

Chapter 1

How to Lose Books of the Bible: A Hands-On Guide

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding what “lost” really means
 - ▶ Surveying the three greatest lost book discoveries
 - ▶ Categorizing ancient religious writings
 - ▶ Looking critically at the idea of lost books and their importance
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Let’s face it: the idea of “lost books” — no matter what the field — is tantalizing and exciting. And when you combine the appeal of arcane writings and “secret knowledge” with the Bible, well, the result is practically irresistible!

The idea of lost books suggests secrets to be discovered, information to be gained, and surprises ahead. It also calls up romantic images of archaeologists uncovering long-lost manuscripts, blowing off the dust, and reading the unexpected. (This is obviously one reason archaeologists are so romanticized, even though *most* archaeologists hardly have lives like Indiana Jones!)

In this chapter, we discuss the general idea of lost books in relation to the Bible and discuss some of the most spectacular discoveries of the 19th and 20th centuries in terms of ancient Jewish and Christian writings. We also talk about the debates and processes that finally led to the Bible that exists today, and the fact that most people think about two groups of writings when they should be thinking about *three*. What we mean is that most folks think of the writings that made it into the Bible and all the others that did not. But there’s a *third* group that we call the “almost in” books. This is the especially fascinating group that *some* Jews and Christians deeply treasured but that still didn’t make the final cut!

What Do We Mean By “Lost Books of the Bible”?

“Lost books of the Bible” is certainly an intriguing phrase and an even more intriguing concept. But what exactly does it mean? Are there really books out there that were supposed to be in the Bible, but somehow got “lost” along the way? Well, not really. By “lost books,” we actually mean a few different things.

Books that were always around, just unknown by most people

Literally dozens and dozens of writings from the time *before* Jesus, written by different groups of ancient Jewish writers, weren’t included in the standard collection of writings known as the Bible. But these writings were never actually lost. (For many people who don’t know about them, however, they may seem like “lost books.”) For example, most everyone has at least *heard* of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but most don’t realize that in addition to the familiar books of the Hebrew Bible, these famous scrolls contain some *very* unusual writings from an unusual group of pre-Christian Jewish believers who lived in the desert near the Dead Sea.



Many people read the Bible but have no idea that ancient Jewish writings that weren’t included in the Hebrew Bible (what the Christians call the *Old Testament*) even exist. Furthermore, many Christians who know their New Testament very well are unaware of the many early Christian writings that weren’t included in the modern Christian New Testament.

Quite a few of these writings have long been available in English translation and gathered into collections, and biblical scholars read and study them very carefully as important historical sources — even if Christians in the churches don’t read them or even know about them. For example, about a dozen writings now called the *Apostolic Fathers* (see Chapter 13) consist of writings that *some* early Christians *did* want in their New Testament! Other writings were written by factions or groups that had particular disagreements with what later emerged as Orthodox Christianity. It turns out that the first centuries of Christianity were quite a wild ride — lots of debates, meetings, arguments . . . and lots of writings! Sometimes the only reason historians even know about some writings that are *still* lost is because the writings are quoted in the arguments of early Christian theologians who try to show how *unacceptable* they are.

Books that were lost but found again

Some lost books have turned up over the centuries. Most of the time, these are writings that scholars knew existed but thought were lost. The famous *Book of 1 Enoch* (see Chapter 6) is one such example; it's not only well known from early Christian use but also is even quoted in the New Testament's Jude:

It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "See, the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him."

—Jude 1:14–15

Early Christian writers after the time of the New Testament also referred to 1 Enoch on occasion, so its existence was known. Then in the late 18th century, the Scottish explorer James Bruce was exploring in Ethiopia and found that the Ethiopic Christians had hand-copied editions of this book in the ancient Ethiopic language of Ge'ez. He brought some copies back to Europe, generating great excitement until it was finally published in English some 30 years later.



To Europeans, the Book of 1 Enoch was lost, but to Ethiopians (who probably wondered what all the fuss was about), it was not.



One way that lost books are found is in old libraries where they're gathering dust and ignored until someone realizes what they are and reveals them to the world. Many formerly lost books were discovered in this way — in the backs of ancient libraries or even in museums!

Books quoted in other works but never actually found

One category of lost books are those whose titles are known and that scholars have some general ideas about content-wise thanks to quotations and references in other ancient writings, such as early Christian theologians who are arguing about them. But they don't have actual copies of these books . . . yet. But in these cases, scholars and researchers definitely know what to look for!

