

## Extra-canonical early Christian literature

**J. K. Elliott**

### **A.**

#### **1.**

The twenty-seven books that were eventually accepted as the foundation documents of Christianity were not the only early Christian texts to have been composed in the first or second century. There are clues within the NT itself to other early writings. Luke's preface indicates that 'many' had attempted to compose gospel-type books; Col. 4:16 refers to a letter which Paul claims to have written to the Laodiceans; 1 Cor 5:9 and 2 Cor 7:8 probably refer to correspondence Paul had had with the church in Corinth in addition to the two surviving letters known to us as 1 and 2 Corinthians. All these texts have been lost. That some early Christian writings did not survive need not surprise us.

#### **2.**

The amazing thing is that so much has survived, given the fact that early Christian writings, including those which were eventually to form the NT, were not composed as scripture and that many of these documents were addressed to a particular locality with a limited readership. The ecclesiastical authorities, east and west, who eventually (and certainly by the 4th cent.) agreed upon a list of authoritative writings (the canon) acceptable to the worldwide church, did so for a variety of reasons. But it seems certain that among the motives was the multiplicity of writings confronting Christians, particularly in the second to third centuries.

#### **3.**

Gnosticism alone spawned a large number of writings in this period. The term is relatively recent and describes certain religious teachings which in their Christian guise were prominent in the second century. Its origin seems to have been in pagan circles but it spread rapidly throughout Christian centres. A major feature of the various Gnostic systems was that initiates could aspire, through secret revealed knowledge (*gnosis*), to the redemption of their divine character. Christian *gnosis* gave a central role to Jesus as an emissary of the supreme God. Some of these Gnostic texts are familiar to us nowadays, thanks to the discovery in 1945–6 of the Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi. Among that library is a collection of sayings (most of them attributed to Jesus) in the Gospel of Thomas. We return to that text at J.11–19.

#### **4.**

Writings by Gnostics and other groups had a great influence on the beliefs of many early Christians. Orthodox authorities such as Irenaeus were concerned to remove the threat by restricting the circulation or acceptability of their literature. The decision to create a canon of Christian writings was due less to a desire to define an exclusive collection of early, apostolic, and universally approved books and more to a requirement to avoid dangerous texts which were new and heretical in the eyes of those who were later to be seen as the orthodox defenders of the faith.

## 5.

Not all the texts that were excluded were in fact heretical or unorthodox. The writings that have conventionally been labelled as the 'Apostolic Fathers' (e.g. *1 and 2 Clement*, the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*) do not fall into this category. Nor should the bulk of the writings commonly collected together under the (less than ideal) title 'The Apocryphal New Testament' be dismissed *en bloc* as heretical.

## 6.

'Apocryphal' literally means 'hidden'. Few of the so-called apocryphal books merit this designation, although the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Andrew* do claim to contain secret words or hidden truths. Books assembled into the category 'New Testament Apocrypha' usually include those texts which were written in imitation of the writings that were later accepted into the NT canon, i.e. gospels, epistles, acts, and apocalypses, although some 'apocryphal' texts are not paralleled in the NT itself. In any case, it is clearly anachronistic to use 'canonical' and 'apocryphal' or 'non-canonical' of texts written in the first two Christian centuries. It is also inappropriate to apply judgements about heresy and orthodoxy to the teaching in these 'apocryphal' texts. To do so is to use the language of the fourth-century Christian establishment with reference to literature that for the most part had been written and was circulating 200 years prior to the crystallizing of such attitudes.

## 7.

Many of the apocryphal books originated in the second century. In several cases such texts are obviously secondary to, and influenced by, earlier works. However, as will be seen below, some of the texts that are now published as NT apocryphal writings may have been composed as early as the first century and therefore be contemporaneous with the NT writings proper. Indeed, some scholars argue for the independence of some of the so-called apocryphal texts (the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, Egerton Papyrus 2). In other words, some of these early writings may merit study as primary sources alongside those texts which were accepted into the canon.

## 8.

But even if we disagree, and instead argue for a date later than the first century for *all* the extra-canonical writings, none the less material found in *some* of these texts could conceivably have had a long history. Possibly some of the stories and sayings about Jesus could have survived in the oral tradition over several generations, and have earthed themselves only in a second- to third-century writing; some stories and sayings may have been preserved in writing within texts that have subsequently disappeared but their past inclusion in a literary form may have helped to popularize them. It could be that that material then influenced later, currently extant documents. To argue along those lines means that one could be dealing with some Jesus material found in noncanonical sources, which is as old, as authentic, and as historically viable as that found within our NT. This applies especially to sayings and some deeds of Jesus in the apocryphal gospels.

