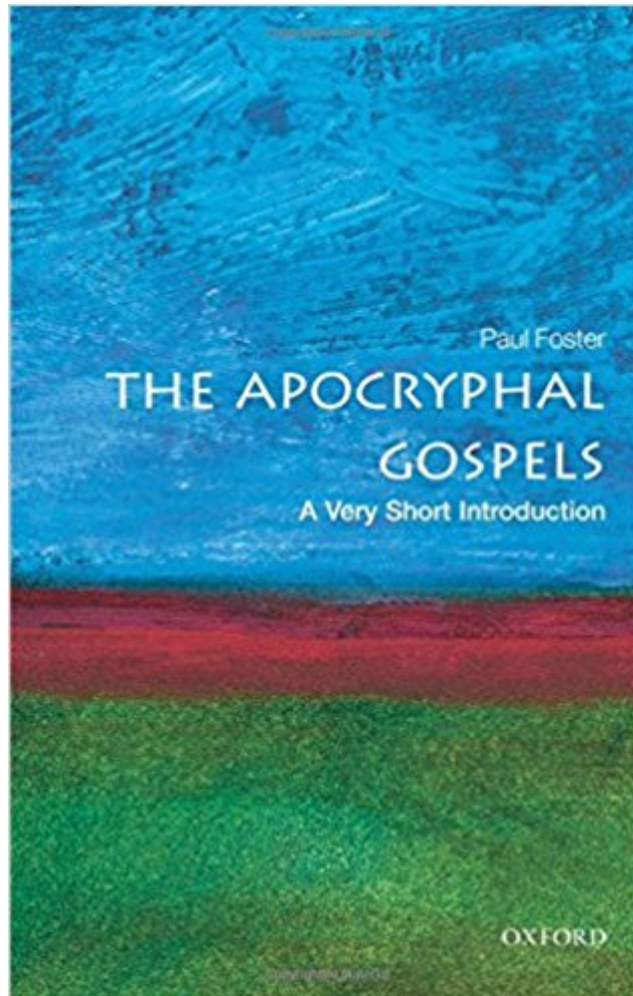




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# The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

This Very Short Introduction offers a clear, accessible, and concise account of the apocryphal gospels--exploring their origins, their discovery, and discussing how the various texts have been interpreted both within and outside the Church. Looking at texts ranging from the Gospels from Nag Hammadi to the Dialogues with the Risen Savior, Paul Foster shows how the apocryphal gospels reflect the diversity that existed within early Christianity, and considers the extent to which they can be used to reconstruct an accurate portrait of the historical Jesus. Foster demonstrates how close analysis of text, contents, and context are vital in assessing the value and authenticity of such ancient documents. Including discussions of controversies and case-studies such as the alleged hoax surrounding the discovery of Secret Mark, Foster concludes that the non-canonical texts, considered in the correct context, can help us reach a more complete understanding of the multi-faceted nature of early Christianity.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Fascinating reading. \* David Sexton, Evening Standard \* He writes with elegance and clarity, and

presents... complex arguments... with simplicity and grace. \* John Drane, Baptist Times \* "Very Short" could just as truthfully be described as "Very Informative"... Illuminating and accessible. \* Methodist Recorder \*

Paul Foster is Lecturer in New Testament Language, Literature & Theology, University of Edinburgh.

The book presents in clear and synthetic way the various documents which have not entered the canonical new testament. From the book it emerges why these book did not enter to be part of the New Testament. it is also explained where the values of these document lies i.e. in bringing to life different forms of Christianities which differed from the mainstream.

A concise well-written introduction to the Apocryphal gospels. Includes interesting discussion of what constitutes a gospel. Easy to read and understand. Highly recommended'

Paul Foster's THE APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS: A Very Short Introduction is an entry in the Oxford University Press series that seeks to explain the basis of a topic in a mere 150 pages. Published in 2009, Foster's book responds especially to recent media coverage of the apocryphal gospels. Ever time archaeologists find a new text, it's sensationalistically reported as telling us secrets that the Church doesn't want us to know. As Foster notes, the truth is rather more complicated. Foster begins by talking about what exactly "gospel" (Greek euangelion) means, and then what "apocryphal" or "non-canonical" means in the context of Christian history. Ultimately, the non-canonical gospels are revealed as not very useful for learning what Jesus really taught. Foster is not a believer -- he claims that early Christianity was a mix of equally valid sects and one form just happened to win out. However, he shows how nearly all of the non-canonical gospels date from much later than the Christianity we know. Thus, if Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written long after Jesus taught and must therefore be taken with a grain of salt, the non-canonical gospels are even later and even more problematic. In some cases, the layer of 2nd century Gnostic thought is so heavy that the historical Jesus is utterly obscured. The remainder of Foster's book is a detailed account of each of the non-canonical gospels, and here we can see how they don't in fact overturn the New Testament, but plainly use the figure of Jesus to express later ideas. The Gospel of Judas, which the popular press introduced as a scandalous challenge to Church teachings, is in fact a bizarre text where Jesus is seen as descending from "the realm of Barbelo", the feminine

emanation of the divine. We're dealing here with a 2nd-century analogue of contemporary New Age claptrap, not the real story of Jesus' life. Even the infancy gospels, written by figures sympathetic to mainstream Christianity, are plainly fantastical embellishments. The downside of the Very Short Introduction format is that there's little room for quotations, let alone the actual text of the non-canonical gospels. The reader will have to read the non-canonical gospels in another volume, and then come here for Foster's commentary. Still, even within 150 pages the author finds room for some fun anecdotes about the provenance of these texts. The Egyptian papyri were discovered by a local family involved in a blood feud. The Gospel of Judas was traded around by shady antiquities dealers and even put into a refrigerator in an attempt to preserve it (which in fact almost destroyed it).

