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How Many Gospels Are There?

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How can we be certain that the Gospel accounts contained in the New Testament are both authentic and authoritative?

The discovery of gospel accounts other than those found in the [New Testament](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality-new-testament/18198.aspx>), many of them among the Nag Hammadi documents uncovered in Egypt in the 1940s, sparked a veritable firestorm, and not only in theological circles. Popular writers have also taken up the debate so that it has gained traction even among the general population. More recently the publishing of the [Gospel of Judas](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality/the_gospel_of_Judas/3126.aspx) (http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/religion_and_spirituality/the_gospel_of_Judas/3126.aspx) has added fuel to the fire.

Many claim that these other gospels, a good number of which were written in the second and third centuries, have been deliberately marginalized and should have had a place in the canon of Scripture. According to this view, these works were excluded in part because they did not accord with orthodox views on such wide-ranging subjects as Jesus, church structure and women's place in the church.

How did the Christian church, apparently drowning in a sea of Gospels, finally end up with only four? ... Many perhaps picture councils of bad-tempered bishops voting on which books to include in the Bible one minute, and voting to execute heretics the next.

CHARLES E. HILL, *WHO CHOSE THE GOSPELS? PROBING THE GREAT GOSPEL CONSPIRACY* (2010)

A statement by Elaine Pagels, a respected authority in the study of the Gnostic gospels, expresses the sentiment well: "If [church leaders] suppressed so much of early Christian history, what else don't we know about? What else is there to be known? ... As a historian, I think it's a really important question because the answer means a great deal."

Has material been suppressed? How can we be certain that the [Gospel accounts](http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-gospel-of-jesus-4042) (<http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/series-index-the-gospel-of-jesus-4042>) contained in the New Testament are both authentic and authoritative, and that omission of these additional accounts was no mistake—deliberate or otherwise?

CREATIVE IDEAS

The concern expressed by Pagels and others is valid if the books that make up the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, were selected for inclusion centuries after being written, as many people believe. One popular idea is that the final makeup was engineered by order of Emperor Constantine in the fourth century—an idea popularized by Dan Brown in his 2003 bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* (</visionmedia/religion-and-spirituality/da-vinci-code-4201>).

And what about the number? By whose authority do we have *four* Gospels? It's easy to provide an answer from the perspective of creative conjecture, and indeed many do. In fact, it was various Catholic Church Fathers, beginning with Irenaeus in the second century, who first put forward explanations for the number four. Today their theories are still popular, though most have very little to do with the Bible itself or have only a tangential relationship to it; for example, that the four Gospels correlate with the four "living creatures" the apostle John saw in a vision (Revelation 4:7), or with the four directions of the compass or the idea that the world is made up of four elements. Anyone can find a group of four items that they feel is somehow applicable. But all such explanations are based on human reasoning, not on any historical authority.

People have also argued that the four Gospels of the New Testament were written by apostles, whereas other gospels weren't. But not only were the Gospel writers Mark and Luke not apostles, but as its name implies, the noncanonical Gospel of Peter purports to be the work of an apostle (a claim broadly rejected by scholars, however).

Still others defend the final selection by saying they were written *on behalf of* the apostles. Indeed, there is some internal evidence in the New Testament to support that idea. The problem with reasoning from that point of view is that most people don't accept the Bible as authoritative in the first place. So what validity does internal evidence have on its own?

EARLY ACCEPTANCE

What we need is to establish the authority behind the New Testament Canon. How credible can any explanation be unless the person offering it can draw on the authority of whoever established the collection in the first place?

In fact, as we will see, the question of which Gospel accounts were to be included in the New Testament was settled long before any recently discovered additional gospels were even written. Thus the exclusion of those additional texts could be justified on the sole basis of the

time of their writing, without even considering problems with their content. Timing also draws their authenticity into question in the sense that they could not be the work of eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ.

But Luke remarks that even in his time many accounts had been written regarding the life and times of Jesus Christ and His earliest disciples (Luke 1:1–4); yet by the end of the second century, numerous authors were noting the existence of only four as a part of Scripture. Among these writers was Irenaeus (ca. 140–200 C.E.), bishop of Lyon, who was acquainted in his youth with John’s disciple Polycarp. Irenaeus writes of four Gospels (*Against Heresies* 3.11), the same four that are included in the New Testament to this day.

A short time earlier, also during the third quarter of the second century, a Syrian convert named Tatian had prepared his *Diatessaron*, a single account that harmonized the four Gospels of the New Testament.

The *Muratorian Fragment*, a listing of biblical books that dates from the late second century, as well as Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen, each writing from Africa in the late second to early third centuries, provide additional witness to the universal acceptance of four Gospels throughout the known world prior to the establishment of any central authority of orthodoxy.

The fact that by the end of the second century only four Gospels were accepted as authoritative is further borne out by the discovery of physical copies of the four works bound together in book form and dating from the late second and early third centuries. Books at that time were made from papyrus, a reed which decayed quickly in damp conditions. Copies have thus been discovered only in the dry desert conditions of Egypt, and even there many of the books are only fragmentary. Numerous papyri were found in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, at the turn of the 20th century, while a number of more extensive manuscript fragments appeared on the antiquities market in Egypt in the 1930s. The manuscripts had apparently been hidden in stone jars inside a church in a desert area of Egypt, and their remnants are now in libraries in Ireland, the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe.

