

The Apocryphal Gospels

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The Apocryphal Gospels

Jesus Traditions outside the Bible

Jens Schröter

Translated by Wayne Coppins



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THE APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS
Jesus Traditions outside the Bible

Early Christian Apocrypha 9
Westar Tools and Translation

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To my friends and colleagues at the Research Centre
“Beyond Canon,”
University of Regensburg

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Preface to the English Edition

THE PRESENT WORK IS the revised and expanded English translation of my book *Die apokryphen Evangelien: Jesusüberlieferungen außerhalb der Bibel* (Munich: Beck, 2019). The work on the translation was completed in 2020–2021 during a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Studies “Beyond Canon: Heterotopias of Religious Authority in Ancient Christianity” at the University of Regensburg, funded by the German Research Foundation. I am grateful to my colleagues and friends for a wonderful time in Regensburg.

The book provides a survey of texts outside the New Testament that contain traditions about Jesus’ birth, ministry, suffering, and death, as well as his appearances as the Risen One. Many of these texts are preserved only in fragmentary form. Quite a few of them were also unknown for a long time because they were lost in the sands of the Egyptian desert or left neglected on the shelves of museums and libraries. Since the end of the nineteenth century, many of them have been rediscovered, published, and translated into modern languages. In this way, our knowledge of the apocryphal Jesus traditions has been significantly expanded and changed.

Jesus traditions outside of the New Testament have played an important role in texts and visual presentations in the history of Christianity from early on. In particular, narratives about the birth and childhood of Jesus as well as traditions about his passion have deeply influenced Christian piety. Through the discovery of additional texts since the nineteenth century, the spectrum has expanded, for example, through writings that present the teaching of the risen Jesus and set entirely new emphases vis-à-vis the presentations of his activity in the Gospels of the New Testament.

In recent scholarship it has been asked whether the apocryphal gospels contain information that changes our picture of the historical Jesus.

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This question will also be taken up in this book. The value of the apocryphal gospels—as can already be said at this point—resides not so much in their contribution to the historical reconstruction of Jesus' life, but in the fact that they provide glimpses of aspects of his ministry and passion that became meaningful in certain periods of the history of Christianity. Thus, the search for historically reliable traditions in the apocryphal gospels is less productive than the interpretation of these texts as receptions of the Jesus figure—his ministry, suffering and death, as well as his resurrection—in different periods of Christianity. This shall be sketched out in more detail by means of brief introductions to the relevant writings.

Many thanks are due to Wayne Coppins who has translated the book into English with admirable expertise, which has already proven itself on many occasions. As with previous projects, the collaboration with him was very enjoyable and productive. Likewise, I am thankful to the series editors, Janet Spittler, Tony Burke, and Brent Landau, for including the book in their series. Janet and Tony have read the manuscript very carefully and made many important and valuable comments that helped to improve it, both in language and content. I owe them a lot of thanks! Finally, I would like to thank the publisher, Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, for their friendly and competent collaboration.

Note: Translations from apocryphal gospels are from Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels*, unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

Gospels in Early Christianity

“Apocryphal” Gospels and the Gospels of the New Testament

IN ADDITION TO THE Gospels of the New Testament, numerous other writings were composed about Jesus and persons in his immediate environment from an early time. These are often designated as “apocryphal”—i.e., hidden—gospels (the Greek word *apókryphos* means “hidden”). They contain numerous traditions about Jesus that go beyond the New Testament and sometimes even contradict it. If these writings are included, then the Jesus picture of Christianity becomes much more varied than the picture that can be derived from the Bible. Moreover, with regard to the designation “apocryphal,” we have to ask in what sense these texts and their pictures of Jesus were or are indeed “hidden.” Today, the apocryphal writings are readily accessible in critical editions and translations and are kept hidden by no one. They do not, however, belong to the Bible. How did there come to be a distinction between biblical and “apocryphal” gospels?

