



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

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The Fifth Gospel – Thomas, Gnosticism & the NT Canon

The Early Church were a diverse and separated community each of which had individual leaders and teachers, initially with access to the Synagogue and Hebrew Scripture (canonised in 90CE in Jamina) and perhaps some early Letters from Paul and others. With no immediate return of Jesus, these writings became more important, maintaining a link to the original apostles. Later various Gospels were written to secure this link.

- Canon: from the Greek *kanon* meaning 'standard of measure'

Development of the New Testament Canon

The first list of Christian Writings was proposed by Marcion. It consisted of only one Gospel (Luke from §3) and Paul's Letters (inc Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians but not 1 & 2 Timothy or Titus). He had a large following but was considered a threat by the Roman Church with his Gnostic theology and he was excommunicated in 144CE. They took on the idea of a Canon so that diversity could be removed and theology harmonised under the authority of the Church in Rome. Gnosticism, which emphasised a mystic or 'secret knowledge found within', was a popular early Christian sect (using ideas formulated before Jesus' time) but seen as a particular heresy by Rome.

- Orthodox: having the correct faith or 'straight thinking' (Greek: *orthos* - right; *doxa* - opinion)
- Heresy: an opinion contrary to the orthodox (Greek: *hairesis* - a choice)

Some Texts in the Mix

- The Letter of Clement 1, written by the then Bishop of Rome ~95CE, was another well thought of text, but fell from favour due to comments in §12 referring to the Phoenix resurrecting after 500 years.
- Gospel of Barnabas, written ~100CE, has a main theme that the OT should be read allegorically and not literally.
- Shepherd of Hermes, a composite text, is apocalyptic in content.
- Gospel of Peter appears to have been written independently of the Synoptics but was considered fanciful.
- Didache, or the Teachings of The Twelve, written ~100CE in Syria, is a collection of early church instruction and discipline.
- Secret Gospel of Mark, re-found in 1958, was used in Alexandria, compiled during the 2nd Century and is a continuation of Mark. There is also a 3rd Gospel of Mark.
- Gospels of Mary Magdalene, Judas, Philip, Hebrews, Truth along with hundreds of other texts: some narrative, some apocryphal, some sayings, some mythical.

The Gospel of Thomas

Written in Greek. Some date it with the Synoptic Gospels, others around 200CE. It was translated into Egyptian Coptic ~350CE.

It contains no narrative or doctrine; it is a collection of 114 'sayings' and gives added credence to the existence of the Q gospel idea.

Blends of Gnostic (and Buddhist?) ideas can be found within it; in use by 'Thomas Christians' in Southern India.

Development of the New Testament Canon Table

Marcion ~150CE??	Muratorian List ~200CE	Origen ~250CE	Eusebius ~300CE	Athanasius 397CE Carthage
	Matthew	Matthew	Matthew	Matthew
	Mark	Mark	Mark	Mark
Luke (§3 on)	Luke	Luke	Luke	Luke
	John	John	John	John
	Acts	Acts	Acts	Acts
Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans
1 Corinthians	1 Corinthians	1 Corinthians	1 Corinthians	1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	2 Corinthians
Galatians	Galatians	Galatians	Galatians	Galatians
Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians
Philippians	Philippians	Philippians	Philippians	Philippians
Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians
1 Thessalonians	1 Thessalonians	1 Thessalonians	1 Thessalonians	1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians
	1 Timothy	1 Timothy	1 Timothy	1 Timothy
	2 Timothy	2 Timothy	2 Timothy	2 Timothy
	Titus	Titus	Titus	Titus
	Philemon	Philemon	Philemon	Philemon
			Hebrews	Hebrews
	James		James	James
		1 Peter	1 Peter	1 Peter
			2 Peter	2 Peter
	1 John	1 John	1 John	1 John
	2 John		2 John	2 John
			3 John	3 John
	Jude		Jude	Jude
		Revelation John		Revelation John
	Wisdom Of Solomon	Revelation of Peter		
	<i>For Private Use</i>	<i>Disputed</i>	<i>Disputed</i>	
		Hebrews		
		James	James	
		2 Peter	2 Peter	
		2 John	2 John	
		3 John	3 John	
		Jude	Jude	
			Revelation John	
	The Shepherd Of Hermes	The Shepherd Of Hermes		
		Letter Barnabas		
		Didache		
		Gospel Hebrews		

Table from Robert Stace

History is written by the winners, who then determine what is 'orthodox' or 'heretical'.

