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Nazarenes, Gospel of

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Historiography

Because none of the early Jewish-Christian gospels that the Church Fathers mention or quote has survived in its entirety, the so-called *Gospel of the Nazarenes* is a scholarly reconstruction. Consequently, the history of its research is closely tied with the question how many early Jewish-Christian gospels scholars have assumed and what passages they have attributed to these gospels

From the beginning of the 20th century, research was dominated by two main theories (for the history of earlier research, see Handmann, 1888, 1–25). In German and English scholarly literature, the Three-Gospel Hypothesis (the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*) was the most influential theory throughout the 20th century. H. Waitz started to develop the Three-Gospel Hypothesis in the second edition of E. Hennecke's collection of early Christian apocrypha. In the first edition, A. Meyer had still argued for only two Jewish-Christian gospels (Meyer, 1904a–b). This basic solution assumes that in addition to the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, there was only one Jewish-Christian gospel. A. Meyer named it the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, but later proponents of the same solution also used the title *Gospel of the Nazarenes*. The hypothesis is today supported especially in French scholarly literature (Lagrangé, 1922, 161–181, 321–349; Mimouni, 1998, 209–211, 215–216; 2012, 175–189). In more recent research the criteria used in the two classic hypotheses have been questioned. This has induced some refinements to the classic theories (Frey 2012a–e) as well as a new hypothesis that falls between the two classic ones (Luomanen 2012).

Sources

The church fathers do not explicitly use the titles the “*Gospel of the Nazarenes*” or the “*Gospel of the Ebionites*” (**Ebionites**), although they refer to gospels used by the Nazarenes and the Ebionites. However, Clement of Alexandria and several other church fathers knew about a gospel titled *Gospel of the Hebrews*/*Gospel according to Hebrews* (Clem. *Strom.* 2.9.45; Or. *Comm. Jo.* 2.12; Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 3.25.5; Epiph. *Haer.* 30.3.7; 30.13.2; 46.1; Didy. *Comm. Ps.* 3.184.9–10; Jer. *Comm. Mich.* 7.5–7; *Vir. ill.* 3; *Comm. Isa.* preface 65). The scholars who support the theory that the *Gospel of the*

Nazarenes is the same as the *Gospel of the Hebrews* naturally link these references to the Nazarenes.

The title “*Gospel of the Nazarenes*” is used for the first time in the mid-9th century CE by Paschasius Radbertus and Haimo of Auxerre (see Klijn & Reinink, 1973, 268–269; Klijn, 1992, 22, 129). It is clearly a later reconstruction based on earlier references to the “gospel that the Nazarenes use.” These later references do not reveal any useful information about an early Jewish-Christian gospel. Therefore, the present entry focuses on a discussion of traditions related to the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* from the 1st century to the beginning of the 5th century CE.

Jerome often refers to a gospel that the Nazarenes used or read (Jer. *Comm. Matt.* 12.13; 23.35; *Comm. Isa.* 11.1–3; 40.9–11; *Comm. Isa.* preface 65; *Comm. Ezech.* 16.13; 18.5–9; *Pelag.* 3.2). Because Jerome thinks that the Nazarenes’ gospel represents the original Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew (Jer. *Vir. ill.* 3; Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 3.39), many scholars have entertained hopes for finding some pre-synoptic traditions in the texts attributed to it. The contents of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* are usually not reconstructed solely on the basis of the quotations where the Nazarenes explicitly appear. Instead, the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* has functioned as one of the categories into which fragments from apocryphal Jewish-Christian gospels are placed, on the basis of various criteria that have been developed in order to create an overall picture of early Jewish-Christian gospels.

The Three-Gospel Hypothesis (H1)

The three gospels of the Three-Gospel Hypothesis are:

- (1) the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which was written in Greek, used in Egypt, and originally quoted by Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Didymus the Blind (for references, see above);
- (2) the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, written in Greek and quoted by Epiphanius of Salamis in *Adversus haereses* (30); and
- (3) the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, written in Aramaic and quoted by Jerome in particular.

In the second edition of E. Hennecke’s German collection of New Testament apocrypha, H. Waitz argued that in addition to the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, a distinction has to be made between the clearly apocryphal *Gospel of the Hebrews* and

the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, which resembles the Synoptic Gospels, especially the Gospel of Matthew (Waitz, 1924a–d). The Three-Gospel Hypothesis was further developed by P. Vielhauer and G. Strecker in the third edition of E. Hennecke's collection. In this form it became widely distributed in German and English textbooks in the latter half of the 20th century (Vielhauer & Strecker, 1991). A.F.J. Klijn's monograph supports the same basic solution (Klijn, 1992).

