

Protevangelium Jacobi (PJ): An Introduction By Chris Jordan

Date and Authorship

In 25:1 the author states εγω δε Ιακωβος ο γραψασ την ιστοριαν ταυτην. Jesus had a brother called James (Matthew 13:55) who may have been older, having been born from a previous marriage of Joseph (PJ 17:2). Certainly, a family member would be the ideal author of a story about the birth of a sibling. In the Greek MSS of PJ, the titles that make reference to the author identify him as αδελφοθεος or αδελφος κυριου, so the Greek textual tradition identifies the author James as the brother of Jesus. In 25:1 the author states how he wrote the text “when an uproar arose in Jerusalem at the death of Herod.” If the reference is to Herod the Great (d. 4 B.C.), then James the brother of Jesus wrote the story not long after Jesus was born. Alternatively, the author may be referring to Herod Agrippa (d. A.D. 44), who persecuted the Jerusalem church in the last year of his reign (Acts 12:1). The Jerusalem uproar that James refers to may be an allusion to this time of persecution. In this light James (d. A.D. 62) the brother of Jesus wrote PJ by A.D. 44. There is the possibility that the author was James the Son of Zebedee, who was killed by Herod Agrippa during the persecution in Jerusalem (Acts 12:2). If this was the case, PJ was written by A.D. 44. The author may be another James who is mentioned in the New Testament: James the Younger (Mark 15:40). The Gelasian Decree (A.D. 494-496), which defamed a number of religious texts including PJ, identified James the Younger as the author of PJ.

If James the brother of Jesus or James the son of Zebedee were the authors, then the text of PJ was composed before the canonical gospels. However, although the author was well acquainted with Judaism and was highly influenced by the Greek Septuagint, his knowledge of Palestinian geography is dubious. For example, in PJ 21:1, the author implies that one is able to travel from Bethlehem to Judea, not realising that Judea is the region in which Bethlehem is situated. The three personalities named James in the canonical gospels would be expected to have a good knowledge of Palestine. This points to the possibility that either James was a non-biblical personality who lived outside Palestine or the name is being used as a pseudonym.

Nock along with the majority of scholars, believes that the name 'James' is a pseudonym and that PJ was written after the canonical gospels, which were composed by the end of the first century.¹ He argues that the author of PJ was motivated by the text of the canonical gospels, in particular, its lack of information about John the Baptist's escape from Herod's soldiers.² According to Nock since the canonical gospels only describe the escape of the infant Jesus, the author of PJ in response decided to describe the escape of John in greater detail than the escape of Jesus.³ Nock concludes that PJ was written in response to the canonical gospels; therefore,

1 R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 9.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

the postscript in chapter 25, which suggests a pre-canonical date of composition, is false.⁴

However, the canonical gospels could have been written in response to the text of PJ. Since PJ focuses on Herod's pursuit of John the Baptist and how he was dramatically rescued through divine intervention, do not the canonical gospels, as a natural response, place an emphasis on Herod's pursuit of Jesus and his escape into Egypt? Therefore, PJ may be a text that was written during the life of Jesus or at least before the canonical gospels, and the canonical birth accounts of Jesus were written in response to PJ. Resch and Conrady are two nineteenth century scholars who support the thesis that PJ is pre-canonical.⁵ Conrady thinks that PJ was used as a source by the authors of the canonical gospels and Resch thinks that the canonical gospels and PJ shared common written sources.⁶ PJ might have originally been a part of the canonical gospels, which became separated from the rest of the work at an early period of transmission. Postel suggested in his publication of PJ (1552) that the text of PJ was the missing introduction to Mark's Gospel.⁷

Most scholars think that PJ was written after the canonical gospels in the late second century: Tischendorf (1852), Cowper (1874), Robinson (1927), De Strycker (1961), Stempvort (1964), Smid (1965), Elliott (1996), Cullmann (1991) and Hock (1995). PJ was definitely written by the third century: Bodmer V is dated ca. late 3rd/early 4th century, and the writings of Justin Martyr (d. 165), Clement of Alexandria (d. 212) and Origen (d. 253/54) contain textual elements which are only found in PJ.

Provenance

The text may have originated in Egypt, Syria or in the interior of Asia minor.⁸ The oldest extant manuscript, Bodmer V, was probably written in Egypt.⁹

Title History

The popular title, *Protevangelium Jacobi* (Infancy Gospel of James), was introduced by Guillaume Postel in his Latin translation of the Greek text in 1552.¹⁰ Postel's Latin title in full is *Protevangelium sive de natalibus Jesu Christi et ipsius matris virginis Mariae, sermo historicus divi Jacobi minori*.¹¹ It is not known whether Postel's title is a Latin translation of one which he found in a Greek manuscript.¹²

⁴ R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 9.

