

The Infancy Narratives

Introduction

I have decided that the apocryphal gospels that we have been recently talking about are like the internet of their day:

- They are personal reflections to bring the author and his views to the attention of others
- They may have a kernel of truth, but it is hard to find.
- There is no way to evaluate them.
- They take on a life of their own as the contents are amplified and reposted.

They are kind of like the fan fiction of their day. If you are a Harry Potter fan, disappointed that J.K. Rowling decided to stop at 7 books, you can go to Pottermore or any one of dozens of other sites and find scores of other stories. What did Harry do the summer before he went to Hogwarts? Where did Ron and Hermione go on their honeymoon? If you can't find the answer, you can contribute one of your own. As Christianity spread and interest in the life of Jesus grew, people had questions about his life and his ministry, and early Christians, through oral tradition and later written accounts, posited their own answers to some of the questions that arose. Was it for their own self-aggrandisement? Possibly in some cases, but I tend to think more kindly about these other gospel writers. When I gave the presentation on Miriam, I talked a bit about Jewish midrash. These are rabbinical writings designed to elucidate or clarify aspects of the Bible. In some cases they expand on a Bible story; in other they give a back story that explains and amplifies a Biblical account. I like to think of the apocryphal gospels in the same way. Well-meaning Christians were trying to fill in the blanks to better explain and understand Jesus. And one of the most intriguing blanks must have been the 30 years between his birth and his public ministry.

I have always been fascinated by imagining the childhood of Jesus. I can accept that Jesus is both human and divine, but it is sometimes hard to wrap my mind around that mystery, even when considering his adult life and ministry. But what was he like as a child? Was he more divine? Did Mary slink around the house afraid to say God damn it if she burned her hand in the fire for fear of a withering glance from Jesus? How did Joseph presume to teach Jesus about the ethical

foundations of leading a good life? Or was Jesus more human? Did the toddler Jesus ever have a meltdown that caused him to lie on the ground in the marketplace kicking and screaming? Did he ever indulge in the early Palestinian equivalent of sneaking a cigarette behind the barn?

You see what the trouble is -- I can only imagine scenarios where either the human or the divine is on display. But his nature was not like alternating current where one or the other attribute was in evidence. He was both human and divine simultaneously and always. How did he manifest his power and character as the Son of God? Would the infancy narratives answer my questions about what such a unique childhood was like? Spoiler alert -- the answer is no, but let's talk about them anyway.

Let me quote from Ronald Hock: About 70 CE some unknown Christian author made a momentous decision. He decided to make Jesus the subject of a narrative complete with setting, cast of characters, plot, motivations, etc. No one else, so far as we know, had thought of doing so before then. Only non-narrative forms such as creeds, hymns, collections of teachings, and letters had been used to express the significance of Jesus for Christians. But around 70, someone wrote the Gospel of Mark. Mark's narrative was soon revised and expanded." Of interest for this presentation was how Mark was expanded backwards. When I first started reading on the subject of infancy narratives, scholars reminded me that we do have canonical infancy narratives. Both Matthew and Luke have accounts of Jesus' birth, even if they are not entirely in agreement about the details. By the mid second-century new narratives now called infancy gospels took the story back to the time of Mary's parents or filled in gaps in Jesus childhood.

Hock again, "The emergence of the Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas, therefore, should be seen within this broader literary history in which an initial narrative, the Gospel of Mark, was revised and expanded in a number of directions, including backward in time. Taken as a whole, the Gospels and Acts constructed a complex and appealing narrative world in which Christians could identify a world that had its own cast of characters, dramatic events, and signs of divine favor. The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas, though focused on Jesus as a mere infant and child, contribute to this narrative world by showing that the virtue and piety of Jesus' family as well as the precocious wisdom and power evident in his own childhood anticipate and confirm his later role as savior and lord."

So, let's start with the canonical infancy narratives. Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, showing him as a descendent of Abraham and David, down to Joseph. He touches on the betrothal of Mary and Joseph, goes on to say the birth occurred in Bethlehem and describes the wise men who came from the East who led to Herod's decree to kill the Holy Innocents. The family fled to Egypt and then returned to live in Nazareth. Chapter 3 starts with the preaching of John the Baptist.

