

Early African Gospels

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Presentation

The New Testament as a collection was first published in the second half of the second century? How do we know?

If you want to date a book that was published in antiquity, you have to examine the manuscript tradition and identify the first documented readers.

If you use this approach to date the Canonical Edition of the New Testament, you will end up in the second half of the second century. And the first documented readers are Justin of Rome, Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian of Carthage (an African) and Clement of Alexandria (another African).

So, if the NT is a publication of the second century, what does this mean for the interpretation of its writings? - This is the topic of today's paper.

It is important to note that by the end of the second century, there were already at least a hundred other texts about Jesus and his apostles in circulation, which are not included in the New Testament. This body of literature is acknowledged in the closing verse of the Four-Gospel volume:

"But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

When we consider the Canonical Edition as a publication of the second century, comparing it with other books on Jesus produced during the second and third centuries reveals typical features of the genre.

One of these features is that they share a meta-narrative. The narrative explains the origin of Christ in heaven, his actions and teachings while on earth, and the events following his return to the spiritual realm from which he had descended. Each publication tells the story a bit differently.

Literature takes shape when it is written down, edited, published, and read. Through publication the Word of God becomes flesh.

Secret Book of John

Secret Book of John presents itself as a manuscript written by the disciple John, in which he recorded a conversation with the “Savior.” The voice of the publisher introduces and concludes John’s narrative, which is written in the first person singular.¹

Title:

The teaching of the Savior, and [the revelation] of the mysteries [and the things] hidden in silence, things he taught his disciple John.

Introduction:

One day when John the brother of James, who are the sons of Zebedee, went up to the temple, it happened that a Pharisee named Arimanios came up to him and said to him, “Where is your teacher, whom you followed?” I said to him, “He has returned to the place he came from.” The Pharisee said to me, “This Nazarene really has deceived you, filled your ears with lies, closed [your minds], and turned you from the traditions of your ancestors.”

Autograph:

When I, John, heard this, I turned away from the temple and went to a mountainous and barren place. I was distressed within, and I asked how the *Savior* was chosen: Why was he sent into the world by his Father? Who is his Father who sent him? (NHC II, 1: 1; Meyer, *Nag Hammadi*, 107)

A few chapters later, the Savior tells John, how “Yaldabaoth” was born. Yaldabaoth is a child of Sophia, which “she conceived of a thought from herself” and “without the consent of the Spirit.”²

Something came out of her that was imperfect and different in appearance from her, for she had produced it without her partner. It did not resemble its mother and was misshapen. When *Sophia* saw what her desire had produced, it changed into the figure of a snake with the face of a lion. Its eyes were like flashing bolts of lightning. ... She named her offspring *Yaldabaoth*. (NHC II, 1: 10; Meyer, *Nag Hammadi*, 115)

When the Savior, who tells the story, recounts the creation of Adam and Eve, he does not hesitate to correct the story in Genesis, “It did not happen, however, the way Moses said”.

What really happened was, according to the Savior, that Yaldabaoth, the first ruler, raped Eve. She gave birth to Yahweh and Elohim, which Moses in his account calls Cain and Abel.

Not the voice of the author, however, but the publisher's voice concludes the book. The publisher talks about the manuscript of John and provides a short provenance narrative.

This is the mystery of the unshakable generation. The Savior communicated this to John for him to record and safeguard. He said to him, "Cursed be anyone who will trade these things *for a gift, for food, drink, clothes, or anything* [32] *like this.*"

These things were communicated to him in a mystery, and at once the Savior disappeared. Then John went to *the other disciples* and reported what the Savior had told him. Jesus Christ Amen.

The Secret Book According to John. (NHC II, 1: 31:25– 32:10; Meyer, *Nag Hammadi*, 132)

Before its publication, the manuscript had circulated only among "the other disciples," which explains why readers had not heard of this work before. They were not allowed to make copies and sell these revelations for "a gift, food, drink, clothes, or anything like this" but after the death of the last disciple, this command became obsolete. Readers now have the privilege to read the secret book as a publication and they will have to pay for a copy of the first edition.

