

The Gospel of the Egyptians

The Gospel of the Egyptians (Gos. Eg.) is composed of sayings that are attributed to Jesus and partially preserved in Greek in a few quotations in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (a church writer who lived at the end of the second century C.E.). This gospel was frequently referred to by name in the second and third centuries, and undoubtedly was widely used and well-respected in Egypt during that time. Unfortunately, there is no material evidence of the contents of the text apart from the brief citations by Clement. The designation, the Gospel of the Egyptians, suggests that this document was named after the land and its inhabitants, and may imply that this was the gospel used by at least one segment of the Egyptian Christian populace. This Gospel of the Egyptians is to be differentiated from another, completely different writing with the same name which is part of the Coptic Gnostic Library from Nag Hammadi.

Despite the paucity of the extant fragments, the theology of the Gospel of the Egyptians is clear: each fragment endorses sexual asceticism as the means of breaking the lethal cycle of birth and of overcoming the alleged sinful differences between male and female, enabling all persons to return to what was understood to be their primordial androgynous state. This theology is reflected in speculative interpretations of the Genesis accounts of the Creation and the Fall (Gen. 1:27; 2:16–17, 24; 3:21), according to which the unity of the first man was disrupted by the creation of woman and sexual division. Salvation was thus thought to be the recapitulation of Adam and Eve's primordial state, the removal of the body and the reunion of the sexes. This return to the primordial state was said to be accomplished—or at least symbolized—by baptism. In this respect, the Gospel of the Egyptians is to be compared with Paul's Letters to the Galatians (Gal.

3:26–28) and the Corinthians (I Cor. 12:13), which presuppose this baptismal theology but use the tradition differently, interpreting the theme of unity as a social category to refer to the unity of Jews and Greeks, slaves and freedmen, males and females.

In the Gospel of the Egyptians, this ascetic theology is included among the traditions of sayings of Jesus. Here, too, comparison should be made with Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, where appeals to sayings traditions were made both by Paul and by the "enthusiasts" with whom he contended (I Cor. 1–4; 7). The Gospel of Luke (Luke 17:26–30; 20:34–36) also reinterpreted traditional sayings to encourage celibacy. Many of the sayings in the Gospel of the Egyptians, moreover, have been used to compose brief dialogues between Jesus and Salome. This compositional technique parallels that of some of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas and a number of those in the Dialogue of the Savior, both in terms of form and structure and in terms of subject matter and content. The most original form of the baptismal tradition, in fact, is that preserved in the Gospel of the Egyptians, where it is regarded as a saying of Jesus given in response to a question of Salome. This tradition is also found as a free-floating saying three times in the Gospel of Thomas, once in an anonymous early Christian homily known as 2 Clement, and in several non-canonical apostolic Acts. Vestiges also underlie some of the sayings in the earliest source of the Dialogue of the Savior and, perhaps, the Gospel of John (John 11:25) as well.

If an Egyptian provenance is granted, the Gospel of the Egyptians shows that the Jesus movement there was, from the outset, influenced by gnosticism. It demonstrates, moreover, the orientation of this particular Egyptian community toward traditions of sayings of Jesus rather than toward the more speculative, systematic writings of other gnostic groups. The earliest possible date for the composition of this gospel would be in the middle of the first century, when sayings traditions such as those attested in I Corinthians were being circulated. The latest possible date would be in the middle of the second century, when certain gnostic groups appropriated this gospel, making use of these sayings which shortly thereafter were quoted by Clement. Based on compositional parallels in the morphology of the tradition, a date in the late first or early second century is most likely.

In the gospel citations that follow, care should be taken to distinguish between the actual quotations of the text of the Gospel of the Egyptians and Clement's own interpretive comments.

The text is listed by the number of the preserved fragments (1–6). The

translation was made by Wilhelm Schneemelcher and George Ogg (New Testament Apocrypha).

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1. When Salome asked, “How long will death have power?” the Lord answered, “So long as ye women bear children”—not as if life was something bad and creation evil, but as teaching the sequence of nature.
(Clement, *Stromateis* 3.6.45.3)
2. Those who are opposed to God’s creation because of continence, which has a fair-sounding name, also quote the words addressed to Salome which I mentioned earlier. They are handed down, as I believe, in the Gospel of the Egyptians. For, they say: the Savior himself said, “I am come to undo the works of the female,” by the female meaning lust, and by the works birth and decay.
(*Ibid.*, 3.9.63.1–2)
3. Since then the Word has alluded to the consummation, Salome saith rightly, “Until when shall men die?” Now Scripture uses the term ‘man’ in the two senses, of the visible outward form and of the soul, and again of the redeemed man and of him who is not redeemed. And sin is called the death of the soul. Wherefore the Lord answers advisedly, “So long as women bear children,” i.e., so long as lusts are powerful.
(*Ibid.*, 3.9.64.1)
4. Why do they not also adduce what follows the words spoken to Salome, these people who do anything but walk by the gospel rule according to truth? For when she said, “I have then done well in not bearing children,” as if it were improper to engage in procreation, then the Lord answered and said, “Eat every plant, but that which has bitterness eat not.”
(*Ibid.*, 3.9.66.1–2)
5. Contending further for the impious doctrine he (Julius Cassianus) adds: “And how could a charge not be rightly brought against the

Savior, if he has transformed us and freed us from error, and delivered us from sexual intercourse?" In this matter his teaching is similar to that of Tatian. But he emerged from the school of Valentinus. Therefore Cassianus now says, When Salome asked when what she had inquired about would be known, the Lord said, "When you have trampled on the garment of shame and when the two become one and the male with the female (is) neither male nor female." Now in the first place we have not this word in the four Gospels that have been handed down to us, but in the Gospel of the Egyptians. Further he seems to me to fail to recognize that by the male impulse is meant wrath and by the female lust.

(Ibid., 3.13.92.1–93.1)

6. And when the Savior says to Salome that death will reign as long as women bear children, he does not thereby slander procreation, for that indeed is necessary for the redemption of believers.

(Clement, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 67.2)