

# The Gospel of Thomas - A Christian Evaluation

*Don Closson looks at the Gospel of Thomas, considering its relationship to the four gospels included in the New Testament. His Christian evaluation of this text demonstrates that it is a later work written in the fourth century after Christ and inconsistent with the original first century writings. Some of the ideas presented in this document were rejected by the early church of the first century.*

## What Is It, and Why Is It Important?

Anyone who has visited the Wikipedia web site, the online encyclopedia with almost two million entries, knows that while the information is usually presented in a scholarly style, it can be a bit slanted at times. So when I recently read its entry for the “Gospel of Thomas,” I was not surprised to find it leaning towards the view that this letter is probably an early document, earlier than the other four Gospels of the New Testament, and an authentic product of the apostle known as Didymus or Thomas. The two Wikipedia sources most mentioned in support of this position are Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton, and the group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar. Both are known for their distaste for evangelical theology and traditional views on the canon in general.



What I found more interesting, though, is the background discussion on the article. Wikipedia includes a running dialogue of the debates that determine what actually gets posted into the article, as well as what gets removed, and here the discussion can be a bit more emotional. One contributor argues that no Christian should be allowed to contribute because of their bias and commitment to the canon of the New Testament. He adds that only atheists and Jews should be allowed to participate (no bias here). The discussion also reflects the idea that as early as the beginning of the second century, the Catholic Church was conducting a massive conspiracy to keep certain texts and ideas out of the public’s hands and minds.

For those who have never heard of the Gospel of Thomas, let me provide some background. A copy of the Gospel of Thomas was found among thirteen leather-bound books in Egypt in 1945 near a town called Nag Hammadi. The books themselves are dated to be about A.D. 350 to 380 and are written in the Coptic language. The Gospel of Thomas contains one hundred fourteen sayings that are mostly attributed to Jesus. Parts of Thomas had been uncovered in the 1890s in the form of three Greek papyrus fragments. The book opens with a prologue that reads, “These are the secret words that the living Jesus spoke and Judas, even Thomas, wrote,” which is followed by the words “the Gospel according to Thomas.”{1}

Why should Christians take the time to think about this book called by some “the fifth gospel”? Mainly, because the Gospel of Thomas is one of the oldest texts found at Nag Hammadi, and because it is being offered by some scholars as an authentic form of early Christianity that competed with the traditional Gospels but was unfairly suppressed.

## Dating and Canonicity

Elaine Pagels of Princeton University argues that there was an early competition between the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Thomas, and that it was mishandled by the early Church Fathers. As a result, Christianity may have adopted an incorrect view of who Jesus was and what his message actually taught.

A key component in this debate is the question of when the Gospel of Thomas was written. Pagels defends a date earlier than the Gospel of John, which would put it before A.D. 90. She and others support this idea by arguing that Thomas is different in both form and content than the other gospels and that it has material in common with an early source referred to as Q. Many New Testament scholars argue that there existed an early written text they call Q and that Matthew and Luke both drew from it. Since Q predated Matthew and Luke, it follows that it is earlier than John's Gospel as well.

However, most scholars believe that Thomas is a second century work and that it was written in Syria. {2} Thomas may contain sayings going back to Jesus that are independent of the Gospels, but most of the material is rearranged and restated ideas from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

An argument against an early Thomas is called the *criterion of multiple attestations*. {3} It goes something like this. The many early testimonies that we have regarding the teachings of Jesus contain material on the end times and a final judgment. These early testimonies include Mark, what is common to Matthew and Luke (i.e., what is in Q), what is unique to Matthew, and what is unique to Luke. All include end times teaching by Jesus. Thomas does not. Instead, Thomas seems to teach that the kingdom has already arrived in full and that no future event need occur. The Gospel of Thomas shows the development of later ideas that rejected Jewish beliefs and show the inclusion of pagan Greek thought.

Craig Evans argues that the Gospel of Thomas was not written prior to A.D. 175 or 180. {4} He believes that Thomas shows knowledge of the New Testament writings and that it contains Gospel material that is seen as late. Evans adds that the structure of Thomas shows a striking similarity to Tatian's Diatessaron which was a harmonization of the four New Testament Gospels and was written after A.D. 170. This late date would exclude Thomas from consideration for the canon because it would be too late to have a direct connection to one of the apostles.

## Gospel Competition

Was there a marketplace of widespread and equally viable religious ideas in the early church, or was there a clear tradition handed down by the apostles and defended by the Church Fathers that accurately and exclusively communicated the teachings of Jesus Christ?

A group of Scholars sometimes known as the "New School" believe that the Gospel of Thomas is an alternative source for understanding who the real Jesus is and what he taught. As noted earlier, Elaine Pagels and the Jesus Seminar are two of the better known sources that defend the authenticity and early date of the Thomas letter. They believe that orthodoxy was up for grabs within the early Christian community, and that John's Gospel, written around A.D. 90, was unfairly used by Irenaeus in the late second century to exclude and suppress the Thomas material.

Pagels writes that Irenaeus, in his attempt to "stabilize" Christianity, imposed a "canon, creed, and hierarchy" on the church in response to "devastating persecution" from the pagan and Jewish population, and in the process he suppressed other legitimate forms of spirituality. {5} Pagels admits

that by A.D. 200 "Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the one 'true faith'." {6} But it is not entirely clear to Pagels that the right people and ideas won the day; we could be missing an important aspect of what Jesus taught.

