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The non-canonical gospels and the historical Jesus

– some reflections on issues and methods

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KEY WORDS: non-canonical gospels; gospel genre; historical Jesus; Gospel of the Ebionites; P0xy 840; PEgerton 2; Gospel of Peter; Gospel according to Thomas.

I. Introduction

Recent years have seen an enormous interest in early Christian writings that were not included in the New Testament, particularly the non-canonical gospels. This is true at both an academic and at a popular level. Scholars have become aware that some of these texts have been much less studied than those that were included in the New Testament, and therefore have turned to them in the hope of new insights about the history of early Christianity. Some have claimed that these texts tell us things that early Christians such as Luke, the author of Acts, set out to hide. Others have argued (correctly, in my view) that such writings are probably later than most or all of the writings contained in the New Testament, and that they tell us more about Christianity in the second- (or possibly third-) century than in the first.

In what follows I consider just one group of these early Christian texts, those

Change of Editor

As a result of changing staff responsibilities at the London School of Theology Professor A. N. S. Lane is standing down from his post as editor of the *Evangelical Quarterly*, which he has held since 2005. Tony has brought to the task his outstanding expertise in the areas of church history and theology and an eagle eye as a corrector of proofs, and we are greatly indebted to him for his initiatives in the soliciting and appraisal of material for publication; he will continue to serve the journal as a Consulting Editor. In his place we are delighted to welcome Dr John-Paul Lotz, lecturer in church history and pastoral studies at the London School of Theology.

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to which we usually refer as non-canonical gospels, and I ask how, if at all, they might be used as evidence for the historical Jesus. I approach these texts as a historian, not as a theologian, so I do not address the question of what religious value, if any, these texts may have for today. I focus instead on some of the issues that may arise in the attempt to use non-canonical gospels as sources for the historical Jesus, and note similarities in the way that historians should approach both non-canonical and canonical gospels as potential evidence. Therefore I am less concerned with the question of what, if any, historical evidence may be extracted from these texts than with the way in which historians seeking the historical Jesus should approach these texts, and how lessons learned from using non-canonical gospels for this purpose should also be applied when using canonical gospels for the same ends. I conclude that the non-canonical gospels offer little historical evidence about the historical Jesus, but that reading them can teach us useful lessons about the way in which we approach the canonical gospels.

II. What makes a book a gospel?

Not all scholars agree that we should approach non-canonical gospels in the same way that we approach their canonical counterparts, so I need to justify why I think that historians (although not necessarily theologians) should do precisely that. The distinction between the work of a theologian and the work of a historian is an important one. This may be seen in two objections that may be raised against using canonical and non-canonical gospels as if they were the same type of text and therefore ought to be approached in a similar way.

The first objection to this kind of approach is clearly theological. ‘When is a gospel not Gospel?’, asks Graham Stanton. ‘When it is a set of Jesus traditions out of kilter with the faith of the church.’¹ Stanton, we should note, is asking a consciously theological question to which he gives a consciously theological answer. Because he defines ‘the Gospel’ (i.e. gospel message) in a particular way, he is able to say that certain books to which ancient readers referred as gospels may not necessarily ‘proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to by Paul, by Mark, and by other early Christians later deemed to belong to the circle of apostles and their followers.’² What he does not do, however, is to deny either that such gospels may contain ‘valuable historical traditions’, or that they may legitimately be referred to as gospels. Stanton notes only that Christians who put themselves in the tradition of Paul, Mark and Irenaeus will repudiate the assumption that ‘Q and Thomas are “gospel” for humankind today’.³

Here Stanton’s approach may be contrasted with that of N. T. Wright. Wright goes further than Stanton, for he argues not only that non-canonical gospels (or

1 Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 4.

2 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

3 *Ibid.*, 3.

at least some of them⁴) do not contain the gospel message found in the canonical gospels, but also that they ought not even to be referred to as gospels. So great are the differences both in content and in form between the gnostic gospels and the canonical gospels that it is not helpful to imply that they are the same sort of text.⁵ It is important to note that Wright makes these comments in a popular and polemical context, that he does not defend them at length, and that the compressed form of his argument means that it is not always clear to which gospels he is referring at particular points in his discussion. Yet the claims that he makes, however briefly, touch on very important issues and raise questions that deserve a response. Thus in what follows I shall take in turn each point that Wright raises or implies. First, I shall begin with the question of whether the title gospel may be appropriate for other texts besides Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Second, I shall address the question of their genre or form. Third, I shall discuss the likely nature of their literary relationship to the canonical gospels. Only then, fourth, shall I consider their content as potential evidence for the historical Jesus.

III. The titles of non-canonical gospels

Wright's claim that at least some early Christian texts usually referred to as gospels should not be granted that name is perhaps analogous to Tertullian's claim that heretics should not be allowed to appeal to Scripture.⁶ Tertullian certainly contests the right of those whom he considers heretics to appeal to Scripture; Wright appears to contest the right of the authors or users of texts such as the *Gospel according to Thomas* and the *Gospel of Peter* to refer to those writings as gospels, or to imply that they may be a similar sort of text. This title is our intellectual property, not yours, and it is up to us to decide who can or cannot use it. But there are difficulties with this approach. If the claim is based on theological grounds – that these texts do not contain the true gospel – then it is hard to see how this can be used as a criterion by a historian who wants to read these texts as potential historical witnesses either to the historical Jesus or to particular understandings of Jesus that may be found in these texts. The fact that their theological perspective may be different from that of the canonical gospels is not important for the historian who wants to see what they say and to try to approach them on their own terms.

4 Tom Wright, *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2006), 29–30. Wright's discussion focuses on texts usually referred to as Gnostic gospels (the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Mary*), but he also refers to other non-canonical gospels such as the *Gospel of the Nazoraeans* and the *Gospel of Peter*.

5 *Ibid.*, 29. The chapter in which this discussion occurs is entitled 'When is a gospel not a gospel?' The key words are 'a gospel'. Whereas Stanton asked when is a gospel 'not Gospel' (on which see above) Wright asks when it is a different sort of book that should not be referred to as a gospel. The former question addresses the theological content or message of the text; the latter addresses its form.

