

GOSPELS (APOCRYPHAL)

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The writing of Gospels did not end with the production of the Gospels which became canonical or even with the fixing of the canon of four canonical Gospels. Many other Gospels continued to be written for many centuries. Most of these do not resemble the canonical Gospels in genre (see Gospels [Genre]). For the purpose of this article a Gospel must be defined as a work which recounts all or part of Jesus' earthly life and teaching (including his appearances on earth between the resurrection and the ascension). This definition excludes some works which were called Gospels, such as the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Philip, the Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians and the Gospel of Eve. There is no space here even to mention a large number of late apocryphal Gospels. Most attention will be given to those Gospels most relevant to the study of Jesus and the canonical Gospels. (It should also be noted that many extracanonical traditions about the life and teaching of Jesus, some of great importance for the study of the canonical Gospels, are not found in Gospels as such, but in other early Christian literature.)

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1. Gospel of Thomas.

The Coptic version of the Gospel of Thomas was discovered in 1945 among the Nag Hammadi codices. Since then it has received more scholarly attention than any other extracanonical Gospel, mainly because of the claim that it preserves early Gospel traditions independently of the canonical Gospels. Certainly, it is more important for the study of Jesus and the canonical Gospels than any other extracanonical Gospel of which we have a complete text. As well as the Coptic version of the whole Gospel of Thomas, there are three fragments in Greek, which were discovered among the Oxyrhynchus papyri and published in 1897 and 1904 (P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655), but not recognized as fragments of the Gospel of Thomas until the Coptic version became known. Though there are significant differences between the Greek fragments (which are from three distinct copies of the work) and the Coptic text, they are recognizably from the same work, which must therefore have existed in at least two

redactions. The original language was probably Greek, though some have argued for a Semitic original.

The earliest of the Greek fragments (P. Oxy. 1) was written no later than A.D. 200 and provides the only firm terminus ad quem for the writing of the Gospel. Hippolytus, writing between 222 and 235, provides the earliest reference to it by name. The Gospel has been dated as early as A.D. 50–70 and as late as the end of the second century. But since parallels to its more explicitly Gnostic concepts and terminology date from the second century, it is probably no older than the end of the first century. The attribution of the Gospel to “Didymus Judas Thomas” (prologue) shows that it derives from the East Syrian Christian tradition, centered on Edessa. It was only in this tradition (from which come also the Book of Thomas and the Acts of Thomas) that the apostle Thomas was known as Judas Thomas and regarded as a kind of spiritual twin-brother of Jesus. Thomas was thought (perhaps correctly) to have been in some sense responsible for the founding of the church in this area, and it is probable that the oral Gospel traditions of this church were transmitted under the name of Thomas and that the Gospel of Thomas drew on these oral traditions. Its points of contact with other literature from this area and especially its probable use by the Acts of Thomas (end of second or early third century) confirms this hypothesis.

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings of Jesus, numbered as 114 sayings (????) by modern scholars. There are no narratives and only minimal narrative contexts provided for a few sayings (22, 60, 100), though the latter are important for showing that Thomas does not, like most of the Gnostic Gospels (see 9. below), have a post-resurrection setting. As a sayings collection, the Gospel has often been compared with the hypothetical Gospel source Q and with the many ancient collections of sayings of the wise. The genre is consistent with the theology of Thomas, which presents Jesus as a revealer of the secret wisdom by which the elect may recognize their true spiritual identity and recover their heavenly origin. Some scholars deny that Thomas is properly Gnostic and locate it rather in the tradition of Jewish Wisdom theology or in the encratite tradition characteristic of East Syrian Christianity. But although there are real contacts with both these traditions, some of the sayings most distinctive of Thomas express a distinctively Gnostic theology (e.g., 18, 29, 50, 83–84).

It seems that the tradition of the sayings of Jesus on which Thomas drew was Jewish Christian in origin (see especially saying 12 on James the Just) but had developed in a gnosticizing direction. Some sayings of clearly Gnostic origin had entered the tradition and the editor of Thomas selected from the tradition sayings which were compatible with his own Gnostic theology. The apostle Thomas has become the authority for an esoteric interpretation of the tradition of the sayings of Jesus (cf. 1, 13).

