Lost Books 3

New Testament Wanna-bes

There are dozens of books written during the first few centuries of the Christian era in the style of scripture and with claims of authority. Most of these books fall into one of two extremes. Either they are too Greek, typically by bringing Gnostic ideas into Christianity, or they are too Jewish, requiring circumcision and obedience to the Law. Some are just weird. Most of them are known only as quotations or references in other works or partial manuscripts. Here are but a few examples.

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas: This borrows a lot from Greek mythology and tells the story of miracles performed by Jesus as a small child. These include: making clay birds come to life, cursing other children to death and later bringing them back to life, and playing with lions. He frequently argues with his teachers, and adults who chastise him die.

The Gospel of Peter: Known only in quotes, this book suggests that Jesus did not die on the cross but disappeared after saying “My power, my power, why have you forsaken me.” He later reappears and ascends into heaven on the same day. Believed to have been a gnostic work.

Dialogue with the Savior: Part of the Nag Hammadi gnostic library, this book consists of questions and answers with Jesus about esoteric knowledge, how to acquire it, and creation of the material world.

Secret Gospel of John: A Sethian gospel that teaches that Jesus is the reincarnation of Adam’s son Seth. Set in the framing device of a revelation delivered by the resurrected Christ to John the son of Zebedee, it contains some of the most extensive detailing of classic dualistic Gnostic mythology that has survived; as one of the principal texts of the Nag Hammadi library, it is an essential text of study for anyone interested in Gnosticism. Also called the Apocryphon of John.

Acts of Paul and Thecla: Set during Paul’s 1st missionary journey, this book tells the story of Thecla, a follower of Paul who so devotes herself to Paul’s teaching that that “one must fear only one God and live in chastity.” This sets up a series of trials where Thecla is burned at the stake, tied to a lion, and chased down by a group of men who intend to gang rape her. In each case a miracle provides a way out and her virginity is saved.

Act of Peter: While the main event in this book is a battle of miracles between Peter and Simon Magus, and a denouncement of the Gnosticism he represents, the book teaches a strange form of Jewish Christianity. Peter teaches that Jews are saved by believing in Moses, Gentiles by believing in Christ, but that the most blessed are those that follow both.

The Book of Elxai: It encourages following the Law (including circumcision), as well as ascetic practices. Sexual desire is presented as wickedness, but a sin that could be cured through baptism. The book uses numbers and measures to foretell the future and further advocates healing rituals, as well as following a schedule based on astrology. The universe is held to be governed by principles created by God, who is called "the great and most high God". God's son (Christ, also called "the mighty king") along with the Holy Spirit (who is female) are depicted as angels of enormous size. Christ is held to have lived on earth repeatedly through reincarnation, sometimes arriving through virgin births. However, Jesus is taught to have been conceived naturally.