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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
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The Lost Way: Thomas, Mary, & Q

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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. The mission was clear, and strong faith was forged in the fires of persecution.

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 and what his violent death might mean? What if there were not unity and certainty at the beginning but Christians differed in their views and experiences and sometimes came into conflict and division? What if the earliest Christians don't model for us a fixed and certain path, but instead call us to emulate their struggles to make Christianity in our day?

Karen King from “The Gospel of Mary Magdala”

One Sunday afternoon when I was in middle school, I was accidentally dropped off at church for a youth group meeting that started an hour later than we thought. As I wandered through the halls, it occurred to me that I could spend the time looking through the books in the church library. (The signs of my future as a religion nerd began early.) And as I scanned the shelves, one book in particular stood out to me. It was titled “The Catholic Bible.”

I remember thinking, “Isn’t the Bible just the Bible?” And the difference could have just been that the interpretive annotations were from a Roman Catholic perspective. But as I opened the Table of Contents, the differences were more profound. Before opening this book, I thought I knew the books of the Bible, having been required to memorize them years ago. But this Bible contained additional books I had never heard of before: 1 and 2 Esdras, 1 and 2 Maccabees,

Tobit, Judith, Sirach, and Additions to Daniel (such as The Song of the Three Children, The Story of Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon). That afternoon was my first glimpse that the Christian tradition was much more expansive than I had previously been told.

Two thousand years later, the anthology known as The Bible — considered by many traditions to be the primary scripture of Christianity — can seem like an inevitability, as if, for example, there were no other alternative to the New Testament being these 27 books in this particular order. But it turns out it was not until the year 367 CE (more than three hundred years after the historical Jesus) that we have the first written record of only the twenty-seven books of what has come to be known as the “New Testament” — in the order that has become traditional with no books missing and no extra books added [LC230]. And that list was in a letter from only one bishop and only to the congregations in his area — not to all Christians everywhere. (And here’s an open secret: when a leader feels the need to specify what books one should be reading, it was because many people were reading books that he disapproved of!)

Continuing in that direction, if you extrapolate from the traces we do have regarding the early Christian writings that are referred (but that are now lost through the vagaries of time, chance, and censorship), scholars estimate that “we have lost [more than] 85% of Christian literature from the first two centuries” (King6). Said differently, all the documents we have — including all the incredible manuscripts discovery in recent centuries of previously lost Christian traditions — all of that together (including the traditional New Testament) represent less than 15% of the Christian literature from the first two centuries. And that doesn’t even get into all the local traditions, customs, and practices that were never written down. [//: UU congregations... Eucharist]

Keep in mind that more than a century after Jesus’s death, communities who sought to follow in the way of Jesus were “widely dispersed around the Eastern Mediterranean...often relatively isolated from one another and probably each small enough to meet in someone’s home without attracting too much notice” (King5). Accordingly, the stories of Jesus’ life, teachings, and the reports of continuing experiences of his presence after his death were not not handed down unchanged from the early first century until today. Rather, these stories were decades and centuries in the making. The Christian traditions were formed in the telling and retelling as

Jesus's various followers struggled to find meaning and carry on in the wake of his execution by Rome. And these stories were told in different ways by the different communities of Jesus followers that gathered around Peter, James, John, Mary, Thomas, and other competing leaders in the wake of Jesus's death.

The idea that there was one, uncomplicated truth passed down from Jesus through an elite male leadership through to today is called a "Master Narrative" — a way of telling history that seeks to cover over all the messiness and diversity of real life both then and now. In contrast, scholars have shown that regarding the first century to even use the word "orthodoxy" is an anachronism (Kloppenborg100). Instead, as Bart Ehrman suggests in his important book Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scriptures and the Faiths We Never Knew, in the decades after Jesus' death, we are much more honest and transparent if we speak not of the "orthodox," but of the "proto-orthodox" — that is, the group that initially was one among many wildly diverse Christian groups, but who later became the most powerful and dominant group, in particular after they gained the support of the Roman Emperor Constantine. But that was not until the early fourth century, more than three hundred years after Jesus.

The Gospel of Mary is one of the many texts discovered in modern times that has increasingly helped us read against the grain of orthodoxy's "Master Narrative" that there is only one, true, pure strand of Christianity and that all deviations are heretical, untrustworthy, and dangerous. The Gospel of Mary was written in the early second century, but was lost until the late nineteenth century when a fragmentary copy was discovered in a cache of fifth-century documents in Egypt. Two more fragments were found in the twentieth century. From what scholars have reconstructed, we probably have approximately half of the original Gospel of Mary when the fragments are combined (King3). And whereas the orthodox tradition depicts Mary Magdalene as a "repentant prostitute," The Gospel of Mary portrays her as "a prominent disciple of Jesus, a visionary, and a spiritual teacher" (154).

When I was in seminary, we studied another document that presents an alternative to Christian orthodoxy that while also "lost" in a sense, may also have been right in front of us the whole time! After taking an introductory course in Greek (the language in which the New Testament was written), [*333BCE Alexander the Great...Aristotle*] my first upper-level Greek

translation course was called “Exegeting Q.” And our focus was on translating the approximately 235 verses that are in the Gospels According to Matthew and Luke almost verbatim but are not in The Gospel According to Mark, which is the earliest of the canonical Gospels (Patterson57).

