

## **Lost Christianities and Banned Books of the Bible**

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

10 November 2013

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

### **Spoken Meditation**

Later in the service, my sermon will explore “Lost Christianities and Banned Books of the Bible.” As preparation, I would like to invite you to reflect on your relationship with what is sometimes called the “canonical Bible”: the version of the Bible that we are most accustomed to seeing, with all the books that weren’t banned, were chosen by the group that became Christian orthodoxy, and were eventually anthologized together into the book we know as “The Bible.”

(As a brief aside, I should perhaps note that the word Bible itself betrays that it is nothing more than an anthology of books. The word Bible is a transliteration of the Greek word *biblia*, which means “books.” It is the same Greek word that etymologically gives us the Spanish word for Library: *biblioteca*. So the Greek *biblia*, Spanish *biblioteca*, and English *Bible* — all refer to a collection of books. And in the case of the Bible, the original authors of all those different books it contains had no conception that their writings might eventually be collected together and canonized as holy writ.)

All that to say, I wonder how your relationship with the Bible has changed over time? (The answer will certainly be different for those of you who grew up Christian vs. non-Christian, religious vs. non-religious.) And to the extent that this question is meaningful, I invite you to picture in your mind the various Bibles that you have owned or encountered in your life. Picture yourself holding these Bibles and how that felt differently at different times in your life and with different Bible. (This reflection may raise both positive and negative memories.) How have you conceived of and interacted with the Bible at differently at different points of your childhood, adolescence, and adulthood? And why?

## Sermon

As a Southern Baptist in my childhood and adolescence, I was taught that the Bible had a definite mystique. It was special, set-up apart, held in high reverence. And although we did not worship the Bible, Freud would probably say that we did fetishize it, regarding it with an excessive attachment.

One of the first major cracks that I can remember in the veneer with which I had been taught to regard the Bible happened one day when I was in middle school. I had arrived early for youth group one Sunday afternoon, and — being the budding religion nerd that I was — I decided to pass the time pursuing the books in the church library. As I lingered in the reference section, I noticed that the spine of one book read, “The *Catholic* Bible with Apocrypha.” That seemed odd to me: what does it mean to apply the adjective *Catholic* to the Bible? Isn’t the Bible “The Bible” no matter who you are? And what is a Bible “with Apocrypha?” At that point, I hadn’t studied for the S.A.T., which included flashcards for words like apocryphal, meaning “of doubtful authenticity.”

Flipping to the table of contents, I saw the books I was accustomed to seeing (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges...Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans). But there were also strange books I had never heard of: 1-2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, The Story of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, 1-2 Maccabees.

In college and graduate school, I came to see much more strongly and definitively that **the Apocrypha was just the beginning of the story of biblical variance and Christian diversity**. Whereas those apocryphal books were included by some Christian groups (such as Roman Catholics and many strands of Eastern Orthodoxy) as books of a lesser or secondary status, there were huge numbers of other books that powerful Christian groups had deprecated and destroyed in previous centuries, but which were oftentimes written in the first place by individuals and groups who understood themselves as sincere, earnest, and authentic followers of that enigmatic first-century rabbi Jesus of Nazareth.

As many of you know, I have been teaching a six-session class this fall at Frederick Community College on “Lost Christianities and Banned Books of the Bible.” And I plan to teach that class here at UUCF starting in mid-January. Since I have spent 9 hours lecturing about this

topic in recent weeks, I thought it might be interesting to share with you the highlights this morning. If you are curious to learn more, both my course and this sermon are drawn from two books by the UNC-Chapel Hill Religious Studies professor Bart Ehrman: Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew and Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament. (The first book is a secondary source about the history of these books. The second is the primary source if you want to read these extra-canonical books for yourself.)

The first and most important point is that it is not the case historically that a simple, unbroken line of “Apostolic Succession” can be drawn from the teachings of the historical Jesus that were passed directly to his earliest followers all the way to the present day. Instead, we now know that early Christianity was stunningly, mind-bogglingly, breathtakingly diverse.

As Harvard professor Karen King wrote in her book The Gospel of Mary of Magdala:

The beginning is often portrayed as the ideal to which Christianity should aspire and conform. Here Jesus spoke to his disciples and the gospel was preached in truth. Here the churches were formed in the power of the Spirit and Christians lived in unity and love with one another.... But what happens if we tell the story differently? What if the beginning was a time of grappling and experimentation? What if the meaning of the gospel was not clear and Christians struggled to understand who Jesus was...?” (158)

And from the perspective of modern scholarship, this latter view appears to many scholars to be the case. After Jesus’ execution at the hands of the Roman Empire, various individuals and groups developed wildly different understandings of how the Jesus movement should continue.

