

Apocryphal Gospels – Then and Now

‘There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.’ (John 21.25)

So ends the Gospel of John, with an acknowledgement that it contained only a limited number of the traditions about Jesus. But is this statement simply mere authorial hyperbole, or does it reflect a reality that in the gospel writer’s day there were a vast number of stories and sayings attributed to Jesus that were in circulation? If, even to a limited extent, the author of the fourth gospel portrays the prevailing circumstances of his own day, it becomes fascinating to ask what happened to all these extra traditions concerning Jesus.

How did traditions about Jesus survive to the present time?

Theoretically there are a number of possible answers to that question. Those of you, who read more widely than me, will be able to draw on popular literature to provide explanations of long chains of oral tradition, or perhaps of secret societies preserving the ‘truth’ about the life of Jesus. We shall return to such vivid and exciting theories later. Suffice here to say that sometimes fact is not stranger than fiction, and the mundane explanation is the correct one. Theories pertaining to the material surviving through long chains of oral tradition passed down by word of mouth through two millennia are simply fanciful. For such additional traditions to survive, the only plausible mechanism is through the medium of written texts. Thus there appear to be two plausible explanations that are supported by actual textual evidence.

1. Traditions have been transmitted through the repeated scribal copying of manuscripts. This is what has happened with a number of texts, such as the four gospels that are found in the New Testament.
2. Through archaeological excavations long forgotten or previously unknown texts have been discovered. A number of these are ‘gospel-like’ documents.

It is helpful to define at this point what we mean by the term ‘apocryphal gospels’ or to employ what is perhaps the more scholarly terminology ‘non-canonical gospels’. The problem with the label ‘apocryphal’ is that at least in popular usage it denotes something that is spurious or false. By contrast, the description of these texts as being ‘non-canonical’ more neutrally denotes them as being gospel texts that do belong to the set of four gospels – Matt, Mark, Luke and John – included in the New Testament. So, here the term is used to designate a text that is not one of the four well-known gospels contained in the bible.

The second element in the label ‘non-canonical gospels’, requires more attention when defining its meaning. Most would understand ‘gospel’ to mean a document like one of the famous four of the bible. This however takes too narrow an approach to understanding what the term ‘gospel’ meant in antiquity.

Prior to the ministry of Jesus the term ‘gospel’ was already in circulation in the Greek language. There are two important indicators to discern the meaning of the term gospel. First, the translations of the Old Testament into Greek known as the Septuagint took place over a couple of centuries probably starting around the middle of the third century B.C. In a passage from Isaiah, perhaps better known from the music of Handel, the author writes ‘how lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who proclaims good news’ (Isa 52.7). Here it is obvious that the verb *εὐαγγελίζω*

does not relate to a written document, but to an act of oral proclamation. The 'gospel' word group was also used outside the context of the Jewish scriptures, in what may initially be thought of as a more 'secular' usage. Study of the Roman imperial cult has been a focus of scholarly attention over the last decades. The Jewish historian Josephus described the events surrounding the ascension of Vespasian in A.D. 69 in the following terms: 'every city kept festival for the good news and offered sacrifices on his behalf' (*Bell.* 4.618). The term was not, however, the unique preserve of Jewish writers. The so-called 'Priene inscription' discovered in five cities in Asia Minor, where the imperial cult flourished, celebrated the peace established in the Empire under the reign of Augustus. In highly charged religious language the relevant portion of the inscription reads

And Caesar, [when he was manifest], transcended the expectations of [all who had anticipated the good news], not only by surpassing the benefits conferred by his predecessors but by leaving no expectation of surpassing him to those who would come after him, with the result that the birthday of our god signalled the beginning of good news for the world because of him.

So, at the earliest stages of the Jesus movement, the term 'gospel' denoted an oral proclamation of some event of significance usually with positive ramifications – such as the accession of a new emperor. Christian usage of 'gospel' language may have looked both to the antecedents in the Old Testament, but also been attuned to the popular contemporary usage as part of the imperial cult, especially in the eastern Mediterranean where emperor veneration appeared to flourish. If this were the case, then Paul's appropriation of 'gospel language' was far from being a politically neutral manoeuvre. Rather, in a subversive and controversial manner the one who styled himself as 'apostle to the gentiles' intentionally took hold of the language of the imperial cult in order to claim that Christ, not Caesar, was the source of good news and the manifestation of divinity.

When did the term 'gospel' first refer to a written text rather than an oral message?

In many ways that is one of the large unresolved debates in NT scholarship. Undoubtedly, by the year A.D. 200 there is surviving evidence to establish that the transformation had taken place – for a manuscript of John's Gospel exists with the title 'Gospel according to John'. Twenty years earlier than this, the early Christian writer Irenaeus speaks of the four evangelists issuing 'gospels' in different geographical locations. Thus, Irenaeus uses the term 'gospel' to denote unambiguously written documents on multiple occasions and without explanation. Trying to press back earlier than this is more problematic. Despite the confident claims of some, it is perhaps best to simply state that by the second half of the second century Christian writers could quite naturally speak of certain written documents as 'gospels'. When Mark, the first of the gospel writers, commenced his account with the line 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ', he almost certainly had no idea that his description of Jesus' oral message as 'gospel' or 'good news' would become the term that would be applied to describing the literary genre of his work.

How many written 'gospels' were in circulation in early Christianity?

The answer would of course depend on whom one asked. For Irenaeus, the proto-orthodox bishop of Lyon, the answer was four – those being the texts preserved in the New Testament canon. Not everyone would have accepted his ruling. Irenaeus himself actually to the fact that others held to either more or fewer gospels, but employing the type of rhetoric that too often has exemplified Christian attitudes to

difference of opinion, he immediately labels such people as heretic, deviants and perverters of the truth. In opposition to Irenaeus enumeration, contemporary attempts to assemble a list of gospel texts known either by title or surviving manuscripts from the first few centuries of the Christian era results not in four gospels but closer to forty.

