

## *Introduction*

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THE OTHER GOSPELS is an anthology of gospel literature that is not part of the New Testament but is of extreme importance for the study of the origins of Christianity. This book is designed to make available in English a collection of relevant non-biblical writings of the earliest Christians that preserve sayings of Jesus and stories about him.

In early Christianity, the memory of Jesus was alive in the traditions of worshiping communities which produced and preserved sayings in Jesus' name and stories attributed to him. Initially these sayings and stories were transmitted in spoken form; eventually they came to be set down in written gospel texts. Gradually some of these writings came to be selected for the "canon," the list of books that were considered to have special status and authority and thus were accepted as part of the Christian Bible. Scholars past and present have relied almost exclusively on the canonical gospels of the New Testament as witnesses to the sayings and deeds of Jesus. Non-canonical texts have been routinely regarded as less important, assumed to be dependent on or influenced by the New Testament. However, recent discoveries have given us reason to call these assumptions into question. The rapidly expanding body of literary evidence—much of it available for the first time—is enabling us to retest the discoveries of the past and see old truths in a new light. New critical analysis is providing the opportunity to examine more fully the history of the literature in which Jesus traditions were transmitted, since substantial non-canonical texts can now be used as primary sources to clarify the developments of gospel traditions.

The sixteen texts that follow constitute what remains of the non-canonical gospels from the first and second centuries. Many are preserved only in fragmentary form; the ravages of time and of the

editor's pen have resulted in the scantiness of the sources. Frequently these fragments are extant solely in quotations of early church writers. These writers repeatedly cited the texts incorrectly, attributing quotations to the wrong sources. They regularly suppressed evidence as well, and interpreted what they did record in a biased manner. Their mistakes have led to countless difficulties in our attempts to isolate and identify correctly the gospels in which these quotations belong. There are a few gospel fragments which are on papyrus so poorly preserved that they are not included in this volume. Free-floating sayings or stories, which are not part of a particular text, are also omitted here; they are the subject of a monograph, not an anthology. Other texts that are called gospels are not included because they either were composed too late or belong to a different category of literature.

Just what is a gospel? Strict usage of the term "gospel" to designate a genre of literature about Jesus is complex and problematic. The original use of this term in the Christian tradition was technical, describing both the activity of Christian missionaries and the content of their proclamation. Not until the middle of the second century, in the works of the early church writer Justin, do we find this term employed for the first time to denote written documents that present sayings of and stories about Jesus. Ever since the latter half of that century, a great variety of religious writings have come to be called gospels. But the use of this term to characterize a genre is misleading, since all gospels comprise various types of literature. They encompass not only collections of sayings, miracle stories, birth legends, infancy narratives, passion narratives, and resurrection stories, but also apocalypses, revelation discourses, exegetical interpretations of the Jewish scriptures, theological treatises, speculative dialogues, homiletic meditations, and pseudo biographies. The four gospels that came to be included in the New Testament share several of these formal features; these gospels are also composed of distinct literary traditions which are equally attested in a number of disparate sources.

Since the canonical gospels themselves are complex literary entities, exhibiting the same compositional features as many other gospels, the criterion for the identification and definition of gospel literature is not canonicity. In seeking to isolate the indicators of a text that distinguish this genre, one needs, rather, to discern the sources behind the texts. It is here, in the sources that have been embedded in the texts, that we find, for the first time, traditions about Jesus presented in written form. Written collections of sayings and stories thus gave gospel traditions their first literary repository. By isolating collections of sayings and

stories intertwined into various legendary accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, one can identify the sources of the gospels and delineate the history of the transmission of their traditions. All texts and portions thereof that can be so isolated are to be brought into any discussion of the historical developments of gospel literature. This must be done without regard to external titles given to the texts or one's theological opinions about such texts.

