

Lecture Eleven

The Gospel of Peter

Scope: One of the most remarkable gospels from antiquity comes to us in only a fragment, discovered near the end of the nineteenth century in a monk's tomb. This is all that remains of the gospel allegedly written by Jesus' disciple Peter, a book that was mentioned by the fourth-century author Eusebius, who noted that it was thought to be forged and heretical. The surviving fragment is an alternative description of Jesus' trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. The narrative has numerous similarities to the canonical accounts, but interesting differences as well, including a heavier emphasis on the guilt of the Jews in the death of Jesus. Most striking of all, the fragment contains an actual narration of Jesus' emergence from his tomb on Easter morning, tall as a skyscraper, followed by the cross, which speaks to the heavens to declare that salvation has now come to those who had died.

Outline

- I. To this point in our course, we have considered a number of the non-canonical gospels.
 - A. We have considered so far a number of gospels that were condemned as heretical.
 - B. In this lecture, we examine a gospel that was excluded from the canon because it was suspected of being heretical and, possibly, Gnostic.
 - C. As with the other gospels we have considered, this one, too, was known by name to scholars throughout the ages but was discovered only in modern times.
 - D. Its discovery in the 1880s caused quite a stir, however, because this gospel was written in the first person, allegedly by none other than Jesus' closest disciple, Peter.
- II. The gospel was known to exist as early as the second century, from a discussion in the "Church History" of Eusebius, who discusses an incident from the life of Serapion, a second-century bishop of Antioch.
 - A. Serapion had discovered that one of his churches, in the town of Rhossus, used a Gospel of Peter in its worship services.

- B. He later read the text, saw that it could be used for heretical purposes, and forbade its use.
- III. A fragment of the gospel was discovered in 1886.
- A. A French archaeological team digging in Akhmim, Egypt, uncovered a monk's tomb.
 - B. Buried with the monk was a manuscript that contained several writings, including a fragmentary copy of a gospel.
 - C. The gospel is incomplete: It begins and ends in mid-sentence and is obviously part of a much larger narrative.
 - D. The surviving portion consists of an account of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection.
 - E. Remarkably, it is written in the first person, in the name of Simon Peter.
 - F. Is this, then, the lost Gospel of Peter mentioned by Eusebius? It is difficult to know for sure, but most scholars have concluded that it is.
- IV. The account is remarkable for a number of reasons.
- A. It has numerous similarities to the accounts of the New Testament gospels.
 1. Jesus is tried before Pilate.
 2. He is crucified with two robbers.
 3. He is taken from the cross before the Sabbath and buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea.
 4. A guard is posted at the tomb.
 5. On the third day, Jesus is raised from the dead.
 - B. But far more striking than the similarities with the more familiar gospel accounts are the differences.
 - C. Some of the differences heighten the responsibility of the Jews in the death of Jesus. These appear to reflect a kind of incipient but already virulent anti-Judaism among the early Christians.
 - D. It is important to understand some historical background of what happened between Christians and Jews in the early centuries.

1. Christianity started out as a Jewish sect. Jesus himself was Jewish, as were his followers.
 2. After Jesus' death, his followers began to proclaim that Jesus was the Son of God, whose death had brought about salvation for the world.
 3. This rejection of the message of Jesus led to a split between the few Jews who accepted Jesus as messiah and the majority who rejected this claim. Those who accepted Jesus began trying to convert others, and Christianity became a separate religion.
 4. All religions in the Roman Empire had been tolerated because all, except Judaism, were polytheistic. Judaism was not considered a problem because it was an ancient tradition.
 5. The new religion of Christianity was seen as dangerous. Christians refused to worship the state gods and did not have an ancient tradition to back up their views.
 6. To defend themselves, Christians began to claim that they were the true representatives of Judaism. This led to a serious split, with Christians accusing Jews of being responsible for the death of Jesus.
 7. It is the King of the Jews, Herod (not the Roman Pilate), who condemns Jesus to death (v. 2).
 8. The Jews realize the evil they have done and fear the wrath of God as a result (v. 25). It became a standard polemic that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. came about because the Jews had executed Jesus.
 9. The Jewish people are explicitly condemned for what they did (v. 17).
- E. Other differences point to the possibly "heretical" leanings of the gospel.
1. Jesus is said to have been silent on the cross "as if he felt no pain" (v. 10).
 2. He appears to bemoan the departure of divine nature before he dies (v. 19).
- F. Still other differences reflect legendary expansions of the traditions of Jesus' death and resurrection. For example, one of the robbers being crucified is punished (for verbally attacking those executing Jesus) by not having his legs broken.
- G. Most striking of all is the detailed narration of Jesus' actual resurrection (that is, his emergence from the tomb, not described in any of the

canonical accounts).

1. Two angels descend bodily from heaven and enter the tomb (vv. 35-37).
2. There then emerge three figures from the tomb, tall as skyscrapers (vv. 39-40).
3. Behind them comes the cross, which is asked from heaven if it has preached to those "who had fallen asleep" (that is, those in Hades) and replies, "Yes" (vv. 39, 41-42).

H. The account ends with the women going to the tomb and learning of the resurrection (vv. 50-57) and the firsthand account of a fishing expedition of the disciples, which breaks off abruptly in mid-sentence (v. 60).

V. The discovery of this remarkable account led to numerous critical questions: When was it originally written? Did it use the canonical gospels as sources for its narratives? Or is it independent of the other known accounts?

- A. These questions continue to be debated.
- B. Probably, the majority of scholars think that it was written after the canonical accounts (possibly in the early part of the second century), as suggested by its virulent anti-Judaism and legendary character.
- C. Because there are very few verbal similarities between it and the others, it may represent an independent account, based on oral traditions that continued to circulate about Jesus for a long time after the New Testament gospels were produced.

Essential Reading:

John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*.

Bart Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, reading 38.

Paul Mirecki, "Peter, Gospel of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. V, pp. 278-281.

Supplementary Reading:

Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*.

John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke*.

Christian Maurer and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, "The Gospel of Peter," in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings*.

Questions to Consider:

1. What about the Gospel of Peter might be taken as "heretical" by a proto-orthodox Christian of the early centuries? Are there ways to interpret the passages in question in a non-heretical way?
2. What kind of argument could be mounted that the Gospel of Peter preserves traditions earlier than those of the New Testament gospels, which were possibly used by these gospels as sources?