The Discovery of non-canonical Gospels

This list of texts has grown over the last century or so, due to archaeological finds. Because of the climatic conditions of dry and desiccating heat, the vast majority of these discoveries were made in Egypt. The first major discovery of a manuscript of a gospel-type text was disinterred during the winter season dig of 1886/87 from a Christian grave in a cemetery at Akhmîm in Upper Egypt. The excavators discovered a parchment codex of 66 pages containing the remains of four texts. The first, occupying pages 2-10 was a fragment of the Gospel of Peter, which had been known through reference to its title by early Christian writers, but apart from this nothing was known of its contents. This nine page fragment caused much excitement both in scholarly circles as well as the popular press when it was published in 1892.

Also discovered in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the most significant find of antique manuscripts in Egypt was unearthed at the famous Oxyrhynchus site. Grenfell and Hunt found mounds thirty feet deep containing a mixture of rubbish, earth and precious papyrus texts. These were excavated by Egyptian labourers, piled in baskets, and then boxed and sent back to Oxford. One papyrus roll was protected in a Huntley and Palmers biscuit tin, others were shipped in tea chests. The volume of this find is hard to quantify, but around a quarter to half a million papyrus fragments were discovered. Texts unearthed over a hundred years ago are still being sorted, edited and published. A recent count shows that so far seventy-three volumes of published texts have appeared, containing transcriptions and analysis of nearly 5000 documents. So far only somewhere between two to four percent of the texts have been published.

Just over half a century was to pass before the next large cache of writings was discovered. However, during the intervening period some discoveries of individual texts had come to light. During the first half of the 1930s the so-called 'Unknown Gospel' – Papyrus Egerton 2 was purchased from an antiquities dealer by the British Museum. At the time the text caused quite a stir since its dating to the middle of the second century meant that it was viewed at that stage as the oldest surviving Christian manuscript. It was considered startling that such a divergent text should go back to the earliest generations of the Christian movement and, at the time of its discovery, should predate all surviving manuscripts of any text in the New Testament. Although not quite as ancient, the next huge find occurred again in Egypt, where the climatic conditions have proved so favourable to manuscript preservation, shortly after the end of the Second World War.

Located in Middle Egypt, Nag Hammadi (the anglicized form of its Arabic name) is a small town of some 30 000 inhabitants located 80km northwest of Luxor, known as Chenoboskian in classical antiquity. Unearthed at the foot of a cliff a local agricultural field-hand made one of the most illuminating manuscript discoveries for casting light on a distinctive branch of early Christianity. The find comprised of twelve leather-bound papyrus codices, along with pages torn from a thirteenth book, buried in a sealed jar. The texts in these books contain among other things a mixture of esoteric and mystical Christian writings, apocalyptic visions, a fragment of Plato's *Republic* and a similarly broken and truncated version of the *Sentences of Sextus* – a

widely circulating text in the late antique and Medieval periods providing moral instruction. Such diversity reflects the eclectic reading tastes of what were probably élitist early Christians who perhaps continued to exist within mainstream Christianity.

Such manuscript finds have continued to come to light in the twenty-first century. Although acquired in 1961 by the Egyptian Museum of Berlin, and accessioned as Papyrus Berolinensis 22220, the nature of this text did not become known until 1991 when the sheets of manuscript were first being worked on for conservation purposes. The text was first published in 1999 and given the title *Gospel of the Savior* by its editors. Even more recently the text known as the *Gospel of Judas* first became widely known in 2006, although the codex of which it was part appears to have first been discovered in a tomb in Middle Egypt as early as 1978. From here it passed through the murky and illicit world of antiquities dealers, finally being purchased by the Maecenas Foundation in Switzerland in 2001 when scholarly work began on the restoration of the codex, which had been badly mishandled since its discovery. At one point it appears to have been frozen in the mistaken belief that this would assist preservation. Quite the opposite was the case – and the structure of this codex and its brittle pages were severely damaged. Thanks to the expert work of a team of manuscript restorers much of its contents were expertly pieced together, but notwithstanding this expert restoration large parts of what was apparently a near complete codex when discovered have been irrevocably lost.

The Gospel of Thomas

The most famous of all the non-canonical Gospels, the Gospel of Thomas comprises of a brief prologue and 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. It is unlike the four canonical gospels in that it has no narrative framework. Instead it is a collection of sentences or pithy maxims attributed to Jesus. Many of the sayings are esoteric and the meaning is far from obvious. The text may have been read by elite Christians who were seeking a more spiritualized and internalized form of religion. It is probably wrong to categorize the text as ‘gnostic’ since it does not present an alternative salvation myth involving escape from the material world. Instead, it promotes a mystical and ascetical version of Christianity which is attainable only by the privileged few.

The work was known only by its title as mentioned in the works of various early Christian authors prior to the 1890s. Then three fragments of the Gospel of Thomas were discovered at Oxyrhynchus:

P.Oxy. 1, published in 1897, dated palaeographically ca. 200 CE. [Bodleian] codex

P.Oxy. 654, published in 1904, dated palaeographically ca. 250 CE. [British Library] opistograph

P.Oxy. 655, published in 1904, dated palaeographically ca. 250 CE. [Houghton Library, Harvard] papyrus roll

All these fragments were written in Greek.