Engagement with Jewish Scriptures

Tertullian, who promoted the Old Testament of the Canonical Edition, opposed the concept of a lesser god than the God of Israel who was to blame for all imperfections of creation. *Secret Book of John* demonstrates why. Stories explaining the origin of this lesser god must correct the creation story in Genesis, and these corrections undermine the authority of Jewish Scriptures. To identify Cain and Abel with Elohim and Yahweh, fathered by the Demiurge who raped Eve, denies that the god who created the first human beings could possibly be the Father of Jesus.

On the other hand, using the disciple John as the authoritative voice and publishing his eye-witness report, shows that *Secret Book of John* seeks a place among Christians and in the library of Christian writings.

Secret Book of James

The Coptic version of *Secret Book of James* forms the second tractate of Codex I of the Nag Hammadi library.³ The implied author, James, writes a confidential private letter to convey his message.⁴

You have asked me to send you a secret book revealed to me and *Peter* by the *master*, and I could not turn you down, nor could I speak to you, so [I have written] it in Hebrew and have sent it to you, and *to you alone*. (NHC I, 2:1; Meyer, *Nag Hammadi*, 23)

The implied publisher made sure that readers understood that the text was based on a Hebrew autograph and that only one exemplar existed. Familiarity with a narrative of Jesus and his twelve disciples was presumed. He expected readers to know who “James” was, who “Peter” was and who “the master” was. The expression “sent to you alone” signals to implied readers of the publication

The twelve disciples were all sitting together, recalling what the savior had said to each of them, whether *in a hidden or an open manner*, and organizing it in books. I was writing what is in [my book]. (NHC I, 2:1; Meyer, *Nag Hammadi*, 24)

The opening scene depicts the twelve disciples of Jesus sitting together, each one writing their own book about what they remember.⁵ The expression “in a hidden or an open manner” conveys the notion that Jesus sometimes communicated with the individual disciple in private and expected the disciple to keep whatever Jesus had told him to himself.⁶

Then the resurrected Lord appears.

Speeches of the resurrected Christ, however, create a set of narrative problems. If Jesus was brought back from the realms of death to receive eternal life, where is he now? To discourage the obvious conclusion that the carpenter from Nazareth must have died a second time, an ascension story resolves the narrative conflict.

This is all I shall tell you at this time. Now I shall ascend to *the place from which* I have come. ... When he said this, he left. Peter and I knelt down, gave thanks, and sent our hearts up to heaven. We heard with our ears and saw with our eyes *the noise of wars, a trumpet blast, and great turmoil*. (NHC I, 2:15; Meyer, *Nag Hammadi*, 29-30)

The Secret Book of James provides a scene in which disciples witness Jesus’ return to heaven. James heard and saw “noise of wars, a trumpet blast, and great turmoil” after Jesus returned to “the place from which” he came. Divine powers in heaven are fighting each other.

Edition Based on an Autograph

James, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, tells the story with the authority of an eyewitness. He received privileged information that he shared with only one

person, the recipient of the letter. The implied publisher suggested that this book was published from James' original document.

Gospel According to Mary

This gospel-book features the voice of a certain Mary by capturing conversations that took place after Jesus' death and resurrection.⁷

Using the first-person plural, "we", Peter speaks for all male disciples.

Peter said to Mary, "Sister, we know the savior loved you more than any other woman. Tell us the words of the savior that you remember, which you know but we do not, because we have not heard them." (BG 8502, 10; Meyer, *Gospels*, 38)

And Mary responds.

She began to speak these words to them. She said, "*I saw the master in a vision*, and I said to him, 'Master, today I saw you in a vision.' "He answered and said to me, 'Blessings on you, since you did not waver at the sight of me. For where the mind is, the treasure is.' (BG 8502, 10; Meyer, *Gospels*, 38-39)

Mary's revelation is based on a visionary experience that no one else had witnessed. After listening to Mary, the disciples Andrew and Peter wondered whether this vision was relevant to anyone but Mary.