[Paul]

As scholars began to closely study the relationship between the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the most glaring difference is that 90% of John is unique to John. So, setting John aside for now, the most compelling theory is that Matthew and Luke were written about the same time around the year 80, but did not know one another. But both Matthew and Luke had on their desks when they were writing a copy of Mark (which had been written about a decade earlier) as well as a document that consisted of those 235 verses I mentioned earlier that Matthew and Luke share almost verbatim, but that are not in Mark. Because German scholars came up with the theory, they named this hypothetical source Q, from the German word *Quelle*, which means “source.”

Now, here’s where it gets really interesting. Those 235 verses are almost entirely Jesus’s sayings and teachings. There is nothing about Jesus’s death or resurrection. And one of the strongest arguments against the existence of an independently circulating Q Gospel was that early Christians would never have isolated Jesus’s teachings from his death and resurrection — because the death and resurrection part was thought to be essential. But it turns out it just seemed essential in retrospect because the orthodox Master Narrative had been dominant for so long, starting from the fourth century through at least the eighteenth century.

But there have always been traces of an alternate account. For example, the Book of James (which is in the canonical New Testament) had long been viewed as really strange because it was just a list of wisdom sayings without any mention of Jesus’s death or resurrection (Kloppenborg64). But it turns out that the genre of the Q Gospel — a collection of Jesus’s teachings without a concern for the stories about his death and resurrection — may have been more common or prominent among early Christians than we once thought.

A huge turning point came in 1945 an incredible collection of manuscripts were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Suddenly, we had copies of early Christian documents that were thought lost forever or that we didn’t even know ever existed. And in a way not previously

possible, we were able to directly read what diverse Christian groups said for themselves instead of only hearing about them secondhand from orthodox Christians.

Perhaps most significant among the Nag Hammadi library was The Gospel of Thomas. While Thomas is not “Q,” it is the same genre as that the Q Gospel is hypothesized to be, which strengthens the case that Q may have once existed as a source for Matthew and Luke. And we now know for certain that early Christians who used the The Gospel of Thomas were interested in a version of the Jesus tradition that had “no birth stories, no miracle, no passion narrative in which Jesus is arrested and crucified, and no resurrection” (Patterson15).

From the perspective of Unitarian Universalism, our forebears have for centuries put the emphasis not on believing creeds about Jesus’s miracles, death, and resurrection, but instead emphasizing the contemporary relevance of his ethics, life, and teachings. As the saying goes, “We believe in deeds not creeds” and that “We don’t have to believe alike to love alike.” But perhaps the most fascinating parallel from UU history is that our Unitarian forebear Thomas Jefferson — around 150 years before The Gospel of Thomas was rediscovered — made his own version of a “Sayings Gospel.” He called his work The Jefferson Bible, and you can see it today in the [Smithsonian](#).

To give you just a taste of The Gospel of Thomas, one of my favorite passages is such a powerful contrast to The Gospel of John, which is the last to be written of the four canonical Gospels and which also depicts Jesus as pointing toward the importance of his own person (whereas the Synoptic Gospel have Jesus pointing away from his own importance and toward the building of the Kingdom of God). Likewise, consider this verse from Thomas in which Jesus says, “I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended” (Pagels229). In other words, Jesus is pointing beyond himself to say that “It’s not about me.” And telling his disciples that they should not merely rely on his secondhand teachings, but should instead cultivate direct, firsthand experiences of the sacred for themselves.

Bart Ehrman in his book *Lost Christianities*, reflects poignantly on what it can feel like as you begin to immerse yourselves in these noncanonical Christian texts. He writes:

[Many] feel a sense of loss upon realizing just how many perspectives once endorsed by well-meaning, intelligent, and sincere believers came to be abandoned, destroyed, and forgotten— as were the texts that these believers produced, read, and revered. But with that feeling of loss comes the joy of discovery when some of these texts, and the lost Christianities they embody, are recovered and restored to us. For our own religious histories encompass not only the forms of belief and practice that emerged as victorious from the conflicts of the past but also those that were overcome, suppressed, and eventually lost. (279)

In that spirit, our Unitarian Universalist tradition explicitly draws on Six Sources all of which are equally important. But because both the Unitarian and the Universalist strands of our UU Living Tradition were liberal Christian movements, we have — in addition to the more general Third Source of “Wisdom from the world's religions” — our Fourth Source which explicitly names that we value the “Jewish and Christian teachings.”

Today we have the freedom to draw wisdom from the orthodox canon of Christian scripture, while also letting go of the parts that are obsolete and oppressive. We also have the freedom to explore the full diversity of early Christian writings — The Q Gospel, The Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip and so many more — as well as to seek wisdom in the writings of Christians and Jews through the full sweep of history until today.

Along these lines, contrary to popular opinion (and despite some admittedly terrible passages attributed to the apostle Paul, not all of which the historical Paul actually wrote) there are some incredible moving and relevant passages in Paul’s letters, for example. But I’m also convinced that much harm has been done by focusing far too much on the writings of one small subset of early Christians. My prescription, for what it’s worth, would be that for all the time an individual or congregation spends studying a first-century letter from Paul, they should spend equally as much time studying writings such as the twentieth-century “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which is equally or more significant part of the Christian tradition that is UUism’s Fourth Source.

For now, I will give the last words of the historical Jesus scholar Stephen Patterson from his new book The Lost Way:

Christianity was and is many things. There was much ado about Jesus's death, to be sure. He was a martyr.... But before all of this...Jesus was saying and doing things that moved people. He was a sage and a prophet. In Q and the Gospel of Thomas we recover something of that original modality of Jesus — wisdom. This was the lost Way.... [These lost Gospels] are changing the way we tell the story of how Christianity began.

Amen. May it be so.