Introduction

Like the Bible, many apocryphal narratives from early Christian and medieval literature included stories about miracles concerning disabilities. Just as the canonical gospels feature Jesus performing various miracles to heal disabilities, extrabiblical stories about Jesus also highlight such feats even in Jesus’ infancy. Non-canonical apocrypha, in fact, were widely popular in the medieval world, and influenced an array of literature like sermons, world histories, and poems, as well as visual arts like manuscript illuminations, wall paintings, sculptures, and church architecture. Two of the most widespread apocrypha in the Middle Ages were the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, both of which feature episodes in which the child Jesus was involved with healing disabilities.

Composed in Latin, likely in the early seventh century, Pseudo-Matthew consists of an expanded adaptation of an earlier Greek apocryphon known as the Protevangelium of James. Both recount the story of Mary’s parents, Anna and Joachim, her birth, childhood, and betrothal to Joseph, the birth of Jesus, and the holy family’s flight to Egypt. The following episode about the birth of Jesus and the withering of the doubting midwife’s hand is taken from chapter 13 of Pseudo-Matthew. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas was originally composed in the second century, probably in Greek or possibly in Syriac. This apocryphal gospel recounts various episodes from Jesus’ childhood, many presaging his later actions and teachings as an adult (as in the canonical gospels). During the Middle Ages, a Latin translation was undertaken and began to circulate paired with Pseudo-Matthew in manuscripts from the twelfth century onward (often called the pars altera [“second part”] because of this designation by the editor Constantine von Tischendorf). The following episode about Jesus’ interaction with his rabbis (Jewish teachers) is taken from chapters 6–8 of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (chapter 31 in Tischendorf’s edition). The other passages are taken from episodes inspired by the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, from an expanded narrative including Pseudo-Matthew, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, and other additions about Jesus’ childhood in the thirteenth-century manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 11867.

All of the episodes presented here include sensational miracles, especially the healings of physical disabilities. In her discussion of canonical Gospel miracles, Sharon V. Betcher highlights “the stock feature of disablement, which always immediately signals cure as resolution,” for example, “in terms of miraculous remediation.” This view is similarly applicable to parallel representations in apocryphal gospels like Pseudo-Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, as with those presented here. Most of these accounts introduce disabilities for the very purpose of demonstrating miraculous powers—in other words, disabilities exist to be healed. One example appears in the episode in which Jesus teaches the rabbis: it concludes with Jesus giving a blessing, using the type of language that is
directly juxtaposed to that of a curse, calling for the reversal of infertility, blindness, lameness, poorness, death, and other states presented as adversities; in response, “immediately all were restored who had fallen under evil illness” (“continuo sunt omnes restituti qui sub malis deciderant infirmitatibus”). Jesus’ miracle, then, is to do away with those infirmities portrayed as “evil illness” (“malis... infirmitatibus”) —here, disabilities linked to the evil state of the world (a consequence of the biblical fall of humans into sin) that must be overcome through miracles.

The majority of these apocryphal miracles also highlight a symbolic relationship between physical disability and spiritual lack. For example, there is a clear parallel between Salome’s doubt and the subsequent withering of her hand and the story of the apostle Thomas’ doubt in John 20:24–29. The intertextuality between these stories highlights the use of disability as metaphor for spiritual impairment. Representations of physical health as allegories for spiritual health demonstrate the multilayered uses of disabilities found in both the Bible and throughout medieval Christian literature. As seen in the previous example of Jesus’ general healing of infirmities seen as “evil,” bodily health, spiritual righteousness, and miraculous healings are closely aligned.

A number of episodes in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas also pit Jesus against the Jews, creating a cast of anti-Judaism. Much of this is rooted in the theological idea of Christian supersessionism, or the belief that Christianity replaced Judaism. Such anti-Judaism is especially pronounced in the symbolism of Jesus blinding the Jews who speak against him after he curses a boy. Similarly, the idea of physical blindness is meant to symbolize spiritual immaturity, or inability to understand, in the episode with Jesus and his rabbis. Master Levi expresses his amazement at not understanding Jesus, the language of blindness is used throughout the passage, and the spiritual symbolism is further emphasized by the comment about Jesus’ healing of those afflicted with illness at the end of the episode. All of this intersects with what Edward Wheatley has discussed in relation to the trope of blindness used in medieval culture (with roots in the New Testament), especially in literature about the Jews. These episodes in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas participate in the more general trend of using blindness as a motif to express medieval Christian anxieties about Jews.

Bibliography


Jesus' Birth and the Doubting Midwife

Factum est autem post aliquantum tempus ut fieret professio ex edicto Caesaris Augusti, ut profiteretur unusquisque in patria sua. Haec professio facta est a praeside Syriae Cyrino. Necesse autem fuerat ut Ioseph cum Maria proficisceretur in Bethleem, quia exinde erat, et Maria de tribu Iuda et de domo ac patria David.

Cum ergo Ioseph et Maria irent per viam quae ducit Bethleem, dixit Maria at Ioseph: “Duos populos video ante me, unum flentem et alium gaudentem.”

Cui respondit Ioseph: “Sede et tene te in iumento tuo et noli superflua verba loqui.”

Tunc apparuit puer speciosus ante eos, indutus veste splendida, et dixit ad Ioseph: “Quare dixisti verba superflua esse de duobus populis de quibus locuta est Maria? Populum enim Iudaorum flentem vidit, quia recessit a deo suo, et populum gentium gaudentem, quia accessit et prope factus est ad dominum, secundum quod promisit patribus nostris Abraham, Isaac et Iacob; tempus enim advenit ut in semine Abrahae benedictio omnibus gentibus tribuatur.”