In Ehrman’s books, he has a helpful term for understanding this dynamic. Instead of referring to the “Orthodox Christians,” he refers to them as the “proto-orthodox” as a way of reminding us that the “victory” of the proto-orthodox in the 4th-century under Roman Emperor Constantine was neither pre-ordained nor inevitable. During the 2nd- and 3rd-centuries, the proto-orthodox were *one and among many* groups claiming to be authentic Jesus followers. Relatedly, the word “heretic” comes from the Greek word for “choice” (*haeresis*). Heretics are

nothing more than individuals and groups who chose their beliefs for themselves as opposed to allowing the proto-orthodox to choose for them.

As many of you know, one significant contribution to the proto-orthodox becoming “The Orthodox” view was the Roman Emperor Constantine calling the Council of Nicea in 325 CE. (Keep in mind that gathering happened almost a full three centuries *after* the death of the historical Jesus, and there was a flourishing of alternative views during those intervening years.) And the more you learn about these “Lost Christianities,” the more you can read between the lines of orthodox Christianity to see that its views were very much not written in a vacuum and were instead most often articulated in opposition to views that came to be deemed heretical.

Consider specifically the example of the Nicene Creed, written in 325 and still recited today in many Christian congregations. It is no accident that creed begins, “We believe in one God” because there are early Christian groups that believed in 1, 2, 30, or even 365 gods.<sup>1</sup>

And it is no mistake that the creed continues to specify that the one God is “the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth” because the Gnostics (one of those Lost Christianities) believed precisely that the one Jesus called God as *not* the same as the lesser god, who the Gnostics thought created the world behind the back of the one Jesus called God.

The Nicene Creed continues that, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,” but the Ebionites (another of those Lost Christianities) were fully committed to both Judaism in general and Jewish monotheism in specific, and believed that Jesus was *fully human* not divine.

The appellations for Jesus continue in the Nicene Creed that he is “true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father,” which is intentionally crafted to refute the Gnostics, who again believed that God and Jesus were *two different beings*.

The Nicene Creed continues about Jesus that, “by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was *made man*,” which directly contradicted the beliefs of the Marcionites (another of those Lost Christianities), who believed that Jesus was fully divine, but *not* really human. Further, the creed’s assertion that Jesus “suffered death and was buried”

---

<sup>1</sup> *1, 2, 30, or even 365 gods* — Bart Ehrman, [Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew](#), 2-3.

would have been deeply antithetical to the Docetics, who believed that Jesus only *seemed* to suffer and didn't really die (or at least the divine part of him didn't).

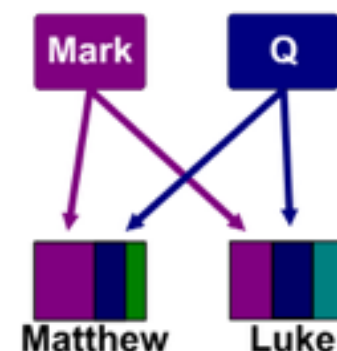
I could go on, but to make one side note, some of you may be surprised that our current UU hymnal includes the classic Trinitarian hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy." Of course, the lyrics are re-written to reflect classic *Unitarian* theology, but if you look in the bottom right-hand corner of that hymn #26 in our hymnal, you'll see that the hymn tune is none other than NICAEA, named after the Council of Nicea!

For now, though, I'll end this section of reading between the lines of the Nicene Creed with the one part that is most significant to me personally. The part of the Nicene Creed that I find most problematic is the part that Jesus "came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried." Do you notice what is missing? What's missing is *Jesus' entire life*: his teachings, his public ministry, his radical acts — all the parts that to me are most significant, meaningful, and challenging.

And what's interesting about that omission from the Nicene Creed is that there are also "Lost Christianities" that emphasized *Jesus' teachings* as the most central and important part, represented most emblematically by The Gospel of Thomas. To back up one step, some of you may have heard about "The Q Gospel." "Q" is short for the German word *Quelle*, which means "source." "Q" is a hypothetical document that scholars began speculating about more than a century ago based on a close analysis of the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

To make a long story short, the reigning theory is that both authors of both Matthew and Luke independently had a copy of Mark on their desk when they were writing. But that Matthew and Luke didn't know each other's work. There are, however, 200 verses that Matthew and Luke share almost verbatim, and those verse are hypothesized to be from a shared written source that was available to both Matthew and Luke, but is now lost to the vagaries of history. German scholars called

Two-source Hypothesis



that hypothetical source *Quelle*, and American scholars call it “Q” for short.

For decades the primary objection to this theory was that it presupposed the existence of a genre (a “sayings” source) for which there was no historical evidence. The argument went that early Christians wrote letters (called “epistles”), apocalyptic literature (like “Revelation”), epics (like “Acts”), and narratives about Jesus (called “Gospels”) — but they didn’t just write lists of 200 sayings of Jesus without any reference to his death and resurrection, which is what Q was hypothesized to be.