⁵ O. Cullmann, "Infancy Gospels," in *New Testament Apocrypha. Volume One. Gospel and Related Writings*, ed. E. Hennecke. Translated by R. McL. Wilson (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 372.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ H. R. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi. A Commentary* (N.V.: Van Gorcum and Comp., 1965), 3.

⁸ R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 12.

⁹ The scribes of Bodmer V have made a number of orthographic errors which presuppose a knowledge of the Coptic language. For example, εγ for εκ. See T. Wasserman, "Papyrus 72 and the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex," *NTS* 51 (2005): 137-54. Download for free: ask.lub.lu.se/archive/00024731/01/download.pdf

¹⁰ R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 4.

¹¹ C. Michel and P. Peeters, *Evangelies Apocryphes* (Paris: Libraire Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1911), i.

¹² R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 4.

There are a variety of titles for the text:

MS	Date (A.D.)	Title
Bodmer V	3 rd /4 th century	γενεσις Μαρίας αποκαλυψις Ιακωβ
MS (used in Tischendorf's edition)	Date (A.D.)	Title
C (Paris. Nationale. 1454) ¹³	10 th century	διηγησις και ιστορια πως εγεννηθη η υπεραγια θεοτοκος εις ημων σωτηριαν
A (Venetus Marcianus, II, 82)	10 th century	του αγιου αποστολου Ιακωβου αρχιεπισκοπου Ιεροσολυμων του αδελφοθεου διηγησις περι της γεννησεως της παναγιας θεοτοκου και αιτιαρθενου Μαρίας
O (Mediolanensis Ambrosianus, A63)	11 th century	λογος ιστορικος δηλων την συλληψιν και αποτεξιν της υπεραγιας θεοτοκου και αιτιαρθενου Μαρίας
D (Paris. Nationale. 1215)	1068	ιστορια Ιακωβου του αδελφοθεου εις την γεννησιν της υπεραγιας θεοτοκου
G (Vaticanus, 654)	12 th century	λογος ιστορικος του αγιου Ιακωβου εξηγουμενος οπως την εξ επαγγελιας γεννησιν εσχεν η θεοτοκος και περι του μνηστηρου αυτης Ιωσηφ
M (Paris Nationale, 1174)	12 th century	ιστορια Ιακωβου του αποστολου εις το γενεθλιον της υπεραγιας δεσποινης ημων θεοτοκου
H (Venetus Marcianus XI, 20)	15 th century	ιστορια παλαια συγραφησα παρα τινος παλαιου ανδρου Ιακωβου εις τον δικαιον Ιωσηφ και εις την Μαρριαν περι της γεννησεως του χριστου
B (Venetus Marcianus, 363)	---	λογος ιστορικος εις το γενεσιον της υπεραγιας θεοτοκου συγραφεισ παρα Ιακωβου του αδελφου του κυριου
P (Mediolanensis Ambrosianus, C92)	---	του αγιου και πανευφημου αποστολου Ιακωβου επισκοπου Ιεροσολυμων λογος εις το γεννεσιν της υπεραγιας δεσποινης ημων θεοτοκου
N (Paris, Nationale, 1176)	13 th century	του αγιου Ιακωβου του αδελφοθεου λογος ιστορικος εις το γενεσιον της υπεραγιας θεοτοκου
L (Paris		λογος του αγιου ενδοξου και πανευφημου αποστολ

¹³ Tischendorf thought that MS C contained the best Greek text.

