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A Consideration of the "Apocryphon of James"

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A Consideration of the "Apocryphon of James"

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"After reading the Apocryphon of James, also known as the Gospel of James, I am intrigued by the way that the text seems to contain both significant parallels and unique dissimilarities to the canonical gospels found in the New Testament. Although there is not a scholarly consensus in regards to an explanation for these apparent contradictions within the document, the historical background surrounding the written account seems to offer some indication of the original author's motivations and intentions in writing it."

Original Essay



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Katie Kreutter

A Consideration of the “*Apocryphon of James*”

After reading the Apocryphon of James, also known as the Gospel of James, I am intrigued by the way that the text seems to contain both significant parallels and unique dissimilarities to the canonical gospels found in the New Testament. Although there is not a scholarly consensus in regards to an explanation for these apparent contradictions within the document, the historical background surrounding the written account seems to offer some indication of the original author’s motivations and intentions in writing it.

According to translator Francis E. Williams, the document’s writer professes to be James, the brother of Jesus. However, since it was common for ancient writers to compose literature under a pseudonym, it is doubtful that the text was actually written by James. In addition, Williams contends that the document seems to include material that can be dated to prior oral and possibly even written transmissions, so it is not entirely the work of a sole individual. Ultimately, though, the document is equally worthy of study and consideration as an early account of Jesus’ interactions with his disciples regardless of its authorship.

Towards the beginning of the account, the author refers to the attempts of the disciples to recall the sayings of Jesus and compile them into written form. Based upon this reference, Williams infers that the text was most likely written during the first half of the second century, since the author’s statement indicates that he was writing at a time in history when it was still possible to discuss the oral sayings of Jesus before they had been officially documented. Further, he argues that the text could not have been written past 314 C.E. because it emphasizes

the significance of martyrdom, which became obsolete after Christianity was no longer persecuted as an illegitimate religion. Within the document, several parables of Jesus are referred to by title only. As Williams contends, this would seem to indicate that the text was written during a period in history during which people were already familiar with the stories attributed to Jesus. Arguably, this familiarity could have been founded upon the oral tradition that was responsible for maintaining the original sayings and teachings of Jesus before they were transcribed to paper. Nevertheless, such awareness would have necessitated a relatively substantial duration of time between Jesus' life and ministry and the composition of James' work.

The tradition of Gnosticism was popular during this time in history, and the Gnostic undertones in the Apocryphon of James are readily apparent. Gnostics believed that there were "secret" elements and sources of deeper knowledge within the Christian religion that only certain individuals were permitted to access and understand. There were several societal conditions that contributed to the development of Gnostic thought, including ancient Middle Easterners' fascination with mystery religions, which professed to offer enlightened understandings of specific deities to its members, who were required to undergo initiation rites before being recognized and included in the tradition. Gnosticism is completely contradictory to traditional Christian thought, since it seems to insinuate that only certain groups of people can have access to God. God is portrayed as highly selective and restrictive in whom he allows to come to Him and truly know and understand Him. In contrast, Christianity proclaims that by coming to Earth in the person of Jesus Christ, God established that all humankind could experience salvation in response to His Son.

The Gnostic themes in the Apocryphon of James begin with a declaration at the start of the letter that the information about to be shared in the text was intended by Jesus only for James and Peter. James urges the recipient of this letter, whose name could not be distinguished in translation, to refrain from distributing the text on a widespread level. Based upon this request, I wonder how it was that the document came to be read and preserved by a significant number of individuals, eventually reaching humans living in the twenty-first century. I can only surmise

that the popularity of the mystery religions contributed to the text's visibility and prominence. At any rate, James continues by describing a detailed and complex account of an interaction that he professes to have occurred between himself, Peter, and Jesus exactly five hundred and fifty days after Christ's resurrection. Williams notes that the primary focus of this text is on the concept of martyrdom, which is reflective of common Gnostic ideas that centered on death of the physical body. Gnostics considered the physical world to be separate from and in opposition to the spiritual world, and, therefore, disregarded the body as insignificant and corrupt. As a result, it would not be difficult for the author of the document to defend and encourage the practice of martyrdom.

In the text, Jesus asks his disciples, "Do you dare to spare the flesh, you for whom the Spirit is an encircling wall?" Shortly thereafter, he states, "[N]one of those who fear death will be saved." Further, he declares that the kingdom of God belongs to those who subject themselves to death rather than, as is present in the canonical gospels, those who receive the kingdom "like a little child." Although it could be argued that these references to putting one's self to death are figurative in nature rather than literal, the context of the phrases suggests that the author intended them to be interpreted literally. In the text surrounding these verses, Jesus warns his disciples of the persecution and imprisonment they will encounter, and urges them to remain steadfast and not to fear the pending suffering or the loss of their earthly bodies.

In traditional Christian literature, the body and soul are believed to be dependent upon one another. The New Testament establishes that Christ will resurrect and restore both bodies and souls at his second coming. The clear-cut distinction between the two entities that seems to be present in the Apocryphon of James does not seem to be emphasized to the same degree in the New Testament canon.

This work contains numerous references to the kingdom of heaven, which, like the references in the gospels of the New Testament, are ambiguous and layered with potential interpretive meanings. They contain subtle parallels to one another, but are essentially dissimilar in terms of their content. According to James, Jesus stressed the importance of being filled with

what was presumably his knowledge, and included it as a prerequisite for entering the kingdom of heaven. For instance, this aforementioned reference to the necessity of being filled in order to enter the kingdom could arguably be paralleled to the frequent occasions within the New Testament when Jesus warns against the behaviors that might inhibit an individual from entering the kingdom of God. Both passages describe the kingdom as a state that necessitates a certain condition of living in order to be experienced by a person. However, the two passages vary rather significantly in their central message. The verses in the Apocryphon of James reflect a Gnostic perspective in terms of their focus on acquiring secret knowledge, and discuss a state of being. Contrastingly, the verses in the synoptic gospels discuss a way of living.

I noticed that there are several elements of this text that seem to coincide with passages in the canonical gospels, although with subtle differences. Towards the letter's conclusion, Jesus speaks of the building of a house that will provide shelter. This reminds me of the passage in Matthew and Luke during which Jesus compares a sturdy house to a person who puts his teachings into practice. Much like the discrepancies between the references to the kingdom of God in the Apocryphon of James and the kingdom references in the canonical gospels, these two separate accounts differ considerably in terms of content. While the subject of the text in the synoptic gospels is an action in terms of the possible results of a positive response to the teachings of Jesus, the Apocryphon of James depicts Jesus himself as the subject, as he is depicted as a builder of a valuable house.

There are many elements within the Apocryphon of James that I found to be rather unclear and contradictory to one another. For example, in the previously mentioned section that emphasizes the themes of death and dying, Jesus implores his disciples to "scorn death" and to "take thought for life." However, several sentences after this exhortation he establishes that they should "become seekers for death," and, later, that "none of those who have worn the flesh will be saved." These two instances seem to contradict one another in terms of message. Perhaps, the phrase "become seekers for death" is meant to be read literally in the context of martyrdom, while the command to "scorn death" is figurative language for spiritual death.

Of course, my limited knowledge with early Christian literature, especially texts that are not included in the New Testament, may inhibit my ability to critically examine the document on a more advanced level. As with any ancient text, it is imperative that this letter be evaluated in terms of its social, historical, and cultural context in order that its meaning may not be distorted or misconstrued. Once these elements are considered, however, it is possible to gain insight into the significance of the document to its ancient Middle Eastern readers in addition to its continued relevance to the consideration of Christianity and its development.