The recent excitement about the rediscovery of the *Gospel of Judas* is similar. (We summarize this work in Chapter 11.) Scholars knew that such a writing

existed, but it didn't turn up until the late 20th century. The discovery was announced to the world with great fanfare in 2005, with a rather significant campaign of books, television programs, and promotional activities.

Previously unknown books

We don't want to sound too cynical by suggesting that calling these works "lost" is always erroneous and an overstatement, because entirely unknown writings are occasionally discovered. It happened in 1948–1956, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. Included in the large number of texts found over a number of years in the caves by the Dead Sea in Israel/Palestine were ancient Hebrew versions of books in the Hebrew Bible. However, the collection also included a large number of writings entirely new, entirely unknown, and entirely unexpected by modern scholars and historians. These were unique writings written by the small group that once owned and produced these hand-written scrolls. So, sometimes unknown writings can turn up.

Three of the Greatest "Lost Books" Finds of All Time

To get an idea of how this "lost books" business works, take a look at three of the greatest finds of the 19th and 20th centuries that are directly related to the Bible:

- ✓ The discovery the Codex Siniaticus, one of the oldest complete New Testaments in Greek in possession today
- ✓ The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library (1945)
- ✓ The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1947–1956)

Throughout this book, we discuss some of the results of these discoveries (and others), but here we focus on the stories of these three major discoveries and a bit about why they were so significant. Not every discovery is this dramatic, and, of course, we chose the best ones to get you, our reader, warmed up to the subject!

The Codex Siniaticus

Here's a great beginning to a story: There once was a German professor of the Bible named Constantin Tischendorf who was notable for his interest in recovering the earliest manuscripts of the Bible he could find. In 1844, he first

visited the famous ancient Greek Orthodox monastery St. Catherine's, which sits at the base of a mountain in the Sinai desert traditionally thought to be *the* Mount Sinai where Moses received the law (a claim highly disputed by modern archaeologists and historians, by the way).

Although he was searching for old manuscripts, Tischendorff never could have dreamed that his travels would soon reveal one of the most important early manuscripts of the Bible. According to one version of the story, the visiting scholar spotted some Greek handwritten pages heading for the fire and recovered them, only to discover that they were ancient Christian manuscripts. In another version of the story, he saved actual pages of a Greek Bible that were headed for the trash, but either way, Tischendorff's inquiries led to his being shown what he thought *should* have been a treasured book from the monastery library (and, in still other versions of the story — it *was* already a treasured work): It was a Greek Bible from the fourth or fifth century CE! It had portions of the Greek Old Testament and a complete New Testament . . . and then some. (The “then some” included some of what was later called the Apostolic Fathers, books that eventually did *not* end up in the New Testament; see Chapter 13 for more on this collection of writings.)

Eventually, Tischendorff returned to the monastery in 1859 with funding from the Tsar of Russia and convinced the monks to lend (or sell, depending on whom you believe) the famous book to the Tsar. The monks today claim to have a letter from Tischendorff promising to return the manuscript, so they accuse him of stealing it!



Like a great murder mystery, the plot thickens. When the Russian Revolution occurred, Lenin needed cash and agreed to sell the ancient Bible manuscript to the British Museum in 1933. It remains on display at the museum to this very day. According to one story, a large crowd gathered when the book was delivered to the museum, and the entire crowd dropped to their knees as the book was slowly walked up the long stairway to the museum entrance. Great story. But why all the fuss?



This particular Bible, known today as *Codex Sinaiticus* (which means *The Book from Sinai*), may well be one of the 50 Bibles commissioned by Emperor Constantine I, the first Christian Roman Emperor, who wanted Bibles produced for 50 churches in his new capital city, Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Furthermore, this New Testament contains the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which don't appear in the existing New Testament. The inclusion of these works in the Codex suggests to some scholars that *some* early Christians included them among New Testament books. Also, the *Gospel of Mark* that appears in the Codex differs slightly from the version in the existing New Testament — it has the famous “shorter ending” that follows the description of the empty tomb. (There are two disputed endings to the Gospel of Mark: the longer ending found in some early manuscripts, and the shorter ending found in Codex Sinaiticus. Most English translations of the New Testament provide *both* endings so you can compare them.)

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library

In the Nag Hammadi region of southern Egypt, a couple of poor farmers were digging for some nitrates to fertilize their crops when they uncovered a jar. Hoping that it contained something valuable, they broke it only to discover a number of leather-bound papyrus pages and many fragments of written work. The farmers wrapped up the ancient writings and brought them home.

They recognized some of the ancient writing as Coptic (an ancient Egyptian language now used almost exclusively as a written language in the Coptic Christian churches in Egypt and Ethiopia), so they assumed that the writings had something to do with Christianity. Eventually, they gave the pages to the local Coptic Christian Priest. It wasn't long before the manuscripts made it to the Coptic Museum in Cairo.

