

Nag Hammadi Gospels

by Dr. Norman Geisler

Some radical critics of the New Testament claim that the Gnostic gospels are equal to those in the New Testament, and that they do not support the resurrection of Christ. The Jesus Seminar places The Gospel of Thomas in their otherwise severely truncated Bible. Both of these conclusions are a serious challenge to the historic Christian Faith.

The Gnostic gospels were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, near Cairo in 1945 and translated into English in 1977. The Gospel of Thomas (140-170) has 114 secret sayings of Jesus.

Credibility of the Gnostic Gospels

The best way to evaluate the credibility of these gospels is by comparison to the New Testament Gospels, which the same critics have grave doubts about accepting. Against the canonical gospels, the Gnostic gospels come up seriously short.

Late Writings

The attested dates for the canonical Gospels are no later than 60-100. Gnostic gospels appeared nearly a century later. O. C. Edwards asserts "As historical reconstructions there is no way that the two can claim equal credentials."¹

Historical Worth

The earliest Christians meticulously preserved Jesus' words and deeds. The Gospel writers were close to the eyewitnesses and pursued the facts (cf. Luke 1:1-4). There is evidence that the Gospel writers were honest reporters. They also present the same overall picture of Jesus.

New Testament Canon

Contrary to the critics, the New Testament canon with Gospels and most of Paul's Epistles was formed by the end of the first century. The only books in dispute, the Antilegomena, have no apologetic effect on the argument for the reliability of the historical material used to establish the deity of Christ.

The New Testament itself reveals a collection of books in the first century. Peter speaks of having Paul's Epistles (2 Peter 3:15-16), equating them with Old Testament Scripture. Paul had access to Luke's Gospel, quoting it (10:7) in 1 Timothy 5:18.

Beyond the New Testament, canonical lists support the existence of a New Testament canon.² Indeed, all the Gospels and Paul's basic Epistles are represented on these lists.

Even the heretical canon of Marcion (ca. 140) accepted the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's Epistles.

Support of Church Fathers

A common body of books was cited by Fathers in the second century. This includes the six books crucial to the historicity of Christ and his resurrection, the Gospels, Acts, and 1 Corinthians. Clement of Rome cited the Gospels in 95 (*Corinthians*, 13, 42, 46). Ignatius (ca. 110-115) quoted Luke 24:39 (*Smyrnaeans* 3). Polycarp (ca. 115) cites all Synoptic Gospels (*Philippians* 2, 7). The *Didache* (early second century) cites the Synoptic Gospels (1, 3, 8, 9, 15-16). The *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 135) cites Matthew 22:14. Papias (*Oracles*, ca. 125-140) speaks of Matthew, Mark (chronicling Peter), and John (last) who wrote Gospels. He says three times that Mark made no errors. The Fathers considered the Gospels and Paul's Epistles to be on par with the inspired Old Testament (cf. Clement's *Corinthians* [47]; Ignatius's *Ephesians* [10]; To Polycarp [1, 5]; and Polycarp's *Philippians* [1, 3-4, 6, 12]).

The Fathers vouched for the accuracy of canonical Gospels in early second century. This is long before gnostic gospels were written in the late second century.

Gnostic Resurrection Accounts

There is no real evidence that the so-called "Q" (Quelle, source) document posited by the critics ever existed. It is an imaginary reconstruction, so the allegation that it has nothing about the resurrection is pointless.

The *Gospel of Thomas* does exist, even though it is from the late second century. Nonetheless, contrary to the critics who support this composition, it acknowledges Jesus' resurrection. In fact, it is the living, post-death (34:25-27; 45:1-16) Christ who allegedly speaks in it. True, it does not stress the resurrection, but this is to be expected because it is primarily a "sayings" source, rather than a historical narration. Further, the Gnostic theological bias against matter would downplay bodily resurrection.

Earliest Christian Creeds

Since the critics acknowledge the authenticity of 1 Corinthians 15, which is dated ca. 55-56 A.D., it is impossible to deny the historicity of the resurrection. This is only twenty-two or twenty-three years after Jesus died (1 Cor. 15:6). What is more, 1 Corinthians 15:1 alludes to a possible creed confessing the death and resurrection of Christ that would be even earlier. Even on the minimal assumption that the creed was ten or twelve years old, that would place it within ten or twelve years of the events themselves. Few ancient events have this immediate, contemporary verification.

Conclusion

The evidence for the authenticity of the Gnostic gospels does not compare with that for the New Testament. The New Testament is a first-century book. The *Gospel of Thomas* is a mid-second-century book. The New Testament is verified by numerous lines of evidence, including other references in the New Testament, early canonical lists, thousands of citations by the early Fathers, and the established earlier dates for the Gospels.

Notes

- 1 O. C. Edwards, *New Review of Book and Religion*, May, 1980, p. 27.
- 2 See Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 294.

Sources

- O. C. Edwards, *New Review of Book and Religion* (May 1980)
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