Gnosticism

We use the word 'agnostic' meaning 'not knowing'. *Gnosis* is Greek for 'knowing through experience' (rather than scientific knowing). 'Insight' would be a good alternative. The orthodox view was/is that a chasm separates humanity from its Creator: God is wholly other. Gnostics suggest that self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.

The Canon Gospels emphasise Jesus' message of 'sin and repentance'; Gnostics emphasise Jesus as the guide who opens access to spiritual understanding. The Gospel of John contains some Gnostic ideas, but was seen as having some useful statements from Jesus that allowed the orthodox view to be emphasised.

Orthodox Christianity: humanity needs a way beyond its own power to approach the divine God - outside the Church there is no salvation (Bishop Irenaeus) - the Church is God's divine revelation.

Gospel of Philip (71:35on): God created humanity; but now human beings create God.

How can we know the way?

John 14: *I am the Way, . . . no-one comes to the father except by me.* And that route lay through the clergy and bishops of the Church of Rome.

Dialogue of the Saviour: *The place which you can reach, stand there!*

Thomas: *There is a light within a man of light, and it lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, he is darkness.*

Gnosticism emphasised the capacity of an individual to find their own direction, with no requirement of any authority.

Gnostics had a variety of beliefs, and resisted the authority of clergy, creed and canon.

In particular they had a differing view of (the true) God with an intermediary (the Demiurge) who was involved in creation which was seen as flawed due to pain and suffering. Humanity needed to find the divine spark within their physical self to find spiritual freedom. Ignorance, not sin, was the problem. Over time, these views developed widely and, like the early Christian Church, there was no unity of ideas. Some extremes should not colour ideas of all Gnostics.

The move within the 3rd and 4th Centuries to ascetic forms of self-discipline, rather than being banned, was brought under Episcopal authority by setting up Monasteries (Greek *monachos* - solitary, a word much used within Gnostic texts).

However, when in 367CE Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, ordered all heretical texts (those of which he did not approve!) to be purged, it is thought that the monks of St Pachomius, in sight of the cliffs of Jabel al-Tarif, hid their texts in sealed jars, found in 1945/6 and referred to the Nag Hammadi texts or the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Fifty Two texts were found within the 13 scrolls recovered, some of which had been referenced in early Church letters, and some which had already been discovered elsewhere.

Gospel Of Thomas Extracts

Familiar

- A sower went to sow, . . . some fell on the path . . . others fell on thorns . . . some fell on good soil . . . sixty times the measure.
- The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard . . .
- A man planned a feast . . . I've bought a farm . . . go into the streets and bring any you can find . . .
- Show me the stone that the builders have rejected; that one shall be my corner stone.

- Foxes have holes, birds boast nests; the Son of Man has no den where he can lay down his head and rest.
- Hand to Caesar what is Caesar's, to God what is God's, and what is mine hand to me.

Gnostic thinking

- These are the secret words of Almighty God, which Lord Jesus Christ uttered and were scribed by his disciple Thomas. He said, "He who comprehends the inner meaning of these words will be immortal."
- For God's Kingdom dwells in your heart and all around you; when you know your Self you too shall be known!
- Happy are the solitary and those chosen, for they shall find God's Kingdom. If you seek it in your heart you shall enter again.
- On the day you see the Light of your own true Self, you'll rejoice.

Politics

- The disciples asked, "We know you'll leave us. Who'll then rule over us?" Jesus replied: "Wherever you arrive, go to James who is righteous, because of whom, even heaven and earth came into existence".
- He (Jesus) took Thomas to one side and addressed three sayings of Almighty God to him. When Thomas returned they enquired, "What did Jesus say?" Thomas replied, "If I tell you what he said you'll pick up stones and hurl them at me; fire will rise up from them and burn you all up!"

Questions

- 1 **How do we view the texts within the Canon against other texts of the period?**
- 2 **Should we at least explore other texts from the Early Church?**
- 3 **How do we view other texts, like those written today?**
- 4 I remember being told that four pillars for the Christian faith were: Scripture, Tradition, Experience, Reason, in that order of importance. At the time, I preferred the order 'REST': Reason, Experience, Scripture, Tradition. Now I wonder now if just RE would suit, although without S it's difficult to start! - **Do you have a view?**

References

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