

The Gospel According to the Hebrews

The Gospel according to the Hebrews is quoted by a number of church fathers connected with the city of Alexandria, Egypt—Clement, Origen, Didymus the Blind, and Jerome (who studied with Didymus in Alexandria); for this reason, scholars assume that it was used, and possibly written, there, probably during the first half of the second century. Regrettably, the book no longer survives intact, but only in the scattered references to it in these other authors' writings. Its name probably derives from the circumstance that it was used principally by Jewish-Christians in that large and thriving metropolis—i.e., it was called this by outsiders of that community, not by those who actually used it.

The Gospel according to the Hebrews was written in Greek and narrated important events of Jesus' life, including his baptism, temptation, and resurrection. It appears, however, that these stories were not simply taken over and modified from the Gospels that came to be included in the New Testament. They were instead alternative forms of these traditions that had been passed along orally until the unknown author of this Gospel heard them and wrote them down.

The Jewish emphases of the Gospel are evident in a several of the surviving quotations, such as fragment 5, which presupposes the importance of James, the brother of Jesus, the head of the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem after Jesus' death. Yet some of the sayings of the Gospel have a Gnostic tone to them (see fragment 1, which is quite similar to Coptic Gospel of Thomas 2).¹ It may be, then, that this particular Jewish-Christian community was more sympathetic than others to the prominent Gnostic teachers in Alexandria in the second century. In any event, the Gospel evidently contained a number of Jesus' ethical teachings (fragments 4 and 7). And some of its accounts were highly legendary—including the post-

¹On Gnosticism, see Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 113–34.

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resurrection appearance of Jesus to James, who had sworn at the Last Supper (in a story found in this Gospel, but not cited by any other authority) not to eat until he should see Jesus raised from the dead (fragment 5).

The following are the quotations of the Gospel that survive in our ancient sources.

1 As it is also written in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, "The one who is amazed will rule, and the one who rules will find rest." (Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 2, 9, 45)

2 If anyone accepts the Gospel according to the Hebrews, there the Savior himself says, "Just now my mother, the Holy Spirit, took me by one of my hairs and carried me up to the great mountain, Tabor." (Origen, *Commentary on John*, 2, 12)

3 It may appear that Matthew is named Levi in the Gospel of Luke. But in fact that is not so; it is Matthias, the one who replaced Judas, who is the same as Levi, known by two names. This is found in the Gospel according the Hebrews. (Didymus the Blind, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 184, 9–10)

4 As we read in the Hebrew Gospel, the Lord said to his disciples: "You should never rejoice except when you look upon your brother in love." (Jerome, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 5:4)

5 The Gospel that is called "according to the Hebrews," which I have recently translated into both Greek and Latin, a Gospel that Origen frequently used, records the following after the Savior's resurrection: "But when the Lord had given the linen cloth to the servant of the priest, he went and appeared to

James. For James had taken a vow not to eat bread from the time he drank the cup of the Lord until he should see him raised from among those who sleep." And soon after this it says, "The Lord said, 'Bring a table and bread.'" And immediately it continues, "He took the bread and blessed it, broke it, gave it to James the Just, and said to him, 'My brother, eat your bread. For the Son of Man is risen from among those who sleep.'" (Jerome, *Illustrious Men*, 2)

6 It is stated in the Gospel written in Hebrew, which the Nazareans read: "The entire fountain of the Holy Spirit will descend on him. For the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Later in that Gospel that we have mentioned we find the following written: "It came to pass that when the Lord came up from the water, the entire fountain of the Holy Spirit descended and rested on him; and it said to him, 'My Son, in all the prophets I have been expecting you to come, that I might rest on you. For you are my rest, you are my firstborn Son, who rules forever.'" (Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* 11:1–3)

7 And in the Gospel according to the Hebrews, which the Nazareans are accustomed to read, the following is described as among the worst offenses: that someone should make the spirit of his brother sad. (Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel*, 18:7)