

The Lost Books of the Bible

IF YOU WERE RAISED in an orthodox Christian denomination, you learned, sooner or later, that the New Testament consists of four gospels and a specific number of epistles or letters, mostly written by Paul. You probably thought that these writings, and only these, were given to the Christian church from its inception. Such assumptions do not stand up to historical scrutiny.

Notwithstanding the incineration of over 400,000 manuscripts in the fire that destroyed the capacious Alexandria library, the seat of classical Greek and Hebrew higher learning, and the systematic destruction of Christian esoteric and gnostic writings by imperial Rome, a sufficient number of what are now called New Testament apocrypha yet survive. Reference to them and many nonsurviving works by Church Fathers of the first Christian centuries makes abundantly clear that arriving at a New Testament canon was a protracted and often highly polemical affair.

To preserve the unity of the faith and maintain consistency of doctrine, a codification of essential Christian beliefs had to be articulated and ratified at the outset by the college of apostles, and this took the form of the Apostle's Creed. This assertion, however, is contested by many theologians, as to both date and provenance, who hold for the Creed's later and nonapostolic origin.

While all the text comprising what we now know as the New Testament was written in the first century, indeed during its middle decades, with the exception of John's gospel, few apostles did not write gospels, epistles, acts, or revelations—if the multiple references to them by famous Church



Oil on panel, 1521, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon
By the time of St. Jerome (340-420), the Bible canon was basically in place. He is shown contemplating human mortality but also the power over death through the crucified Christ. The first known crucifix did not appear until 200 years later.

Fathers is to be given credence. A sampling of such writings includes: the *Acts of Andrew*, referred to by the fourth century church historian Eusebius (died 340); the *Gospel According to the Twelve Apostles*, cited by Origen (died 254) and Ambrose (died 397); the *Gospel of Matthias* (the apostle succeeding Judas Iscariot), mentioned by Origen, Eusebius, and Ambrose; and the *Gospel of Thomas*, referred to by Eusebius, Cyril (died 386), Ambrose, and Athanasius (died 373).

What were the criteria by which the Church Fathers, representing the five Christian patriarchates of Jerusalem, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch

and Rome, made their determination of canon texts? There were heated differences of opinion on this issue, learned and pious men continuing to press for certain texts well into the fourth century until the canon was established. Therefore, we would be mistaken to conclude that what are now noncanonical early Christian writings are necessarily spurious.

We are able to see why some of the writings were rejected, containing as they do liberal infusions of the fantastic, or others because they describe a youthful Jesus who was mean to his neighbors.

The Lost Books of the Bible (Gramercy Books, Random House, 1979), a collection of sixteen documents, all of which were in existence by the time of St. Jerome (331-420), the author of the Latin Vulgate Bible, is essentially a reprinting of *The Apocryphal New Testament*, first published in 1820. Little mention is made of these texts in modern times, but has entered and been divined by the public imagination, serving as the basis for themes in literature, art, and legend, and being of value for historical, theological, and esoteric inquiry.

For example, *The Gospel of the Birth of Mary*, known to exist, at least in title, in earliest Christian times, was attributed to St. Matthew and found in the works of St. Jerome. Paintings by Giotto and other Renaissance artists are based on incidents described in both this gospel and the *Protevangelion* (literally “the first good news”), an account of the birth of Mary and Jesus by James the Lesser, one of the original apostles and the first bishop of Jerusalem. This latter work enjoyed general credit in the Christian world, though controversies, arising over the alleged age of Joseph at the birth of Christ and the fact that he was a widower before his marriage to the Virgin, did not deter Epiphanius, Chrysostom (337-407), Cyril, and in fact all the Latin fathers until Ambrose, from quoting these details about Joseph, basing them on the accepted authority of the *Protevangelion*. We do know that history, particularly religious history, is often writ-



Fresco, 1304-06, Giotto (1266-1336), Scrovegni Chapel, Padua

Dream of Joachim

In the Protevangelion, an angel of the Lord speaks to Joachim in a dream in the desert where he was fasting and praying that his wife Anna, long barren, might be fruitful and bear a child. In the Gospel of the Birth of Mary the angel “stood by him with a prodigious light” and said, “Be not afraid.”

ten backward to conform past events to evolving doctrinal needs and the spirit of present times.

In the aforementioned two works the annunciation of Mary’s birth is first delivered to Joachim, then the long childless Anna, foretelling of the maiden who was to be raised in the temple from age three (immediately after weaning) in preparation for carrying the Son of the Most High. These two texts are also the source for the description of how Mary’s mate was to be chosen—among the rods of many proposed suitors, only Joseph’s will flower and the Spirit in the form of a dove shall alight on its tip. The virgin birth will take place “without any of the heat of lust,” and will thus be “holy, because it only is conceived without sin.”