## 9.

When we turn to the apocryphal Acts a less controversial demarcation line is usually clear—they are second- to third-century novels merely using an apostle as their eponymous hero. The stories themselves, although bearing some relation to the genre of literature which we know from the Acts of the Apostles with its breathless sequence of stories, journeys, conversions, plots, and speeches, are in effect Christianized counterparts to the popular reading-matter of predominantly literate Roman believers. Parallels to these Christian novels are to be found in erotic pagan literature. We shall turn to the apocryphal Acts below, but, at the moment, it is sufficient to anticipate the conclusion set out in that section: namely that no scholar accepts their contents as a true record of the historical circumstances behind the first-century events which they purport to relate. But with the apocryphal gospels we must reckon with the possibility that some of the material—especially that to be seen in the fragmented texts—is either an alternative account of a story known elsewhere from the canonical gospels or a new story that could in theory have fitted comfortably within a canonical gospel. ‘Apocryphal’ in its popular definition as ‘secondary’ or ‘spurious’ does not necessarily apply in such cases. It may well be decided that some of these stories are as authentic and as historical as the canonical accounts.

## 10.

The writings themselves, even if they are accepted as historically plausible, cannot, of course, be canonical—the canon was an entity firmly fixed historically from the fourth century and applied to the twenty-seven books of the NT. Literature falling outside those twenty-seven cannot by definition be canonical, however authentic or original to the Jesus story it may be considered. Conversely all the stories and sayings that occur in a NT MS would have been accepted as canonical even when modern textual critics decide that a saying or story found in only part of the MS tradition did not belong to the original author's published text. For example, Codex Bezae adds after Lk 6:4 : ‘The same day, seeing a certain man working on the sabbath, he said to him, “Man, if indeed you know what you are doing, happy are you; but if not, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law.”’ The pericope of the Adulteress, found in some MSS in John's and in Luke's gospel, would have been accepted as canonical by the original readers of those MSS, but the story is absent from other MSS. Users of these shorter MSS would be unaware of this pericope as part of the canonical texts they read. Similarly, the verses at the end of Mark beyond Mk 16:8 are disputed in the MS tradition. Readers of NT MSS, which contain the additional verses, would accept these as part of the canonical Gospel of Mark. If such secondary material is found in a perfectly orthodox copy of the scriptures then for those who owned, used, and read that MS its entire contents were, by definition, canonical. Ancient commentators who pronounced on the canonical status of the NT books did not concern themselves with the differences—sometimes quite significant differences—that existed between MSS. The Gospel according to Mark was commended without it being specified if ‘Mark’ was to be understood as containing 16:9–20 or not. Even Origen and Jerome, who were alert to textual variation, did not comment on such matters in the context of commending or rejecting certain Christian books.

## 11.

Most of the differences that are readily observed when one compares the NT in the AV (KJV) and the RV (or most modern English versions) obviously concern English style, language, and usage, but there are a significant number of other changes which are due to the differences in the Greek NT used by the translators. And those textual differences are due to differences in the underlying Greek MSS used by the editors of the printed testament.

## 12.

By contrast, paradoxically, material that we may now wish to pronounce as authentic in an apocryphal source can never be canonical. This issue is acute when we turn to the *Gospel of Thomas* (J.11–19), which is probably the best-known of the apocryphal texts in modern times.

## 13.

There is a considerable body of sayings of Jesus that may be collected from patristic writings, biblical MSS, and from apocryphal sources which are not paralleled in the NT. Such sayings are commonly called 'agrapha', that is, sayings 'not written' in the NT itself. As well as the saying in Codex Bezae found after Lk 6:4 (quoted in A.10 above), some other famous agrapha are: 'Be competent money-changers' (in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 1.28.177), and 'Ask for the great things, and God will add to you what is small' (ibid. 1.24.158). Agrapha illustrate the growth of tradition and the accretion of legend. Some may represent early tradition, which may be authentic; some result from false attribution (e.g. 1 Cor 2:9 appears as a saying of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas*, 17); some, embedded in apocryphal works, may have been composed *ad hoc* for the work concerned (and would have no claim to authenticity).

## 14.

But, for the most part, all the extra-canonical sayings and the apocryphal literature that has survived are later than, derivative from, and secondary to the twenty-seven writings that were to form the NT canon of scripture.

In this section we divide the texts into two categories: the early Christian extra-canonical writings, known as the Apostolic Fathers, and the writings of the so-called NT apocrypha.