6 Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*, 37.

If the claim is based on literary grounds, it is hardly less problematic. Not all non-canonical gospels appear to have differed significantly in content and form from canonical gospels, so some may be examples of the same genre. Others are different, but it is not clear that modern understandings of the genre of the canonical gospels will necessarily trump ancient beliefs that certain books were gospels, not least if modern understandings of genre are based solely or mainly on an analysis of the canonical gospels rather than on all ancient texts named gospels in their manuscripts or referred to as gospels by those who knew them.⁷

A third point to be noted here is Wright's appeal to James Robinson, who notes that a gospel such as *Thomas* 'was hardly designated by its original author or compiler as a Gospel. Rather he or she would have called it a collection of sayings.'⁸ This may well have been the case, although the certainty with which Robinson makes the point may be questioned. If *Thomas* is later than the canonical gospels, and if it were compiled at a time when they were already circulating under their traditional titles, then it is not out of the question that other gospels could be given similar titles by their authors. It is hard to know how much Wright would wish to make of Robinson's point, but it is worth noting that Robinson's claim that the title of gospel may have been added to a text by a later reader rather than by its original author applies just as much to canonical as to non-canonical gospels.⁹ There can be little doubt that the now traditional form of the titles, the Gospel according to Matthew, the Gospel according to Mark etc, does not go back to each of the four evangelists,¹⁰ and there is considerable debate as to which, if any of these writers thought of their book as a gospel.¹¹ If a text such

7 See below, 7, 8.

8 Wright, *Judas*, 29, citing James Robinson, *The Secrets of Judas: The Story of the Misunderstood Disciple and his Lost Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 75f. In this semi-popular book Robinson covers similar points to those made in his now classic essay, 'LOGOI SOPHON: On the Gattung of Q', published in James M Robinson and Helmut Koester (eds.), *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 71-113. There he argues that titles such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Philip* and *Gospel of Truth* are all later than the texts to which they refer because these titles appear only in their colophons, not in the main body of their texts. 'In general', he writes, 'one may sense that the titles appended as subscriptions at the end of tractates may be logically secondary to the titles implicit in an incipit, even in cases when both were already present when the Nag Hammadi codices were written' (p. 78).

9 Indeed it may even apply more to canonical gospels than to non-canonical gospels if the former are earlier than the latter.

10 Here I follow the arguments of Helmut Koester and François Bovon against those of Martin Hengel. For my own summary of the debate, see Andrew Gregory, *The Reception of Luke and Acts in the Period before Irenaeus* (WUNT 2.169; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 45-53.

11 Mark (Mk 1.1) and Matthew (Mt 26.13) may have done so, but scholars dispute the significance that should be attached to each use of the word 'gospel'. Luke refers to his work not as gospel but as a narrative (Lk 1.1) and John refers to his account simply as a book (Jn 20.30, 21.25).

as *Thomas* is to be denied the title of a gospel on the grounds that such a title may not have been used by its original author, then the title may also need to be denied to some or all of the canonical gospels. The question of whether a writing is or is not a canonical text has no bearing on this issue, and the historian must be equally stringent with canonical texts as with their non-canonical counterparts in seeking to determine how the first readers of these texts – or even their authors – may have referred to them.

IV. The genre and literary form of the non-canonical gospels

The question of whether non-canonical gospels are of the same genre as their canonical counterparts is both more complex and more important than the question of what titles they may be allowed. There are only four canonical gospels, and there is wide agreement that each is to be considered a form of biography.¹² But there were clearly many more non-canonical texts that either resemble the canonical gospels in content or form, or that were referred to by their ancient readers as gospels. Therefore it is important to be clear that not all these non-canonical texts need be examples of the same genre. Some non-canonical gospels survive only in fragments, and such fragments as are extant may well have come from narrative texts that were biographical in character and were therefore generically similar to the canonical gospels. These include papyrus fragments such as P.Oxy 840 and P.Egerton 2, as well as excerpts attributed to the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazoraeans*. Others survive at sufficient length to leave little doubt of their (at least partial) biographical framework. These include the *Gospel of Peter*, and perhaps also the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Judas*.

Yet there are also other non-canonical texts whose titles include the word gospel although their contents are not so clearly biographical in character. Should we insist strictly on the modern understanding of gospel as a form of ancient biography (recognising that it is based on a detailed analysis of canonical, but not non-canonical gospels), this would presumably lead us to conclude that such non-biographical texts were not gospels, their titles notwithstanding. However there is also another way in which we might approach this apparent tension between the title that ancient readers gave these texts and the modern consensus that the canonical gospels are best understood as a form of ancient biography. This second approach raises the question of whether the modern understanding of the gospel genre gives too much weight to the evidence of the canonical gospels and not enough to non-canonical texts that some ancient readers presented as gospels. Charles Talbert, for example, notes that Helmut Koester's identification of analogies between non-Christian texts and a range of Christian texts that

12 See Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A comparison with Graeco-Roman biography* (SNTSMS 70; Cambridge: CUP, 1992. Second edition, The Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

he understands as different types of gospels raises the question of whether there might be analogies between the canonical gospels and Greco-Roman literature, but he chooses arbitrarily to restrict his own discussion to the canonical gospels. Talbert acknowledges the existence of non-canonical gospels, but he does not address the question of whether or not they should be considered to belong to the same genre as the canonical gospel.¹³

Only slightly more attention is paid to the non-canonical gospels in the important work of Richard Burridge,¹⁴ on which the current consensus is largely founded. Like Talbert, Burridge sets out to establish the genre of the canonical gospels with little reference to the evidence of non-canonical gospels. Unlike Talbert, he offers reasons why he does so. First, the fact that so many of these gospels survive only in fragments means that it is difficult to identify the genre of the texts from which they come.¹⁵ Second, the likelihood that these texts represent a tertiary stage in the development of the gospel genre means that they are later than their canonical counterparts and are therefore probably dependent on them for their form¹⁶ (as well, I might add, as for some of their content). In one way, then, Burridge's identification of different stages in the development of the gospel genre means that his emphasis on a narrative framework as a key component of the gospel genre is in no way threatened by the absence of any significant narrative in certain texts whose ancient readers referred to them as gospels. Thus he makes a distinction between biographical texts such as those referred to above and largely non-narrative texts such as the *Gospel according to Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Truth*. These texts, he suggests, are not the same as the canonical gospels, for they do not share their generic features. Thomas, he notes, lacks 'narrative or chronological and geographical settings'.¹⁷