The collection of writings turned out to be Coptic translations of older Greek manuscripts of Christian writings from the fourth century. Because ancient Christian monks once practiced solitary prayers in the local caves of the Nag Hammadi region, it was assumed that the writings were deposited in the caves for safekeeping and then forgotten. Some have suggested that, at one point, the discovered writings weren't considered acceptable for early Christians to read, and so instead of destroying them, some ancient Egyptian Christians decided to bury them.

Why do so many ancient manuscripts turn up in Egypt?

The answer to this question is easy: Ancient manuscripts survive really well in Egypt's very dry climate. Also, many ancient Egyptian writings are written on papyrus, which consists of flattened and interwoven long strips of leaves from the papyrus plant that grows wild up and down the Nile. Papyrus is very durable, and it likes dry climates!

Even moving the short distance north into modern Israel/Palestine and especially as far north as Lebanon increases the rainfall just

enough to make the environment and atmosphere less friendly to ancient manuscripts. Unless these fragile writings are sealed in clay jars, they're unlikely to make it (even in Egypt, but it's where they have the best chance).

Of course, another important reason for so many discoveries in Egypt is that ancient Egypt was a major Jewish and Christian center — especially ancient Alexandria on the coast — and therefore many writings were produced there.

Most of the Nag Hammadi writings (collectively referred to as the Nag Hammadi Library) show signs of Gnostic influence, an ancient philosophy that influenced a large number of early Christians but led to serious quarrels from Christians who believed that Gnosticism introduced dangerous ideas into Christian theology (see the Gnosticism discussion in Chapter 12). No one knows for sure how these writings were first deposited or why, so the theories are pure speculation.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls

For biblical studies, easily the most spectacular find of the 20th century — and perhaps even the most spectacular find in the entire millennium — is the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The story is now rather famous: A Bedouin boy was trying to find a stray goat that had wandered into one of the dozens of caves in the hillsides by the shores of the Dead Sea (see Figure 1-1 for a photo of these caves). Apparently hoping to chase the goat out of the darkness in the back of the cave, he threw a rock to startle the goat, but the rock hit something and the boy heard the sound of breaking clay. The rest, as they say, is history.



Figure 1-1:
The caves
where the
Dead Sea
Scrolls were
found.



Some of the scrolls were eventually sold to Professor Eleazar L. Sukenik at the Hebrew University; others were sold to clergy of the Syrian Orthodox Church, until they too were eventually purchased by representatives of Israel.

After it became clear where the original clay jars were discovered, all the remaining caves throughout the entire area were thoroughly searched, turning up more and more discoveries. All told, over 800 manuscripts and thousands of pieces and fragments were found, and other finds were discovered in later years. Most of the scrolls are now kept in Israel, but smaller pieces are in other museum collections.

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain two kinds of material:

- ✓ Copies of writings known from the Bible (the Bible, of course, was determined later than the time of the Scrolls)
- ✓ Copies of Jewish religious writings that were never seen before (some known, but some entirely unknown)

It's presumed that the community who originally produced these writings treasured both kinds of literature with equal reverence. The writings that only they knew and treasured most likely were writings that they composed, which is why they weren't known and quoted by other ancient Jewish writers (as far as scholars know) and also why there are multiple copies of these writings.



Portions — some more complete than others — of every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther are represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The real significance of the “biblical” books (of course, there wasn't a Bible yet at the time) is that they're written in Hebrew and Aramaic and therefore are older than any other Hebrew versions that exist in modern times. Because of the tradition in Judaism of using scrolls that are only in very good condition, older scrolls were typically destroyed in favor of newer copies. Therefore, before the Hebrew manuscripts of the Dead Sea were discovered, the oldest Hebrew manuscripts were only as old as the ninth to tenth centuries CE.



Although scholars had old Greek translations of the biblical books (like *Codex Sinaiticus*) prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, they didn't have very old Hebrew versions. So, when you look at a Dead Sea Scroll, you're looking at a Hebrew version of these writings that's virtually 1,000 years *older* than any Hebrew language copies of the Bible that had been seen for hundreds of years. It's like taking a giant step back in time to see how the Hebrew Bible looked back then. Of course, the discovery of these manuscripts revolutionized the study of the Hebrew Bible because it supplied much older manuscripts to work with and to compare with more recent versions.

