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The Many Faces Of Christ: The Thousand-Year Story Of The Survival And Influence Of The Lost Gospels



The MANY FACES of CHRIST

The Thousand-Year Story of the
Survival and Influence of the Lost Gospels

PHILIP JENKINS



Synopsis

The standard account of early Christianity tells us that the first centuries after Jesus' death witnessed an efflorescence of Christian sects, each with its own gospel. We are taught that these alternative scriptures, which represented intoxicating, daring, and often bizarre ideas, were suppressed in the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Church canonized the gospels we know today: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The rest were lost, destroyed, or hidden. In *The Many Faces of Christ*, the renowned religious historian Philip Jenkins thoroughly refutes our most basic assumptions about the Lost Gospels. He reveals that dozens of alternative gospels not only survived the canonization process but in many cases remained influential texts within the official Church. Whole new gospels continued to be written and accepted. For a thousand years, these strange stories about the life and death of Jesus were freely admitted onto church premises, approved for liturgical reading, read by ordinary laypeople for instruction and pleasure, and cited as authoritative by scholars and theologians. The Lost Gospels spread far and wide, crossing geographic and religious borders. The ancient Gospel of Nicodemus penetrated into Southern and Central Asia, while both Muslims and Jews wrote and propagated gospels of their own. In Europe, meanwhile, it was not until the Reformation and Counter-Reformation that the Lost Gospels were effectively driven from churches. But still, many survived, and some continue to shape Christian practice and belief in our own day. Offering a revelatory new perspective on the formation of the biblical canon, the nature of the early Church, and the evolution of Christianity, *The Many Faces of Christ* restores these Lost Gospels to their central place in Christian history.

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Customer Reviews

A considerable merit of this book is its accessibility for a non-academic audience. A two-page glossary, although limited, can be helpful. Showing a very comprehensive grasp of a great mass of pertinent literature, the extensive endnotes serve in place of a bibliography for those incentivized to go further and deeper; Jenkins provides the reader with many tempting side trails to take! The cutting-edge chapter is “After Darkness, Light: How the Reformation Era Drove the Ancient Gospels from the Churches.” • “Reformation era” encompasses both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation (or Catholic Revival or Catholic Reformation, if you will). So the luxuriant excrescence of alternative gospels is said to have proliferated across a wide geography until about five hundred years ago, supplying longed-for explanations and details that the four canonical gospels so tantalizingly skimp on. Jenkins is convincing in maintaining that the pre-suppression circulation of these vibrant writings was both underground and above ground in both the Eastern and Western Church. But the beat goes on. In his final chapter, Jenkins says: “Put crudely, when did God decide to cease speaking through scripture? [Even] if we agree that a given text is neither canonical nor inspired, then does it still have a place within the Christian scheme?” • (p. 242) Much hangs on that question; the possible answers come in various flavors. For Jenkins, “the best argument for reading the alternative texts of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages is that they represent such a massive portion of the Christian spiritual heritage.” • (*ibid.*) How much truth value you want to assign to one, some, or all of them can vary, but they (at least) deserve a degree of respect for their endurance and popularity.

The Many Faces of Christ by Phillip Jenkins is a complicated work. To review his book, a brief review of history is needed. In 325 AD the Emperor Constantine convened the council of Nicaea. While the council did not determine what was and was not authorized (canonical) scripture it did set the stage for the church to exercise authority in determining what was genuine scripture and what scriptures were flawed teaching, heretical, or simply bogus. Of course, not all purported scripture was deemed legitimate (canonical) gospel. Jenkins gives us the stories of those gospels that did not “make the cut.” • How some gospels though not strictly canonical were in mainstream use, how others were used in Eastern European and elsewhere but not in Western Europe, and even how parts of the Qur'an have their genesis in non-canonical scripture. There is no overarching theological point to Jenkins’ work. He just recounts how a certain non-canonical gospel was

used during such and such time by such and such people while a different non-canonical gospel was favored, or at least in use, by a different group of believers at a different point in time. In recounting the use of these non-canonical gospels, Jenkins clearly doesn't like the term 'ælost gospels' • in that non-canonical (aka 'ælost') gospels were often in still is use by large number of Christians. However, some gospels, like those discovered in modern times at Nag Hammadi, were truly 'ælost' • to nearly all of Christianity. Biblical scholars, like Jenkins, pride themselves on being objective, but this scientific objectivity, has its limits. Without a discussion of what is and what is not the inspired word of God (even if written by imperfect man) biblical scholarship is just another branch of history.

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