

The
Extra
Gospels

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Introduction

The trigger for doing the research for this short book was similar to that which led me to think about *Priestcraft and Magic*, having arrived at a church with a very ‘high’ ritual practice to which I was not accustomed. It was the words that the celebrant used in the eucharistic prayer: ‘Blessed Mary ever virgin’.

I knew that the New Testament referred to the four brothers of Jesus (and some sisters too), and that the apparent leader of the early church in Jerusalem was James, ‘the brother of Jesus’. In any case, even if these were step-brothers, children of Joseph but not of Mary, surely no one who has given birth to a baby can hardly continue to have an intact hymen and vagina?

So, I asked myself, how could anyone believe that a mother could be called ‘ever virgin’? Where was the evidence for this? So I began my research into

the kind of documents where such beliefs might originate.

These books go by various names: one is ‘the apocrypha’ which means ‘hidden’, and the other is ‘pseudepigrapha’ which means ‘false writings’. These books appeared in the first three or four centuries of the church’s history. What they all have in common is the name of the supposed author being an important figure from the New Testament. In other words they claim to have been written by Peter, or James, or Thomas, or some other figure mentioned in the New Testament. This claim of origin can be shown to be fiction by the very date of their writing, long after the claimed author had died. So if the authorship claim is fiction, what about the contents? Are they fiction too?

This is the central question that I hope to provide the material in which an answer might be found. It is a large and complex topic, and what you find here will be no more than a brief introduction. If it helps

to stimulate a desire for further more detailed research, I will have achieved my aim.

I was searching for a good title before starting this writing. Apocrypha and, even more so Pseudepigrapha, seemed much too cumbersome. Then came to mind ‘The Counterfeit Gospels’. But that title would assume a verdict which would suggest a very closed mind. These ‘*extra gospels*’ may contain both useful insights and actual events. In many ways this is the real question here. Do they? So I have opted for what seems to be the most neutral title. Let readers of what follows make up their own minds.

Note: to avoid constant repetition: all dates (unless shown otherwise) should be taken to refer to the common era (CE or AD depending on what you prefer).

The Canon

By definition the 'extra gospels' stand outside the canon of the New Testament. It took the early church leaders quite a while to decide which books that were circulating amongst them were to be relied on as authoritative. The test (canon means a measure by which something can be determined) was apostolic approval or authorship. As regards the canonical gospels, both Matthew and John were themselves apostles; Mark was deemed to be writing with the support of Peter, as a record of Peter's recollections; and Luke was the friend and companion of Paul, and so Paul's approval was sufficient. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, wrote that four was the correct number of gospels around the year 180. Other early church leaders gave various lists of books they considered authoritative, and by and large there was a consensus that the 27 books we have in our New Testament today were the ones that could be relied on, and therefore should be read aloud in church services. The compilation of the canon is in itself an important topic, and it could fill

a book on its own. But my wish is to concentrate on the extra-canonical gospels, those not included in the canon. Many of these may be found in translation: if you search the internet you will find hardcopy editions to purchase of 'The Other Gospels'. What you will find here is a summary of each, rather than the full text. This may prompt you to make a deeper study.

I do possess a hardcopy book, bought in a second-hand bookshop, which is a bit battered. The title page is itself quite an imposing read. In various sizes, all upper case, it goes as follows: *The Suppressed Gospels and Epistles of the Original New Testament of Jesus Christ, and Other Portions of the Ancient Holy Scriptures, now extant, attributed to His Apostles and their Disciples, and venerated by the primitive Christian Churches during the first four centuries, but since, after violent disputations, forbidden by the Bishops of the Nicene Council, in the reign of the Emperor Constantine, and omitted from the Catholic and*

Protestant editions of the New Testament by its compilers. Translated from the original tongues with historical references to their authenticity, by Archbishop Wake, and other learned divines.

The date of this magnificent book is given as MDCCCLXIII, which I hope I correctly understand to be 1863.

Given that copyright on the translations will have expired, I will cite it from time to time, using italic script to indicate this. Other citations will be culled from the internet, indicating their sources. There are a number of pseudo-gospels that are not included in Wake's collection.

The title uses informative words: extant, attributed, venerated, and forbidden. In many ways these four words sum up what we are looking at. There are gaps in what has survived to the present day; these works are only on the surface written by the supposed author; these works were in

circulation and actually used by the early churches occasionally and locally; they were eventually dismissed as not to be used to establish true Christian doctrine.

The order of the chapters that follow is partly chronological and partly thematic. I will start at the middle of the second century.

Marcion

Marcion was the son of a Christian bishop and originated from Sinope, in the Roman province of Pontus, a port on the north coast of the country that is now Turkey. Nearly all the details of his life and activity are gleaned from what was written about him by Christian opponents some time after his death, which came about the year 160.

The Gospel of Marcion does not exist in any extant form, apart from small fragments, but can be reconstructed from what was said by his opponents, mainly Tertullian. It is essentially a version of the Gospel of Luke, with various passages (especially the first two chapters which contain the nativity narratives) left out, and some parts that were included edited to add the Marcionite view point.

Marcion also published his own canon of what were reliable apostolic writings, which focused on the Gospel he produced, claiming its true author was the apostle Paul, and the ten earliest letters of

Paul, in other words omitting Paul's pastoral letters (to Timothy and Titus). Marcion also made minor modifications to the ten letters he approved of. He would accept no other writings than these.

The church's response to Marcion, who by now was preaching in Rome, and was attracting a significant following of people who shared his views, in 144 was to excommunicate him. This did not deter him very much, as he returned to his birth area and built up many congregations of followers. Some of these congregations remained active for a few centuries. So Marcionite teachings and all the differing presumptions behind his gospel remained a threat for the orthodox understanding of Christianity for quite a while.

His main difference of teaching was about the God represented by the books of the Old Testament. He regarded YHWH as a lesser being, a demiurge, seemingly because of the possibility of seeing a contrast between the severe actions of YHWH and

the God of love Jesus taught about. Marcion also held the view that Jesus was not truly human, but only an illusion; the view called ‘docetist’, from the Greek for ‘it seems’. These two ideas (a lesser god and docetism) are central to the philosophical stance we call ‘gnosticism’. This word comes from the Greek word for knowledge: *gnosis*. I will look much more deeply into this in the next chapter.