But is this the last word on the matter? The *Gospel according to Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip* each survive in manuscripts in which each text is called a gospel. Therefore at least some ancient readers thought of them as gospels even though they are clearly different in form from the canonical gospels. If we can privilege a modern critical definition of gospel over this ancient labelling of these texts, then Burridge's analysis of generic features and the way in which they cluster to give recognizable family resemblances may be used to support the position that these texts are not gospels at all. If, however, we may allow that ancient readers could identify family resemblances on the basis of less evidence than we would need, it may be possible that these texts are better regarded not

13 For his discussion of the non-canonical gospels, see *ibid.*, 8-9. The question that he sets out to ask is 'In literary terms, what are the canonical gospels?' (p.1). In an endnote, printed on p.17, he adds, 'Though the question of the literary genre of the apocryphal gospels is also important, this study limits itself to the canonical four.'

14 Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*. My page references are to the second edition.

15 *Ibid.*, 242.

16 *Ibid.*, 243.

17 *Ibid.*, 242.

as non-gospels but as types of gospel that differ considerably from other gospels, and that may be influenced significantly by other genres. As BurrIDGE himself observes, even if titles were added by later readers, nevertheless 'they still tell us, in our literary milieu, how literary people in the ancient world saw these works, in their literary milieu.'¹⁸

Perhaps also open to challenge is BurrIDGE's suggestion that another category of texts, those that include only information either about Jesus' childhood or his passion, are not to be considered gospels. These texts, he notes do not 'share the family resemblance of the four canonical gospels.'¹⁹ But there are striking similarities between each of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Peter* and the canonical gospels. Jesus is clearly the main subject of each text and the geographical setting is similar to that of the canonical gospels. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* points indirectly to Jesus' character and identity through what he did and said as a child, and the *Gospel of Peter* clearly presents the resurrection as pointing to Jesus' identity as Son of God. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is complete, whereas we do not know how far back in Jesus' life the *Gospel of Peter* began, but each includes biographical material of a type that is paralleled by one or more canonical gospel. Neither book is entitled gospel in the manuscripts in which it is preserved, but each is a book about Jesus; each is clearly a gospel-like book. Therefore there seems no compelling reason to deny that these two books are not gospels of some sort,²⁰ even if their production at a late stage in the development of the genre means that they exhibit significant differences from, as well as significant affinities with, earlier examples of the genre. BurrIDGE suggests that the fact that a text such as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* consists of 'legendary stories about the boyhood of Jesus'²¹ sets it apart from the canonical gospels, but some readers might see the use of legendary material as something that they have in common.

18 Ibid., 109.

19 Ibid., 243.

20 An 'infancy gospel' might be a particular type of gospel (a biographical narrative focussing on Jesus' childhood rather than on the portion of his adult life in which he engaged in public ministry) rather than a distinct genre. An account of Jesus' post-resurrection teaching might be a 'revelation dialogue' or 'dialogue gospel', but understood as a particular type of gospel rather than as a distinct genre. Such a text (for example, the *Gospel of Mary*) certainly focuses on only the risen rather than on the pre-Easter Jesus, but Matthew, Luke and John each accommodate the risen Jesus within their biographical framework. Since the *Gospel of Mary* includes teaching ascribed to Jesus and presents it in a clear biographical and narrative framework it is not clear why it cannot be considered biographical, even if the biographical interest (at least as it survives) is restricted to the period after Jesus' resurrection. If Luke could supplement Mark's account of Jesus' public ministry by providing some account of his infancy and childhood and do so in a gospel, why could the authors of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary* not also provide such information, however partial, in a gospel?

21 BurrIDGE, *What are the Gospels?*, 243.

V. The literary relationship between canonical and non-canonical gospels

Central to the 'quest for the historical Jesus' is a desire to move behind the portraits of Jesus that are found in early Christian gospels and other texts in order to establish what historians can claim to know about Jesus as he actually was. This reconstructed historical Jesus will therefore not be identical to the Jesus portrayed in one or more of our sources, but a figure reconstructed on the basis of a careful sifting of those texts. Therefore this process requires not only that historians seek to understand any relevant primary texts on their own terms, but also that they test the content of those texts and seek to establish whether they rely on earlier sources. Non-canonical gospels should not be dismissed out of hand, but should be tested neither more nor less rigorously than any other primary sources.

There is widespread agreement that our earliest written evidence about Jesus is found in the letters of Paul, but continuing disagreement about the extent to which Paul either knew or cared about the life of Jesus prior to his crucifixion. Therefore historians who wish to attempt to reconstruct the historical Jesus need to turn to later texts that make more detailed claims about what Jesus said and did. This, of course, is where the gospels come in. Most historians have concentrated on the canonical gospels, especially the synoptics, but others have tried to use non-canonical gospels as well. I have argued above that none of these texts should be ruled out simply because they were not included in the canon, or because they may be different in content or form from the canonical gospels. Neither of those factors means that they could not contain potential evidence for the historical Jesus.

What should matter more to the historian than the canonical status of these gospels are the intertwined questions of the date of these texts and the nature of their relationship to the canonical gospels. If any of these texts are earlier than the canonical gospels, might they contain more ancient evidence than is found in those texts? If contemporary with or later than the canonical gospels, might they nevertheless contain evidence that is independent of the canonical gospels, and might such evidence bring us back to the historical Jesus? Put in other words, do any of these non-canonical gospels contain material that is earlier than and potentially historically superior to that of the canonical gospels? Or do they contain material that is later, and therefore more likely to shed light on second or third-century Christianity than on the historical Jesus?

