

Transcript Episode 191

How Early Christian Writings Help Us Understand the Bible with Shirley Paulson

James Early [00:00:33]:

This is the Bible speaks to you. Podcast. Episode 191. Today I'm talking with Shirley Paulson about extra canonical texts and how they can help us understand the Bible better. You're listening to the Bible speaks to you. Podcast. I'm James Early, your host, and this is the place to be to rediscover the original Christianity of Jesus. Each week we talk about how Jesus wanted us to think and act and pray and live our daily lives. And we dig down into the mindset of Jesus to discover how we can think and act like he did. The goal is to experience more of Jesus's promise that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And welcome back to the Bible. Speaks to you, podcast. I am so grateful you've tuned in today to listen. This week's episode is going to be a little different than sometimes, and you'll see why in just a minute. I'm talking with Shirley Paulson about early Christian texts or manuscripts that are not in the Bible. Hey, Shirley. It's great to have you on. The Bible speaks to you. Podcast.

Shirley Paulson [00:02:06]:

Oh, thanks for being courageous enough to have me on with you. I appreciate it.

James Early [00:02:11]:

I'm so delighted you're here.

Shirley Paulson [00:02:13]:

Thank you.

James Early [00:02:14]:

Yeah, let me tell you a little bit about Shirley. Shirley Paulson is the founder and principal producer of early Christian texts, the Bible and beyond. She loves to explore and research into early manuscripts that are not in the Bible. And that all got started when she was working on her Master's of Theological Studies at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, and that led to getting her PhD in Religion and Theology from the University of Birmingham in the UK. Her website is called Earlychristiantexts.com, and I'll have that link in the show notes, and it has a whole lot of resources. She's got online teaching courses, she's got a blog and a podcast both called The Bible and beyond. And she really likes to highlight the work of other scholars in this field, and there are a lot of people studying these manuscripts. Shirley's academic work focuses on all these early Christian writings, and she really likes the things well, there's so many categories, but especially she likes to look at the healing practices and theology of early followers of Jesus. And recently, she's written a book called *Illuminating the Secret Revelation of John*. That's one of those early manuscripts, *Catching the Light*, and it explains in everyday language why this classic ancient text is important for modern Bible readers. She's also

contributed a chapter to Westar's book, after Jesus Before Christianity, and she's serving on the board of directors of the Westar Institute as well. Shirley, you're living in Illinois, is that right?

Shirley Paulson [00:04:03]:

Yes, I am. And thank you for that introduction. You got it right. Thanks.

James Early [00:04:09]:

Anything else we need to know about you? Any hobbies or anything cool going on in your life right now?

Shirley Paulson [00:04:14]:

Oh, gosh, that's fun. Actually, I can't wait for next week for spring break because I get to go skiing with my family, which I really look forward to, and I love playing pickleball. That's kind of a new interest of mine. So, yeah, I like to be active.

James Early [00:04:28]:

Oh, that's cool. That's cool. Well, we're going to talk about these early Christian texts that aren't in the Bible today, and the main focus I want to bring is how can they help us understand the Bible better? And you and I talked about this previously, how they can shed light on understanding the Bible and the Bible times and the early followers of Jesus. So I'm wondering if you could just share with my listeners to kind of get us started. What kind of texts or manuscripts are we talking about here? How do we have all these manuscripts, these ancient texts, and how many are they? Where did they come from? When did we find them? What's cool is there probably more out there that we haven't found yet.

Shirley Paulson [00:05:10]:

Wow, you asked a lot of questions all at once. Here, let me see if I can remember them all. To get started, let me just say I'm really glad you're approaching this from the point of view of why do these help us understand the Bible? Because that's the reason I'm studying them, and I want to get into that too. But then you also asked about what are they and all that kind of stuff, so let me go there too. There were lots and lots of writings that were going on, especially in the second century, several generations after Jesus. In fact, that's when most of the books of the Bible were written. They were all written around the same time. We now know of over 100 of these texts, and we only have 27 of them that are in the Bible that we're familiar with. So there are lots of them out there, and a lot of them were found kind of recently, and I say recently meaning, like, in the 20th century, because they had been lost when they weren't in the canon anymore. We don't know why they disappeared, but they did, and they were discovered, many of them, in the 19th century. The large majority of them were found at one place that's called Nagamadi, near Egypt. There were 52 of them found there. And so that's a huge number of brand new texts. Well, 40 of those or so were brand new to us, and when did.

James Early [00:06:29]:

They find those in Nagamadi?

Shirley Paulson [00:06:31]:

Yeah. Okay. Great question. That was 1945. So mid 20th century. That was about 2030 years or so after other discoveries have been made, also in Egypt. So a lot of these discoveries took place in Egypt.

James Early [00:06:45]:

Well, that's interesting. You would think we'd find them in Israel or the Holy Lands. Christianity was a big thing in Egypt, obviously, early in the early centuries.

Shirley Paulson [00:06:55]:

Yeah. And you raise a really good point there. Why weren't they found in Jerusalem or Rome or anything? The reason is that the land in Egypt is dry, and so they just simply didn't disintegrate there.

James Early [00:07:11]:

Oh, that makes sense.

Shirley Paulson [00:07:13]:

So that just people who were exploring in the 19th century discovered that, wow, there's a lot of things that were preserved in Egypt just because of a dry climate there. And they were destroyed, probably all the rest of them up north.

James Early [00:07:27]:

Interesting. Yeah. Because the humidity and stuff. Wow.

Shirley Paulson [00:07:31]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:07:31]:

Isn't it interesting how topography or geography plays a role that you don't usually think about in history? Sort of the backdoor version of what influences history? I don't know. That's fascinating to me.

Shirley Paulson [00:07:45]:

Well, it's fascinating to me, too, because it does have a lot to do with even the relationships between people and who said what and where they were, how they said. All those things have a lot to do with the geography too, so you're right. That's a good point.

James Early [00:07:58]:

So I know you we've known each other for a number of years, and I know you've always been a Bible reader, and you'd love to study the Bible. You love the Bible. And I'm just curious, when you were in graduate school, what got you interested in these extra canonical writings? Because they're not in the Bible.