Marcion essentially wanted to create a version of Christianity that made a complete break with the God of the Old Testament. He also took a view of the incarnation that went against the main stream of Christian theology in the second century. Trinitarian doctrine had yet to be formally defined (as it was at the Council of Nicaea, which was called by the Emperor Constantine in 325), but already most Christians were sure that Jesus was both truly divine and truly human.

This is but an introduction to a topic which can be looked at in much more detail. There is a modern

reconstruction of the Marcionite Bible at this
location:

marcionite-scripture.info/Marcionite_Bible.htm.

Gnosticism

Before we look at our next ‘extra’ gospel we need to review the philosophical stance that goes under the name I have chosen for this chapter. Ancient philosophy, right back to Plato five centuries B.C., began to ask questions like ‘how do we know anything?’; ‘what is stuff made of?’; ‘what is real?’. To illustrate this sort of problem Plato told the story of a cave: in it were people trapped and secured so that they could only face forwards; behind them was a light; between the light and them were objects, whose shadows were cast on to the wall in front of them; so their reality consisted entirely of shadows; only the objects behind them were real; but all this was in a cave, and outside the cave was another level of reality: everything in bright sunshine.

Plato was raising the question: what is real and what is mere illusion? And this is where gnosticism comes in, with the answer that all physical matter is an illusion, and that only spiritual realities are what matters. If you check out the definition given in

Wikipedia you will find these statements of gnostic belief: all matter is evil, and the non-material spirit-realm is good; there is an unknowable God who gave rise to lesser spirit beings called Aeons; the creator of the (material) universe is not the supreme god, but an inferior spirit (the Demiurge); Gnosticism does not deal with “sin,” only ignorance; to achieve salvation, one needs *gnosis* (knowledge).

All of these beliefs can be contrasted with Christian beliefs: matter is what God made, and He called it good; the God of the Old and New Testaments is the Creator of everything, and is the only God. This God offers salvation as eternal life, whereas the gnostic view of salvation is escape from life, in much the same way as is taught in Buddhism.

For a deeper understanding of all this I recommend a full reading of the Wikipedia article. You could also look up the site called The Gnosis

Archive (gnosis.org), where you find a great deal of material. Much of what follows here uses the resources available from this site. The impetus for a lot of modern thinking about gnosticism has come from the discovery in 1945 of ancient codices at a place in upper Egypt called Nag Hammadi. This is particularly true of the ‘extra’ gospel which we will look at in the next chapter: that alleged to have been written by Thomas.

One important and very useful part of the gnosis.org site is a section entitled ‘The Gnostic Catechism’. It uses question and answer format to summarise what modern gnostics believe. I cite several sections from this document in the hope of giving a good summary of what gnosticism is. All citations that follow may be found from: <http://gnosis.org/ecclesia/catechism.htm>.

59. What is Gnosis?

Gnosis is the revelatory and salvific knowledge of

who we were, of what we have become, of where we were, of wherein we have been thrown, of whereto we are hastening, of what we are being freed, of what birth really is, and of what rebirth really is. This is an ancient definition which is still accurate.

62. How is Human Gnosis acquired?

Primarily by way of the study and assimilation of the teachings of the Messengers of Light and of the seers and sages of the Gnostic tradition and by way of the amplification of these by individual insight.

66. Who was the latest great revealer of Gnosis?

It was the Lord Jesus Christ, who acted both as the rectifier of the existing tradition of Gnosis and as the revealer of new elements of Gnosis.

The most revealing part (I found) was the section (Lesson Five) about Jesus Christ. I will quote only a small part, and recommend a full reading of this section, and possibly the whole catechism, to appreciate the extent to which gnosticism departs from traditional Christianity.

73. *Who is the Lord Christ?*

He is one of the High Aeons of the Fullness (PLEROMA); being the articulated thought (LOGOS) of God and the expression of God's redemptive power (SOTERIA), for which latter reason He is also called the Savior (SOTER).

78. *Did Jesus save humankind by His physical death on the Cross?*

No. His physical death was merely a tragic incident in the sublime drama of His life.

From these few short extracts one can now recognise the gnostic elements that come through very clearly in the gnostic gospels. One can also understand why the bishops of the Nicene Council rejected them.

Thomas

Without the Nag Hammadi discoveries we would know very little about the Gospel of Thomas. Hippolytus of Rome wrote about it (c. 222-235) in his 'Refutation of Heresies', and Origen (c. 223) included it in a list of apocryphal gospels known by him. In the 4th century Cyril of Jerusalem wrote: 'let none read the Gospel according to Thomas, for it is the work not of one of the twelve apostles but of one of the three wicked disciples of Manes.'

Although called a gospel, it is not like any of the canonical gospels in that it is simply a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus (114 in all), with no actual narrative. Almost half of these correspond to sayings included in the four canonical gospels, though sometimes with significant variation. The others are found only in Thomas. The opening states: 'these are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the twin wrote them down.' By saying that these are 'hidden' sayings, the author is already assigning the work to

‘apocrypha’.

What we have today is the codex discovered in 1945, which is in Coptic (the local language in use in Egypt in the early centuries of this era). Some scholars believe that the Coptic version was itself a translation of a Syriac original.

The verdict given by Professor N. T. Wright in his ‘The New Testament and the People of God’ reads as follows: “Thomas’ implicit story has to do with a figure who imparts a secret, hidden wisdom to those close to him, so that they can perceive a new truth and be saved by it. . . . The Thomas Christians are told the truth about their divine origins, and given secret passwords that will prove effective in the return journey to their heavenly home. . . . Thomas reflects a symbolic universe, and a worldview, which are radically different from those of the early Judaism and Christianity.”

The Gnostic Society Library (gnosis.org) includes

five different translations of the Gospel of Thomas,
for those who wish to read the text for themselves.

