

New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels

In the introduction to this series ([ET&N 34](#)), I mentioned that the term "New Testament Apocrypha" was problematic for a variety of reasons. Applying the name "Gospels" to any of these works is even more troublesome since the literal definition of "gospel" is good news, and many of the heretical doctrines and silly stories in these so-called gospels are anything but good news. I only refer to them as Gospels because that's how they're generally titled, but about the only thing they have in common with the canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) is that they're stories about Jesus.

To consider these apocryphal books Gospels permits biblical skeptics and cynics to publish books like [The Complete Gospels](#), edited by Robert Miller of the Jesus Seminar (an earlier edition was co-edited by Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar), which subtly suggests that these other stories of Jesus deserve equal footing with those of the New Testament. The very name, [The Complete Gospels](#), in fact, suggests that the canonical Gospels are somehow incomplete.

Laying aside the implication that God has not been faithful in ensuring that His Word is complete, the apocryphal "gospels" are categorically different from the real Gospels in terms of authorship, age, and authenticity, as you will learn. They are also not to be confused with "gospels" that preceded the canonical ones. Luke tells us that before his orderly Gospel, "many (had) undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us." He does not disparage these efforts, but builds upon them. All of these earlier gospels, however, have been lost. All of the apocryphal works post-date the canonical Gospels.

Note: in this series I am only considering those works dating to the fourth century or earlier.

Then

Birth and Childhood

With the exception of the story of Jesus in the Temple when He is twelve, the New Testament is silent about the time between His birth and the beginning of His ministry. It would be natural for people to try to fill in the gaps and, in the absence of reliable information, I suppose, to invent some. There are two surviving documents that deal with Jesus' birth and childhood: [The Book of James](#) (or [Protevangelium](#)) and [The Infancy Gospel of Thomas](#), both filled with stories that denigrate the Lord in different ways.

In reality, the [Protevangelium](#) isn't really about Jesus at all, but primarily Mary and is the source of the fantastic stories ascribed to her. According to the [Protevangelium](#), Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit and lived in the Temple from age 3 to 12:

"...(Her parents) went up into the temple of the Lord. And the priest received her, and kissed her, and blessed her, saying: The Lord has magnified thy name in all generations. In thee, on the last of the days, the Lord will manifest His redemption to the sons of Israel. And he set her down upon the third step of the altar, and the

Lord God sent grace upon her; and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her... And Mary was in the temple of the Lord as if she were a dove that dwelt there, and she received food from the hand of an angel." (from Chapters 7-8)

When Mary reaches the age of 12, the council of priests begins to worry that Mary will "pollute the sanctuary of the Lord," (presumably through menstruation) and betroths her to Joseph by lot. Joseph is portrayed as an old widower with grown children thus solving the contradiction between "Jesus' brothers and sisters" (Matthew 13:55-56) and Mary's legendary perpetual virginity (which has no biblical basis). The remainder of the account in the Protevangelium mirrors the Gospels for the most part, although a few additional fantastic details are added. Two of these at the end of the book relate (1) the death of Zachar(y)ias, father of John the Baptist, during Herod's slaughter of the innocents and (2) the identification of Simeon (see Luke 2:25-35) as the successor of Zacharias in the Temple.

If the Protevangelium is offensive for the unscriptural attributes it ascribes to Mary, The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is even more so for its portrayal of Jesus. The book begins when Jesus is five and ends with the familiar story of Jesus in the Temple when He is 12. In 19 ludicrous chapters, it makes Jesus the proverbial *l'enfant terrible*, breaking several of the 10 Commandments along the way.

He violates the Sabbath, dishonors His father and, astonishingly, murders another child:

"After that again he went through the village, and a child ran and dashed against his shoulder. And Jesus was provoked and said unto him: Thou shalt not finish thy course. And immediately he fell down and died" (4:1).

Not surprisingly, "...no man after that durst provoke him, lest he should curse him, and he should be maimed" (8:2). Compared to this version of Jesus, Bart Simpson, the foul-mouthed South Park kids, and Junior of *Problem Child* were model children! Even though I recognize that the standards of behavior may have been somewhat different then, it is difficult to believe that The Infancy Gospel of Thomas could have a Christian origin. How could these stories uplift Jesus? They sound more like the all-too-human actions of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses.

Ministry

There are many so-called Gospels besides those included in the New Testament canon. Those that are of distinct Gnostic character are considered in the next section. Among others, most exist only in fragments preserved in the works of early church writers. Typically, they are of synoptic character and add little or nothing to the canonical accounts of Jesus' ministry. Occasionally, they present additional or odd details. Jerome, for example, quotes the Gospel of the Nazaraeans:

"Behold, the mother of the Lord and his brethren said to him: John the Baptist baptises unto the remission of sins, let us go and be baptised by him. But he said to them: Wherein have I sinned that I should go and be baptised by him" Unless what I have said is ignorance."

