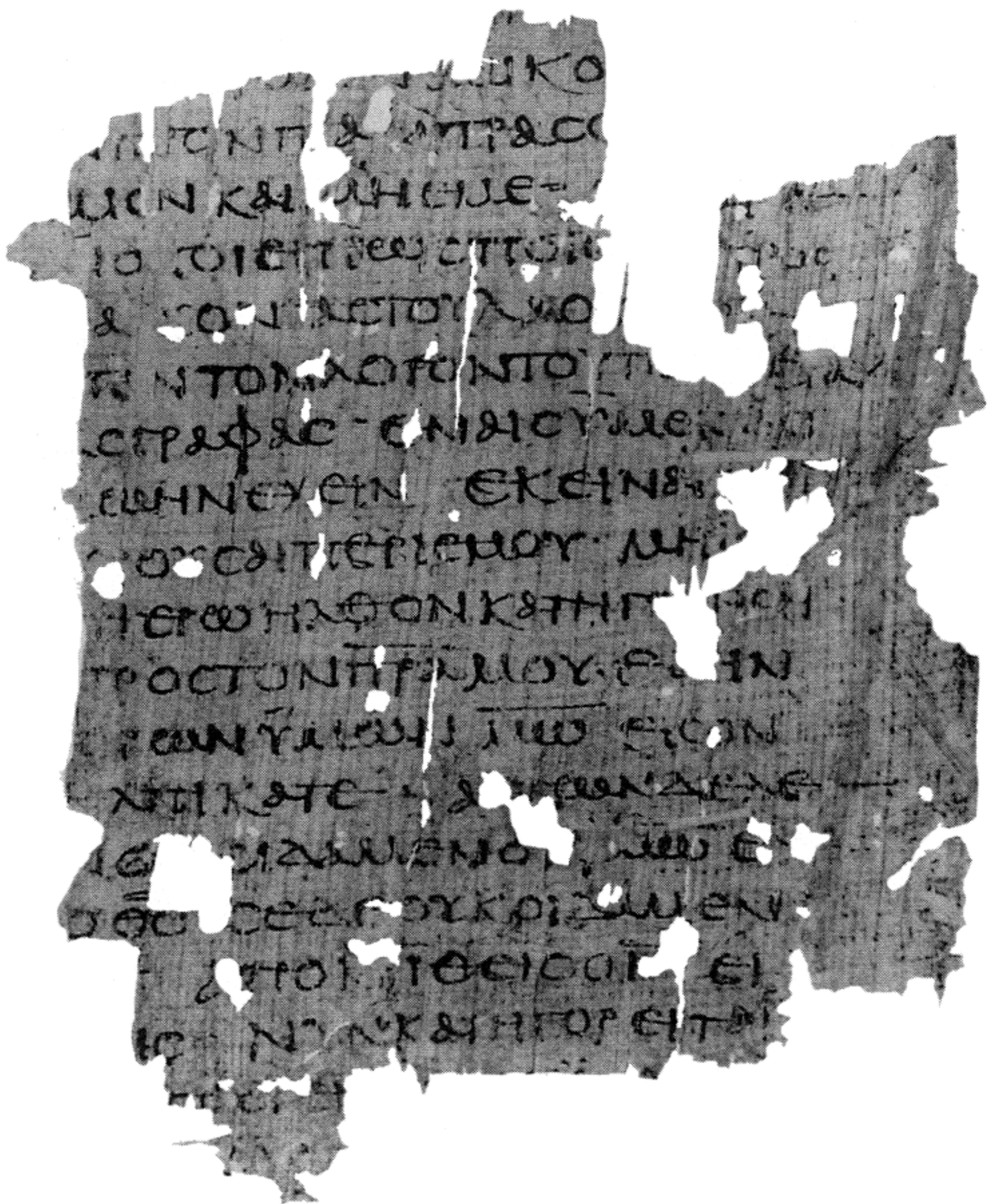




Agraphon from an unknown gospel. Egerton Papyrus 2, fragment I, verso side. 11.5 cm. x 9.2 cm. Dated middle of the second century.

Fragment I has been translated as follows: ". . . ? And Jesus said] unto the lawyers, [? Punish] every wrongdoer and transgressor, and not me; And turning to the rulers of the people he spake this saying, Search the scriptures, in which ye think that ye have life; these are they which bear witness of me. Think not that I came to accuse you to my Father; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, on whom ye have set your hope. And when they said, We know well that God spake unto Moses, but as for thee, we know not whence thou art, Jesus answered and said unto them, Now is your unbelief accused . . . " H. Idris Bell and T.C. Skeat, eds., *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and Other Early Christian Papyri* (London: Trustees, British Museum, 1935), 28. Compare to John 5:39, 45, and John 9:29.