The majority of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas have parallels in the Synoptic Gospels (including the triple tradition, the Q material, and matter peculiar to Mt and to Lk; see Synoptic Problem; M; L), but whether Thomas is dependent on the canonical Gospels is still debated. Arguments for dependence try to show both that Thomas reflects the specifically Matthean and Lukan redactions of Gospel traditions and that its differences from the Synoptics can be explained as deliberate redactional changes expressing a Gnostic interpretation. But neither of these points has been conclusively established. On the other hand, it is striking that the order of the sayings in Thomas almost never corresponds to that of the Synoptics, while the association of sayings by catchword connections—one of the few reasons that can be discerned for the order in Thomas—is characteristic of oral tradition. It has been argued on form-critical grounds that Thomas sometimes preserves sayings, especially parables, in a more primitive form than the Synoptics. Finally, it should be noticed that since a significant number of the sayings in Thomas which do not have parallels in the canonical Gospels are also attested in other extracanonical sources, it is impossible to argue that the canonical Gospels were the only source of Gospel traditions used by Thomas. It follows that even if the editor of Thomas knew the canonical Gospels, a parallel to them need not derive from them.

The most probable opinion is that Thomas is dependent on a tradition substantially independent of the canonical Gospels, though influence from the canonical Gospels cannot be ruled out—whether during the oral transmission of the tradition, or at the stage of editing or at the stage of translation into Coptic. Thomas can therefore provide useful evidence for the study of the origins and development of the traditions behind the canonical Gospels, provided that due allowance is made for its greater distance (both theologically and probably chronologically) from the historical Jesus. It is even quite possible that a few of the sayings in Thomas which

have no parallels in the canonical Gospels (such as the parables in 97 and 98) are authentic sayings of Jesus.

2. Gospel of Peter.

A substantial fragment of the Gospel of Peter, in a manuscript of the eighth or ninth century A.D., was discovered in 1887 at Akhmim in Egypt. It contains a narrative which begins at the end of the trial of Jesus, includes the crucifixion (see Death of Jesus), burial and resurrection of Jesus, and breaks off in the course of a story which must have described a resurrection appearance to a group of the disciples. The words "I, Simon Peter" (14:60) identify the text as part of the Gospel attributed to Peter to which some writers of the early church refer. We have only two other indications of the rest of its contents. The Syriac ?????????? (early third century), which used the Gospel of Peter, refers briefly (ch. 21) to the resurrection appearance in the house of Levi which must have followed the end of the Akhmim fragment. According to Origen (Comm. Mt. 10.17), the Gospel of Peter supplied evidence that the brothers of the Lord were sons of Joseph by his first marriage. This may indicate that the Gospel began with a birth narrative. In addition to the Akhmim fragment, there are two tiny fragments of another Greek manuscript (P. Oxy. 2949) of the late second or early third century. The differences between one of these and the Akhmim text suggest that the latter cannot be relied on to preserve the text of the original Gospel very accurately.

The quite probable use of the Gospel of Peter by Justin and very probable use of it by Melito of Sardis suggest that it must date from before the middle of the second century. At the end of the second century, Bishop Serapion of Antioch heard of a dispute over its use in the church of Rhossus. When he discovered it was being used to support docetic heresy and that a few passages in it were suspect from this point of view, he disallowed its use (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 6.12). Recent scholarship has come to the conclusion that, on the evidence of the Akhmim fragment, the Gospel itself cannot be considered docetic, though there are phrases which docetists could interpret in their support. This conclusion is confirmed by its probable use by Justin, Melito and the Syriac ?????????? which suggests that it was quite widely accepted in orthodox circles.

The Gospel is distinguished, in the text we have, by its interest in the fulfillment of prophecy in the passion narrative, its strongly anti-Jewish bias (see Anti-Semitism), which emphasizes the sole responsibility of the Jews for the death of Jesus, its heightening of the miraculous, and its apologetic interest in supplying evidence for the resurrection. Distinctive features include Herod's participation in the trial of Jesus and ordering of the crucifixion to be carried out by Jews, and the account (which has a close parallel in Ascension of Isaiah 3:16-17) of the exit of the risen Christ from the tomb, escorted by angels.

The Gospel's relationship to the canonical Gospels is disputed. There are parallels to all four canonical Gospels, but remarkably few verbal parallels. Some scholars have thought the Gospel of Peter completely independent of the canonical Gospels; most have thought it dependent on all four. J. D. Crossan has recently argued that although sections dependent on the canonical Gospels have been secondarily added to the text, the greater part of the Akhmim text is not only independent of the canonical Gospels, but actually a source used by all four canonical Gospels.