Luke, we may note, refers to others ('many', he says) who had undertaken to compile a narrative 'of the things accomplished among us' (Lk 1.1). Many modern scholars have also identified written sources and oral traditions behind the canonical gospels, the most significant of which is Q. If Q were available to both Matthew and Luke, then there is no reason why it (or indeed other written sources, if they existed) could not also have been available to the authors of other gospels, even those who may not have written their gospels until the sec-

ond century.²² This need not mean that we will be able to identify traces of such sources in texts that do survive, but it does mean that we should be open to the possibility that the authors of the non-canonical gospels may have had access to early sources about Jesus that have not been preserved elsewhere.²³ Even if at some points they are demonstrably dependent on and later than the canonical gospels, nevertheless there may be other points at which these gospels may draw on other sources or traditions, some of which may be as early or earlier than those used by the authors of canonical gospels.

The last point to be addressed before looking selectively at some non-canonical gospels is the question of how we may establish whether they do depend, at least in part, on the canonical gospels. This may be done most effectively by means of a widely recognised criterion for indicating both the existence and also the direction of literary dependence between two texts. This criterion is that literary dependence on the finished form of a text is to be identified only where the later text makes use of an element from the earlier text that can be identified as the editorial (i.e. 'redactional') work of the earlier author/editor.

This criterion is not without its limitations, since it may be applied only to instances where evidence of the editorial activity of a canonical evangelist may be identified reasonably securely (however such reasonable security may be defined). This means that it can only be used where we can be clear that a gospel writer has made changes to one of his sources. Therefore it depends on a prior decision having been made about the nature of the relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke. I assume, with the majority of scholars, that Matthew and Luke each used two major sources. One is Mark, on which they rely for their overall outline and for much of its narrative content; the other is the postulated source usually referred to as Q, on which they rely for much of Jesus' teaching that is found in Matthew and in Luke but not in Mark.

Mark survives independently of Matthew and Luke, but Q does not. Therefore we can be much more confident in identifying changes that Matthew or Luke introduce to passages based on Mark than we can be in regard to passages based on Q. In practice, this means that this criterion is more useful when looking at passages found in all three gospels ('triple tradition') rather than at passages found in only Matthew and Luke ('double tradition') or in any one gospel ('single tradition'). On this basis, and within these limitations, such results as this rigorous and stringent method allows may be considered secure. Therefore if at any point a non-canonical gospel contains material that is the result of Luke's or Matthew's editing of Mark, then it depends – at least at this point – on one of their gospels. It cannot reflect an earlier source, but must depend on either Matthew or Luke.

Two analogies with the canonical gospels may be noted. First, as noted above,

²² See for example, *1 Clement* 13.2, 46.7-8.

²³ It also means that other Christian texts, not just gospels, may contain potential evidence for the words or deeds of the historical Jesus. A canonical illustration of this possibility may be found at Acts 20.35, which gives a saying of Jesus that is not otherwise attested.

most scholars believe that the Gospel according to Mark is older than the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Luke, and that it was used as a source for each of those texts. Therefore Mark has often been seen as an earlier and perhaps therefore more reliable source for the historical Jesus. Yet it does not necessarily follow that either Matthean or Lukan single tradition is therefore of no bearing on the historical Jesus, even if it were not committed to writing until after Mark was composed. Nor does it follow that Matthew and Luke could not have had access to earlier sources that appear not to have been used by Mark. The same logic applies to non-canonical gospels, although considerations about the relative dating of these texts must be taken into account – most scholars put the canonical gospels in the late first century, and non-canonical gospels in the second century. Therefore there may be a greater temporal distance between the non-canonical and canonical gospels than there is between canonical gospels. This needs to be recognised, but it is important also to acknowledge the often limited evidence on which these standard dates are based.

Second, similar issues arise when the fourth gospel is compared with the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Most scholars now see John as having known at least Mark, but it does not necessarily follow that distinctive Johannine tradition is therefore of no bearing on the historical Jesus. Again, the same logic applies to the non-canonical gospels. Further, it may be the case that John's literary and theological differences from the synoptic gospels may provide something of a bridge between the synoptics and certain non-canonical gospels.

VI. The content of some non-canonical gospels: a very brief overview

Having argued that at least some of the texts to which modern scholars refer as non-canonical gospels share significant generic affinities with the canonical gospels, and that there is no good reason not to refer to them as gospels, I turn next to a brief and selective overview of some of these texts. Since my reason for doing so is to consider what evidence, if any, they might provide for the historical Jesus, I shall focus on those that are more similar to the canonical texts. Two criteria shall guide me: (1) a setting that is at least ostensibly consistent with what we know of Second Temple Judaism in first-century Galilee and Judea and (2) an interest in presenting what Jesus said and/or did. This decision might be criticised on the grounds that it necessarily means that I favour sources precisely because that are consistent rather than inconsistent with canonical evidence, but it may be justified on the solely historical grounds that the historical Jesus needs to fit within a Palestinian and Jewish context rather than a Gnostic context that presupposes later intellectual currents. I do not exclude the possibility that Gnosticising trends, or beliefs that would be attractive to later Gnostics, were present in first-century Jewish contexts. Neither do I exclude the possibility that early traditions might be preserved in later Gnostic texts, but I do assume that any portrait of Jesus which presupposes well-developed Gnostic beliefs cannot be considered to depend on early tradition. Therefore it is likely to shed little light

on the historical Jesus, although it may tell us much about how some followers of Jesus understood his ongoing significance. Thus I make no further mention of texts such as the *Gospel of Truth*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Judas*. The only text often referred to as a 'Gnostic Gospel' to which I will devote any further attention is the *Gospel of Thomas*, for it is sometimes thought to contain sayings that may go back to the historical Jesus. The others that I will consider, albeit very briefly, are as follows: the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, POxy 840, PEgerton 2, the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Thomas*.