The Noncanonical Sayings of Jesus

Of the hundreds of sayings attributed to the mortal Jesus but not found in the New Testament, relatively few that may be genuine offer fresh insight. None are authenticated with certainty.

Stephen E. Robinson

The Greek noun *agraphon*, or *agrapha* in the plural, means “something unwritten.” In the field of biblical studies, this term denotes sayings or quotations attributed anciently to the mortal Jesus¹ but not found in the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). In 1889 a German scholar named Alfred Resch caused a minor stir in the world of biblical scholarship with the publication of his book *Agrapha: Aussercanonische Evangelienfragmente* (Agrapha: Extracanonical gospel fragments).² For his book, Resch had drawn together and classified, from patristic authors, variant readings of New Testament manuscripts, apocryphal books, and elsewhere literally hundreds of sayings or variations on those sayings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth but not found in the New Testament Gospels.

Until that time, almost no one had been aware of the large number of such noncanonical sayings that had been preserved, and most had subscribed in one degree or another to the principle of *non in thora, non in mundo*, that is, if it is not contained in the canonical Gospels, Jesus did not say it. The theory behind modern study of the *agrapha* is that in the first century there were oral traditions about Jesus and his teachings out of which the New Testament Gospels were distilled but all of those traditions surely could not have been included in those Gospels. Could not the eyewitnesses who informed Luke of his facts³ also have remembered other incidents and teachings from their time with Jesus? As long as the original disciples of Jesus lived, their fresh reminiscences about him would have continued adding to the body of oral tradition

circulating in the early Church, thereby increasing the possibility of genuine extracanonical sayings.

Unfortunately, many persons felt that the idea of genuine agrapha implied that the New Testament Gospels were incomplete or defective and so resisted any suggestion that genuine sayings of Jesus could exist outside the New Testament. In fact, Resch himself was motivated in his study by the belief that there had indeed been an original gospel that was only imperfectly represented by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

However, the work of Resch was flawed by other biases and by certain methodological errors that further distorted his judgment. Therefore, it remained for an American scholar, J. H. Ropes, to sift through the material presented by Resch with a more critical eye and to present the agrapha to scholars in a form they could work with. This he did in 1896, when he published *Die Sprüche Jesu, die in den kanonischen Evangelien nicht Überliefert sind* (The sayings of Jesus that were not included in the canonical Gospels).⁴ Of the scores of agrapha presented by Resch, Ropes retained only twenty-seven as valuable or possibly valuable, and subsequent scholars have felt that even fewer should be included.⁵

In the same year that Ropes published his work, two archaeologists named Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt discovered a unique fragment of Greek papyrus while working in Egypt at Oxyrhynchus, about 120 miles south of Cairo. The fragment contained eight previously unknown dominical sayings—each beginning with the words “Jesus says.”⁶ In 1904, Grenfell and Hunt published two more manuscript fragments, Oxyrhynchus Papyri 654 and 655, containing between them eight more sayings attributed to Jesus.⁷ Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices in 1945, scholars have determined that all these sayings come from a Greek version of the Gospel of Thomas that was similar but not identical to the Coptic version in the Nag Hammadi library.⁸ Since the work of Grenfell and Hunt, other material has come to light that has added to the collection of sayings attributed to the mortal Jesus and that adds also to the likelihood that at least some of the agrapha might be genuine. The Coptic Gospel of Thomas alone contributes 114 sayings.⁹ Since it is an article of faith among the Latter-day Saints that the canonical text of the New Testament is

neither entirely complete nor entirely correct, it is understandable that there should be some interest among us in these extracanonical sayings.

So, is it possible then that genuine sayings of Jesus circulated anciently that were not preserved in the canonical Gospels? This is not only possible, it is veritably certain, for the prime examples of such materials can be found in the New Testament itself, though not in the Gospels. In Acts 20:35, Luke records how the Apostle Paul encouraged the elders of Ephesus “to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Since this statement of Jesus is not found in the four Gospels and since we have no reason to doubt either Paul or Luke, the last line in Acts 20:35 must be accepted as a genuine *agraphon*. Further, Paul’s exhortation that the elders “remember” these words of Jesus indicates that they were known to the elders and, therefore, that they circulated in the primitive Church independently of the written text of the four Gospels. Thus Acts 20:35 contains an example of a genuine saying of Jesus that was widely known in the early Church but that would not have been preserved had Paul not quoted it nor Luke remembered that he had done so.