Shirley Paulson [00:08:16]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:08:17]:

What got you interested in all this?

Shirley Paulson [00:08:19]:

Well, thanks. That's a helpful question to kind of get into all this, because I definitely was not looking for it. I went to seminary mainly because I wanted to understand how different Christian communities could get together and talk to each other and understand each other. And so when I got there, I began to learn that some people thought I was a heretic and that I was doing everything wrong. And so they said, you sound like a gnostic when you talk. I said, Well, I can't, because I don't even know what that is. They said, well, you better read these texts because this is what you sound like. So when I read them, I thought, oh, this is startling, because it does sound like me, even though I'd never read it before. So I had a wonderful supervisor in my seminary who guided me to these texts that I had never heard of. He said to me, Read these before you read any commentaries, so you can decide for yourself what it means. That was helpful advice, because I read it without anybody telling me whether it was good or bad. Or why it would be good or bad, but just read it. That's when I was surprised to discover there was a great deal of deep meaning in these texts. And the more I looked into it, the more I realized it was an incredible treasure house right in front of me that I'd never known of before. So I started to explore it, and.

James Early [00:09:45]:

Probably once you got started, there were so many different rabbit holes to go down. You're still in there, right?

Shirley Paulson [00:09:51]:

You're so right about the rabbit holes. Yes, and I had to be careful about which one to choose, and I chose the one that really had to do, I think, was where is it leading me toward a better understanding of the Bible and what is helping me understand how healing happened? Those are the two questions I kept asking.

James Early [00:10:09]:

Oh, that's good. And if you wanted to distill the Bible down, that's really one of the important themes in there, because you've got healing in the Old Testament when Jesus and his disciples show up on the scene, it sort of mushrooms and explodes. And I think that's happening today, too. I'm sure you've seen that in your own life, but I see it in lots of different, as you say, different church communities, different faith traditions. This whole healing power of God is much more talked about and evident. So I think it's interesting that you're finding that influence in these older texts as well. It was something that was alive and well back then, wasn't it?

Shirley Paulson [00:10:50]:

You know, what I learned in my study of all this was that, yes, the idea of healing was definitely alive and well, but probably it's different from the way most of us think of it today. And the reason I say that is that many of us have been educated to think of healing in a medical context. They weren't thinking of it that way then. I think the best way to understand healing in antiquity is to realize that that word is really the same word as salvation. And so when you think about I mean, the word is actually in Greek, it's soteria. And the word soteria is used is translated as both salvation and healing. And in our modern world, we don't think of those words at all the same. We tend to think of salvation having to do with sin and healing having to do with a medical condition. But in those days, it was all about a relationship with God.

James Early [00:11:49]:

Right. That makes sense. So in your study of these ancient texts, how has it added to your understanding of the Bible? And can you give me any examples?

Shirley Paulson [00:12:00]:

Oh, I hope I can do this fairly briefly. That's a huge question. That's all right.

James Early [00:12:07]:

We got plenty of time.

Shirley Paulson [00:12:08]:

All right, well, if I get rambling, you'll let me know. But yes, I think what happened to me is that the more I got into it, the more I began to realize it's actually adding lots of color to what I thought was already there. It filled in gaps of things that I didn't even know were gaps in my understanding of things. And I would use the example of healing and salvation as just one

example of the way it helped me to think of healing in a bigger way, even salvation. I mean, I thought salvation had more to do with coming to terms with God and getting over your sins, but I didn't really see how they were the same thing until I read more of those texts that talk about them, really in the same breath. So that's one way it helped me understand the Bible better. But another way might be understanding the diversity of the early followers of Jesus. I don't know where it came from exactly, but we've been taught that there's one unified truth about the Bible, and that that's the way it is. But when you look at it more closely, you see that, in fact, each of the four Gospels has something different to say. And in some cases, they contradict each other. And it's not that they're bad or wrong. It's just that they have different points of view of things. And so when I read these other texts, I began to understand more a fuller picture of the diversity of the Jesus followers. And it wasn't that they fought with each other. They just simply had different views. And it was okay. Sometimes they just shared thoughts, sometimes they argued. But it wasn't any major fight about it, really, until about the fourth century, many hundreds of years later. So the earliest texts just show a lot of people's thoughts. And what I love about the second century writing is that it was a very innovative time, and I want to just explain a little bit about why that is. So what's important about reading Bible things is that most of the writings of the Bible were written after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. And so it was not only after Jesus's death and crucifixion and resurrection, but it was after the fall of the temple. So the Jews were absolutely at a loss in terms of their relationship to Rome. They were a conquered people, and they had lost everything. And so at this time, many of the Jesus followers began to just think and write, what does this all mean? Where do we go from here? So the Gospels that are in the Bible and the Gospels that are not in the Bible were all written in that context, and so many of them have different points of view, different ways of thinking about it. And I think the reading all of them gives you a very big and colorful picture of what they were thinking about in terms of their great struggle at the time.

James Early [00:15:13]:

That's interesting. Yeah, we just know little bits and pieces. And when you read these other texts. I guess I have not really read any of these things. Maybe, I don't know. When did the Gospel of Thomas come out? I think I read that like 20 or 30 years ago. He's been out a while, hasn't it?

Shirley Paulson [00:15:31]:

Yeah. Let me talk about the Gospel of Thomas just a moment, if you don't mind.

James Early [00:15:34]:

Yeah, please.

Shirley Paulson [00:15:35]:

The Gospel of Thomas is the most famous of these extra canonical texts, and it was found in that whole collection at Nakamati in 1945. What's interesting about the Gospel of Thomas is that they discovered around 1950 let me see in the 50s somewhere, at least maybe 55 or so. That's when they discovered that, in fact, there had been some early fragments known as the sayings of Jesus

that were discovered in 1897 or so that turned out to be part of the Gospel of Thomas. Oh, so the Gospel of Thomas was found in whole at the Nagamati collection, and then it was later that they found out, oh my gosh, those little texts were the Gospel of Thomas. So the discovery at Nagamadi, that is still the only version of the whole text that we have in the world right now, and that was found in 1945. Now, the reason it's well known, it claims to be a gospel and it's a gospel of one of the disciples, supposedly, and also the fact that it was known for a long time that it existed, but nobody knew what it was until they found it. So it has been the most well known and along with all of them, controversial. And that's probably why it gets well known, is that the controversy brings it to the surface.