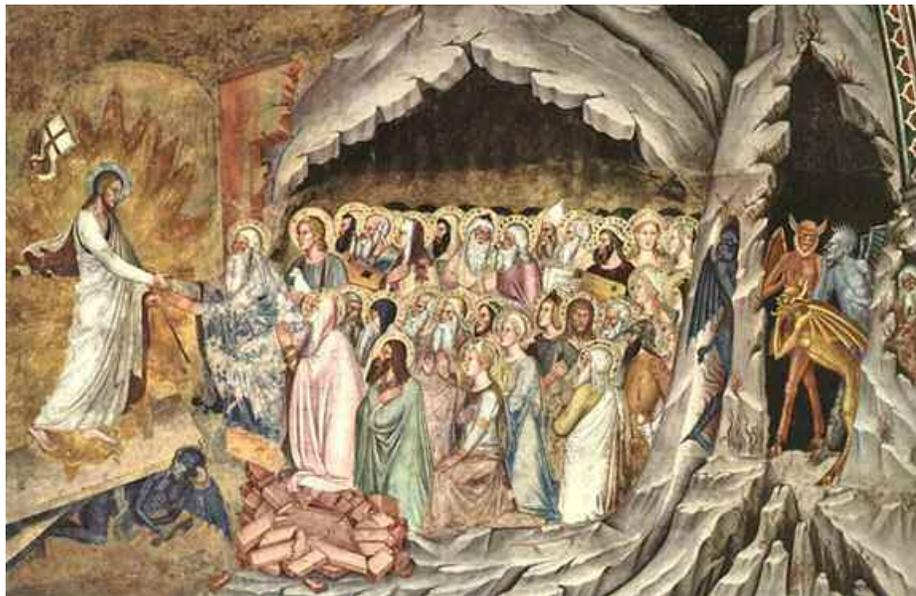
In these texts are found the details that Mary delivers her son in a shepherd’s cave and that a midwife is brought in by Joseph to assist at the delivery, as well as Salome. Earliest iconography of the Nativity depicts two women washing the newborn infant. Here too is the source for depictions of the ox in Nativity scenes, together with the ass that bore Mary to Bethlehem, it being this animal’s manger or eating trough in which the Christ Child is placed.

The first and second *Gospels of the Infancy of Jesus Christ* were esteemed by second century Gnostics and credited by Eusebius, Athanasius, Chrysostom, and others. Several stories found in these two gospels were once widely known believed, including the mysterious falling of idols upon the entry of the holy family into Egypt. Numerous miraculous were performed by Mary and the Child during this time. Two robbers, Titus, a humane thief, and Dumachus, who demand money of Joseph in order to pass, were thirty years later to become the two thieves crucified with Jesus.

A startling passage records Jesus' response to a question on astronomy given when he visited the temple at age twelve. He refers to "the number of the spheres and heavenly bodies, as also their triangular, square, and sextile aspect; their progressive and retrograde motion..." The Magi were astrologers. So too, it appears, was the youthful Jesus! Another intriguing passage relates that from the age of twelve "Jesus began to conceal his miracles and secret works...till he arrived to the end of his thirtieth year."

The *Gospel of Nicodemus*, formerly called the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*, though of great antiquity, is deemed by some to be a pious fraud of the third century. Nevertheless, it was used in churches at that time and was appealed to by several ancient authorities. This is the source for the story of Pilate's wife, Procla, urging him to have "nothing to do with that just man, for I have suffered much concerning him in a vision this night." To Pilate's question, "What is Truth?" Jesus answers, "Truth is from heaven." Pilate said, "Therefore truth is not on earth." Jesus said to Pilate, "Believe that truth is on earth among those, who, when they have the power of judgment, are governed by truth and form right judgment."

This gospel narrates Nicodemus' defense of



Fresco, Andrea da Firenze (1343-1377), S. Maria Novella, Florence

Descent into Limbo

The Gospel of Nicodemus provides the details that are illustrated in this painting. Christ as the King of Glory, bearing the ensign symbolizing His victory on the cross, breaks down the ramparts of hell, tramples on death, releases "the captives that were held in chains by original sin, and bringest them into their former liberty." "Taking hold of Adam by his right hand he ascended from hell, and all the saints of God followed him."

Christ before Pilate in the presence of scribes and Pharisees. Here also is the origin of the names of the two thieves, Demas and Gestas, and the bribing of the guard who saw an angel of God roll away the stone from the sepulcher.

Most significantly, in this gospel we find the account of Christ's descent into hell, a point of doctrine not entered into the Apostle's Creed until after 600 A.D. Christ delivered Adam, Seth, and all the saints by breaking hell's gates of brass and cutting the bars of iron in sunder. Then "the King of Glory trampling upon death, seized the prince of hell, deprived him of all his power, and took our earthly father Adam with him to his glory....And taking hold of Adam by his right hand, he ascended from hell, and all the saints of God followed him."