Luke has Mary and Joseph from Nazareth and in Bethlehem for the birth only because of the census. We have the story of the conception of John the Baptist as well as the annunciation and the meeting of these two women cousins. In the birth narrative in Chapter 2 we learn there was no room at the inn and that the birth was attended by shepherds, not wise men. Jesus was taken to the temple for purification where he was seen by Simeon and Anna, and then the family returned to Galilee. The family went to Jerusalem every year for Passover, and the year that Jesus was 12 he was left behind at the temple. When his parents returned to retrieve him they found him with the temple scholars and were "astonished at his understanding and answers." Despite Jesus' telling them "How is it that you sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business?" he returned with them to Nazareth. Now we are at Chapter 3 and John the Baptist again. And these are the only brief views the canonical gospels give us about the first 30 years of Jesus' life. Is it any wonder that others tried to fill in the narrative gap?

The interest in these hidden years increased in late antiquity, flourished in medieval times, and continues to this day. I recently read Christopher Moore's satirical novel *Lamb*, an account by Jesus' best friend Biff. This book posited that Jesus spent much of the time between the appearance at the temple and his public ministry in the East sequentially with the three wise men where he learned the tenets of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. There are many, many infancy narratives, some clearly fragments or derivatives of other versions. I will devote the rest of my presentation to the two best known of the infancy narratives: the Protoevangelium of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. But I want you to be aware that there are others such as *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, *the History of Joseph the Carpenter*, and *the Arabic Infancy Narrative*. Many of these have elements that are both common to other sources and unique to that specific manuscript.

Protoevangelium of James

Let's start with the Protoevangelium of James. It is technically a proto-gospel rather than a gospel because it deals with events leading up to the birth of Jesus, rather than with the life of Jesus. Although generally called one of the infancy narratives, it is actually about Mary's birth and upbringing and is designed to show that she was worthy to be chosen by God as the mother of Jesus. It goes to great lengths to emphasize Mary's purity throughout her life.

This book is basically divided into three sections. First, is Mary's conception and birth to a childless couple, who are being chastised and rebuked for being childless. By the way, what is Mary's mother's name? Anne. How do you know this? It is not given in the canonical gospels, but has become a firm part of Christian -- and Muslim -- tradition based on the apocrypha. The protoevangelium of James appears to be the earliest of the writings to so name her. A heavenly messenger appears to Anne to say she will bear a child. Her husband meanwhile has been in the desert praying. His absence supports the theological tenet of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Mary's bedroom is transformed into a sanctuary where nothing unclean can touch her. When Mary is two they take her to the temple to fulfill their vow to give her to God and she spends the rest of her childhood in this protected environment.

The second section opens with Mary at 12 and about to become a woman, thereby threatening the purity of the temple. It is decided her purity can be maintained by marrying her to an elderly widower who presumably will make no physical demands on her. This incidentally, allows the Biblical references to the brothers of Jesus to be interpreted as half-brothers by Joseph's earlier marriage. After their marriage Joseph leaves Mary to go build houses and eventually there follows an annunciation scene similar to that in Luke. There's some consternation with Joseph's return and discovery of the pregnancy but the temple priest orders a test to prove their innocence and they pass. Incidentally, during the time that Mary is alone she works on the veil for the temple, foreshadowing the rending of this cloth at the crucifixion. And let's just glide over the fact that Mary was 12 when she married and Joseph left, 16 and pregnant when he returned, and yet Mary and Joseph still had to prove their purity to the temple priest,

The third section covers familiar ground from the canonical accounts. While the basic story line follows Matthew and Luke, there are many changes, expansions and additions that create a surprisingly fresh account. For example, Joseph's sons accompany them on the trip, but they never make it to Bethlehem. The birth occurs in a cave. While Joseph is searching for a midwife

he has a vision and time stops -- all creation notes what is happening in the cave. The birth has occurred before the midwife and another woman Salome arrive at the cave. The midwife makes a discovery that supports a major theological tenet of the Catholic Church: A virgin has given birth. Salome is skeptical. Here's a rather graphic description of what follows:

The midwife entered and said, "Mary, position yourself for an examination. You are facing a serious test." And so Mary, when she heard these instructions, positioned herself, and Salome inserted her finger into Mary. And then Salome cried aloud and said, "I'll be damned because of my transgression and my disbelief, I have put the living God on trial. Look, my hand is disappearing. It's being consumed by flames." An angel instructs her to pick up the baby. She does so and is healed. A miracle. The wise men visit. There is an expanded account of Herod's anger, but instead of the family fleeing to Egypt, Jesus is saved by Mary's hiding him in a manger. John the Baptist is saved when a mountain opens up to hide him and his mother.