The dates of the scrolls are estimated to be from about 300 BCE to 50–60 CE. Scholars assume that these scrolls were written by a community of Jews who were disappointed with the religious life in Jerusalem and may even have had some arguments with the people controlling the Temple there. It appears that

the community left Jerusalem to set up a separate community somewhere near the Dead Sea and possibly at the ruins near Qumran. When the Jewish Revolt led to Roman military reprisals against Jewish towns and communities, one theory is that members of this community hid their library in hopes of coming back to retrieve it after things had settled down — but nobody survived who knew where the works were hidden. So, there they sat, in those caves, until the 20th century.

In, Almost In, and Out: Categorizing Ancient Religious Writing

Anyone who studies the formation of the Bible soon discovers that the process involved lots of discussion about various writings — especially among Christians. The Jewish scholars, interestingly enough, didn't talk much about the issue of a "set collection" of special writings even though they most certainly did make a final decision about their collection of religious writings — a collection that eventually became the Hebrew Bible. The Christians eventually had to decide what their Bible would contain, but they had to decide on contents for *both* their Old Testament *and* their New Testament. The Jewish tradition eventually decided what comprised their Hebrew Bible, but their decision process was quite different from the Christians' even though they were talking about some of the same writings!

To complicate matters even more, not only are we talking about three different processes (Christians working on *two* different collections and Jews working on *one*), but also there were never only two categories of religious writings: good and bad. That's far too simplistic, and furthermore, it's not true to the historical facts and the discussions that actually took place.



There are actually *three* categories of ancient religious writings in the lives of the ancient Jews and the ancient Christians:

- ✓ The books that *are* in the Bible.
- ✓ The books that were *almost in* the Bible. Lots of people like them, but in the end, they didn't make it.
- ✓ The books that were *rejected* for inclusion in the Bible. These books had no shot at being included.

Note: *Lost Books of the Bible For Dummies* doesn't focus on the first category, the books that are in the Bible. We briefly talk about them collectively, but if this is your real interest, then we recommend that you turn to *The Bible For Dummies*, by Jeffrey Geoghegan and Michael Homan (published by Wiley). Even though we speak about the Bible throughout this book, we're mainly interested in the second and third categories, the "almost in" and the "clearly out."

Complicating matters: Adding a fourth category

An early Christian historian named Eusebius of Caesarea (early fourth century) is often called the Father of Christian History Writing because he wrote a massive work (that we still have, usually published in two volumes) called the *History of the Church*.

In his work, Eusebius discusses some of the debates and discussions among Christians about the religious books that would eventually become part of the canon of the New Testament. Eusebius actually talks about dozens and dozens of early Christian writings, including the books that eventually did become part of the

New Testament. In his discussion, however, Eusebius divides these writings into no less than *four* categories:

- ✓ The writings that everyone agrees are centrally important
- ✓ The writings that people argue about but most everyone likes
- ✓ The writings that people argue about but only a few people like
- ✓ The writings that pretty much nobody likes

Questioning the Idea of Biblical Lost and Found

When you get past the initial excitement of the idea of lost books and especially lost books of the Bible, some questions start nagging: How does anyone lose a book of the Bible? In fact, how can anyone lose such an important writing? And how does anyone *find* such books? Do people know where to look, or are the discoveries simply fortuitous accidents?

How do books get lost?

The interest in discovering lost books isn't new, but you may be wondering how books that are so important get lost in the first place.

Well, the main problem is that we are modern persons who think like modern people! We have printing presses that produce *thousands* of copies of a book, and wonder how *anyone* could lose a book — even a bad book.

But in the ancient world, books were *rare*. They had to be produced by *hand*, and they were kept in libraries, sometimes far from population centers where the precious writings could be damaged, stolen, or destroyed. If you only

have a few copies to begin with, you begin to understand how a writing could be “lost.” If a tragedy occurs — disease, fire, conquest — precious manuscripts could be lost forever. Many discovered manuscripts appear to have been *hidden* precisely to prevent bad things happening to them. Furthermore, if the writings were produced by a small faction, a “group” within the larger Church, then perhaps only a few copies were *ever* made. And, last, we hate to admit it, but the early believers (bless them) were not above *destroying* books that they didn’t like, either.

When you think about it, each and every discovery of an ancient manuscript from before the days of printing is an incredible gift to modern scholars, readers, and historians. The interesting thing is, finding rare writings was already something that *ancient* people loved to talk about. Of course *they* knew how rare writings were . . . so you know *they* knew how important it was to find something older! We can easily prove this with a story from the Bible itself.

