Early Christian writings outside the New Testament: study guide

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

Cover each answer, try to recall it, then check. Testing yourself this way builds memory; rereading and highlighting feel productive but build little. Come back on the days in the tracker.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. From the canon lesson: what is the earliest surviving list of exactly the 27 books?
2. From the canon lesson: which books did Eusebius list as disputed?
3. What is the difference between the date of a manuscript and the date of the text it preserves?

Key terms

The words

- Apocrypha: Books outside the accepted list. Athanasius used the word for writings he said heretics had invented; Protestants today use it for the books in Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments that are not in the Hebrew Bible.

Why it matters: Why should a reader check which sense a writer means?

- Pseudepigrapha: Writings that falsely bear an author's name. Whether any New Testament book is one is debated book by book.

Why it matters: Why did a false claim to an apostle's name matter so much to early readers?

- Antilegomena: Greek for "spoken against". Eusebius's word for books that were disputed yet familiar to most churches: James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John, all in today's New Testament.

Why it matters: How is a disputed book different from a rejected one?

The writings

- Apostolic Fathers: A name modern scholars use for early Christian writers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius (a bishop of Antioch who wrote seven letters to churches while being taken to Rome to be executed), Polycarp and Papias; two works the site cites use it in their titles.

Why it matters: Why are these writers evidence for the New Testament books as well as for their own time?

- Didache: A short church manual on conduct, baptism and the Lord's meal, lost until a copy was found in 1873. Scholars are split on its date, 50 to 150 CE.

Why it matters: How would an early date change what the Didache tells us, compared with a late one?

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

- Gospel of Thomas: A collection of 114 sayings credited to Jesus, with no story of his life, known in full from a Coptic copy found at Nag Hammadi in 1945.

Why it matters: Why does what it can tell us depend on whether it used Matthew, Mark and Luke?

The reasons

- Apostolicity: Being written by an apostle or a close follower of one. Metzger counts age as part of it.

Why it matters: Why could a respected, early letter like 1 Clement fail this test?

- Orthodoxy (the rule of faith): Agreement with the teaching the churches held, one of the three tests Metzger finds.

Why it matters: Why is this test about the judges as much as about the book?

- Consensus of the churches: Continuous use across the church at large, the third of the tests Metzger finds.

Why it matters: Why did Metzger say books like the Gospel of Thomas "excluded themselves"?

Timeline

- 50 to 150 CE: Didache (Scholars are split).
- 95 to 120 CE: 1 Clement (Most scholars agree). Written about 95 or 96 CE on the usual dating, and not later than about 120. A few scholars date it as early as about 70.
- 105 to 115 CE: Ignatius (Most scholars agree). Dated between 105 and 115 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 110 to 200 CE: Gospel of Thomas (Most scholars agree). Written between 110 and 200 CE. Brown reports that most scholars think it a second-century work; within that century the works cited here differ, Ehrman and Méndez dating it 110 to 120, Metzger about 140, and Gallagher and Meade probably to the latter half.
- 170 to 200 CE: Muratorian fragment (Scholars are split). Gallagher and Meade (2017) say the debate continues, with a significant following for each date; Metzger (1987) holds the late second century, McDonald (2007) and Robbins (1992) favor the fourth.
- 315 to 325 CE: Eusebius, Church History 3.25 (canon list) (Most scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 315 and 325 CE, the date most scholars give.
- about the middle of the 4th century: Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph (01)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown and Metzger both date it to about the middle of the 4th century.
- 367 CE: Athanasius, 39th Festal Letter (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates to 367 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- early 5th century: Codex Alexandrinus (A (02)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown dates it to the early 5th century, and Metzger calls it a 5th-century book.
- 1896 to 1897 CE: Oxyrhynchus excavations (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 1896 and 1897, a date scholars broadly accept. Grenfell and Hunt dug their first season there over the winter of 1896 to 1897.
- 1945 CE: Nag Hammadi Library (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated to 1945, a date scholars broadly accept.

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

Explain it

In your own words: why do historians treat "left out of the New Testament" and "rejected as the work of heretics" as two different things?

Worked example: the Shepherd of Hermas

The four steps a historian takes to trace how early Christians received one book.

