

ADIOGNETUS SHOWS HOW GOSPELS WERE HIDDEN OR IGNORED IN EARLIEST CHURCH

Christians like to argue that the gospels were well known soon after being written and thus must be true for nobody refuted them or said they were nonsense. This is the pivot of their argument that Jesus really existed and really died on a cross and really rose from the dead.

The Epistle of Diognetus gives an often astute but blistering attack on Judaism which proves that, at the very least, its creator never knew about the Gospels. The practices of the Jews which he calls superstitions were the practices of Jesus Christ. He condemned their beliefs about unclean food as nonsensical certainly knowing that God endorsed these beliefs in the Old Testament but not knowing that Jesus considered the Old Testament to be inspired scripture. The fact that the Epistle to Diognetus does not quote the Gospels adds weight to this assertion that they were kept under wraps.

The Epistle consists of an open letter to Diognetus, a toff who had been conducting an investigation into Christianity (1). The research did not involve the gospels for the Epistle never uses them. Nobody knew of any gospels or cared about them in those days. Not caring about them is startling and shows that the Christians themselves did not believe in them.

The author wrote of the Jews, “As for their scrupulousness about meats, and their superstitions about the Sabbath, and their much-vaunted circumcision, and their pretentious festivals and new-moon observances - all of them too nonsensical to be worth discussing – I hardly think you need instruction from me” (page 144, Early Christian Writings). The author did not know or believe that Jesus really supported the Law before his death. Jesus kept all the feasts and the early Church was Jewish for years after his death. The author says he knew the apostles and there is no reason to doubt that assertion. That would mean that the apostles never sanctioned anything like the Jesus story as it appears in the gospels.

The epistle speaks of “the faith of the Gospels” (11). The Gospels could be anything even short books on the principal stories or details about Jesus but were more probably records of his teaching. The tradition of saying that a person preached the gospel even when that person does not employ the New Testament is an old one. It appears in the epistles of the New Testament.

The Epistle states that Jesus was plain in all the revelations he gave his apostles (11). This suggests that the mysterious and ambiguous and oblique Gospel of John is a fake and was probably unknown and also rejects the vague revelations in the synoptic gospels.

The author says that the flesh hates the soul for it wants to practice self-indulgence and the soul opposes that. Nevertheless the soul loves the body though it leads to sin (6). This blames the body for everything. The soul should wish that the body would die or something instead of loving it so that it would be free. This implies that Jesus was not God incarnate for he had a body. It implies that Jesus didn't rise again in his human body and if he rose his resurrection was more spiritual than anything.

Above all, the author said that his doctrine is nothing strange or new (11). It was current then in the Church of his time.

Diognetus is dated to the second century because of its genre. But it could still be older. Its author says he was the apostles' pupil once (11) but don't Christians today say that they are pupils of Jesus? But maybe he did learn at the feet of the apostles for he talks as if he got it first-hand. The letter dates itself as coming between 70 and 120 AD assuming the author was born in 50AD. The earliest date given for it by scholars is 120 AD on account of a seeming influence from a work called The Preaching of Peter but there is no evidence that the Preaching did not appear long before that in some form. Clement of Alexandria and Diognetus have some similarities which compel some to date the letter to 200 AD or before. Again that could have happened if Diognetus had been written a century before. It is interesting that there are affinities between the work's declaration in 10 that God loves all and gave his son for them so that all who love him might be taken to Heaven and John 3:16. But they are different enough to be coincidence or something that was quoted from a very popular early hymn. A Christian who never heard of John 3:16 would easily say that God loved everybody so much that he gave his Son to save the world. It is longer than John so did the author of John simplify it? Maybe he did for he says that God's proof of love was giving his son while Diognetus chooses our existence to demonstrate this. He says that God loved us because he made us and that he sent his son to us but does not link the loving to the sending of the son. If Diognetus had been plagiarising John he would not have changed the example for John's was best.

All I want to say is that the letter probably was written in the early years of the second century when the Preaching of Peter began to take shape for you would expect that to happen about that time the way things get put together and evolve into books. The gospels were still unknown and hidden at that time.

Diognetus is evidence that the gospel data was not highly regarded by the early Church or perhaps was not even known of even half-properly.