Andrew answered and said to the brothers, "Say what you think about what she said, but I do not believe the savior said this. These teachings certainly are strange ideas." Peter voiced similar concerns. He asked the others about the savior: "Did he really speak with a woman in private, without our knowledge? Should we all turn and listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?" Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that *I made this up by myself* or that I am *lying about the savior*?" (BG 8502, 17-18; Meyer, *Gospels*, 40-42)

Mary poses a central question: Are visions something a spiritual person "makes up"? Would such a person be "lying about the savior"? These questions are probably rhetorical questions, expecting an answer along the lines that a spiritual experience is not a lie. But if visions and revelations of Jesus are relevant to understanding the message of God, gender should not make a difference. Or should it?

Addressing Social Conflict

The gospel-book of Mary addresses a social conflict of the second century, the question whether the spiritual experience of women is just as genuine as the

spiritual experience of men, and whether women can provide spiritual leadership in Christian faith communities. This timeless discussion is presented in the voices of first century characters: Mary, Peter, Andrew, and Levi.⁸

Exploring Other Examples

1. **The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit** introduces a distinct view of creation, involving a lesser god named Sakla, who wrongly believed he had created everything. As the book shares, "Sakla was delusional and thought that he had created everything, including the first human." This text explains the broken nature of creation and emphasizes the divine intervention of the Great Invisible Spirit, offering humanity a chance for redemption through Jesus.
2. **The Gospel of Truth** offers a profound metaphor for the crucifixion of Jesus. Instead of reporting events from Jesus's life directly, it assumes readers' familiarity with them. As stated in the Gospel, "Jesus appeared, put on that book, was nailed to a tree, and published the father's edict on the cross." It shows deep understanding of the book publishing culture and uses it as a metaphor for divine revelation.
3. **Dialogue of the Savior** illustrates conversations among Mary, Judas, and Matthew, assuming a shared understanding among readers about these characters and their relationships. It introduces a unique concept: "he left many things with the mother of all," adding a feminine touch to the concept of the Demiurge.
4. **Infancy Gospel of James** fills in narrative gaps left by the Canonical Edition. It includes unique stories, such as: "Mary's mother, Anna, conceived without having sex." This text provides unconventional explanations for topics like Mary's virgin birth and her continued virginity after Jesus's birth.
5. **Infancy Gospel of Thomas** offers insight into Jesus's childhood and the struggles his parents faced raising him. The Gospel begins with: "When this child Jesus was five years old, he was playing by the ford of a stream." The stories align with, yet subtly differ from, canonical narratives, suggesting independent traditions.
6. Lastly, **Second Discourse of Great Seth** is narrated by Christ himself, recounting his journey from heaven, his experiences in a human body, and

his return to the divine realm. A significant quote is when Christ states: "I approached a bodily dwelling and evicted the previous occupant, and I went in."

In summary, each of these texts employs unique narrative strategies and themes, that illustrate the richness and diversity of the gospel genre.

Shared Features

Shared Narrative

Second-century publications on Jesus share a common meta-narrative consisting of three basic settings, like three acts of a drama. The first act is set in the invisible world of Divine Powers and results in the creation of the material world.

"Let us make humans in our image" (Genesis 1:26)

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God" (John 1:1)

The second act covers the activity of a Son of one of the Divine Powers who appears in human form on Earth, delivers a message to humankind, and dies on the cross.

The Four-Gospel Book.

The third act is set after the return of the Son to the Divine Power who sent him, and it shows how the Son's new status plays out in the spiritual experience of those who believed him and acted on the message he delivered to the world.

Revelation of John.

The genre allows for poetic license. The border between narrative traditions about Jesus and visionary experiences of Christ is fluid. Narrative perspectives reach from Christ telling his own story, to disciples providing eyewitness accounts, to first followers describing their visions, to philosophers figuring out God's plan for the world.

Books are used as the central medium to communicate the Son's Divine Message to humankind in hopes that the written record transcends the lifespan of an individual and passes on knowledge from one generation to the next. This literary device delivers secret traditions, which had been written down a long time ago in the hand of enlightened eyewitnesses and were made accessible to the public for the first time. Readers are expected to be familiar with a culture

of book production and, more specifically, to be able to distinguish between the ancient author and the contemporary publisher.

