

Foreword

Since the end of the nineteenth century, numerous ancient Christian gospel writings have been discovered. A rich literature of this genre is thus known today. But for the student of the New Testament and the interested reading public, it has not always been easy to have access to these “other gospels”—and even much of New Testament scholarship is still carried on with little attention to this literature. Although these gospels were not accepted into the canon of the New Testament, they are, however, extremely important for the study of early Christianity, and they may yet substantially alter our concepts of ancient Christian history. Some would argue that these gospels add little to our picture of the historical Jesus. Our picture, however, is dependent upon our understanding of the transmission of traditions about and from Jesus and of the process of the formation of written gospel texts. The non-canonical gospels are important witnesses to these developments. In many instances, they are directly dependent upon the earliest stages of the collections of sayings of Jesus and stories about him; and they show little, if any, influence from the gospels of the New Testament. Students of early Christian literature will be greatly enriched if they utilize these materials as they learn to understand how the earliest oral traditions of Jesus were used and transformed in Christian communities: how they were collected, put into writing, edited, and repeatedly revised.

The non-canonical gospels demonstrate that this process by no means resulted exclusively in the composition of the four gospels of the New Testament. They establish further that this process did not come to an end with the New Testament. On the contrary, the four canonical gospels were still living documents, constantly used in the mission, instruction, and edification of Christian communities, and

therefore, still subject to further development. As a result, more gospel writings continued to be produced, of which fragments still survive. While large parts of the early church finally limited the growth of this literature by canonizing the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, other Christian groups continued to cultivate their own books—books which claim to contain both the genuine words of Jesus' revelation and their interpretations. Although some of these writings are known as "gnostic gospels," which sometimes place Jesus' words into a post-resurrection situation, they often preserve older traditions. Perhaps more important, these gospels reveal to us the way in which Christians in different situations renewed the living voice of Jesus on the basis of such older traditions.

Much can be learned here, since the basis for future scholarship on the oral and written transmission of the entire tradition about Jesus is much broader than was believed a few decades ago. The work has only begun and there are yet more questions than answers. The easier the access to these important texts, the greater is the hope that our insights will increase through the fruits of the labors of many—of scholars, students, and laypersons alike. This volume is a significant step toward providing precisely that access. Its introductions are substantive yet non-technical, and are based on the most up-to-date insights of critical scholarship. The "other gospels" are a valid and vital part of the life and faith of the early Christians. They deserve a fair and unbiased hearing.

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