

The Writing and Reading of Apocryphal Gospels

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The so-called “apocryphal” gospels are a subject of fascination among many today. How do they relate to the four canonical gospels? What are they and why did people read and write them? To start with a definition, the apocryphal gospels are a diverse collection of texts that expand and elaborate on the teachings and narratives of Jesus' birth and life, ministry, death, and post-resurrection appearances as found in the canonical gospels. These noncanonical writings were produced from the second century onward and provide insights into the diverse and creative ways early Christians interpreted the traditions about Jesus. The major types of noncanonical gospels can be divided into several categories, each with its own focus, including infancy gospels, ministry gospels, passion gospels, and post-resurrection dialogue gospels. These works not only reveal the vibrancy of early Christian imagination but also their theological, pastoral, and often esoteric concerns. We begin with a survey of the various types before returning to the question of why they were produced (and reproduced).

Infancy Gospels

The infancy gospels address a gap in the canonical gospels by focusing on the early life of Jesus. The most famous of these is the *Protevangelium of James*, which situates Jesus' birth within a larger narrative about Mary, his mother. This gospel includes popular traditions, such as the names of Mary's parents (Joachim and Anna), and embellishes the biblical accounts with additional details like Mary riding a donkey to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus occurring in a cave. The text was well-received in early Christianity and continued to influence Christian piety in later centuries.

In contrast, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* presents a more episodic portrayal of Jesus' childhood, often characterized by playful and even mischievous behavior. The gospel contains stories such as Jesus creating birds out of clay and bringing them to life, as well as his disputes with teachers over the meaning of letters. Unlike the *Protevangelium*, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* seems to have been more focused on entertainment rather than religious edification.

Both texts, though different in tone and content, reflect an early Christian desire to fill in the gaps of Jesus' early life, which the canonical gospels leave largely unaddressed.

Ministry Gospels

Several apocryphal gospels focus on Jesus' ministry, often combining sayings and episodes from the canonical gospels with new material. For example, the *Egerton Gospel* (Papyrus Egerton 2) presents fragments of a narrative that includes a dialogue about Jesus' authority in comparison to Moses, a miraculous healing of a leper, and a dialogue about the emperor's rule. These fragments suggest that the *Egerton Gospel* drew upon both Synoptic and Johannine traditions, creating a composite portrait of Jesus' ministry.

Other fragmentary texts, such as Oxyrhynchus Papyri 840 and 1224, also provide tantalizing glimpses of second-century ministry gospels. These texts include dialogues and debates, sometimes featuring Pharisees or other Jewish authorities. For example, Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 840 contains a debate between Jesus and a Pharisee named Levi, focusing on purity laws.

These gospels demonstrate the ongoing interest in Jesus' teachings and actions, particularly as they related to Jewish religious practices.

In addition to these ministry gospels, certain texts categorized as "Jewish Christian Gospels" also emerged. The *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Ebionites* are two such examples. These texts appear to have drawn heavily from the Gospel of Matthew, and their content includes familiar episodes such as Jesus' baptism, the Last Supper, and his resurrection. However, they also contain unique material, leading some scholars to consider them distinct gospels, while others view them as recensions or revisions of Matthew.

Passion Gospels

The apocryphal passion gospels focus on the events surrounding Jesus' death, often with theological or narrative innovations that distinguish them from the canonical accounts. The *Gospel of Peter*, for instance, presents a distinctive version of the passion narrative, emphasizing the guilt of the Jewish leaders and downplaying the role of Pontius Pilate. This gospel also features a dramatic and theologically rich resurrection account, in which Jesus emerges from the tomb accompanied by two angels, towering over the earth.

Other passion gospels, such as the *Fayyum Fragment* (Papyrus Vindobonensis G. 2325), offer only small portions of the passion narrative, such as Jesus predicting Peter's denial. Although these texts do not provide a full passion account, they highlight the continued interest in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

One of the most notorious of the passion gospels is the *Gospel of Judas*, which presents a radically different interpretation of Judas' role in Jesus' betrayal. Far from being a simple traitor, Judas is portrayed as Jesus' most trusted disciple, the one who understood his true nature and mission. This gospel, linked to Gnostic theology, presents a subversive reinterpretation of the passion story, challenging mainstream early Christian understandings of Jesus' death and its salvific significance.

Post-Resurrection Dialogue Gospels

The post-resurrection dialogues fill another gap in the canonical narratives, where the risen Jesus speaks little compared to his pre-resurrection ministry. These gospels often present Jesus in extended conversations with his disciples, revealing esoteric teachings or hidden wisdom. The *Gospel of Thomas* is perhaps the best-known of these texts. It consists of 114 sayings of the "living Jesus," many of which parallel the Synoptic gospels, but others reflect a Gnosticizing interpretation of Jesus' message.

