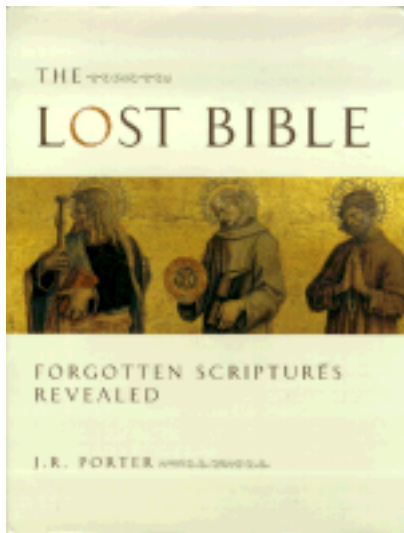


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Porter, J. R.

The Lost Bible: Forgotten Scriptures Revealed

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

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The author of this book is Professor Emeritus of Theology at the University of Exeter, England, and a former Fellow of Oriel College, University of Oxford. In this publication he aims at revealing the “lost scriptures” to a wider public than the specialists concerned with these writings. The book offers, as it says, “an anthology of ancient scriptures which did not become part of the Jewish or Christian Bibles” (6).

The first thing to note when handing through the book is its extremely beautiful layout. This volume offers reproductions of works of art reflecting the reception of stories from “the lost Bible” throughout history. Thus we find, for example, a full-color reproduction of a wall painting from roughly 500 C.E. from the San Gennaro catacombs of Naples (114), a picture of the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus as painted in a fifteenth-century French manuscript of Josephus’s *Antiquities* (125), but also a picture of a first-century Buddhist monastery at Takht-i-Bahi, Pakistan, that functions as an example of the many monasteries in the area Thomas allegedly traveled through (202). These are but three examples picked at random. The riches of the illustrations are splendid and continue page after page. This in itself is reason enough to buy the book: the rendition of the fourteenth-century mosaics of the church of St. Savior in Chora (see 132–33) of the scenes from the Life of the Virgin originating in the *Protevangelium of James*,

for instance, proves that the stories described in these “forgotten scriptures” were indeed well known throughout great periods of the Christian history. Next to that, the pictures are great to marvel at.

Apart from the replicas of various episodes from the history of art, this book is interesting only for those who are thoroughly unacquainted with extracanonical writings. They will find a brief, thematic introduction to the majority of these writings, as well as samples of their texts. The book is divided into two parts: part 1 presents “the ‘lost’ Hebrew Scriptures,” and part 2 “the ‘lost’ New Testament.” The first part consists of five chapters: “In the Beginning”; “Words of the Patriarchs”; “Lost Writings of the Prophets”; “Psalms, Songs, and Odes”; and “Wisdom and Philosophy.” The second part holds six chapters: “The Missing Years of Jesus”; “Gospels of the Passion”; “Gnostic Mysteries”; “Legends of the Apostles”; “Visions of the End of Time”; and “Lost Letters to the Faithful.” The amount of sources presented is huge, and still not all texts relevant to the Old and New Testaments are mentioned. The literature of Qumran, for instance, is left out, for obvious reasons: inclusion would expand the scope of the book even further.

The description of most of the sources presented by Porter contains a brief summary of the “Data” (Title, original date, original language, provenance, and earliest extant manuscript), a thematic introduction to the book (approximately five hundred words, very brief), and a short specimen of the text in translation (taken from Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, or from Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*). This survey already shows how scanty the information Porter offers necessarily has to be: the book is not meant as a scientific commentary or introduction to this corpus of literature but as a first quick look at it.

Notwithstanding the obvious advantages and the beauty of the book, *The Lost Bible* suffers from a number of serious flaws. First, the information is so scanty that those who use the book soon need to turn to other, more specialized literature on these “lost” writings. A bibliography of this literature is given on page 238, but the titles mentioned there are very general. Any specific question or detail will have to be sought out in literature the reader will not be able to find directly through *The Lost Bible*. A bibliographical survey on each of the writings discussed in this volume would have been useful, but unfortunately it is lacking. This means that the book is not really helpful for biblical students who really want to widen their scope. After buying *The Lost Bible* you still have to get J. H. Charlesworth’s volumes on *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* and J. K. Elliott’s *The Apocryphal New Testament* (not even mentioned in the introduction!) or

Schneemelcher's *New Testament Apocrypha*. These authors did not comprise the artwork, but they do offer the information any interested student needs to have at his or her disposal.

A second flaw of *The Lost Bible* is that its presentation of the writings suggests a semicanonical, thematic unity where this unity does not actually exist. Would it not have been wiser to present these "lost writings" in a chronological order instead? The "Lost Hebrew Scriptures" are presented now in a Tanak-like order: first "In the Beginning" and "Words of the Patriarchs," then the "Lost Writings of the Prophets," and finally "Psalms, Songs, and Odes" and a chapter on "Wisdom and Philosophy." It would have been interesting to see when, for example, these speculations on the patriarchs became important or when wisdom and philosophy entered the "Hebrew" domain.

Porter's decision to present the books in a semicanonical order instead of a chronological sequence brings us to a third problem. *The Lost Bible* does not discuss the function these writings had among Jews and Christians, nor does it give a presentation of the problems of canonicity. Why were some books considered "canonical" and others declined? In what theological or other conflicts did these writings play a part? That is an interesting though difficult field into which *The Lost Bible* unfortunately refuses to enter.

The next problem with the book is that the approach chosen by Porter prevents him from explicitly dealing with the subject of the Christianization of Jewish sources. Interpolations into extracanonical Jewish sources often changed the character of these writings to such an extent that we can hardly decide whether they are Jewish or Christian. Nevertheless, in the case of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* the matter is relatively clear: in its present form this writing reflects a Christian text in which several earlier texts were reworked. Porter, however, denies this writing its obvious Christian character. Even if he would be right in doing so in this case, the notorious difficulty of the religious provenance of many of these texts is passed by far too easily in his volume. A similar problem occurs in the case of the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, which is evidently a Christian text (also according to Porter). The antichrist described in this source is indeed "clearly a Christian figure," but Porter's conclusion that "the strange account of his physical appearance betrays the Jewish origin of the passage" is drawn far too easily. Luca Signorelli's picture of the antichrist is beautifully reproduced, but unfortunately the discussion of the *Apocalypse of Elijah* lacks the quality of Signorelli's work. The presentation of the writings Porter deals with as "lost Hebrew Bible" and "lost New Testament" may seem logical at first sight,

but at second sight there are great difficulties in regard to the Jewish or Christian character of the sources. There were obviously Christian authors who wrote texts on Jewish characters such as Abraham or Elijah, not because they merely adapted Jewish texts, but because these Jewish characters were important to them. This complex problem is nowhere dealt with in *The Lost Bible*.

Unfortunately, the conclusion has to be that, apart from the illustrations, *The Lost Bible* is a somewhat disappointing publication. The beauty of its layout can be seductive, but for the reader who demands something more than aesthetic admiration Porter has but little to offer. Porter's introductions to the various sources are superficial and scanty, bibliographical information on the writings presented is missing, and a canonical order of the books is suggested that is absent from the writings themselves. Furthermore, the problems of canon and Christianization of Jewish texts are only briefly mentioned and insufficiently discussed. Hence this book is of use only for beginners who really know nothing of extracanonical literature as well as for those who wish to have a collection of beautiful reproductions. The "wider public" Porter wrote for will perhaps be enchanted by the colors, but the prime goal of this book was to inform. It is in this regard that it disappoints at least this reviewer.