

Bible and Non-Bible: Some introductory notes on the Gospels of Thomas

When someone talks about Bible Christianity, two assumptions seem to be implied: 1) Everything in the Bible is completely consistent with everything else in the Bible; 2) Everyone is agreed on what books are in the Bible. Both assumptions are questionable. The most obvious point (which challenges both assumptions) is that Jews “own” the Old Testament, but don’t “own” the New Testament.....and a lot of Jewish teaching is developed from rather than actually found in the Old Testament. Jesus was attacked because He was forthright in criticising some traditional Jewish teaching which was seen as Bible-based. Even the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin) of the time of Jesus was quite bitterly divided over e.g. the existence of angels, and the reality of an afterlife,,,, as the New Testament bears witness.

There were long (and continuing) arguments about what books to include in the Old Testament and similarly for the New Testament. With both Testaments, and with both included and excluded books, there was a tradition of naming books after someone who almost (or indeed absolutely) certainly did not write them. Nobody saw anything wrong with this: the books were seen as trying to capture what that person might have said or done.

Quite often, books that didn’t make it into the final Bible text were recognised by the excluders as still being useful.....and well worth reading.

My “Message” Bible has 39 Old Testament books – including 5 “books of Moses”, 12 “history books”, 5 “Wisdom” books, and 17 “Prophets” books. It has 27 New Testament books – including 4 Gospels, the Book of Acts, 21 Letters, and the Book of Revelation. My Jerusalem Bible has 27 New Testament books, but 45 Old Testament books - the extras being Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Ecclesiasticus. These extra books are sometimes called Apocryphal: a word which means various things, but in particular “Not in the official Hebrew list of Old Testament books. The full Apocrypha list, including part-books, is longer.

The original King James/ Authorised Version Bible included the Apocryphal books. Their exclusion from most (?) English Bibles is quite recent.

The two Thomas Gospel books are among a surprisingly large number of books that didn’t make it into any Bible but circulated in the early centuries of Christianity, and were taken seriously. These books are generally short. The Gospel of Thomas comes from the Gnostic tradition – that is the tradition in which “secret knowledge” was highly valued. “I know what you don’t.” But you will recognise a great deal of the Thomas Gospel, because it is familiar material from the Gospels you do know well. The extra bits are sometimes intriguing. The Thomas named here is presented as the Apostle we know as Doubting Thomas, but identified as brother (indeed twin) of Jesus.

The Childhood of Jesus Thomas Gospel is presented as what a Jesus family member might have known about the (largely hidden) years of Jesus until His public ministry began. We might well see it as interesting (sometimes maybe misguided) speculation about what we have in the Bible proper only Birth, escape to and return from Egypt, and an age 12 visit to Jerusalem.