The publications typically use first-century voices to address second-century concerns.

Dating Books on Jesus and His Early Followers

Some books, like Mary's gospel-book, are dated because of the age of the oldest manuscript fragments. Others, like *Gospel of Truth*, the anonymous *Infancy gospel-book* attributed to Thomas, *James' gospel-book*, and the *Marcionite Edition*, are dated because of perceived references to them in second-century writings. Books like *Invisible Spirit* or *Dialogue of the Savior* or *Second Discourse of Seth* which are found in the Nag-Hammadi codices of the fifth century, are Coptic translations of earlier Greek writings. And because they cover topics documented for the second century, like the discussion of the Demiurge, the role of women in congregations, and the authority of Jewish Scripture for Christians, they are assigned to this period. All these categories – manuscript evidence, first documented readers, contemporary issues – are used to date the Canonical Edition of the New Testament as well.

Why Did People Write and Publish Books about Jesus?

Readers decide about the success of a publication, not publishers. If a publisher knew which book will sell, she or he would produce fewer titles and sell select books in higher numbers. Books pass the test of time only if they resonate with audiences. From a historian's perspective, a successfully distributed book conveys reliable information about the mindset of its historical readers, no matter how imaginative the content is.

The oldest exemplars of the three books mentioned in this presentation (*Gospel of Mary*, *Secret Book of John*, *Secret Book of James*) were found in Egypt. They were copied by Africans to be read by Africans.

Conclusion

Let us return to the last sentence of the Four-Gospel volume:

"But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Many second-century books on Jesus provide secret knowledge. Christian faith-communities pass these secrets on from one generation to the next, transcending time and geographical boundaries.

Who is better suited to explain the mystery of a god sending his Son to Earth than Jesus himself? Gospel-books typically create a platform to stage the speeches of Jesus and Christ.

In the Canonical Edition of the NT speeches of Jesus are prominent: five speeches in Mt, like the Sermon on the Mount. // Fare well speeches in John. // Paul references the words of Christ during his Revelation in 2Cor 12. // Christ dictates his sayings to John on Patmos in Revelation of John.

Historical reading communities were willing to buy such books. They wanted to hear what Jesus had to say and accepted the literary format in which the message, called "the good news", was presented.

Many of these early Christian writings were produced by Africans for Africans. They provide insights into the spiritual and societal aspects of early Christianity in Africa.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ The *Secret Book of John* is preserved in four copies, NHC II, 1; III, 1; IV, 1; BG 8502,2. It is dated to the second century because Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.29, narrates part of the story line, but he does not give the title of his source.

² NHC II, 1: 9; Meyer, Nag Hammadi, 114.

³ It is thought to have been translated from a second-century Greek source. The translations are taken from M. Meyer, J. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*.

⁴ Although missing in the only existing witness of the prescript, the conjecture "James" is certain as the name is repeated several times in the text.

⁵ Cf. Justin Martyr's generic description of the canonical gospels as "memoirs of the apostles" (Justin, 1Apol 66).

⁶ The insistence on a miraculous discovery is a common strategy to create the impression of authenticity when documents were published for the first time, cf. Speyer, *Fälschung*, 44-84.

⁷ The Coptic version of The Gospel of Mary (Berlin Gnostic Codex 8502 = BG 8502) misses six pages at the beginning and four pages in the middle. Quotes refer to the pages in this manuscript. The text is also known from two Greek fragments (Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 3525 and

Papyrus Rylands 463). It is usually dated to the second century, cf. Meyer, *Gnostic Gospels*, 36.

⁸ The Canonical Edition addresses the same conflict with the voice of Paul. On the one hand literary Paul endorses the role of women in the community like Chloe and Phoebe. On the other hand, the Paul of the Canonical Edition insists that women should neither teach (1 Tim 2:12) nor speak at congregational meetings (1 Cor 14:34), clearly siding with Peter and Andrew against Levi in Gospel of Mary.