

**Review of Bart Ehrman's *Lost Christianities*
by R.A. Baker**

Probably due to an undercurrent of anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States that began with the Puritans and can still be found among American Protestant fundamentalists, there remains a dearth of knowledge and understanding of early Christianity. Ehrman, like a nighttime hide-n-seek friend jumping out from behind a bush, overwhelms the uneducated with a dizzying array of texts and obscure references from the first two “Christian” centuries. His point (which I agree with) is that these texts should not be so obscure, but have been “lost” or rejected by what he calls the “proto-orthodox.” This designation refers to what became the dominant Christian group in the first three centuries — primitive writers, leaders and theologians, speaking for an accepted faith, and standing against aberrant viewpoints. “Proto-orthodox” because some of the views of this primitive group ultimately were rejected by later orthodoxy as theological issues continued to be honed and defined.

Ehrman successfully illustrates the diversity of early Christianity. This diversity began with the apostles and is alluded to in the first Christian history, the *Acts of the Apostles*. Chapter 15 of this early document indicates some kind of resolution in what was a growing problem for the early Church — was the Christian message to be separated from Judaism, or were converted Gentiles required to follow the laws of Moses? Ehrman documents how this struggle continued into the next two centuries.

In particular, Ehrman reviews some of the evidence for the Ebionites (an early Jewish-Christian sect), Marcionites (an anti-Jewish/Old Testament and somewhat Gnostic sect), Christian Gnostics (as depicted by various documents that advocate an extreme asceticism), and the Montanists (a sect given to ecstatic utterance and apocalypticism). In addition, Ehrman cites various texts that did not make it into the New Testament canon; some of these texts may have been used by the sects mentioned above — others further illustrate the diversity of belief in the first three centuries: *The Gospel of Peter*, *Acts of Paul*, *Didache*, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Thomas* of the Nag Hammadi collection, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, and *The Gospel of Truth* — this only represents around half the documents Ehrman cites.

While Ehrman does a fine job of introducing these various sects and documents (one of his stated goals), some of his underlying assumptions are dubious. Throughout this study he states that these noncanonical texts were rejected, scorned and burned. Clearly there were times when documents were rejected and burned, but every document has its own story for why it was not accepted, or disappeared. Ehrman says as much in the chapter on how the New Testament canon came to be, and he consistently gives a fair historical synopsis when he discusses a particular text, but he misrepresents this historical period by consistently commenting on documents being “lost, rejected, and/or burned.” It seems clear that Ehrman’s commentary is predicated on the thesis that these noncanonical texts were discriminated against in something of a patristic conspiracy. As Ehrman states in the chapter on the NT canon, there were a few NT documents that only made the canon after years of debate and consternation. In another timeline Ehrman (and others) would be moaning about the “lost” Christianities due to the rejection of the *Gospel of John*, *Hebrews*, and that strange little letter

attributed to the brother of Jesus, *Jude*. These NT books contain shades of Philo/Middle Platonism, ebionitic christology, and Judaistic apocalypticism respectively. There was no way to have a canon that contained *all* the texts claimed by “Christians” — the only practical option was to “accept” the best texts and allow the others to drift slowly into the sands of time. There are too many conflicting pieces of evidence in both the noncanonical texts and in the patristic record for the conspiracy theory to hold up.

Another dubious assumption Ehrman makes is to assign more historical validity to these noncanonical sources than to the accepted NT texts. Against the NT record and all the writings of the early fathers, Ehrman wants us to believe the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Thomas* which both claim Thomas as the twin brother of Jesus. Although Ehrman does not think this Thomas really authored the gospel in his name (p.57), he does appear to accept the claim that Jesus had a twin brother, Didymus Judas Thomas (*didumos* being “twin” in Greek). But, *if* this Thomas was in fact a twin, he could have been the twin of James, rather than of Jesus. The twin brother theory is never even alluded to in the NT and, as far as I know, is not supported in any of the early fathers.

Again, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* we see extreme asceticism that goes against the Pauline record (1 Timothy) in the NT. Though *Thecla* is known to be a forged document, Ehrman believes these stories were not completely fabricated, “there are reasons for thinking that he compiled stories he had heard, oral traditions that had been in circulation for years” (p.32). Belief in the conspiracy keeps him from granting the same kind of latitude to the New Testament documents. Ehrman sees the *Thecla* stories to be more in line with NT Paul and the motivating factor for “Paul” to write 1 Timothy (p.39). So we should consider the oral traditions behind *Thecla* to be more reliable than the oral traditions recounted by the fathers for Paul’s authorship of the Pastorals. Why? The Conspiracy.

More examples could be cited, but Ehrman makes his presupposition clear, “Where did we get our New Testament Gospels in the first place, and how do we know that *they*, rather than the dozens of Gospels that did *not* become part of the New Testament, reveal the truth about what Jesus taught?” (p.93)

The victors write the history and we know there were socio/geopolitical struggles that influenced the various writers of the NT, but does that mean we disregard anything they tell us? Five hundred years from now someone will dig up some twentieth century Neo-Nazi writings that describe and explain the struggle of the Nazi party of the 1940’s against the Allies. Why would anyone believe this testimony over the writings of Winston Churchill or Dwight Eisenhower? Yet this is exactly what Ehrman seems to be advocating in *Lost Christianities*.

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