Philip

Also in the 1945 Nag Hammadi find was the codex of the Gospel of Philip, although the claim for Philip as the author is only via a codicil at the end of the text. Philip is the only named follower in the gospel.

The gospel reveals itself as gnostic in many ways, especially in the use of gnostic terms such as Aeon and Pleroma (fullness). But what has attracted attention is the way it refers to Mary Magdalene. Modern fiction (Da Vinci Code) has latched on to this. Here (from the gnosis.org translation) we read: ‘Three Marys walked with the lord: his mother, his sister and Mary of Magdala, his companion. The companion is Mary of Magdala. Jesus loved her more than his students. He kissed her often on her face.’

There has been much discussion about what meaning should be attached to the word used in this gospel ‘companion’. Could it be translated ‘wife’?

The gospel refers to marriage generally many times, referring to it as a mystery, and that the world depends on it. The expression ‘bridal chamber’ comes repeatedly.

Obviously it is pure speculation whether this portrait of Jesus’ relationship with Mary Magdalene was intended by the author to convey actual marriage. Many scholars reject this. It is equally a matter of pure imagination to come to the conclusion that this supposed marriage actually took place.

As an addendum to this chapter we note that the Nag Hammadi find included one more codex with the title of gospel: that called ‘the Gospel of Truth’. This was also known to Irenaeus of Lyons, and rejected as heresy, But its format is not really a gospel, but rather a sermon full of exhortations.. I will not therefore add more analysis for that reason.

A further find worth mentioning did not have the

title 'gospel', but rather it was called 'the secret book (apocryphon) of James'. Rather like the Gospel of Thomas, it consists of sayings of Jesus.

Judas

The Gospel of Judas is known to us from a codex discovered in the 1970s in Egypt. A translation from the Coptic, which is thought to be a translation from an original in Greek, has been published by the National Geographic, and I have been able to borrow a copy of this book from my local library.

Scholars agree that the theology behind the gospel is thoroughly gnostic, and date it as late second century. It contains few narrative passages, and consists mainly of the teaching given by Jesus to Judas, alleging that Judas alone of the twelve disciples has the right level of capacity to receive these teachings. These special teachings are about the meaning of the cosmos, with Jesus being represented as a teacher and revealer of wisdom, rather than a saviour who dies to save people from their sins.

The gospel also represent Judas as a hero rather than a villain. It claims that Jesus actually asks

Judas to betray him to the authorities. These notes here are intended simply to prepare expectations if you wish to study the gospel further. Because it is so obviously not likely to have much value as a source of useful information to add to the canonical gospels, I will keep this chapter quite short.

Mary (Magdalene)

There is a gnostic gospel attributed to Mary (using that name on its own, but with every indication that this is Mary of Magdala). It is very fragmentary, with an initial six pages missing and other gaps in the middle. It exists in two instances, a papyrus from the 3rd century and another one being a translation of the original into Coptic.

In what is available of the text we are taken to conversations between the risen Lord Jesus, before His ascension, and His followers, including Mary. Jesus commands the apostles to go and preach the gospel to the Gentiles. The text suggests that the apostles are fearful to do this, dreading a similar outcome as befell Jesus, and then Mary encourages them to do so in spite of their fears.

She reveals that Jesus has privately given her teachings in a vision. These are typical gnostic teachings, about the human soul, its difficulties in achieving true spirit inspired knowledge that will

lead to the gnostic fulfilment of escape to the eternal resting place of heaven.

This leads to further arguments between Mary and Peter and the others. Then Levi encourages them to accept that Jesus preferred Mary to themselves, and declares that they should go and preach this gospel.

All this suggests that the context of these writings was questions about the true nature of the gospel, and the possibility that true leadership was female rather than male. From this small set of fragments we gain a useful insight into some of the disputes that would have been going on in different locations of Christian communities in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

Mark

We know about the ‘Secret Gospel of Mark’ only from a reference to it in a letter written by Clement of Alexandria. In this letter two passages are quoted, with an indication of where in the accepted version of the canonical Gospel of Mark they should be inserted. The conclusion is that there existed an expanded version of the original Mark, but we do not know what else might have been included.

The shorter passage contains nothing at all remarkable, except a reference to Salome, and an expansion of detail about the trip to Jericho made by Jesus (to be added in the middle of verse 46 of Mark chapter 10).

But the longer passage is worth citing in full (from the translation made by Morton Smith):

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 straightaway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near, Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightaway, 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.

This is taken by scholars to be a Markan version of the raising of Lazarus, given in much more detail

by John in chapter 11 of his gospel. There has been noted what may be a gnostic viewpoint in the reference to Jesus teaching about the ‘mystery’ of the Kingdom of God. The passage is to be placed between Mark 10:34 and 10:35.

Scholars have commented that there is such a vast difference of writing style and content that this passage is not dependent on the John account, but an independent version of the same event. It is commonly accepted that there would have been many collections of accounts of events in the life span of Jesus that were never included in any of the canonical gospels, and obviously this is one of them.

Peter

The ‘Gospel of Peter’ is in many ways similar to the Secret Gospel of Mark. It contains a narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus and His resurrection that seems to borrow a great deal from the canonical gospels. The gnostic influence is not huge but can be noted in several instances.

Jesus is recorded, when the nails were being driven in, as ‘keeping silent as one feeling no pain.’ The gnostic take on the humanity of Jesus is that He was not truly human, but only appeared to be so (the view called docetism). In a similar way Jesus’ death is described as Him ‘being taken up’, as though (to use the words of F. F. Bruce in his ‘Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament’) “he – or at least his soul or spiritual self – was ‘assumed’ direct from the cross to the presence of God. . . . Then the cry of dereliction is reproduced in a form which suggests that, at that moment, his divine power left the bodily shell in which it had taken up temporary residence.”

The other main difference is the way in which Pilate is totally exonerated from responsibility in the condemnation of Jesus, the blame now falling on both Herod Antipas, and – even more completely – on the chief priests and scribes of the Jews.

