

REVELATION



INSPIRATION



ANIMATION



COLLECTION

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TRANSLATION



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INTERPRETATION



APPLICATION



COMMUNICATION

THE WRITTEN WORD

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, September 13, 2009

Non-Canonical Books (New Testament)

Just as there were books associated with the Old Testament Scriptures that did not possess the same distinguishing stamp of divine authority as Scripture possesses; there were also similar books that have been associated with the New Testament.

I. THERE WERE BOOKS THAT WERE CONSIDERED USEFUL TO THE CHURCH--THOUGH NOT POSSESSING THE MARK OF SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY.

- A. The best known of this type is the collection of post-apostolic books (from 70-135 A.D.) named "The Apostolic Fathers". As Dr. F.F. Bruce noted, "Their works are not to be classed as 'New Testament Apocrypha'; they are simply what they profess to be, writings of Christian men, designed for the edification of their fellow-Christians."¹ Some of these books that were written by acknowledged leaders in the church who were immediate students of some of the original disciples of our Lord. The authors of others of these books are unknown. Their authenticity is not in dispute; and their value is that they "provide significant and often unparalleled glimpses of insight into the life of Christians and the Christian movement during a critical transitional stage in its history".²
- B. This collection contains ten books by various authors writing on various subjects to the church: a letter to the church in Corinth by Clement, and a second book that contains a sermon by him; a collection of letters by Ignatius, a letter from Polycarp to the Philippians, along with a separate book that tells the story of his martyrdom, the Didache (or The Teaching of the Twelve) which is an early church manual, a letter from Barnabas, The Shepherd of Hermas (a Christian allegory), the epistle of Dignetus, and a fragment of a work by Papias.

II. BUT THERE WERE SOME BOOKS THAT CLAIMED TO BE AUTHORITATIVE BUT TAUGHT Gnostic HERESIES.

- A. This classification is best referred to as a New Testament Apocrypha; which "properly so called are the various Gospels, Acts, Epistle, and Apocalypses produced during the second century and later under the names of apostles and other associates of our Lord. Most of these belong to the category of religious fiction. Some of our apocryphal Gospels were intended to satisfy the desire for information about the 'hidden years' of our Lord's life before his entry upon public ministry; these include several 'Infancy Gospels', relating the prodigies performed by Jesus as a child. The apocryphal Acts were largely intended to supply information about the later career of those apostles who disappear from the New Testament record at an early date. . . . Of the apocryphal Apocalypses the most interesting is the 'Apocalypse of Peter' . . . it has a literary interest in that its lurid descriptions of the torments of the damned coloured much mediaeval and even more recent pictures of hell, including in particular Dante's *Inferno*."³
- B. Some of the books that fall into this category were rediscovered in 1945 in a collection found near Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt. Fifty-two of these books have been collected and published as "The Nag Hammadi Library".

The great majority of them prove to be Gnostic in character--that is, they espouse a more developed form of the heresy that the apostles Paul and John warned about in many of the New Testament letters. One of the most famous of these--having received much attention in recent years--is the Gospel According to Thomas. It is a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus; but are introduced as His "secret sayings". Some of these sayings are taken out of the Gospels that we have in the Bible. Many of the sayings attributed to the Lord are in contradiction to the things He taught in the Gospels; and many of the statements are confusing and clearly gnostic in nature.

- C. Another famous book in this category is the recently rediscovered Gospel of Judas, recently republished by the National Geographic Society. This book may have been the one written about by the church father Irenaeus in his book *Against Heresies*. He wrote; "Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above . . . They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas" (*Against Heresies*, I.31.)

III. AND SOME BOOKS ARE FRAUDS OF RECENT ORIGIN.

- A. A third category of books are circulated and republished under the idea that they represent "lost books". In reality, the claim is not that they were lost, but that they were suppressed by the leadership of the early church in favor of books (i.e., the canonical books) that supported their claim to power.
- B. There are two frequently encountered books of this kind. One is "The Lost Books of The Bible: Being all the gospels, Epistle, and other pieces now extant attributed in the first four centuries to Jesus Christ, His apostles and their companions not included, by its compilers, in the authorized New Testament; and, recently discovered Syriac mss. of Pilate's letters to Tiberius, etc." It is sometimes published as "Apocryphal New Testament". At the very least, this is a bad publication of what has been collected in better and more complete form elsewhere. Another such book is "The Archeological Writings of the Sanhedrim and Talmuds of the Jews"; more recently published under the simple title, "The Archko Volume". This book was discredited late in the 1800's; but still sees a revival now and then.
- C. An excellent resource regarding these types of books is Edger J. Goodspeed's "Modern Apocrypha" (Boston: the Beacon Press, 1956); sometimes also published as "Famous 'Biblical' Hoaxes".

¹F.F. Bruce, *The Books and The Parchments* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1984); p. 260.

²J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, trans., Michael W. Holmes, ed. and rev., *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2nd. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 1.

³Bruce, p. 262.