	PLACE DISCOVERED	HOUSING LOCATION
CANONICAL GOSPELS			
All four canonical Gospels discovered in one codex			
P45 (Beatty Papyrus I)	3rd c.	Aphroditopolis	Dublin, Chester Beatty Museum
Aleph (Codex Sinaiticus)	4th c.	St. Catherine's Monastery	London, British Museum
A (Codex Alexandrinus)	5th c.	Fayum	London, British Museum
B (Codex Vaticanus)	4th c.	Egypt	Rome, Vatican Library
W (the Freer Gospels)	ca. 400	Giza	Washington D.C., Freer Gallery
Matthew			
P1 (P. Oxyrhynchus 2)	early 3rd c.	Oxyrhynchus	University of Pennsylvania
P64+P67	late 2nd c.	Coptos	P64 (Gr. 18) in Oxford, Magdalene College; P67 (inv. no. 1) in Barcelona, Fundacion San Lucas Evangelista
P77 (P. Oxyrhynchus 2683)	2nd c.	Oxyrhynchus	Oxford, Ashmolean Museum
P104 (P. Oxyrhynchus 4404)	early 2nd c.	Oxyrhynchus	Oxford, Ashmolean Museum
Mark			
P45 (Beatty Papyrus I)	3rd c.	Aphroditopolis	Dublin, Chester Beatty Museum
Luke			
P4+P64+P67 (three papyri of one codex) (Gr. 1120)	late 2nd c.	Coptos	Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale
P75 (P. Bodmer XIV)	late 2nd c.	Dishna Plain	Geneva, Bodmer Institute
John			
P5 (P. Oxyrhynchus 208, 1781)	3rd c.	Oxyrhynchus	London, British Library
P22 (P. Oxyrhynchus 1228)	3rd c.	Oxyrhynchus	Glasgow, University Library
P52 (Gr. P. 457)	110–125	Fayum	Manchester, John Rylands Library
P66 (P. Bodmer II)	late 2nd c.	Dishna Plain	Geneva, Bodmer Institute
P75 (P. Bodmer XV)	ca. 200	Dishna Plain	Geneva, Bodmer Institute
P90 (P. Oxyrhynchus 3523)	late 2nd c.	Oxyrhynchus	Oxford, Ashmolean Museum
NONCANONICAL ORTHODOX GOSPELS			
Egerton Gospel			
P. Egerton 2	ca. 150	Fayum	London, British Museum (Egerton Col.)
P. Köln 608	ca. 150	Fayum	Cologne, Institut fur Alterumskunde
Gospel of the Nazareans			
No manuscript; known only through citations of church fathers			

APPENDIX C: *Discovery Sites Map*



Modern names in parentheses.

DISCOVERY SITES	MANUSCRIPTS
Aphroditopolis (Atfih):	P45, P46, P47
Arsinoe:	P12
Coptos (Qift):	P4, P64/67
Dishna Plain—Jabal Abu Mana:	P66, P75
Fayum:	P37, P38, P52?, P53
Medinet Madi (Narmouthis):	P92
Nag Hammadi/Chenoboskeia:	Nag Hammadi Codices
Oxyrhynchus (El-Bahnasa):	P1, P5, P9, P10, P13, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24, P27, P28, P29, P30, P32?, P35, P39, P48, P51, P52?, P69, P70, P71, P77, P78, P82?, P85, P90, P100–116
Qarâra:	P40
Qumran:	Dead Sea Scrolls
St. Catherine's Monastery:	Codex Sinaiticus

NOTES

Preface

1. Published by the United Bible Societies.

Introduction

1. Michael Baigent, *The Jesus Papers: Exposing the Greatest Cover-Up in History* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 241.

Chapter 1 What Is a Gospel?

1. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.2.
2. For details concerning the publication and distribution of the Gospels, see Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2005), 15–54.
3. See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 10.2, 100.1; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.21.
4. See Luke 1:1.
5. Greek *chreiai.*
6. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15.
7. Greek *apomnemoneumata.*
8. Acts 1:1-2, NIV.
9. John 20:30-31, NIV.
10. A comparative study by Burridge also indicates that the closest ancient genre to the Gospels is ancient biography—in terms of literary and semantic evidence. See Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
11. Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 101.
12. See John 14:26.
13. See Acts 1:21-22.
14. See Luke 10:1.
15. See Acts 1:15.
16. See Acts 2:42.
17. From *katechethes logon,* or "oral recitation."
18. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16.
19. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15.
20. John 1:14, NRSV.
21. See 1 John 1:1-2.
22. See Mark 3:5.
23. See Mark 8:12.
24. See John 11:33-38.
25. See John 12:27; 13:21.
26. Mark 5:41.
27. Mark 7:34.
28. Mark 14:36.
29. Mark 15:34.
30. See Mark 1–3; 5.
31. See John 1:39.
32. See John 2:6.

33. See John 5:2.
34. See John 21:9-11.
35. See Luke 1:1-3, NIV.
36. See John 1:14; 19:35; 21:24.
37. See Luke 1:1-4.
38. See Luke 24:48; 1 John 1:1-4.
39. See T. C. Skeat, "Irenaeus and the Four-Gospel Canon," *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992):194–199; Skeat, "The Earliest Gospel Codex?" *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997); and Graham Stanton, "The Fourfold Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 317–346.
40. T. C. Skeat, "The Oldest Manuscript of the Four Gospels?" *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997).
41. See 2 Peter 3:15-16.
42. Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.3.

Chapter 2 Exploring the Religious Context

1. Opinion is divided as to whether the Achamenid Dynasty of the Persians really did become Zoroastrian—none of their inscriptions mention Zoroaster, and many of their practices were at odds with his teaching. Further, while we grant here that Zoroaster preached monotheism, it remains difficult to prove this from the earliest writings. For more on these questions, see Edwin Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 419ff.
2. See Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 8:1-8; *2 Baruch* 85:3.
3. Dio Chrysostum, *Discourse* 32.9.
4. See Acts 17:18.
5. The classical authors Plutarch and Apuleius are examples of thinkers from this school.
6. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 364.
7. The Seleucids were the dynasty of one of Alexander's generals; they ruled from Persia to eastern Asia Minor and fought the Ptolemies (from another of Alexander's generals) early on to gain control of Judea.
8. 1 Maccabees 1:44-50, 62-63, RSV.
9. 1 Maccabees 2:15, 19-28, RSV.
10. See Philo of Alexandria, *Migration of Abraham* 89–90.
11. Some have identified the Qumran sect with the Essene sect mentioned in various passages of Josephus and Philo. While this falls short of being completely substantiated, the similarities are quite compelling. For further discussion of the relationship between the two groups, see T. S. Beall, *Josephus' Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Another sect of Judaism, called the Theraputae, is described by Philo (quoted by Eusebius in *Preparation for the Gospel* 8.11) as a celibate Jewish communal group dedicated to worship, contemplation, and asceticism, but none of their literature remains. They may have had some connection to the Essenes.

Chapter 3 What Is Gnosticism?

1. *Secret Book According to John* 18:2-5, as translated in Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 42.