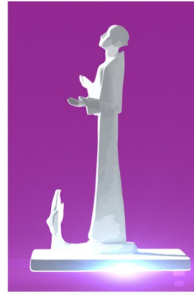


EXPLORING THE BIBLE

a St Francis College short course



Theme 4: Reading the New Testament

4e: Were there ever only four Gospels?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine the decisions involved in choosing which gospel accounts to include in an agreed collection!
2. What criteria would be non-negotiables for you if it was your job to decide on the contents of the New Testament?
3. Make a list and add to it over the week, as you continue to think over this tricky question!
4. It's exciting to hear that discoveries of source documents still happen. Archaeological discoveries also influence how we read the texts, as we learn new things about cultural practices of the day. What is your response to the idea that there is more to be learnt about the New Testament texts?
5. Does this idea influence how you look at the documents we have in our Bible?

TRANSCRIPT

The Very Rev'd Dr Greg Jenks

Dean, Grafton Cathedral

Yes, we've got four Gospels in the New Testament. They're the Gospels most people are familiar with: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There were, of course, many other gospels written. Probably around 30 that we know of. We may find others with more time and more documents coming to light, but we know of around 30.

Most of them are not narrative gospels in the way that all four in the New Testament tend to be narrative, telling the story of Jesus. John has less of that but there is still a bit of a story there. So the canonical Gospels in the New Testament tend to be telling the story of Jesus. The other gospels which didn't make the cut, for whatever reason, tend to be more collections of things Jesus did or things Jesus said, not so much a narrative from start to finish.

We've always known about some of these 'extras' because they're referenced in the ancient sources themselves. Irenaeus for example, writing near the end of the second century attacks what he is sure is a number of heresies in a massive book called Against Heresies. He mentions some of these fake gospels, like the gospel of Judas. So, we've known about some of these even if the documents themselves were lost (often the church destroyed them - It was ancient censorship!)

So we knew these documents had been there, but for the most part we didn't have copies of them. Sometimes the Christian author quotes so much of the opposing document you could almost reconstruct it from the quotes. Not good essay techniques for a student but that was their context!