A second example of a saying of Jesus preserved only by Paul can be found in 1 Thessalonians 4:15: “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent [precede] them which are asleep.” Here again, since Paul is certainly not quoting from the four Gospels, it must be conceded that the early Church knew and used more sayings of Jesus than those preserved in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Yet not all that glitters is gold, and while the possibility of genuine *agrapha* on the model of Acts 20:35 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15 must be granted, most of the *agrapha* collected by Resch and Ropes or discovered since then are almost certainly not genuine. Particularly among the apocryphal gospels do we find recorded supposed sayings of Jesus that clearly serve the theological interests of a later time. Since the authority of Jesus himself was unquestionable for Christians, the temptation on the part of some authors to put their own views in his mouth after the fact seems to

have been irresistible. A prime example of this interpolation in the agrapha can be found in the Gospel of the Ebionites. The Ebionites were a Jewish-Christian sect that practiced vegetarianism. Consequently, we should not be surprised to find in the gospel used by them an agraphon in which Jesus says, when asked by the disciples where he wanted to eat the Passover, "Do I desire with desire at this Passover to eat flesh with you?"¹⁰ Some of the Gnostic material from Nag Hammadi is particularly well known for the blatant manufacture of sayings that serve Gnostic theological ends.¹¹ In another Jewish-Christian gospel, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the redactor was evidently embarrassed that a sinless Jesus should be baptized by John. So he explains that Jesus was pushed into baptism by his mother and then puts these words in Jesus' mouth: "What sin have I committed that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless this that I have just said is a sin of ignorance."¹²

Apart from those agrapha that are clearly inventions, there is another class that consists merely of alternate versions of canonical gospel sayings that have been slightly paraphrased or expanded. For example, the saying from Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1 that reads, "Jesus says, 'A city which is built on top of a high mountain and firmly set can neither fall nor stay hidden,'" is certainly a variant of the line in Matthew 5:14 that reads, "A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid." While scholars may debate the significance of the different readings, no one seriously argues that they represent two originally separate sayings. And while this type of agraphon has some importance in the debate over textual transmission, it adds very little to our understanding of the original teachings of Jesus.

Another class of agrapha whose authenticity is suspect are those proverbs, maxims, or clever sayings that may have been attributed to Jesus by mistake, in the same way that so many modern sayings have been transferred to Abraham Lincoln, or in the way a line from LDS President Heber J. Grant is sometimes attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹³ Unfortunately, while this type of transference must certainly have taken place, it is impossible to be certain which of the clever sayings from the agrapha might fall into this category or from what ancient sources they may have been transferred.

An additional complication is that among the agrapha we find several sayings that are apparently taken from the letters of Paul. For

example, Origen, followed by three other writers, attributes to Jesus this passage in Ephesians 4:26: "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."¹⁴ And the passage in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 that says "the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" is attributed to Jesus three times in patristic literature.¹⁵ Most scholars see these passages as indisputable cases of transference from Paul to Jesus.

However, since we have already established that Paul has twice quoted the words of Jesus explicitly (Acts 20:35–36; 1 Thes. 4:15), is it not possible, even probable, that he has quoted or paraphrased the words of the Lord elsewhere without citing his source? In fact, the wording of 1 Thessalonians 5:2 seems to support this view, for Paul says, "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." The phrase "for yourselves know perfectly that" indicates that what follows is taken from the common tradition of the Church and is not original to Paul.

Moreover, the patristic attribution of this saying to Jesus is supported by the Joseph Smith Translation, where the Prophet added the following words to the King James Version of Luke 12:44: "And now verily I say these things unto you, that ye may know this, that the coming of the Lord is as a thief in the night." Similarly, Paul's interpretation of Deuteronomy 25:4 (1 Cor. 9:9–11; 1 Tim. 5:18) is attributed in the Joseph Smith Translation to Jesus himself in an addition to the King James Version of Luke 12:33.¹⁶ Scholars have long insisted on a sharp distinction between the theology and the teachings of Jesus and those of Paul, but a reexamination of these and other "agrapha of transference" may indicate that the letters of the great Apostle to the Gentiles are influenced by the words and phrases of Jesus to an extent we never suspected.

How then, finally, are we to distinguish between "genuine" agrapha and "false" ones? Frankly, much of the time we cannot. All we can say for certain is that some of the agrapha are more plausible than others, or perhaps that some are less implausible, depending on one's point of view. However, those few agrapha that have impressed scholars as possibly genuine all share certain broad characteristics. First of all, the setting must be appropriate to the life of Jesus, that is, first-century Palestinian Judaism. Conversely, genuine agrapha will be free of the polemical agendas of later

times and other places, for example, of Gnosticism, Ebionism, Neoplatonism, adoptionism, Docetism, asceticism, etc. Also, those *agrapha* that can be shown to have been attributed to Jesus very early in the tradition of the Church, for example, the Gospel of Thomas and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, must be given careful consideration. Finally, the greater the number of different or independent sources that attribute a saying to Jesus, the more likely it is to be genuine. The best example of an *agraphon* that fulfills these criteria is one found first in Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 150–213) and then, in one form or another, in thirty-six other places, though it is not always attributed to Jesus. The *agraphon* reads as follows: “But be ye proven money changers, rejecting some things but retaining what is good.”¹⁷ The *agraphon* refers to the money changer, whose livelihood depended on his ability to spot and reject the counterfeit. The setting is plausible, for the money changer was certainly a feature of Palestinian Jewish life. The attribution to Jesus comes fairly early, around A.D. 200, and the number of citations is overwhelming. Thus, this *agraphon* presents a strong case for authenticity.

