



Bock, Darrell L.

The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Building on the success of his bestselling book *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, Darrell L. Bock examines the claims of scholars who suggest that in the first century there were many Christianities that were eventually drowned out by the group that would later come to represent orthodoxy. In *The Missing Gospels* Dr. Bock compares and contrasts these ‘alternative Christian’ movements with what he terms ‘traditional Christianity’.

In the “Introduction” Dr. Bock informs us that:

This study concentrates on the period before Irenaeus, that controversial church father of the late second century. The new school claims that Irenaeus “won” and was the key architect of orthodoxy. The claim is that orthodoxy (or the claim of a defined, legitimate Christianity) emerged even more clearly in the third and fourth centuries. So the new school argues that the Christianity we know has roots that do not really go back to the time of Jesus or even to the apostles in a way that precludes other alternative views of Christianity. (xxiv-xxv)

Bock’s main argument is concentrated against a group of scholars that he calls the ‘New School’ which includes scholars such as Elaine Pagels of Princeton University, Bart Ehrman of UNC at Chapel Hill, Marvin Meyer of Chapman University, Helmut Koester of Harvard University, et al. who have all followed in the footsteps of the late German NT scholar Walter Bauer. Bauer’s

theory was that these alternative Christianities (labeled 'heretical' by the early church fathers) actually represented the majority of early Christianity.

The method for comparison is quite simple, Bock takes key topics that are considered foundational to Christianity and examines what each group (i.e., alternative and traditional) has to say about these concepts. This examination covers 4 topics over 8 chapters (ch. 6-13) with a chapter for each topic devoted to the 'traditional' view and a chapter devoted to the 'alternative' view. The points covered are as follows:

1. The Nature of God and Creation
2. Jesus: Divine and/or Human?
3. The Nature of Humanity's Redemption: Spiritual or Also Physical?
4. Jesus' Death: Knowledge, Sin, and Salvation

But before delving into his examination of the various views concerning these topics Dr. Bock takes the time necessary to introduce us to the major figures (i.e., persons & texts) and ideas in the debate. Bock outlines the texts we are to examine saying:

The missing gospel texts and other types of works closely related to them receive special attention. These include key gospels: *of Thomas, of Phillip, of the Savior, of Truth, of Mary Magdalene*. They also include other significant works tied to the alternative tradition(s): *Apocryphon of John, Dialogue of the Savior, and Apocryphon of James*. (xxv)

He does well not to lump all of these texts together under the heading of 'Gnostic' literature because some of them quite frankly are not Gnostic and Gnosticism in and of itself was a very diverse movement. Bock notes this in his chapter entitled "Discussion of a Key Alternative View" when he says: "This general use of the term was applied to all types of religious experiences and claims . . . It has been difficult to pin down the features that make a work Gnostic and the features that make it simply something different from what we know today as orthodox Christianity but not necessarily Gnostic." (16)

Bock outlines five points that generally identify Gnosticism and Gnostic works — below is my summary of his points:

1. Dualism — a mix of good and evil. (19)
2. Cosmogony – a contrast of spheres in the creation: light vs. darkness; soul/spirit vs. matter/flesh. (19)

3. Soteriology — gaining knowledge about creation’s dualistic nature, only for the spirit/soul, not for the flesh. (19)
4. Eschatology — a recovery of the creation into the ‘fullness’ or ‘pleroma’ where the good dwells. Understanding and connecting with the spiritual, separating from the physical. (19)
5. Cult and Community — not much is known about this area but it is known that they had rites past baptism. (20)

Bock succeeds in summarizing the various views in light of the materials examined. Any beginning student of New Testament apocryphal writings will do well to read Bock’s summaries. But one thing is painfully clear — Dr. Bock certainly favors the traditional Christian sources as representing normative early Christianity. Certain critics have faulted him for not making his bias clear from the beginning but I believe he has done exactly that in challenging Bauer’s thesis. He says:

Here are the roots of a mantra heard in much of recent buzz about the new gospels. That saying goes. “History is written by the winners.” Like a triumphant chorus, the mantra never asks whether the winners won for a reason other than “favorable circumstances.” (46)

Bock certainly believes that the winners did win for a reason, that reason being that their faith and practices went back to the earliest sources (i.e., written sources and traditions).

One thing I really appreciated about this book is that Dr. Bock doesn’t demonize or vilify the so-called ‘new’ writings, in fact he maintains that they are important and do tell us a lot about early Christian history (see the four contributions he feels the ‘new school’ has made with their claims concerning these texts on pp. 201-202). He simply concludes that these sources do not present enough evidence to reach the conclusions that the ‘new school’ have reached in terms of competing Christianities from the earliest times.

One thing I would have liked to have seen but didn’t (even in the chapter entitled “Dating the Origin of Gnosticism”) was a comprehensive argument about the dates of the ‘new’ texts and the traditions they arose from. In my mind the crux of the argument has to do with timing. If indeed the author wants to argue for traditional Christianity as being the original faith then he needs to firmly establish that it is earlier. I think he does an excellent job of showing the differences but not as great of a job in establishing the timelines. The traditional Gospels are treated as extremely early (40s – 90s A.D.) while the alternative texts are dated to the early to late

2nd century (sometimes later) — but he does not develop this. He doesn't present enough of the opposing arguments to satisfy my interest in the issue.

Rather than list point by point all of Bock's conclusions (thereby reproducing the entire book) I'd rather just urge the reader to purchase a copy. Every layman needs a copy of this important contribution to the debate on early Christianity. Not only will it help in debunking certain misconceptions about the early faith, but it will serve as a primer for the study of alternative religious movements in antiquity. This could certainly be used to teach an adult Bible study—in fact it seems designed for just such a purpose, having review questions asked at the end of each chapter.