Versions of the same Gospel continued to be edited through the Middle Ages as writers added names to some of the anonymous minor characters in the canonical Gospels: Melchus, Caspar, and Phadizarda (the three wise men, Matthew 2:1-12); Mariosa (the woman with an issue of blood, Matthew 9:20); Malchus (the man with

the withered hand, Matthew 12:10); Meruae or Meroe (the Queen of the South, Matthew 12:42 and Luke 11:31); and Mariosa (Jarius' daughter, Luke 8:42). Presumably, some felt that the addition of names added credibility to the work.

More interesting are the small additional sayings of Jesus. According to the Gospel of the Nazaraeans, Jesus explained Matthew 10:34-36 ("I came to set a man against his father...") by saying "*I chose for myself the most worthy; the most worthy are those whom my Father in heaven has given me.*" Such a statement is problematic at best since worthiness is never presented as a relative trait in the canon. One is either worthy (through the blood of Christ) or unworthy (through unbelief).

The Gospel of the Hebrews includes additional details from the Resurrection. Two details are notable in the passage: (1) a representative of the priests was present at the tomb and (2) James, like Thomas, needed to see for himself.

Now the Lord, when he had given the linen cloth unto the servant of the priest, went unto James and appeared to him (for James had sworn that he would not eat bread from that hour wherein he had drunk the Lord's cup until he should see him risen again from among them that sleep)', and again after a little, 'Bring ye, saith the Lord, a table and bread', and immediately it is added, 'He took bread and blessed and brake and gave it unto James the Just and said unto him: My brother, eat thy bread, for the Son of Man is risen from among them that sleep.

The Gospel of Peter (before 190), the only extant fragment discovered in 1886, is another interesting non-Gnostic apocryphal gospel. It is an account of the passion of Christ, and the depiction of the trial and crucifixion closely mirrors that of the canonical Gospels, albeit somewhat more anti-Semitic, which was typical of some later Christian and Gnostic sects. It goes on to suggest that the signs during the crucifixion (darkness, tearing of the veil) convinced many of the Jewish leaders that they had made a big mistake. "If his death has produced these overwhelming signs, he must have been entirely innocent!" (8:1b)

The fragment of the Gospel of Peter closes after the discovery of the empty tomb: "Now it was the last day of Unleavened Bread, and many began to return to their homes since the feast was over. But we, the twelve disciples of the Lord, continued to weep and mourn, and each one, still grieving on account of what had happened, left for his own home. But I, Simon Peter, and Andrew, my brother, took our fishing nets and went away to the sea. And with us was Levi, the son of Alphaeus, whom the Lord..." (14:1-3). The text breaks off there, probably lost forever. Noteworthy in that last quote is the author's reference to *twelve* disciples, although according to Matthew, Judas Iscariot had hanged himself and, according to Acts, Matthias had not yet been chosen to replace Judas.

Finally (although there are many more), there is the so-called Secret Gospel of Mark, referred to in a letter from Clement of Alexandria (150-215) to a man named Theodore that was discovered in 1958 in a book containing letters of Papias, a student of the Apostle John. Theodore had apparently been introduced to a version of the Gospel of Mark that is somewhat different from the one with which he was familiar (the canonical Mark), and he had written to Clement inquiring about it. As a general comment, Clement writes "Now of the things they keep saying about the divinely inspired Gospel according to Mark, some are altogether falsifications, and others, even if they do contain some true elements, nevertheless are not reported truly. For the true things being mixed with inventions, are falsified, so that, as the saying goes, even the salt loses its savor."

But then Clement goes on to disclose that there is indeed another version of Mark's Gospel. According to Clement, Mark originally wrote during Peter's (unknown) visit to

Rome (perhaps in the early 40's) for a general audience and later revised it with additional information for believers. So that Theodore can compare the version he has read with the authentic revised Mark, Clement cites two passages. The first, inserted between Mark 10:34 and 10:35, relates the story of Jesus raising a young man from the dead at his sister's request. The passage is very similar to John's story of Lazarus:

"And they come into Bethany. And a certain woman whose brother had died was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, "son of David, have mercy on me". But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the Kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan."

The second fragment fills in a small gap in Mark 10:46 (*Then they came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd...*) with the following: "And the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, and Jesus did not receive them." According to Clement, Mark willed his revised Gospel to the church in Alexandria, "where it even yet is most carefully guarded." What additional stories and sayings of Jesus were in this revised Mark? We'll probably never know, but it is likely that they would add little or nothing to the information in the four canonical Gospels.