Then the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi (remote Upper Egypt) in a find that has been called the “most significant collection of lost Christian writings to turn up in modern times.” And the Gospel of Thomas — although not the Lost Gospel of Q — was precisely the genre that scholars had predicted Q to be: a sayings Gospel. Thomas is a Gospel that has nothing about Jesus’ life, miracles, death, or resurrection; instead, it is simply 113 sayings of Jesus. And the early Christian community that produced Thomas — as well as perhaps the community that produced the “Q Gospel” — are strong evidence of Lost Christianities that cared deeply about Jesus’ teachings, but did not share the proto-orthodox emphasis on certain interpretations of his death and resurrection.

One theory is that the Nag Hammadi library was buried in the late fourth-century in response to the proto-orthodox’s increasing persecution of individuals, groups, and texts they viewed as heretical. Keep in mind that the Council of Nicea in 325 CE produced the Nicene Creed to help regulate and eliminate theological diversity. But the Council of Nicea did not make a ruling about what books would be canonized into an anthology that we would come to know as the Bible.

Indeed, in 367, four decades after the Council of Nicea, is the first time we have a historical record of the 27 books known today as the New Testament in the order that we find them today with no other books added or missing. That list is from a letter from Athanasius of Alexandria (the same Bishop Athanasius that led the charge against the “heretical” views of Arius at the Council of Nicea) that was written to all of the congregations over which Athanasius was bishop. And it may have been in response to that 367 CE letter that a monk at a monastery near Nag Hammadi buried the now banned books to keep them from being burned and destroyed.

Astoundingly those banned books remained undisturbed for approximately 1,500 years before being rediscovered in the mid-20th century. And suddenly, we were able to read what those Lost Christianities *said about themselves* instead of only having what their opponents (the proto-orthodox) said about them.

Importantly, that 367 CE letter, which limited the books orthodox Christians were officially permitted to read was only applicable to the congregations in Athanasius' jurisdiction as bishop. And although there was a growing census about which books were in and out, there was no official ruling until the Reformation at the Council of Trent in the mid-1500s. Similarly, I will note briefly that the official contents of the Tanakh, the "Jewish Bible" was not settled until the early 3rd century. In Jesus' day, for example, you hear about not the full Tanakh (or Christian "Old Testament") that we have today, but about the "Torah and the Prophets," only 2/3s of the today's Hebrew Scriptures, because the rest was still under dispute or still coming into final form.

There is, of course, much more to say. I would love to share more with you about The Gospel of Peter, which before being banned, was arguably at least as popular as the Gospel of Mark in that we have three times as many surviving manuscripts of the Gospel of Peter as we do of Mark.<sup>2</sup> Peter's Gospel includes some fantastic scenes than include a giant Jesus (whose is so extraordinarily tall that his head reaches the clouds) as well as actual words being spoken by the cross on which Jesus is crucified.<sup>3</sup> (And although these scenes may strike us as unbelievably odd, that may be do principally to their unfamiliarity. Are they really that different in kind from the most familiar — but still fantastical — claims found in the canonical scriptures?) Or the Acts of Paul and Thecla, which tells us about the incredibly popular and well known stories of the *female* preacher and teacher of Thecla in early Christianity. And to name only one more, one of my personal favorites of these Lost Christian documents is the Infancy Gospel of Thomas produced

---

<sup>2</sup> *three times as many surviving manuscripts of the Gospel of Peter as we do of Mark* — Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Peter's Gospel includes some fantastic scenes* — *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament*, 33.

by early Christians who wondered about what Jesus must have been like as a child. And there are some wild stories of what Jesus was like as a child.

For now, allow me to conclude with a few thoughts on the significance for us twenty-first century Unitarian Universalists of these “Lost Christianities and Banned Books of the Bible.” The most important point may be that there never was a simple beginning in which all you needed to do was believe in a certain interpretation of the meaning of Jesus’ death. As rediscovered “Lost Christianities” and banned books have shown, in the beginning was diversity, experimentation, and conflict — that has continued to this day — over the meaning of Jesus’ life and teachings.

So if you have ever found yourself questioning the “party line” of a particular church or denomination’s beliefs about Jesus, you likely have historical heirs who have asked similar questions. There are even Christian theologians publishing books such as *A New New Testament* — with the lost and banned books integrated with the historically canonical books — as a way of exploring how these previously banned books might inform Christian practices today and in the future. This expanded and diversified version of Christianity may be appealing as a resource for some UUs. After all, our Fourth Source is “Jewish and Christian teachings.”

As to which (if any) of these books may be meaningful to any of you today, I leave you with a quote from our Transcendentalist forbear Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in 1846 wrote in his *Journals*, “**Make your own bible. Select and collect all the words and sentences that in all your readings have been to you like the blast of trumpet** out of Shakespeare, Seneca, Moses, John, and Paul.” As UUs, we have the freedom to draw from any or all of our Six Sources including those books historically valorized *and* those books historically burned. I wish you all happy reading, and may your reading of banned books be filled with passages that to you are as resonate, invigorating, and attention-grabbing to you as the blast of a trumpet.

### **For Further Reading**

*Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* by

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker



Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus by John S.  
Kloppenborg