

The Gospels That Didn't Make the Cut

How did some gospels make it into the New Testament while others were left on the sidelines—or “lost”?



The Apostle John (left) and Marcion of Sinope (right) from an 11th century manuscript

Jesus said, “Blessed is the lion which the man eats, and the lion becomes man.”

Jesus said, “Be passers-by!”

Jesus said, “For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Not the Bible you're familiar with? That's because these sayings of Jesus all come from the Gospel of Thomas, which was blacklisted by Hippolytus in the third century C.E. in his *Refutation of All the Heresies*.

The New Testament recognized by most Christians today comprises 27 books accepted as authoritative, or canon. But what made some writings canon and others not?

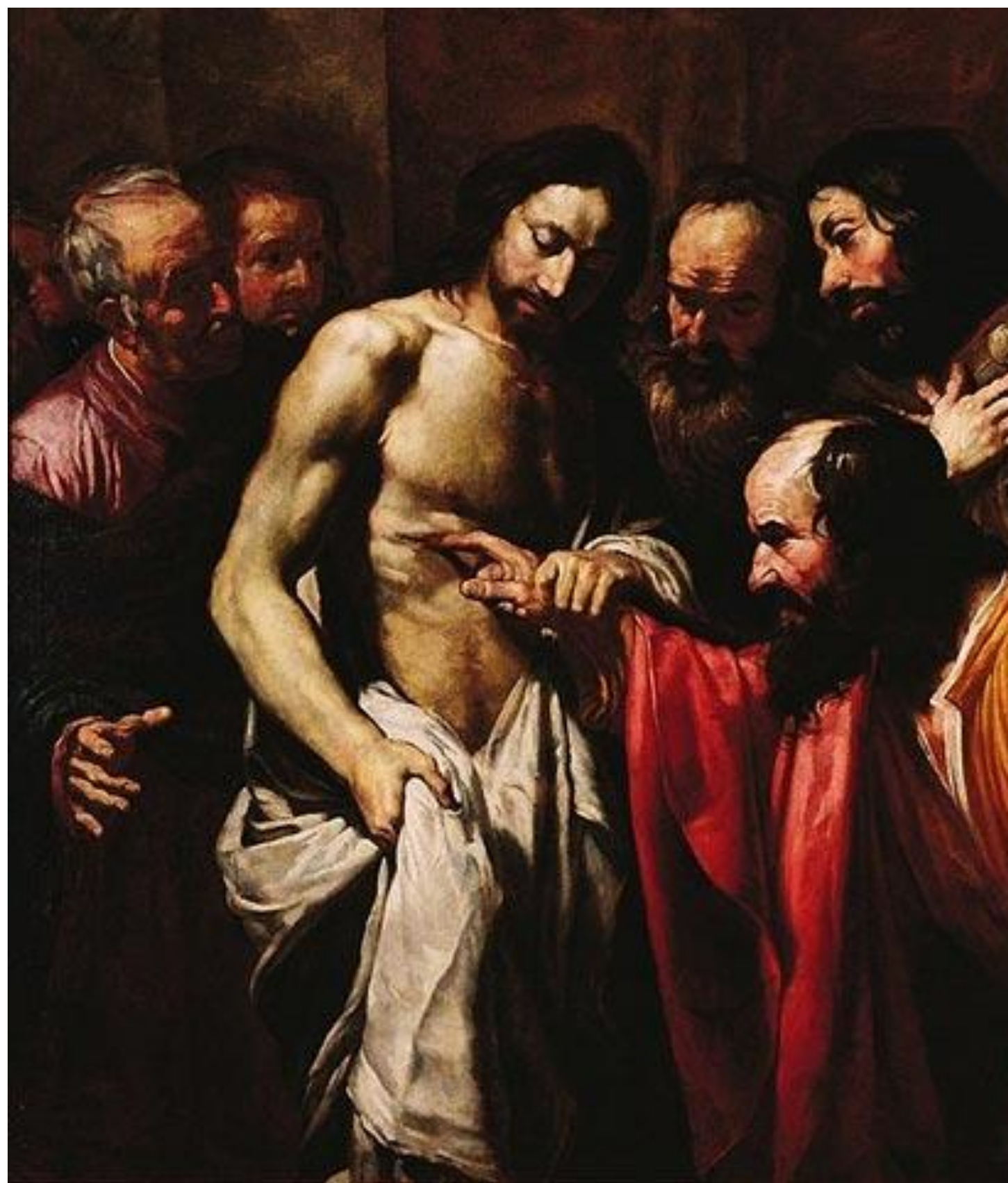
There is no sufficiently detailed record of just how the Church decided which books were worthy of the New Testament, but there's enough evidence to piece together some of the story.