Unfortunately, for a great number of the *agrapha* that have been preserved, there is simply not enough evidence to justify a firm conclusion one way or the other. For example, a saying quoted by Origen—“And Jesus also said, ‘For the sake of the weak I became weak, for the sake of the hungry I hungered, and for the sake of the thirsty I thirsted’”¹⁸—has a nice ring to it, and there certainly is no reason why Jesus could not have said it, but neither is there any really convincing evidence that he did. The following are other *agrapha* that might be included in this category:

1. From an addition to the text of Luke 22:28 in the famous Codex D: “Increase in my service as one who serves.”¹⁹
2. From the writings of Symeon of Mesopotamia: “As the Lord says, ‘The kingdom of God is plainly on the earth, and men don’t see it.’”²⁰
3. From the *Judicium Petri*: “For he said to us before, when he taught us, ‘What is weak will be saved by what is strong.’”²¹
4. From the Epistle of Barnabas: “‘And so,’ he says, ‘those who want to see me and take hold of my kingdom must receive me in afflictions and sufferings.’”²²

5. From Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1: "Jesus says: I stood (up) in the midst of the world, and in the flesh I appeared to them and found them all drunk, and none found I athirst among them, and my soul is troubled (or: feels pain) for the sons of men, because they are blind in their heart and do <not> see."²³

Any of these or several others like them may have been spoken by Jesus, but there is no way to prove or disprove such an attribution.

Nevertheless, a small number of the *agrapha* have recently received the rather tentative endorsement of some scholars.²⁴ Perhaps the most exciting of these is one that appears to be a fragment of an otherwise unknown gospel. It was found by those tireless searchers, Grenfell and Hunt, and is known as Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 840:

First before he does wrong (?) he thinks out everything that is crafty. But be ye on your guard that the same thing may not happen to you as does to them. For not only among the living do evil doers among men receive retribution, but they must also suffer punishment and great torment.

And he took them [the disciples] with him into the place of purification itself and walked about in the Temple court. And a Pharisaic chief priest, Levi (?) by name, fell in with them and s<aid> to the Saviour: Who gave thee leave to <trea>d this place of purification and to look upon <the>se holy utensils without having bathed thyself and even without thy disciples having <wa>shed their f<eet>? On the contrary, being defi<led>, thou hast trodden the Temple court, this clean p<lace>, although no <one who> has <not> first bathed <himself> or <chang>ed his clot<hes> may tread it and <venture> to vi<ew> <these> holy utensils! Forthwith <the Saviour> s<tood> still with h<is> disciples and <answered>: How stands it (then) with thee, thou art forsooth (also) here in the Temple court. Art thou then clean? He said to him: I am clean. For I have bathed myself in the pool of David and have gone down by the one stair and come up by the other and have put on white and clean clothes, and (only) then have I come hither and have viewed these holy utensils. Then said the Saviour to him: Woe unto you blind that see not! Thou hast bathed thyself in water that is poured out, in which dogs and swine lie night and day and thou hast washed thyself and hast chafed thine outer skin, which prostitutes also and flute-girls anoint, bathe, chafe, and rouge, in order to arouse desire in men, but within they are full of scorpions and of <bad>ness <of every kind>. But I and <my disciples>, of whom thou sayest that we have not im<mersed> ourselves, <have been im>mersed in the liv<ing . . . > water which comes down from < . . . B>ut woe unto them that . . .²⁵

When this fragment was first discovered, scholars did not know as much about the Jerusalem Temple and its institutions and rituals as they do now. Consequently, the details of this fragment were thought to be absurd. However, scholars have since learned that the pool of David was part of the purification area and that the bathing, the washing of feet, and the changing into clean white clothing were part of the temple ritual. They have also learned that there were others besides the high priest who were called *archiereis*, including as is likely in this fragment, the *sagan*, or chief of the temple police, whose duties included enforcement of the proper ritual observances.²⁶ Because the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, composition of the unknown gospel from which this very knowledgeable fragment came should probably not be dated much after that time.

