The Lost Gospels

What are the most reliable accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings?
Use of the Lost Gospels
Indeed, for hundreds of years after the death of Jesus, groups adopted radically conflicting writings about the details of his life and the meaning of his ministry, and murdered those who disagreed. For many centuries, Christianity was first a battle of books and then a battle of blood. The reason, in large part, was that there were no universally accepted manuscripts that set out what it meant to be a Christian, so most sects had their own gospels.
So Misunderstood . . .

There was the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Gospel of Simon Peter, the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Barnabas. One sect of Christianity—the Gnostics—believed that the disciple Thomas was not only Jesus’s twin brother but also the founder of churches across Asia. Christianity was in chaos in its early days, with some sects declaring the others heretics. And then, in the early 300s, Emperor Constantine of Rome declared he had become follower of Jesus, ended his empire’s persecution of Christians and set out to reconcile the disputes among the sects. Constantine was a brutal sociopath who murdered his eldest son, decapitated his brother-in-law and killed his wife by boiling her alive, and that was after he proclaimed that he had converted from worshipping the sun god to being a Christian. Yet he also changed the course of Christian history, ultimately influencing which books made it into the New Testament.
Understandably, His life was recorded by thousands of followers across the land.

“More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.

“Who chose which gospels to include?” Sophie asked.

“Aha!” Teabing burst with enthusiasm. “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.” (231)
Gospel of Thomas

- Included by Jesus Seminar in *The Five Gospels* and greatly preferred by them
- John Dominic Crossan claimed that this is an earlier and more reliable source on the life of Jesus than the four canonical Gospels
Gospel of Thomas

- The Gospel of Thomas existed in two major recensions. The Coptic text belongs to the later recension.
  - Logion 5
  - Logion 36
- Due to the sparse evidence, it is not presently possible to reconstruct the original Gospel of Thomas.
- Hans-Martin Schenke, a former member of the "Koester school," argued that logion 68 requires a date after the Bar Kochba rebellion in AD 135.
- Stephen Patterson admits that logion 7 was composed in the 3rd or 4th century.
- Nick Perrin has argued convincingly that the GT was first written in Syriac and probably post-dates Tatian's Diatessaron.
- Late date is consistent with external evidence since earliest reference to Thomas is by Hippolytus in AD 225.
Gospel of Peter

• Evidence of Dependence on Matthew
  – Matt. 27:64 & Gos. Pet. 8:30
    mhvpote ejlqovnte" oiJ maqhtaiV aujtou' klevywsin aujtoVn
  – Matthean vocabulary
    • mhvpote 2,4,2 (8,2,7)
    • ejlqovnte" 10,10,8 (28,16,12)
    • maqhtaiV 31,5,36-37 (72-73,46,37)
    • klevywsin 2,2,1 (5,1,1)
Gos. Pet. as a Second-century Work

- Compositional strategies
- Presence of later church dogma
- Apparent allusion to later New Testament material
  - Seven Seals
  - Lord's Day
- Shared features with other second-century apocryphal sources
  - Moving crosses (*Epistula Apostolorum*; Ethiopian Apocalypse of Peter)
  - Enormous Christ (Shepherd of Hermas; 4 Ezra)
Evidence of Forgery

Interesting parallels with *The Mystery of Mar Saba* (1949)

- Revolutionary manuscript find at Mar Saba
- Manuscript explains resurrection in naturalistic terms
- 1947 edition included text of forgery on fly paper of book
Evidence of Forger

• Characteristics of script
  – Forger’s tremor
  – Script dissimilar from other 18th century texts at Mar Saba
Evidence of a Forgery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>θ</th>
<th>λ</th>
<th>τ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sabas 452</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 1R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabas 518</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 2R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabas 523</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 4R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabas 574</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 1R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabas 591</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 1R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabas 648</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 1V</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabas 649</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 1R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodore</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fol. 1V</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morton Smith</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence of Forgery

• Characteristics of script
  – Forger’s tremor
  – Script dissimilar from other 18\textsuperscript{th} century texts at Mar Saba
  – Script identical to Mar Saba 22
    • A 20\textsuperscript{th} century hand
    • M. Madiotes
    • Experienced writer and scholar interested in patristics and western critical scholarship

• 1910 catalogue of Mar Saba library makes no mention of the copy of Ignatius
Evidence of a Forgery

• Smith’s discovery corroborates scholar’s earlier theories
• Smith appears to have left clues betraying true nature of the text as is common with scholarly hoaxes
  – Preface: “No doubt if the past, like a motion picture, could be replayed, I should also be shocked to find how much of the story I have already invented.”
  – Conclusion: “Truth is necessarily stranger than history.”
  – Dedication of Scholar’s version: “To Arthur Darby Nock”
  – Dedication of Popular version: “To the one who knows”
And Jesus said, “My wife . . . .”
Karen King

- Discovery announced by Karen King of the Harvard Divinity School Sep. 18, 2012
- King claimed that the Coptic fragment dated to the 4th century and was a translation of a 2nd century Greek original
- She stated that the text suggested that some second century Christians believed that Jesus had been married, probably to Mary Magdalene who is mentioned later in the fragment
HARVARD SCHOLAR’S DISCOVERY SUGGESTS JESUS HAD A WIFE

HISTORIAN SAYS PIECE OF PAPYRUS REFERS TO JESUS’ WIFE

JESUS HAD A WIFE, NEWLY DISCOVERED GOSPEL SUGGESTS
Challenging Assumptions

• Media assumed that the fragment was authentic although it had not been vetted by other scholars

• Media assumed that a fourth century document (and radiometric testing showed that the papyrus was actually from the 8th century) was more reliable than Gospel accounts from the first century

• Media often failed to acknowledge the general skepticism of Coptic scholars toward the fragment
Evidence of Forgery

- Although the papyrus is ancient, the ink cannot be established as ancient
- Almost all phrases in the fragment could have been cut and pasted from a modern edition of the Gospel of Thomas
- Another fragment in the collection, purportedly a Coptic manuscript of John, is clearly a forgery since every line break matches the line breaks in Codex Qau, available online
- The two Coptic fragments were written in the same hand using very similar inks and appear to be the work of the same “scribe”
- Since the John fragment is a forgery, the Gospel of Jesus’s Wife is likewise a forgery
- The owner’s claims about provenance have proven to be untrue
Leo Depuydt

“The following analysis submits that it is out of the question that the so-called Gospel of Jesus’s Wife, also known as the Wife of Jesus fragment, is an authentic source. The author of this analysis has not the slightest doubt that the document is a forgery, and not a very good one at that.”
Lessons

• Be cautious about sensational claims by the media claiming that a new discovery proves some claim about Jesus

• Be cautious about claims made by individual scholars or a small group of scholars that have not been properly vetted by the leading experts in the field and do not assume that the media recognizes the leading experts