This last passage has served as the basis for one of the most popular icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its theme gave greater cause for celebration than Christ's resurrection *per se*, because before he ascended, he descended, interceding directly and immediately for captive man, delivering his soul from the dominion of death.

An *Epistle of Paul to the Laodicieans* and several

to the Roman philosopher Seneca are included in this collection, having been highly regarded by several early churchmen.

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* purports to have been written in the Apostolic age, and though possibly a forgery, it is still credited with authentic history. Thecla was a virgin who, though espoused, refused to marry after she heard and was converted by Paul's preaching. Her faith was severely tried on many occasions and rewarded by miraculous deliverances. The "first [female] martyr and apostle of God" lived a reclusive, monastic life until she was translated at the age of ninety.

These *Acts* also contain the earliest and most detailed description of Paul—a man "of a low stature, bald (or shaved) on the head, crooked thighs, handsome legs, hollow-eye, a crooked nose, full of grace; for sometimes he appeared as a man, sometimes he had the countenance of an angel."

Two *Epistles of Clement to the Corinthians* were, according to Eusebius, read in the assemblies of the primitive Church and were actually included in one of the ancient collections of the canon Scriptures. Clement (died 100 A.D.) was a disciple of Peter and afterward Bishop of Rome.

The *General Epistle of Barnabas* lays a greater claim to canonical authority than most other texts and was cited by many early Church Fathers as authentic. Barnabas was a companion of and fellow-preacher with Paul. He speaks Paul's distinctive language. Several examples: "He therefore that desires to be saved looketh not unto the man, but unto Him that dwelleth in him." "God has abolished [the old law] that the new law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is without the yoke of any necessity, might have the spiritual offering of men themselves."

Seven *Epistles of Ignatius* to various Christian centers are included in *Lost Books of the Bible*.

Bishop of Antioch and disciple of John, Ignatius was martyred in 107. His last words were, "I am Christ's grain of wheat which must first be crushed by the teeth of wild beasts before it can become pure bread."

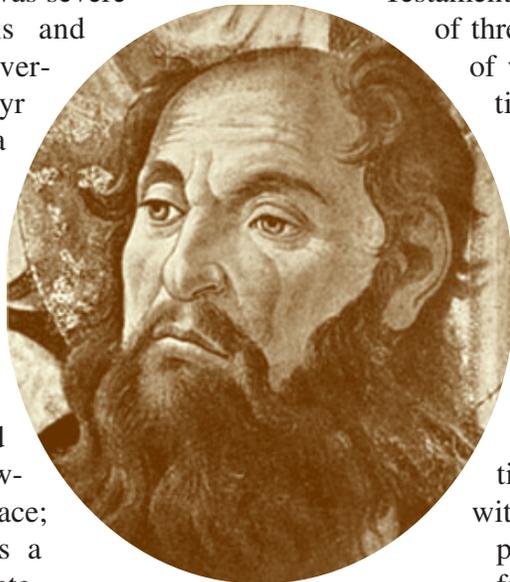
The *Shepherd of Hermas*, written by the brother of Rome's bishop Pius, is found attached to some of the most ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. Widely read and cited, it consists of three books: the first, called *Visions*, of which there are four; the second, titled *Commands*, numbering twelve; and the third, *Similitudes*, of which there are ten. Upon issuing the twelfth command, the Angel of Repentance, who is disguised as the shepherd Hermas, charges, "Thou hast now these commands, walk in them." The ten elaborate similitudes, actually didactic illustrations or similes, are introduced with the advice, "Live here as in a pilgrimage; for your city is far off from this city...in another country."

Finally, the lost *Gospel According to Peter*, witnessed to from the second century onward, is

said to have once held a place of honor comparable to that assigned to the four canonical gospels, from which it differs on twenty-nine details of fact, including: 1) It was Herod who gave the order for the execution. 2) Joseph of Arimathea was a friend of Pilate. 3) The disciples had to hide because it was feared they were set on burning the temple. 4) The centurion Petronius was given command to guard the tomb with a group of soldiers.

In the Preface to *The Lost Books of the Bible* Frank Crane writes that "History may be true, but in a sense tradition is even truer." An intuition of higher truth may inform the soul of folk memories to which strict reportage is blind. While absolute proof of the genuineness of these writings may be objectively impossible, the reader will no doubt find that much of what is presented in these works has the ring of truth. □

—Carl Swan



Detail from the altar-piece of St. Barnaby, Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510), Uffizi, Florence

St. Barnabas

Evangelist and companion of St. Paul