James Early [00:16:57]:

Yeah, that makes sense. What language were these texts written in? Was it Greek, Coptic?

Shirley Paulson [00:17:03]:

Yeah, that's a great question. They were undoubtedly written in Greek. As far as I know, almost all of the writings in the New Testament were in Greek. And same thing with these extracanonical texts. But as we have discussed, the ones that were discovered that lasted were in Egypt. So the Egyptian language was Coptic and these were copied in Coptic. So we only have a Coptic version of the Gospel of Thomas and the original fragments were in Greek. So those little bits and pieces that we have were in Greek.

James Early [00:17:37]:

Oh, okay.

Shirley Paulson [00:17:39]:

That's why it took a while to figure out that those early fragments were indeed the Gospel of Thomas that had been translated into Coptic.

James Early [00:17:46]:

Okay, so one of the other books, and that's what you've written your book about that was in the Nagamadi collection, was The Secret Revelation of John, is that right?

Shirley Paulson [00:17:56]:

That's right, yeah. And that's actually one of the most important ones because it appears in the Nagamati collection three times. It's the only one that appears three times?

James Early [00:18:07]:

What, there are three copies of it?

Shirley Paulson [00:18:09]:

Yes. Now there are I have to say that there are two versions of it, a longer and a shorter version. There are two longer versions and one shorter version, and then the fourth copy of The Secret Revelation of John exists in another collection, but there are three of them that appeared in the Nakamati collection.

James Early [00:18:29]:

Wow. And so the two that were long, were they both the same? Were they?

Shirley Paulson [00:18:33]:

Well, close enough, yeah.

James Early [00:18:35]:

Okay.

Shirley Paulson [00:18:36]:

There's some differences, but enough to realize it's the same book.

James Early [00:18:41]:

Yeah. Okay, that's cool. Now, you talked about this whole idea of gnosticism, and that's kind of a nasty word in the Christian world. It's kind of a buzzword for heresy among a lot of Christians.

Shirley Paulson [00:18:54]:

Exactly.

James Early [00:18:55]:

But I think sometimes we don't really understand that word, and it's not even a word that people used back in antiquity, is it? We sort of lump all these different schools of thought as gnosticism. But what's really going on with that word? Can we talk about that a little bit? And is it dangerous to read these texts? They might lead us astray. I mean, kind of talk about this whole thing a little bit.

Shirley Paulson [00:19:17]:

Oh, boy. Again, this is another hour long conversation, but I'll try to be kind of brief on that one too. But you're right. Gnosticism is a very nasty word. It's probably the biggest heresy the world has ever known. It's horrible, in fact. So when I was in seminary and I was accused of being a gnostic, I said, oh, no, I'm not that. I don't know what it is, but I'm not that, because I know it's

terrible. That's all I knew was, it is terrible. Everybody knows that. So identifying with agnosticism is a very dangerous and bad thing to do, and I don't do it now either. But I will say this. You were right that people don't understand the word. And in fact, they were not even using the word in antiquity. It was a word that was really invented in the 17th century to try to explain what scholars thought was going on in the heretical world. And they didn't have access to these texts because these texts, again, were still hidden in Nagamati, in the cave or whatever. So they were trying to discuss these texts that they couldn't read or see, and they had only to go on. They only had the writings of the church fathers, whose writings did persist. And the church fathers were mostly the ones who were against some of these texts, and that's why we only knew about gnosticism from them. But let me just say that the more scholars have tried to look into what gnosticism is or was, the more they find there's nothing there. The word doesn't make any sense. And now I say that with people getting kind of wound up about this, because, of course, everybody knows what that is. But when you try to identify it, it's like saying, okay, we have ten points. We can say this is gnosticism, but for every ten points, you can find why that particular point exists somewhere in the canon, in the authorized version of Christianity, but from a different point of view. It's not the same thing, but it's also not different in different ways. I also have to make really clear that the texts in Nakamadi are not saying the same thing. They're all different from each other. There's no one voice of Gnosticism anywhere, and it's not in Nakamadi. So there are different points of view. Yes, but there are also different points of view, even in the Bible. For example, Paul, who talks favorably about women in his letters, then there are other books that are attributed to Paul where he speaks against women's leadership. Well, that's all in the Bible. So you can't say that there's one voice in the Bible either, and there's no one voice in Nakamadi, and there's no one voice that's gnostic. There are certain concepts that are worthwhile thinking about, but they're usually spoken of in a how shall I say, in a disparaging way without even looking at what they mean. And that's the problem, is that people assume there's something wrong with them before they even really look at what they are.

James Early [00:22:28]:

So that's a good point. That's kind of what got you reading these texts in the first place. Your advisor, your your person said, well, read these and don't read any commentaries and see what you think.

Shirley Paulson [00:22:40]:

Yes, exactly right.

James Early [00:22:41]:

And that's hard to do, because we take what other people say. We don't even realize it sometimes we need to think for ourselves. Is there something, whether you call it gnosticism or whatever, because you said that's a word that they made in the 17th century, but is there something that we should be wary of in these texts, or is there something that is really not in keeping with things Jesus said? I mean, I I know you very well. I know you are not agnostic even by modern definitions of what people think that is that's not who you are. But sometimes people just like to use that as a label they throw on somebody they disagree with. So I'm just curious, what what

was it that the early fathers were worried about or afraid of or against that they didn't understand or they didn't agree with, that they got labeled narcissism later? That's a really hard I don't know how to ask the question really even.