Around 180 CE, Irenaeus of Lyon composed a large-scale work in five books titled *Against Heresies*. In this writing he provides extensive critical engagement with teachings that, in his view, falsify the truth of the Christian confession. In Book 3, he comes to speak of the witness of the Gospels. Right at the beginning, he emphasizes that the gospel of God

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has been handed down to the church through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This one gospel is, therefore, “four-formed,” just as there are also four corners of the earth, four directions of the wind, and four cherubim before the throne of God (cf. Ezek 1:5–10 and Rev 4:6–11). The church spread over the whole earth is thus based on four pillars—namely, the four Gospels—and corresponds in this way to the order of the world, which reflects at the same time the Son of God’s economy of salvation, as well as the four covenants that God made with Adam, Noah, Moses, and, finally, through the gospel.

There is obviously a problem concealed behind this forceful rationale of the *fourfold* form of the *one* gospel. Irenaeus is here defending this four-form against its contestation by people who claim that the Gospels are not free of error and that they also do not agree with one another. He also argues that Christian groups or individual teachers such as the Ebionites, Marcion, and the Valentinians rely on only one of the four Gospels and interpret it against its sense. According to him, this meaning discloses itself only from the overall consideration of the one four-formed gospel. Finally, Irenaeus writes about the followers of Valentinus, a Christian teacher who was active in Rome around 140 CE, and vehemently contests their claim that they possess more gospels than the four. In this context, he mentions a work that they call the “Gospel of Truth,” although, in his view, it does not, in fact, contain the truth handed down by the apostles (on this, see the section on the *Gospel of Truth* in chap. 6).

Irenaeus’ remarks show that it was by no means uncontroversial whether *all four* Gospels and *only these gospels* present the authoritative witness to Jesus. Irenaeus, therefore, defends the four-ness of the Gospels both against its reduction to only *one* gospel and against the view that there are, beyond them, other gospels that are to be regarded as authoritative. After all, it is by no means obvious that there should be precisely *four* gospels that contain the authoritative witness to Jesus for the church rather than one or two or three. One could just as easily supply rationales for these numbers—for example, with reference to the one God, to the two natures of Jesus Christ, or to the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The fact that Irenaeus insists that the truth is based on four Gospels can only be explained, therefore, by the circumstance that these four Gospels were already widespread and recognized in Christian communities. And this is also the only plausible explanation for why all three of the Gospels that are quite similar to one another—namely, the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke (which are also called Synoptic,

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i.e., Gospels that can be read together)—made it into the New Testament and not just one or two of them. This is especially noteworthy in the case of the Gospel of Mark, whose content is almost completely contained in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Irenaeus uses the term *euangelion*—the Greek word for “good news”—in two ways: 1) for the one gospel of Jesus Christ in its fourfold form, and 2) as a designation for the individual writings, which are called the “Gospel according to Matthew,” the “Gospel according to Mark,” the “Gospel according to Luke,” and the “Gospel according to John.” He presupposes, therefore, that the term *euangelion* is used as a designation for certain writings, while also being familiar with the meaning “good news (of Jesus Christ).” This double usage can be traced back to the beginnings of Christianity. In his letters, Paul frequently mentions “the gospel,” which he describes more specifically as “the gospel of God,” “the gospel of Jesus Christ,” and, also, as “my gospel.” With “gospel” Paul thus designates the message of God’s saving action through Jesus Christ that he proclaims. In the Gospel of Mark, the term *euangelion* is then applied to the story of the ministry and fate of Jesus. The first sentence already reads “The beginning of the *euangelion* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” *Euangelion* then occurs at multiple points in the Gospel of Mark: Jesus proclaims “the *euangelion* of God” (1:14), Jesus and the *euangelion* are mentioned alongside each other (8:35; 10:29); and the *euangelion* is to be proclaimed to all the nations in the world (13:10; 14:9). In the Gospel of Mark, the proclamation of the gospel of the imminent reign of God through Jesus is thus closely connected with his activity and fate.

