

What is The Gospel of Thomas?

by Dr. Norman Geisler

The Claim of the Critics

Some radical critics of the New Testament claim that the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas is equal or superior to the New Testament and that it does not support the resurrection of Christ. The so-called Jesus Seminar places the Gospel of Thomas in their otherwise severely truncated Bible. Both stances are serious challenges to the historic Christian faith.

The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, near Cairo in 1945 and was translated into English in 1977. While some have attempted to date parts of it earlier, the Gospel of Thomas is most reliably dated no earlier than A.D. 140-170. It contains 114 secret sayings of Jesus. Defenders of the Gospel of Thomas include Walter Baur, Frederick Wisse, A. Powell Davies, and Elaine Pagels.

An Evaluation of the Credibility of the Gospel of Thomas

The best way to evaluate the credibility of the Gospel of Thomas is by way of comparison to the New Testament Gospels, which often the same critics have grave doubts about. When this comparison is made, the Gospel of Thomas comes up seriously short.

The Canonical Gospels Are Much Earlier. Assuming the widely accepted dates of the Synoptic Gospels (ca. A.D. 60-80), the Gospel of Thomas falls nearly a century short. Indeed, there is evidence of even earlier dates for some Gospels, as even some liberal scholars admit.¹ O. C. Edwards asserts of the Gospel of Thomas and the canonical Gospels that “As historical reconstructions there is no way the two can claim equal credentials.”² And Joseph Fitzmyer adds, “Time and again, she is blind to the fact that she is ignoring a good century of Christian existence in which these ‘gnostic Christians’ were simply not around.”³

The Gospel of Thomas Is Dependent on the Canonical Gospels. Even if the Gospel of Thomas could be shown to contain some authentic statements of Jesus, “no convincing case has been made that any given saying of Jesus in the Gospels depends on a saying in the Gospel of Thomas.”⁴ Rather, the reverse is true since the Gospel of Thomas presupposes truths found earlier in the canoni-

cal Gospels.

The Gospel of Thomas Portrays a Second-Century Gnosticism. The Gospel of Thomas is influenced by the kind of Gnosticism prevalent in the second century. For instance, it puts into the mouth of Jesus these unlikely and demeaning words: “Every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”⁵

The Gospel of Thomas’s Lack of Narrative Does Not Prove Jesus Did No Miracles. The fact that the author(s) of the Gospel of Thomas did not include narratives of Jesus does not mean they disbelieved in Jesus’ miracles. The book seems to be a collection of Jesus’ sayings rather than his deeds.

The Canonical Gospels Are More Historically Trustworthy. There are numerous reasons why the New Testament Gospels are more trustworthy than the Gnostic ones. First, the earliest Christians were meticulous in preserving Jesus’ words and deeds. Second, the Gospel writers were close to the eyewitnesses and pursued the facts (Luke 1:1-4). Third, there is good evidence that the Gospel writers were honest reporters. Fourth, the overall picture of Jesus presented in the Gospels is the same.

The Basic New Testament Canon Was Formed in the First Century. Contrary to claims of the critics, the basic New Testament canon was formed in the first century. The only books in dispute have no apologetic effect on the argument for the reliability of the historical material used to establish the deity of Christ.

The New Testament itself reveals that a collection of books existed in the first century. Peter speaks of having Paul’s epistles (2 Peter 3:15-16). In fact, he considered them on a par with Old Testament “Scripture.” Paul had access to Luke’s Gospel, and quotes it in 1 Timothy 5:18. The churches were instructed to send their epistle on to other churches (Col. 4:16).

Beyond the New Testament, there are extrabiblical canonical lists that support the existence of a New Testament canon.⁶ Indeed, all the Gospels and Paul’s basic epistles are represented on these lists. Even the heretical canon of the Gnostic Marcion (ca. A.D. 140) had the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul’s epistles, including 1 Corinthians.

The Second-Century Fathers Support the Canonical Gospels. The second-century Fathers cited a common body of books. This includes all the crucial books that support the historicity of Christ and his resurrection, namely, the Gospels, Acts, and 1 Corinthians. Clement of Roman (A.D. 95) cited the Gospels (*Corinthians*, 13, 42, 46). Ignatius (ca. 110-115) cited Luke 24:39 (*Smyrnaeans* 3). Polycarp (ca. 115) cited all the Synoptic Gospels (*Philippians* 2, 7). The *Didache* often cites the Synoptic Gospels (1, 3, 8, 9, 15-16). The *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 135) cites Matthew 22:14). Papias (ca. 125-140) in the *Oracles* speaks of Matthew, Mark (following Peter), and John (last) who wrote Gospels. He says three times that Mark made no errors. What is more, the Fathers considered the Gospels and Paul’s epistles to be on a par with the inspired Old Testament.

Thus the Fathers vouched for the accuracy of the canonical Gospels in the early second century, well before the Gospel of Thomas was even written.

The Resurrection Account. The Gospel of Thomas does acknowledge Jesus' resurrection.

In fact, the living, resurrected Christ himself speaks in it (34:25-27; 45:1-16). True, it does not stress the resurrection, but this is to be expected since it is primarily a sayings source rather than historical narration. Furthermore, the Gnostic theological bias against matter would downplay the bodily resurrection.

Conclusion

The evidence for the authenticity of the Gospel of Thomas does not even compare with that for the New Testament. The New Testament dates from the first century; the Gospel of Thomas, the second. The New Testament is verified by many lines of evidence, including self-references, early canonical lists, thousands of citations by the early Fathers, and the well-established dates for the Synoptic Gospels.

(From *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book House, 1999. Used with permission.)

Notes

¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), passim.

² O. C. Edwards, *New Review of Books and Religion* (May 1980), p. 27.

³ Joseph Fitzmyer, *America* (February 16, 1980), p. 123.

⁴ Gregory Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), p. 118.

⁵ Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶ See Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), p. 294.