When P.Oxy. 1 was discovered Grenfell and Hunt made a guess of identification, suggesting that it was a fragment of the Gospel according to the Egyptians. This was based on the geographical location of discovery. When the pair returned 6 years later they discovered two further fragments of sayings of Jesus. Although P.Oxy. 654 contained the opening prologue, the very broken nature of the manuscript meant that the text still could not be identified as the Gospel of Thomas – although that was one of the numerous possibilities suggested. Nor had they come to the opinion that these three fragments were all different manuscript remains of the same work. That insight was to wait nearly half a century before coming to light. The second text in what has

been by convention called Codex 2 from Nag Hammadi contained a series of 114 sayings written in Coptic and attributed to Jesus, and the text contained the title the Gospel of Thomas.

The prologue does much to set the flavour of the elusive sayings which follow. It reads: 'These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down.' First, it is stated that these are 'secret' sayings, maybe to explain why hearers will not have heard them previously and probably also to signal that they are intended for consumption by elite seekers of esoteric Christian truth. However, as one reads the Gospel of Thomas it is apparent that not all the sayings are that 'secret' after all. Many of them have direct parallels with sayings in the canonical gospels. In fact over half the sayings parallel material also found in the NT Gospels. Secondly, these are words spoken by the living Jesus. In good scholarly fashion there is no consensus as to what this means! Does it signal a designation of the post-resurrection Jesus after he has been revived, and the fact that he is alive again testifies to his divine status and favour? Alternatively, others suggest precisely the opposite, that the term 'living' designates that Jesus spoke these words during his earthly ministry. Finally, others suggest that the description portrays Jesus as the one who imparts life through his words. In this sense the 'Living Jesus' means the life-giving Jesus. The final part of the prologue reveals both the scribal process of writing down the sayings which follow, and the identity of the scribe and guardian of these revelatory words. The name Didymus Judas Thomas is somewhat tautologous. The word 'didymus' is Greek meaning 'twin', Judas is a common Jewish name widely attested in the first-century, the name Thomas is an Aramaic word here transliterated using Greek letters and also meaning 'the twin'. The question arises, as to whose twin Thomas might be. The Gospel of Thomas does not tell readers the answer. However, in a later text also attributed to Thomas, the so-called Acts of Thomas, readers learn that Thomas is actually the twin of Jesus. This must be considered quite a surprising embellishment to the canonical traditions, and this proximity in relationship to Jesus probably allowed adherents to early forms of Thomas Christianity to claim their version of faith was correct because of Thomas' privileged access to Jesus.

Sayings 1 and 2 are obviously related, they both promise life and higher levels of understanding to those who seek after the deep meaning of Jesus' words as preserved in these sayings. Such a perspective resonates with a number of the contemporary mystery cults. Insiders are given secret and higher levels of knowledge, which in turn allows for spiritual progression and escape from the constraints of the material realm. Although a few centuries earlier, the Pythagoreans, apart from their abiding theorem dealing with right-angled triangles, were also known for transmitting the secret properties of numbers to those initiants in the group. It is perhaps possible to infer from the contents of the Gospel of Thomas that adherents. Apart from questing after secret knowledge, Thomas promotes an ascetic and individual lifestyle. The text promotes the faith of the 'single one'. This may be the earliest Christian evidence of the promotion of some form of monastic lifestyle. Many have seen Thomas advocating celibacy and calling for a return to a pre-sexual child-like state as a means of attaining a pure spiritual life.

Saying 12 is perhaps one of the two sayings that provide a clue to the origin of the group behind the text. It states:

- The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you are going to leave us. Who will be our leader?"
- Jesus said to them, "No matter where you are, you are to go to James the Righteous One, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being."

The emphasis on James the Just or James the righteous, strikes one as being somewhat out of place in a text where Thomas is the authority figure mediating the secret words of Jesus. This James was not one of the 12 disciples, but James the brother of Jesus who became leader of the church in Jerusalem. He was put to death by stoning at the behest of Annas the Jewish high-priest around A.D. 61, during the power-vacuum that followed the death while in office of the Roman procurator Festus and prior to the arrival of his successor Albinus. Perhaps more significant than these biographical details is the fact that James is usually seen as representing a form of Jewish-Christianity which maintained a more positive attitude towards Jewish law, traditions and practices. While proclaiming allegiance to Jesus as Messiah, this form of Christianity was in many ways dissonant with the more radical pro-Gentile form of Christianity spread around the eastern Mediterranean and beyond by Paul. It is interesting that the *Gospel of Thomas* promotes the authority of James and thereby aligns itself with some form of Jewish-Christianity. Perhaps, however, the link with James the Just in the *Gospel of Thomas* is more a strategy than a theological statement. It is striking that while many of the saying in *Thomas* are anti-hierarchical and advocate a solitary spirituality, at this point the text draws upon the authority of an individual figure. The issue here may be more to do with legitimating the type of spirituality that is being advocated, by linking the community and its teachings with the heritage of James.

Yet in the saying that follows on from this statement concerning James the Just, Thomas is elevated above two other prominent disciples because of his insight into Jesus' true nature. The purpose of this short narrative is focused upon the correct way to describe Jesus. Moreover, it appears intentionally to correct the confession, which according to Matthew's gospel was made at Caesarea Philippi by Simon Peter. There Peter declared of Jesus that 'you are the Christ the Son of the living God.' This perspective is affirmed by Jesus, who declares, 'blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven' (Matt 16.16-17). By comparison, the *Gospel of Thomas* appears to subvert this perspective with the following exchange between Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, Matthew and Thomas.

¹ Jesus said to his disciples, 'Compare me, tell me whom I am like?'

² Simon Peter said to him, 'You are like a righteous angel.'

³ Matthew said to him, 'You are like a wise philosopher.'

