

## JESUS IN THE NON-CANONICAL GOSPELS

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### A QUICK DISCLAIMER

This material I present is not in any sense intended to defy our sense of what really should be in Holy Writ. It is here to provide information that I consider significant for further discussion.

### WHAT IS A NON-CANONICAL GOSPEL?

None are full bios of Jesus, but all deal in some way with the person of Jesus.

None are considered “authoritative”, “inspired”, or “without error”.

All have characteristics which canonists did not want to include in the Holy Bible.

Some are considered heretical, part of the corpus of alternate Gnostic Gospels (writing of “losing sides” in the early writings of competing followers of Jesus).

Thirteen were found by archeologists digging in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945.

### IMPORTANCE OF NON-CANONICAL GOSPELS

Problems with Gnosticism include the soteriological issues of whether we are saved by the atoning sacrifice at Calvary, or by secret knowledge (“gnosis”), given by Jesus to his select few.

Are there Gnostic teachers in our churches today?

These gospels raise issues of orthodoxy—in effect, do they tell the truth—about our salvation and about the life, death & resurrection of Jesus?

They also clearly bring evidence of social and cultural biases of early Christians. For example, could any woman be an apostle?

### EXAMPLES OF NON-CANONICAL GOSPELS

#### 1. GOSPEL OF THOMAS (Nag Hammadi Codex 11,2, found by archaeologists in Egypt)

Not a biography. Rather a set of 114 sayings:

The last of these is the most interesting:

“Simon Peter said to them, ‘Mary should leave us, because women aren’t worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, am I to make her a man? So that she may become a living spirit too, she’s equal to you men, because every woman who makes herself manly will enter the kingdom of heaven.’”

#### 2. INFANCY GOSPEL OF THOMAS (Found in early Greek manuscript, Hagios Saba-- our earliest copy 11th century)

Early life of Jesus. Jesus makes sparrows at age five. He kills a child of Annas the high priest. He curses a careless child. He is accused of pushing another child from a roof. But then, he is remembered for his early healing powers (before his baptism in the Jordan River).

#### 3. GOSPEL OF MARY (MAGDALENE) (Greek Coptic codex, in Berlin Library, Greek 5th century, Greek papyrus rolls 3rd century)

The Gospel of Mary suggests that women do not need to change, as the Gospel of Thomas insists. Her Gospel relates that the risen Jesus appears to her, sharing his presence together with words of wisdom, which she is instructed to share with his male followers. Because of

this, several traditions claim her as the “Apostle to the Apostles.” This, of course, infuriates those who insist that Peter was the first pope. Although Dan Brown’s *The DeVinci Code*, claims that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, and she was pregnant with their son, Jude, at the time of Jesus’ death and resurrection, there is no such evidence. This despite the Gospel of Philip referenced in #4 below.

#### 4. GOSPEL OF PHILIP (Nag Hammadi Codex II, Coptic papyrus 4th/5th centuries)

Should be most interesting to Pentecostals because Philip had four prophesying daughters. In the early church, prophesy and the gift of healing were as important gifts as that of tongues. Philip also “revealed” that Mary Magdalene was the closest of Jesus’ students/followers, and that he frequently kissed her (on her cheek?) in sections 63-64.

#### 5. GOSPEL OF PETER (Akhmim Fragment, Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2949 and 4009 <2nd century>)

This gospel is about the trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The most interesting differences from canonical accounts are that Jesus showed no sign of pain, and instead of saying “My God, My God...” he screamed “My Power, the Power, you’ve left me!” Then Mary Magdalene ran away from the open tomb in fear, rather than in joy.

#### 6. GOSPEL OF JUDAS ISCARIOT (Coptic, papyrus 3rd century)

Describes a close relationship with Jesus, as his provider and friend, arranging his agenda and providing his clothing, as well as handling his business affairs. It is quite unique in that no mention is made of his act of betrayal.

#### 7. GESTA PILATI

Finally, a most interesting writing, alleged to be by Pontius Pilate—the *Gesta Pilati*, (*The Writings of Pontius Pilate*). This claims to be Pilate’s letter to Emperor Tiberius, trying to explain why he agreed to kill Jesus. It was later claimed by certain individuals in the Eastern Churches to be the Gospel of Nicodemus. More recently, an actual letter to Tiberius has been discovered (now in the Br. Library and Vatican Library)—but it is not the same as the *Gesta Pilati*. My personal discovery in Flint, MI, c. 1953.

#### WHO MADE THE CANONICAL LISTS?

SO WHAT??? Is this simply an intellectual enterprise, or does it have any significance for our lives today?

For original sources in English translation, one of the better ones is *Gospels.net*. This provides a large set of non-canonical sources, although it is not comprehensive and not complete.

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