

# Gospel Truth: Do the “Lost Gospels” Undermine Biblical Authority?

[Jeff Myers](#) April 3, 2017



By Dr. Jeff Myers, excerpted from [Understanding the Faith: A Survey of Christian Apologetics](#)

In 1945, fifty-two papyri were discovered at Nag Hammadi in Lower Egypt. Some of these texts had the word “gospel” in the title. Scholars have known about these and other second- through fourth-century documents for a long time, but in a culture that loves conspiracy theories and cover-ups, these so-called “Lost Gospels” make an irresistible story for investigative reports on television.

Why are these Lost Gospels excluded from the biblical canon? Generally speaking, there were three criteria used to decide which books were received as authoritative (that is, as Scripture):

1. Apostolicity: Was a book written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle? Mark was accepted because he was an associate of Peter, and Luke was accepted because of his relationship to Paul. Or to put it another way, if the book was not from the first century, it was not Scripture because it could not be historically connected to the apostles who were taught and commissioned by Jesus (who was crucified in AD 30–33).
2. Orthodoxy: Did this book conform to the teachings and theology of other books known by the apostles?
3. Pedigree: Was the book accepted early on in the life of the church and by the majority of churches across the region? It was important that a book wasn’t just accepted in one location but that lots of Christians in different cities and regions accepted it.

Based on these criteria, the Lost Gospels, while historically interesting, are inferior to the canonical writings contained in the New Testament. The New Testament writings all date to the first century, when the apostles—or those who could have interviewed them—would have been alive.

Here's something else of interest: there was a collection of texts already functioning as Scripture in the early church, long before the emperor Constantine could have decreed them as Scripture (as books such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* claim). New Testament scholars Andreas Kostenberger and Michael Kruger summarize as follows:

“The concept of canon not only existed before the middle of the second century, but ... a number of New Testament books were already received and being used as authoritative documents in the life of the church. Given the fact that such a trend is evident in a broad number of early texts—2 Peter, 1 Timothy, 1 Clement, the Didache, Ignatius, Polycarp, Barnabas, and Papias—we have good historical reasons to think that the concept of a New Testament canon was relatively well established and perhaps even a widespread reality by the turn of the century. Although the borders of the canon were not yet solidified by this time, there is no doubt that the early church understood that God had given a new set of authoritative covenant documents that testified to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and that those documents were the beginning of the New Testament canon..”

All of the extant “Lost” or “Missing” Gospels are from the second century or later; therefore, they are not our earliest and best sources. They fail the test of having been written by an apostle or produced through a direct interview with one.

Most important, the worldviews and theology of many of the Lost Gospels—such as the gospels of Thomas, Mary, Philip, and many others—are inconsistent with the teachings of earliest Christianity. Their theology is based on gnosticism, not orthodox Christianity. Gnosticism taught that the world was made by a lesser divine being and that the material world and body were intrinsically evil. Because Jesus's appearing in a body would have corrupted his ministry, gnostics believed that Jesus was merely a spirit who appeared to be human. Gnostics taught that our main problem is ignorance, not sin, and that it is possible to gain “special knowledge” leading to salvation for those clever enough to decode it. In short, these Lost Gospels teach a false gospel. The early church fathers therefore rejected them after careful study.

In spite of sensationalist claims in the media, these Lost Gospels were known in the early centuries after Christ's ministry and rejected for very good reasons.

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This is an excerpt from *Understanding the Faith: A Survey of Christian Apologetics* by Jeff Myers, [available in Summit's bookstore](#).

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