

"Bible Hunters" Part 2, and What They Omitted

"The Bible Hunters, Part 2" was transmitted on BBC2 on 20th February 2014.

One of the leading experts in New Testament manuscripts, Dr Larry Hurtado, Professor Emeritus in New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, has published on his blog his review of the programme, which he has called: **"Bible Hunters" Part 2, and What They Omitted**

This can be seen on his website, here: <http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2014/02/21/bible-hunters-part-2-and-what-they-omitted/>

I can do no better than direct readers to his comments, which I also reproduce below. For the purpose of speeding up reading for those who are pressured for time, I have taken the liberty of highlighting some of his comments, and I have added one short comment, which I have identified as being from me.

Update 22/2/14: I add further comments from Dr Hurtado and others, below.

From: **Larry Hurtado's Blog**

Sent: 21 February 2014 17:19:04

"Bible Hunters" Part 2, and What They Omitted

by [larryhurtado](#)

The second (final) programme in the "Bible Hunters" production aired here in the UK last night, and, as I suspected focused on the discovery of various extra-canonical texts. The discovery of any early text is cause to be grateful, and the discovery of any early copy of a Christian text (biblical or not) likewise (or even more so for scholars in Christian origins).

So, to be sure, the fragments of extra-canonical texts turned up by Grenfell & Hunt at Oxyrhynchus in the late 19th century, and the more substantial cache of writings found at Nag Hammadi in 1946 are rightly to be seen as important. The Nag Hammadi texts in particular confirm the vigorous text-producing nature of ancient Christianity, and its theological diversity as well.

But I have to say that I found it strange that some really crucial (arguably more important) manuscripts finds were totally ignored. If we're talking about "Bible Hunters" and the attendant concern for early manuscripts that may tell us something about the Bible, I have to say that the programme missed the boat entirely.

In fact, with all due gratitude to those 19th century and early 20th century figures mentioned in the first programme (Tischendorf, the Smith sisters, and also Freer), the 20th century was the time when perhaps the most spectacular biblical manuscript finds appeared. Certainly, spectacularly early in comparison with anything available previously. Here are the "biggies".

We can start with the fabulous collection of biblical codices acquired by Chester Beatty (now housed in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin Castle). For a generally accurate and brief introduction the Wikipedia entry can be read [here](#). First announced in late 1931, over the ensuing years the eleven codices were edited and published in a series that included both photographic facsimiles and transcriptions (with introductions and analyses). The codices include 3rd century CE Greek copies of

Paul's letters, the four Gospels and Acts, and Revelation. The great F. G. Kenyon handled the NT volumes. In addition, there are (Greek) copies of Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Esther, dated variously to the 2nd-3rd century CE.

So far as NT studies are concerned, the Chester Beatty papyri were of monumental importance, and remain so. Earlier scholars had been pleased to have copies of NT writings as early as the 4th century (Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus). But the Chester Beatty papyri took scholars back to the early 3rd century, well before Constantine, Nicaea, and to a time when Christianity was still fighting for its life, well before a NT canon had been fixed. [Comment by TRA: About 100 years before Constantine and Nicaea.]

The Chester Beatty gospels codex ("P45" in the reference scheme used by NT textual critics) contains the four canonical gospels and the book of Acts. The gospels are in the "Western" order: Matthew, John, Luke, Mark. And it's very interesting that Acts is included with the four gospels (whereas its more familiar location in early manuscripts was with the so-called "catholic/general" epistles). Although a NT canon wasn't yet closed, **this codex suggests that by its date (ca. mid-3rd century CE) the four gospels were a closed circle, at least for many Christians.**

Just about contemporary with the Nag Hammadi discovery was the find of hundreds of manuscripts at Qumran, the so-called "Dead Sea Scrolls." These manuscripts date variously from the 2nd-1st century BCE, and were copied and read by devout Jews (often thought to have formed a sect whose base was at Qumran). The Qumran manuscripts give us copies of OT writings in Hebrew ca. 1,000 years earlier than what had been available. Even though the cache includes no NT or Christian writings, the Qumran manuscripts are of unsurpassed importance for anyone concerned with the textual history of the OT writings and/or the religious context of Jesus and earliest Christianity.

For NT textual history, however, there was more. Beginning in 1954, the Bodmer Papyri began to be published. Two in particular have rightly received enormous attention. P.Bodmer II (or "P66" in NT textual parlance) gives us a substantially preserved copy of the Gospel of John, and is palaeographically dated to the early 3rd century CE. P.Bodmer XIV-XV ("P75") gives us substantially preserved copies of the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John, also dated about as early (**ca. 175-225 CE**).

One of the things shown by the Bodmer papyri is that the textual copying tradition reflected in Codex Vaticanus (mid-4th century CE) is clearly attested already by ca. 200 CE (and likely much earlier). This copying tradition seems to reflect a concern for careful copying, with no evidence of substantial variants (either of omission or addition).