Just because it's “found” doesn't make it important

Earlier in this section, we raise an important question: “How can such important writings ever be lost?” Part of the answer is already in the question: *Important* writings are rarely lost. For both the Jews and the Christians, the only books that became lost were books not considered important by very many people. Think about it — if a work is unknown and never quoted, or only rarely mentioned by other ancient writers . . . then the fact of the matter is that the work wasn’t really missed. These writings are the work of a small group of people, and it’s therefore very easy to *overestimate* their importance because of the romance of finding ancient writings!



Although it’s *always* important to find ancient writings to add to the evidence for writing ancient history, it’s another matter completely to try to determine how *important* a writing is. After all, somebody’s ancient grocery list may be ancient, and it may tell historians something about ancient diets or family meals, but it hardly belongs in the Bible as a sacred discovery. In short, age is *not* the only issue here.

In fact, books of the Bible aren’t really lost or found. The Bible emerged from a long process of using writings in the life of a religious tradition. The very fact that these writings weren’t lost is important — you don’t lose something that you use again and again, make copies of, and distribute all around. But if you’re a small group whose writings don’t appeal to very many folks, then when you die out, so does the interest in your writings . . . sometimes. The important point is this: Scholars actually have every single work that was

quoted extensively and often by ancient Christians. They weren't lost. But what scholars don't have is *every* work that ancient Christians ever quoted. Some writings that weren't quoted very often (if at all) haven't survived. True, it would be nice to have them, but that's not the same as saying, "A book of the Bible is *missing*!" That would make a *great* headline, but it doesn't make sense. How could it be so important if it's lost?

Do Books Get Suppressed?

Another way to speak of lost books, however, has more to do with *modern* ideas than ancient ones. Some modern scholars, for example, have decided that they quite *like* some of the books that were excluded from the Bible. For one reason or another, they defend their interest in those books by suggesting that it was a "political" decision to exclude these writings.

However, the fact is that Christianity in the first few centuries was never so centrally and powerfully organized. Nobody paid much attention to "central leaders" until the Roman Empire became "Christian." So, most of the time, the early Christian leaders decided to endorse those writings that the Christians already were using for over 200 years and finding really positive and useful. Leaders weren't imposing books on people who didn't want them, just following along with the "group decision."

On the other hand, modern readers may wonder if there was some kind of agenda (religious or political) that led to some books being excluded. If you could make the historical case that a large number of people *liked* a particular writing that was excluded, then you may have a good argument that something is up — and you have reason to wonder what happened!

Although it doesn't happen anymore, books may have been suppressed, or even destroyed, among early Christians. In fact, some believe that the Nag Hammadi Library is a group of writings that some early Christian didn't have the heart to destroy, so he buried them (or hid them) instead, and the documents survived to the present.

The real question is whether there's any such thing as a modern conspiracy to hide some religious writings. The answer should be obvious to anyone who has visited a good university library! There they are in plain sight: English translations of everything that has been found so far.

It's traditional that historians or archaeologists have the right to be the first ones to publish their discoveries. But they're supposed to get to it in a reasonable amount of time. They're allowed a few years to do some research

and carefully prepare a publication of what they've discovered, including a translation, but they aren't supposed to take lots of time to do it. Other scholars will get *very* impatient if the find isn't published fairly quickly.

For example, some of the Dead Sea Scrolls were held up for publication for decades, causing a great outcry among scholars until it was revealed that photographic copies of virtually all the main scrolls were available in libraries in different parts of the world. The Huntington Library in Los Angeles famously made the first announcement that they would make these previously secret photographs available for scholarly examination. Why were they kept from public view in the first place? We hesitate to answer this because it doesn't put scholars in a very good light! The scrolls weren't being suppressed because people were afraid of what they said; rather, it's now quite clear that the scrolls were being held by a handful of scholars who wanted the sole right to decide who could publish them and do research on them. Eventually, a public outcry against the scholars who kept these scrolls to themselves incited the Huntington Library to break the silence by announcing the availability of the photos.

What does this story reveal? Basically this: The scholarly world would never tolerate a suppressed discovery. No church, no museum, and no organization has the ability to keep discoveries from the public for long. The outcry eventually becomes intolerable (and rightly so!). Moreover, *most* scholars absolutely agree with full disclosure and staunchly resist the idea that anything should be suppressed. Although some people believe that some ancient writings may be suppressed to protect certain institutions or even whole religions, the simple fact is that many scholars have no particular religious interests, and so they certainly wouldn't go along with any religious-based attempt to suppress writings.



So, although “conspiracy to suppress evidence” sounds exciting, in the end it's really impossible to execute in the modern scholarly and academic world. Medical researchers wouldn't last long if they faked or withheld evidence . . . it's the same with ancient historians! The only lost books of the Bible that remain unknown are the *ones that are still lost*.