⁴ Thomas said to him, 'Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like.'

⁵ Jesus said: I am not your master. 'After you drank, and become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out.'

⁶ And he took him and withdrew. He spoke to him three words.

⁷ Then when Thomas returned to his companions, they asked him, 'What did Jesus say to you?'

⁸ Thomas said to them, 'If I tell you one of the words which he said to me, you will take up stones and throw them at me; and a fire will come out of the stones and burn you up.'

(Saying 13).

The opening question recalls the twin enquiries made by Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is? ... but who do you say I am?' (Mark 16.13, 15). The choice of both Simon Peter and Matthew as literary foils, whose perspectives are corrected by the mysterious 'non-answer' of Thomas can perhaps be explained. Firstly, Peter makes the central declaration concerning Jesus which lies at the heart of early christology – namely, 'Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God.' Such

‘certainties’ seem discordant with the ineffable and veiled nature of Jesus that is affirmed by the Thomasine community.

It is interesting that in this saying the *Gospel of Thomas* changed Peter’s ‘confession’ about Jesus to a declaration that he is ‘a righteous angel’. It is uncertain whether this change is designed to make the Petrine position more susceptible to rebuttal, or whether such a declaration is seen as not being incorrect, but represents the lowest stage in a hierarchy or progression of christological understandings. Either way such an ‘angelomorphic christology’ is viewed as defective by the author either in its entirety or its extent, and interestingly Jesus chooses not to respond to this answer.

While the first type of response may draw on motifs already found in Jewish apocalyptic texts, the second response offered by Matthew, that Jesus is the sagacious philosopher, aligns more with a certain strand of wisdom tradition. The portrayal of Jesus as the supreme teacher is prominent in Matthew’s gospel (Matt 23.8), and here *Thomas* may be critiquing what it views as the limited understand that Jesus is simply the rabbi *par excellence*. Finally *Thomas* speaks out and declares that Jesus is beyond categorization or description. Here there seems to be a concatenation of various Jewish mystical tradition tied up with the christological perspectives of the Thomasine community. It has been suggested that the three unrepeatable words spoken by Jesus are linked with the divine name Yahweh, which because of its sacredness is not uttered in Jewish tradition. When the divine name is discussed during Moses’ encounter with God in the wilderness at the burning bush, God provides an allusive response which is encapsulated but not unpacked in three Hebrew words (הַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַיְהוָה) ‘I am who I am’ (Exod 3.14). It is likely that Jesus has revealed to Thomas that he is the one who bears the divine name – and because of the sacred nature of this name Thomas cannot reveal this to his fellow disciples.

Hence the issues of authority figures and christology are closely linked in the *Gospel of Thomas*. It appears that differences in understanding the essence and nature of Jesus were demarcation points between Thomasine Christians and other branches of the nascent Jesus movement. One further significant authority figure surfaces in *Thomas* in its final saying. Only here is Mary Magdalene mentioned in the text and her gender is presented by Peter as a barrier to her participation in the benefits of community life. There is possibly a critique of the exclusion of women from authority roles in the emergent orthodox church. The response proposed by the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* may strike readers as being misogynistic by modern standards especially because of its lack of affirmation of Mary as a female. Instead Jesus offers the possibility of some type of gender transformation. ‘Jesus said, “Look, I will lead her that I may make her male, in order that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter into the kingdom of heaven.”’ (Saying 114). This type of gender transformation needs to take account of three contemporary factors:

- (i) the encratic life of the Thomasine community;
- (ii) perspectives on gender change in other non-canonical texts;
- (iii) Jesus own apparently gender-transcending being in certain texts.

The solitary life advocated in the *Gospel of Thomas* was seen as the path to ascertaining entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, in line with the wider phenomenon of developing Christian monasticism, especially in the Egyptian context of the third and fourth centuries, a harsh life of self-denial is seen as a means of pursuing a more elevated spirituality. Other texts that are found in the Nag Hammadi corpus likewise require devotees to

undergo some gender change. For instance, the *Gospel of Philip* sees the adherent's spiritual journey as resulting in the reunification of a being's earthly male part with its now separated angelic female part. This view of salvation is to affect a repair of ruptured beings that now are tainted by gendered fragmented pieces of the full being. Finally, in saying 114, Jesus appears to speak from beyond the realm of gendered existence since he is able to address Peter and his associates as 'you males'. In this sense Jesus becomes a mystical example for the *Thomasine* community of wholeness of being that transcends gendered existence. Moreover, it is by reaching beyond narrow gender categories that one is able to enter the kingdom of heaven – which is the goal of members of this community, although their understanding of the kingdom appears radically different to that of their rival Christians in other communities.

The *Gospel of Thomas* offers a mystical version of Christianity, that is élitist, self-denying, mystical and focused upon a higher realm of existence. Esoteric knowledge and commitment to the secret interpretations of the community are central to its understanding and are the basis of its allegiance to the teachings of Jesus. While the form of mysticism that is found in the *Gospel of Thomas* is far less complex than the detailed cosmologies and ascent-journeys found in other texts generally labelled as 'gnostic', it is possible to see why *Thomas* was a text which appealed to adherents to these more developed belief systems. The *Gospel of Thomas* defies easy categorization. Some of the material it contains is undoubtedly early and may even occasionally preserve versions of sayings that perhaps pre-date the more developed forms found in the canonical gospels. Also in the case of material unparalleled in the canonical gospels, some of these sayings might also preserve material which in some form originated with the historical Jesus. Notwithstanding these facts, as the Coptic fourth-century version of the text is preserved it represents a text that underwent revision with the accretion of added traditions to make it 'live' for the successive generations that treasured, used and quarried these saying to draw themselves closer to the 'living Jesus' who speaks these enigmatic words.