To be brief, one net effect of the biblical manuscripts discovered in the 20th century was to provide a much earlier and much more secure basis for textual criticism of the OT and the NT writings. So, contrary to the narrative pursued in the "Bible Hunters" programme (despite my attempt to warn them off), for anyone in "the know", **the 20th century was a time of discoveries that actually enhanced our ability to chart the textual transmission of the biblical writings.** Whether one treats them as "scripture" and whether one assents to faith in what the NT writings project is another question. But

the fabulous finds gave scholars a massively enhanced knowledge of the early textual history of these writings.

Oh, and one more point relating to the "Bible Hunters" programme. **Despite all that talk of writings that were "excluded" from the NT, such as the Nag Hammadi texts, there is actually no evidence that the authors of these texts ever sought to have them included!** Indeed, *to judge from the highly esoteric and sectarian nature of the writings, it is highly unlikely that the authors would have been happy to have these writings lumped in with the various writings that came to be included in the NT.* These so-called "gnostic" texts seem to reflect an elitist stance, the authors and intended readers treated as "special", superior even to other garden-variety Christians. These texts profess to give "secret" teachings that were withheld from mere Christians, and given only to the special person (Thomas, Philip, Mary) posited (fictionally) as the favoured recipient.

As Fred Wisse suggested decades ago, it seems more likely that these texts didn't really function as the "scriptures" of "gnostic" groups/churches (and weren't intended so), but instead were probably passed from hand to hand among individuals who liked esoterica and may have thought of themselves as some kind of superior type of Christian.

To return to manuscripts of biblical writings, they continue to appear. In the last few decades, for example, fragments of a number of early copies of NT writings have been published in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri series, some of these palaeographically dated to the early 3rd or even late 2nd century CE. And, given that only about 1% of the estimated body of Oxyrhynchus papyri has been published at this point, who knows what more lies in the vaults waiting someone with the skills to identify and edit it?

On Oxyrhynchus, see the conference volume: A. K. Bowman et al., eds., *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 2007). On its relevance for NT textual criticism:

Eldon Jay Epp, "The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: 'Not Without Honor Except in Their Hometown'?", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004): 5-55 (but his list of NT papyri is already out of date).

<http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2014/02/21/bible-hunters-part-2-and-what-they-omitted/>

Update 22/2/14: One day further on, Dr Hurtado has added more comments on "Bible Hunters Part 2" on his blog. For his complete posting, I refer people to his blog, here:

<http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2014/02/22/ancient-gnostics-intellectuals-not-really/>

Here are a few short but representative quotations from that posting:

Ancient "Gnostics": Intellectuals? Not Really!

by [larryhurtado](#)

Another feature of the "Bible Hunters" programme (part 2) that caught my attention was the reference to ancient "gnostic" Christians as "intellectuals." That was very funny, really. Just read the relevant texts, which are readily available in English translation: James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd rev. ed. (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1988)

It's perhaps a natural mistake for people who haven't read the texts, given that "gnostic" comes from the Greek word "gnosis", which means "knowledge." But in the case of those called "gnostics," the kind of "knowledge" that they sought wasn't "intellectual," but (to put it kindly) what we might term "esoteric," secretive truths expressed typically in cryptic, riddling form, deliberately intended to make little sense as expressed. Put unkindly, one might characterize it as a bunch of "mumbo-jumbo" with no attempt to present them reasonably and in terms of the intellectual climate of the time.

...

Their aim and approach, however, wasn't "intellectual."

For those wanting to see some *informed* comments on the gnostics, along with pointers to further study, Dr Hurtado's posting is a good place to go – quite the opposite of the misinformed and sensationalist claims of the programme.

Dr Simon Goldhill's claims

Among those who posted replies to Dr Hurtado's blog was **Dr Richard Bauckham**, *Emeritus Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St Andrews and a fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh*. Dr Bauckham is one of the world's leading experts on the New Testament period and author of numerous scholarly publications in academic journals as well as books that are authoritative and informed, but also extremely-readable by non academics, such as "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses", which I recommend highly.¹

Dr Bauckham makes a short but telling comment on one of Dr Goldhill's allegations:

Did you notice that Simon Goldhill said that Gnostics were burned to death by orthodox Christians? If so, ***I've never heard of it.***

My comment would be that for burning heretics to death, Dr Goldhill was over 1,000 years and 2,000 kilometres out. – Trevor R Allin

Dr Hurtado makes his own, telling comment on Richard Bauckham's contribution:

Yes, I too wondered at that! And his reference to "riots in the street" in Victorian times over textual variants! The guy works in classics, but sure had his opinions about various things. He made for lively TV, which is likely why he was featured so much, **not because he had facts behind his colorful claims.**

¹ Bauckham, Richard, "Jesus and the Eyewitnesses", Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.