After having excluded Epiphanius' references in Epiph. *Haer.* 30 (i.e. the *Gospel of the Ebionites*), P. Vielhauer and G. Strecker reconstructed the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* by sorting the citations of the church fathers into two categories on the basis of two principles.

Criteria for derivation from the Aramaic *Gospel of the Nazarenes* must be

(a) indications that the text has a Semitic basis, and

(b) the synoptic character of the text or its affinity in particular to Matthew, since the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, according to all that we know of it, diverged very much from the synoptic type (Vielhauer & Strecker, 1991, 148).

Because of the assumed close affinity with the Gospel of Matthew, P. Vielhauer and G. Strecker also included in the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* "Jewish" marginal readings from a number of manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew. In the manuscripts, these readings are titled τὸ Ἰουδαϊκόν / *to Ioudaikon*, suggesting that they were from a Jewish gospel.

The Two-Gospel Hypothesis(H1)

This basic solution assumes that in addition to the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, there was only one Jewish-Christian gospel. Scholars call it either the *Gospel of the Hebrews* or the *Gospel or the Nazarenes*. The hypothesis is supported especially in French scholarly literature (Lagrange, 1922, 161–181, 321–349; Mimouni, 1998, 209–211, 215–216; 2012, 175–189).

The Character of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*(H1)

The contents of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, as well as its literary and theological profile, naturally depend on the way in which it is reconstructed. Because the number of passages that can be attributed to early Jewish-Christian gospels is relatively small, all of the characterizations of these gospels are sketchy. The classic Three-Gospel

Hypothesis, as presented by P. Vielhauer and G. Strecker, attributes 23 fragments to the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, many of which include only a few words (esp. *to Ioudaikon* frgms.). In addition, there are 13 later references to *Gospel of the Nazarenes* that are not included in the actual reconstruction. Seven fragments are attributed to the *Gospel of the Ebionites* and eight to the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. According to the Three-Gospel Hypothesis, the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* closely resembles the Synoptic Gospels, especially the Gospel of Matthew. However, closer analysis of the fragments has revealed wordings that have affinities with the Gospel of Luke, and there are also fragments that do not have synoptic parallels. Thus, even in the framework of the Three-Gospel Hypothesis, it would be more appropriate to characterize the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* as a gospel that creatively used materials from the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke in particular, and combined them with its own traditions (Frey, 2003, 135–136; Luomanen, 2012, 86–87).

The larger fragments that have synoptic counterparts allow comparisons that cast some light on the literary character of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*. The Synoptic Gospels have a story about Jesus healing a man whose hand is withered (Mark 1:1–6; Matt 12:9–14; Luke 6:6–11). Jerome offers a fragment (Jer. *Comm. Matt.* 12.13), usually attributed to *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, where the man with the withered hand gives grounds for his request to be healed: “I was a mason and earned my living with my hands. I pray to you, Jesus, make me healthy again, so that I do not have to disgracefully beg for my food.” There is also a colorful elaboration in the story about a rich man, which is included in the Latin translation of Origen’s commentary on Matthew (Or. *Comm. Matt.* 15.14). As in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 10:17–22; Matt 19:16–22; Luke 18:18–23), the rich man learns that it is not enough to obey the Ten Commandments, because one should also sell one’s possessions and follow Jesus. The description of his reaction is more colorful here, however, and Jesus’ response also differs from the synoptic versions:

<quote>But the rich man begun to scratch his head and it did not please him. The Lord said to him: “How can you say: I have done the law and the prophets? For it is written in the law: love your neighbor as yourself. See, many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are covered with dung, dying from hunger and your house is full of many good things, and nothing at all comes out of it for them.” He turned and said to Simon, his disciple that was sitting by him: “Simon, Son of Jonah, it is easier for a camel to go

through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

(trans. Luomanen, 2012, 175–176)<quote>

If these fragments come from the same gospel and are somehow representative of its character, it would seem that its stories were richer in detail, it paid more attention to honor and shame than the Synoptic Gospels, and its stories had clear references to a Jewish setting (“your brothers, sons of Abraham”; “Simon, Son of Jonah” = Peter; for analysis, see Luomanen, 2003; or 2012, 175–199).