As Roy W. Hoover writes in **How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen**, there was much discussion and disagreement early on—and for centuries after—to determine just which texts should be included.

Controversy was swirling early in the mid-second century when Marcion, a successful merchant and son of the bishop of the Church in Asia Minor, made the radical suggestion that the Church should reject the Jewish scriptures and excise any references to the God of the Jews mentioned in Luke and Paul. He was excommunicated.

But Marcion's suggestion made the Church reexamine its criteria for what counts as canon. Still, many writings were considered, but few were chosen. Some writings contradict what is now considered canon, or offer additional accounts of the events from other perspectives. Should they be canon? Were the right choices made?

So many sources...so much controversy. And yet, so many more opportunities for discovery, interpretation, and discussion.



Doubting Thomas by Giovanni Serodine (1594-1630). The Apostle Thomas, supposed author of the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, inspecting Jesus' wounds for himself.

Consider **The Gospels that Didn't Make the Cut**—17 apocryphal gospels, rejected as unworthy of becoming canon. Why should we study them? In part, because they are a window into the world of early Christians. It's an opportunity to learn what early Christians believed about Jesus.

Robert J. Miller explains it this way:

If the only gospel we knew were John, we would not know that Jesus was remembered as an exorcist because he does not cast out demons in John's Gospel. If our goal is to attain an adequate understanding of early Christianity, common sense requires that we attend to all four gospels. By a simple extension of this same logic, we also need to take into account other gospels, for they too represent forms of early Christianity. That later centuries judged these gospels to be incompatible with official church doctrine does not alter the fact that, in the contexts of their own times, these gospels expressed the religious convictions of sincere Christians.

Miller argues that we can better understand the context of the New Testament when we recognize the wide diversity of Christianity recorded in these other gospels.

By the end of the second century, the Church urged Christians to avoid reading any writings other than the official canon of Christian scripture; in fact, many writings were "lost" (or hidden) for centuries. It wasn't until the beginning of the Renaissance that scholars began to uncover old manuscripts in monastery libraries. Then those writings gained a much wider readership—thanks to the newly invented printing press.

Many writings were "lost" for far longer, some rediscovered in only the last one hundred years. Each new discovery uncovers yet another facet of early Christianity.

Why do these writings matter? Isn't the New Testament the final authority?

Well, scholars will tell you it depends on which New Testament you mean.

Consider all the voices clamoring to tell the story of Jesus, and the young Church working to sort it all out. The voice of the Roman Church ultimately won out, declaring which writings would comprise the "official" New Testament, and those other voices were silenced...for a time.

But the shape of the Christian Bible has not remained static across the centuries. The Eastern Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Church, the Ethiopian Church, and others each have their own interpretation of what they consider canon.

From the very beginning, Christianity has been a religion of texts and story. It is inevitable that some writings will contradict what is now considered canon. But scholars emphasize that these writings—no matter how controversial—are well worth studying, because they contribute to a deeper understanding of the origins of Christianity.

Non-canonical gospels answer some questions, raise more

For as long as there have been Christians, there have been untold numbers of writings about the life and teachings of Jesus.

We study writings such as this because they reveal the richness of early Christianity—all while raising more questions:

How did the Signs Gospel help shape the Gospel of John, including its inconsistencies and contradictions?

What's missing from the Sayings Gospel, and how does that help us put it in perspective?

What was the apparent motivation for the writing of the Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas? What do they tell us about early Christianity?

How do the modern discoveries of the Nag Hammadi texts color our understanding of the New Testament as it is today?

What other lessons are there to be learned from ancient writings that were rejected as part of the New Testament?

These are the kinds of questions that keep people like you studying the Bible, biblical history and archaeology. The kinds of questions that deliver not just new insights into the ancient past, but also into our current realities.

They're the kinds of questions that are answered continually by the renowned biblical scholars and archaeologists who contribute to publish with the Biblical Archaeology Society. **And you can get the answers to these questions and hundreds more through the BAS Library.**

In **The Gospels that Didn't Make the Cut**, BAS editors have carefully compiled a special collection of articles from *Biblical Archaeology Review* and *Bible Review* that explore the questions posed here.

You'll want to read all of the articles included in this collection:

- [**How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen**](#)
by Roy W. Hoover
- [**The 34 Gospels**](#)
by Charles W. Hedrick

- **“Lost Gospels”—Lost No More**
by Tony Burke
- **The Gospel of Thomas: Jesus Said What?**
by Simon Gathercole
- **The Gospels that Didn’t Make the Cut**
by Robert J. Miller

Plus an engaging video lecture:

- **The Proto-Gospel of James**
by Mark Goodacre of Duke University