

BOOK REVIEW

Darrell L. Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006). xxvi + 230 pp. Hdbk. US\$21.99.

For some time there has been interest in books that did not make it into the New Testament, especially the non-canonical Gospels. This is seen on a popular level in Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, and on the academic level in books by scholars such as Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels*, 1979; *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, 2003) and Bart Ehrman (*Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, 2003). As a result, there is great need for a survey of the issues, especially a non-technical survey for laypeople. This is the purpose of Darrell Bock's *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth behind Alternative Christianities*.

The strength of this book is its logical and easy-to-follow structure. Bock does not assume any knowledge of the issues, so he lays a foundation of basic concepts. Understanding that much of the confusion about non-canonical books is about a forced blending of time periods, Bock introduces the reader to the relevant periods: (1) Jesus and the Apostolic Period, (2) Apostolic Fathers and the Rise of Alternative Works and (3) Apologists and More Alternatives. Acknowledging that there were many alternatives to orthodoxy, Bock brings the focus onto Gnosticism. He does a good job of presenting the challenges of narrowly defining Gnosticism, but at the same time gives the reader some guidelines in identifying texts with Gnostic tendencies.

This brings Bock to the problem of placing the alternatives in their relationship to orthodox Christianity. He introduces readers to scholars involved in the debate, including Walter Bauer and his followers. Bock rejects the idea that there were multiple valid forms of Christianity in the earliest period, with orthodox Christianity only gradually emerging as the victor over its competition. Rather, orthodox Christianity was the earliest form, with alternatives only appearing later on.

The main body of the book looks at various theological issues and how they are dealt with in various texts. The issues treated include the nature of God and creation; Jesus: divine and/or human; the nature of humanity's redemption: spiritual or physical; and Jesus' death: knowledge, sin, and salvation. Bock labels Gnostic and other alternative texts as 'newer texts' and orthodox texts such as the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers as 'traditional texts'. By looking at each issue in both kinds of texts, Bock is able to demonstrate that traditional interpretations can be traced back to the earliest texts while alternative interpretations were newer developments. He presents some evolution of Gnostic beliefs within the alternative texts, with the earliest (such as the *Gospel of Thomas*) being closer to the traditional views.

Although *The Missing Gospels* is a valuable book, it does have its weaknesses. In evaluating the value of early Christian texts, Bock relies heavily on traditional understandings of authorship. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are seen as more valuable than *Thomas* or *Philip*, because the canonical Gospels come directly from Apostles or their associates, while the alternative texts are pseudepigraphical, adopting the names of the Apostles to seem authoritative. While many scholars do accept the traditional authorship of the canonical Gospels, Bock's argument alienates those scholars who see the canonical Gospels as more anonymous. There are other arguments in favour of the canonical Gospels that would be more convincing, including their earlier dates, compatibility with Paul's letters, and the lack of fantastic legend elements found in many of the alternative texts. Another problem is that this book came out just as the *Gospel of Judas* was being published, so evidence from the *Gospel of Judas* is not used in the body of the book, although Bock does provide a preliminary survey in an appendix.

As already noted, this book is aimed at non-specialists. But that does not mean that it is simplistic. Instead of avoiding the issues, Bock takes time to define possible unfamiliar terms. When he uses an alternative text for the first time, he provides a summary of the issues around that text, including the date. As a result, Bock provides a book that is a good introduction to the issues of alternative Gospels for readers, either with or without academic background. This book should be a useful tool for the seminary and the church for many years to come.

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