Thus it is possible to draw the conclusion that the Gospel of Peter is a use of all the canonical material with additions and variations to create a more docetist and anti-Jewish account. It was sufficiently widely circulated to have been mentioned by writers at the end of the 2nd century.

Little Known

I will use this chapter to refer to ‘gospels’ that we know of only through references to them by early Christian writers, but, apart from the discoveries made at Nag Hammadi, with no actual fragments yet discovered. One such is called the ‘gospel of the Egyptians’. It is known to exist through quotations of it made by Clement, Hippolytus and Epiphanius. It appears to have been written to promote various doctrines embraced by gnostics, such as the rejection of marriage, elimination of sexual differences, and sexual asceticism.

Irenaeus refers to a ‘gospel of truth’, noting that it differs substantially from the canonical gospels. A similar ‘gospel of the twelve’ is known about through reference to it by Origen and other early writers, even as late as Bede of Jarrow.

Jerome, who made the first complete translation of the New Testament into Latin refers to a ‘gospel of the Hebrews’, which was written in Aramaic, and

which Jerome translated into Greek and Latin. There are some quotations from it made by Clement and Origen. Given the obvious value placed on it by Jerome, it is a shame we know so little of what it contained.

Another gospel referred to by many early writers and even included in lists of gospels as late as the 7th century is the ‘gospel of Matthias’. We know nothing of its contents. Another text is known only by its quotations from Clement, called the ‘traditions of Matthias’.

Similarly we could include the ‘gospel of Basilides’ which has critical citations from Clement, Origen, and Irenaeus. Basilides taught in Alexandria during the reign of Hadrian (117-138).

It is worth noting that to use the word ‘gospel’ in the title of some of these early writing is misleading. Some are not truly narrative but rather a list of sayings and exhortations, attributed to Jesus

to give them extra authority, but really intended to expound a particular theological stance. And very often the quotations of them made by early church leaders were solely for the purpose of declaring them false doctrines. This helps us understand better the tensions in the early church, where before the arrival of Constantine persecution made many Christians groups isolated, and the need Constantine had to summon bishops from all over his newly won empire to meet in a central place (Nicaea) to determine a single set of agreed doctrines for all Christians to follow.

A further category of texts are exemplified by the ‘gospel of the Ebionites’ and the ‘gospel of the Nazoreans’. Both are selective compilations of the canonical gospels, with additional material, which these two groups of Christians were using. Both groups were largely composed of Jewish believers in Jesus as Messiah, and their aim in these gospels appears to address the very specific problems Jewish Christians had in aligning their newly found

faith with their much loved Jewish traditions.

Truth

I referred to a ‘gospel of truth’ in the previous chapter, saying that it was known only by references to it. In fact in the Nag Hammadi collection, discovered in 1945, there is a full text with the opening words:

The gospel of truth is joy for those who have received from the father of truth the grace of knowing him by the power of the word, who has come from the fullness and who is in the thought and the mind of the father.

Scholars vary in their opinions as to whether this is the same document that was mentioned above, or a completely different book.

The whole tenor of the book, which is expository rather than narrative, is that Jesus is the saviour by way of being the revealer of hidden truths, hidden mysteries.

I will add citations from just two parts, and you can read the whole text at: <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/got-barnstone.html>.

That is the gospel of him whom they seek, which he has revealed to the perfect through the mercies of the father as the hidden mystery, Jesus the anointed. Through him he enlightened those who were in darkness because of forgetfulness. He enlightened them and gave them a path. And that path is the truth that he taught them.

This is the manifestation of the father and his revelation to his eternal beings. He revealed what is hidden in him and explained it. For who is it who exists if it is not the father himself? All the spaces are his emanations.

These cited paragraphs have all the hallmarks of pure gnosticism in these key words: truth, fullness, hidden mystery, enlightened, manifestation,

revelation, eternal beings, emanations.

I recommend using the URL given above for a reading of the whole text, and then you will be able to draw your own conclusions.

Egyptians

In the ‘little known’ chapter I mentioned the ‘gospel of the Egyptians’ as being only known through references. But among the Nag Hammadi collection there is a text which begins as ‘the holy book of the Egyptians.’ This may be the same book as what some early church leaders called the ‘gospel of the Egyptians’. It is however not so much a gospel as a treatise on gnostic beliefs.

The name of Jesus occurs but three times in it, but the name Seth occurs 26 times, usually prefixed as ‘the great Seth’. Seth is also declared to have written the book.

It is clearly not a gospel about Jesus in the strict sense of the word, and so I will not give it much space here.

If you want to read a translation, you will be able find an online copy of this at <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gosegypt.html>. The website that contains this text has a full list of the Nag Hammadi finds at <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhlcodex.html>.

You will see in this list that there are many texts that are not described as gospels, and in order to be consistent with the title of this book, I will omit any consideration of those texts which do not include narrative accounts from the life of Jesus. Otherwise I might easily change the emphasis of this book into a full scale review of every gnostic text from ancient times.

Nicodemus

The ‘Gospel of Nicodemus’ is also known as the ‘Acts of Pilate’. A source for the whole book is <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelnicodemus.html>. And another online translation is at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob10.htm>.

It is a late work, possibly 3rd or even 4th century, and it contains an older text known as the ‘Acts of Peter and Paul’. This describes Pontius Pilate’s involvement in the trial and condemnation of Jesus. Appended to the gospel is what is alleged to have been the official report made by Pilate to the Roman emperor, Claudius. This is almost certainly a work of fiction.

The first section of the gospel, eleven chapters in all, is an expanded narrative of the trial before Pilate and the crucifixion of Jesus. Nicodemus is included in the narrative, addressing Pilate in support of Jesus. Others too are added, testifying to the miraculous healing they had received from Jesus.

Pilate then offers to release either Jesus or Barabbas, and, following the canonical gospels, Pilate's decision is recorded. The account of the crucifixion follows the canonical gospels closely, with a few additions, including a note about the eclipse of the sun and further details about the reaction of the Jewish leaders to both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, whom they imprison. Then follows an account of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, somewhat abbreviated when compared with the canonical gospels. The first section concludes, in chapter 11, with more narrative about Nicodemus and Joseph.

