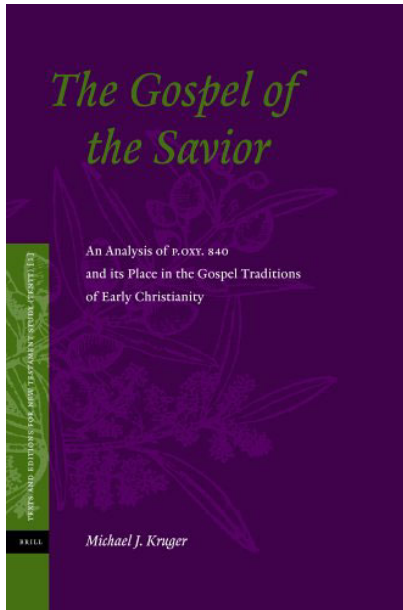


RBL 07/2006



Kruger, Michael J.

The Gospel of the Savior: An Analysis of P. OXY. 840 and Its Place in the Gospel Traditions of Early Christianity

Texts and Editions for New Testament Study 1

Leiden: Brill, 2005. Pp. xii + 299, Hardcover, \$113.00, ISBN 9004143939.

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P.Oxy 840 is a one-page parchment leaf (r-v) of forty-five lines that was discovered late in 1905 and that contains the text of what was labeled a noncanonical Gospel by its editors, Grenfell and Hunt (1908). The fragment received some attention right after its publication and again in the past twenty years. It figures in all collections of New Testament apocrypha, but Michael Kruger's is the first monograph ever that has been dedicated to it, the result of a Ph.D. dissertation completed at the University of Edinburgh in 2004 under the supervision of L. W. Hurtado. In five chapters the author successively offers a most detailed codicological and papyrological analysis, presents a new edition with translation, discusses the historical problems raised by the text, and addresses the double question of its relation to the canonical Gospels and its place within early Christianity.

Kruger argues convincingly that P.Oxy 840 is a miniature codex and not an amulet (see already his essay in *JTS* 2002) that dates from the first half of the fourth century but also is careful to add that it can, of course, not be excluded that the leaf may once have been used as an amulet, even though it was not the original purpose (39). It would then in any case have been an amulet of a quite exceptional type (see 29).

In four instances Kruger's edition of the text differs from that of Santos Otero, the latest edition dating back to 1963. The differences are minimal. All are suggestions for restoring a lacuna (line 9 προε[λ]θων : προσ[ελ]θων; line 21 σ[ταθεις ευθυσ : στας ευθεως; line 44 ζω[σιν εκ του ουρανο]υ : ζωης αιωνιου τοις; line 45 του πατρος επανω : no text).

More important is the discussion of the historical problems that are created by the quite singular description of the temple area or precincts and the rituals to be performed. Against Bovon (and others) Kruger argues that the papyrus does not stem from some heretical group criticizing Christian baptism but rather from a Jewish-Christian milieu and still exhibits a good knowledge of certain technicalities of temple practice. However, not all of his explanations are equally convincing. That the Greek word for "high priest" should not always be taken literally and can also mean archpriest or chief priest has long been accepted. That Pharisees could take official priestly duties is also well documented. But if the author of P.Oxy 840 was that well acquainted with the situation, it remains a bit of a problem that he does not use an even more precise title, such as "captain of the temple" or the like (see Acts 5:24), instead of the possibly more general ἀρχιερεύς. Two lines earlier the author does use what seems to be a very specific word (line 8 τὸ ἀγνευτήριον, "the place of purification") that he identifies as a or the room where the holy vessels were put on display on certain solemn days. Josephus (*Ant.* 3.128) tells us that this was sometimes the case, and the Talmud also knows this custom (*b. Yoma* 54a; *b. Hag.* 26b; *b. Pesah.* 57a). The problem is that Josephus is more interested in the mechanics that were used to draw and undraw the veil that covered the view and does not even give a specific name to the room (πρὸς τὸ κατοπτεῦσθαι, which Kruger renders somewhat too freely as "to the view of the sanctuary"); neither does the Talmud, except in *b. Pesah.* 57a, where it speaks quite imprecisely of "a high place on the Temple Mount." Moreover, Kruger makes little of the fact that the only instance of the very rare word ἀγνευτήριον in pre-Christian literature is found in a fragment of the Stoic philosopher Chaeremon and refers to places of purification in *Egyptian* temples. Does P.Oxy 840 after all echo an Egyptian origin, as many a scholar has thought? Kruger thinks "the pool of David" in line 25 refers to one of the *miqva'ot* or Jewish ritual baths that are known to have existed in the temple area and all over the city. The problem is that we have no indication what the Greek equivalent for *miqveh* was; λιμνή, although attested with the meaning of "pool," would not have been the most obvious choice, since it is more commonly used to refer to the sea or to a marsh area left by the sea or a river.