The book ends with a brief epilog about the author and the circumstances in which he composed the account. "Now I James am the one who wrote this account at the time when an uproar arose in Jerusalem at the death of Herod." Actually scholars believe it was written by someone with a Jewish background who was familiar with the Greek version of the Old Testament, but much later than the time of James' death in 62. The author had some literary talent and training, but little knowledge of Palestine's geography. There are questions about the literary unity because of stylistic differences that have led many to conclude that it is a compilation from at least two sources. There has been disagreement about the dating but most contemporary scholars believe it was written sometime between 178 and 204 in part because of theological questions it purports to answer. It is considered to be an "apology" or defense of Jesus and Mary, which became less necessary as Christianity spread.

This Gospel was rejected in Western Christianity. One reason was that Jerome was offended by the brothers of Jesus being seen as step brothers rather than his preference for their being cousins. Jerome thought Joseph needed to be a virgin, too. This book was officially condemned by Pope Innocent I in 405 and eventually in the sixth century document known as the Gelasian Decree.

It was not rejected in the East where Mary was becoming a more important figure in the church, and this book was actually read liturgically on certain Marian feasts.

The rejection of this infancy gospel resulted in this writing being unknown in Medieval and Renaissance Europe until Postel reintroduced it in a Latin version in 1552. A Greek version followed a decade later. In the 19th century scholars were engaged in a massive search for ancient manuscripts and more than a dozen versions of this manuscript turned up in Paris, Venice, the Vatican, and other European libraries and archives. New versions also appeared in the 20th century sands of Egypt. The total now numbers more than 150 Greek manuscripts and a range of eastern versions in Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, and Slovanic

Infancy Gospel of Thomas

Now the Infancy Gospel of Thomas was more like what I had in mind when I first heard of Infancy Gospels. It was known only as the Gospel of Thomas until recently when the Nag Hammadi discoveries of the 1940s yielded another Gospel of Thomas. The two are unrelated, but to distinguish them, the one I am about to talk about became known as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. This is not a lengthy and coherent narrative but rather a collection of largely self-contained stories that are only loosely held together by a series of indications of Jesus' age as the stories take place when he is 5, 6, 8 and 12. One consequence of this loose connection and fluidity is that some individual stories appear in one manuscript but are absent from others. Some speculate that it was even longer at one point but became purged of Gnostic heresies somewhere along the way.

The gospel opens with a series of episodes in which Jesus is 5 years old. He is playing with other children by a stream on the Sabbath, making ponds to collect water, which he purifies with a command. He mixes the water with clay to make 12 sparrows. He is seen by someone who reports this to Joseph as a violation of the Sabbath. When Joseph comes to reprimand him, Jesus claps his hands and the sparrows come to life and fly away. Another child drains the ponds, angering Jesus who causes that child to wither and die. The parents blame Joseph.

On another occasion Jesus is walking in the village and is bumped by another child. Jesus gets mad and causes the child to die. The populace blames Joseph and tells him he must teach Jesus to bless and not curse or leave the village Joseph reprimands him. Jesus causes his accusers to go blind. Joseph gets angry and grabs Jesus by the ear but gets a sharp reprimand himself. "It's one thing for you to seek and not find; it's quite another thing for you to act this unwisely. Don't you know that I don't really belong to you? Don't make me upset."

A teacher overhearing this offers to school Jesus, but although Jesus agrees he does not cooperate and when the teacher hits him on the head Jesus shows him that he knows much more than the teacher and humiliates him. In the following days he makes more benign use of his power. He brings back to life a boy who has fallen off the roof so that it can be proven that he did not push him. He heals the foot of a young man who has been cut by an axe. Now the crowd worships Jesus because he possesses the spirit of God.

When he is 6 he is sent by Mary to fetch water from a well but breaks the pitcher. He carries the water back in his clothes.