Shirley Paulson [00:23:43]:

Well, you're right. It's a hard question to ask because it's so undefinable. That's the whole point. You're having a hard time asking the question just because it's so hard to talk about. And so I thank you for making the effort to even try. So I appreciate that. I think you gave the best definition so far when you said it's what people disagree with. That's the best definition of gnosticism I can come up with. And so you'll find that all along, through history, people will talk about, oh, that must be gnostic if they disagree with it, and it has nothing to do with anything else, something else that might be considered gnostic just because somebody else disagreed with it. So gnostic seems to be the throwaway word that would say, I don't agree with it, so it must be a heresy, it must be bad. So you're right. That's why the word is not very useful. It doesn't tell us anything. But there are things to talk about that are important to talk about. And I'm I'm glad you can bring that up. I would say this is also important in terms of understanding the connection of heresy with watch out and be aware of something, because that's what happened in the fourth century. And I think it's important to recognize there's a huge gap between Jesus and the fourth century.

James Early [00:24:53]:

Oh, really? You think?

Shirley Paulson [00:24:56]:

And in that gap is when all this diversity was going on. Lots of innovative thinking. And so the fourth century, let's get a little history going here, which will help, I think, to identify the problem. You know that the Roman empire had dominated within control and had taken over the whole Mediterranean area. And Constantine then became emperor of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century. In 313, he began to consolidate power. And part of the power consolidation had to do with controlling the religious practices. So as is probably well known, Constantine became a Christian, and so he decided to make Christianity the global or Roman official religion. So that's when Christianity then became part of the Roman Empire, it became hierarchical, just like the empire became hierarchical at that time. So the important part about that is that up until that time, the Jesus followers were the oppressed people. They were the ones who were attacked, they were the ones who were crucified. And then in the fourth century, they suddenly became the hierarchy reverses itself, and now they are at the top of the hierarchy. And now that they're at the top, they're in a position of consolidating power. In any kind of hierarchical situation, you have to be able to say who's out, who's in and who's out. And to keep your power on the top, you have to push everybody else down. So they had to identify and find who's not agreeing with me. That's my enemy. That's when heresy began to take on shape, because before then, as I said, there were just simply conversations going on, disagreements, yes, but lots and lots of different thoughts going on. So heresy then became a hot issue when the empire needed to control the religion.

James Early [00:26:52]:

Oh, that's interesting. So when a hierarchy decides who's in and out, who did they decide was in? And who did they decide was out? In this case, right?

Shirley Paulson [00:27:05]:

That's a perfect question because that's what helps us understand why some of these books were banned or if they were banned or whatever, they disappeared. And so I found that there are three basic kinds of people who were excluded from the power. Obviously, women would come first because that's an easy kind of separation. So women had been very active in leadership roles until then. And then suddenly you begin to see writings and all kinds of evidence of as to why women were no longer considered for positions of power and authority. That's number one. Number two, I think it's interesting to see that, in fact, healing became a threat to the hierarchy. And if you think about why that might be, healing and salvation together have to do with your relationship to God, that if you have your own relationship to God, you don't need to have the power of a church to tell you you have an access to God. You have it by yourself. That's a threat to the power of the hierarchy. So healing suddenly became a threat to the power of the church. And then the third, I think of there are three basic ones. The third one is the more spiritually inclined a text or thought might be, the more a threat it would be to that power of that hierarchy. The reason is that, again, spirituality implies that you have your own relationship with God, with the divine. And again, you don't need someone else's power. So spirituality and healing and women always go together, and they are a threat to hierarchical powers.

James Early [00:28:45]:

Oh, that is so interesting. So if they could suppress those things, they could maintain their power.

Shirley Paulson [00:28:50]:

Exactly.

James Early [00:28:51]:

And put those powerful threats out of the way. And so you're saying that's why some of these texts then were disapproved of or not mentioned anymore, because they didn't want that influence of the healing and the women. That's fascinating. Well, even in the Bible, there are women leaders there's junia. I don't remember them all, but you know this better than I do. There were a woman deacon and woman apostles going back to what's in the Bible, even just there. There are churches today that try to change the text to make junia. Junio. So it's not even a woman. And there are some translations. So that's still going on today because they want to keep their control. Is that right?

Shirley Paulson [00:29:38]:

That's exactly what's going on. And, you know, that leads us right into the whole question about canon, because the canon is another form of consolidating the power. And so you're right that the Bible has some reference to the women because they were doing those things, but much of it was suppressed, and there's much more evidence of an egalitarian kind of way of life for the Jesus followers outside the canon than within the canon. So even though the canon you can't hide it altogether, but it's much more of it is outside the canon.

James Early [00:30:11]:

When was the New Testament canonized, to use that word? When did we get those 27 books that make up our New Testament?

Shirley Paulson [00:30:21]:

Yeah, well, I wish that was an easy answer. It's. Not. Most of us have been taught that the Bible sort of fell out of the sky and it came from Jesus, and then here it is and it's all done. It just didn't happen that way. And so when you again, you realize that there was no such thing as a canon for hundreds of years. There was no reason for it, there was no need for it. The only need for a canon was to consolidate power. So it was in the effort to sort of emphasize this is right and that's wrong, you begin to develop the concept of a canon. This is what you should agree with, and anything else that is not going to agree with us. So the texts that then that disagree with a hierarchy are the ones that are less likely to be authorized. And there was a lot of disagreement about it. In fact, there was not even a desire to make a canon at first. There's a long history of the whole story of how there were some lists of books and some lists that were disagreed with. For example, Ireneus in the second century was probably one of the first ones who suggested there ought to be four Gospels, even though he was aware of other gospels, he said there ought to be four of them because of the four corners of the world. And so that was his reason for choosing four Gospels and whether I mean, there are reasons like that, who knows as to why they happen? But the point is that there was no particular council that sat around and decided what a canon was going to be. The councils had more to do with trying to decide who Jesus was. That was more important question to them than what books people should or shouldn't be reading. But later there was more and more of a discussion as to what books are appropriate, what ones should be recommended and which ones should not, and so forth. So then that continued to go along. And then don't forget that you couldn't just send your manuscript to the publisher and have a book produced because there were no such thing as books being published then. So copying and writing books was a very laborious and expensive thing to do and they didn't combine them really until hundreds of years later. So the idea of a canon just did not happen all at once. It took many hundreds of years for it to develop. Even now, there's no such thing as one canon. The Protestants use 27 books. Catholics also include what Protestants call the apocrypha in their canon. But the Ethiopian Bible and the Eastern Orthodox Bibles, they all have different books that they agree are canon. So there's still no such thing as a Christian canon. There's just agreements as to which group wants which books.