From this starting point, the term *euangelion* became established as a designation for the narratives of the activity and fate of Jesus around the turn from the first to the second century. In order to distinguish them from each other, they were called “According to Matthew,” “According to Mark,” etc. These designations thus became necessary only in the moment at which multiple gospels were known and used together. The distinctive designation “Gospel according to + name” expresses the view that there is *one* gospel available in different forms. Later gospels—for example, the “Gospel according to Thomas” or the “Gospel according to Mary”—take up this designation and apply it to their presentations of Jesus. In this way, they claim that they likewise—or in contrast to the other gospels—contain authoritative Jesus traditions. By contrast, the plural “gospels” is first encountered around the middle of the second century CE in the writings of the Christian philosopher and martyr Justin. He

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designates the writings of the apostles as “memoirs” (memorabilia, a literary characterization that was also used for Xenophon’s work *Memorabilia of Socrates*) and explains that the “Memoirs of the Apostles” are also called “gospels” (1 *Apol.* 66.2). Later, the term “gospel” was also used for writings that do not call themselves “gospel” and that sometimes differ clearly from the Gospels of the New Testament. In this expanded meaning it is applied to texts that present the origin, teaching, activity, and fate of Jesus in different literary forms. This expansion has led to the fact that in the orbit of the Gospels we also find texts that deal with persons from the environment of Jesus, such as his parents, John the Baptist, and Pilate. Writings that relate to the person of Jesus with biographical intent can be gathered together in this expanded understanding as “gospels and related literature.”

The remarks of other early Christian theologians can be placed alongside those of Irenaeus. In his work *Stromateis* (“Patchworks” or “Miscellanies”), Clement of Alexandria, a contemporary of Irenaeus, quotes from a “Gospel according to the Egyptians,” but notes that the quotation does not come “from one of the four Gospels handed down to us”:

This is why Cassian says, “When Salome inquired when the things she had asked about would become known, the Lord replied: ‘When you (pl.) trample on the garment of shame and when the two become one and the male with the female is neither male nor female.’” The first thing to note, then, is that we do not find this saying in the four Gospels handed down to us, but in the Gospel according to the Egyptians. (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.92.2–93.1, trans. Ehrman/Pleše; see also below on the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*)

In another place he quotes a saying from the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*:

Which also is written in the Gospel according to the Hebrews:
He who marveled shall reign, and he who reigned shall rest.
(*Strom.* 2.45.5; see also 5.96.3; a similar saying occurs in the *Gospel of Thomas*, saying 2).

A letter of the bishop Serapion to one of his communities is quoted in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, which emerged in the first decades of the fourth century. The letter, which goes back to around 180 CE, mentions a “gospel under the name of Peter”:

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We, my brothers, receive Peter and all the apostles as we receive Christ, but the writings falsely attributed to them we are experienced enough to reject, knowing that nothing of the sort has been handed down to us.

When I visited you, I assumed that you all clung to the true Faith; so without going through the “gospel” alleged by them to be Peter’s, I said: “If this is the only thing that apparently puts childish notions into your heads, read it by all means.” But as, from information received, I now know that their mind had been ensnared by some heresy, I will make every effort to visit you again; so expect me in the near future.

It was obvious to me what kind of heresy Marcian upheld, though he contradicted himself through not knowing what he was talking about, as you will gather from this letter. But others have studied this same “gospel,” viz. the successors of those who originated it, known to us as Docetists and from whose teaching the ideas are mostly derived. With their comments in mind, I have been able to go through the book and draw the conclusion that while most of it accorded with the authentic teaching of the Savior, some passages were spurious additions. These I am appending to my letter. (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.12.3–6; trans. Williamson)

Finally, Origen, in his homilies on Luke, which he composed around 233/234 CE in Caesarea, notes that the church knows four Gospels, whereas the “heresy” knows many. Origen also lists some of the gospels of the “heresy”: a gospel “According to the Egyptians,” one that is called “According to the Twelve Apostles,” another issued under the name of Basilides as well as gospels called “According to Thomas” and “According to Matthias”:

You should know that not only four Gospels, but very many were composed. The Gospels we have were chosen from among these gospels and passed on to the churches. We can know this from Luke’s own prologue, which begins this way: “Because many have tried to compose an account.” The words “have tried” imply an accusation against those who rushed into writing gospels without the grace of the Holy Spirit. Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke did not “try” to write; they wrote their Gospels when they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Hence, “Many have tried to compose an account of the events that are clearly known among us.”