1. Describe what survives: A long book of visions, commandments and parables from Rome, calling Christians to repentance. Brown and Gallagher and Meade date it to the first half of the 2nd century; Metzger calls the date unresolved.
2. Find who valued it: Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen valued it. It was copied in Codex Sinaiticus, a Greek Bible from about the middle of the 4th century, and read in some churches, and Athanasius listed it among books for new converts to read.
3. Find who rejected it, and why: The Muratorian Fragment allows it to be read, 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."
4. Reach a qualified judgment: Hermas was valued, read and copied, then left out because it was too late to be apostolic; the sources do not give falseness as the reason. Name who held each view and when, rather than speaking for all early Christians at once.

Your turn: the Gospel of Thomas

Why was the Gospel of Thomas left out? The first two steps are filled in below. Write your own answers to the last two, then open the answer.

1. Describe what survives: A collection of 114 sayings credited to Jesus, with no story of his life. The full text survives in a Coptic copy found at Nag Hammadi in 1945, with Greek fragments from Oxyrhynchus.
2. Find who valued it: The Naassenes, a group Hippolytus describes, used a gospel "according to Thomas."

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

3. Find who rejected it, and why: What do Origen, Eusebius and Cyril of Jerusalem say, and what reasons does Eusebius give?

4. Reach a qualified judgment: What would you conclude, and what does its disputed date leave open?

Common misconceptions

Any verdict from the past, about books or anything else, can be read this way: ask who gave it, when, and for what reason.

- A common claim is that every early Christian book left out of the New Testament was condemned as false. The sources the site cites do not bear this out. Some of these books were read in churches and copied in Bibles. Corinth still read 1 Clement in church about 170, Codex Alexandrinus (a Greek Bible from the early 5th century) copies it after Revelation, and no early writer called it false. The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas were copied in Codex Sinaiticus (about the middle of the 4th century), and Athanasius listed Hermas and the Didache among books for new converts to read. The reasons given concern authorship and age: no apostle wrote 1 Clement or the Didache, and the Muratorian Fragment says Hermas came after the apostles' time.
- Some people assume the Gospel of Thomas was unknown until it was found in 1945. The complete text was found in 1945, but the book was known by name long before. Hippolytus describes a group that used a gospel "according to Thomas", and Origen, Eusebius and Cyril of Jerusalem all name it in order to reject it. Greek fragments of it come from Oxyrhynchus. What the Nag Hammadi find added was the complete text, in Coptic.
- Some think early Christians accepted any book that carried an apostle's name. The sources show early writers testing such claims and rejecting books that failed them. The Gospel of Peter carried Peter's name, but Serapion, bishop of Antioch, rejected it after reading it, finding "some things added" to the true teaching and tracing it to the Docetists. Eusebius named the gospels of Peter and Thomas among books put forward by heretics under the apostles' names, and he put the Epistle of Barnabas among the rejected books although Clement of Alexandria had quoted "the Apostle Barnabas."

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. Which of these writings is copied after Revelation in Codex Alexandrinus, a Greek Bible from the early 5th century?

A. The Shepherd of Hermas

B. 1 Clement

C. The Epistle of Barnabas

Reason: What does this show?

A. Every church that used that Bible counted the book as Scripture.

B. The copyist added it by mistake, since no church read it.

C. A book could be copied in a Bible without being counted among the 27.

2. Why does the Muratorian Fragment say the Shepherd of Hermas should not be read in church?

A. It taught what the churches counted as heresy

B. It was not known in the churches of Rome

C. It was written after the apostles' time

Reason: Which of Metzger's tests does this reason belong to?

A. Apostolicity, which in Metzger's account includes a book's age

B. Orthodoxy, agreement with the rule of faith

C. The consensus of the churches, continuous use across the church at large

3. How did the early church writers who name the Gospel of Thomas treat it?

A. As a work of heretics

B. As one of the disputed books, like James and 2 Peter

C. As a book for new converts to read, like the Didache

Reason: Who did use a gospel "according to Thomas", according to Hippolytus?

A. The church at Corinth, which also read 1 Clement

B. The Naassenes, a group he describes

C. The church at Rhossus, near Antioch

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

4. How does the site's timeline label its date for the Gospel of Thomas, 110 to 200 CE?

A. Most scholars agree

B. Some scholars hold

C. Scholars are split

Reason: Why is the date disputed?