A more plausible view needs to build on the following three observations: (1) The major parallels are with special Matthean material (M) and with Markan material; (2) Close verbal parallels are largely limited to the passages parallel to Markan material, which are closer to the text of Mark itself than to Matthew's redaction of Mark; (3) If Markan and M passages are distinguished, both in Matthew and in the Gospel of Peter, it can be seen that connections between Markan and M passages are quite differently made in Matthew and the Gospel of Peter respectively. It seems then that the Gospel of Peter drew primarily on Mark's Gospel and on Matthew's special source, independently of Matthew's Gospel. Whereas Matthew gave priority to the Markan narrative and augmented it from his special source, the Gospel of Peter gave priority to the narrative of M and augmented it from Mark. M was probably the oral tradition of the church of Antioch and its neighboring churches, which acquired written form in the Gospel of Peter no doubt some decades after Matthew had used it. On this view, the Gospel of Peter would be valuable evidence for the study of Matthew's use of his sources.

3. Papyrus Fragments of Unknown Gospels.

Among the papyrus fragments of extracanonical Gospels there are some which cannot be identified as belonging to any known Gospel. The following are the most important:

3.1. P. Oxy. 840. This fourth- or fifth-century manuscript contains the conclusion of a discourse by Jesus, followed by a visit to the Temple in which Jesus engages in a discussion about ritual purification (see Clean and Unclean) with a Pharisaic chief priest named Levi. Some scholars have defended the historicity of the account.

3.2. P. Egerton 2. This manuscript, dating from around A.D. 150, is one of the two earliest Christian manuscripts extant, along with the fragment of the Gospel of John in P52. It contains fragments of four pericopes. The first gives the conclusion of a controversy between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, in which Jesus has been accused of breaking the Law and at the conclusion of which he escapes an attempt to stone him. There is close verbal relationship with several parts of John's Gospel. The second pericope concerns the healing of a leper, the third contains a version of the question about the tribute money, and the fourth contains an otherwise unknown miracle story. The second and third resemble Synoptic material.

The relationship of this unknown Gospel to the canonical Gospels is disputed. Some have argued that it is entirely independent of all four, shares common tradition with them or was even a source used by Mark and John. If this were accepted, the distinctively Johannine material in the first pericope would be very important for the study of the sources of John's Gospel. But it seems at least equally possible that this unknown Gospel draws on oral tradition which had been substantially influenced by the canonical Gospels.

3.3. Oxy P. 1224. The legible parts of this fourth-century manuscript contain parallels to three Synoptic sayings of Jesus and one otherwise unknown saying whose authenticity was defended by J. Jeremias. It could be from an early Gospel independent of the Synoptics, but is too brief for any firm conclusions.

3.4. Fayyum Fragment. This third-century fragment parallels Mark 14:27, 29–30 with some variation. It is too brief for its relationship to Mark to be ascertainable.

3.5. Strasbourg Coptic Fragment. Unlike the preceding fragments, which are all in Greek, this fifth- or sixth-century fragment is in Coptic. "We, the apostles" are the speakers, but this phrase could be consistent with attribution to a particular apostle (cf. Gos. Pet. 14:59). The contents are a prayer of Jesus, a conversation with the disciples and a revelation of his glory to them, all in the context of bidding them farewell, most probably before the passion but possibly before the ascension. There are close contacts with both Synoptic and Johannine material, on which this unknown Gospel is probably dependent.

4. Jewish Christian Gospels.

The Gospels used by specifically Jewish Christian groups in the early church—whether, like the Ebionites, they were heretical in the eyes of the Catholic Church, or, like the Nazarenes, they were orthodox but separate from the predominantly Gentile Catholic Church—have unfortunately survived only in quotations by the Fathers, along with some untrustworthy evidence from the Middle Ages. The titles which the Fathers use for these Gospels and the manner in which they refer to them leave it very unclear how many such Gospels there were and from which the surviving quotations come. Recent scholarly consensus distinguishes three, all of which seem to have resembled the Synoptic Gospels in genre:

4.1. Gospel of the Hebrews. The most recent investigation by A. F. J. Klijn assigns seven quotations to this Gospel. These show no sign of dependence on the canonical Gospels. One saying also appears in the Gospel of Thomas (2). Otherwise the traditions are quite distinctive to this Gospel, including the account of the risen Christ's appearance to his brother James the Just, who was highly revered in Jewish Christian tradition. The Gospel was written in Greek before the middle of the second century. It may well have originated in Egypt, where its title would have designated it the Gospel of the Greek-speaking Jewish Christian community and distinguished it from the Gospel of the Egyptians (see 5. below) used by the Gentile Christian community in

Egypt.

