In my discussion of why the four Gospels were given their names, I hypothesized that it was because an edition of the four was produced in Rome in the mid second-century, and that this edition named the Gospels as “according to Matthew” “according to Mark” “according to Luke” and “according to John.” The trickiest name to account for is Mark’s. Here I suggested that the editor of this Gospel edition wanted the readers to understand that this Gospel presented the views of Peter; but he did not call the Gospel of the Gospel according to Peter because such a Gospel was already known to exist. This naturally led several of my readers to pose an important question. Here is how one reader worded it:

**QUESTION:** If this hypothetical edition of the four gospels in Rome did not attribute ‘Mark’s gospel to Peter because the gospel of Peter was already known at that time, why did this edition of four gospels also not include the gospel of Peter?

**RESPONSE:** Ah, that was a part I forgot to mention! If my hypothesis is right, the reasons for not including this other Gospel of Peter among the church’s Gospels would be (a) it was not as widely accepted in proto-orthodox circles and (b) that was because it was thought to present a theologically dubious understanding of Jesus. To explain all that, I need to give more information on the Gospel of Peter – at least the one that is now (partially) known. To do that I will reproduce the “Introduction” to the Gospel that I wrote for the the new translation and edition of the early Christian Gospels, produced by my colleague Zlatko Plese and me, published this past year. It’s a relatively long introduction so I’ll spread this over three posts.

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The third-century Origen is the first patristic author to mention a Gospel allegedly written by Jesus’ disciple Simon Peter. Origen indicates that the book may have spoken of Jesus’ “brothers” as sons of Joseph from a previous marriage (Commentary on Matthew 10.17). It is not clear that Origen had actually read the book: nothing that we now know indicates that any such story was in it, and Origen also states that the information may instead have come from a “book of James”–presumably a reference to what is now called the Proto-Gospel of James, a book that does identify Jesus’ brothers in this way. The next church father to mention a Gospel of Peter is the fourth-century “father of church history,” Eusebius, who twice numbers the book among writings not accepted by the church as Scripture (Church History, 3. 3. 2; 3. 25. 6). On one other occasion, Eusebius discusses the book at some length, in order to show why it had been excluded from consideration from the canon.

The story involves ...

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