The Church has four Gospels. Heretics have very many. One of them is entitled “According to the Egyptians,” another

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“According to the Twelve Apostles.” Basilides, too, dared to write a gospel and give it his own name. “Many have tried” to write, but only four Gospels have been approved. Our doctrines about the Person of our Lord and Savior should be drawn from these approved Gospels. I know one gospel called “According to Thomas,” and another “According to Matthias.” We have read many others, too, lest we appear ignorant of anything, because of those people who think they know something if they have examined these gospels. But in all these questions we approve of nothing but what the Church approves of, namely only four canonical Gospels. (*Hom. Luc.* 1.1–2; trans. Lienhard)

Thus, around the turn from the second to the third century, there were a multiplicity of writings that called themselves “gospel.” Early Christian theologians, such as Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen, regarded the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the Gospels that contained the authoritative witness to Jesus of Nazareth, to his earthly activity, his resurrection, and his post-Easter appearances. Other writings that likewise claimed to be “gospels” were rejected by them as “heretical,” “forged,” or “apocryphal”—or at the very least, they were distinguished from the four Gospels. Other early Christian teachers—such as, e.g., Valentinus—by contrast, held a different view. According to their position, gospels that were composed later, either by themselves or their followers, or that besides the four Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John circulated among early communities, were important testimonies for the meaning of Jesus and his message as well.

The fundamental commonality of the Gospels that were included in the New Testament lies in the fact that they tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth from its beginning to his death and resurrection. At the same time, there are numerous differences among them. These pertain, for example, to the chronological and geographical presentation of the activity of Jesus, the characterization of his person, and the individual characteristics of his activity, such as his teaching and his powerful deeds. These differences surface most clearly between the Synoptic Gospels, on the one hand, and the Gospel of John, on the other. The Synoptic Gospels recount the establishment of the reign of God through the activity of Jesus and especially through his healings, his table fellowship, and his teaching in parables. The Gospel of John, by contrast, presents Jesus as the incarnate divine “Word” through which God’s glory has appeared in the world. This glory could be directly recognized in Jesus during his earthly activity:

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“The Word became flesh and we saw his glory” (John 1:14). In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks in large discourses about himself as revealer of the truth of God, as “light of the world,” “bread of life,” and “good shepherd,” and his deeds of power are “signs” of his divine origin. Thus, in comparison to the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John more clearly views Jesus’ earthly activity from the perspective of his resurrection and exaltation. It is already further removed from the historical events, even though it has also preserved historical information about the activity of Jesus.

Thus, the New Testament contains no unified picture of Jesus but different narratives with their own distinctive features. Historical-critical Jesus scholarship, which has its beginnings in the eighteenth century, therefore, saw itself confronted with the question of how a historical picture of the activity of Jesus can be produced from the Gospels’ different pictures of Jesus. Here, it reached the view—which is largely accepted up to the present—that the Synoptic Gospels are closer to the historical reality of the activity of Jesus than the Gospel of John. Historical-critical presentations of Jesus, therefore, usually take their orientation from the Synoptic Gospels, whereas the Gospel of John is regarded as a theologically-oriented interpretation of the person of Jesus that arose later and that, in terms of its language and content, primarily reflects the theology of its authors or the circle from which it comes.

The New Testament Gospels probably originated between 70 and 100 CE. The Gospel of Mark, as the oldest of them, was composed around 70 CE and used by the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The Gospel of John presupposes the other Gospels and interprets the activity of Jesus from a deepening theological perspective. In the second half of the second century CE, other gospels came into view. Some of these contain narratives about the birth and childhood of Jesus, others about his passion, and still others about his appearances and his teaching as the Risen One. These works usually presuppose the older Gospels and present the activity, teaching, and fate of Jesus in their own distinctive ways. In addition to the Gospels of the New Testament, they make recourse to other traditions, for example, to sayings of Jesus or to episodes recounting his activity. Thus, in the case of the “apocryphal” gospels, we are dealing with “creative reinterpretations” of the activity and teaching of Jesus as either continuations of the Gospels of the New Testament or as alternatives to them.

In the course of the first three centuries of Christianity, “authoritative” writings were distinguished from “disputed” and “rejected” (or

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“forged”) writings. This development ultimately culminated in the contrast between “canonized” and “apocryphal” writings. This is first encountered in the thirty-ninth Easter Letter of Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria from 367 CE. Around the middle of the fourth century, the term “canon”—which had previously been used for the ecclesiastically valid statements of faith—established itself as a designation for the books that were to be read in the church, which were demarcated from writings that were designated as “non-canonical” or “apocryphal.” This distinction was especially meant to regulate the reading of Christians—both in the church and also in private. According to Athanasius’ letter, “apocryphal” writings should not be read in the church at all and in private only in exceptional cases.