In the next section (beginning with chapter 12) the writer is straying very far from the canonical gospels. There is a starting connection to Matthew 27:52, which tells that at the very point of Jesus' death on the cross, tombs were opened and some dead people emerged living again. The names are given of two of them: Charinus (or Karinus) and Lenthius (or Leucius), who, it is claimed, are the

two sons of Simeon. Simeon, in Luke's gospel (2:25 ff), is the priest who recognised Jesus as the Messiah when He was brought as a baby to the temple by His parents. His two sons had apparently died by the time of Jesus' crucifixion, and so were in Hades. They claim they had been given three days after emerging from the tomb to deliver (in writing) their accounts of everything that had happened to them in Hades. They had met many prominent figures from the Old Testament and also mentioned Satan and 'the prince of hell'. Each had given a separate written account, which matched each other perfectly. Having done this they were 'changed into exceeding white forms and were seen no more'.

By all means read the whole section in one of the online translations noted above, but my view is that this is so obviously a work of imagination rather than authentic record that it is not worth a more detailed summary here.

One further detail of interest is that the gospel of Nicodemus gives us the name of the soldier who pierced Jesus with a spear as Longinus, and the two criminals who were crucified alongside Jesus are named as Dimas and Gestas. Dimas is reputed to be the penitent thief, and is venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

Mary

I turn now to the interest shown by the early church in Mary the mother of Jesus. This brings me also to many additional accounts about the hidden infancy years of our Lord.

The ‘Gospel of the Birth of Mary’ is found in the Latin works of Jerome, which gives us a good idea of where interest in this topic had reached by the 4th century. The full text may be read at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/lbob/lbob05.htm>. It opens very simply with:

THE blessed and ever glorious Virgin Mary, sprung from the royal race and family of David, was born in the city of Nazareth, and educated at Jerusalem, in the temple of the Lord. Her father's name was Joachim, and her mother's Anna. The family of her father was of Galilee and the city of Nazareth. The family of her mother was of Bethlehem.

Joachim and Anna had been childless for a long

time and had vowed that they would devote any child they had to the service of the Lord. They had suffered much reproach from their state of childlessness. Eventually Joachim is visited by an angel, and the angel promised that Anna will bring forth a daughter, who is to be called Mary. These words are then spoken by the angel:

She shall, according to your vow, be devoted to the Lord from her infancy, and be filled with the Holy Ghost from her mother's womb. She shall neither eat nor drink anything which is unclean, nor shall her conversation be without among the common people, but in the temple of the Lord; that so she may not fall under any slander or suspicion of what is bad. So in the process of her years, as she shall be in a miraculous manner born of one that was barren, so she shall, while yet a virgin, in a way unparalleled, bring forth the Son of the most High God, who shall, be called Jesus, and, according to the signification of his name, be the Saviour of all nations.

The angel also appeared to Anna, with a similar message, and further instructions about Mary's upbringing, that she should remain in her father's house for her first three years, then be sent to the temple, to remain there devoted to the service of the Lord, till she arrives at the years of discretion, at which time, still a virgin, she shall bring forth a son to be the Saviour of the world.

The gospel then describes her upbringing in the temple in Jerusalem, until she reached her fourteenth year, at which time according to the rules about virgins in the temple she would need to leave and be married. This meant that the high priest of the temple would need to find a man who was willing to take on this responsibility.

The selection process is described in some detail, and resulted in Joseph being selected, who is described as being of the house of David, far advanced in years, and not married. Joseph now returns to his own city Bethlehem to get things

ready for the marriage, while Mary leaves the temple to return to her parents' home in Galilee.

Next comes the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, more or less as told in Luke's gospel, promising the virgin birth of the Son of God.

Three months pass and Joseph goes from his home town in Judea to Galilee, to marry Mary. But Mary is now with child, and this is known by Joseph, so his initial reaction is quietly to break off the engagement. But an angel appeared to him in a dream, and, following the account in Matthew's gospel, explains how it is that Mary is pregnant and that Joseph should go ahead with the marriage. Joseph obeys the angel, marries Mary, and (to quote) 'did not know her but kept her in chastity'.

The gospel concludes:

And now the ninth month from her conception drew near, when Joseph took his wife and what

other things were necessary to Bethlehem, the city from whence he came. And it came to pass, while they were there, the days were fulfilled for her bringing forth. And she brought forth her first-born son, as the holy Evangelists have taught, even our Lord Jesus Christ, who with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, lives and reigns to everlasting ages.

It is clear that this gospel commanded a great deal of respect in the early church, even though it was not included in the canon. There is no obvious gnostic bias, or any other heretical tendency. Reference to the ‘holy Evangelists’ indicates that this gospel was written after the canonical four. The next chapter will also give a detailed account of the birth of Mary, believed to have been written in the middle of the 2nd century.

James

The ‘gospel of James’ is usually called the ‘protevangeli-um of James’, and the author is alleged as James the brother of Jesus. Given the date of the work this makes it another pseudepigraphon, in other words a work claiming an authorship that is not actually true. Its first mention comes from Origen of Alexandria in the early third century. His comment is that the work is of dubious recent appearance, and that, like the ‘gospel of Peter’, claims that the ‘brothers of the Lord’ were the sons of Joseph by a former marriage. Other later church leaders, including Pope Innocent I in 405, condemned it as inauthentic. The title of ‘protevangeli-um’ can be rendered as ‘pre-gospel’ or ‘infancy-gospel’, and in spite of several councils rejecting it as not reliable it remained very popular. This can be deduced from the number (150) of Greek manuscripts that have survived, and the many languages into which it was translated.

The protevangeli-um has three sections: the birth

of Mary to the apparently barren Anna, together with Mary's childhood and upbringing in the temple in Jerusalem; next when she is twelve, through the direction of an angel her betrothal to Joseph; finally the birth of Jesus and many subsequent events that are not found in the canonical gospels. Much of this material has already been related in the previous chapter, and so here will only be summarised the additional details. The whole text is at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm>.

