

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The New Testament Scriptures

by Dan Trygg

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves people will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Acts 20:28-32

“If anyone teaches other doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, ⁴ he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions...”

1 Timothy 6:3-4

We have been looking at the reliability of the documents in our Bibles. We have seen that the vast number of ancient manuscripts, and the early date of those manuscripts to the original writings, were *unsurpassed in comparison to any other document of ancient history*. We have also discussed the unparalleled historical accuracy of the biblical witness. Archaeology has repeatedly confirmed the meticulous accuracy of the biblical authors. There have been hundreds of artifacts and texts discovered that confirm the biblical witness, ...and *not one archaeological artifact has ever contradicted the biblical record*. Last time, we talked about the OT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. These were books written between the OT and the NT that were never universally accepted by the church, did not have extensive manuscript support, and often also had doctrinal or historical errors. We concluded that **they were not accepted by most of the church fathers and historic church as “scripture” because they did not “measure up”**. They fell short of the “measuring stick” that would indicate inspiration, and so they were not included in the OT canon.

Today we are going to look at books that were not included in the list of inspired writings that we have in our NT. How many books were there? When were they written? **Why were they excluded from our NT canon?** Who made this decision? **What support is there for the books we have, and why were they included?**

First of all, it is important to state that there were many other books and writings, just as there is at virtually any time in history. We know of nearly 300 other books or letters that are referenced in the writings of early church fathers, or that we have partial manuscripts of. Many have been lost, meaning that no extant copy exists of these texts. **The extrabiblical books that pertain to the life of Jesus, or the early church have been categorized into pseudepigrapha and apocryphal writings,** just as we saw in regard to the nonbiblical writings of the OT. In addition, there are a number of **Gnostic writings**, texts that support the theology of sects that combine elements of Christian thought with Greek myths and erroneous teachings. **Writings of other offshoot cults** from the late second to fourth century have survived, or have been somewhat reconstructed from other citations.

Again, *pseudepigrapha* were writings that were authored by people who lived at a later time, but who ascribed their work to someone who lived at the time of Christ. *Pseudepigrapha* means “false writings” in that the author impersonated someone else. **All of the pseudepigrapha were rejected as authentic, ...because they were not.** They were based upon a deception by their very nature. **Other books were called apocrypha,** which means “hidden away” or “obscure”. These books were considered of interest, even useful, but were not inspired. **A few church fathers referred to some of them, but they were not widely accepted. Gnostic and cultic writings were vigorously opposed.**

Virtually all of these books were written in the second or third centuries. They were not written by apostles or eyewitnesses. They reflect the beliefs, world view and imaginations of the writers. **They include many fanciful and strange stories, not supported by the NT, or by the leaders of the churches.** There was a great deal of interest in knowing more about Jesus’ childhood, so there were several “**infancy narratives**” produced from the imagination of second century authors. These were never recognized as authentic. There were a number of **other “gospels”** or accounts of Jesus’ life, but these were written in the second or third centuries. The so-called “Gospel of Thomas” (mostly purported sayings of Jesus) was among these. Then, in 1945, a library of Gnostic texts were found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. These include supposed dialogues between Jesus and His disciples, where He laid out the doctrines and teachings of this cult. The so-called “Gospel of Judas” was among these. According to that text, Judas was a hero who carried out his Master’s instructions, though the other disciples did not understand. In 1896, a Sahidic Coptic codex, dated the fifth century, had a text referred to as the “Gospel of Mary Magdalene”. There are also at least seventeen texts that recount the “**Acts**” of different apostles or other historical figures. Again, these were written much later, and are full of “folly, self-contradiction, falsehood and impiety” according to a later Patriarch of Constantinople. There are at least nine “**epistles**” or letters between early church leaders (2nd century) to other

individuals or church groups. Some of these were highly regarded, but were not considered to be inspired like the epistles we have in our NT. There are ten other “**visionary writings**”, similar to the book of Revelation. They were attributed to apostolic figures, but were written later (pseudepigrapha). Over fifty texts describe **the later life and fate of Mary**, the mother of Jesus. These writings vary widely in their accounts. They were not broadly recognized. There are many additional texts or accounts referred to in the writings of others, which have not survived.

