JESUS TRADITION IN EARLY PATRISTIC WRITINGS

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Early patristic writings provide us with a wealth of Jesus tradition. But in spite of this promising introductory statement, for those who are interested in early patristic Jesus traditions that have a chance to be historically reliable and are not known from the books which now make up the New Testament canon, the harvest may still be disappointing. However, even small scraps of possibly reliable extracanonical Jesus traditions deserve to be taken into account for the study of the historical Jesus. In this chapter we will give a survey of the different kinds of such extracanonical traditions, in order to make it clear in which context the more valuable ones—valuable with respect to the historical Jesus—have been transmitted.

We will confine our survey of early patristic writings roughly to authors of the second century CE, i.e., from Clement of Rome, whose Epistle to the Corinthians is usually dated to the end of the first century, to Clement of Alexandria, whose works date to the end of the second and the beginning of the third centuries. We will also pay attention to the philosopher Celsus who wrote a book against the Christians around 178 CE. He is certainly not a patristic author, but the fact that large parts of his book, Alēthēs Logos, have been preserved in Origen’s apology Against Celsus (of 248 CE) is a good reason to include him in this chapter.

In patristic writings of this period we will distinguish the following categories of Jesus traditions.

1. Extracanonical traditions about Jesus’ origin, birth, youth, and baptism.
2. Traditions about Jesus’ teaching that seem to derive from or are quoted from the canonical gospels.
3. Words of Jesus that may derive from an independent tradition that has also been included in the canonical gospels.
4. Traditions about Jesus’ teaching and passion that are quoted or derived from extracanonical gospels.
5. Agrapha that seem to be transmitted independently.
6. Records of a secret oral tradition that Jesus transmitted to a small number of his disciples.
7. Extracanonical traditions about the risen Jesus.

Some comments may be added to this classification:

a. We will see that often there is no unanimity about whether words of Jesus are borrowed from the canonical gospels or whether they derive from independent tradition that has also been included in these gospels (categories 2 and 3).

b. Sometimes it is not clear whether a saying is quoted from an extracanonical gospel or should be classified as an independent agrapphon (categories 4 and 5).

c. For the second century the terms “canonical” and “extracanonical gospels” are admittedly anachronistic, but we use them for convenience’s sake.¹

d. One possible category is conspicuously absent: early patristic literature does not contain any extracanonical records of miracles attributed to Jesus.

1. Extracanonical Traditions about Jesus’ Origin, Birth, Youth, and Baptism

Apart from the canonical stories on Jesus’ origin, birth, and baptism, Justin Martyr transmits the tradition that Jesus was born in a cave, which he considers a fulfillment of Isaiah 33:16 LXX (“he will dwell in a high cave of a strong rock”).² He relates that Jesus, who was considered the son of Joseph the carpenter, also worked as a carpenter and made ploughs and yokes.³ Justin narrates that, when Jesus stepped into the