The Gospel of Philip

This text follows immediately after the Gospel of Thomas in Nag Hammadi codex 2. It represents what people may label as a more conventional 'gnostic' outlook – although the term 'gnostic' requires careful definition, and it bears witness to some strange sacramental rites such as the bridal chamber ritual. However the text is famous, or more correctly has been made famous for one detail, Jesus kissing Mary Magdalene. The reason for this fame is simple, Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. After heading to a library Teabing, the central character, pulls a book from the shelves entitled *The Gnostic Gospels*, he flips open to the middle of the book and turning to the female love interest memorably states, 'The Gospel of Philip is always a good place to start.' The passage he has indicated is cited in the following form: 'And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us."' (*Gos. Phil.* 63.32-64.4). He then authoritatively tells his fellow investigator Sophie that 'any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word *companion*, in those days, literally meant *spouse*.' All publicity might be good publicity, but it is not necessarily accurate. First an Aramaic scholar would be of little use, since as with the other Nag Hammadi texts the Gospel of Philip is written in Coptic not Aramaic. Secondly the text is very broken.

Despite these lacuna or gaps in the manuscript, it is obvious that from the perspective of the text, it describes the privileged role of Mary Magdalene and that she enjoys an obvious degree of intimacy in her relationship with Jesus. However, various reconstructions of the text have tried to make the type of relationship more explicit by sexualizing the level of intimacy and describing the kiss as one that is given on the mouth. Typical among the reconstructions is the following. Too often this is interpreted by conspiracy theorists or the writers of popular literature as providing a window into Jesus' physical relationship with Mary Magdalene and revealing 'a truth' that the institutionalized church has suppressed. The reality is far less exciting. The practice of exchanging kisses among fellow Christian believers is known from the pages of the New Testament. Paul tells the addressees of his Epistle to the Romans to 'greet one another with a holy kiss' (Rom 16.16). In the wider culture kisses were a common way of greeting family members and did not carry the same overtones that have become attached to this practice in a highly sexualized modern society. Since many who followed Jesus became ostracized from their families, like many new religious movements Christian literature presented a fictive kinship whereby the replacement family of believers becomes the authentic locus for the use of signs of familial affection. The second factor that needs to be recognized is that in a number of non-canonical gospels Mary becomes a subversive authority figure for the marginalized groups that read these texts. She is presented as a significant figure because of the quality of her insight and discipleship, thereby critiquing the forms of Christianity that centred upon the more structured and hierarchical leadership of figures such as Peter.

The Infancy Gospels

There are two early gospel-like texts that are usually grouped together in this category, yet in many ways they both expand the definition of what is a gospel. The Protevangelium of James is primarily not a story about Jesus, but about his mother Mary. It commences prior to her conception, and concludes with Jesus' birth and the slaughter of the infants in Jerusalem by King Herod. The other text is the Infancy Gospel of Thomas – not to be confused with the Gospel of Thomas with its 114 sayings.

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas occurs in a variety of Greek forms, for convenience references here are to the longer form known as Greek A. After identifying the author as 'Thomas the Israelite, the Philosopher', the story picks up with Jesus at the age of five. In a story that feels like a pastoral idyll, the young Jesus amuses himself by making clay sparrows. However, picking up a recurrent theme in the canonical gospels, Jesus is observed to be carrying out this activity on the Sabbath and hence runs foul of the Jewish law. Strikingly it is Joseph, Jesus' father, who castigates him for this unlawful behaviour.

This story has a long transmission history down through the centuries, and may have taken on a life of its own apart from the IGT. It is portrayed in art, and even in Arabic texts. The Arabic Infancy Gospel, probably translated from the Syriac at some time after the sixth century, contains a version. Perhaps even more surprising is that this story surfaces in the Qu'ran.

The IGT also contains a story of a helpful child Jesus assisting his father with carpentry tasks in chapter 13.

- Now his father was a carpenter and made at that time ploughs and yokes. And there was required of him a bed by a certain rich man, that he should make it for him. And one beam, that which is called the shifting one, was too short and

Joseph knew not what to do. The young child Jesus said to his father Joseph: Lay down the two pieces of wood and make them even at the end next to you. And Joseph did as the young child said to him. And Jesus stood at the other end and took hold of the shorter beam and stretched it and made it equal with the other. And his father Joseph saw it and marvelled: and he embraced the young child and kissed him, saying: Happy am I because God has given me this young child.

While Christian art and even Islamic traditions have chosen to reproduce these stories of the young Jesus being helpful, surprisingly most stories in the IGT are not of this character. The boy Jesus, is malicious, vindictive and even murderous.

In chapter three a fellow child disperses puddles of water collected by Jesus. In revenge, Jesus takes the water out of his body by telling him to wither up, and the child dies. In chapter four, another child while running around accidentally bumps Jesus. In response, Jesus cries out 'you will not finish going your way.' Again the child drops dead. There are three attempts to send Jesus to school. Not only does he out-smart his teachers, he exasperates them beyond measure and afflicts one with illness. While Jesus' behaviour is moderated later in the story, one asks why these types of stories were transmitted and treasured. In part, it reveals the different understandings of divine power in the ancient world. A wonder-working cursing *enfant terrible* still demonstrated divine power at work within him.

Protevangelium of James

The second infancy gospel is the Protevangelium of James. Like so many ancient books the title of this work is not found at the beginning, but at the end. In the final verse of the brief epilogue the twin-title 'Birth of Mary, Revelation of James' is supplied. While these twin ancient titles may be preferable to the modern construct of *Protevangelium of James* these are not without their own problems. In comparison with other ancient texts labelled as 'Revelations' or 'Apocalypses', this writing is devoid of much of the apocalyptic imagery which is a feature of that literary genre. The description 'Birth of Mary' is perhaps more useful, but this text is far more than a simple birth-story of Mary, since it tells of events down to the early years of Mary's own motherhood. So one is left with the conventional title, the *Protevangelium of James*, as the accepted way to describe this text.