1. The Gospel of the Ebionites

The *Gospel of the Ebionites* is one of two or three 'Jewish-Christian' gospels that may be partially reconstructed on the basis of what appear to be citations from, or references to, particular gospel traditions in the writings of certain Church Fathers.²⁴ There is no independent manuscript tradition for any of these texts, so they are available to us only as they are preserved by these other writers. Broadly speaking, these excerpts contain material that is concerned with things that Jesus did or said. Thus (assuming that these fragments may be considered representative of the texts from which they are excerpted) there is no compelling reason why these writings should not be considered generically similar to the canonical gospels. Therefore both in content and in form these texts are closer to the canonical gospels than they are to some other non-canonical texts that refer to themselves, or have been referred to by others, as gospels.

The title *Gospel of the Ebionites* originates with modern scholars. Epiphanius, who is the only source for this text, refers to it variously as the Gospel according to Matthew and the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*. He notes the association of this text with a putative original written in Hebrew by Matthew, but also appears to question that this was the case. So confusing are the ways in which he refers to this text that it seems better to base any conclusions about it entirely on what may be gleaned from the evidence of the excerpts themselves. Two things seem clear. Not only are the excerpts written in Greek, but they appear to contain material that depends on at least Matthew and Luke.²⁵ This use of the synoptic gos-

24 In this discussion of the *Gospel of the Ebionites* I draw heavily on some work previously published as A. Gregory, 'Jewish-Christian Gospels' *ExpTim* 118 (2007) 521-29, and reprinted in P. Foster (ed.) *Non-Canonical Gospels* (London: Continuum, 2008). For another recent introduction to this gospel, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (T&T Clark International, 2003), 51-54. Translations of the text are available in Bart D. Ehrman (ed.), *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not make it into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), J. Keith Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), W. Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha, Volume One: Gospels and Related Writings* (ET edited by R. McL. Wilson; Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1991).

25 See D. A. Bertrand, 'L'Évangile des Ébionites: une harmonie évangélique antérieure au Diatessaron', *NTS* 26 (1980) 548-63; A. Gregory, 'Prior or posterior? The *Gospel of the Ebionites* and the Gospel of Luke', *NTS* 51.3 (2005) 344-60.

pels, together with the presence in one excerpt of a pun that works only in Greek, strongly suggests that Greek was the language in which this text was composed.

The use that this gospel (or gospel harmony, as it is often described) makes of both Matthew and Luke means that it can be dated no earlier than a time when these two works were in circulation. This means that it could hardly have been written much before the end of the first century, and probably sometime later than that. It must also have been written before the late fourth century, when Epiphanius composed his *Panarion*, but the internal evidence of the text gives little help in establishing more precise dates within this range. If it is to be identified with the Gospel according to Matthew that Irenaeus said that Ebionites used, this would place its date of composition before the final quarter of the second century. That would certainly be late enough to draw on Matthew and Luke in the way that its author appears to have done, and would place the composition of this text around the time of the composition of other gospel harmonies such as the *Diatessaron*. However the *Diatessaron* draws on John as well as the synoptic gospels, so it has been suggested that the *Gospel of the Ebionites* should be dated around 150 on the grounds that its author could not have failed to use John had he been writing any later than this.²⁶ However this seems to me little more than an argument from silence, and it is particularly problematic because it is applied to a text that survives only in part. So little of the text is extant that it seems unsafe to assume either that its author did not draw on the fourth gospel, or that he could not have had a good reason for choosing not to do so.

Its use of material drawn from at least Matthew and Luke and its difference from its sources in certain respects raise the question of whether its author differed from his identifiable sources because he had other sources that he preferred, and that might be of greater historical value, or because he adapted earlier traditions according to his own theological purposes. There is widespread agreement that the latter explanation is the more likely explanation. Thus, for example, this gospel's portrayal of John's vegetarian diet (he eats honey cakes rather than locusts, a pun on the Greek words ἐγκρίς and ἀκρίδες) more likely reflects the author's own preference for a vegetarian diet than any historical tradition going back to the earliest followers of John and/or Jesus. This may be explained either as part of an ascetic outlook, or as reflecting a Roman aversion to the eating of locusts; locusts were kosher, so it is difficult to see this presentation of John's diet as vegetarian as arising from Jewish dietary concerns.

Two other excerpts that may be noted each contain sayings attributed to Jesus. One is a statement in which Jesus says, 'I came to abolish the sacrifices, and if you will not desist making sacrifices, wrath will not desist from you' (30.16.5). A partial parallel with Matthew 5.17 may be noted, but Epiphanius presents the saying to support his claim that the Ebionites believed that Christ was a creature, an archangel who came and instructed that sacrifices should be abolished.

26 A. F. J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition*, 29; more cautiously, Bertrand, 'L'Évangile des Ébionites', 551.

It is introduced in the course of a protracted if not altogether clear account of Ebionite Christology. Similar objections to sacrifice are found also in the *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* and are one of a number of parallels between that text and the *Gospel of the Ebionites*. If it were accepted as a saying of the historical Jesus, it would accentuate but not distort his critique of the Temple cult.

Another excerpt records Jesus as saying 'I did not earnestly desire to eat meat with you this Passover' (30.22.4) If this is to be read alongside John's non-locust diet, it might be taken to support those who interpret the text as advocating vegetarianism. If, however, it is read alongside Jesus' saying about the abolition of sacrifices it may be seen as concerned primarily with the abolition of the sacrificial cult. Either way, this testimony to a Jesus who expressed reluctance to participate in the Passover Meal would be at variance with the evidence of the canonical gospels, and there is no good reason to privilege a source found in a demonstrably late and dependent text over the evidence of the texts on which it clearly draws.

2. POxy 840

Papyrus Oxyrhyncus 840²⁷ is a single parchment fragment, probably from a miniature codex rather than an amulet. It was probably produced c. 300-350, and there are palaeographical clues that suggest that it may have been part of an extended collection of gospel stories. This collection, suggests Michael Kruger, 'may have looked quite similar to the canonical gospels'.²⁸ The presence of material apparently influenced by redactional portions of all four canonical gospels suggests that the text can be dated no earlier than the second century, when all four gospels were in circulation.