Writings that could be brought into agreement with the basic convictions of Christianity—which were summarized in the “rule of faith,” which could also be called “rule of truth” or “ecclesiastical rule”—were included in the Christian Bible. By contrast, writings for which this was, in the view of the ancient theologians mentioned above, not the case were rejected as “apocryphal” or “forged.” These works also included the “apocryphal gospels.” On the one hand, these works are known to us through references to them in the writings of early Christian theologians (sometimes they are mentioned only by their title and sometimes there are quotations from these writings). On the other hand, many of these works are known through numerous manuscripts that contain (often fragmentary) texts with “apocryphal” Jesus traditions.

In today’s usage, “apocryphal gospels” is an umbrella term for a broad spectrum of texts. It designates not only the writings rejected by early Christian authors but more generally those Jesus traditions that are not found in the New Testament. These diverse texts did not form a corpus in antiquity, which is why it is misleading to refer to these works, as sometimes occurs, with designations such as “apocryphal Bible,” “apocryphal New Testament,” or “Bible of the heretics.” Instead, “apocrypha of the New Testament” were first compiled in an edition by Johann Albert Fabricius in 1703 (second edition in 1719) with the title *Codex Apocryphus Novi Testamenti*. Here, “apocryphal” no longer meant “forged” or “heretical” writings. Instead, it meant writings that do not appear in the New Testament but are nevertheless of interest for the history of ancient Christianity. Since then, this usage has guided the investigation of these writings, which has resulted in numerous editions, translations, and

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studies (some of which can be found in the list of works at the end of the individual chapters of this book).

Editions of apocrypha of the New Testament or of ancient Christian apocrypha—and thus also of apocryphal gospels—can differ in content, depending on which writings are included in such a collection by the editors. The term “apocrypha” is usually retained, though not in the disparaging sense in which it is used by early Christian theologians. Sometimes the neutral designation “non-canonical” gospels is used. This describes the status of these texts in a way that is more impartial and, therefore, ultimately more appropriate. In any case, the expression “apocryphal” applies only to some of these texts, both in the meaning “hidden” and in the evaluation “forged” or “rejected.” The *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Apocryphon of John*, and the *Apocryphon of James* do, in fact, designate themselves as “apocryphal”—i.e., as writings that require special insight to be understood. This is not, however, the case for other writings, such as the so-called Infancy Gospels, the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and quite a few others. They were only designated as “apocryphal” in the disparaging sense later—i.e., they “became apocryphal” (on this, see the title of the work by Dieter Lührman in the list of resources at the end of this chapter).

Apocryphal gospels are thus important witnesses for the history of early Christianity—and then also for the history of the Middle Ages and of the modern period. They show that Christianity, reaching beyond the Gospels of the New Testament, has intensively occupied itself with the life of Jesus—with his birth and childhood, his family, his activity and teaching, his death and resurrection, and his appearances and instructions as the Risen One. Some of these works have had a deep impact upon the history of Christian piety. They have been translated into different languages, augmented, and presented in visual interpretations, such as mosaics and frescoes. By contrast, other apocryphal texts have disappeared from the Christian stream of tradition and have been rediscovered and published only in more recent times. In all their differences, the apocryphal gospels place the four Gospels that were included in the New Testament within a broader landscape of interpretations of the person of Jesus.

The apocryphal gospels provide important insights into the social history and history of piety of early Christianity. Some of these writings have had a significant impact upon how Jesus is viewed. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that only a few early Christian communities would have known—let alone possessed—all four of the Gospels that

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made it into the New Testament. Instead, it must be assumed that there were one or two of these Gospels in the communities, and beyond them, other writings, including works that are now assigned to the “apocryphal gospels.” Some apocryphal texts are witnesses to Christian and “gnostic” groups in the environment of Christianity as it was developing into the great church. The investigation of the apocryphal gospels, therefore, expands our knowledge about early Christianity, both in terms of its interpretations of the person of Jesus and with respect to the use of writings in churches and in private contexts.