The author of P.Oxy 840 knew all four of the canonical Gospels and has integrated elements from Luke 11:37–52, Matt 23:13–32, John 7:1–52 and 13:10, and (only possibly, in my opinion) Mark 7:1–23 into his account. Whether that necessarily also means that he knew them as part of the fourfold Gospel collection is not so obvious as Kruger seems to assume, especially since—as is often the case—it is very difficult to demonstrate the

influence of Mark. The inner/outer contrast has a much closer parallel in Luke 11:41; some of the other parallels are also found in Matt 15 (πορνείαι in v. 19 and πορναί in line 36); the verb παραλαμβάνω is used in quite different ways in Mark 7:4 and in line 7, and the parallels between 7:8 and line 5 and 7:21 and line 38 on, respectively, “the traditions of men” and “the heart of men” are rather weak and partly found also in Matthew; and the remarkable combination of νίπτω and βαπτίζω (7:3–4) is relevant only if one reads βεβα[πισθαί in line 43 (Swete and Bonaccorsi: βεβα[μμενους). Moreover, the way the author has used elements from the Gospels shows that he had no interest in preserving their individual characters. But Kruger has demonstrated beyond any doubt that P.Oxy 840 has known and used at least three of these Gospels.

In the fifth and last chapter Kruger compares the papyrus with other apocryphal texts and concludes that it stems from a Jewish-Christian group that is “engaged in dispute over ritual purity practices” (16), a controversy not only with rabbinic Judaism but with other Jewish-Christian groups as well. The Nazarenes (Kruger’s name for the Nazoraeans of the church fathers) would be a possible candidate, which would situate the origin of the text in Syria at about A.D. 125–150. I am afraid this is a lot to swallow, and Kruger here is in danger of going far beyond what this little fragment can offer us. For one thing, it is true that P.Oxy 840 defends a position on the issue of purity that is not more heretical than the one that is defended by Jesus himself in the canonical Gospels, but is that enough to conclude that we have to do with a form of “orthodox” Jewish Christianity of a Nazarene type that would have embraced Pauline Christianity along with its own interpretation of the Christian message (so 227–28)? After all, the fragment does not give a clue about the group’s Christology, and the one issue that is at stake is addressed nowhere else in the patristic sources on the Nazarenes/Nazoraeans. Also, the alleged parallels with the *Gospel of the Nazoraeans* are quite farfetched (235–38), and it is a good thing that Kruger does not want to make the fragment part of that Gospel. Second, Kruger builds (too) heavily on R. Pritz’s monograph on the reconstruction of the history of the Nazoraeans, which is all too confident in the accuracy of the patristic accounts. Third, the fragment would be fighting on two fronts—against rabbinic Judaism and against former group members who had broken away to constitute the Ebionite group and were for that reason regarded as some kind of “crypto” Pharisees (“in essence, they are one and the same” [243])—but what evidence is there for such a conclusion? Fourth, and perhaps most important, the controversy would not have been about ritual purity in temple practice (that issue had become irrelevant), and it was not about purity in matters of liturgy either (the best way to make sense of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees after the other explanation is made impossible). According to Kruger, the conflict as viewed by P.Oxy 840 would have been about table fellowship (223–29). But this issue is not even hinted at in the whole of the fragment and could have been developed in a much more direct way by

someone acquainted with passages such as Mark 7:1–23 or Luke 11:37–39. This last move puts a heavy burden on the whole of Kruger’s hypothesis and leads one to wonder whether the cost of saving the fragment for Jewish Christianity may not be too high. Hence, should we not safely return to “the waters (of eternal life)” or (John’s) “(living) waters” of lines 43–44 and settle for (inner-Christian) controversy about baptism as the most probable explanation? I urge the reader to take this last comment not just as a critique of Kruger’s careful analysis but also as a confession that work on such fragmentary texts as P.Oxy 840 remains most difficult and needs to be continued.