The text, which begins and ends mid-sentence, opens with Jesus teaching his disciples. Jesus then takes his disciples to the Temple, where he enters into dispute with a Pharisaic high-priest about whether he and disciples are allowed to be inside the place of purification and to see the holy vessels that it contains. There is no reason to deny the biographical character of the story, though it is of course impossible to know anything more of the text from which it came. The text's interest in matters of ritual purity and Temple worship is certainly conducive to a Second Temple Jewish setting, but certain details in the text have raised questions about its historical veracity. Thus François Bovon has argued that the fragment is better understood as reflecting not first-century Jewish debates about purity but second- or third-century Christian controversies about the validity of water baptism. Michael Kruger, however, disputes Bovon's claim that certain details of the fragment fit better with what we know of early Christianity

27 For recent introductions, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (T&T Clark International, 2003), 26-27; Michael Kruger, *The Gospel of the Savior: An Analysis of POxy. 840 and its Place in the Gospel Traditions of Early Christianity* (*TENT*, 1) Leiden: Brill, 2005. Translations of the text are available in Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*.

28 Kruger, *The Gospel of the Savior*, 61.

than of Judaism, and argues that each disputed point would have been ‘consistent within the known context of early Judaism, if not highly probable’.

If (as seems likely) Bovon is correct, there is little reason to find here any evidence for the historical Jesus, for the text is written by a later Christian author unfamiliar with the Second Temple period. But even Kruger claims little more. His belief that the text presupposes all four canonical gospels causes him to date it no earlier than the second century, and he argues only that its setting is plausible, not that it is authentic. Even if it were considered authentic, it would add little to (but would corroborate) the canonical gospels’ account of Jesus’ opposition to the way in which the Temple cult was administered. It would also tell us more about the Temple cult, and would provide evidence that there were stronger links between Pharisees and priests than is usually thought to be the case. The latter point might conceivably provide independent support for the way in which Matthew links chief priests and Pharisees in his account of Jesus’ trial, but might equally (or more likely) be dependent on Matthew for this point.

3. *PEgerton 2*

Papyrus Egerton 2²⁹ consists of three fragments of a papyrus codex. Two are written on each side and allow some text to be reconstructed; the third is so fragmentary that it allows us to read only a few isolated words. When first discovered, the manuscript was dated to c. 150, solely on the basis of its palaeography. However the discovery and identification of another part of the same manuscript, P. Koln 255, has led to it being redated to c. 200. This makes it more difficult to argue that its text – which contains elements both of a synoptic and of a Johannine character – comes from a stage before the early gospel tradition bifurcated into synoptic and Johannine forms. As Frans Neirynck has argued, the evidence suggests ‘that the text is post-Synoptic and that the writer probably had some acquaintance with the three Synoptic Gospels and almost certainly with Luke.’³⁰

In one episode (recorded on the front part of the first fragment), Jesus is in dispute with Jewish opponents identified as lawyers. In another (recorded on the back of the first fragment), he escapes from opponents, presumably also Jewish, now identified as rulers, and goes on to heal a leper. In the third incident (recorded on the front of the second fragment), Jesus answers a trick question about what should be rendered to kings; in the fourth (recorded on its back) he appears to perform a miracle by the side of the Jordan. Nothing is dramatically

29 For recent introductions, see Tobias Nicklas, ‘Papyrus Egerton 2 – the “Unknown Gospel”’ *ExpTim* 118 (2007) 261-66, reprinted in P. Foster (ed.) *Non-Canonical Gospels* (London: Continuum, 2008), and Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (T&T Clark International, 2003), 23-26. Translations of the text are available in Ehrman (ed.), *Lost Scriptures*, Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*.

30 Frans Neirynck, ‘Papyrus Egerton 2 and the Healing of a Leper’ in F. van Segbroeck (ed.), *Evangelica II: 1982-1991 Collected Essays by Frans Neirynck* (BETL 99; Leuven: Leuven University Press and Uitgeverij Peeters), 773-784; quotation from p.779.

different from incidents recorded in the canonical gospels. Even if its content were largely independent of those texts in their final form, there is little here that would lead to any significant reassessment of the historical Jesus as he might be reconstructed on the basis of canonical texts.

4. The Gospel of Peter

The text to which modern scholars refer as the *Gospel of Peter*³¹ is known primarily through the remains of one codex containing some or all of four different texts that was unearthed at Akhmîm in Egypt. This manuscript is dated to the eighth century on palaeographical grounds. The text takes its title from the fact that at one point the text identifies Peter as its narrator. It is possible that it is the same *Gospel of Peter* that Eusebius says was read at Rhossus around the end of the second century, especially if a fragment of Greek text (P.Oxy. 2949), dateable to the second or third century, is considered part of the *Gospel of Peter*.

As copied in the Akhmîm Fragment, the surviving portion of the *Gospel of Peter* both begins and ends mid-sentence. This may mean that it was copied from a longer source, which may have begun much earlier than Jesus' trial, but we simply do not know. The text that survives is clearly of a biographical nature, akin to the canonical gospels, but restricted to Jesus' passion and resurrection. It begins with a scene in which Herod, his judges and certain unidentified Jews refuse to wash their hands, causing Pilate (whose own handwashing appears to be presupposed) to leave. It then continues with an account of Jesus being mocked, crucified and buried, and of him leaving the tomb and appearing to his disciples. Jesus' deposition and resurrection are each accompanied by great portents. The ground shakes when Jesus is taken down from the cross, and the risen Jesus, who emerges from the tomb supported by two others, has a head that goes above the skies, and is followed by a cross that speaks. Such legendary details clearly go beyond what is recorded in the canonical gospels, but they do not contradict them and may therefore be regarded as a heightening of those earlier accounts. The same may be said of the way in which the text very pointedly blames the Jews for Jesus' death.

At no point is there any material that seems likely to provide better access to the historical Jesus than is found in canonical accounts, although Crossan's claim that this text provides access to a much earlier 'Cross Gospel' that was a source both for the *Gospel of Peter* and the canonical gospels may be noted.³²

31 For recent introductions, see P. Foster, 'The Gospel of Peter' *ExpTim* 118 (2007) 31-25, reprinted in P. Foster (ed.) *Non-Canonical Gospels* (London: Continuum, 2008) and Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (T&T Clark International, 2003), 82-88. Translations of the text are available in Ehrman (ed.), *Lost Scriptures*, Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha*.

