

The Lost/Suppressed Gospels

January 27, 2008

This is the third and last sermon in the “Hard Questions of Faith” Series. The question for this morning is one that I received last year from a young adult during the intense interest in the *DaVinci Code* and the lost or suppressed gospels. I enjoyed digging into her question of what these gospels were and why they weren’t included so much that I decided to do it again. I understand there was a study of the book, The Gnostic Gospels by Elaine Pagels here at MIUMC.

So, first question. “So what?” Why does it matter whether gospels were left out of the New Testament because they were lost or suppressed? Why do we have four gospels instead of 5 or 8?

One of the reason it matters is that we put our trust in the Jesus who is portrayed in the New Testament. If it turns out that the portrait of Jesus that we have in the gospels is distorted, or blatantly untrue, because of error or intention, it would have consequences for the basic claims of Christianity.

This notion that politics of the early church conspired to distort the truth by suppressing certain writings and that the Christian faith is built upon falsehood and secrecy, of truth suppressed, is a very 20th – 21st century North American interest. We are people who have been burned deeply by institutional betrayal in politics and in religion, much of the history about our nation that we have been taught is now being revised, and in this context, people – especially those who have been alienated from the institutional church have turned a very suspicious eye on the foundations of classic Christian faith. Every once in a while there is a sensational story in the media, “New Gospels Refute Basic Christian Beliefs!” I think it is important for you to have a basic grasp of the context of the early church and these writings.

Most of the gospels which were not included in the New Testament fit into a category of philosophy or world view called Gnosticism. Gnosis is the Greek word for “knowledge.” In the Christian community, there were people who called themselves Christians, and also referred to themselves as *gnostikoi*, people of knowledge. I want to talk this morning about that large movement in the second century.

Gnosticism had some very clear tenets.

1. The most striking feature of Gnosticism, which marks it out against the mainstream Jewish and early Christian thought is a deep and dark dualism. The present world of time, space, and matter is a bad place. It was created by an evil, malicious god. Therefore, this creation is bad, evil through and through. Human beings are made up of physical matter and therefore are bad.

2. The world we know was created by a bad, stupid god. There is another god, divine being, who is wise, pure, and true, who is quite different. Sometimes the Gnostics called this wise and true god “Father” which is very confusing for Christians, because the Gnostics did not mean the creator god. The god who made the world, they said, is at least foolish, at worst, malevolent.

3. Given this reality, the main aim of any right-thinking human being is to escape this wicked world, and the outward human existence. The human being has a spark of divinity within himself, and the goal of knowledge is to set that divinity free. Salvation means attaining deliverance from the material cosmos and all that it means. Then the person attains bliss.

4. The way to salvation is through knowledge, gnosis. Not the kind of knowledge you can be taught in school and study, not what you could learn in church. This special knowledge comes through attaining knowledge about the true god, about the true origin of the wicked world, and about one’s own true identity. This knowledge requires someone to reveal it. A revealer must come from the realms beyond, from the

pure upper spiritual world, to reveal to the chosen few that they have within themselves the spark of light, the divine identity hidden deep within their gross, shabby outward form.

So . . . we have a wicked world; a wicked god who made it; salvation coming as rescue from it; rescue coming through the imparting of secret knowledge, including the secret knowledge that we have the divine spark within us as our true being.

We find these four characteristics referred to in the arguments by early church leaders, the scripture found in the Egyptian Nag Hammadi library with many Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Judas.

Some Gnostics saw Jesus as the Revealer, able to give them secret knowledge. They collected and arranged his sayings. These collections were referred to by their authors or editors as “gospels.” But they were a very different kind of literature from the four gospels we know, and certainly had a different message. Unlike the gospels we know, they were, for the most part, collections of sayings, and had no stories about Jesus. Sometimes the collections claim they are secret information that Jesus gave to a favored few among the disciples. Sometimes they claim to be special sayings delivered after Jesus came back from the dead – however, they did not want to have anything to do with a bodily resurrection.