Other agrapha that have aroused the interest of at least some scholars include the following: In the writings of Clement of Alexandria, we read: “Ask for the great things, and the little things will be added unto you.”²⁷ Of course this statement may only be a variant of Matthew 6:33/Luke 12:31, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” However, the difference is great enough to justify consideration, especially since a variation of this saying is cited at least seven other times by three additional authors.²⁸ Justin Martyr cites this agraphon in his *Dialogue with Trypho*: “For also our Lord Jesus Christ has said, ‘In whatever circumstances I may catch you, in them also will I judge you.’”²⁹ The saying is also attributed to Jesus in Cyprian and in the Syriac *Book of Degrees*.³⁰ The message of the passage is clear—it’s never too late to change, for the better or for the worse. A lifetime of righteousness avails nothing if you are a sinner when the end comes; a lifetime of sin doesn’t matter if the end finds you converted. You will be judged as you are found.

In addition, in Codex D the story about the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–5) is followed by another short story not found in other manuscripts. It reads, “On the same day, when he saw a man working on the Sabbath, he said to him, ‘Man, blessed are you if you know what you are doing, but if you don’t know, you are cursed and a transgressor of the Law.’”³¹ Jeremias has argued persuasively that the setting for this story, the Sitz-im-Leben

and its agraphon, is early Palestinian, and he feels the story may be genuine.³² The message seems to be that if the individual is breaking the Sabbath for a higher cause, he is to be commended for distinguishing between the greater and the lesser. If, on the other hand, his breaking of the Sabbath has no such motivation, he stands condemned. Those who sacrifice the lesser law to live the greater are blessed, but those who live neither law are cursed.

Also, an expanded version of a canonical story that comes with an important agraphon is found in the Gospel of Nazaraeans. Here the story of the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23) is told with an intriguing addition. After Jesus says to the young man, “Go and sell all thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me,” the Gospel of the Nazaraeans continues:

But the rich man began to scratch his head, and the saying pleased him not. And the Lord said to him, “Why do you say, ‘I have kept the law and the prophets?’ For it is written in the law, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,’ and behold, many of your brothers, children of Abraham, are dressed in filthy rags and dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things. Yet nothing at all goes out from it to them.”³³

The Gospel of the Nazaraeans then adds the conclusion to the episode that is found in the New Testament Gospels—that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” etc. In the New Testament version of the story, the condemnation of the rich man stems primarily from his refusal to sell all, give it to the poor, and to then follow Jesus. In the apocryphal version, the force of the addition is to emphasize the dire needs of the poor.

Resch lists no fewer than nine citations for an agraphon found first in the writings of Tertullian, although only Tertullian cites it specifically as a saying of Jesus. And it reads, “No one who has not been tempted can inherit the kingdom of heaven.” The saying is put into the context of Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane and of his abandonment and denial by the apostles and by Peter.³⁴

In his commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians, Jerome quotes an agraphon from the Gospel of the Hebrews. It reads, “‘And never,’ he says, ‘be joyful except when you look upon your brother in love.’”³⁵

Finally, in the Gospel of Thomas there are several intriguing agrapha, at least one of which, the parable of the great fish, could be mentioned here. The Coptic text, found in the Nag Hammadi codices, reads as follows:

And he said, "Man is like a wise fisherman, who cast his net into the sea and pulled it up from the sea full of small fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a large and good fish. He threw back all the small fish into the sea and chose the large fish without hesitation. He that has ears to hear, let him hear."³⁶

As with several sayings from the Gospel of Thomas, here the setting is appropriate enough—a lone fisherman casting a hand net on the Sea of Galilee. There are no offensive theological intrusions from a later time; in fact, two parables from the canonical Gospels, the parable of the pearl of great price and the parable of the treasure hidden in a field, convey the same message—that the surpassing good fortune of finding the kingdom of God overshadows all other considerations. Also, the Gospel of Thomas is a very early source; some would even place it in the second half of the first century.³⁷

The final class of agrapha remaining to be discussed here are those which are of special interest to the Latter-day Saints. Some of these are also of interest to scholars; some are not. Perhaps we could begin with Jesus' one reference in the agrapha to "his mother in heaven." There are in fact many references to a mother in heaven in early Christian literature, particularly among the Nag Hammadi codices. Unfortunately, some of our more enthusiastic Latter-day Saints have tried to find in these some support for the LDS doctrine of Heavenly Mother. This is certainly a mistake, as a close examination of the passages will show, for in reality these passages refer to the Holy Spirit, a member of the Godhead who does not yet have an exalted body. In Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac the word for spirit, *ruach*, and its cognates are feminine. Consequently, Semitic-speaking Christians and Jews often thought of the Holy Spirit as female, and many Semitic-speaking early Christian groups thought of the godhead as Male-Female-Offspring, or Father-Mother-Son, as well as Father-Son-Holy Ghost. In the Coptic Gospel of Philip from Nag Hammadi, the feminine nature of the Holy Spirit was used as an argument against the belief that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit: "Some said, 'Mary conceived by

the Holy Spirit.' They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman?"³⁸ Similarly, the Apocryphon of John speaks of the Holy Spirit as "the mother of the living."³⁹ That the being referred to as the mother in these and other passages is really the Holy Spirit is made explicit in an agraphon from the Gospel of the Hebrews, as cited by Origen: "The Savior himself said, 'My mother the Holy Spirit just now took me by one of my hairs and carried me to the great Mount Tabor.'"⁴⁰ So while it may be true that there is a doctrine of a heavenly mother in the extant literature of early Christianity, it is probably not the LDS doctrine.