32 John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross that spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

5. *The Gospel according to Thomas*

Of the various texts that I have surveyed, the *Gospel according to Thomas*³³ is the most likely source of any non-canonical tradition that might go back to the historical Jesus. It is also the most difficult of these texts to describe as a gospel on account of its almost complete lack of any narrative structure. It consists of 114 sayings ascribed to Jesus, and survives in one complete Coptic text and a number of Greek fragments. The Coptic text, discovered in 1945 as part of a large collection at Nag Hammadi, in Egypt, is contained in a codex that may have been written in the third or fourth century. This codex includes the title *The Gospel according to Thomas*. Since this is a Greek idiom, rather than Coptic, it seems likely that it was copied from an earlier Greek version of the gospel that already bore this name. Three Greek fragments are extant, each apparently from a different manuscript, at least one of which may be dated to the second century. These Greek fragments differ not insignificantly from the Coptic, so those portions of the Coptic text that contain no parallel with these fragments may also differ from the earlier (and probably original) Greek.

That the Coptic text depends at least sometimes on Matthew and Luke seems clear, for it draws on redactional passages from each text. Such redactional material is present also in the earlier Greek text, so it too was written after at least some of the canonical gospels were already in circulation.³⁴ Yet there remains the possibility that at other points *Thomas* may include sayings that go back to Jesus but were not preserved in canonical texts. This possibility should not be ignored, but it is very difficult indeed to know how it should be assessed. If we use the criteria that those sayings that are more readily consistent with a Second Temple Jewish context are more likely to go back to Jesus than are more Gnosticising sayings, it remains unclear that anything attributed to the historical Jesus would make any significant difference to a reconstruction based mainly on canonical accounts.

Four sayings from *Thomas* will illustrate this point. The first is saying 8, the parable of the fisherman and the large fish:

And he said, 'The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a fine large fish. He threw all the small fish back into the sea and chose the large fish without difficulty. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.'³⁵

33 For recent introductions, see April DeConick, 'The Gospel of Thomas' *ExpTim* 118 (2007) 469-79, reprinted in P. Foster (ed.) *Non-Canonical Gospels* (London: Continuum, 2008), and Hans-Josef Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (T&T Clark International, 2003), 107-123. Translations of the text are available in Ehrman (ed.), *Lost Scriptures*, Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* and in James Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (revised edition; Leiden: Brill, 1996).

34 For a measured and authoritative discussion, see Christopher Tuckett, 'Thomas and the Synoptics' *NovT* 30 (1982) 132-157.

35 Here and below I follow the translation by Thomas O. Lambdin, in James Robinson (ed.) *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (revised edition; Leiden: Brill, 1996).

As Otfried Hofius observes, this parable fits a Palestinian context, and shows close links with two parables found in Matthew: the parable of treasure hidden in a field (Mt 13.44) and the parable of the pearl of great value (Mt 13.45-46). Hence, he suggests, it may be one of either two things: 'an old independent tradition which may have as much claim to authenticity as the Matthean parables', or a secondary composition, based on the parable of the pearl found in Matthew and influenced by the form in which that parable appears as saying 76 of *Thomas*.³⁶

The second saying, this time with no significant parallel in the synoptic gospels, is saying 82: 'Jesus said, "He who is near me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom."' This saying (like many parables found in the canonical gospels) is enigmatic, but it is not at all inconsistent with a Palestinian context and does not demand a Gnostic interpretation. There is no clear reason not to think that it may go back to a very early stage in the transmission of sayings ascribed to Jesus, but it is difficult to see how it would make any significant difference to the historical Jesus as he might be reconstructed on the basis of traditions found predominantly in the synoptic gospels.

This does not mean, however, that *Thomas* may not contain material that might challenge the way in which the synoptic gospels are used as sources for the earliest accessible form of sayings attributed to Jesus. This may be illustrated by sayings 65 and 66. The former, saying 65, is a version of the parable of the wicked tenants. The latter, saying 66, appears to be an allusion to Psalm 118.22. The juxtaposition of this parable and this saying is paralleled in all three synoptic gospels, but whereas the synoptic gospels clearly link the saying to the parable that precedes it, *Thomas* presents them as two entirely separate (albeit consecutive) sayings. This is one of a number of factors that have led some scholars to argue that *Thomas* gives us access to these sayings in a more primitive and less developed stage than the form in which they are found in the synoptic gospels and that therefore his text brings us closer to the historical Jesus than do the synoptic accounts.

Thomas's version of the parable of the tenants also differs from those in the synoptic gospels in several ways. It is shorter and simpler than them, and does not include what appears to be an allusion to Isaiah 5.1-7 in all three of their accounts. Neither does it include within the parable anything to suggest a link between Jesus and the son whom the wicked tenants kill, just as it makes no connection between the parable and the saying that follows. Therefore it does not lend itself to be read in allegorical way as a parable about God's dealing with his people or about Jesus as God's son whom his people reject and kill. For reasons like this, some scholars conclude that the version of the parable found in *Thomas* is earlier than, and independent of, those in the synoptic accounts. Thus, they argue, it may offer access to a parable and a saying of Jesus, each in a form that has not been reworked to fit with the developing post-Easter beliefs of the early church. Others disagree, and point to details in *Thomas* that may reflect

36 Otfried Hofius, 'Unknown Sayings of Jesus' in Peter Stuhlmacher (ed.) *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 336-360, quotation from 353.

its dependence upon the version of the parable in one or more of the synoptic gospels.³⁷ The evidence is finely balanced, although I myself am inclined to see *Thomas's* version of the parable as post- rather than pre-synoptic. If we could be confident that at this point *Thomas* were earlier than and independent of the canonical gospels, this would be an example of how its evidence could help scholars to understand how the authors of the canonical gospels reshaped sayings of Jesus in order to explain his death (a move that *Thomas* does not make). If, however, *Thomas* does depend (even indirectly) on the synoptic gospels for his version of this parable, it would point to the opposite conclusion, namely that some of Jesus' followers appear to have been much less interested in Jesus' death than were those whose theology is more obviously in continuity with that of canonical theologians like Mark and Paul.

