

[MJTM 19 (2017–2018)]

BOOK REVIEW

Rick Brannan. *Greek Apocryphal Gospels, Fragments, and Agrapha: A New Translation*. Lexham Classics. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017. xi + 193 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-68359-065-1. \$14.99.

In the ever-increasing empire of Faithlife, Lexham Press continues to bridge the gap between expensive academic volumes and affordable works needed by those in the church. Lexham Press was birthed out of the digital Logos platform and is known for designing books in innovative ways. Lexham is also a self-consciously evangelical publisher, focusing on works that are harmonious with the orthodoxy of the Apostles' Creed.

Greek Apocryphal Gospels by Rick Brannan is part of the Lexham Classics Series. This series takes out-of-print works and redesigns them for modern readers. While many of these selections are within the genre of biblical or theological studies, this book provides a valuable resource for the background of the New Testament and the early church.

In the short introduction, Brannan explains the significance of the content. He introduces readers to apocryphal material in a straightforward manner that avoids both sensationalism and fear. Brannan also guides readers to focus on four key lines of inquiry when reading the sources: "Analyze in context," "Consider why the material is recorded," "Consider who records it," and "Consider how it conceives of Jesus" (9). Such guiding questions are helpful and enable readers to glean the most from the book.

The body of the work consists of eight chapters. The first chapter covers the agrapha, purported sayings of Jesus recorded in the New Testament or elsewhere for which no explicit source is available. For instance, Acts 20:35 reports Jesus to have said, "it is more blessed to give than to receive," which is not recorded

in the four canonical Gospels. The agrapha are important for biblical and historical studies, as they raise questions regarding the original sources of the sayings of Jesus. The agrapha have been used to create a hypothetical original or *Ur*-gospel that stands behind the four extant today.

The next six chapters contain essential material for understanding the early church's development, its reflection on Jesus, and the circumstances surrounding his movement. In order, they are the Protoevangelium of James, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Nicodemus and Descent of Christ into Hades, and the Gospel of Mary. Each chapter gives a brief introduction and a survey of the content. Brannan also offers readers an explanation of the relationship between the apocryphal material and the New Testament. He also highlights the distinctive features of the apocryphal material, such as the passage in the Gospel of Peter where the wooden cross talks when it emerges from the tomb.

The translations are the author's reworking of the earlier English text of M. R. James. Brannan modernizes the translation and adjusts it using Tischendorf's Greek manuscripts. Readers will likely find the style colloquial and smooth. Brannan targets a relaxed reading experience rather than a wooden reflection of the Greek source. I believe this is the best feature of the book. For many readers, especially those working in ecclesiastical settings, the goal is familiarity with these background texts rather than in-depth critical analysis. For this reason, Brannan avoids discussing the syntax of the Greek or showcasing difficult translation choices. Unlike other editions of the apocryphal material, Brannan does not offer alternative readings.

The last chapter gives translations of ten fragmentary papyri and parchments including the famous P.Egerton 2. The choice of using standard lines and fragmentary translations makes their inclusion in this book questionable. For instance, the translation for P.Oxy.210 fragment one on the verso is "he is not able . . . but to remain . . . angel . . . about an angel . . . to use the . . . this . . . yet." While these manuscripts are important for academic studies, the target reader will likely have little use for them. It seems Brannan included them simply for thoroughness and

comparability with similar books, as they do not address the needs of the target audience. To keep the overall work the same length, these fragments could have been replaced with more commentary on the apocryphal material (and its connections with the New Testament) or other early church writings (e.g. Ignatius, Polycarp, or the Shepherd of Hermas).

This final chapter highlights the most pressing question about the book: who is the target reader? Most of its features and overall design suggest a reader in undergraduate studies or an ecclesiastical setting. The lack of Greek or other critical features makes it unfit for serious scholarship. At \$14.99 this is an excellent resource for readers wishing to have access to an English translation of these ancient texts in a single volume. For those who have not read these sources and wish for an approachable and portable edition, I recommend the book.

However, the book is not appropriate for citation in academic publications. While Brannan offers plenty of footnotes and a bibliography for each section, the book is not a critical edition of the sources. For readers looking for a more academic edition in a single volume, they can turn to *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* by Ehrman and Pleše (Oxford University Press, 2011). However, that book is two and a half times as long and costs \$39.95.

The cost highlights one last variable. At \$14.99 it is a worthwhile acquisition for the features it offers, but Lexham offers even more options. In our digital age, readers are always faced with the option of print or digital editions. The book is available in a digital version in Logos for \$35.99, which of course incorporates hyperlinks to the Greek texts and any other resources owned by the user. Within the Logos system, its power and ability for further study are multiplied. However, at that cost one could purchase the critical edition by Ehrman and Pleše, albeit without the digital benefits of search capabilities and hyperlinks.

For students and teachers of the Bible, this is a bargain buy for what it offers. The book is readily usable for both the undergraduate classroom and advanced Bible study classes.

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