Nationale, 1190)	1567	ου Ιακωβου του αδελφοθεου οτι ειπε περι της ατεκνιας Ιωακειμ και της στειρωσεωσ Αννησ και περι θρηνησεωσ και προσευχησ αυτων και περι της συλληψεωσ της υπεραγιασ θεοτοκου και περι της γεννησεωσ αυτησ και περι της συγχαριασ και αναθρεψεωσ αυτησ εωσ τριετησ και περι της εν τω ναω εισοδου αυτησ και ανατραφεισησ και μεχρι δωδεκαετουσ αυτησ εν τω ναω υπαρχουσησ και μετα ταυτα δοθεισησ Ιωσηφ και συνελαβεν εν γαστρι εκ πνευματοσ αγιο υ και της ελεγγεωσ Ιωσηφ και αυτησ υπο του ρεωσ και περι της απογραφησ Καισαροσ και της γεννησ εωσ Χριστου και των μαγων και Ζαχαριου του φονου
Menologion Lectionary MS	Date (A.D.)	Title
Vatopedi 74	12th century	εισ το γενεσιον της υπερ αγιασ και παναγνου δεσποινησ ημων θεοτοκου και αιειπαρθενου μαριασ
Vatopedi 636	1417	εισ το γενεσιον της υπερ αγιασ και παναγνου δεσποινησ ημων θεοτοκου και αιειπαρθενου μαριασ λογοσ ιστορικοσ
Vatopedi 448	1700	του εν αγιοισ παρθενοσ ημων Ιακωβου του αποστολου και αδελφοσ θεου επισκοπου Ιεροσολυμου λογου περι της γεννησησ της υπεραγιασ δεσποινησ ημων θεοτοκου
Sinai 497	10 th /11 th century	ιστορια ιακωβου εισ το γενεσιον της παναγιασ δεσποινησ ημων θεοτοκου
Sinai 495	11 th century	λογοσ ιστορικοσ εισ το γενεσιον της υπεραγιασ θεοτοκου συγγραφεισ παρα ιακωβου αδελφου του κυριου
□Pantocrator 3 Non- Lectionary MS Vindobonensis Palatina Hist. gr. 61	16 th century Date (A.D.) 1319	Title ιστορια Ιακωβου περι της γεννησεσ της θεοτοκου και αιειπαρθενου Μαριασ εο[?] δεσπιτοτ[?]

The titles in the majority of MSS (presented in the above table) contain a textual element about James the author and another about Mary. According to the titles the central theme of PJ is the birth of Mary, however, the titles in MSS H and L also make reference to the birth of Christ. MSS C, O, Vatopedi 74 and Vatopedi 636 contain no reference to the author James. The title in MS L is notably long since it aims to summarise the story. What a contrast in size is Bodmer V's title compared to that of MS L. A number of the titles share a similar textual tradition. For example

MSS B and Sinai 495 have almost identical titles; the placement of the definite article before αδελφου in Sinai 495 is the only difference. The titles in MSS Vatopedi 74 and Vatopedi 636 also are very similar; the addition, λογος ιστορικος, placed at the end of the title in Vatopedi 636, is the only difference. Apart from these examples, the titles vary greatly from one other, and they only share a similar textual tradition in respect to particular textual elements. For example, MSS O, G, B, N, Vatopedi 636 and Sinai 495 describe PJ as λογος ιστορικος; therefore, these MSS share a similar textual tradition in respect to the textual element λογος ιστορικος.

Genre

PJ mainly describes the birth, childhood and motherhood of Mary, and the birth of Jesus. The story is continued by the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which describes the childhood of Jesus until the time he enters the Temple.

Smid refers to PJ as “a fictitious historia” that is based on themes from the Old Testament and written by someone “amore Mariae.”¹⁴ According to Smid the purpose of PJ is the glorification of Mary.¹⁵ He has identified three themes of Mary’s glorification intertwined in the text: dogma, biography and apology.¹⁶ According to Hock, the pseudonymous author, inspired by the Graeco-Roman literary world, wrote a *historia* of Mary in the style of an encomium, the central theme of which is Mary’s purity.¹⁷ Vorster recognises that PJ is not only about Mary but also about Jesus; therefore, he suggests that the central theme of PJ is the birth of Jesus as seen in the eyes of Mary.¹⁸

Reception of Text

Jerome (d. A.D. 420) disliked PJ because it stated that Jesus had brothers, even though they were from a previous marriage.¹⁹ As PJ was rejected by the Gelasian Decree (A.D. 494-496), elements re-appeared in the West through the Latin *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (a combination of PJ and the *Gospel of Thomas*) and the later apocryphal text, *De Navitate Mariae*, which is an abridgement of the PJ story.²⁰ The Greek text of PJ was re-introduced to the West through Postel’s Latin translation in 1552.²¹ Postel printed a Greek edition in 1564.²² In the East PJ was popular from an early period because Mary, who was named Theotokos by the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431, was especially venerated by the church there. PJ was read on two feast days of the Byzantine church, September 8th and November 21st, when aspects of Mary’s

¹⁴ H. R. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi. A Commentary* (N.V.: Van Gorcum and Comp., 1965), 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 17.

¹⁸ W. S. Vorster, *Speaking of Jesus: Essays on Biblical Language, Gospel Narrative, and the Historical Jesus*, ed. J. Eugene Botha. Supplements to Novum Testamentum 92 (Leiden: Brill, 1998)

¹⁹ O. Cullmann, “Infancy Gospels,” in *New Testament Apocrypha. Volume One. Gospel and Related Writings*, ed. E. Hennecke. Translated by R. McL. Wilson (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 373.

