

ARE THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPELS ANONYMOUS?

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(Unless otherwise noted, all italicized quotations are from Lee Strobel, The Case For Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation Of The Evidence For Jesus, 20-46 (Kindle Edition, Interview With Dr. Craig Blomberg); Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan)

Anonymous Gospels?

“He sat back and continued. “It’s important to acknowledge that strictly speaking, the gospels are anonymous.”

Are the Gospels anonymous?

For a document to be “genuine,” it means that it was written by the author to whom it is attributed. Many believe that the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are actually anonymous. As such, many claim that they were written by forgers decades or centuries after the time of Christ.

What evidence is there that the New Testament Gospels are genuine?

Superscript

The superscript has reference to the “titles” placed above the Gospels in the Greek manuscripts. For example, the superscript on the Gospel of Matthew reads, “The Gospel According To Matthew.”

The superscript on the Gospels is as old as the Greek manuscripts themselves!

“The first and perhaps biggest problem for the theory of the anonymous Gospels is this: no anonymous copies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John have ever been found. They do not exist. As far as we know, they never have.

Instead, as New Testament scholar Simon Gathercole has demonstrated, the ancient manuscripts are unanimous in attributing these books to the apostles and their companions....Notice three things about this evidence. First, there is a striking absence of any anonymous Gospel manuscripts. That is because they don't exist. Not even one. The reason this is so significant is that one of the most basic rules in the study of New Testament manuscripts (a practice known as textual criticism) is that you go back to the earliest and best Greek copies to see what they actually say. Not what you wish they said, but what they actually say. When it comes to the titles of the Gospels, not only the earliest and best manuscripts, but all of the ancient manuscripts—without exception, in every language—attribute the four Gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. 14 Second, notice that there is some variation in the form of the titles (for example, some of the later manuscripts omit the word “Gospel”). However, as New Testament scholar Michael Bird notes, there is “absolute uniformity” in the authors to whom each of the books is attributed. 15 One reason this is so important is because some scholars will claim that the Greek manuscripts support the idea that the titles of the Gospels were added later....Third—and this is important—notice also that the titles are present in the most ancient copies of each Gospel we possess, including the earliest fragments, known as papyri (from the papyrus leaves of which they were made). For example, the earliest Greek manuscript of the Gospel of Matthew contains the title “The Gospel according to Matthew” (Greek euangelion kata Matthaion) (Papyrus 4). Likewise, the oldest Greek copy of the beginning of the Gospel of Mark starts with the title “The Gospel according to Mark” (Greek euangelion kata Markon)....Finally, the earliest manuscript of the Gospel of John that exists is only a tiny fragment of the Gospel. Fortunately, however, the first page is preserved, and it reads: “The Gospel according to John” (Greek euangelion kata Iōannēn) (Papyrus 66). In short, the earliest and best copies of the four Gospels are unanimously attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There is absolutely no manuscript evidence—and thus no actual historical evidence—to support the claim that “originally” the Gospels had no titles.” (Brant Pitre, *The Case For Jesus: The Biblical And Historical Evidence For Christ*, 16-18 (Kindle Edition); New York; Image)

Church Fathers

The church fathers were the disciples who were converted by the Apostles and became important leaders in the second century church. Johnson writes:

“Clement of Rome was a convert of Barnabas on his first trip to Rome. He remained behind when Barnabas returned to Jerusalem. Taking a year to sell his business in Rome, he then moved to Jerusalem. He studied mainly under Peter, but was also an eyewitness of Paul and John (Phil 4:3). He wrote a work, called 1 Clement, to the Corinthians for the sake of correction, about AD 95....The Apostle John had two main disciples, Polycarp and Ignatius. Ignatius was born in AD 35 and became the second bishop of Antioch. He studied under several of the apostles and was martyred at Rome between AD 98 and AD 107. He wrote some of his epistles before the Apostle John was exiled to the Island of Patmos, so his writings pre-date the book of Revelation....Irenaeus was born in AD 130 and became the bishop of Lyons, France. He wrote a five-volume set called Against Heresies. In this work he detailed all of the cults of his day with their true history, along with witnessing tips for them. He testified that he was an eyewitness of both John and Polycarp. He confronted Victor of Rome saying he had no authority to change doctrine. He died about AD 200. (Ken Johnson, Ancient Church Fathers: What The Disciples Of The Apostles Taught, 12 (Kindle Edition))