This survey of four sayings from *Thomas* may appear somewhat meagre in terms of its results,³⁸ but it is important not to overlook this gospel as a potential source for the historical Jesus simply because it contains only sayings that are not embedded in a clear narrative setting. There is widespread agreement among early Christian sources that Jesus was a teacher, so a collection of sayings attributed to him is hardly without some biographical import, not least if it might presuppose a wider narrative framework in which these sayings would be heard.³⁹ This observation, I believe, means that we should take the *Thomas* seriously as a gospel-like text, even if it is to be considered part of what Burrige has characterised as the tertiary development of the gospel genre⁴⁰ in which the narrative setting is greatly diminished. But, even if this argument is rejected, that would not make *Thomas* any less likely a source for sayings that might go back to the historical Jesus. Neither here nor elsewhere in this essay do I wish to argue that any text labelled generically as a gospel must be a reliable source for the historical Jesus. But I oppose utterly any attempt to deny ancient texts this title if that is intended as a way of ruling them out of the discussion without first reading them on their own merits and asking what, if anything, they might contrib-

37 For a succinct discussion, with further bibliography, see Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 276-299. Snodgrass argues that *Thomas* (here as elsewhere) depends on the synoptic tradition. For an important recent defence of *Thomas's* version of the parable as independent of the synoptic gospels, see John S. Kloppenborg, *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine* (WUNT 195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 242-271.

38 For a different and much more maximalist perspective on how *Thomas* may be used as a source for the historical Jesus, see Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1993) 225-241.

39 Here a parallel with the traditions contained in the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain might be instructive. When contained in Matthew or Luke, such teachings certainly contribute to their biographical portrait of Jesus. But some of these sayings were also known to the author of *1 Clement*, apparently in a different form to that of the synoptic gospels. Do the sayings in *1 Clement* contribute any less to our understanding of the historical Jesus as a teacher than those in Matthew or Luke?

40 See above, 8-9.

ute to a historical reconstruction of what Jesus may have said or done. It would be no more appropriate to exclude *Thomas* on the grounds that it is not a gospel than it is to exclude the indisputably early testimony of Paul on the grounds that he wrote not gospels but letters.

VII. Conclusion

I have presented here very little non-canonical gospel tradition that might be claimed as clear evidence for the historical Jesus, and I have argued that one of the criteria for establishing such material is precisely that it should be consistent with the canonical gospels at least insofar that it portrays a Jewish Jesus who would fit in first-century Galilee and Judea. Thus these results add little to what might be said of the historical Jesus on the basis of the canonical gospels. For entirely historical reasons, the canonical gospels remain our most important sources for the historical Jesus. They were very probably written at an earlier date than any other gospels, and are more clearly rooted in Second Temple Judaism than those other texts.

Perhaps more significant, however, is the way in which this survey may remind us of, and underline, some of the difficulties involved in extracting historical information from the canonical gospels themselves. Readers who are not as familiar with non-canonical as with canonical texts may find the former more bizarre or outlandish than the latter. If so, they need to ask to what extent that reaction depends on the content and claims of the texts or on the frameworks and lenses through which they approach them. We ought to be careful, notes Tony Chartrand-Burke, that we do not forget that both canonical and non-canonical gospels contain material that few of us would naturally be predisposed to accept as true. Nor should we forget that many critical historians who are Christians and do accept their claims do so because of the theological authority that they ascribe to these texts, not just because of their work as historians. It is not fair to characterise only the non-canonical texts as ‘bizarre embroidering’, as if there were some clear distinction in kind rather than in degree between their content and that of canonical texts. As Chartrand-Burke observes:

Certainly some parts of the Christian Apocrypha are bizarre to modern readers. But the New Testament texts too are pretty bizarre. The canonical gospels feature a man who is born from a virgin, speaks to voices from heaven, walks on water, multiplies food, heals afflictions, and rises from the grave. How are these things any less “bizarre” than a talking cross (*Gospel of Peter*) or a cursing Jesus (*Infancy Thomas*; see the canonical Acts for plenty of examples of cursing holy men)? We all (scholars and non-scholars) know the canonical texts so well that often we give little thought to how strange these texts are.⁴¹

41 Tony Chartrand-Burke, ‘Top Ten Faulty Arguments in Anti-Apocrypha Apologetics (Part 2)’, 9. Posted 9 August 2007 on ‘Apocryphicity: A weblog devoted to the study of the Christian Apocrypha’ (<http://www.tonychartrand-burke.com/apocryphicity>). Last accessed 17 August 2007.

Chartrand-Burke's point is important. The way in which readers who are already familiar with canonical gospels then react when they read the non-canonical gospels for the first time (which is often to judge those new texts to be strange or bizarre) may not be dissimilar to the way in which many others respond to the canonical gospels when they read them for the first time. There is a real danger that readers who are familiar with the canonical gospels may domesticate them and take for granted the claims that they make. If so, readers of the canonical gospels may benefit from reading non-canonical gospels in order to remind them just how extraordinary are the claims of all the gospels, even if not all are equally useful witnesses to the historical Jesus. Thus the contribution of this survey may lie less in its demonstration that non-canonical gospels are of significantly less value than the canonical gospels as potential witnesses to the historical Jesus than in its reminder of how bold, startling and extravagant are the claims of the canonical gospels – theological claims that lie beyond what historians may be able to assess. For however reliable we believe their testimony to be, the fact remains that these texts make claims about God acting in space and time, claims that historians can neither prove nor disprove by the normal means of historical investigation.

Abstract

This essay offers a brief introduction to selected non-canonical gospels as potential evidence for the historical Jesus. I argue (contra N. T. Wright) that many of these texts may be referred to appropriately as gospels, and that historians should approach both canonical and non-canonical gospels in precisely the same way. I then survey six texts to show what this might mean. I conclude that the non-canonical gospels offer little evidence about the historical Jesus, but that reading them can teach New Testament scholars useful lessons about the way in which we approach the canonical gospels.

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