Gnostic

Gnosticism was a major threat to the orthodox church throughout most of the second and third centuries. Gnostic (from the Greek word, *gnosis*, knowledge) churches sprung up across much of the Roman Empire. By the late third century, however, most had disappeared along with their versions of the Gospel stories. In 1945, however, near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi, an Arab peasant unearthed a large red earthenware jar containing 13 ancient codices with over 50 texts. Since the translations were completed in 1971, these texts have become the darlings of Bible skeptics and insidiously found their way into the public consciousness. The major tenet of Gnosticism, as the name suggests, is salvation through knowledge.

The Gospel of Philip (ca. early 3rd century) probably would have remained an obscure document were it not for Dan Brown's profanely ludicrous invention of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene in The Da Vinci Code. This premise is based solely on two passages in the Gospel of Philip:

(32) " There were three (women) who kept company with the Lord at all times: Mary his mother, <his> sister and Magdalene, who is called his companion..."

(55b) The S[avior lov]ed [Ma]ry Magdalene more than [all] the disciples, and kissed on her [mouth] often."

Surrounding these statements are many statements about alleged sacraments employed to initiate the new believer. According to the writer, "the Lord [did] everything in a mystery: (water) baptism, chrism (administration of a mixture of olive oil and balsam oil), eucharist (communion), redemption, and bridal chamber." Of these, the "bridal chamber" is emphasized and we'll take a closer look at this in the next issue of ET&N.

In addition, there are many typically Gnostic concepts:
(94b) "...the tree of knowledge awakened man to life. The tree was the Law."
(99a) "The world came into being through a mistake."
(115) "The husbandry of the world is through four kinds: they gather into the barn through water, earth, wind and light. And the husbandry of God is likewise through four: faith and hope and love and knowledge. Our earth is faith: it is this in which we take root. The water is hope: it is this through which we are nourished. The wind is love: it is <this> through <which> we grow. But the light [is] knowledge: it is this through which we [ripen]."

The Gospel of Thomas (mid-2nd century) is undoubtedly the best known Gnostic text. In The Five Gospels, the Jesus Seminar's judgment and vision of the "real" sayings of Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas is viewed as more authentic than any of the four canonical Gospels. It has also been popularized by the modern Gnostic scholar and author, Elaine Pagels. The Gnostic character of the Gospel of Thomas is revealed in its introduction: "These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke..." Perhaps it is the syncretism of the Gospel of Thomas that makes it relatively appealing to the naive Christian, for it contains many sayings very similar to some in the canonical Gospels, and others that sound a lot like the canonical Jesus. For example, saying 8 is:

"Man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea; he drew it up from the sea full of small fish; among them he found a large good fish, the wise fisherman; he threw all the small fish into the sea, he chose the large fish without difficulty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

But there are also many sayings which diverge from the biblical view of Jesus:

(30) "...Lift up the stone, and there you will find me; cleave the wood, and I am there." Sounds more like Hindu pantheism than Christianity to me.

(67) "He who knows the all, (but) fails (to know) himself, misses everything."

(114) "...every woman who makes herself male will enter into the kingdom of heaven." This last saying in the Gospel of Thomas is embarrassing to its promoters. Small wonder that they now want to claim that it wasn't part of the original.

The Apocryphon of James (ca. 125-150) is a bizarre Gnostic text - purportedly a letter written by the Apostle James to the second century Gnostic leader, Cerinthus. In it, James reveals secret teachings of Jesus given to James and Peter "550 days after (Jesus') resurrection from the dead." The introduction is typical of the secretive nature of Gnostic teachings. "You asked me to send you a secret teaching," the writer says. "I send it to you, and to you only."

The Apocryphon of James portrays a distinctly unbiblical view of God, one that reflects the dualism characteristic of Gnosticism: "...do you perhaps think that the Father is a lover of mankind, or that he is won over by means of prayers, or that he bestows grace on someone because of another, or that he listens to someone who asks (something of him)?" The Gnostic view of God the Father was that he was completely disassociated with creation.

Equally disturbing is the rejection of anything Jesus said during his earthly lifetime. Supposedly, the earthly Jesus could not be a revealer because the "head of prophecy" was cut off with John the Baptist. To the writer of the Apocryphon of James, the only real purpose of Jesus' time on earth was to be together with the disciples that they could become the cause of life for others. "Become better than I!" Jesus tells James and Peter. "Make yourselves like the son of the Holy Spirit." Later, the church would error by introducing salvation through works; to the Gnostic "unless you receive (salvation) through gnosis you cannot find it."