Consider some of the following testimony from the church fathers:

“The same authority of the apostolic churches will afford defense of the other Gospels also, which we possess equally through their means, and according to their usage. I mean the Gospels of John and Matthew—while that which Mark published may be affirmed to be Peter’s, whose interpreter Mark was. For men usually ascribe Luke’s form of the Gospel to Paul.” (Tertullian (c. 207, W), 3.350)

"It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds. Now, the church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the church is the Gospel. Therefore, it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and renewing men afresh.” (Irenaeus (c. 180, E/ W), 1.428.)

“The Gospel according to Matthew was written to the Jews. For they laid particular stress upon the fact that Christ is of the seed of David. Matthew also, who had a still greater desire [to prove this], took particular pains to afford them convincing proof that Christ is of the seed of David. Therefore, Matthew begins with His genealogy.” (Irenaeus (c. 180, E/ W), 1.573)

“Having become the interpreter of Peter, Mark wrote down accurately whatever he remembered. However, he did not relate the sayings or deeds of Christ in exact order. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter. Now, Peter accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord’s sayings. Accordingly, Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For one thing, he took special care not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements.” (Papias (c. 120, E), 1.155, as quoted by Eusebius)

“After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also handed down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter.” (Irenaeus (c. 180, E/ W), 1.414)

“Such a ray of godliness shone forth on the minds of Peter’s hearers, that they were not satisfied with a single hearing or with the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation. So, with all manner of entreaties, they pleaded with Mark, to whom the Gospel is ascribed (he being the companion of Peter) to leave in writing a record of the teaching that had been delivered to them verbally. And they did not let the man alone until they had prevailed upon him. And so to them, we owe the Scripture called the “Gospel of Mark.” On learning what had been done, through the revelation of the Spirit, it is said that the apostle was delighted with the enthusiasm of the men and approved the composition for reading in the churches. Clement gives the narrative in the sixth book of the Sketches.” (Eusebius, citing Clement of Alexandria (c. 195, E), 2.579)

“The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke. . . . Now, he himself did not see the Lord in the flesh. And he, according as he was able to accomplish it, began his narrative with the birth of John. . . . Moreover, the Acts of all the apostles are comprised by Luke in one book . . . because these

different events took place when he was personally present. The principle on which he wrote was to write only of what fell under his own notice. And he shows this clearly by the omission of the martyrdom of Peter, and also of the journey of Paul, when Paul went from the city of Rome to Spain.” (Muratorian Fragment (c. 200, W), 5.603)

“The fourth Gospel is that of John, one of the disciples. When his fellow-disciples and bishops entreated him, he said, “Fast now with me for the space of three days, and let us recount to each other whatever may be revealed to each of us.” On the same night, it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that John should narrate all things in his own name—as they called them to mind.” (Muratorian Fragment (c. 200, W), 5.603)

“For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them.” (Justin Martyr)

The Gnostics

The Gnostics were a group of heretics who tried to combine Christianity with pagan Greek religion. Several Gnostics scriptures were found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

“The Nag Hammadi Scriptures is a collection of thirteen papyrus codices—bound books, not scrolls—that were buried near the city of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt most likely in the second half of the fourth century CE. They had been brought together earlier in that century and then buried in a jar for safekeeping at the foot of the Jabal al-Tarif, a cliff close to the hamlet Hamra Dum. In all, there are some fifty-two tractates in the collection of Nag Hammadi codices, and since six are duplicates, there are forty-six different texts. Of these, forty-one are texts that were not previously extant, but ten are very fragmentary, so that one may say that the discovery has added about thirty-one new texts to our knowledge of religion and philosophy in antiquity. This is indeed a dramatic escalation of source material on early Christian, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Sethian, and Valentinian thought. The precise dates of the composition of these texts are uncertain, but most are from the second and third centuries CE. All were originally written in Greek and translated into Coptic.” (Marvin W. Meyer & James M. Robinson, The Nag Hammadi

Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume, 164-170 (Kindle Edition); HarperOne)

Studying the Nag Hammadi texts, we find the following references to the New Testament Scriptures.