So, out of all these wide selection of texts, **how was it that we ended up with the twenty-seven books that we have in our New Testaments? And, why were these others not included?**

We saw that our NT books were:

- (1.) **written by the apostles, or the close associates of the apostles.** They were written in the first century, by those who were there. They were the accounts of eyewitnesses, or those who interviewed eyewitnesses.
- (2.) **They had early and wide support for their authenticity and value** by church leaders and members.
- (3.) **They were read, used and cited by church leaders and others from the earliest days, right up to the present.**
- (4.) **We have clear, broad, early and well-documented manuscript evidence** that these texts have been accurately copied and transmitted down to us.
- (5.) **They are historically accurate**, recording people, events, place names and details with meticulous detail.
- (6.) **They are consistent in their theology and teaching.** They present a congruent testimony to the truth. **And,**
- (7.) **the people who have studied them have reported that they are edifying** and useful in building up their faith.

What about the “NT Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha”, or the so-called “Lost Books of the Bible”?

- (1.) **They were not written within the first century, by apostles or eyewitness associates of the apostles.** They were written in the second to the fourth centuries, by people who tried to claim that an apostle wrote them.
- (2.) **They were not widely read or accepted as scripture by early church leaders.** There was *not* a universal or even significant testimony of support for most of these writings. Though they were read by many, and even cited by some, they were not seen to be historic, credible or on the same level as scripture.
- (3.) **Most of them fell into disuse and obscurity.** Few have been read and utilized by *any* branch of the historic church. Most were lost, and many have only been recently been discovered.
- (4.) **The manuscript support for these texts is very sparse.** While the NT documents enjoy unparalleled support in the vast numbers and early date of manuscripts, these writings have very little support. What is available is often incomplete, fragmentary, or dated much later. Some survive through a handful of texts, or even a single copy. This, again, speaks to the fact that they were not widely used, or considered valuable enough to preserve and copy.
- (5.) **The content of many of these is very strange**, ...filled with unusual supernatural acts that seem out of character for Jesus to perform, or promote some strange teaching that has no support in the NT. In the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the boy Jesus made twelve birds out of clay. When someone confronted Joseph about this, saying that since it was the Sabbath, the boy was guilty of violating the Law, Jesus clapped His hands, and the birds flew away. By contrast, the NT is clear that the people of Nazareth were surprised that He was doing miracles. They had known Him and His family, and He had not done anything like this before (Mk. 6:1-5). In the *Gospel of Peter*, the risen Christ comes out of the tomb, supported by two angels, and followed by the cross. Jesus and the angels expand and become so tall that their heads disappear into the clouds. When God speaks to the cross from heaven, it verbally responds.
- (6.) **The doctrine of these writings can often be in conflict with the teachings of the NT.** For example, the *Gospel of the Hebrews* seems to promote an early heresy regarding Christ’s nature, called “Adoptionism”. This teaches that Jesus was born of the physical union of Mary and Joseph (denying the virgin birth), but became divine later, at His baptism, when supposedly God “adopted Him” and filled Him with the Spirit. The testimony of the NT was that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit while Mary was a virgin (Matt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:27-35; cf. Jn. 1:1,14)
- (7.) **These writings contain historical errors.** One example is the *Gospel of the Ebionites*. This records that John the Baptist ate wild honey, but not locusts, ...because this sect was comprised of vegetarians! This conflicts with the testimony of the biblical gospels (Matt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6).
- (8.) **Those who read or study them find them to be a curiosity, or, if they take them seriously, are led astray into speculations or false beliefs.** They do not have a consistent track record of drawing people closer to God or the truth.

The apostle Paul warned of this problem. As we have seen in our own time, many of those who read these texts insinuate that there has been unfair suppression of important truth by corrupt church leaders. **Some suggest that the church even tried to cover up important “facts”, in order to manipulate the narrative to its own ends. This is ridiculous!** These were simple, humble pastors, who were concerned for the health and well-being of their relatively small flocks of people. They were scholars, clear-minded advocates of the truth, and they carefully discussed these writings in their letters to each other. No one was “sweeping anything under the rug”. **They could clearly see what you and I can easily see. That which was the inspired word of God met a standard that other writings did not.** No one had to “decide” that, or “pronounce” it. It was self-evident. **Our NT books “measure up”. These other writings do not.**