CHAPTER TWO

THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN GOSPELS

Introduction

In spite of the many references to Jewish-Christian Gospels in ancient and mediaeval literature much remains unclear with regard to, for example, their number, the names by which they were originally known and the language in which they were written. Many Christian writers quoted from these Gospels even though they had never seen any of them. This has been the cause of errors, misunderstandings and unjustified ideas about their contents now and in the past. This also means that we have to go into some critical questions.

Latin sources after Jerome, apart from the Latin translation of Origen's Commentary on Matthew, will be dealt with separately.

Number, language, date, place of origin and names of the Jewish-Christian Gospels

Before anything can be said about the various references to Jewish-Christian Gospels, we have to know the Gospel to which they belonged and the language in which it was written. It appears that Jerome and the authors after him supposed that only one Jewish-Christian Gospel existed, that this had originally been written in Aramaic and that it must have gone back to the original Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew. This view would have been stimulated by the knowledge that a Jewish-Christian Gospel in Aramaic existed; by the tradition about a Jewish-Christian sect of the Nazoraeans that bore the same name as the early Christians in Jerusalem and by the awareness of a Gospel said to be "according to the Hebrews" that was quoted by Clement and Origen. Even Epiphanius, who discovered a Jewish-Christian Gospel which widely differed from the Gospel of Matthew, did his best to show the difference between this Gospel and that of Matthew in order to demonstrate that the Jewish-Christians had falsified its text.

However, we have to reckon with at least two different Gospels because we meet two different versions of the Baptism of Jesus, one referred to by Epiphanius, Panarion 30 13 7-8 (IX) and another one by Jerome, in Es. 11,1-3 (XXI). At present it is generally assumed that Epiphanius quoted from a Gospel that was known to him only. It has its own particularly theological character but it is also of a typically harmonistic kind. This second element is absent from quotations found in other authors.⁷³

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⁷³ A. Schmidtke, Neue Fragmente 424, and A. Schmidtke, Hebräerevangelium, ZNW (1936) 24-44, esp. 36, has always defended the identity of the Gospel acc. to the Ebionites, quoted by Epiphanius, with the Gospel acc. to the Nazoraeans, especially against H. Waitz, Das Evangelium
We intend first to discuss the Gospel used by Epiphanius. Its original language must have been Greek, because its numerous parallels with the canonical Gospels can only be explained if we assume that the author of this work used a Greek text of the New Testament.

Epiphanius writes about the name of this Gospel: “The Gospel which is called with them according to Matthew which is not complete but falsified and distorted, they call (it) the Hebrew Gospel ...” (Panarion 30 13 2). This remark repeats the traditional view of a Jewish-Christian Gospel and should, therefore, not be taken at face value. It is for this reason that another name has been proposed, taken from the contents of one of the references which reads (VI): “There was a man called Jesus ... who chose us” and “(Jesus) opened his mouth and said: ‘... I chose John and James, the son of Zebedee, and Andrew and Thadaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot and you Matthew ...’”.

At the beginning of this quotation there is mention of us, viz. the twelve apostles, who also seem to be responsible for the contents of this Gospel. This would mean that the Gospel could be called “Gospel of the Twelve”, which is the name of a Gospel mentioned in a passage in Origen. On the other hand, however, it is clear that at the end of the quotation it is Matthew who is being addressed in particular. This means that the name “Gospel according to Matthew” can also be defended. This last name cannot be easily dismissed because it can explain why Epiphanius wrote “The Gospel which is called with them according to Matthew” and why he was so indignant about its contents.

If the title of this work had been “Gospel of the Twelve”, the place of origin could have been Egypt because this name is known to Origen only. However, the relation of this work to the contents of the Periodoi Petrou and Anabathmoi Iakobou seems to show that the work belongs to the region east of the river Jordan.

der Zwölf Apostel (Ebionitenevangelium), ZNW 13 (1912) 338-348 and 14 (1913) 38-64 and 117-132, see esp. 14 (1913) 40ff, and H. Waitz, Neue Untersuchungen über die sogen. judenchristlichen Evangelien, ZNW 16 (1937) 60-81.

74 See p. 6.


The idea has been rejected by A. Schmidtke, Neue Fragmente 170-175 and 242 and Zum Hebräer-evangelium .... 32, but see also M. D. A. Bertrand, L’Évangile des Ébionites: une Harmonie évangélique antérieure au Diatessaron, NTS 26 (1980) 548-563, esp. 561.

76 See p. 15 and Klijn-Reinink 31.