However, an LDS doctrine that is often on the lips of Jesus in the agrapha is the doctrine of the Great Apostasy. Two of these are found in the second-century writings of Justin Martyr. The first reports that Jesus warned his disciples that "in the time before his second coming there would be corruptions and false prophets in his name."⁴¹ The second reads, "For he said, 'Many will come in my name dressed outwardly in the skins of sheep, but inwardly they are plundering wolves, and there will be divisions and heresies.'"⁴² This saying is found in four other sources also attributed to Jesus and is considered by scholars to be possibly authentic. If it is genuine, the saying sheds new light on 1 Corinthians 11:18-19, where Paul says, "For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." A good case could be made that with these verses Paul is applying the formula of Jesus to the Corinthians; that is, when he heard that there were divisions among them, he knew from the dominical saying that heresies would soon follow. And again, if the agraphon is genuine, it argues for Paul's thorough knowledge of the traditional sayings of Jesus.

But the most striking agraphon dealing with the theme of apostasy is found in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas:

Jesus said, "The kingdom of the [father] is like a certain woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking [on the] road, still some distance from home, the handle of the jar broke and the meal emptied out behind her [on] the road. She did not realize it; she had noticed no accident. When she reached her house, she set the jar down and found it empty."⁴³

Latter-day Saints would say that the true gospel, like the meal from the broken jar, was gradually lost before the great arrival of the Lord due to “divisions and heresies.”

Several of the *agrapha* make reference to the esoteric tradition, both in doctrine and in liturgy, of early Christian groups. Since the Latter-day Saints also have an esoteric tradition, perhaps we should briefly mention these *agrapha*. Clement of Alexandria writes, “The Lord has declared in a certain gospel, ‘My mysteries are for me and for the children of my house.’” Versions of this *agraphon* are found in at least three other authors.⁴⁴ The Coptic Gospel of Thomas quotes Jesus as saying, “I will tell my mysteries to those who are worthy of my mysteries. What thy right hand will do, let not thy left hand know what it does.”⁴⁵ Also from the Gospel of Thomas, saying 17, we read, “I will give you what eye has not seen and what ear has not heard and what hand has not touched and what has not arisen in the heart of man.” Yet another *agraphon* preserved in the Apostolic Fathers reads, “If you didn’t guard what is small, who will give you what is great?” Second Clement interprets this passage to mean “Keep the flesh holy and the token unspotted in order that we might receive eternal life.”⁴⁶ Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 655 reads, “You are much better than the lilies that neither card (wool) nor spin. But since you have one garment, what, indeed, do you lack? Who of you can increase his stature? He shall give you each your garment!”⁴⁷

Finally, there are two *agrapha* that may imply the LDS doctrine of the premortal existence. The first of these is found in the writings of Ephraim the Syrian and reads, “Thus he spoke, ‘I chose you before the world was created.’”⁴⁸ Admittedly, this is pretty thin. The second comes from Islamic literature. In the ruined city of Fathpur-Sikri in North India, once the center of the Mogul empire, there is inscribed on an ancient mosque what appears to be a saying attributed to Jesus. It reads, “Jesus, on whom be peace, said, ‘The world is a bridge. Cross over it, but do not build your home there.’”⁴⁹ This saying is also attributed to Jesus in the writings of Al Ghazali, but Abu Talib al-Makki attributes it to the prophet Muhammad. Jeremias believes that some version of this *agraphon* lies behind the otherwise cryptic command of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas “Be passers-by,” that is, be those who pass over the bridge

from one world to the next.⁵⁰ What no one seems to have noticed so far is that if this saying is genuine it clearly implies the doctrine of premortal existence, since a bridge is a passageway connecting two points and does not start in thin air. If this saying is as old as the Gospel of Thomas, it would be very difficult indeed not to understand it in the context of a well-defined belief in the premortal existence of souls found in intertestamental Judaism⁵¹ and later in Gnosticism.⁵²

In conclusion, what is to be said for the noncanonical sayings of Jesus? What contribution is made to our understanding of Jesus of Nazareth and of his original teachings by the surprisingly numerous *agrapha* presented by Resch, Ropes, Jeremias, and others? The judgment of scholars on that question has been unanimous and is perhaps best represented by a modern proverb: We labored mightily and brought forth a mouse. In the words of Jeremias, "The extra-canonical literature, taken as a whole, manifests a surprising poverty. The bulk of it is legendary, and bears the clear mark of forgery. Only here and there, amid a mass of worthless rubbish, do we come across a priceless jewel."⁵³ Yet even the jewels are liable to be appraised differently by different scholars.