The Gospel of Mary (date unknown) ascribes a special place to Mary Magdalene, having allegedly been loved by Jesus (as in the Gospel of Philip) more than the other disciples. After Jesus' ascension, the Gospel of Mary portrays the (male) disciples as

discouraged and perplexed: "But they were greived and wept sore, saying: 'How shall we go to the heathen and preach the Gospel of the kingdom of the Son of Man? If he was not spared at all, how shall we be spared?'" It is then Mary who rallies the troops:

"Then arose Mary, saluted them all, and spake to her brethren: 'Weep not, be not sorrowful, neither be ye undecided, for his grace will be with you all and will protect you. Let us rather praise his greatness, for he hath made us ready, and made us to be men'" (*perhaps reflecting the concept in Thomas 114*). It is not the idea of a woman encouraging men that is offensive here, since it is certainly not unusual for women to have stronger faith at times. Rather, it is the fact that this account runs directly contrary to the testimony of Acts in terms of the boldness of the disciples after seeing their risen Lord.

Now

Other than small fragments preserved in the works of early church fathers (by way of refuting them), it is noteworthy that most of the apocryphal (Gnostic) gospels were lost until the 1945 Nag Hammadi find, leading me to wonder if that discovery is related to the "powerful delusion" Paul links to the coming of the "lawless one" in 2 Thessalonians 2. At the very least, the Nag Hammadi find has been a boon to the skeptics, leading to the publication of almost countless books attacking the accuracy and sufficiency of the canon. Some of these books are very direct in their attacks; others are more subtle.

Take, for example, the book entitled The Complete Gospels. The title itself is insidious since it implies that the Bible contains the "incomplete gospels." Plastered on the cover, almost like a subtitle, is "Everything you need to empower your own search for the historical Jesus," a quote from John Dominic Crossan. Both Miller and Crossan are influential members of The Jesus Seminar, the self-appointed group of liberal scholars who have themselves published The Five Gospels (Thomas is the fifth) and The Acts of Jesus, both of which question the authenticity of the words and actions of Jesus in the Bible. The Complete Gospels is a useful text, as are any compilations of the apocryphal Christian and Gnostic books because they show us the development of Christian and pseudo-Christian thought after the end of the Apostolic Age. It is certainly no secret that the both the orthodox and heterodox church diverted from some aspects of the original message with disturbing quickness.

The skeptics, however, would suggest that it is now our job to sort out the original message from later revisions and additions and they "helpfully" offer up post-biblical texts to allow us to do so. Frankly, it would appeal to me to believe that using a variety of ancient sources, I could piece together an authentic gospel. I love research, and I find these ancient texts frequently intriguing. But to believe that is possible or appropriate is to believe that God is unable or unwilling to communicate clearly to His creatures. Many of the apocryphal texts in question have only (re)surfaced in the 20th century. If they represent a more complete or faithful picture of Jesus, why would God have left so many to be deluded for nearly 2000 years?

In faith, I believe that God closed His written revelation with the works of the New Testament. Some will inappropriately quote the Book of Revelation to "prove" that the New Testament is complete: "*I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book*" (Revelation 22:18). John is clearly referring to the Book of Revelation itself, not the canon of the New Testament, which was far from determined at that time (ca 90-95 AD). Furthermore, there is no certainty that

Revelation was, in fact, the last of the New Testament books to be written; nor that there were non-canonical (but highly revered in the church) works penned earlier than Revelation (e.g., The Didache). We humans tend to think chronologically because we are time-bound while we're here, but God has no such restriction.

I'll have more to say about revelation (the concept, not the book) in the next issue of ET&N and try to demonstrate why it is important that we accept the closed canon of the New Testament.

Discussion

I received several nice notes after the last issue of *ET&N*, mostly encouraging comments about our daughter. Thanks especially to Ted, a beloved brother from Atlanta whose family was very special to ours during our years there.

At the risk of seeming prideful, I also want to share this note from Darrell, who is a brother in my local church:

"Dick, you are so articulate and credible. It is pure pleasure to read your comments, descriptions, definitions, and suggestions. You accurately put into words that which I believe and much of what I think. A real gift."

I am grateful for any gift God chooses to give me, but I consider it far less important than the kind of work Darrell does. He and his wife have been instrumental in our congregation's campus ministry at the University of Delaware and particularly to specific work with international students who come to UD for the English Language Institute. Their tireless work has led to many conversions and new missionaries who are now spreading the Gospel in their home countries. If my writing encourages him and others like him, it is worth the effort!



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Gnosticism and Personal Revelation (October 12)

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