Because of this she believes that we need to rethink what orthodoxy and heterodoxy mean. Just because Irenaeus labeled a set of ideas as heretical or placed a group of writings outside of the inspired canon of the New Testament doesn't necessarily mean that he was right. Pagels adds that Christianity would be a richer faith if it allowed the traditions and ideas that Irenaeus fought against back into church.

Evangelicals have no problem with the idea that there were competing beliefs in the early church environment. The biblical account mentions several: Simon the magician in Acts, Hymenaeus and Philetus in 1 Timothy, and the docetists, who believed that Jesus only "appeared to be in the flesh," are referred to in John's epistles. However, they do not agree with Pagels' conclusions.

The various religious ideas competing with the traditional view were rejected by the earliest and most attested to sources handed down to us from the early church. They were systematically rejected even before Irenaeus or the emergence of the canon in the third and fourth centuries.

## Contents

Attempts to classify the contents of the Gospel of Thomas have been almost as controversial as dating it. Those who support it being an early and authentic witness to the life and ministry of Jesus argue that it offers a form of Christianity more compelling than the traditional view. For instance, in her book *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels explains how she discovered an unexpected spiritual power in the Gospel of Thomas. She writes, 'It doesn't tell you what to believe but challenges us to discover what lies hidden within ourselves; and, with a shock of recognition, I realized that this perspective seemed to me self-evidently true.' {7} This statement comes after a time in her life when she had consciously rejected the teachings of evangelical Christianity. It also coincides with the height of the self-actualization movement of psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow which would have made the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas seem very modern. Pagels argues that just because Thomas sounds different to us, it is not necessarily wrong, heretical, or Gnostic.

So what does Thomas teach? On a spectrum between the traditional gospel on one end and full blown Gnosticism of the late second century on the other, Thomas is closer to the four traditional Gospels of Matthew Mark, Luke, and John. It includes comments about the kingdom of God, prophetic sayings, and beatitudes, and doesn't contain Gnostic elements regarding the creation of the world and multiple layers of deity. However, its one hundred fourteen sayings portray Jesus as more Buddhist than Jewish.

According to Darrell Bock, professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, "the bulk of the gospel seems to reflect recastings of the synoptic material, that is, a reworking of material from Matthew, Mark, and Luke." In doing so, Jesus comes across more as a wise sage turning his followers inward for salvation rather than towards himself as a unique atonement for sin. For instance, Saying Three includes the words, 'When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that you are sons of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.'" Bock concludes that 'In Thomas, the key to God's kingdom is self-knowledge and self-understanding. Spiritual awakening produces life.' {8}

Even if the Gospel of Thomas is a first century document, it is offering a different gospel. Early church leaders compared the teachings of Thomas with the oral tradition handed down from the apostles and with the traditional gospels and rejected Thomas.

## Summary

Although the focus here has been the Gospel of Thomas, our discussion is part of a larger debate. This larger question asks which ideas and texts present in the first and second century should be considered Christian and included in what we call the canon of Scripture. In other words, are there ideas and texts that were unfairly suppressed by individuals or the organized church in the early days of Christianity?

In his book *The Missing Gospels*, Darrell Bock lists three major problems with the view held by those who think that we should include the Gospel of Thomas and other so called “missing gospels” into the sphere of orthodox Christianity.

First, this group undervalues the evidence that the traditional sources are still “our best connection to the Christian faith’s earliest years.”{9} Elaine Pagels and others work hard to show that all religious ideas during this time period are human products and have equal merit. They also claim that we know little about who wrote the four Gospels of the NT, often implying that they too could be forgeries.

While there is a healthy debate surrounding the evidence supporting the traditional works, Bock asserts that, “the case that the Gospels are rooted in apostolic connections either directly by authorship or by apostolic association is far greater for the four Gospels than for any of the other alternative gospels,” including Thomas.{10} He adds that “the Gospels we have in the fourfold collection have a line of connection to the earliest days and figures of the Christian faith that the alternatives texts do not possess. For example, the Church Father Clement, writing in A.D. 95 states, “The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. . . . Having therefore received their orders and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and full of faith in the Word of God, they went forth.”{11}

Secondly, supporters of these alternative texts fail to admit that the ideas taught by the “missing gospels” about the nature of God, the work and person of Christ, and the nature of salvation were immediately rejected from the mid-first century on.{12}

Finally, those who support Thomas are wrong when they claim that “there simply was variety in the first two centuries, with neither side possessing an implicit right to claim authority.”{13} Instead, there was a core belief system built upon the foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures and the life of Jesus Christ.

As Bock argues, Irenaeus and others who rejected the ideas found in the Gospel of Thomas were not the creators of orthodoxy, they were created by it.

## Notes

1. Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 62.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 61.
3. Ibid., 62.
4. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 67.

5. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, (New York: Random House, 2003), inside front cover.
6. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xxiii.
7. Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 32.
8. Bock, *The Missing Gospels*, 166.
9. Ibid., 202.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 204.
12. Ibid., 207.
13. Ibid., 211.

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**See Also:**

The Jesus Seminar by Jimmy Williams  
A Brief Overview of The Gospel of Judas by Patrick Zukeran  
Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip by Michael Gleghorn  
Probe Articles Answering *The Da Vinci Code*