I have my favorites; there are some I think, or hope, to be genuine. But they are precious few when compared with the hundreds of *agrapha* one must sift through to find them. And even then, with those precious few, there is no way to be certain whether or not they come from Jesus. If some of the doctrines of Jesus have not been preserved in the canonical texts, they have not been preserved at all. Surely we shall not find them, as Resch had hoped, hidden away among the *agrapha*.

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NOTES

¹Sayings attributed to the risen Christ are generally not included among the *agrapha*.

²Alfred Resch, *Agrapha: Aussercanonische Evangelienfragmente*, Texte und Untersuchungen 5.4 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1889). The second edition is entitled *Agrapha: Aussercanonische Schriftfragmente* (*Agrapha: Extracanonical*

scripture fragments), *Texte und Untersuchungen* 15.3/4 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1906; reprint, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967) (hereafter cited as *Agrapha*²). Unless otherwise cited, translations in this article are by the author from documents contained in Resch.

³In the prologue to his gospel (Luke 1:1-3), Luke informs us that he was not an eyewitness to the events he records, but rather is dependent upon those who were.

⁴J. H. Ropes, *Die Sprüche Jesu, die in den kanonischen Evangelien nicht Überliefert sind: Eine Kritische Bearbeitung des von Alfred Resch gesammelten Materials* (The sayings of Jesus which were not included in the canonical Gospels: A critical revision of the material collected by Alfred Resch), *Texte und Untersuchungen* 14.2 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1896).

⁵See Joachim Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 2d ed., trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), 5, especially n. 2. A variant, and in some ways opposite, approach to the search for the words of Jesus is that undertaken by the Jesus Seminar. Instead of searching the *agrapha* for genuine sayings, this group of scholars acted on the premise that some of Jesus' teachings in the four Gospels were inauthentic. They undertook to determine which, out of the 1,500 sayings attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas, were spoken by Jesus "in a form close to the one preserved for us," which have "suffered modification in transmission," which may only reflect his ideas, and which are inauthentic. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), ix-x. They decided that relatively few sayings found in these five Gospels are close to Jesus' words. One group of sayings they dismissed are those in which they detected "detailed knowledge of postmortem events" and which therefore must have been formulated "after the fact" (Funk and others, *The Five Gospels*, 25).

⁶Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, eds. and trans., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, 61 vols. (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1898-1995), 1:1-3. This fragment is discussed in greater detail in Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, eds. and trans., *Logia Iesou: Sayings of Our Lord* (London: Henry Frowde, 1897), though many of their observations have since been proven incorrect with discovery of the Gospel of Thomas (see below).

⁷See Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, eds. and trans., *New Sayings of Jesus and Fragment of a Lost Gospel* (London: Henry Frowde, 1904). The most accessible translation of this material is that of Beate Blatz in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. and ed. (English ed.) R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 1:117-18, 123.

⁸The Coptic text with English translation was made available first in A. Guilaumont and others, eds., *The Gospel according to Thomas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill; New York: Harper, 1959); and most recently in Marvin W. Meyer, ed. and trans., *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, with an interpretation by Harold Bloom (San Francisco: Harper, 1992). A convenient translation is also found in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3d ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 124-38.

⁹One must bear in mind, however, that attribution and authenticity are two separate issues.

¹⁰Variation on Luke 22:15 as cited by Epiphanius (*Panarion*, 30.22.4). See Resch, *Agrapha*², 232; and Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:170.

¹¹Namely, "The Book of Thomas the Contender," or "The Dialogue of the Savior," both available in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 199-207, 244-55.

¹²Cited by Jerome, *Against Pelagius*, 3.2. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 233-34.

¹³The frequently misattributed saying is, "That which we persist in doing becomes easier for us to do; not that the nature of the thing itself is changed, but that our power to do is increased." Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards*, ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1941), 355. This writer, in an earlier draft of this paper, was among those who have been fooled concerning the origin of this quote. The erroneous attribution of this saying provides an excellent example of how tricky transference can be.

¹⁴This saying is attributed to Jesus in an early Christian treatise called "Dialogus de recta in Deum fide" (Dialogue concerning proper faith in God), which was ascribed to Origen but was actually written by an opponent with the pseudonym Adamantius. See the references in Resch, *Agrapha*², 136.

¹⁵Cited once by Didymus the Blind (*On the Trinity*, 3.22) and twice by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 69.44.1 and *Ancoratus*, 21); see Resch, *Agrapha*², 146.

¹⁶I am indebted for these two observations to the acknowledged authority on the JST, Robert J. Matthews. See his "A Plainer Translation": *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 241-47.

