

New Testament Apocryphal & Pseudepigraphal Writings

New Testament pseudepigraphal writings refer to a large body of literature written from the second century A.D. into the middle ages. “Pseudepigraphal” means “*false writings*”—works that are forgeries, claiming apostolic authorship so they will be viewed as authoritative.

Many popular writers are now arguing that some of these writings have the same value as the New Testament documents. Among the more popular proponents of this view are Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels*), Bart Ehrman (*Lost Christianities*), and Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*).

In general, these writings fall into two categories:

A. Cheap devotional literature focusing on the miraculous and bizarre, written to satisfy the desire for further information about the life of Jesus and the careers of the apostles.

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which dates from the middle of the third century, is typical of this type of literature. It records various alleged incidents in Jesus' early childhood.

“This little child Jesus when he was five years old was playing at the ford of a brook; and he gathered together the waters that flowed there into pools, and made them straightway clean, and commanded them by his word alone... And the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph; and he took a willow branch, and let out the waters which Jesus had collected. And Jesus, seeing what was done, was angry, and said to him: ‘O wicked, impious, and foolish! What harm did the pools and the waters do to you? Behold, even now you shall be dried up like a tree, and you shall not bring forth either leaves, or root, or fruit.’ And straightway that boy was withered up.”¹

“After that He was again passing through the village; and a boy ran up against Him, and struck His shoulder. And Jesus was angry, and said to him: ‘You shall not go back the way you came!’ And immediately he fell down dead.”²

This account clearly portrays Jesus as an unpredictable, hot-tempered miracle-worker. It also contradicts the canonical gospels, which indicate that Jesus did not perform miracles until the wedding at Cana (John 2:11; Mark 6:2,3).

B. Attempts to propagate different and often heretical teachings.

Pseudepigraphical literature was written by heretics in an effort to foist their ideas on the church with the alleged endorsement of Jesus or the apostles. Some of these writings are historically valuable because they provide information about the post-apostolic church

¹ *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, 2:1; 3:1-3.

² *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, 4:1.

and the doctrinal aberrations it faced. But they are not apostolic and therefore should not be regarded as canonical.

The Gospel of Thomas is the best known New Testament apocryphal writing of this sort. It was written in the early second century, and was discovered in 1945 among the literature excavated at Nag Hammadi. But the *Gospel of Thomas* is neither a gospel (it is a collection of 114 alleged sayings of Jesus), nor is it written by the apostle Thomas (most scholars date the writing to around 150 A.D.).

Nevertheless, *Thomas* has been put forth as offering an alternative but equally valid view of Jesus that was suppressed by the religious elite. Below are a few quotes along with comments:

“These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down. And he (Thomas) said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’” (1)³ Notice the Gnostic view of salvation which comes through learning secret knowledge.

“Jesus said, ‘. . . the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, you will dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.’” (3) Salvation here is not receiving God's forgiveness through Christ; it is coming to realize that we are already sons of God.

“The disciples said, ‘We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being.’” (12) Apparently heaven and earth were made for James the righteous! This is one of many puzzling quotes in *The Gospel of Thomas*. Here are two additional examples:

“Jesus said, ‘Blessed is the lion which becomes man when consumed by man; and cursed is the man whom the lion consumes, and the lion becomes man.’” (7)

“Mary said to Jesus, ‘Whom are your disciples like?’ He said, ‘They are like children who have settled in a field which is not theirs. When the owners of the field come, they will say, ‘Let us have back our field.’ They will *undress in their presence* in order to let them have back their field and to give it back to them . . .’” (21)

Other quotes clearly have a different view of Jesus than the canonical gospels:

“Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like.’ Simon Peter said to Him, ‘You are like a righteous angel.’ Matthew said to Him, ‘You are like a wise philosopher.’ Thomas said to Him, ‘Master, my mouth

³ This quote and the ones that follow are from a translation of the *Gospel of Thomas* found in Ron Cameron, Ed., *The Other Gospels* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 25 ff. The number of each saying in *Thomas* follows the quote in parentheses.

is totally incapable of saying what you are like.’ Jesus said, ‘I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out.’” (13) Jesus corrects Thomas for calling him “Master.” But in the canonical Gospels, Jesus claims to be the Messiah, the Lord, etc. When Thomas worshipped him as “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28), Jesus accepted this worship.

“His disciples said to Him, ‘When will the repose of the dead come about, and when will the new world come?’ He said to them, ‘what you look forward to has already come, but you did not recognize it’” (51) In Matthew 19:28, Jesus clearly speaks of the millennial kingdom as a future event, and of the disciples’ roles in that future kingdom. This verse sounds more the false teachers Paul encountered who said that “the resurrection has already taken place.” (2 Tim. 2:18)

Despite the fact that Thomas the apostle could not have written this gospel, many recent authors are taken with it. Harold Bloom says, “Sometimes, as I contemplate organized, institutional Christianity, historical and contemporary, it seems to me a very weak misreading of the teachings of Jesus. Thomas speaks to me, and to many others, Gentile and Jewish, in ways that Matthew, Mark and Luke do not.”⁴

One wonders if that’s how Bloom felt as he read this...

“Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.’” (114)⁵

⁴ Harold Bloom & Marvin Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (New York, New York: Harper Collins, p. 1992), p. 114.

⁵ Some translators say that this saying was added later, but it is included in the only complete manuscript we have of the Gospel of Thomas: Nag Hammadi, Codex II, Tractate 2.