An additional item in the account here of the birth of Mary is Anna's lament and the answer given by an angel. Also additionally is the statement of Joseph, when it became clear that he was the one chosen to be Mary's husband to care for Mary when she was to move from the temple: "I have children, and I am an old man, and she is a young girl."

Also included here is the visit of her kinswoman Elizabeth, as recorded in Luke. In a similar way there is an account of how, with Mary being six months pregnant, Joseph was perplexed, since he

had not had any carnal contact with her. Following Matthew's account, Joseph is told by an angel what to do. There follows now a long passage about the enquiries into how Mary has become no longer a virgin apparently, with Joseph saying firmly that she still is a virgin as far as he is concerned. Both Joseph and Mary are tested for honesty by the ordeal of water, and both passed the test.

In the last eight chapters (17-24) there is the greatest amount of new and interesting material. When Joseph has to obey the edict of the Roman Emperor Augustus for him to enrol his family in Bethlehem, there is another reference to the already existing sons of Joseph. He sets the heavily pregnant Mary on his ass for the journey, with a son leading it. As they approach Bethlehem Mary declares that her time has come, so they find a cave for the birth to happen in. Leaving his two sons to watch over Mary, Joseph sets off to find a midwife in the district of Bethlehem. As he makes this journey everything seems to come to a standstill:

birds, sheep, shepherds, and so on. Joseph finds a midwife and explains to her that Mary is about to bring forth a saviour who was conceived of the Holy Spirit. The next few sentences are worth quoting verbatim:

And the midwife said to him: Is this true? And Joseph said to her: Come and see. And the midwife went away with him. And they stood in the place of the cave, and behold a luminous cloud overshadowed the cave. And the midwife said: My soul has been magnified this day, because my eyes have seen strange things — because salvation has been brought forth to Israel. And immediately the cloud disappeared out of the cave, and a great light shone in the cave, so that the eyes could not bear it. And in a little that light gradually decreased, until the infant appeared, and went and took the breast from His mother Mary. And the midwife cried out, and said: This is a great day to me, because I have seen this strange sight. And the midwife went forth out of the cave, and Salome met her. And she said

to her: Salome, Salome, I have a strange sight to relate to you: a virgin has brought forth — a thing which her nature admits not of. Then said Salome: As the Lord my God lives, unless I thrust in my finger, and search the parts, I will not believe that a virgin has brought forth. And the midwife went in, and said to Mary: Show yourself; for no small controversy has arisen about you. And Salome put in her finger, and cried out, and said: Woe is me for mine iniquity and mine unbelief, because I have tempted the living God; and, behold, my hand is dropping off as if burned with fire. And she bent her knees before the Lord, saying: O God of my fathers, remember that I am the seed of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob; do not make a show of me to the sons of Israel, but restore me to the poor; for You know, O Lord, that in Your name I have performed my services, and that I have received my reward at Your hand. And, behold, an angel of the Lord stood by her, saying to her: Salome, Salome, the Lord has heard you. Put your hand to the infant, and carry it, and you will have safety and joy. And Salome went

and carried it, saying: I will worship Him, because a great King has been born to Israel. And, behold, Salome was immediately cured, and she went forth out of the cave justified. And behold a voice saying: Salome, Salome, tell not the strange things you have seen, until the child has come into Jerusalem.

The account now moves on to follow broadly that of Matthew, with the visit of the Magi. The difference is that the star moves to over the cave, but the gifts mentioned here, and the Magi going home without reporting to Herod, follows the account in Matthew. However it diverges when relating Herod's rage. Hearing that Herod has ordered all children under two years old to be killed, Mary hides Jesus in an ox-stall. In even more detail we have Elizabeth, on hearing that Herod was searching for her son John, trying to find a hiding place for them both, being taken care of by an angel opening a cleft in a mountain for them to hide in. But Herod, in a rage, orders John's father, Zechariah, to be murdered in the temple.

The gospel concludes:

And I James that wrote this history in Jerusalem, a commotion having arisen when Herod died, withdrew myself to the wilderness until the commotion in Jerusalem ceased, glorifying the Lord God, who had given me the gift and the wisdom to write this history. And grace shall be with them that fear our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory to ages of ages. Amen.

It will be up to each reader to determine how much of the ‘gospel of James’ is pious imagination, and how much can be relied upon as useful and factual.

Infancy (Matthew)

The text to look at next is an infancy gospel entitled Pseudo-Matthew. It is an edited version of the protevangelium of James, with additional material about the flight to Egypt to escape from Herod's plan to kill all the new-born boys in Bethlehem (see the canonical Matthew ch2 v13-23)

To avoid repetition, I will pass over the first 17 chapters, which have already been covered. You can follow, if you want to, the whole text in <http://www.gnosis.org/library/psudomat.htm>.

This 17th chapter concludes with:

Joseph was warned in his sleep by the angel of the Lord, who said to him: Take Mary and the child, and go into Egypt by the way of the desert. And Joseph went according to the saying of the angel.

From chapters 18 to 25 we have an account of

what the family did in Egypt, before being told by an angel that it was safe to return to the land of Judah.

What then follows is an edited version of another infancy gospel, that of Thomas, which I will summarise in the next chapter, concentrating here only on the Egyptian sequence of events.

The journey of the holy family begins with them reaching a cave. They have three boys and a girl in their company, as well as the suckling Jesus. Suddenly many dragons come out of the cave, and the children cry out with terror. But Jesus stands up before the dragons and they adore him. Jesus says to Joseph and Mary that they should not be afraid or think of him as a child for: *“I am and always have been perfect, and all the beasts of the forest must needs be tame before me.”*

The account continues by saying that lions and panthers kept walking with them, quite tamely,

never attacking any of the domesticated animals with them.

Next event is Mary being tired and resting under a palm tree, and wishing to eat some of its fruit. But the tree is too tall for Joseph to climb, so Jesus commands the branches of the tree to bend low down for them to eat of its fruit. The branches obey and the family is refreshed by eating its fruit. Jesus rewards the palm tree by getting an angel to take one of its branches up to heaven. Jesus explains that this is so that the branch may be a blessing to the saints resting there.