It is sometimes suggested that a fundamental difference between canonical and non-canonical gospels is that whereas the former enjoyed widespread circulation throughout the early church, the latter were read only in small isolationist conventicles that were themselves representative of aberrant forms of Christianity. Not only is such an understanding historical anachronistic, retrojecting the fourth century structure of a dominant orthodoxy into the second century when there were multiple expressions of Christianity struggling to define beliefs, but it is just plain wrong in representing the use of at least some of the non-canonical gospels as being highly limited. The *Protevangelium of James* was a particularly widely read document in many branches of Christianity. Based on the evidence of surviving manuscripts the wide circulation of this document is amply attested. To date more than 140 Greek manuscripts have been catalogued. The text is also witnessed in numerous translational versions including Sahidic Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Slavonic and Arabic. In fact the Arabic text may have influenced Qu'ranic and later Islamic understandings of the place of Mary in the Christian tradition.

The lack of a complete surviving Latin manuscript may initially seem odd, but a number of factors account for this. It is almost certain that the *Protevangelium of*

James did exist at some stage in Latin translation. Some Latin fragments of similar traditions have been identified as the remains of a manuscripts of this text (although this is contested), but more importantly the fact that it was known to the compiler of the Gelasian decree also strongly suggests the existence of a Latin version. The decree written no earlier than the fifth-century, contains lists of accepted and rejected writings, among which is listed in the apocryphal category and hence to be rejected is a work described as the ‘book of the nativity of the saviour and of Mary or the midwife.’ This description aligns closely with the contents of the *Protevangelium of James*. Consequently there is good reason to suspect the same text is being described. Given the probable existence of this text in Latin its disappearance can be attributed to two factors. First, much of its content seem to have been absorbed into larger expanded versions of infancy and childhood compilations of stories such as *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, *The Life of Joseph the Carpenter* and *The Gospel of the Birth of Mary*. Yet a more fundamental reason for the loss of the Latin textual tradition was because in the Western Church the text was deemed to be suspect because of its teaching about Joseph’s first marriage. As certain sections of the Church became fixated on virginity as a spiritual discipline and a purer state of being, not only was it necessary to present Mary as a perpetual virgin – a key concern of the *Protevangelium* – but the perpetual virginity of Joseph was also asserted. Since the storyline of the *Protevangelium* presented Joseph as an elderly widower with surviving children, this text became highly problematic in the Latin Church. However, within the Orthodox tradition the perpetual virginity of Joseph did not feature as a doctrinal concern. Consequently the text circulation widely and shaped orthodox beliefs as is attested by the wealth of surviving manuscripts.

Outline of the text

The text, in its current form, can be divided into three major sections which relate to separate though related phases in the life of Mary, coupled with a brief epilogue giving details of pseudonymous author.

SECTION	OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS
1.1-8.2	Mary’s conception, birth and events until her adolescence
8.3-16.8	‘Marriage’ to Joseph, pregnancy, and preservation of virginity
17.1-24.14	Journey to Bethlehem, birth of Jesus, violent events
25.1-4	Epilogue: putative author and circumstances of composition

It is only in the third section that the text overlaps with the versions of the nativity and infancy stories found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The material in the first two sections of the *Protevangelium of James* is a mix of legendary details and pious theologizing. There is little in this text that can be seen as describing historically the actual events it purports to report. Instead its historical value arises from the way it provides a reflection of the religious and social context which enabled such a text to be written, read and circulated. Its concerns surrounding the cult of virginity, the attitude that incredible miracles commended rather than hindered belief, and the devotion to Mary are all in accord with the wider tastes of many Christians from the late second-century onwards.

The Value of the Infancy Gospels

Both the *Protevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* are highly fictionalized accounts of stories relating to the birth, childhood, or ancestry of Jesus. Yet the value of these texts does not arise from the historicity of the events they

purport to describe. Instead these two writings, which are the earliest examples of this sub-genre of apocryphal writings, are a window onto a vibrant and diverse world of early Christianity. The way these fanciful narratives are told is both ponderous and wondrous. At times these stories become grindingly tedious, yet at other times they present flashes of theological insight. The bizarre, the pious, and the profound sit alongside each other in these highly creative texts. The theological purpose of the author of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* in creating such a maverick and fearful representation of the boy Jesus remains a mystery. By contrast, the aims of the author of the *Protevangelium of James* are generally transparent, especially when read against the backdrop of emergent Marian piety. While the historian who correctly recognizes the fictionalized portrayal of the circumstances of Mary's birth, may remain unpersuaded by claims of her immaculate conception, and baulk at the pious devices to circumvent the clear meaning of references to brothers and sisters of Jesus in the canonical gospels by casting them as step-siblings, and moreover perhaps scoff at the incredulous verification of Mary's virginal state after the birth of Jesus, this does not make the texts worthless. Despite the dubious value of the historicity of the events these texts claim to record, nonetheless, they can still be appreciated as invaluable witnesses to the social and theological history of pious believers in the centuries following the life of Jesus.

The Gospel of Peter

The text has a number of theological and authorial purposes, most of which revolve around strengthening the faith of the pious.