4.2. Gospel of the Nazarenes. Klijn assigns twenty-two quotations definitely to this Gospel, but many of these are indications of points where a few words differed from the text of Matthew's Gospel. Others are more substantial additions to or variations from the text of Matthew. The Gospel was evidently a free translation (in targumic style; see Targums) of Matthew into Aramaic or Syriac. The view of Jerome and others that it was actually the Semitic original from which our Greek Matthew was translated cannot be maintained. In Jerome's time it was used by the Nazarene community in Beroea in Syria, and may have originated among them in the second century.

4.3. Gospel of the Ebionites. Epiphanius preserves seven quotations of this Gospel, which was composed in Greek and based on all three Synoptic Gospels. Taking Matthew as its principal authority, it drew on Mark and Luke in order to combine the three in a harmonized narrative. It is thus an example of the apparently rather common second-century tendency to produce harmonies of the various Gospel texts, of which Tatian's Diatessaron is the most famous example.

Ebionite theology is evident in the quotations. Since the Ebionites rejected the virginal conception and held an adoptionist christology, the Gospel began with the baptism of Jesus. The Ebionite prohibition on eating meat and their opposition to the Temple cult are also reflected.

5. Gospel of the Egyptians.

This Gospel appears to have been the one predominantly used by Gentile Christians in Egypt until it was superseded by the canonical Gospels in orthodox circles. Unfortunately, little is known of it. The only clear information comes from Clement of Alexandria, who refers to a conversation it contained between Jesus and Salome (a woman disciple of Jesus who is prominent in apocryphal, especially Gnostic, Gospel traditions). This contained sayings, also known from the Gospel of Thomas (22, 37; cf. also 2 Clem. 12:1–2), about the rejection of sexuality, which reflect an encratite view of salvation as the restoration of the original condition of humanity without sexual differentiation. Whether the Gospel was not merely encratite but Gnostic is unknown. The Sethian Gnostic work from Nag Hammadi, which is also known as the Gospel of the Egyptians (CG III, 2 and IV, 2), is a quite different work.

6. Secret Gospel of Mark.

M. Smith discovered in 1958 (but did not publish until 1973) a previously unknown letter of Clement of Alexandria in an eighteenth-century copy. The majority of scholars have provisionally accepted Smith's case for the authenticity of the letter, though not all rule out the possibilities that it is an ancient pseudepigraphon (in which case its witness to the Secret Gospel of Mark could still be of value) or a modern forgery.

Clement claims to know three versions of Mark's Gospel: (1) the Gospel used publicly in the church (our canonical Mark), which Mark wrote first; (2) the Secret Gospel, which Mark wrote later, in Alexandria, by adding to his earlier text certain secret traditions which are revealed only to initiates; (3) the version used by the Carpocratian Gnostics, who have made their own additions to the Secret Gospel. Clement gives no more than two words of the material peculiar to (3), but quotes the two passages which the Secret Gospel adds to the public Gospel. After Mark 10:34, the Secret Gospel had a story set in Bethany, which is clearly related to the Johannine account of the raising of Lazarus, but told in Markan rather than Johannine language. Six days after Jesus raised the young man (who is anonymous in the Secret Gospel) from the dead, he came to Jesus at night, wearing only a linen cloth, and Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. The reference must be to some kind of initiation, most likely involving baptism. The Secret Gospel's second addition to Mark occurs in 10:46: it is an oddly brief reference to Jesus' refusal to receive the young man's sister and his mother and Salome.

Smith argued that the additional material is so characteristically Markan that it must derive from the same body of tradition as canonical Mark. Some have argued that canonical Mark is a later, expurgated version of the

Secret Gospel. Others regard the material in the Secret Gospel as late interpolations, deliberately imitative of Markan style and content. So far the evidence remains peculiarly puzzling.

7. Birth and Infancy Gospels.

From the second century onwards, interest in the family background and early life of Jesus produced many works devoted solely to this theme. Two second-century works on this theme proved extraordinarily popular for many centuries, and all later Gospels of this kind were indebted to one or both of them.