Jesus then shortens the long journey to any towns in Egypt, so that instead of it taking 30 days, it took them only one.

This brings them happily to the region of Hermopolis and the city of Sotinen. Having no idea where to find shelter they go into the temple of that city. Here there are 355 locally worshipped idols.

Bad news for the idols. When Mary with Jesus in her arms enters the temple, all the idols fall down, broken to pieces. The local governor, when told of this, went to the temple, and adored the baby Jesus, and the local people came thus to believe in the Lord God through Jesus Christ.

Then the narrative takes the family back to Judaea.

Infancy (Thomas)

Having looked at these ‘extra’ versions of the birth of Jesus, I turn now to another of the stories that describes the infancy of Jesus, in which there are parallels with the account given in Luke (2:41-52)

The author is named as Thomas. There is a complication, in that there are three versions of this book, usually referred to as Greek A, Greek B, and Latin. The longest of these is Greek A, so this is the one to check out online. I use the most recent: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/infancytomas-hock.html>.

Thomas begins by describing himself as an Israelite, writing for Gentiles about the extraordinary deeds of Jesus Christ ‘in my region’. The first miracle Jesus performed at the age of five. He was playing in a stream, and made the waters pure by a command, then shaped soft clay into the form of twelve sparrows. This was on the sabbath,

so it could be classed as work. The other boys reported this to Joseph, who rebuked him for breaking the sabbath. Jesus' response was to clap his hands and tell the birds to fly away, which they did.

Next another boy drained the water from the pond Jesus had made, which incensed the boy Jesus. He cursed the boy for this act, and the boy immediately withered away.

In a similar way Jesus dealt with a boy who accidentally bumped him, and with a word Jesus caused him to fall down and die. The villagers became fear stricken that the boy Jesus could do things like this, and went to Joseph. Joseph privately rebuked Jesus, but Jesus answered by saying "I don't really belong to you. Don't make me upset."

A local teacher, Zacchaeus, offered to Joseph to tutor his boy, since he so obviously had a good

mind. Joseph warned Zacchaeus that no one is able to rule the child. Jesus, hearing this, told Zacchaeus that this was true, saying: “I am the Lord of these people . . . I existed when you were born . . . listen to me and I’ll teach you wisdom.’

We then have considerable detail about the interactions between Jesus and this poor teacher, in which Jesus confounds him with his superior knowledge. Zacchaeus ends up asking Joseph to take the boy back, not knowing whether Jesus was a god or an angel or whatever else.

A few days later Jesus was playing on a roof and one of the boys playing with him fell off the roof and died from the fall. The parents of the dead boy accused Jesus of pushing their son off the roof. Jesus denied this, and to prove himself innocent commanded the boy to get up and say whether or not he had been pushed by Jesus. The boy, Zeno by name, recovered immediately and said: “No, Lord, you didn’t push me, you raised me up”

The next miracle described is that of a youth who was splitting wood with an axe, which slipped and cut his foot off. Jesus restored and healed the foot, Everyone now worshipped the child Jesus, saying: “Truly the spirit of God dwells in this child.”

When Jesus was six years old, he was sent to draw water from the well. Jesus lost his grip on the pitcher and it broke in pieces. So Jesus filled his cloak with water and used that to get the water back to the house. Mary was suitably impressed.

At the age of eight Jesus went out with his father to sow grain in their field. This sowing yielded one hundred measures, so that Joseph could share all this abundance with the local poor.

Joseph as a carpenter was making a bed for a rich man, but made a mistake in cutting two boards unevenly. Jesus helped him out by stretching the shorter board to make it the same length as the

other.

Further problems with teachers follow, with each finding the boy Jesus an impossible pupil, being so much cleverer than they were. The details are somewhat repetitive.

Next comes a mention of James, clearly the older step-brother of Jesus. He was bitten by a poisonous snake, and Jesus healed him, preventing him from dying.

Then there was an infant who died and whose mother grieved terribly. Jesus heard her loud wailing and brought the dead infant back to life. The next raising from the dead comes, with Jesus restoring to life a workman who had fallen fatally from a building he was working on.

Finally comes the section about Jesus as a twelve year old, visiting Jerusalem with his family. It follows almost verbatim the account of the incident,

Jesus being missed and then found in the Temple conversing with all the teachers there, as recorded in Luke.

This connection with a canonical gospel is an interesting one. It is almost as though the author felt that Luke had left too much out, and wanted to supply the remedy. But all the inclusions are so out character with the Jesus I know from the canonical gospels that I find it hard to receive them sympathetically.

Didache

This work does not have an alleged single author, and does not set itself up as a gospel. But it is an early Christian writing, possibly around the end of the first century, and has important aspects to it that make it relevant in this study. Didache means teaching, and its full title is ‘Teaching of the Twelve Apostles’. It was written in Greek and there are lots of English translations on the internet.

It contains typical Christian moral teaching, some instructions about baptism, a very simple form of words to use in the Eucharist, but significantly for our purposes, detailed instructions about itinerant teachers. They are even referred to as apostles and prophets.

This gives us an insight into the way that doctrine was being developed in the early church. We need to remember that, mainly because of sporadic efforts to suppress Christianity in the Roman Empire, all churches were local, unstructured, and

possibly quite isolated from other congregations. It was possible for anyone to set themselves up as an apostle or prophet, and wander around giving teaching to local church congregations. Thus the Didache was written to try to regulate this unstructured, and potentially problematical state of affairs. Who could say what was an authorised and trusted account of the Lord's time on earth? There were by now bishops in each local church, but these men could have profound differences among themselves about true doctrine. It was not until the Roman Emperor was a convert to Christianity that bishops could be summoned to a universal meeting to settled disputed matters.

This sets the scene for 'gospel-writing', and I will next look at the influences that were at work in this activity.