James Early [00:32:57]:

I'm going to come back to this idea of their different perspectives because you mentioned that early and I think that's so important. One thing I like to do when I'm teaching a Bible class or whatever, is and I've shared this on the podcast before. If you're one of my longtime listeners, Paul talks about different members of the body of Christ. The hand and the foot and the eye. Well, I like to think the elbow or whatever. If you put on your physical body, if you had six iPhones and you taped one to your head, one to your shoulder, one to your waist, one to a knee, one to a foot and one on the back, and turned the video camera on and walked down the street, your body's only going through one motion. The body of Christ is doing one thing, but all those videos would be a completely different picture and especially the one pointing backwards, and they would describe things differently. They might see similar things, but they'd see it from a different angle. And I think as members of the body of Christ, we need to learn to respect people who have a different perspective. And sometimes we may disagree on some important theological points, but we see things differently because of where we are in the body of Christ. And I used to be afraid of anybody that disagreed with me, and now it's like, okay, well, tell me why you believe that. Tell me, share me that. And I can learn from them and hopefully they can learn from me. But I think what I hear you saying, Shirley, is that this was going on comfortably in the first 2nd century. People had differences of perspective, but they were all coexisting, I guess is a good word to say. Wow.

Shirley Paulson [00:34:35]:

Yeah, they were coexisting. And there was no such thing as a centralized powerhouse. There was no central place for Christianity to be governed. And that's an important part of this. And I'm so glad you're emphasizing the fact that there were just different perspectives. The disciples had different perspectives on Jesus, so they didn't have one voice that went out either. From the very beginning, there were different views of Jesus and his message. And as people discussed it and thought about it, and there were huge questions that came up because of this amazing human being who was crucified so unjustly, raised zillions of questions. And that's what this is all about.

James Early [00:35:16]:

To oversimplify this last 2000 years, I think the human mind has tried to figure things out.

Shirley Paulson [00:35:25]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:35:26]:

And you get brilliant men. I'd like to wonder where the women were back in 325 at the Council of Nicea or any of those councils.

Shirley Paulson [00:35:34]:

Right.

James Early [00:35:35]:

But brilliant men. And through history there have been some wonderful enlightened women too, who have wrestled with these ideas. Who is Jesus? What is Christianity? What does it mean to believe in God, all these things? And how did this happen? Why did that happen? And sometimes the intellect of the human mind tries to figure things out to a degree that you just can't get all the way there with the human reasoning. Paul says in one corinthians, chapter two, verses nine and ten. And I just actually did a recent podcast episode about this, about the eye and the ear. Paul says, and even the human heart, the human mind, can't perceive what God is revealing to us through the Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit. God made us all pretty smart. Some people seems like are smarter and more intellectual than others, but if you get a bunch of intellectualism together trying to figure things out, then you get into arguing about who's right, who's wrong, all that stuff. Where's the revelation from the Holy Spirit? This is a little bit off track, but it's really to the point in another way. You remember when Barnabas and he was still called Saul at the time, there were a group of people praying, and the Holy Spirit says, separate me out, Barnabas and Saul for the work that I have to do for them. I mean, what if we were in our churches today and we heard the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, talk to us that way, and we were so sure of what to do because it was not us voting on it. It was not us trying to figure it out. I think we need more of that spirit of revelation in our own lives, personally as well as collectively in our churches and collectively in the Christian church as a whole, don't you think?

Shirley Paulson [00:37:21]:

Yeah, and I'm glad you bring that up, that particular thought about the revelation, because there are a lot more of the texts outside the canon that are called Revelations. The book that I wrote on was The Secret Revelation of John or The Apocryphon of John. But there are a lot of apocryphons or Revelations, and they all have to do with different views of Jesus that came to people through a revelation. So I think that whole idea of trusting that somebody had a deeply inspired thought and they wrote it down because of that kind of revelation, that was more prevalent than it seems to come across only in the canon.

James Early [00:38:00]:

That's interesting. I want to come back to something we were talking about, the Naghamadi collection. Why is that so important? Yeah, that's a loaded question.

Shirley Paulson [00:38:14]:

I love it. Thank you. I would venture to say I think that that is probably the most important discovery in the modern world. That's saying a lot.

James Early [00:38:28]:

Wow.

Shirley Paulson [00:38:29]:

And the reason I say that is that when you consider the weight that Christianity has bestowed on the world in history, the history of human thought, christianity is huge. Even though there are other major, major religions, just think of the way the the world has has developed in relationship to Christianity. So Christianity itself is huge. When you consider that Christianity has been based on 27 books and that Nagamati has 40 more new books, that tells you that there's a much bigger view and understanding of Christianity than the world has ever known. And the fact that many of those 40 books are so surprising, we don't know what to do with them tells you that we've got a lot to learn. One of the biggest differences between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nagamati collection is that the Dead Sea Scrolls tended to confirm what the Hebrew texts were already saying. There was a major discovery, and that happened to be the same year, 1945, that the Nagamadi discovery took place. So when you consider the people tend to know Dead Sea Scrolls because that confirmed what we know, but Nagamati is not so well known because it's so surprising and jarring. So I think that we're just beginning to think about the impact of this major discovery.

James Early [00:40:03]:

Wow. I think that's an important point, and I'm glad you made the distinction between the Dead Sea Scrolls, because that was more, as you said, the text from what we call the Old Testament. So it confirmed things where this is all brand new material, like yes, right? Yeah. Why is that scary? I mean, why do people say, oh, my gosh, don't read that. That's dangerous. You might be pulled away from the true faith? Why are people afraid of it?