In the classic Two-Gospel Hypothesis, the character of *Gospel of the Nazarenes/Gospel of the Hebrews* is different. The core literary characteristics described above remain the same, but particularly the theological profile is different, because the seven passages that the Three-Gospel Hypothesis attributes to the separate *Gospel of the Hebrews* are added to the same gospel. The distinctive features of these seven fragments – that also form the profile of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* in the Three-Gospel Hypothesis – include brotherly love, emphasis on the (Holy) Spirit, and the Jewish wisdom tradition. The last feature was originally taken by P. Vielhauer and G. Strecker as an indication of a “gnostic” influence, since one of the fragments has a parallel in the *Gospel of Thomas* (2). For this reason, they also presumed a separate *Gospel of the Hebrews*. In the light of more recent research on the *Gospel of Thomas*, the label “gnostic” is questionable, and even more so in the case of *Gospel of the Nazarenes/Gospel of the Hebrews*, which is perfectly understandable within the Jewish wisdom tradition.

Critique and Developments(H1)

Although both of the above classic hypotheses continue to have support, a number of critical points have been raised against the Three-Gospel Hypothesis, especially in its classic 20th-century form. This has resulted in refinements in the reconstructions and in the supporting arguments.

P. Luomanen has presented the New Two-Gospel Hypothesis, a solution that falls between the two classic hypotheses (and could therefore be also called the New Three-Gospel Hypothesis). P. Luomanen questions the criteria of the classic Three-Gospel Hypothesis for distinguishing between the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*. The argument based on distinguishing between canonical and noncanonical types of gospel traditions may have seemed valid when Waitz

introduced it in the second edition of E. Hennecke's collection, but after the *Gospel of Thomas* became known to scholars – with its mixture of synoptic-type and apocryphal sayings – it should have been dismissed (Luomanen, 2012, 82–89). P. Luomanen seeks to develop more neutral criteria on the basis of the date and the form of the introductions of the fragments. He concludes that Jerome received from the Nazarenes a collection of anti-rabbinic sayings that were based on a Syriac or Aramaic translation of Matthew's Gospel, which the Nazarenes had modified to better serve their critique of contemporary representatives of rabbinic Judaism. In this reconstruction, a separate *Gospel of the Nazarenes* disappears from the scene – or becomes only a modified translation of the Gospel of Matthew. In P. Luomanen's solution, the fragments that do not belong to the Nazarenes' anti-rabbinic collection or to the *Gospel of the Ebionites* all come from one and the same gospel, the *Gospel of the Hebrews* (Luomanen, 2012, 83–119). A. Gregory also finds the distinction between the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* and *Gospel of the Hebrews* to be ungrounded, and he critically asks if it is even justified to assume a distinct category of Jewish-Christian gospels that could be somehow differentiated from other early Christian gospels (Gregory, 2006, 398–399; 2008, 56–59).

J. Frey's chapters in a German collection of Christian apocrypha (a new ed. of E. Hennecke's collection) present a new version of the Three-Gospel Hypothesis (Frey, 2012a–e). J. Frey has dropped the most vulnerable arguments traditionally used to support the hypothesis. For instance, he has excluded the *Ioudaikon* readings from the reconstruction of the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, because they could come from various sources that were considered Jewish, not necessarily the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*. J. Frey also avoids arguing on the basis of the pre-determined distinction between canonical and non-canonical types of gospel traditions. Because J. Frey seems not to provide any new arguments to support the hypothesis, the net result is that the reconstruction is mainly based on linguistic criteria: Greek fragments are attributed to the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and fragments that hint at Hebrew/Aramaic background to the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* (Frey, 2012b, 595–597).

Although the *Gospel of the Nazarenes* continues to intrigue scholarly imagination as a possible source for pre-Synoptic Gospel traditions, it should have become clear at this point in the history of research that our knowledge about the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*/*Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Ebionites* is too meager and

speculative to provide any access to the earliest phases of gospel traditions. This is even more so because, as far as the traditions can be compared with synoptic sources, there is greater evidence of their post-synoptic character (Luomanen, 2012, 240–241). C.A. Evans' solution, to simply list the traditions known to the church fathers (see Evans, 2007) without trying to reconstruct the gospels, is too extreme. But one should, nevertheless, keep in mind that the contents of these gospels are only reconstructions that are based on certain premises. General introductions to early Christian literature have often forgotten this and uncritically relied on the two classic solutions that more recent research has proven vulnerable.

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