These were sensational discoveries as they pushed the date of extant manuscripts—albeit incomplete—back by more than a century prior to the oldest texts known to that point. Some segments of John’s Gospel date from the early second century and constitute the oldest surviving fragments of the New Testament. The papyrus labeled by archaeologists and papyrologists as P⁷⁵ is considered to be from the late second or early third

century and contains parts of Luke followed by John. P⁴⁵ is in some respects the most notable, however. It dates from the third century but contains large portions of all four Gospels as well as of the book of Acts.

MISSING LINK

From the writings of Irenaeus and others, we know that the four Gospels of the New Testament had been accepted as Scripture by the latter half of the second century. But as yet we have seen no definitive connection to the time of the apostles—the eyewitnesses of the events of Jesus' life and death.

To find that connection we must go to a well-known personage of the fourth century, church historian Eusebius Pamphilus. Eusebius quotes directly from the writings of a man named Papias (ca. 60–135 C.E.) on the background to the writing of two of the Gospels (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39). Papias, identified as a bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, claimed that his knowledge came from those who had actually walked with the apostles. His works are now lost to history, but several writers of the second century were well acquainted with them and quoted or paraphrased portions of them.

While academics might not ... attribute the collation of the Bible to ‘the pagan emperor Constantine,’ many even in the academic community insist that the question of which Gospels the church ought to endorse was still up for grabs in the fourth century.”

CHARLES E. HILL, *WHO CHOSE THE GOSPELS? PROBING THE GREAT GOSPEL CONSPIRACY* (2010)

Eusebius himself engages in a discussion of all four Gospels in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24, naming, in order, the four accounts we have today: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In 3.39 he identifies Papias as his source for confirming that Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts were genuine and already accepted as canonical by the early part of the second century. But he nowhere directly quotes Papias with regard to the Gospels of Luke or John.

Today, however, respected New Testament scholars such as Charles E. Hill offer compelling evidence that Eusebius included a lengthy paraphrase of Papias’s writing on that subject, preserving much of the vocabulary of the original work. The way in which Eusebius begins the account indicates that he is referencing an unidentified written source. Based on an exacting study of Eusebius’s wording, and comparing it with similar passages in the works of second- and third-century writers also known to have read and quoted Papias (including Irenaeus, Origen and the writer of the *Muratorian Fragment*), Hill concludes that Eusebius’s words in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.5–13 are drawn directly from the writings of Papias. In that passage, Eusebius begins with a reference to Matthew’s Gospel and then goes on:

“And when Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry... .

“They say, therefore, that the apostle John ... gave in his Gospel an account of the period which had been omitted by the earlier evangelists, and of the deeds done by the Saviour during that period... .

“John accordingly, in his Gospel, records the deeds of Christ which were performed before the Baptist was cast into prison, but the other three evangelists mention the events which happened after that time.”

Following his closely argued presentation of the available data, Hill remarks that in his opinion, to suggest that anyone other than Papias is Eusebius's source for this passage “strains credibility well past the breaking-point.” He posits “not merely that Eusebius' account in *HE [Ecclesiastical History] 3.24.5–13* is adapted from Papias but that it is scarcely possible to conceive of it as coming from anyone else.”

Despite the existence of other gospels, ... all these readers of Papias—Irenaeus, Clement, the Muratorian Fragment, Origen, Victorinus, and Eusebius—testify that only the four were considered to have sound apostolic credentials.

CHARLES E. HILL, "WHAT PAPIAS SAID ABOUT JOHN (AND LUKE): A 'NEW' PAPIAN FRAGMENT," IN *JOURNAL OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* (OCTOBER 1998)

Based on Hill's conclusions, Papias, whose source was those who had known and walked with John and the other apostles, verifies that John acknowledged the authenticity of the other three Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. This leads to the further conclusion that the four Gospel accounts Christendom uses today owe their authority and place within the canon of Scripture to the apostle John at the end of the first century (as recorded by Papias and later paraphrased by Eusebius). The similarity in details recorded in other second-century writings is testimony to the fact that Papias was their common source. Further, Papias's record of John's acceptance of the first three Gospels and his addition of a fourth toward the end of the first century accounts for the archaeological evidence of second-century and early-third-century books containing the four Gospels. As for John's Gospel, Eusebius notes in the early fourth century that it "has been accepted without dispute both now *and in ancient times*" (3.24.17, emphasis added).

Numerous scholars now consider Papias's five books (collectively titled *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*) to have been written in the first decade of the second century. This puts the earliest reference to acceptance of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to within 80 years of Jesus Christ's death.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Even before the end of the first century various apostolic writings were considered on a par with the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament. This is evident from one of Peter's epistles; he remarks that some people were twisting the apostle Paul's writings "to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:15–16).

While Peter was speaking specifically of Paul's epistles, the record of history is that by the end of the first century the four Gospel accounts included in the New Testament had also been established as canonical by the early church.

No one knows the exact number of additional accounts written over the centuries. But besides the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, any written before the Gospel of John were omitted by the decision of John. It was not left to the whim of Constantine or any other post-apostolic authority figure but was undertaken by an eyewitness of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The final makeup of the biblical Gospels was never a question of what suited the religion of various groups or churches; rather the New Testament collection of four Gospels was sanctioned by the person understood to be the last surviving apostle and a companion of Jesus Christ Himself.