A. Its only complete copy is in Coptic, so the text cannot be older than that copy.

B. The Nag Hammadi copy carries a date that scholars doubt.

C. Scholars disagree on whether it used Matthew, Mark and Luke or preserves older, independent sayings.

5. Why did Serapion, bishop of Antioch, reject the Gospel of Peter after first allowing it?

A. A council ordered him to reject it

B. He read it and traced it to the Docetists

C. It did not carry an apostle's name

Reason: What does his change of mind show?

A. A book carrying an apostle's name was accepted until a council ruled on it.

B. Bishops judged books by their titles alone.

C. A judgment could rest on reading a book's teaching, not only on its title.

6. Which of these writings does the site's timeline date to 95 to 120 CE, with the label "Most scholars agree"?

A. 1 Clement

B. The Didache

C. The letters of Ignatius

Reason: Why does an early date make 1 Clement useful evidence?

A. It shows that the canon was closed by about 100.

B. It sets a latest date for the books it echoes, such as 1 Corinthians and Hebrews.

C. It shows that Clement was one of the apostles.

7. Which statement is a historical claim rather than a statement of belief?

A. The Didache is not inspired Scripture.

B. Eusebius put the Didache among the rejected books.

C. The churches chose the right books.

Reason: What makes it historical?

A. It can be checked against a surviving source.

B. Most Christians today would agree with it.

C. Eusebius was a historian, so what he wrote must be accurate.

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
What is the Didache, and how does the site date it?	A short church manual on conduct, baptism and the Lord's meal; 50 to 150 CE, a date scholars are split on.
When is 1 Clement usually dated?	About 95 or 96 CE, and no later than about 120 (95 to 120 CE on the timeline, the date most scholars give).
When did Ignatius write his seven letters, and to whom?	About 105 to 115 CE, to churches, while being taken to Rome to be executed.
What is the Gospel of Thomas?	114 sayings credited to Jesus, with no story of his life.
Where and when was the full Gospel of Thomas found?	At Nag Hammadi in Egypt, in 1945, in a Coptic copy.
Which two writings left out of the New Testament were copied in Codex Sinaiticus, and how old is it?	The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas; it dates from about the middle of the 4th century.
Why did the Muratorian Fragment not allow Hermas to be read in church?	It was written after the apostles' time.
What three tests does Metzger find the churches using during the 2nd century?	Orthodoxy (the rule of faith), apostolicity and the consensus of the churches.
What does "antilegomena" mean, and which books did Eusebius put under it?	"Spoken against": James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John and 3 John.
Who first allowed the Gospel of Peter and then rejected it?	Serapion, bishop of Antioch.

Answers

Warm-up

1. Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter, 367 CE.
2. James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John and 3 John.
3. A text can be much older than the surviving copy of it.

Why it matters

- Apocrypha: In one sense it is a charge of forgery by heretics; in another it simply names books outside a list. A reader who mixes them up can take a neutral label for an accusation, or the reverse.

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

- Pseudepigrapha: A link to an apostle was the main test a book had to pass, so a false name could win a book a place it did not earn. That is why Serapion rejected "the writings falsely ascribed" to the apostles once he had read the Gospel of Peter. Modern scholars differ on the intent of those who wrote in another's name: Brown pictures a disciple writing in the master's name, with fraud largely set aside; Carson, Moo and Morris, citing Serapion and Tertullian, say the church rejected writings it knew to be falsely named; Ehrman and Méndez call such writings forgeries, common in antiquity but almost universally condemned.
- Antilegomena: A disputed book was well known and accepted by many churches, and all five Eusebius named are in the New Testament today. A rejected book, such as Hermas or the Didache in his list, was set outside, and the books he traced to heretics he cast aside altogether.
- Apostolic Fathers: Their letters quote or echo New Testament books. A writer whose date is roughly known, such as 1 Clement (95 to 120 CE, usually dated about 95 or 96) or Ignatius (about 105 to 115 CE), shows that the books he echoes were already written and in use before him.
- Didache: At the early end, about the middle of the 1st century, it would be one of the oldest Christian texts of any kind, written before many New Testament books. Near 120 it comes after most of them, so its closeness to Matthew's teaching would mean something different.
- Gospel of Thomas: If it used them, as Mark Goodacre argues (Ehrman and Méndez report his case), it is a later reworking that tells us mainly about the 2nd century. If its sayings are early and independent, the minority view that Brown reports from the Jesus Seminar, it could show how Jesus' sayings were passed on beside the gospels.
- Apostolicity: No apostle wrote it, and the letter itself looks back to "the blessed Paul the Apostle" and his letter to Corinth. Being early, respected and read in churches was not enough without a link to an apostle.
- Orthodoxy (the rule of faith): The standard was the judges' own teaching, so a verdict of heresy records what the churches held as well as what the book said. Serapion, for example, measured the Gospel of Peter against "the true doctrine of the Saviour."
- Consensus of the churches: In his view they never won the wide, continuous use in churches that the 27 books had, so they fell away for lack of use rather than being shut out by one decision.

