



# Books That Didn't Make the Bible and Why

## SESSION 2

| *How did Christians decide which books got into the Bible? And what about all the ones that didn't? Should we care about them?*

### Introduction

In Session 1, we said that one criterion for the canon was the distinction between books that were read in church and books that were okay to read theologically or devotionally in private study but were not read in the church.

For a while, several books that were included by the Apostolic Fathers were regarded as Scripture and read in church—particularly in Alexandria in Egypt. But early in the fourth century, these were pretty much excluded from the canon. We still find them helpful to read today. We can learn a great deal about the life and faith of the early church from them. We can see the development of doctrine. But we do not hold them on the same level as the Scriptures. Most of them are included in the collection that we call the Apostolic Fathers.

But the Apostolic Fathers are in a separate class. What about those other books listed that didn't make the canon? Are any of those gospels, acts, and letters helpful to read? In Session 1, we said that some of those books were "popular paperbacks" of the period. They answered questions that people had about what Jesus was like as a boy or what Paul and the other apostles did on their journeys. Some of them are rather fanciful, like the infancy gospels that show Jesus making clay birds on the Sabbath and then bringing them to life, before he got in trouble for breaking the Sabbath. The *Acts of Thomas* is a reflection on celibacy, salvation, and the Christian life. It was probably excluded because it sounded too "Gnostic" for the church's taste.



In this session, we'll look with some care at one of the most controversial gospels, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and use it as a case study for inclusion/exclusion from the Scriptures.

### Some Necessary Background

The *Gospel of Thomas* was found in a collection of texts called "the Nag Hammadi Codices." This collection is very ancient, and its discovery ranks with the Dead Sea Scrolls in importance. The texts are in codex, or book, form and were sealed in a clay jar and hidden in a cave in the Egyptian desert, probably around AD 400. Most of the texts, however, are much older than that. They are in Coptic, which is a way of writing the Egyptian language in Greek letters. The story of their modern rediscovery in 1945 reminds one of Indiana Jones. Some Egyptian peasants, digging for guano, found them in the cave and took them home. After a long series of misadventures, during which some of the books may

have been burned, they turned up on the antiquities market in Cairo and were snatched up by scholars and collectors. Eventually, they all found their way back to the Coptic Museum in Cairo.

The *Gospel of Thomas* was probably written around AD 100. Although many have called it a Gnostic text because it was found in a collection of mostly Gnostic texts (see Session 1 for a definition of Gnostic), it more likely is Jewish-Christian wisdom speculation, not unlike *Ecclesiasticus* in the Apocrypha. It is different from the Gospels we find in the New Testament in that it has no narrative materials. There are no miracle stories, no travel from Galilee to Jerusalem, no Last Supper, betrayal, crucifixion, or resurrection. There are only sayings of Jesus. Many of those sayings are parallels to sayings found in the New Testament, some almost word for word. Others sound like something Jesus might have said, but there is nothing like them in the New Testament. Others sound very strange to our ears, and we don't know what to make of them. It is probably because of these strange-sounding sayings, as well as for the lack of narrative, that *Thomas* was not taken seriously as a candidate for inclusion in the canon.

## A Look at *Thomas*

In this section, we will look at some of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* and ask ourselves about their place in Christian teaching. The sayings are a mix of the three types listed above. They are not the full teaching of the *Gospel of Thomas* but are representative of the kinds of teaching we find there.

These are the secret words which the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote. And He said: Whoever finds the explanation of these words will not taste death.

*Saying 1*<sup>1</sup>

These are the opening words of the Gospel. It is not clear whether it is Jesus speaking or Thomas. In either case, the promised reward for reading and study is clear—death will be overcome. This is, in fact, the promise of Christian faith, which makes the book inviting already. Finding the “explanation” suggests there is an interpretation to be found. The Gospel purports to be a collection of the secret teachings that Jesus gave only to the inner circle, a collection that has been interpreted by the community, an interpretation that each new

believer needs to find for herself or himself. By finding the interpretation, or explanation, the Christian will find a new experience, a new way of life—she or he will not taste death.

The disciples said to Jesus: We know that thou wilt go away from us. Who is it who shall be great over us? Jesus said to them: Wherever you have come, you will go to James the righteous for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.

*Saying 12*

James the righteous (or the Just) is the younger brother of Jesus, who became the head of the church in Jerusalem soon after the resurrection. But the sense of the saying seems to be that James is not so much an individual as a tradition, or a sense of authority in the community. It's almost as if Jesus were saying, “Well, if you need leadership, go to James. But here (in *Thomas*) is the real authority.” Saying 13 also advances the authority of Thomas over that of Peter and Matthew. Remember, this is not an authority of power or leadership—it is authority in understanding and interpreting Jesus. As an aside, the *Gospel of Thomas* gives us several clues about struggles for leadership and authority in the early church, some of them paralleled in the *Book of Acts*.

The disciples said to Jesus: Tell us how our end will be. Jesus said: Have you then discovered the beginning so that you inquire about the end? For where the beginning is, there shall be the end. Blessed is he who shall stand at the beginning, and he shall know the end and he shall not taste death.