¹⁷Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1.28.177. Compare 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, and see Resch, *Agrapha*², 112-16, for additional references.

¹⁸Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 13.2. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 132-33.

¹⁹Codex D, otherwise known as Codex Bezae, is the chief representative of the Western text of the New Testament. For the agraphon cited and the Greek text of Luke in Codex D, see H.-W. Bartsch, *Codex Bezae versus Codex Sinaiticus im Lukasevangelium* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1984), 186.

²⁰See Hermann Dörries, *Symeon von Mesopotamien: Die Überlieferung der messalianischen "Makarios" Schriften*, Texte und Untersuchungen 55.1 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1941), 224.

²¹Resch, *Agrapha*², 104.

²²Barnabas 7:11. Also cited in Prochorus' *Acta Joannis*; see Resch, *Agrapha*², 89-90.

²³Translated by Blatz in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:121. This agraphon is the Greek equivalent of Logion 28 in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas.

²⁴Jeremias, in the best treatment of the agrapha material in this century, lists twenty possibly authentic sayings in *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*.

²⁵Translated by R. Mcl. Wilson in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:94-95.

²⁶See the discussion in Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 47-60.

²⁷Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1.24.158.

²⁸That is, Origen, Eusebius, and Ambrose; see Resch, *Agrapha*², 111-12; and the discussion in Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 98-100.

²⁹Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 47. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 102.

³⁰Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 83–88.

³¹See Resch, *Agrapha*², 45–48.

³²Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 61–65.

³³Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 15.14. See also Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:161.

³⁴Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 20. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 130–32.

³⁵Jerome, *On Ephesians*, 5.3,4. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 236.

³⁶Gospel of Thomas, Logion 8. See also Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 127.

³⁷See Helmut Koester, in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 125.

³⁸“The Gospel of Phillip,” in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 143 (55.23–26), and 152 (70.22–26), where it says the spirit given to Adam is his mother: “The soul of Adam came into being by means of a breath. The partner of his soul is the spirit. His mother is the thing that was given to him. His soul was taken from him and replaced by the spirit.”

³⁹See “The Apocryphon of John,” *Nag Hammadi Library*, 110 (10.17–18).

⁴⁰Origen cites this twice, in *Commentary on John*, 2.6 and in *Homily on Jeremiah*, 15.4. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 216.

⁴¹Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 51. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 172–74.

⁴²Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 35. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 100–101. Compare Matthew 7:15 and 25:4; and see the discussion in Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 76–77.

⁴³Gospel of Thomas, Logion 97, as cited in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 136.

⁴⁴Clement, *Stromata*, 5.10.64. See Resch, *Agrapha*², 108–9.

⁴⁵Gospel of Thomas, Logion 62. See also Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library*, 133.

⁴⁶2 Clement 8:6.

⁴⁷These lines do not appear in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (they would appear in Logion 36), and they are rather fragmentary in the Greek. My translation follows the reconstruction of Robert A. Kraft, “Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 655 Reconsidered,” *Harvard Theological Review* (1961): 254, though the difficulty of reconstructing these lines is admitted (see Kraft, “Oxyrhynchus,” 258–59). Blatz in Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:123, would translate the above as, “Much better are you than the lilies which card not neither do they spin. And have no garment also,” apparently following the suggested reconstruction of Theodor Zahn, “Neue Funde aus der alten Kirche,” *Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 16 (1905): 97 n. 1.

⁴⁸See Resch, *Agrapha*², 145–46; compare Ephesians 1:4.

⁴⁹See H. G. C. Moule, “An Agraphon,” *Expository Times* (1899–1900): 507.

⁵⁰Coptic Gospel of Thomas, Logion 42. See the discussion in Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 111–18.

⁵¹See the discussion of the Prayer of Joseph by J. L. Smith in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:703–4. “The term ‘created before’ (lit. ‘pre-created’) occurs only here and in late Christian texts. The notion that wisdom, Torah, or the nation Israel were pre-existent is quite widespread in Jewish materials. Less common is the claim that the patriarchs or Moses were pre-existent” (Charlesworth, *The Old*

Testament Pseudepigrapha, 2:713). Also see the discussion of the Prayer of Joseph in Wilfred L. Knox, *Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1944), 49. For discussions of belief in premortal existence in the Dead Sea scrolls, see Dana M. Pike, "Is the Plan of Salvation Attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *LDS Perspectives on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Dana M. Pike (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, forthcoming [1997]); and A. Lange, "Wisdom and Predestination in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Dead Sea Scrolls Discoveries* 2, no. 3 (1995): 340-54.

⁵²For a document that has Gnostic or early Christian elements and implies a belief in premortal existence, see John W. Welch and James V. Garrison, "The 'Hymn of the Pearl': An Ancient Counterpart to 'O My Father,'" *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996-97): 127-38.

⁵³Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 120.