- 1. Shifting blame for the crucifixion from Roman authorities to Jewish figures.
- 2. Producing a Christology that aligns with the author's elevated understanding of Jesus.
- 3. Heightening miraculous elements as a means of commending belief.
- 4. Resolving theologically problematic features in the canonical form of the Passion narratives.
- 5. Creating a form of the tradition that is more robust for apologetic purposes.
- 6. Filling gaps in the narrative to satisfy the curiosity of the pious.
- 7. Producing a stylistically more developed text with greater points of narrative tension.

Contents

The text of the *Gospel of Peter* begins as it ends in the middle of a broken sentence. Modern scholars have divided it into fourteen chapters (with a further sub-division into sixty verses). This helpfully enables the discussion of individual scenes. The first partially preserved scene would appear to follow on from a detail found only in Matthew's Gospel – the moment when Pilate famously washes his hands and declares 'I am innocent of this man's blood' (Matt 27.24). The first surviving line of the text of the *Gospel of Peter* states 'but of the Jews no-one washed the hands, nor Herod, nor one of his judges. And when they were not willing to wash, Pilate rose up' (*Gos. Pet.* 1.1). This expansion of the canonical tradition, presents the behaviour of the Jewish authority figures as being in contrast with that of Pilate, who rises up in protest against the miscarriage of justice that he is viewing. Next Joseph enters the scene. Although he is not named explicitly as the Joseph of Arimathea known from the accounts of Matthew, Luke and John, there can be little doubt that the same figure is intended, since he undertakes the same task of requesting the body of Jesus from Pilate. However, unlike the sequence of the canonical narratives this request is made

prior to the crucifixion rather than afterwards. Presumably this is just a stylistic alteration which makes space for the additional details the author of the *Gospel of Peter* introduces to the post-crucifixion storyline. In chapter three, a description of the pre-crucifixion mockery takes place. Not only is this more brutal than that of the canonical gospels, but it is carried out by the Jewish mob acting at the behest of Herod Antipas rather than by Roman soldiers acting in accordance with Pilate's orders. Thus a controlled Roman execution is transformed into a brutal act of mob violence. This is carried out under the direction of Herod Antipas. The effect is to shift the blame away from the Romans and to implicate 'Jews' more fully in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Chapter four commences the crucifixion scene proper. Interestingly the title on the cross is not 'This is the King of the Jews' (Lk 23.58), but is subtly altered to 'This is the King of Israel' (*Gos. Pet.* 4.11). Whereas the term 'Jew' had become pejorative, early Christians wished to claim the heritage of historic Israel as their own. The same tendency was found in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, where the supposed author describes himself as 'Thomas the Israelite' (*Inf. Gos. Thom.* 1.1). This section of the *Gospel of Peter* also shows its dependence on Luke's account by retelling the story of the penitent thief which among the canonical gospels only occurs in Luke. However, the *Gospel of Peter* piously deletes the reference to one of the two criminals reviling Jesus. Thus a more reverential attitude towards protecting the status of Jesus is to be detected. In the ensuing description of the crucifixion accompanying miracles become more fabulous and the apocalyptic portents are more vivid. The darkness that descends is coupled with a description of people stumbling around with lamps. The earthquake which occurs at the point of Jesus' death recorded in Matt 27.51, takes place in the *Gospel of Peter* precisely at the moment when the sacred body of Jesus is taken down and laid on the ground. The earth itself convulses upon coming into contact with this corpse. No thoroughgoing docetic theology would view the dead shell of the divine Logos in such reverential terms.

The remainder of the account relates post-crucifixion events. Bemused and trembling onlookers, cowering disciples and devious Jewish officials pepper the narrative. The story of the guard at the tomb is greatly developed in comparison to the version in Matthew's account. Contrasting with that shorter version, in the *Gospel of Peter* the Jewish authorities anticipate the possibility of the disciples stealing the body prior to the resurrection. Proactive action is taken. Pilate is approached for a detachment of guards to secure the site. A huge stone is rolled in place to block the entrance, seven seals are affixed, and a tent is pitched so that round-the-clock surveillance can take place. The extraordinary anticipatory security is obviously a mythical feature of this story which simultaneously rebuts claims that the disciples could have snatched the body, but also shows only divine intervention would be able to breach such defences. The emphasis placed on these features reveals that the text had the apologetic purpose to nullifying the suggestion that disciples came to an unguarded tomb, took the body, and consequently created a resurrection myth. Thus, the *Gospel of Peter* tells the story in such a way as to undercut such an argument.

In a story full of miraculous interference and written for those who know the outline of the canonical accounts the events of the resurrection are not unanticipated. However, they have certainly become more fantastic. Trembling soldiers, descending angels, a self-animated stone, enlarged bodies, and a walking and talking cross – liberties are definitely taken with more primitive form of the story. Yet this probably illustrates the attitudes of those who used the canonical texts to such traditions. The text was a resource for theological reflection, not a fixed and invariable entity – at

least for the author of the *Gospel of Peter* and he certainly was not alone in this attitude. Other texts from this period exhibit a similar tendency.

The last sections of the text concludes with a declaration from Pilate that he is 'clean from the blood of the Son of God' (*Gos. Pet.* 11.46). This proclamation of innocence not only absolves Pilate, but has the purpose of shifting the blood-guilt for the death of Jesus squarely onto the Jewish people. However, out of fear of the crowds the leaders reason that 'it is better for us to make ourselves guilty of the greatest sin before God than to fall into the hands of the people of the Jews and be stoned' (*Gos. Pet.* 11.48). While such tendencies are understandable historically as Christians sought to define their own identity in at times what was bitter opposition to Jewish rivals, the consequences of such a 'blame-game' theology has resulted in some of the most reprehensible acts of anti-Jewish persecution by Christians. Obviously the *Gospel of Peter* is not solely or even primarily responsible for this. It does, however, represent an early expression of the anti-Jewish attitude which was to flower into the bitter fruit of medieval pogroms against Jews and even shaped the thinking that could lead to supposed Christians turning a blind-eye or even worse during the events of the holocaust.

