Early Christian writings outside the New Testament: student handout

Module 20: Non-Canonical Gospels, Apocrypha, and the Apostolic Fathers.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____ **Class:** _____

Central question: Why did early Christians value some writings that are not in the New Testament and reject others, and what do the surviving sources say about each?

Start with each document's source note, then fill in the organizer with your partner. The documents are pages of ExtantBible with short passages from the ancient writings themselves.

Document A: 1 Clement, Ignatius and the Didache

Source: The canon page's cards for 1 Clement and the Didache, the timeline entries for 1 Clement, Ignatius and the Didache, and two short passages from the letters.

Primary sources: 1 Clement (about 95 or 96 CE) and a letter of Ignatius (about 105 to 115 CE), in J. B. Lightfoot's public-domain translation (1891), with a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of the canon page and timeline, which cite Metzger, Brown, Gallagher and Meade, and Ehrman and Méndez.

“Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the Apostle. What wrote he first unto you in the beginning of the Gospel? Of a truth he charged you in the Spirit concerning himself and Cephas and Apollos, because that even then ye had made parties.”

1 Clement 47, trans. J. B. Lightfoot, The Apostolic Fathers, ed. J. R. Harmer (1891)

“I do not enjoin you, as Peter and Paul did. They were Apostles, I am a convict; they were free, but I am a slave to this very hour.”

Ignatius, Letter to the Romans 4, trans. J. B. Lightfoot, The Apostolic Fathers, ed. J. R. Harmer (1891)

- 1 Clement is a letter from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth, urging it to restore leaders it had removed. It is usually dated about 95 or 96 CE, and no later than about 120 (95 to 120 CE on the site's timeline, the date most scholars give). It echoes Romans, 1 Corinthians and Hebrews. Corinth still read it in church about 170, Eusebius says it was "publicly used in a great many churches", and Codex Alexandrinus, a Greek Bible from the early 5th century, copies it after Revelation. No early writer called it false, but no apostle wrote it: Gallagher and Meade note that early on, being linked to an apostle was the main difference among such books.
- Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters to churches while being taken to Rome to be executed, about 105 to 115 CE (the date most scholars give). His letters echo Matthew and several of Paul's letters.
- The Didache is a short church manual: teaching on two ways of life, then rules for baptism, the Eucharist, fasting and prayer. It was lost until a copy was found in 1873. Scholars are split on its date (50 to 150 CE on the site's timeline): Ehrman and Méndez note that it has been debated since the book was found, and place its final form around 100. Athanasius listed it among books for new converts to read; Eusebius put it among the rejected books. Metzger thinks its title naming the apostles was added later.

On ExtantBible: Timeline: 1 Clement

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Document B: The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas

Source: The canon page's cards for both books, the entries for Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus on What actually survives, and a passage from Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter.

Primary source: a letter of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, written in 367 CE, in a public-domain translation (NPNF, 1892), with a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of the canon page, which cites Metzger, Brown, Gallagher and Meade, and the ancient writers they quote, and a table of two Bible manuscripts dated from published scholarship.

Bible manuscript	Date (Brown; Metzger)	Early Christian books outside the 27 copied in it
Codex Sinaiticus, a Greek Bible	About the middle of the 4th century	The Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas, after the New Testament
Codex Alexandrinus, a Greek Bible	The early 5th century	1 and 2 Clement, after Revelation

“But for greater exactness I add this also, writing of necessity; that there are other books besides these not indeed included in the Canon, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd.”

Athanasius, Festal Letter 39.7, ed. Archibald Robertson, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 4 (1892)

- In Athanasius's list, "the Shepherd" is the Shepherd of Hermas and "the Teaching of the Apostles" is the Didache. He kept both outside his canon.
- The Shepherd of Hermas is a long book of visions, commandments and parables from Rome, dated to the first half of the 2nd century by Brown and by Gallagher and Meade (Metzger calls the date unresolved). Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen valued it, and it was read in some churches. The Muratorian Fragment, a damaged Latin list of books usually dated 170 to 200 CE (some scholars date it to the 4th century), allows it to be read privately but not in church, because it was written after the apostles' time. Tertullian rejected it in his later writings, and Eusebius put it among the rejected books while noting that others thought it "quite indispensable."
- The Epistle of Barnabas is a treatise written as a letter that reads the Old Testament as allegory, dated after 70 and probably before 135 (Metzger; Brown). Clement of Alexandria quoted "the Apostle Barnabas", and Origen valued it. Eusebius put it among the rejected books, and Jerome counted it among the apocryphal writings; in Metzger's judgment its claim to come from Paul's companion Barnabas does not hold.

On ExtantBible: How the canon formed: the books left out

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Document C: The gospels of Thomas and Peter

Source: The canon page's cards for both gospels, the timeline entries for the Gospel of Thomas and the Nag Hammadi Library (citing Metzger, Brown, and Ehrman and Méndez), a letter of Serapion that Eusebius quotes, and Carson, Moo and Morris on that letter.

A summary by ExtantBible (2026) of the canon page and timeline on two gospels written in the 2nd century or, for Thomas on a minority view, earlier, with a primary source: a letter of Serapion, bishop of Antioch, about the reading of the Gospel of Peter at Rhossus about 200 CE, as Eusebius quotes it, in a public-domain translation (NPNF, 1890).

“For we, brethren, receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ; but we reject intelligently the writings falsely ascribed to them, knowing that such were not handed down to us. When I visited you I supposed that all of you held the true faith, and as I had not read the Gospel which they put forward under the name of Peter, I said, If this is the only thing which occasions dispute among you, let it be read.”

