

This thread has taken several detours (never mind the mixed metaphor), and I want to end it where I had planned to take it all along. What's been going on in my mind has been an issue that I raised in one of the posts, about how we are to conceptualize the situation of first and early second century when it comes to our Gospels. I'll talk about it with reference to Papyrus Egerton 2, about which I've only said a few things - lots more there to talk about. (But I'll be moving on after this.) Before doing so let me recap the situation:

Scholars have traditionally thought of the four canonical Gospels as THE Gospels that were available, so that when a new Gospel like the Unknown Gospel in Papyrus Egerton 2 appeared the question always was: WHICH of the canonical Gospels was the author familiar with (and which did he use). I challenged that view in my earlier post. We shouldn't think that there were basically FOUR, and everything else was dependent more or less on the four. There were lots floating around all at the same time. The four became THE four only by the end of the second century at the earliest.

But I'm still wrestling with how to imagine the situation at the end of the first and beginning of the second century. (Unlike the vast majority of my posts, where I'm writing something I know or think, here I'm simply thinking out loud; I really am trying to figure this one out.) At this point I'm imagining two scenarios, and I'm not sure which is better.

SCENARIO ONE: A Messy Situation with Fixed Boundaries.

In this scenario, the way it worked is this: Matthew, Mark, and Luke were among the earliest Gospels to be written. Matthew and Luke both used Mark and Q and other unknown sources (call them M and L, but they could be one thing, lots of things, written, oral, combination, etc.). As Luke indicates, there were "many" other accounts also floating around. But these three were the ones most widely used. Later John was written (near the end of the first century). These four circulated independently of one another. And still other Gospels were written.

Just as Matthew and Luke used Mark, so other Gospels used other Gospels. And some of these other Gospels used Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. So when there are close similarities between another discovered Gospel and Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, it is plausible that the author used one or more of these others (in this scenario).

Papyrus Egerton 2 has close ties, for example, to Mark (story of the leper) and John (almost direct parallels to words of Jesus from John 5, e.g.. And so, in this model, the author of this Unknown Gospel used these earlier ones.

If THIS scenario is right, then the use to which Papyrus Egerton 2 puts John and Mark is highly significant. It would mean he actually had them as texts in front of him. That could be useful to know for several reasons.

1. If he used Mark, we could in theory figure out which *form* of Mark he used, and that could help us reconstruct an old form of Mark. For example, I pointed out that there are good reasons for thinking that in the healing of the leper in Mark, Jesus is said to have become angry. One piece of evidence: the emotion (whether anger or compassion) has been deleted by Matthew and Luke, both of whom used a copy of Mark - suggesting that the emotion expressed was anger (as I argued in an earlier post: see there). It is striking that ALSO in Papyrus Egerton 2 there is no mention of Jesus' anger or compassion. Does that

ALSO count as evidence that a form of Mark was in circulation that indicated Jesus got angry? I'm not so sure, but it's worth at least raising as a question.

2. Most important, if this scenario is right, then it tells us a LOT about how earlier Gospels were being treated by Christian authors of the period. They were NOT sacrosanct, seen as holy, treated reverentially as a revelation from above. On the contrary, they were used as sources of information that could be altered, amplified, contracted, modified at will, as much and to as great an extent as an author wanted. They were not seen as THE Gospels. They were simply reports about Jesus' words and deeds. They were no more special than other such reports. (And I should stress, the reason we would think that these later Gospels even *used* the earlier ones we know is that we actually *have* those earlier ones. These later Gospels could have used lots of other Gospels as well - maybe even revered others as being more "faithful" to the "truth" than the ones that at a much later date became Scripture. The reason we don't know if they used other Gospels is because the other Gospels they would have used no longer survive to alert us to the fact that they have been used.) So that's the first scenario. It's a bit messy because it indicates that there are lots of Gospels floating around and none of them was held to be fully authoritative, not just the four. Lots. (I realize that many readers of this blog already think this, but I'm trying to figure out how to imagine the situation). I'm saying it involves fixed boundaries because it maintains that the four did exist, were in circulation, and were used.

The second scenario is even messier. It's one I need to work out in my head a bit. I'll sleep on it and continue tomorrow.



[Early Gospels: A Messier Scenario](#)
[Jesus' Anger in Mark 1:41](#)