Shirley Paulson [00:40:30]:

All right, so it's understandable why it is that those who want to keep power would not want someone to find something that would undermine their power. And if you remember why what was going on in the beginning of the power structure of Rome, of the earliest part of the church, you can see why they were needing to consolidate power. And so the things that were excluded for that reason would still threaten the power of the Church. So it makes sense that even today, it could seem threatening. I mean, look at the whole struggle with women. Right now, after all these years, we're still struggling with the role of women in the church. But if we found out that women were much more involved in leading early Christian thinking than we've ever thought of, that changes a whole lot of things right there.

James Early [00:41:24]:

That's just one of the things yeah, that's true. What does it take to be willing to read these texts or even just accept that, okay, maybe this was a valid thing going on back then, and maybe you're in this rigid position of no women leadership in the church. What does it take to open up to these new possibilities? I don't know if you've watched The.

Shirley Paulson [00:41:51]:

Chosen, I've heard of it. I watched too much of it.

James Early [00:41:54]:

There are things that the writers have Jesus say that are startling even to Christians. He puts it in a fresh way, and you think, you realize we read the Gospels. We think, oh, yes. Isn't that wonderful? But what he said was startling at the time. He said things that upset people, the people in authority. Kind of what you're talking about.

Shirley Paulson [00:42:14]:

Exactly right.

James Early [00:42:16]:

I'm wondering, what does it take? We think we're so familiar with what Jesus said, but what does it take for us to be more open to fuller understanding of everything Jesus was really all about?

Shirley Paulson [00:42:31]:

Oh, that's a very powerful question, because you're so right that when we read things that are comfortable to us, we let it affirm our belief, and we feel good about the fact that, I've got the truth. I know what it is. I'm satisfied with what I know. And we read it again to reaffirm that I already know that. And then when we read something else, what do we do with that? It changes not only our worldview, but our identity. Who are we? So it's a huge, difficult question to think about.

James Early [00:42:59]:

Yeah. And that's scary, I think, for people.

Shirley Paulson [00:43:01]:

Absolutely it is. It's scary for all of us.

James Early [00:43:04]:

You know, I have found in my prison ministry, and when I do Bible studies, some people have more faith in their theology than they do in God.

Shirley Paulson [00:43:13]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:43:13]:

They have more trust in their doctrines than they do in following Jesus, or they think they're following Jesus, but they're really following their doctrines about Jesus. I think if we identify I just realized this while you were speaking. I think maybe the problem is sometimes we identify with what we believe instead of identifying in our relationship with God. And if you identify, as your theology has taught you to believe, that's not who you really are. Who you really are is a child of God. It's relational. It's your relationship with God. And then if that's true, then even according to evangelical Christianity, you're not saved by works, you're saved by grace. Our theology doesn't save us. It's God.

Shirley Paulson [00:43:59]:

You're leading right into one of the major topics that's associated with the whole gnostic question, which is the fact that it was before Nicaea, the main way of thinking, doing, practicing religious thought was seeking gnosis, which is, of course, where gnosticism comes from. Gnosis means understanding something. It's the knowledge of your relationship to God. So the goal, especially written in these early texts that we don't know much about, is always talking about gaining gnosis. When you gain Gnosis, you have healing and salvation. So gnosis is the primary thing. But later, when the hierarchy took over, gnosis was the problem. As I mentioned, spiritual understanding would be a problem. So it became the focus then turned from gnosis to belief. So the goal of the Christian teaching there was to believe. You don't need to understand anything. You just need to believe it. If you believe it, that's all we need. So the argument about whether you should understand something doesn't hold any weight for people who think that the only way to be a Christian is to believe.

James Early [00:45:07]:

Oh, that is so fascinating. I had a lady one time in a Bible study. She said she had grown up in a church where she wasn't allowed to ask any questions.

Shirley Paulson [00:45:15]:

Right.

James Early [00:45:15]:

She was just told, believe what we tell you, and if you doubt it or have questions, you're not being faithful.

Shirley Paulson [00:45:22]:

Right.

James Early [00:45:22]:

And back to this sense of hierarchical authority is just believe what you're told and don't try to figure it out, don't try to understand it. We'll take care of you. It's like it's replacing your relationship with God, with the institution. Is that right?

Shirley Paulson [00:45:38]:

Exactly. And that's what Gnosis is all about, is understanding your relationship to God.

James Early [00:45:43]:

So maybe all these new discoveries are going to help us get a better idea of what Gnosis really is in the right sense. Because Jesus said, ye shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free. He doesn't I don't know what the Greek word is there, but he's talking about knowing the truth. It's hypnosis. So it's like, oh, we're not going to call Jesus agnostic. So Jesus knew what he was talking about. And I think the other thing is, if you have a sense of your relationship with God, you don't have to be afraid of all these it's okay to read something. I've learned more from reading things I disagree with or talking to people I disagree with than just all the things that affirm what I already believe. I mean, I've learned so much more about what I really do believe, and sometimes I have to realize, oh, they've got a good point.

Shirley Paulson [00:46:32]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:46:32]:

We have to think for ourselves.

Shirley Paulson [00:46:34]:

Yeah. Well, and so you can see why Gnosis would be a scary thing then, for those who are trying to hold power. Right, because when you understand your relationship to God, then that's a threat to those who want to hold the power. So that's one of the probably defining parts about Gnosis that people don't like. And so you'll find there's a lot of discussion about understanding, learning Gnosis and so forth in these extracanonical texts that are not so prevalent in the canonical writings.

James Early [00:47:04]:

Got you. I want to come back on something we talked about earlier, just touched on, and that is you said in a lot of these manuscripts you've seen things about healing. You talked about how that was the same thing as salvation. Was there anything in particular that had been like an AHA moment or something that sort of brought some focus to this whole idea of healing through spiritual thinking? Or however, the best way to ask whatever the best way to ask that question is, what have you seen in these other texts about healing?