The Study of the Apocryphal Gospels

Until the last third of the nineteenth century, the apocryphal gospels were primarily known through references and quotations in the writings of early Christian theologians and through some manuscripts, especially the Infancy Gospels and the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. The aforementioned edition of Fabricius from 1703 lists ancient Christian references to these writings and provides Greek or Latin texts. Moreover, this edition includes a section titled “On the Sayings of Christ, our Savior, which are not contained in the Four Canonical Gospels” (*De Dictis Christi Servatoris Nostri: Quae in quatuor Evangeliiis Canonicis non extant*).

Beyond this, numerous fragments with Jesus traditions—usually in Greek or Coptic—have been discovered in various locations. Some of these can be assigned to writings that were already known to us from references to apocryphal gospels in the writings of ancient Christian authors. In the case of quite a few of these fragments, however, it is not possible to provide a more precise specification of their content, length, or literary character. Finally, other writings are known to us only through quotations of ancient authors, though in some cases, the only information they provide is a title. All of these texts are readily accessible through editions, studies, and translations into modern European languages, such as English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and German. Moreover, there are quite a few introductory works that provide good overviews of these texts. As part of the Jesus tradition of early Christianity, the apocryphal gospels have also found a place in presentations of early Christian literature and the emergence of the New Testament canon. This has provided a far more multifaceted picture of the emergence of Christianity and its development in the first centuries.

The Apocryphal Gospels and the Quest for the Historical Jesus

Do the apocryphal gospels contain distinctive traditions about the historical Jesus that are independent of the Gospels of the New Testament? Do they even result in a different picture of Jesus from the one that can be sketched on the basis of the New Testament Gospels and that has established itself in Christian tradition? These questions have received much discussion in scholarship. This discussion has been driven, not least, by the tantalizing possibility that previously unknown “hidden” writings could bring us closer to the person of Jesus and the content of his activity and teaching. Already in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (in *Neue Hypothese über die Evangelisten als bloss menschliche Geschichtsschreiber betrachtet*) had speculated that a “Gospel of the Nazarenes,” which contained the oldest reports of the teaching and life of Jesus, lay behind the New Testament Gospels. The discovery of numerous apocryphal texts since the end of the nineteenth century gave new impetus to the idea that through apocryphal texts one could obtain new information about Jesus that the New Testament does not contain or even perhaps consciously keeps quiet. In some corners of North American scholarship, a view of Jesus that takes its orientation from the Jesus tradition of the New Testament is sometimes replaced by a one-sided privileging of the apocryphal texts, which allegedly contain old Jesus traditions that are independent of the New Testament Gospels. In the meantime, this sometimes naïve enthusiasm for the apocryphal gospels has given way to their sober historical placement in the history of Christianity.

The question of whether or not a writing made its way into the New Testament cannot, of course, answer the question of its historical value or of the age of the traditions contained within it. What an early Christian text contributes to the reconstruction of the activity and fate of Jesus is, therefore, independent of whether it is a “canonical” or “apocryphal” text. Apocryphal texts can contain historically reliable information and, conversely, New Testament texts contain legendary traditions that contribute nothing or only very little to the historical quest for Jesus (for example the narratives about the birth and childhood of Jesus in Matthew and Luke). In any case, the question of the historical value of the apocryphal texts cannot be answered in a sweeping manner but only with respect to each text on its own. Nevertheless, the previously mentioned testimonies of

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early Christian authors indicate that apocryphal gospels came into view later than the Gospels that were included in the New Testament and were then set over against these or measured by them. Accordingly, it seems that the Four Gospels, which would later represent the testimony of Jesus in the New Testament, had already gained acceptance in Christian communities before other gospels came into view.

In some cases, it is indeed possible—sometimes even probable—that apocryphal writings contain old Jesus traditions. We owe, however, the narrative framework in which these traditions are embedded to the Gospels that were included in the New Testament, which recount the activity of Jesus in Galilee and Jerusalem. This does not represent a value judgment about the apocryphal gospels. Their significance for the history of Christianity does not, however, reside in the bringing to light of new historical insights about Jesus. Rather, they are important witnesses to the variety of interpretations of Jesus and the social and cultural world of ancient Christianity.

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