

On Canonical and Apocryphal Gospels

How do we know that the Gospels in the New Testament are the right/true/real ones, rather than the “lost gospels,” such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, and the *Gospel of Mary*?

I see two questions here. First, how do we know that the canonical Gospels are better sources than the extracanonical gospels for historical information about Jesus? Second, how do we know that the authors of the canonical Gospels were divinely inspired while the authors of the extracanonical gospels were not?

For the first question, it would be best to go on a document-by-document basis. However, some general points can be made about the extracanonical gospels vis-à-vis the canonical Gospels. The canonical Gospels can be dated to the first century. Temporal proximity (closeness in time) to Jesus would support the canonical Gospels. In contrast, the extracanonical “gospels” post-date the New Testament both (1) originally and (2) in the surviving (extant) manuscripts.

Dates for Some Better Known Extracanonical “Gospels”

- 📖 *Gospel of Judas*: originally ca. 130-170, though the only extant manuscript is from the early-4th c.
- 📖 *Gospel of Mary*: perhaps originally as early as 120-180; no later than the 3d c.; two extant 3d-c. fragments in Gk and 1 longer Coptic translation from the 5th c.
- 📖 *Gospel of Peter*: perhaps originally 2d c., though the only extant manuscript is from the 8th c.
- 📖 *Gospel of Philip*: perhaps originally early 3d c., though the only extant manuscript is from the mid-4th c.
- 📖 *Gospel of Thomas*: perhaps originally ca. 140, though the only extant manuscript dates from the early 3d c.
- 📖 *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*: 6th c.

In addition to temporal proximity, there are hundreds of times more early copies of the New Testament Gospels than of the extracanonical gospels. Further, the contents of the “lost gospels” are typically of no value as a source for historical information about Jesus.¹ Consider the following:

¹ For those who are genuinely curious about the sources for historical information about Jesus, see the magisterial analysis by John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (Doubleday, 1991), 41-166.

Description of Some Better Known Extracanonical “Gospels”

- 📖 *Gospel of Judas*: one extant manuscript; from the Gnostic Cainites, who turned biblical villains (Cain, Esau, the Sodomites, Judas) into the heroes; Jesus trusted Judas alone to make sure that Jesus could be freed from his bodily shell—totally Gnostic
- 📖 *Gospel of Mary*: no complete manuscript extant; there are 2 fragments (Gk) and a longer Coptic translation; not a life of Jesus, but about Mary Magdalene’s visions, Jesus’ secret teachings to her, and Peter’s objections against such things
- 📖 *Gospel of Peter*: has a narrative of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus, though with some weird parts (e.g., a giant talking cross exits Jesus’ tomb with him) and inaccuracies (e.g., Herod orders Jesus’ execution)²
- 📖 *Gospel of Philip*: one extant manuscript; not a narrative of the life of Jesus
- 📖 *Gospel of Thomas*: one extant manuscript; not a narrative of the life of Jesus
- 📖 *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*: though late, there are extant manuscripts—with great variations among them—in five languages; imaginative tales of Jesus as a child

The second question is this: how do we know that the authors of the canonical Gospels were divinely inspired while the authors of the extracanonical gospels were not? Perhaps another way of phrasing it is “why can’t the newly recovered ‘gospels’ be accepted as Scripture with the four canonical Gospels?”

The foremost Catholic biblical scholar of the twentieth century, Raymond Brown, provides the basis for an answer: “At the Council of Trent the guiding principle for acknowledging canonical Scripture was the long and universal use of books in the church for public reading.”³ Neither were the extracanonical “gospels” ever widely used in churches for public reading nor have those documents been read in churches for nearly two millennia.

For use as historical sources about Jesus, the extracanonical gospels are worthless. As inspired Scripture, the extracanonical gospels simply do not fit. The extracanonical gospels are valuable only as evidence for what was happening among early Christians and Gnostics.

² That Jesus was crucified under orders from Pontius Pilate is attested not only by all four Gospels but also by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus and the early second-century Roman historian Tacitus. Few facts in pre-modern history are so well supported.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *101 Questions and Answers on the Bible* (Paulist Press, 1990), 18.