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What is the difference between the canonical gospels and the apocryphal gospels?

23 Questions & answers about Jesus Christ, prepared by a team of catholic theologians of the University of Navarre. This is question 10: "What is the difference between the canonical gospels and the apocryphal gospels?"

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● While the inspired nature of the canonical gospels is itself not demonstrable, the first demonstrable difference is external to the gospels themselves:

▶ The canonical gospels are part of the biblical canon and the apocryphal gospels are not.

▶ This means that the canonical gospels were received by the churches of the East and the West as the genuine apostolic tradition in the generation immediately after the apostles;

▶ The apocryphal gospels, though used sporadically by scattered groups, never managed to gain acceptance nor were they recognised by the universal Church.

▶ An important reason for this, as can be demonstrated historically, is that the canonical gospels were written during the apostolic period,

understood in the broad sense, that is, while the apostles or their immediate disciples were still living. This can be deduced from references to them by Christian writers of the following generation, and also from the fact that around 140 A.D. a harmonisation was produced of excerpts from the four canonically recognised gospels (Tatian).

► References to the apocryphal gospels, on the other hand, are found only later on, around the end of the second century.

● Apocryphal manuscripts with a text style similar to the gospels, some from the middle of the second century, are very fragmentary, a sign that the works they represent were not sufficiently highly esteemed to have been passed on carefully to subsequent generations.

● Apocryphal manuscripts which have survived or which have been

found recently are very different from the canonical gospels, both in form and content.

► Those which were known throughout the patristic and medieval period are full of stories of a legendary or fantastical nature. They try to meet the demands of popular piety by giving detailed accounts about events which the canonical gospels either do not mention at all or treat very summarily.

► In general they are in agreement with Church teaching. They contain stories about St Joachim and St Anne and the birth of the Blessed Virgin (Nativity of Mary), about how a midwife discovered Mary's virginity (Proto-Gospel of James), the miracles worked by Jesus as a child (Gospel of Pseudo-Thomas), etc.

► Very different are the apocryphal gospels of Nag Hammadi (Egypt),

which are clearly Gnostic and heretical. They take the form of secret teachings of Jesus (Coptic Gospel of Thomas), or revelations of the risen Lord about the origin of the material world (apocryphal Gospel of John), or the ascension of the soul (Gospel of Mary Magdalene), or are a turgid weave of ideas taken possibly from homilies or catecheses (Gospel of Philip). Although some of them may be fairly ancient, perhaps from the second century, the differences from the canonical gospels are immediately apparent.

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