Chart Of New Testament Allusions From Gnostic Holy Scriptures Discovered
In Nag Hammadi Egypt

Gnostic Work	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	Other New Testament References	Totals
The Prayer Of The Apostle Paul	0	0	0	3	4	7
The Secret Book Of James	19	13	9	5	34	80
The Gospel Of Truth	10	3	7	12	26	46
The Treatise On Resurrection	3	2	3	1	11	20
The Tripartite Tractate	10	3	6	5	14	38
The Secret Book Of John	0	0	0	2	6	8
The Gospel Of Thomas With The Greek Gospel Of Thomas	88	39	79	15	11	232
The Gospel Of Philip	16	5	6	9	9	45
The Nature Of The Rulers	0	0	0	2	3	5

On The Origin Of The World	4	4	2	1	23	34
Exegesis On The Soul	2		2	1	15	20
The Book Of Thomas	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Holy Book Of The Great Invisible Spirit	1	1	1	1	1	5
Eugnostos The Blessed	0	0	0	0	4	4
The Wisdom Of Jesus Christ	9	9	6	4	0	28
The Dialogue Of The Savior	6	0	1	0	3	10
The Revelation Of Paul	0	0	0	0	4	4
The First Revelation Of James	1	2	2	4	2	11
The Second Revelation Of James	0	0	0	1	0	1
The Revelation Of Adam	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Acts Of Peter And The Twelve Apostles	35	1	1	4	1	42
Thunder	0	0	0	0	3	3
Authoritative Discourse	0	0	0	1	3	4
The Concept Of Our Great Power	1	1	1	0	7	10

Excerpt From Plato's Republic	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Discourse On The Eighth And Ninth	1	1	1			3
The Prayer Of Thanksgivin g	0	0	0	0	0	0
Excerpt From The Perfect Discourse	1	1	0	0	0	2
The Paraphrase Of Shem	0	0	0	0	7	7
The Second Discourse Of Great Seth	12	7	6	8	1	34
The Revelation Of Peter	13	4	14	2	6	39
The Teachings Of Silvanus	6	1	2	8	24	41
The Three Steles Of Seth	0	0	0	0	0	0
Zostrianos	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Letter Of Peter To Philip	7	6	4	5	10	32
Melchizedek	3	3	2	2	13	23
The Thought Of Norea	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Testimony Of Truth	15	9	13	9	15	61
Marsanes	0	0	0	0	0	0

The Interpretation Of Knowledge	4	2	3		14	23
Valentinian Exposition With Valentinian Liturgical Readings	0	0	0	0	0	0
Allogones The Stranger	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hypsiphron	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Sentences Of Sextus	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Forms Of First Thought	0	0	0	2	1	3
The Gospel Of Mary With The Greek Gospel Of Mary	12	9	6	6	3	36
The Act Of Peter	0	0	0	0	2	2
The Gospel Of Judas	3	3	3	2	1	12
The Book Of Allogenes	1	1	1	0	0	3
Totals	318	82	122	115	281	978

Let's notice several things.

What Do The Nag Hammadi Texts Teach Us About The Genuineness Of The New Testament Scriptures?

From studying the Gnostic scriptures, it is absolutely clear that the traditional authorship of the New Testament Books was clearly established and

accepted. Several quotations from the Nag Hammadi documents confirm this fact.

For example:

Secret Book Of James 2, 7-3-38-“The twelve disciples were all sitting together, recalling what the Savior had said to each of them, whether in a hidden or an open manner, and organizing it in books.”

Treatise On The Resurrection 45, 23-46-2-“As the apostle⁸ said of him, we suffered with him, we arose with him, we ascended with him.”