The title of a work is not a reliable guide to its genre. Many documents entitled "gospels" do not, in fact, belong to the group of texts that present sayings of and stories about Jesus. The *Gospel of Truth*, for example, tells of the joyous proclamation of knowledge which Jesus has brought, and is to be compared with writings such as Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which describe the need, means, and effects of salvation. The recently discovered portions of the *Gospel of Mani*, on the other hand, do not present Jesus traditions at all, but describe Mani's alleged revelations and call to be a world missionary. Documents such as these represent an extended use of the term "gospel" to characterize a wide variety of writings which are so designated because they were considered to be authoritative by a particular community.

One of the most vexing problems in the study of gospel literature is determining with any sort of precision the date of composition of a particular document. This is no less a problem in seeking to date the gospels of the New Testament than it is in dating the non-canonical gospels. There are, however, techniques available that permit one to suggest, with a reasonable degree of confidence, a plausible date of composition:

1. Form criticism provides a means of ascertaining the relative dating of discrete pieces of the tradition. Texts whose literary forms are relatively spare can generally be dated to a period earlier than those which exhibit a more elaborate, developed stage of the tradition.

2. Compositional parallels in the gospel tradition furnish additional evidence. When the history of a saying or story in one text can be paralleled in another whose development can be determined and to which a date can be assigned, then a contemporaneous date of composition can generally be given to both texts.

3. The role given to persons of authority, whose position in a particular community serves to authenticate its transmission of the tradition, supplies further confirmation of a likely date of composition. At a certain point in the history of early Christianity, communities began to appeal to revered figures of the past in order to legitimate the

traditions of their own groups. The period in which the community that fostered the Gospel of John began to revere the memory of the Beloved Disciple and Peter by looking to them as the guarantors of its traditions, for example, was most likely contemporary with the time when the community of the *Gospel of Thomas* began to esteem Thomas and James by appealing to them as authorities in the transmission of its traditions.

4. Literary dependence of one document upon another, datable one establishes the earliest possible date at which the dependent document was composed. Thus, the date of the composition of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke is later than that of the Gospel of Mark, since Mark was used by Matthew and Luke as a source of their respective writings.

5. When a text refers to historical events, the text must have been composed sometime during or after those events took place. The Gospel of Mark's reference to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., for example, means that this document in its final form could not have been composed before that time.

6. The existence of external witnesses to a text gives fairly reliable confirmation of at least the latest possible date of composition of the text. Such external attestations consist of datable manuscripts and of quotations and references in early church writers. It is to be noted that, in these quotations and references, non-canonical gospels are cited as frequently as canonical gospels are. The attestations do not support any artificial distinction between canonical and non-canonical (or "apocryphal") writings. Church writers referred to documents of both categories with equal regularity, even when these same writers may have rejected one particular gospel or another.

It would be desirable and appropriate to include the four gospels of the New Testament in this volume as well, making it a complete collection of all gospel texts. The economy of space, however, has made this impossible. But it should be remembered that the four gospels that gained admission into the canon are primarily gospels about Jesus. In many instances, the history of the transmission of the traditions of Jesus' sayings and stories is reflected most directly in what are now non-canonical gospels. Clearly, when significant documents emerge from what is generally considered to be a group of texts of minor importance, we must reassess our scholarly judgments and return to the texts as inquiring students.

In each of the introductions to the gospel texts that follow, I have tried to discuss the critical issues concerning the nature and signifi-

cance of the text. These issues include the following: the title of the document; its external attestations, literary forms, and sources; the original language of the text; the language(s) in which the extant text is preserved; the date and place of composition; the date and place of discovery, publication, and conservation of the extant edition(s) of the text; and the text's influence and relevance for the study of gospel literature. For all these gospels, select annotated bibliographies have also been appended, in which information is provided about the original editions of the texts, available facsimile editions, best critical editions, and a few important scholarly discussions. These will enable the reader to continue to use the texts judiciously. The "other gospels" are worthy of careful study. I hope this collection will help stimulate the enthusiastic discussion that all gospel traditions so richly deserve.

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