This new contribution to the *Interpretation Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Early Church* limits itself to apocryphal Gospels. Bockmuehl states in his introductory chapter his approach is both accessible and nonsensational (29), in contrast other recent books which describe this literature as suppressed by the establishment and containing secrets threatening the very fabric of institutionalized Christianity. As Bockmuehl states, it is remarkable that none of these Gospel-like texts provide an alternative narrative to the canonical Gospels. Nor were they suppressed from the canon, they were never part of any canon in the first place (228). In fact, he concludes that on a minority of the texts surveyed in this introduction intended to explicitly subvert or displace the fourfold canonical Gospels (233) and they do not appear to have been widely read (235). This is a reasonable and judicious assessment of the apocryphal gospels.

In the first chapter Bockmuehl provides some orientation to how Gospels were read in the early church. He acknowledges some plurality in the early church, but he asserts this did not detract “from the surprisingly early appearance of a widely acknowledged core of the fourfold gospel narrative in both the East and West” (14). Evidence for this early acceptance is the cross-referencing within the Gospels themselves (and I would add the many potential allusions to Jesus tradition in the epistles) as well as the early citation of the canonical gospels alongside the Old Testament as Scripture before A.D. 100. Bockmuehl resists the temptation to label these documents as Gnostic since “Gnosticism is a potentially misleading modern analytic construct” (20). Nor does Bockmuehl think there was a widespread suppression of these documents by increasingly orthodox Christianity seeking to limit access to potentially heretical and secret writings. Certainly some church writers sought to blacklist non-canonical gospels, but Bockmuehl points out this did very little and it was not until well after the sixth century the church had power to make these apocryphal texts go away (27).

What is an apocryphal gospel? Some of these gospels were found among the many thousands of documents found at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. This massive collection included the Gospel of Thomas and fragments of the gospels of Mary, Peter and James. Other apocryphal gospels were found as part of the Nag Hammadi collection. Thirteen leather bound books were discovered in Egypt in 1945 and were once considered to be examples of Gnostic texts from the library of the nearby St. Pachomius monastery and discarded in the graveyard as canonical boundaries were established in the fourth century. Bockmuehl points out there are several improbabilities with
this popular theory and suggests the manuscripts were an “eclectic collection of privately commissioned copies buried as part of the owner’s grave goods” (17).

After cataloging the many texts which might be considered to be an apocryphal gospel (ie. having something to do with Jesus), Bockmuehl suggest four categories: infancy, ministry, passion, and resurrection.

Chapter two discusses the two infancy Gospels of James and Thomas, summarizing the content of each and offering a section on the influence of each of these sources on the Christmas story. The Infancy Gospel of James has had a great influence on how the church thinks about the first of Jesus, although few Protestants are aware of this. In addition to the two well-known infancy gospels, Bockmuehl catalogs another eight lesser-known texts known from translations (for example, the Arabic Infancy Gospel, known from two Arabic and three Syriac manuscripts). The existence of these infancy gospels indicates the church began to emphasize the role of Mary very early and fill-in some gaps in the canonical gospels.

In chapter three Bockmuehl covers what he calls “fragmentary ministry gospels.” Beginning with Q, he outlines the development of sayings gospels especially among early Jewish Christianity. Some of these narrative gospels are lost, such as the Gospel according to the Hebrews, the Gospel according to the Nazoreans, and the Gospel according to the Ebionites. Although these gospels were known to ancient writers, nothing has been preserved. This chapter also includes Marcion’s edited gospel (which he claimed to be a recovery of the true gospel) and Tatian’s Diatessaron, an early harmony of the four canonical Gospels.

More promising is the Papyrus Egerton 2. This manuscript dates to about A.D. 200 and was discovered in 1935. It contains five non-canonical episodes from the life of Jesus including encounters between Jesus and Jewish opponents. For some scholars, this gospel represents an early, more Jewish form of Christianity in the Johannine tradition, but Bockmuehl is more cautious based on the lack of evidence for the circulation of the fragments (108-09). After surveying the contents of a number of other papyri fragments, Bockmuehl briefly discusses the Secret Gospel of Mark (a highly questionable text which may in fact be a forgery) and the Abgar Legend.

Chapter four reviews several passion gospels, with pride of place going to the Gospel of Peter. Crossan and others have argued the Gospel of Peter predates the New Testament and contributed to the shape of the canonical gospels, but this view has fallen into disfavor (140). The book was originally discovered in 1887 as part of a parchment codex dated between the sixth and ninth century (the Akhmim Codex). Although photographed in 1981, the manuscript is not missing from the Cairo museum (138). The Gospel of Peter contains some striking imagery of the cross and resurrection, perhaps accounting for the popularity of the book in antiquity. After surveying some of the scholarly debate about the book, Bockmuehl suggestions the Gospel of Peter
represents “an appropriation and relecture of protocanonical synoptic tradition, not necessarily in written form” (144), placed into the mouth of Peter perhaps as a stamp of authority (146).

The fifth chapter collects what Bockmuehl calls “post-resurrection discourse gospels,” including the gospels of Thomas, Philip, Mary, Judas, Bartholomew and the Epistle of the Apostles. Of these, the 114 sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are by far the most significant because many are similar to the canonical Gospels, although with significant differences. This has led to a “booming industry” for critical studies of the Gospel of Thomas (170). Bockmuehl discusses two important questions, first, “is it a gospel” (Bockmuehl says it is a gospel but not a bios) and second, is it Gnostic? Here Bockmuehl concludes the book is not “properly Gnostic” but it certainly went on to become so (178).

The Gospel of Philip is equal in importance to the Gospel of Thomas, but has received less attention. The document is sometimes described as a “tract about rituals” including baptism and anointing (188) even if it stands in contrast to emerging Christian orthodoxy. Bockmuehl suggests the Gospel of Philip represents the “excerpted summary of the teachings of a gnostic preacher or catechist” (189).

This chapter also includes sections on the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Judas, two texts which have been the subject of headlines in recent years. With respect to the first, Bockmuehl says “we can safely conclude the Gospel of Mary tells us nothing about the closeted sexual life of Jesus or about a primitive radical feminist message suppressed by the later catholic church” (203). With respect to the Gospel of Judas, Bockmuehl cites Foster approvingly: the book is a “bitter satire of apostolic Christianity” (209).

Conclusion. Bockmuehl contributes a useful introduction to apocryphal gospels which avoids the kind of sensationalism which often accompanies books on non-canonical documents. The glossary of technical terms and extensive bibliography makes this an excellent introduction to the apocryphal gospels.

The Westminster John Knox Press website has a 53 page sample PDF which includes the front matter and the entire first chapter of the book.

NB: Thanks to Westminster John Knox Press for kindly providing me with a review copy of this book. This did not influence my thoughts regarding the work.

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