*Saying 18*

The disciples ask about the end—perhaps their own deaths, perhaps the end of the world (certainly a common question in the canonical Gospels). Jesus changes the context and meaning of the discussion. The goal is not to know the end but the beginning. And the beginning is always present. Here is one of the sayings in *Thomas* that could be seen as having Gnostic roots (see Session 1 for a definition of Gnostic). Many Gnostics believed that salvation consisted in the knowledge (*gnosis*) of (1) where we have come from (the beginning) and (2) where we are going (the end). In their complex systems, it is most important to know where we come from. When we know that, we will know where we are going. So to know the beginning truly is to know the end, and this is salvation. Not tasting death does not mean we shall not physically die, but we shall triumph

over death—we shall not die eternally.

Jesus said: Love thy brother as thy soul, guard him as the apple of thine eye.

*Saying 25*

This saying suggests a strong sense of community and solidarity. Care for one's brothers and sisters in the faith is like care for oneself. Eyesight is one of the most precious gifts we have, and we go to great lengths to protect our eyes. That same care is to be given to our fellow believers. The saying strongly reminds us of Jesus' saying that the second commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. This saying is something Jesus could have said and clearly echoes something we know he did say.

Jesus said: It is impossible for a man to mount two horses and to stretch two bows, and it is impossible for a servant to serve two masters, otherwise he will honour the one and offend the other. No man drinks old wine and immediately desires to drink new wine; and they do not put new wine into old wineskins, lest they burst, and they do not put old wine into new wineskins, lest it spoil it. They do not sew an old patch on a new garment, because there would come a rent.

*Saying 47*

The metaphors of the horses and bows are clear: You can't do two things at the same time. The world in which the Christian lives is far different from the world in which the nonbeliever lives. One can't live in both worlds. The same is true about two masters. The clear implication is that the Christian makes a choice. When one accepts the authority of Jesus, one turns off the other world. This affects the way one lives, carries out one's business, and treats one's family of faith. The images of wine and wine drinking carry this understanding further. The desire for the taste of old wine (the aged, mellow stuff) turns one away from the desire for new wine that is not yet ready to drink. Staying with the interpretation (Saying 1) put forth by the community causes one to lose a taste for the things of the world or even for a different interpretation of the faith. The saying about the wineskins reminds the reader that the two worlds are incompatible, even detrimental to each other. They cannot be mixed without damage.

So far, we have looked at sayings from *Thomas* that do not seem too far removed from what we might find in

the canonical Gospels. There are other sayings, however, that are strange to our ears and raise questions in our minds.

Jesus said: I am the Light that is above them all, I am the All, the All came forth from Me and the All attained to me. Cleave a piece of wood, I am there; lift up the stone and you will find Me there.

*Saying 77*

The saying presents three statements Jesus makes about himself: he is the Light, is the All, and is found in nature. As Light, Jesus is not only light of the world but the light that helps the believer discern all things. As the All, Jesus is both the origin of all that is and the fulfillment or goal of all beings. On one level, that would mean (in language familiar to us) he is the Alpha and Omega. Jewish speculation about the nature of God runs along similar lines. As Light and All, Jesus has no boundaries. He is source and goal for everything. He is universally available and universally attainable. Nothing and no one can be outside the Light. The second part of the saying is more pantheistic and perhaps troubling to many readers (both the original readers and ourselves). Not only is Jesus everything, but he may be found in every place, even in a piece of split wood or under a stone.

Simon Peter said to them: Let Mary go out from among us, because women are not worthy of the Life. Jesus said: See, I shall lead her, so that I will make her male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

*Saying 114*

First, Peter represents a community primarily of males but has accepted the presence of Mary (probably Mary Magdalene). Now he wants to exclude her on grounds that she is not worthy of the Life. This sets the stage for Jesus' statement. Second, Jesus finds a way to include women in a faith community defined as Peter here defines it. *Thomas* sees Jesus as neither male nor female (just as we say today that God is above gender) and able to transform Mary in a way that will make her a full member of the community. The key, however, is not gender—it is that Mary will become a living spirit. Both males and females are becoming, and their becoming leads them to be living spirits. The last part of the saying is not a discounting of women. Women must become

aware of their maleness, becoming complete human beings, in order to enter the kingdom. Other sayings reflect the reality that men must become aware of their femaleness, becoming complete human beings, in order to enter the kingdom. The issue is not misogyny but wholeness.

## Should We or Shouldn't We?

If you were helping decide what should be included in the canon, what would you do with the *Gospel of Thomas*? On what grounds would you make your decision? Some scholars have argued that the church should “open up” the canon, so *Thomas* could be included. They argue that *Thomas* includes some important teachings of Jesus that are not found elsewhere or are in a more original form, and we should not lose this valuable insight into

Jesus. Others argue that much of *Thomas* is “strange teaching,” and there were good reasons why the church chose not to include it in the canon. They also point out that opening up the canon means everything is on the table. What if someone wanted to take out some of the books? What do you think?

## About the Writer

*John Gooch is a retired United Methodist clergy, having served churches in both rural and urban areas. He has taught and written about the Bible for forty years and confesses to a “lifelong love affair with the Word.”*

## Endnote

1. All quotations from the *Gospel of Thomas* are taken from A. Guillaumont, H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel, W. Till, and Yassah 'Abd al Masih, trans., *The Gospel According to Thomas* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).