

Francis Watson, 2026 Burkitt medal

I'm delighted and honoured to have been awarded the British Academy's Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies. The award represents a welcome public recognition of biblical studies and its contribution to the critical understanding of our western cultural heritage.

Since arriving in Durham nearly 20 years ago, my work has focused on early Christian gospel literature. This category is not limited to the four gospels found in the New Testament – the originally anonymous texts traditionally linked with the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Modern biblical scholarship has shown how these interrelated texts originally competed with one another, as each tried to provide the definitive account of Jesus's life and teaching; it was only in the later 2nd century that they came to be viewed as complementary. My own research focus has been on the early gospel literature excluded from the four-gospel collection, much of it rediscovered in modern times. Parts of or entire gospels attributed to Peter, Thomas, Mary, and even Judas Iscariot have come to light. A modified version of the Gospel of Luke promoted a totally different account of Jesus's human origins. Small fragments of an unidentified gospel seem to reflect an earlier version of the Gospel of John. In my book, *Gospel Writing* (2013), I explored the role of the fourfold gospel construct in creating a breach within the field of early gospel literature between texts approved by influential church leaders and texts they rejected. In spite of this official disapproval, many of these gospel-related texts continued to circulate widely among ordinary readers, in the original Greek or in translation into languages such as Coptic, Ge'ez (classical Ethiopic), Syriac, and Latin. Most of these excluded texts have also been sadly neglected by modern biblical scholarship, and I have published monographs on two of them – *An Apostolic Gospel: the "Epistula Apostolorum" in Literary Context* (2020), and *The Gospel of Truth* (2025) – so as to highlight their significance within the diverse literary landscape of early Christianity. Both monographs feature new and more accessible translations.

Research doesn't take place in a vacuum, and I'm most grateful to colleagues in both Theology and Religion and in Classics for the supportive research context they have provided. My ongoing work has been most directly influenced by two outstanding researchers funded through my AHRC project on "The Fourfold Gospel and its Rivals" (2012-17): Matt Crawford (now Australian Catholic University, Melbourne) and Sarah Parkhouse (University of Manchester). Sarah and I have co-edited two volumes – *Connecting Gospels: Beyond the Canonical/Non-Canonical Divide* (2018), and *Telling the Christian Story Differently: Counter-Narratives from Nag Hammadi and Beyond* (2020). We currently work along with Kim Fowler (University of Groningen, formerly Durham) as editors of the monograph series "Coptic Gospels and Associated Texts" (CGAT). I should also mention Kelsie Rodenbiker (University of Copenhagen), whose PhD work on the formation of the New Testament has stimulated my own interest in the creation of the Christian Bible as a whole, and Alberto Rigolio (Classics), who stimulated me to upgrade my rudimentary knowledge of Syriac and to work on the *Acts of Thomas* – another fascinating and neglected early Christian text.

There have been two notable occasions when my research reached out most directly to a wider public. The first dates back to 2012, when a supposedly ancient gospel fragment was published in a blaze of publicity containing the words, “Jesus said, My wife...”, and so named “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife”. My demonstration that this is a forgery led to massive international press interest, strained relationships with several transatlantic colleagues, and a successful Impact Case Study for the 2014 REF. More recently and more enjoyably, I have worked alongside Lauren Randall (another exceptional PhD student), Giles Gasper (History), and the London-based Projection Studio in a series of public engagement events focused on Codex Amiatinus – an 8th century Bible created in Wearmouth and Jarrow in Bede’s time. This enormous and amazing book was presented as a gift to the Pope, and it is the oldest intact single-volume Bible in any language; most earlier scriptural manuscripts contain much smaller collections or single texts. Unlike the “Lindisfarne Gospels”, this great book is little known in the area that produced it, and the aim of our project was to persuade our audiences of its rightful place in the cultural heritage of the north-east of England.

Once again, I am grateful to the British Academy for considering this body of work worthy of the Burkitt Medal. It’s a great honour.