There are literally hundreds of references to the New Testament Scriptures in the Nag Hammadi library; and never is there a hint of a suspicion that the New Testament Books were forgeries. Instead, the Gnostics argued that they possessed superior knowledge to the Apostles of Jesus.

As McGarvey says of the Gnostic teacher named Marcion:

“His teaching demonstrates the previous general recognition of this Gospel and these ten Epistles, while his antagonism to the other Gospels and the writings in general of the other Apostles, demonstrates the existence of those. Moreover, the ground on which he rejected the latter was not their want of genuineness, but, admitting their genuineness, he denies the apostolic authority of their authors.” (J.W. McGarvey, *Evidences Of Christianity*, 75 (emphasis added); Indianapolis, IN: Faith And Facts Publishers)

What Do The Nag Hammadi Scriptures Teach Us About The New Testament Canon?

What is more, several of the scholars who have helped to translate the Nag Hammadi scriptures have noted how the Nag Hammadi books rely on the New Testament Scriptures (showing that the New Testament is older than the Nag Hammadi books, and was well-known and authoritative).

For example:

“This impressive composition, which adroitly chains together and inventively elaborates a series of striking images in a discourse interwoven with subtle allusions to New Testament texts, is no doubt the work of an important figure.” (Einar Thomassen & Marvin Meyer, Introduction To Gospel Of Truth, Marvin W. Meyer & James M. Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume, 33 (Kindle Edition); HarperCollins E-Books)

“As Michel Tardieu suggests, the author of the tractate has utilized his source, Eugnostos, within an artificial framework borrowed from the New Testament and apocryphal literature emphasizing the revelation of Christ to his disciples after the resurrection.” (Madeleine Scpello, Introduction To The Wisdom Of Jesus Christ, in Marvin Meyer & James M. Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume, 285 (Kindle Edition); HarperCollins E-Books)

“The vocabulary of the Gospel of Philip includes expressions drawn from both the New Testament and the Jewish scriptures.” (Madeline Scopello & Marvin Meyer, Introduction To Gospel Of Philip, Marvin Meyer & James M. Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume, 159 (Kindle Edition); HarperCollins E-Books)

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“It is interesting that most of these reinterpretations of the Christology of the apostolic church in Three Forms of First Thought seem to depend on key passages from the Gospel of John to score their point in any acute fashion.” (John D. Turner, Introduction To Three Forms Of First Thought, in Marvin W. Meyer & James M. Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised

and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume by Marvin W. Meyer, James M. Robinson, 713 (Kindle Edition); HarperOne)

The canon of the New Testament had been established long before the close of the first century A.D., and this all argues strongly in favor the genuineness and credibility of the New Testament Scriptures and the Lord Jesus Christ that they reveal.

What Do The Nag Hammadi Scriptures Teach Us About The Preservation Of Gnostic Works By The Church?

A study of the Gnostic scriptures of Nag Hammadi reveals that they had many grievances with the Christians; however, they never accused Christians of intentionally corrupting or misrepresenting their works. Indeed, the translators of the different Gnostic books from Nag Hammadi discuss in detail the integrity of the church fathers in preserving these works.

For example:

“The statements found in the answers are more or less identical with liturgical formulas recorded by Irenaeus of Lyon (Against Heresies 1.21.5) for the group of Valentinians that he calls Marcosians and later on by Epiphanius of Salamis (Panarion 36.3.1–6) for a group he calls Heracleonites.” (Wolf-Peter Funk, Introduction To The First Revelation Of James, in Marvin W. Meyer & James Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume, 322 (Kindle Edition); HarperOne) :

“The second tractate of Codex XI is an untitled treatise that in scope and vocabulary resembles the Valentinian treatises presented by the church fathers.” (Einar Thomassen, Introduction To Valentinian Exposition With Valentinian Liturgical Readings, in Marvin W. Meyer & James Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume, 663 (Kindle Edition); HarperOne)

“The Gospel of Judas was discovered in the 1970s and was first published in 2006,¹ but the title was known from Irenaeus of Lyon (Against Heresies

1.31.1), who denounced the Gospel of Judas in around 180 as a text read by people he called Gnostics and included in his denunciation a brief description of its contents. His précis fits quite well the Coptic translation of the Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos.” (Marvin Meyer, Introduction To Gospel Of Judas, in Marvin W. Meyer & James Robinson, The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume, 755 (Kindle Edition); HarperOne)

Now, what may we conclude regarding the genuineness of the New Testament from all of this?