²⁰ R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²² B. H. Cowper, *The Apocryphal Gospels and other Documents Relating to the History of Christ* (London: Frederic Norgate, 1874), 2.

life were celebrated.²³ According to Wake, Postel in the sixteenth century observed how PJ was publicly read as a canonical text in the eastern churches.²⁴ PJ was an important text in the east but Postel's comment about its canonical status in the east is most probably an exaggeration to ease the passage of his Latin edition into the west.

Transmission of Text

The manuscripts of PJ are written in Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Sahidic and Old Slavonic.²⁵ There are no complete extant Latin MSS of PJ. The majority of extant MSS are written in either Greek or Old Slavonic. De Strycker has listed 140 Greek manuscripts that contain the text of PJ including Bodmer V.²⁶ PJ was probably first written in Greek, although Wake states that PJ may have been composed in Hebrew.²⁷

The text of PJ was transmitted freely due to its non-canonical status. According to Smid PJ was an ιστορια ψυχοφελησ, the purpose of which was to edify.²⁸ The scribe therefore would have freely omitted from or added to the text if this helped to increase its power to edify.²⁹ A good example of this free textual transmission is found in MS Vatopedi 74 where a scribe, at some point in the transmission of this particular textual tradition, has concluded PJ (24:4) with a Trinitarian statement, which is startling since James the author was meant to be writing at the time of Jesus' birth: εστω δε η χαρις μετα των φοβουμενων τον κν̄ ημων ιν̄ χν̄ ω η δοξα και το κρατος συν τω αναρχω πρι και τω αγαθω και ζωοποιω πνι νυν και αιει και εις τους αιωνας των αιωνων αμην.

Harnack, through the application of the redaction method, saw PJ as a compilation of three texts (chps 1-16 'Mary Source', 17-20 'Joseph Source', 22-24 'Zechariah Source') put together by an editor in the fourth century who then added chapters 21 and 25 to the edition.³⁰

²³ PJ is still an important text for the eastern churches in particular the Greek Orthodox Church. PJ has also influenced the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church. For example, listen to the Kontakion of the Nativity of Christ being sung

http://www.goarch.org/en/special/listen_learn_share/nativity/listen/ and then read PJ 18:1.

²⁴ Archbishop Wake, *The Suppressed Gospels and Epistles of the Original New Testament of Jesus Christ* (London: E. Hancock & Co., 1863), 19.

²⁵ O. Cullmann, "Infancy Gospels," in *New Testament Apocrypha. Volume One. Gospel and Related Writings*, ed. E. Hennecke. Translated by R. McL. Wilson (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 370.

²⁶ E. de Strycker, "Die Griechischen Handschriften Des Protevangelium Iacobi," in *Griechische Kodikologie und Textuberlieferung*, ed. D. Von Harlfinger (Darmstadt: Buchgesellschaft, 1980), 597-607.

²⁷ Archbishop Wake, *The Suppressed Gospels and Epistles of the Original New Testament of Jesus Christ* (London: E. Hancock & Co., 1863), 19.

²⁸ H. R. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi. A Commentary* (N.V.: Van Gorcum and Comp., 1965), 6-7.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ R. Nock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995), 14.

History of PJ Editions

Date	Editor	Notes
1552	G. Postel	A Latin translation from a number of Greek manuscripts.
1564	G. Postel	A Greek edition
1564	M. Neander	The Greek manuscripts used for this edition are now lost.
1703	J. Fabricus	Fabricus divided the text into 25 chapters.
1832	J. Thilo	This edition is based on 9 manuscripts from Paris and Venice, and collations of a number of Vatican manuscripts.
1849	C. Tischendorf	Tischendorf used six new manuscripts in addition to the ones already discovered. He divided the text into verses.
1910	E. Amann	
1958	M. Testuz	Testuz published the text of Bodmer V which was found in the sands of Egypt.
1961	E. De Strycker	De Strycker used Bodmer V and a 5 th century papyrus MS in addition to the MSS consulted in past editions.
1965	Smid	Smid printed the text of Bodmer V and MS Paris 1454 as parallel reading texts.
1995	R. Nock	Nock's reading text is a modified version of de Strycker's. He created a new system of versification.

In modern editions of PJ, no attention has been given to the Greek lectionaries (menologia) that contain the text of PJ. De Strycker included a number of lectionaries in his list of 140 PJ manuscripts,³¹ but he did not use any in his own critical edition.³²

³¹ E. de Strycker, "Die Griechischen Handschriften Des Protevangelium Iacobi," in *Griechische Kodikologie und Textuberlieferung*, ed. Harlfinger (Darmstadt, 1980), 597-607.

³² E. de Strycker, *La Forme La Plus Ancienne Du Protevangile de Jacques* (Bruxelles: Societe Des Bollandistes, 1961)

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