7.1. Protevangelium of James. This tells of the miraculous birth of Mary to her childless parents, Joachim and Anna, who dedicate her to the Temple where she lives until entrusted to Joseph. The story from the annunciation to the massacre of the innocents (concluding with the martyrdom of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, at that time) makes free use of the narratives of both Matthew and Luke, laying special emphasis on the virginity of Mary. The birth of Jesus in a cave is miraculous, preserving Mary's virginal state. Her perpetual virginity is implied, since the brothers of Jesus are considered sons of Joseph by a previous marriage. The work is attributed to one of them, James, though he does not appear in the narrative. The main purpose of the work is clearly the glorification of the figure of Mary as a pure virgin, though an apologetic defense of her virginity against Jewish anti-Christian polemic may also have influenced the traditions it contains. It has been called midrashic (according to the loose use of that term in some NT scholarship; see Midrash) because of its creative use of OT texts in developing the narrative. It probably originated in second-century Syria, where its ideas about the virginity of Mary can be paralleled from other texts.

7.2. Infancy Gospel of Thomas. This work consists solely of a series of stories of miracles performed by the child Jesus up to his twelfth year. For example, Jesus makes sparrows out of clay and brings them to life (a story which later found its way into the Qur'an). He heals the injured, raises the dead, curses his enemies so that they die, proves superior in knowledge to all his schoolteachers. The general effect is to manifest his superhuman nature to all who encounter him.

In its original form the work must date from the second century, but from the extant texts in many versions it is very difficult to establish the original text.

7.3. Later Gospels. The Coptic History of Joseph does for Joseph what the Protevangelium of James did for Mary. The Latin Infancy Gospel of Matthew (often called Pseudo-Matthew) transmitted much of the content of the Protevangelium of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, along with further legends of its own, to the medieval West. The Latin Infancy Gospel published by M. R. James is important for one of its sources, otherwise unknown, which must be of early origin. Many other late birth and infancy Gospels in many languages are extant.

8. Gospel of Nicodemus.

This title is given to a work combining two distinct parts: the Acts of Pilate and the Descensus ad Inferos (descent to Hades). The Acts of Pilate is an account of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, and of an investigation by the Sanhedrin which receives evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. The work is notable for its anti-Jewish and apologetic tendencies. Descensus ad Inferos is the fullest account from the early church of Christ's activity in the realm of the dead between his death and his resurrection: his victory over the powers of Hades and his liberation of Adam and the righteous dead. The Gospel of Nicodemus in its present form is generally assigned to the fifth century, but undoubtedly draws on earlier sources.

9. Post-Resurrection Revelations.

Those who wished to amplify the known teaching of Jesus or to trace to Jesus secret revelations handed down in esoteric tradition found the most suitable literary vehicle to be an account of Jesus teaching his disciples in the period between his resurrection and ascension. Often such accounts take the form of a dialog in which Jesus is questioned by his disciples about subjects left unclear by his teaching before his death. Gospels of this kind

sometimes draw on traditions of the sayings of Jesus, in order to interpret and develop them further, but often the contents are unrelated to Gospel traditions. Though the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus in the Synoptics (Mt 24 par.) was sometimes a model for such works, their genre is often as close to that of the apocalypses as to other kinds of Gospel (and so several of these works are entitled Apocalypses).

Though this kind of Gospel proved especially useful to and popular among Gnostics, it did not originate with and was not confined to Gnostics. Orthodox examples from the early second century are the Apocalypse of Peter and the Epistle of the Apostles, both significant for the Gospel traditions they contain, the latter for the way in which it seems to draw on the canonical Gospels, including John, within a continuing oral tradition. The Freer Logion (added to Mk 16:14 in one manuscript) is not a complete work, but illustrates the second-century tendency to ascribe additional revelations to the risen Christ. Later non-Gnostic works of this type, from the third century or later, are the Questions of Bartholomew, the Syriac Testament of our Lord, and the Ethiopic Testament of Our Lord in Galilee. Gnostic works of this type include the Apocryphon of James (CG I, 2), the Book of Thomas (CG II, 7), the Sophia of Jesus Christ (CG III, 4 and BG 8502, 3), the Dialogue of the Saviour (CG III, 5), the First Apocalypse of James (CG V, 3), the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter (CG VII, 3), the Gospel of Mary (BG 8502, 1), the Pistis Sophia and the Books of Jeu.

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