The Apocryphal Gospels - A Very Short Introduction, by Paul Foster This is a very interesting book. But first of all, a word of warning. In order to get the most value from this book, one needs to have read in full at least some of the texts with which Paul Foster deals here. Even a reader very familiar with the New Testament may be quite unaware of the topic of the apocryphal New Testament literature, and even the frequent (but necessarily limited) quotations such as Foster provides are not enough to give the true flavour of these apocryphal 'books' or to give any sense of the true difference that exists between them and the canonical New Testament. Readers must wrestle with the possible meanings of 'gospel, canonical, non-canonical, apocryphal, and Gnostic', concepts which Foster keeps trying to clarify as he goes along. The most complete English translation of the apocryphal New Testament literature (including the 'gospels' with which Foster is dealing) is listed in Foster's bibliography: "The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation", by J.K. Elliott, paperback, 2006. Unfortunately, it costs about £25. Some of these apocryphal writings are however sometimes quoted in more detail, or even given in full, in learned commentaries on the New Testament. Foster's book does repeatedly correctly emphasize that these apocryphal gospels, which are Christian writings which are not included in the New Testament, are all later than the New Testament writings. These apocrypha date from the second to the fourth centuries, and frequently rehash or 'fictitiously' expand what is already to be found in the New Testament witness to Christ and Christianity. Lurid media headlines, claiming that the study of these apocryphal texts overthrows Christianity and the traditional view of Christ, are to be treated with scepticism. These non-biblical writings give us information about how some Christians of those later centuries thought and lived, but they do not destroy the authenticity of the New Testament itself, which contains the very earliest accounts of the life of Christ and the

foundation and spread of the Church. And so to my next, associated point. Although Foster's book had to be short, he needed to deal explicitly with two questions which he fails to consider: the relation of the canonical (New Testament) and non-canonical (Apocryphal) writings to the Old Testament, and the question of Church. Both of these are key considerations for deciding why the apocryphal writings eventually fell by the wayside while the canonical writings of the New Testament survived. First of all, although the New Testament writings themselves exhibit a developed theological view (and not merely a 'reportage' view) of the Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, and of the founding and spread of the Church, scholarly examination of the New Testament texts shows, almost for every verse, and often many times for a single verse or passage, a rooting and sourcing in the Old Testament (and also in non-biblical 'Intertestamental' Jewish writings, notably in the Dead Sea Scrolls). This sourcing in and fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New Testament is not to be found with anything approaching the same conviction in the apocryphal literature. Secondly, the New Testament writings show a developed sense that Jesus of Nazareth founded a Church to preserve and spread his teachings. This Church was to be a fount of discipline and of orthodoxy and of orthopraxy for every human being. This is clear already in the writings of Paul from 50 AD onwards (also already incorporating even earlier hymnic and catechetical material), in Acts, Hebrews, Peter and other writings, and in the perceived commands of Jesus as given in Matthew, in his founding of his Church, Community, Assembly, on Peter; and in his final mission statement: "All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth. Going, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all days, even to the end of time". The word 'all' is found all four times in the Greek original. A treatment like Foster's needs to consider the universal teaching of the New Testament, as found for example in Ephesians (1.9,10): "[H]e (God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ) has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fulness of time, to gather up [anakephalaïosasthai] all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (NRSV). Messiah has come. And he founded a Church, which is the Roman Catholic Church. The only Messiah is the Jesus Christ of the New Testament, who 'was with God and was God'. There was no other Messiah or Mediator or Demiurge such as the apocryphal gospels describe. Nor was there a Messiah 30 years before Jesus, as Israel Knohl thinks (see his book 'The Messiah Before Jesus'), nor yet another different 'First Messiah' 70 years earlier still (see 'The First Messiah' by Michael O Wise). It is Jesus alone who fulfils the prophecies and functions which Knohl and Wise correctly identify as essential for the expected Messiah, but which these

authors then most unconvincingly seek to attribute to their respective candidates. Foster concludes (p. 137) that 'orthodox', mainstream Christianity emerged victorious over 'non-canonical' Christianity "whether this is piously seen as being due to divine providence, or rather more pragmatically as being due to the vagaries of history", and, as the victor, 'orthodoxy' wrote the Christ story as it wanted. I do not accept Foster's alternatives. The scholarly examination of history massively supports the view that the 'pious' belief in the intervention of divine Providence is at the same time (in the Person and work of Jesus Christ) the most 'pragmatic' thing about history. Foster's 'vagaries of history' suggestion simply does not provide an explanation for the Person and work of Jesus Christ and Christianity.

Fascinating and concise introduction, very well-written and among the best of the series that I have read. It also includes a useful guide to further reading.

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