The evidence from the early sects (such as the Gnostics) provides powerful testimony regarding the genuineness of the New Testament, the early date of the canon, and of the faithfulness and integrity of the church fathers in their reproductions of Gnostic works.

Early Enemies Of Christianity

The earliest and most well-trained enemies of Christianity acknowledged the genuineness of the New Testament Scriptures.

“All the early adversaries of Christianity granted the genuineness of the New Testament books. These adversaries were men of talent and learning. By worldly interests and intense hatred of Christianity they were urged to use against it every possible weapon. The fact that they did not show its sacred books to be spurious is proof that they were not able to do so....”*Testimony of Julian*. The Emperor Julian composed his work against Christianity in 361. He united talent, learning, power, and persecuting zeal. If anything could have been said against the genuineness of the New Testament he would have been eager to make his attack from this side, but he did not. He bore witness to the genuineness of the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. He concedes their early date and quotes them as the genuine works of their reputed authors. He quotes Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians. His whole attack assumes the genuineness and credibility of the New Testament...”².
Testimony of Hierocles. In 303 he was president of Bithynia; a cruel persecutor, and a sarcastic writer. He concedes the genuineness, and confines his efforts to the hunting up of internal flaws and contradictions. He refers to six of the eight authors of the New Testament. 3. Testimony of Porphyry.

He was the most severe and formidable adversary of the primitive church..."He wrote about 270. He was well acquainted with the New Testament. He has plain references to Matthew, Mark, John, Acts, and Galatians. There is no trace of a suspicion that the sacred books were spurious. That he would have made this point, if possible, is evident from the fact that he did attack the book of Daniel in this manner...4. "Testimony of Celsus. He flourished about 176, and about 76 years after the death of the Apostle John. What we know about his work entitled 'The True Word' has been preserved by Origen. More than eighty quotations, made by him from the New Testament, have been thus preserved. His whole argument proceeds upon the concessions that the books he quoted were in existence, were held in high esteem by the churches, and were genuine. Thus by a plain and independent path we can trace the New Testament back to the Apostolic Age. It is also a remarkable fact that these bitter enemies are made to bear this unwilling, but decisive, testimony." (Harvey W. Everest, *The Divine Demonstration: A Textbook Of Christian Evidence*, 54-55; Nashville, TN; Gospel Advocate Company)

Chart Of Evidences Regarding Genuineness Of New Testament Scriptures

Evidence From Superscript	Titles Above The Gospels
Evidence From The Church Fathers	Tertullian; Irenaeus; Papias; Eusebius; Clement Of Alexandria; Muratorian Fragment; Justin Martyr
Evidence From The Gnostic Texts Discovered At Nag Hammadi Egypt	The Prayer Of The Apostle Paul; Secret Book Of James; Gospel Of Truth; Treatise On The Resurrection; The Tripartite Tractate; The Secret Book Of John; The Gospel Of Thomas; Gospel Of Philip; Nature Of The Rulers; On The Origin Of The World; Exegesis On The Soul; Holy Book Of The Great Invisible Spirit; Eugnostos The Blessed; Wisdom Of Jesus Christ; Dialogue Of The Savior; Revelation Of Paul; First Revelation Of James; Second Revelation Of James; Acts Of Peter And The Twelve Apostles; Thunder; Authoritative Discourse; Concept Of Our Great Power; Discourse On The Eighth And Ninth; Excerpt From The Perfect Discourse; Paraphrase Of Shem; Second Discourse Of Seth; Revelation Of Peter; Teachings Of Silvanus; Letter Of Peter To Philip; Melchizedek; Testimony Of Truth; Interpretation Of Knowledge; Three Forms Of First Thought; Gospel Of Mary; Act Of Peter; Gospel Of Judas; Book Of Allogenes.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

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