Shirley Paulson [00:47:34]:

Well, that's what led me deep, deep, deep into the Secret Revelation of John. The first time I read it again without any other kind of commentary on it, I was struck by the word healing in the book and also things like mind and the counterfeit spirit. And they were words that reminded me of my own understanding of the way spiritual healing happens. So that's what drove me deeper into the book to understand, well, what are they talking about with healing and understanding and so forth. The Secret Revelation of John is kind of a long text, but it's all about the theology of healing. The whole book is it starts off with John the Disciple. This is why it's called The Revelation of John, that John is in despair because Jesus is gone and he has no idea what to do or where to go next, and he's having a crisis of faith. And then Jesus comes to him in a vision and explains to him the whole story of creation and how evil happened and how the whole idea of Christ is there to save and heal. So the whole book is about healing. It doesn't use the word healing very much, but when you realize that they're talking about bodies and soul being restored, to me, that's what healing is about. So the whole book is a very long, detailed story about how to understand the basis of creation and how that's the foundation for healing. That's the major book that I know of that does that. There are other texts that pick up similar themes along the way, but The Secret Revelation of John is the one that seems to capture all of it in one book.

James Early [00:49:18]:

So is your book illuminating the Secret Revelation of John catching the Light? Is that what you talk about in that book?

Shirley Paulson [00:49:25]:

Yes, I would say the main purpose of my writing the book is to make it readable because it's a very difficult text. It's long and it's very hard to read even in English translations, because it uses allusions to things we're not familiar with. And it has terminology that we're not familiar with. And even the turn of a phrase is complicated. But when you distill it all down, it basically says three basic what I call gems. And those gems are the the first one is the fact that God is all good and omnipotent, and there's nothing else besides the omnipotent good God. The second gem is that evil is found out to be actually just a fraud. It has no actual power of its own, and it can't destroy God's goodness. And the third gem is that by understanding the gnosis of your original identity with God as God's image and likeness, you have what you need to know to be able to overcome all the suggestions of evil that would make you feel sick or sinful or dead. So it's a long treatise on how to heal.

James Early [00:50:31]:

Wow. Where can people get a copy of your book that puts this in everyday language?

Shirley Paulson [00:50:37]:

Thank you for asking that question. Well, you can find it on Amazon, but you can also find it on my website. If you get it on my website, which is earlychristiantexts.com, you go to Paulson's book on my website and I'll send you a copy that I'll sign for you. Cool.

James Early [00:50:54]:

Well, I'll have that link as well as an Amazon link, however people want to get it. That's great. Tell me quick about your that you wrote a chapter in the book after Jesus Before Christianity. We kind of talked about this period a little bit about before Christianity got institutionalized. What is your chapter on that book about?

Shirley Paulson [00:51:14]:

My chapter is on the question as to why Jesus has so many different names. And I don't just mean the name Jesus, but I mean how is Jesus understood so many different ways? So it's really about the variety of different views of Jesus. And I will say that in that book, there are several of us who wrote chapters in there, but the editors took our words and completely rewrote them to make it one continuous book. So we only have one chapter after another by different authors. So it reads as if it's one book. But I did the major contribution in that one chapter.

James Early [00:51:49]:

Well, that I assume is also available on your website.

Shirley Paulson [00:51:53]:

It's not on my website, but it is on Amazon. It's on almost all booksellers. Yeah.

James Early [00:51:58]:

Okay. I'll have a link for that, too, in the show notes.

Shirley Paulson [00:52:00]:

Thank you.

James Early [00:52:00]:

So if you're interested in getting a copy of that, check out the show notes. Let's see. We kind of need to wrap up here pretty soon. I really appreciate all the time here. I could talk to you for another hour.

Shirley Paulson [00:52:12]:

Yes.

James Early [00:52:13]:

What do you think is the most important contribution that all these other manuscripts bring to us? You used a metaphor the other day when we were talking about relatives.

Shirley Paulson [00:52:24]:

Yes.

James Early [00:52:25]:

I don't know if that would be helpful to share. Now, how do all these things help us understand the Bible better?

Shirley Paulson [00:52:31]:

Yeah, well, the metaphor I use is the fact that I think of these extra books like cousins. In other words, we're familiar with the family of the books in the Bible, but just as in any family, the more you get to know your cousins, the more you kind of understand the bigger picture of your own family. And I think if we look at these other books not as competition or right and wrong with the canon, but rather these are related cousins that help us understand our family better. So I don't want to imply that everybody should drop the canon or to stop reading the Bible. I want these these other books to help deepen and enlighten our understanding of the Bible.

James Early [00:53:11]:

So there are so many. You said there are over 100 well, 27 we already have in a canon. Some of them are more well known. If somebody wanted to start with something that was accessible, that wasn't too scary or where should someone start? What are the top two or three that you would suggest if someone wanted to put their little toe in the water?

Shirley Paulson [00:53:32]:

I think the first place to start is with the Gospel of Mary for two reasons. One is that it's pretty short, that English translations are pretty clear.

James Early [00:53:42]:

Is this referring to Mary Magdalene?

Shirley Paulson [00:53:44]:

Yes, it is probably.

James Early [00:53:46]:

Okay.

Shirley Paulson [00:53:46]:

Just simply called the Gospel of Mary. And it doesn't say Magdalene, but judging from the way Mary Magdalene is understood in all these other texts, it's probably Mary Magdalene. Okay.

James Early [00:53:58]:

And so what about after that? We've talked about the Gospel of Thomas. That's more well known. Are there any others that are a good place to jump in?

Shirley Paulson [00:54:07]:

Well, one of the reasons I wrote my book is that I think the Secret Revelation of John is a great foundation for everything else. It is deep. But the reason for my book is that I want to make it accessible to real people who like the Bible, who want to understand the Bible. And so I wrote my book for that reason, to make it accessible so that people can get into all these other texts. And I wrote just so you know, I wrote a paraphrase of the book in my book so that people can read a paraphrase and get an idea of what the book really means through my paraphrase. I have to say they're not easy just because they're so different. We're not expecting them. And when we read things that we don't know where it's coming from, it's like, where do we go with this? And so you need a little commentary and help to get through these. I mean, if you were to read the Bible for the first time ever, you need a commentary too.

James Early [00:54:55]:

And that's the same with these other right. We have a bigger history, a longer history of much longer reading the Bible, talking about it, hearing sermons, listening to podcasts, going to Bible studies, and there's none of that available, really.