Most Jews 200 years before and after Jesus were emphasizing the kingdom of God coming on earth as in heaven, and the justice of God breaking in to history to make everything right, rescuing the created order from corruption and decay and giving people renewed bodies to live gloriously in the new world after suffering on God’s behalf. But Gnostics were teaching exactly the opposite. The true, pure god whom they worshipped was completely removed from this transient world of pain and suffering created by a malevolent or stupid, capricious god.

You can see this play out in the Gnostic Gospel of Judas, where Judas is the hero. Jesus asks Judas to betray him in order that Jesus can be freed of his body and escape the world. Jesus, on the cross, has no pain, because it is another person on the cross, and Jesus, in heaven, is scornfully laughing at the disciples and the others who are clinging to the cross and crying. He has shed his human matter as if it were clothing, and he is free. But there isn't any good humor in his laugh, or compassion or love for those he leaves behind.

Now, the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels, Jesus of the earliest letters of Paul – this Jesus did not believe that the world of space, time, and matter was a giant blunder of an incompetent and hostile god, but that it was the world made by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the one true and only God, and this God was bringing history to a great climax through which God would establish sovereign rule in and for the world. The coming of God's kingdom was never about people being snatched away from the wicked world. (The teaching of Rapture and the popular Left Behind series have more in common with these Gnostic gospels than with the message of Jesus Christ.) The Lord's Prayer "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" would have horrified any self-respecting Gnostic.

The canonical gospels are Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Some of the Gnostic gospels we have are Thomas, Philip, Peter, Mary, and Judas. They don't tell us anything new about Jesus or about the disciples, though they might contain some sayings that are authentic that we don't find elsewhere. The New Testament gospels were probably written between 70 and 90 A.D., some scholars say as early as 60-80 A.D. We don't hear about the Gnostic gospels until about 150 A.D., 60-70 years after the gospel of John. They are very important as history, and as documents to learn more about the religious outlook and worldview of the time. But they are not helpful in telling us anything more about Jesus or any of the disciples whose names they bear.

The gospels we know are primarily story, with teaching interspersed within an overall storyline. There are tensions, and a definite climax. The Gnostic gospels, like the

Gospel of Thomas, are collections of sayings with no story line. The canonical gospels are news, proclamation – something has happened in the world and it has changed the world. The Gnostic gospels are more like advice. Gnostic gospels offer a list of teachings about spiritual practices and how to attain a disembodied bliss.

Whatever the “Jesus” of these Gnostic writings has done, the main thing about him is not that he has come to rescue the world or heal or change it, but to give secret teaching about how to escape it.

So, why are they called gospels, in the first place? James Robinson who has edited, published and interpreted the Nag Hammadi and other texts over the past 50 years says that the original authors would not have called them gospels. They would have called them collections of sayings. But in the effort to get the accreditation of the church on a par with other gospels that were gaining authority and canonicity, this collection of sayings was secondarily named a gospel. (The Gospel of Judas is an exception, of being a story-line rather than a collection of sayings.)

The four gospels we have now were established as canon between 150-180. We didn't have agreement on the whole New Testament, but the gospels were recognized as four. Varieties of writings circulated, but that does not mean that there was no discernment about which were authoritative.

There is a modern-day assumption that cunning church leaders were working to consolidate their power and that's why the Gnostic gospels were expelled. The way the story has been told in sensationalized versions takes things out of context. And the context is just the reverse from what is often presented.

Gnostics had no investment in the world or God's rule breaking into the rule. They posed no threat to the established order, they did not believe in martyrdom, easily gave the allegiance demanded by Rome, and may have turned over names of other Christians. Gnostic Christians were not the people who were persecuted and martyred.

The people who were being burned at the stake, fried on hot irons, thrown to wild beasts, pulled apart on the rack – these people were not thinking of political victories of orthodoxy over heresy. They were following their crucified Lord.

The Christians who died in Gaul in 177 and the thousands who died around the whole Roman Empire in that century were not reading Thomas, or Peter, or Mary or the Gospel of Judas. They were reading, praying, quoting, singing Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They had a vivid faith in Jesus not as the revealer of secret truths to help them escape the wicked world, but as the one who announced God's rule on earth, and they died for it.

That's why we have four gospels in the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And that's why the Gospels of Judas, Mary, Thomas, and Peter are not.