Serapion, quoted in Eusebius, Church History 6.12.3-4, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890)

“...we have been able to read it through, and we find many things in accordance with the true doctrine of the Saviour, but some things added to that doctrine, which we have pointed out for you farther on.”

Serapion, quoted in Eusebius, Church History 6.12.6, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890)

- The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings credited to Jesus, with no story of his life. The full text survives in Coptic, found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, with Greek fragments from Oxyrhynchus.
- Its date is debated. Brown reports that most scholars think it, as a whole, a work of the 2nd century, Metzger places its compiler about 140, Ehrman and Méndez date it 110 to 120, and Gallagher and Meade to the latter half of the 2nd century; the site's timeline gives 110 to 200 CE, a date scholars are split on. Mark Goodacre argues that it knew Matthew, Mark and Luke, as Ehrman and Méndez report. The Jesus Seminar, Brown reports, treats all or most of it as a work of the 50s, earlier than those gospels; the timeline gives this minority view as 50 to 100 CE.
- The Naassenes, a group Hippolytus describes, used a gospel "according to Thomas." Origen, Eusebius and Cyril of Jerusalem rejected it; Cyril warned, "Let none read the Gospel according to Thomas." Every early church writer who names it treats it as a work of heretics.
- The Gospel of Peter is part of a gospel of Jesus' trial, death and resurrection, told under Peter's name; a large fragment was found at Akhmim in Egypt in the winter of 1886 to 1887. Some in the church at Rhossus, near Antioch, read it about 200. Serapion first allowed it, then read it and traced it to the Docetists, who taught that Christ only seemed to have a body.
- Carson, Moo and Morris quote Serapion's words about "the writings which falsely bear their names" as evidence that the church rejected writings it knew to be falsely named.

On ExtantBible: Timeline: the Gospel of Thomas

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Document D: The reasons given

Source: The canon page's answers to "What made a book belong?" and "Why were books like the Gospel of Thomas left out?", citing Eusebius, Metzger, and Gallagher and Meade, and two passages from Eusebius.

Primary source: Eusebius of Caesarea, Church History 3.25, written about 315 to 325 CE, in a public-domain translation (NPNF, 1890), with a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of the canon page's answers, which cite Metzger (1987) and Gallagher and Meade (2017).

“Among the rejected writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles…”

Eusebius, Church History 3.25.4, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890)

“…those that are cited by the heretics under the name of the apostles, including, for instance, such books as the Gospels of Peter, of Thomas, of Matthias, or of any others besides them, and the Acts of Andrew and John and the other apostles, which no one belonging to the succession of ecclesiastical writers has deemed worthy of mention in his writings. And further, the character of the style is at variance with apostolic usage, and both the thoughts and the purpose of the things that are related in them are so completely out of accord with true orthodoxy that they clearly show themselves to be the fictions of heretics.”

Eusebius, Church History 3.25.6-7, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890)

- Eusebius sorted the books into accepted, disputed and rejected. His disputed books, James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John, are all in today's New Testament; his rejected books include Hermas, Barnabas and the Didache ("the Teachings of the Apostles"). The books of heretics, such as the gospels of Peter and Thomas, he would not place "even among the rejected writings": they were to be cast aside altogether.
- Metzger finds three tests that the churches came to use during the 2nd century: orthodoxy (agreeing with the rule of faith), apostolicity (written by an apostle or a close follower of one) and the consensus of the churches (continuous use across the church at large). Age counted as part of apostolicity.
- Metzger argues that books like the Gospel of Thomas "excluded themselves", because they never won wide use in churches. Gallagher and Meade note that not every book left out was rejected as false. Athanasius, for his part, called apocryphal writings an invention of heretics, who gave them a date so they could pass as ancient.

On ExtantBible: How the canon formed: what made a book belong

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Evidence organizer

	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
1.	Put these in order with the dates the site's timeline gives: the Gospel of Thomas, 1 Clement, the letters of Ignatius.	
2.	Name two writings that were copied in a Bible manuscript but left out of the New Testament, and the manuscript and its date for each.	
3.	How do 1 Clement and Ignatius speak of the apostles, and what does that suggest about how they saw their own letters?	
4.	What reason does the Muratorian Fragment give for not reading the Shepherd of Hermas in church?	
5.	What three reasons did Eusebius give for rejecting the gospels of Peter and Thomas?	
6.	Why did Serapion first allow the Gospel of Peter and then reject it?	

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	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
7.	Where does the full text of the Gospel of Thomas come from, and how do scholars date it?	
8.	Where do the documents agree, and where do they pull in different directions?	

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Your written answer

In one or two paragraphs, answer the central question. Cite at least three documents by letter, give a date for each writing you use, point to at least one passage from an ancient writing itself, and compare one writing that was read in churches but left out with one that was rejected as the work of heretics.

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Check your work: the single-point rubric

The middle column is the target. Note where the work falls short on the left and where it goes beyond on the right.

Concerns	Target	Going beyond
	Sourcing: Says who judged each writing, when, and in what kind of source (a list, a history, a letter), and gives the date range the site gives for the writing itself.	
	Distinguishing outcomes: Tells apart writings read in churches but left out, disputed books, and writings rejected as the work of heretics, with an example of each.	
	Weighing reasons: Explains the reasons ancient writers gave (authorship, age, wide use, agreement in teaching), what each reason shows about the writer as well as about the book, and what the writings show about themselves (1 Clement and Ignatius looking back to the apostles, Serapion reading the Gospel of Peter).	
	Descriptive, qualified language: Attributes datings and judgments ("Eusebius rejects", "scholars are split on the date") and keeps historical claims apart from claims about which books are Scripture.	

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