The narrative continues before it breaks off with a number of post-resurrection events. First the story from Mark's gospel of the visit of the women to the tomb is followed in quite close detail – although there are embellishments. Finally the story commences a story of Simon Peter and Andrew fishing beside the sea, perplexed and uncertain what to do after Jesus' death. Here it appears that a story similar to that contained in the final chapter of John's gospel will be recounted. Yet, unless somebody unearths another manuscript of this fascinating text this may remain a supposition – admittedly a highly plausible one, but a supposition nonetheless.

The Non-Canonical Gospels and the Historical Jesus

Conspiracy theorists seem to adore the non-canonical gospels. They are employed to support the suggestion that the image of the true Jesus has been suppressed, buried under layers of ecclesiastical constructs that domesticate the revolutionary message of the teacher from Nazareth. It is true that by comparison the canonical accounts present a relatively tame picture of Jesus, who is best understood within a first-century Jewish context. Perhaps it is because the canonical gospels present a Jesus whose teaching and life is tightly linked to a specific historical setting that in some ways these texts have become less attractive to post-modern tastes. By contrast, the non-canonical accounts are often free from the limitation of historical context and their esoteric teachings are ambiguous enough to be interpreted in multiple ways. Yet even if the utility of the ideas in non-canonical gospels is more appealing for those pursuing contemporary spiritualities, this does not make their portrait of Jesus more authentically historical. If Jesus, the first-century Galilean, has become irrelevant to modern minds, he cannot be reclaimed by privileging historically dubious representations of him. Bad history does not make for good faith. It needs to be acknowledged that most of the non-canonical texts appear either to derive in various ways from the four gospels of the New Testament, or they seem to be the products of speculative and visionary theological schools that flourished between the second and fourth centuries.

This is not to say that no material in the non-canonical gospels has any claim of originating with the historical Jesus. Rather expectations should be limited. As has

been discussed, the *Gospel of Thomas* is the most likely source of extra-biblical authentic Jesus tradition being preserved among the non-canonical gospels. Some forms of sayings which parallel canonical versions actually appear more primitive and consequently raise the possibility that they retain a form of wording closer to what was actually spoken by Jesus. Again there is still a huge gap between what is recorded and what Jesus may actually have said. The *Gospel of Thomas*, at least in the fullest form it is preserved, is written in Coptic. This is likely to be a translation of a Greek version, evidenced by the fragments discovered at Oxyrhynchus. Jesus himself almost certainly gave his teaching in Aramaic. So even if the *Gospel of Thomas* does preserve the wording of a saying closer to that uttered by the historical Jesus than a version preserved in the New Testament, this is still perhaps two stages of translation removed from Jesus' actual spoken words. Where the *Gospel of Thomas* may provide more interesting data is when it presents otherwise unattested sayings that have a degree of probability of originating with Jesus. In reality most scholars who even entertain this possibility would place only a small selection of sayings from *Thomas* in this category.

Belief that the non-canonical gospels offer the possibility of repristinating early Christianity is just that – a belief! When the material contained in these texts is analyzed from a thoroughgoing historical perspective, the vast majority of sayings and narratives are seen to stem from the period subsequent to the New Testament and thus have lesser claim than the canonical gospels to be accurate portraits of the historical Jesus. Does this then mean that the study of non-canonical gospels is a fruitless endeavour? Hopefully not, but it needs to be recognized that their value lies elsewhere.

What is the Value of the Non-Canonical Gospels?

Hopefully by now it will be recognized that texts can have multiple layers of historical contexts. A modern historical novel, set in Tudor England say, may wish to transport readers back to that period and help them to experience the authentic feel of Elizabethan England. Attention may be given to dress, diet and even details of the station and influence of major figures. Yet often to connect with a modern readership contemporary concerns must be projected back on to ancient characters. Thus the psychological, relational and financial concerns they express can have a very modern feel, which while resonating with twenty-first century readers would nonetheless actually be foreign to the purported context.

The same is true with the majority of non-canonical gospels. They reflect the concerns of their world more closely than the world of the first-century Jesus. Yet for the historian of ancient Christianity this is itself an extremely important window onto the piety, practices and beliefs of diverse groups of Christians in the second and third centuries – and beyond. For example the *Gospel of Peter* shifts the blame for the crucifixion heavily onto the Jews and seeks to absolve the Roman authorities. This does not mean that its storyline accurately represents the first-century historical reality. However, it is vitally important to understand that at least by the end of the second-century early Christians were downplaying Roman involvement, perhaps to remove the offence of Jesus having been crucified by imperial authority, and simultaneously allowing Christians to scapegoat one of the groups that most fiercely disputed claims of Jesus' messiahship and divinity.

Non-canonical gospels are also a powerful witness to the diversity of early Christianity itself. It has long been recognized that 'the winners write history.' Even within Christianity there have been victors and those whose perspectives have been

defeated and rejected. Regardless of whether this is piously seen as being due to divine providence, or rather more pragmatically as being due to the vagaries of history, it remains the case that what emerged as 'orthodox' Christianity was able to produce the narrative of the history of the church. In so doing, it either neglected competing understandings of the faith, or represented these as heretical and deviant. More than anything else, what the non-canonical gospels permit is the opportunity to hear once again those voices from the margins. By reading these texts it is possible to enter the thought-world of various mystical and experiential forms of Christianity. The discovery of such texts has rescued long lost voices and in the process enlarged the understanding of the diversity and variety of early Christianity.