Explain it

Because the sources treat them differently. Some books left out, such as 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Didache, were read in churches, copied in Bibles such as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus, or listed for new converts, and the reasons given were authorship and age, not false teaching. Others, such as the gospels of Thomas and Peter, were called the work of heretics for their style and teaching as well as their lack of earlier use. Merging the two would misreport what the ancient writers said.

Your turn: the Gospel of Thomas

3. Find who rejected it, and why: All three 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. Eusebius's reasons: no church writer in the line from the apostles had used it, its style was unlike the apostles', and its teaching departed from the faith the churches held.

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

4. Reach a qualified judgment: Unlike Hermas, Thomas was treated as the work of heretics by the writers who name it. Its date is another matter. Scholars are split (110 to 200 CE on the site's timeline), and some scholars argue that its sayings go back to 50 to 100 CE. Keep the ancient verdict on the book apart from the modern debate over the age of its sayings.

Self-test

1. Answer B, reason C. 1 Clement was read in churches (at Corinth about 170) and copied after Revelation in Codex Alexandrinus, yet the canon lists leave it out, except the Apostolic Canons of about 380. The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas were copied in a different Bible, Codex Sinaiticus, from about the middle of the 4th century.
2. Answer C, reason A. Metzger counts age as part of apostolicity. The Fragment still allows Hermas to be read privately, so it is not calling the book heresy, and Hermas came from Rome itself and was read in some churches.
3. Answer A, reason B. Origen, Eusebius and Cyril of Jerusalem rejected it, and every early church writer who names it treats it as a work of heretics. Hippolytus says the Naassenes used a gospel "according to Thomas." The church at Rhossus read the Gospel of Peter, not Thomas, and Athanasius listed the Didache and Hermas, not Thomas, for new converts.
4. Answer C, reason C. Ehrman and Méndez describe an intense debate on this question and report Mark Goodacre's case that it knew the first three gospels, which puts it in the 2nd century. The Jesus Seminar, Brown reports, treats all or most of it as a work of the 50s; the site's timeline gives this view as 50 to 100 CE, labeled "Some scholars hold". A text can be much older than its surviving copies, so the date of the Coptic copy does not settle the date of the writing.
5. Answer B, reason C. Some in the church at Rhossus read it about 200. Serapion first allowed it without having read it; when he read it, he found additions to the true teaching and traced it to the Docetists, who taught that Christ only seemed to have a body. The book carried Peter's name, and no council was involved.
6. Answer A, reason B. 1 Clement, usually dated about 95 or 96 CE, echoes Paul's letters and Hebrews, so those books were written and known before it. The Didache's date (50 to 150 CE) is one scholars are split on, and the letters of Ignatius are dated 105 to 115 CE. The canon was not closed for centuries, and no apostle wrote 1 Clement.
7. Answer B, reason A. A historical claim can be checked against the sources: Eusebius's Church History survives. Whether many people agree with a statement, or whether Eusebius judged rightly, is a different question. The other two options are statements of belief, which communities hold and explain for themselves.

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/

License

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. You may copy, share and adapt it for noncommercial purposes if you credit ExtantBible, link to the license, say what you changed, and share your version under the same license. The ExtantBible name and logo are not licensed: on an adapted version, remove the logo and add the line below.

The line to add to an adapted version

Adapted from ExtantBible (extantbible.com) under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. ExtantBible does not endorse this adaptation.

Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Original: extantbible.com/learn/non-canonical-writings/study-guide/