Shirley Paulson [00:55:09]:

That's right. Except for my website, which is what I'm trying to do, is to make it all accessible.

James Early [00:55:14]:

Well, now, where do you see this study going? Are more and more people getting interested in these texts? Scholarly people? I mean, maybe it has to start there, but are more people realizing the validity of these things?

Shirley Paulson [00:55:26]:

Well, I think that actually Dan Brown helps by getting people interested in the possibilities of what's going on in these other texts. And the the scholar Elaine Pagels is the first one who really brought these to the attention of the world and said, hey, there's something important here. So it

began with good scholarship, but as you know, there was all kinds of resistance and fear and everything. And plus, it was in Coptic, and who knew Coptic? So there was difficult to get into them in the first place. But then now more people are really thinking about them, and they're recognizing that they're giving them a bigger picture of their own church experience, their own experience with the Bible. And so people who are in that mindset are more willing to look at them, and they're finding some surprising and inspiring sources there.

James Early [00:56:18]:

So you use the word mindset. I love that word. If somebody's going to read some of these texts, well, translations or commentaries, what's the right mindset? How should we approach that and try to have an open mind and not be defensive? What's the right way to approach these these texts? What's our relationship with him?

Shirley Paulson [00:56:38]:

Yeah. I think the best way to get into these is to just realize that you're going to have a new view of something about Jesus and you're going to put it in the context of what you already know. But don't try to read it through the lens of what you already know, because that'll only make you think, oh, it's different. And therefore I don't know what to do with it. But it's going to be in the context. It'll just broaden you. But the mindset should be be open to a new view of what was going on in the world of Jesus.

James Early [00:57:06]:

I love that. What was going on in the world of Jesus and Jesus followers. This is a record of what the people in the latter part of the first century, second century, third century, this is what they were thinking. These were their thoughts. And so it's really it's kind of a window into church history, isn't? Well, not church in the institutional sense, but the church as in the community of believers.

Shirley Paulson [00:57:30]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:57:30]:

Is that right?

Shirley Paulson [00:57:31]:

Yeah, I would say in the community of the Jesus followers.

James Early [00:57:34]:

Yeah. Well, I think in that light, we don't have to be afraid of it.

Shirley Paulson [00:57:39]:

Exactly.

James Early [00:57:39]:

We can say, okay, I'm just going to find out what these people were experiencing.

Shirley Paulson [00:57:44]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:57:44]:

And that's cool. Any final thoughts here before we wrap up? Is there like, one little nugget you want to share, maybe something I didn't ask that you want to mention real quick?

Shirley Paulson [00:57:55]:

I love your questions, James. They've been really thoughtful and helpful, and I would just say that when you are open to looking at these things, you're going to find, I think, more about your relationship to God, more about your relationship to Jesus, and more about your relationship to each other. All of my work is designed to help regular people have access to these things, and so I'm hoping that people will find their own experience with this and share it more broadly.

James Early [00:58:23]:

I want to honor you, Shirley, for all the love and dedication you've put into helping people understand these ancient writings and how they shed light on the Bible and the early Christian church. I just think it's probably going to be more and more important as we go forward. There may be some answers there for some of the challenges the Christian church is facing today. I think they were dealing with issues back then, too. And I just want to honor you for your heart in all this process.

Shirley Paulson [00:58:51]:

Gosh. Thank you so much, James.

James Early [00:58:53]:

So the best place for people to connect with you is on your website earlychristiantext.com, and I'll have that link in the show notes. I've got three final questions before we say goodbye.

Shirley Paulson [00:59:04]:

Oh, okay.

James Early [00:59:05]:

I ask all my guests these three questions. Question number one if you could talk to any Bible character other than Jesus, who would it be and what would you ask them?

Shirley Paulson [00:59:16]:

Oh, I think I know right away I would be talking to Mary Magdalene and I would ask her, how do you understand Jesus after he's gone?

James Early [00:59:26]:

After he's ascended?

Shirley Paulson [00:59:27]:

Yeah.

James Early [00:59:28]:

Oh, that's a beautiful question. I'd like to know the answer to that, too. Okay, here's question number two. Is there any character in the Bible who you especially identify with?

Shirley Paulson [00:59:41]:

Let me think about that for just 1 second here. Well, I used to identify with several of the disciples of Jesus, but now that I sort of know more about them, I guess I know that their lives are more complex and more complicated than I used to think. So I can't say I identify with them so much anymore. Again. The Bible tells it in such a church history tells it in such a strange way. But I would like to understand Mary, the mother of Jesus, better. Because if you don't think of her as the mother of God but rather a human being who dealt with this enormous thing going on in her life, I'd love to understand her life better.

James Early [01:00:28]:

Okay, here's the third question.

Shirley Paulson [01:00:31]:

Okay.

James Early [01:00:32]:

The Bible Speaks to you podcast is about getting back to the original Christianity of Jesus and embracing Jesus's mindset.

Shirley Paulson [01:00:40]:

Yeah.

James Early [01:00:41]:

How would you describe Jesus's original message of how he wanted us to live our lives?

Shirley Paulson [01:00:47]:

Well, maybe twofold. One is that I think he was always talking about confronting hypocrisy in their own relationship to God and that he wanted people to find again in their hearts a relationship to God without hypocrisy.

James Early [01:01:01]:

Wow. Nobody has ever answered the question quite that way.

Shirley Paulson [01:01:04]:

Oh, really?

James Early [01:01:06]:

We really have to confront that in ourselves. We don't realize it until it's somehow pointed out.

Shirley Paulson [01:01:12]:

Yeah.

James Early [01:01:12]:

That's beautiful. Shirley, I want to thank you so much for giving me some of your time today. And it's just been a real interesting conversation. I've learned a whole lot. And for those of you listening, I hope you've enjoyed this. I hope we have challenged you to think about things in a new way. Just so grateful you're giving us some of your time.

Shirley Paulson [01:01:32]:

I sure did appreciate the being with you today, James, because I think your whole project is a wonderful one, and you've asked terrific questions to be able to help all of us probe just a bit deeper. So thank you for doing what you're doing, James.