Other post-resurrection dialogue gospels, such as the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Apocryphon of James*, emphasize Jesus' communication with specific disciples, often Mary Magdalene or James, to whom he reveals special, secret knowledge. The *Gospel of Mary* portrays Mary as a key figure in understanding Jesus' teachings, especially regarding the soul's journey after death. The text suggests a spiritual hierarchy in which Mary has access to wisdom that even Peter and the other apostles do not.

In contrast, the *Epistula Apostolorum* ("Epistle of the Apostles") offers a more orthodox portrayal of the post-resurrection period, emphasizing the collective witness of the apostles to the risen Christ. This text serves as a defence of the apostolic tradition, countering the more esoteric and individualistic post-resurrection dialogues found in other apocryphal gospels.

Gospel Harmonies and Marcion's *Euangelion*

In addition to composing original gospels, second-century Christians also engaged in the harmonization of existing gospels. The most famous example is Tatian's *Diatessaron*, a gospel harmony that combined material from all four canonical gospels into a single continuous narrative. This project reflected a desire to synthesize the Jesus tradition, creating a unified account from the diverse and sometimes divergent canonical sources.

A little earlier in the second century, Marcion's *Euangelion* ("Gospel") represents a very different approach. Marcion accepted only Luke's gospel and heavily redacted it, excising any references to Jewish prophecy or the Old Testament. His gospel reflects his theological agenda of separating the Creator God of the Old Testament from the Redeemer God revealed in Jesus. Marcion's approach stands in stark contrast to the harmonizing tendencies of other early Christians, who sought to preserve the fullness of the Jesus tradition and its connection to the Old Testament.

Reasons for Writing and Reading Apocryphal Gospels

When many Christians today learn about these Apocryphal Gospels, their first question is often, Why? Why did people write these gospels and why did others read them? The proliferation of apocryphal gospels in the second century can be attributed to several factors.

First, these gospels allowed early Christians to fill in gaps left by the canonical gospels, especially regarding Jesus' early life and his post-resurrection appearances. The *Infancy Gospels* and post-resurrection dialogues are prime examples of this. They have sometimes been characterized as an ancient form of fan fiction.

Second, the apocryphal gospels were read for entertainment and moral instruction. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, with its playful stories of the boy Jesus, likely entertained its readers while also offering lessons about Jesus' divinity and humanity.

Third, these gospels often reflect theological and pastoral concerns specific to particular Christian communities. For example, the Gnostic gospels, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Judas*, express a worldview that emphasized secret knowledge (gnosis) and rejected the material world in favour of spiritual enlightenment. These texts catered to the spiritual needs of communities that valued esoteric wisdom and saw themselves as possessing deeper insights into Jesus' teachings. On the other hand, texts like the *Epistula Apostolorum* arguably were written by proto-orthodox authors in the service of canonical gospels, validating their apostolic authority and promoting their use as Scripture alongside the Old Testament.

Finally, the apocryphal gospels reveal the diversity of early Christian beliefs and practices. While the four canonical gospels became increasingly authoritative, other gospel compositions demonstrate awareness of them to various degrees and were often read alongside them. Diverse groups continued to produce and read augmented narratives or alternative sayings that aligned with their theological perspectives. In this sense, some apocryphal gospels served as a way for marginalized or heterodox groups to preserve their traditions and interpretations of Jesus. That said, the historical evidence suggests that apocryphal never generated an independent alternative life of Jesus or a rival collection to the fourfold gospel. Rather, they

typically presupposed a widespread acceptance of the canonical gospels as the authoritative center of gravity for the Jesus tradition.

Conclusion

The apocryphal gospels represent a rich and diverse body of literature that expands upon the canonical gospels in creative and sometimes subversive ways. Whether filling in gaps, offering new theological insights, or harmonizing existing traditions, these texts reflect the vibrant and complex world of early Christian thought. Their composition and reception reveal not only the diversity of early Christian beliefs about Jesus but also the enduring, unparalleled influence of the four canonical gospels, which provided the foundation upon which much of this creative gospel writing was built.

Further Reading

Markus Bockmuehl and Jacob A. Rodriguez, "Jesus Books, Gospel Fragments, and Gospel Harmonies," in *Baylor Handbook on Second Century Christianity*, eds. Michael F. Bird and Scott Harrower (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming 2025).

Markus Bockmuehl, *Ancient Apocryphal Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

Jacob A. Rodriguez, *Combining Gospels in Early Christianity: The One, the Many, and the Fourfold*, WUNT 2.597 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023).