

# Non-canonical Gospels

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As you know, the Bible includes four *canonical gospels*: the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, the canonical gospels are not the only *gospels* that exist. In order to discuss the non-canonical gospels we must first understand what is meant by the word *canon* and what is meant by the word *gospel*.

## Canon

The word *canon* originally referred to a reed that was used for measuring, similar to our ruler. In the early Church, the word was used to refer to the rule of faith, that by which other things would be measured. As Catholics, we are very familiar with this word because we also use it in relation to saints. Saints are *canonized*. Canonized saints become our models, those by whom we *measure* a holy life.

The fact that we have four canonical gospels is the end result of a process that took over one hundred years. Our canonical gospels are thought to have been written between AD 65 (Mark) and AD 90 (John). Remember, these canonical gospels appropriated oral and written traditions that preceded them. Each of the canonical gospels was written for a specific community: Mark for Rome; Matthew for Antioch, Syria; Luke most likely for Antioch, Greece; and John for Ephesus. During this first century no gospels were considered *canonical*. However, as time went on, as gospels spread from one community to another, and as a variety of gospels were available, the Church felt a need to affirm some gospels for use in worship settings and to forbid others.

These judgments were based primarily on the way various texts were received by the worshipping communities. If the texts nourished people's faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they were affirmed. If they promoted, or could be used to promote, various heresies, they were forbidden for use in the worship setting.

Additional considerations were whether or not the texts were of apostolic origin. This did not mean that the text had to have been written by an apostle. Rather, the text needed to have found its source in a tradition associated with an apostle. The late second century attributions of our four canonical gospels to apostles (Matthew and John) and to apostolic men (Mark, an associate of Peter, and Luke, a companion of Paul) are expressions of this criterion that the texts be associated with an apostolic source.

By the end of the second century, our four canonical Gospels were standard throughout the Christian world and were used in worship settings. This was the first step toward being considered sacred texts, as were the Jewish Scriptures, and, finally, being included in the codices of the collection of texts called the Bible. Texts that were not included, that did not become canonical, were not destroyed or forbidden. Many were still used in the context of personal piety.

## Gospel

Initially, in Christian circles, the word *gospel* was used in the singular. The word *Gospel* referred to the good news of Jesus Christ. Today we use the word in the plural. The word *gospels* refers to the four accounts of this good news that are in the canon as well as to accounts of the good news that are not in the canon: non-canonical gospels, also called apocryphal gospels.



Our four canonical gospels have a narrative structure. If we consider them as a whole they include: birth narratives, sayings of Jesus, mighty acts of Jesus, an account of Jesus' passion and death, and post-resurrection appearance stories. None of the non-canonical gospels include all of these elements. Rather, they develop various elements of this overarching narrative.

Some are infancy gospels (The Infancy Gospel of Thomas; the Infancy Gospel of James), some sayings gospels (The Gospel of Thomas; The Apocryphon of James; the Dialogue of the Savior), some passion, death, and resurrection gospels (the Acts of Pilate; the Gospel of Peter), some post-resurrection dialogue gospels (the Gospel of Mary; the Epistula Apostolorum). Scholars use the word *gospel* in relation to these texts even if the text itself does not claim to be a gospel. If the document purports to contain an apostolic recollection about Jesus, it is called a gospel.

## The Value of Non-canonical Gospels

Since the apocryphal gospels did not make it into the canon, why bother reading them? Of what value are they to us today? These gospels can give us insights about the development of the canonical gospels and about the development of the Jesus tradition in the second-century Church.

Even before we had the texts of many of the non-canonical gospels we knew that they had existed because they were quoted by early Church writers. Then, in 1945, in the Nag Hammadi region of Egypt, 13 codices were discovered that contained 50 different tracts. The texts were written in Coptic, the language of Egypt. However, they were translations of documents that were originally written in Greek. They had been buried around AD 400.

As scholars studied this amazing find they tried to determine the relationship of the texts to the canonical gospels. Did any of these materials precede the canonical gospels? Did they include information from the canonical gospels mixed with oral traditions not included in the canonical gospels? Did they simply expand on the canonical gospels in imaginative ways? The answers were never easy to determine.

Two of the apocryphal gospels were not discovered but are hypothetical reconstructions by biblical scholars: the *Signs Gospel*, and the *Sayings Gospel Q*. The *Signs Gospel* is thought to have been a source for the book of Signs in John's Gospel. The *Sayings Gospel Q* is thought to have been a source for both Matthew and Luke's gospels.

While the apocryphal gospels are not canonical, they are valuable reading for anyone interested in the growth of early Christianity. They are also a source of information about beliefs that do not appear in the Bible. For instance, why do we think that Mary's parents were named Joachim and Anna? Why do we believe that Jesus was Mary's only child even though Scripture refers to Jesus' brothers? Why do we believe that Mary remained a virgin even after the birth of Jesus? All of these beliefs are present in the *Infancy Gospel of James*, a work thought to date to the middle of the second century. Although the apocryphal gospels are not included in our canon or proclaimed in our worship settings, they are an invaluable source of information on the development of our canonical gospels and on some of our extra-biblical beliefs as well.

