



Newton, Tim

***The Forgotten Gospels: Life and Teachings of Jesus
Supplementary to the New Testament: A New
Translation***

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There has been an increasing interest in the noncanonical scriptures of early Christianity during the last years. As an example one can name the Gospel of Thomas, which has become quite popular recently. But many of the books relating to these important texts, especially the text editions, are either of a highly academic level (e.g., the classic edition of Schneemelcher), are of dubious value because they do not stand any critical examination on an academic level, or, in the worst case, reproduce conspiracy theories about the “truth” about Jesus that is suppressed by “the” church. This may not be a major problem for the student, scholar, or lecturer of biblical Scriptures, but it has always been a problem for the interested layperson to find proper information about this topic. Ten years ago in Germany, Klaus Berger’s and Christiane Nord’s *Neues Testament und frühchristliche Schriften* became a sudden success with more than six reprints in ten years. The merit of that edition lies not in the somewhat modern translation but in the fact that the scriptures of the New Testament are printed together with their contemporary companions in a chronological order. Some of Berger’s datings can be seriously questioned (e.g., he starts his edition with the second and the third letter of John, dating them both to ca 50 C.E.), but nevertheless this is the first serious and at the same time easily accessible edition of all the texts of the whole world of early Christianity.

Tim Newton, an English scholar for ancient Greek, has now tried something similar. In this very nicely made book, he collects most of the more important Christian writings of the first and second centuries, but he does not include the writings of the New Testament itself, which makes the book, of course, much easier to handle than the more than 1,300 pages of the Berger-Nord edition. The title of Newton's *The Forgotten Gospels* is a little bit misleading, because of the twenty-five texts edited by Newton, only eight are Gospels—not even a third of the edition! But, on the other hand, those eight Gospels are, of course, the longer texts of the book and fill about 50 percent of its pages (not counting the six appendices). Even the subtitle *Life and Teachings of Jesus Supplementary to the New Testament* is still misleading because most of its texts besides the Gospels are *not* related directly to the life or the sayings of Jesus. They tell about Jesus' family, his disciples, or the fate of the early Christians (texts 13–18, 22, and 25). Further, the chapter called “Other Texts” does not contain any original texts but is only an introduction to those Gospels and letters Newton omitted in his edition, except 3 Corinthians, which is printed as appendix I. The reasons for this selection of texts is not quite clear to me, but it is obvious that the editor focuses strongly upon the narrative texts, which are, of course, the most interesting for the nonacademic reader. That is for me the only explanation why he prints a text such as 3 Corinthians or most of the more or less heretical Gospels but does not print much more important texts such as the Didache or the Letter of Barnabas, which were widely recognized as orthodox in the time of early Christianity, and edited only two small parts from the first letter of Clement (ch. 10).

Newton opens his book with a short introduction where he retells in a very abbreviated form the history of the New Testament texts and the history of the canon. Then he continues with twenty-six small chapters, each containing one main apocryphal text, and each text again with a small introduction. He starts with the fragments of the two “unknown” Gospels Pap.Ox. 840 and Pap.Eg. 2, delivering then the Gospels of the Ebionites, the Hebrews, the Nazareans, and the Egyptians. The content of Newton's introductions, which are printed in a single column on the left with the text of the Gospels printed in double columns on the right, follows more or less that in the edition of Hennecke-Schneemelcher (3rd and 4th German edition, 1959/68; resp. the English edition of 1973), which is not the worst thing to happen, but we may ask why Newton did not use a more modern edition for reference (see Newton's list of literature on 207, which consists only of eight books, most of them older editions).

After these fragmented Gospels follows the only complete apocryphal Gospel, that of Thomas. Newton closes this “Gospel” part of his book with the so called Secret Gospel of Mark (and he does not miss to explain its rather dubious status) and two small chapters with agrapha (chs. 9 and 10). As noted before, Newton then turns his focus from Jesus to his family and his disciples. In the following six chapters he brings the Quadratus

fragment and quotations of Hegesippus, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and Julius Africanus, all coming from Eusebius's history, except the Papias quotation, which is from Irenaeus.

The following five chapters (17–21) contain nothing from what we usually call New Testament Apocrypha. In fact, they contain mainly anti-Christian polemic material: three of them bring material from the Jewish tradition, that is, the Bar Kokhba letter and quotations about Jesus from the Talmud and Josephus. The fourth chapter (20) tries to reconstruct the fragments of Celsus out of Origen's *Contra Celsum*. This last section of the book is extended by four more Roman fragments: the "Chrestus" fragment from Suetonius, the description of Nero's prosecution in Tacitus's *Annals*, the amendments of the Slavonic version of Josephus, and, finally, the letters of Pliny, Trajan, and Hadrian concerning the proper way to investigate Christians.

Although Newton does not mark it, the book is obviously divided into four parts: section 1 contains the narrative tradition about Jesus and unknown sayings of Jesus (chs. 1–10). Part 2 contains other Christian material, mostly concerning Jesus' family and disciples (chs. 11–16). Part 3 brings Jewish and Roman anti-Christian polemics (chs. 17–20), and part 4 brings more or less official Roman material about the dealings of the empire with Christians (chs. 21–25). As said before, chapter 26 does not contain any original material but is another kind of introduction to that material that is omitted by Newton. Furthermore, the book contains six appendices, the first of which contains 3 Corinthians. The other appendices contain chronologies, glossaries, genealogies, and the notes and the sources of the main part.

Although Newton in his introductions seems sometimes very confident in church tradition (e.g., concerning the traditional authorships of the New Testament books), he follows the results of modern critical biblical scholarship: Newton gives most clear introductions about the sometimes dubious historical value of the apocryphal scriptures, and he never fails to inform his readers about the questionable orthodoxy of most of them. In the end, this is a most desirable book for it makes accessible some of the most interesting texts of early Christianity besides the New Testament in a reliable edition for the nonacademic public.