Judaism

It is very easy for us, in modern times, to overlook the connection between Christianity and Judaism. We easily forget that Jesus was Jewish, and that all the first followers of Jesus were Jews. These first followers of Jesus saw themselves as still Jews, and for at least the first few weeks after the Ascension of Jesus frequented the Temple in Jerusalem daily. Did they stop observing their customary dietary habits? I doubt it. They defined themselves as yet another sect within Judaism, being different from all the others as believers in the promised Messiah, Jesus, crucified, risen, and ascended. The first instinct of the then Jewish leaders was to outlaw and attempt to suppress this new sect. Thus the first enemy that Christianity faced was those who, to use Paul's phrase, saw their beliefs as a 'stumbling block'.

Paul, in the missionary activity which he engaged in, whenever he came for the first time to any town, always went first to the synagogue, if there was one,

or to the Jewish place of prayer if there was not. His message was essentially a Jewish message: he just proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah, and invited them to put their trust in Him as Lord and Saviour. With an echo towards the baptism practice of John, he invited them to demonstrate this new faith by being baptised in the name of Jesus.

The outcome, typically, if we follow the narrative of Luke in Acts, was that some members of the Jewish community were persuaded, and became Christians (Messiah folk), and others became so angry that they would try to stone Paul to death. So in every town where Paul preached there would arise two groups of Jews: Messiah folk and enemies of the Messiah folk. And the Messiah folk would find their numbers increased with believers who had no Jewish background. How the Jewish Christians absorbed these new believers was not to be a simple matter. Did these Gentile believers have to become Jews? It took some little while for the answer to be determined by the early church leaders. The key

decision was that Gentile Christian men did not have to become true Jews by being circumcised, but did have to be bound by the moral laws already set down by Yahweh.

Did Jewish Christians stop going to the synagogue? There is evidence that some did not, as we have a letter from an early bishop forbidding them to do so. Obviously some would attend the synagogue on the Sabbath (Saturday) and then, on Sunday, attend the gathering to celebrate the Eucharist. This was a tension that clearly became stronger and stronger, to the point where virtually all Christian leaders saw Judaism as an enemy. The chapter on Marcion details the most extreme example of this, and during later times, especially in the middle ages, Jews were a despised and barely tolerated, sometimes not even tolerated, minority. And we all know the steps taken in Europe by the Nazis.

But not only do we have Marcion and his

‘gospel’. In some of the other ‘extra’ gospels there is an obvious intention to minimise the responsibility of Pontius Pilate, and emphasise that of the Jewish leaders, in the condemnation of Jesus to be crucified. So Judaism, and all it stood for, was a significant point of focus for all the itinerant ‘apostles and prophets’ who went around isolated Christian communities preaching the message of Jesus, as they saw it. It is not difficult to imagine the literate among them wanting to make their message more compelling by composing their own versions of the story of the lifetime of Jesus. No doubt they were drawing on other written sources, but the date of their writings rule out the use of personal testimony and genuine recollections. By claiming as author a respected original leader they were hoping to add authority to their narrative.

Paganism

Paganism is not an accurate word, but a useful one. Its original use was to define country folk, as a way of suggesting that they were simpler, and less intelligent or sophisticated, than urban people. But in time it came to be used by Christians about those who were outside their faith. It therefore can simply mean non-Christian.

The pagan world of the first three centuries was multi-faceted: there were those who worshipped the many gods and semi-gods of the Greek world. Read a book called Greek Mythology and you will have enough data about them. But alongside all this, remembering Gibbon's comment that the ordinary people believed them all equally true while philosophers believed them all equally false, we can see the major influence that is summed up in the word gnosticism.

Pagan converts to Christianity would have come from one or other of these two background. From

the first there would be the challenge to change from polytheism, including the worship of the current Roman Emperor, to monotheism: there is only one God, the Creator and source of everything, seen and not seen. This would be a dramatic challenge, and an absolute one. The difficulty would be in understanding how Jesus might be both human and divine. Hence the various docetic stances (He only seemed to be human) we find here and there. Or the adoptionist view that Jesus was adopted from human status to a divine one. The Council of Nicaea had its main task to address these problems.

Those pagans who had originated in the philosophical sphere would be more likely to carry a different sort of baggage. They might easily try to bring their gnostic perceptions of reality with them, and adapt their ideas of the nature of reality to the new doctrines of Christianity they were embracing. Jesus could be one of many emanations of the unknowable Supreme Being. Spirit is good, material

is bad, salvation is from knowledge of the truth, and so on. It is very clear from a study of the 'extra' gospels that this tendency was widespread, and, from an orthodox point of view, insidious. Hence the widespread references to these writings among those we call the early church fathers.

Those itinerant apostles and prophets we have been thinking about would find it irresistible to generate versions of the life of Jesus that would support their beliefs. And clearly this is what happened.

Gaps

The third pressure we find in the ‘extra’ gospels is to fill the gaps left by the four canonical gospels. Why did only two of the four describe the birth of Jesus as a narrative? Why did only one of the four give us just one story about the boyhood of Jesus? And why do we know so little about the women in Jesus’ life?

In the first sentence of his gospel Luke refers to many accounts he has looked at before setting himself the task of producing an orderly account. It is clear that as time went by, and the original witnesses of Jesus’ activity were beginning to die, people would feel it right to write down what they had seen and heard.

The fundamental question is to what extent those who much later filled the gaps about the boyhood of Jesus, or wrote more about the birth events, were using genuine written recollections, or their own imagination. Dragons in caves, clay bird models

flying away, and suchlike, are clearly in this second category. Does that mean we have to reject the whole document which includes this sort of thing? Or do we accept that there might be a mixture there of both true recollection and obvious imagination?

This seems to be the choice we must make. We may wish to follow the verdicts of most of the early church fathers, or we may see that in time there were those who became very influential in the way the church developed who were happy to accept these gap-fillers as largely truthful.

The essential crux of the matter is the opposition between those who believe that doctrine should derive solely from canonical writings, and those who regard church tradition as equally decisive.

It is a sad fact that there are a multitude of sects within Christianity, and even many variations within both the scripture-only set and the tradition-good set.

I know where I stand, but the research and reading I have put into this short book has made it a little easier to appreciate the thinking of those who take a different stance from mine.