At 8 he helps his father with the planting of grain. His one measure of seed at harvest produces 100 measures, which allows Jesus to give some to the poor in the village. In the carpenter shop a rich man has ordered a bed but Joseph's boards are not the right length. Jesus stretches them. Jesus is sent to another teacher. He is again hit on the head and the teacher is cursed. A third teacher is amazed by his knowledge of the law and says he is filled with grace and wisdom and sends him back to Joseph.

In the next story his brother James is sent out for firewood but is bitten by a viper. This is reminiscent of a story about Paul in Acts 28. Jesus blows on the bite and restores James to good health. He also brings a dead infant back to life and a year later does the same for a construction worker who has fallen to his death.

This Gospel concludes with a slight reworking of Luke's story of Jesus' visit to the temple at age 12. It goes a little further by having the Pharisees ask Mary if she is his mother and then pronouncing a blessing that is reminiscent of Luke 1:42: "You are more than any woman to be congratulated, for God has blessed the fruit of your womb."

This gospel is generally conceded to be an anonymous work. From various internal evidence scholars have deduced that the author is not a Jewish Christian. He wrote in Greek and is believed to have had a good education and a talent for effective narration. The range of possible dates posited by scholars goes from the first to the sixth centuries, but the late second century is thought to be "not improbable." The earliest extant manuscripts are from the late 5th or sixth century. The place of authorship cannot be narrowed down further than the Greek East of the Roman Empire.

Like the protoevangelium of James, there are many versions of this manuscript, including the first translation in 1704, but the standard scholarly version is that published by von Tischendorf in 1853, which included two different versions. There is actually a small cottage industry of scholarship that tries to determine the “genealogy” of the various manuscripts -- which came first, which influenced which, etc. Many of the Greek manuscript versions are from the middle-ages, not early Christian times.

It is difficult to know whether this gospel is meant to be taken seriously as an account of what Jesus was really like as a young child or if it was meant to be a somewhat humorous entertainment by Christians imagining what Jesus would have been capable of before he had to shoulder the responsibilities of adulthood. Lapham writes, “It seems evident that folk-stories and legends about the childhood of Jesus circulated freely in every region during the early centuries. Some would surely have local associations. All would be subject to embellishment and exaggeration in the telling; and the favorite stories would find a place in more than one composition.”

As you might imagine, many scholars try to explain away the scenes of Jesus’ anger and violence. Some suggest that the culture of the time would not have found these scenes as shocking and offensive as modern readers do. But at least one scholar has suggested that indeed early Christians would have been just as uncomfortable with this version of Jesus, and so she concludes that the stories were composed by opponents of Christianity who wished to undermine Jesus’ character and authority by presenting a compromised picture of his youth. By absorbing critiques of Jesus into their own literature, she further suggests, Christian editors were able to manage embarrassing stories about the boy Jesus and ultimately regain control of his image.

Bart Ehrman writes that, “In short, in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas we have stories of the child Jesus that indicate the character of the Christian savior. He is a powerful miracle worker, the all-knowing Son of God; he is the one who stands above the law of the Jews, who has the power of life and death; he is the one who heals those in desperate need yet who violently opposes all who fail to believe in him or who try to gainsay his mission.”

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to read from *The Apocryphal Gospels* by Paul Foster:

“Both the Protoevangelium of James and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas are highly fictionalized accounts of stories relating to the birth, childhood or ancestry of Jesus. Yet the value of these texts does not arise from the historicity of the events they purport to describe. Instead, these two writings, which are the earliest examples of this sub-genre of apocryphal writings, are a window onto a vibrant and diverse world of early Christianity. The way these fanciful narratives are told is both ponderous and wondrous. At times these stories become grindingly tedious, yet at other times they present flashes of theological insight. The bizarre, the pious, and the profound sit alongside each other in these highly creative texts....Despite the dubious value of the historicity of the events these texts claim to record, nonetheless, they can still be appreciated as invaluable witnesses to the social and theological history of pious believers in the centuries following the life of Jesus.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think proving Mary’s purity was so important to the early Church?
2. How important is it as a tenet of your own faith?
3. What is your reaction to the stories of Jesus as a child in the Gospel of Thomas?
4. What do you think Jesus was like as a 5 year old?