Et cum haec dixisset, iussit angelus stare iumentum, quia tempus advenit pariendi; et praecepit descendere de animali Mariam et ingredi in speluncam subterraneam, in qua lux non fuit unquam sed semper tenebrae, quia lumen diei penitus non habebat. Ad ingressum vero Mariae coepit tota spelunca splendore habere, et quasi sol esset in semine Abrahae benedictio omnibus gentibus tribuatur.

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Iam enim dudum Ioseph perrexerat ad quareendas obstetrices. Qui cum reversus esset ad speluncam, Maria iam infantem generat. Et dixit Ioseph ad Mariam: Ego tibi Zelomi et Salomen obstetrices adduxi, quae foris ante speluncam stant et prae splendore

Jesus' Birth and the Doubting Midwife

Now, it came to pass that after some time a proclamation was made by an edict of Caesar Augustus that everyone should hasten to their native land. This proclamation was first made by Cyrius, the governor of Syria, and made it necessary that Joseph go to Bethlehem with Mary, because Joseph and Mary were from the tribe of Judah and from the house and family of David.

When, therefore, Joseph and Mary were going along the road that leads to Bethlehem, Mary said to Joseph, “I see two peoples before me, one weeping and the other rejoicing.”

To which Joseph responded, saying, “Sit and hold onto your mule and do not speak unnecessary words to me.”

Then a beautiful boy appeared before them dressed in gleaming clothing and said to Joseph, “Why did you say that the words you heard about the two peoples were unnecessary? For she saw the Jewish people weeping because they have withdrawn from God, and the gentile people rejoicing because they have drawn near to the Lord, which he promised to your fathers Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. For the time has come that by the seed of Abraham a blessing shall be given to all nations.”

And when he had said these things, he ordered the mule to stand still, and instructed Mary to get down from the animal and go into a cave in which there was always darkness because, in its innermost parts, it did not have the light of day. But when Mary went in, the whole cave began to fill with great brightness; and as if the sun were in it, so did the whole [cave] begin to exhibit the gleaming of light; and as if it were the sixth hour of the day, so did the divine light illuminate that same cave. This light did not withdraw, neither day nor night, until Mary gave birth to a male, whom angels surrounded at birth; and when he had been born on his feet, immediately they worshipped him, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.”

Audiens hanc vocem alia obstetrix nomine Salome dixit: Quod ego audio non credam nisi forte ipsa probavero. Et ingessa Salome ad Mariam dixit: Permite me ut palpem te et probem utrum verum dixerit Zelomi.

Cumque permisisset Maria ut eam palparet, misit manum suam Salome. Et cum misisset et tangeret, statim aruit manus eius, et prae dolore coepit flere vehementissime et angustari et clamando dicere: Domine, tu nosti quia semper te timui, et omnes pauperes sine retributione acceptionis curavi, de vidua et orphano nihil accepi, et inopem vacuum a me ire numquam dimisi. Et ecce misera facta sum propter incredulitatem meam, quia ausa fui temptare virginem tuam.


And Joseph, finding Mary with the child to whom she had given birth, said to her, “I have brought Zehel, a midwife, to you; behold, she is standing right outside of the cave, but is unable to enter because of the great brightness.” Hearing this, Mary smiled. Then Joseph said to her, “Do not smile, but take care that she inspect you, in case you need her medicine.” And Mary commanded her to enter.

When Mary allowed herself to be scrutinized, the midwife called out in a loud voice and said, “Great Lord, have mercy! Never before has it been either heard or suspected that the breasts might be full of milk, and yet this newborn makes manifest that his mother is a virgin. No stain of blood is on the child, and no pain was evident in the birth. A virgin has given birth and after giving birth she has continued to be a virgin.”

Hearing this cry, another midwife named Salome said, “Certainly I will not believe this unless indeed I verify it.” And Salome went in to Mary and said to her, “Let me examine you so that I should know if the words that Zehel declared to me are true.”

Now when Mary allowed her examination, as soon as Salome drew away her right hand from the inspection, the hand withered and she began to be most violently stricken by the pain and to cry out, weeping and saying, “Lord, you know that I have always feared you and have taken care of all the poor without the worry of payment. I have taken nothing from the widow and the orphan and I have never sent the destitute away from me empty-handed. And behold, I am made wretched because of my unbelief, because I have dared to test your virgin, who gave birth to the Light and after this birth remained a virgin.”

And while she was saying these things, a brilliant young man appeared beside her saying, “Go to the child and worship him, and touch him with your hand, and he will heal you, because this is the Savior of all who hope in him.” And quickly Salome went to him and worshipped the child and touched
Jesus Teaches the Rabbis

Iterum magister Zachyas legis doctor dixit ad Ioseph et Mariam: Date mihi puerum, et ego tradam illum magistro Levi, qui doceat eum litteras et erudiat.

Tunc Ioseph et Maria blandientes Iesum duxerunt in scholas, ut doceretur litteras a sene Levi. Qui cum introisset, tacebat. Et magister Levi unam litteram dicebat ei: Responde.

Jesus autem tacebat et nihil respondebat. Unde praeceptor Levi iratus apprehendens virgam storatinam percussit eum in capite. Jesus autem dixit ad didascalum Levi: Ut quid me percutis? In veritate scias quia ipse qui percutitur magis doceat percutientem se quam ab eo doceatur. Ego enim te possum docere qua a te ipso dicuntur. Sed hi omnes caeci sunt qui dicunt et audiunt, quasi aes sannans aut cimbalum tinniens, in quibus non est sensus eorum quae intelliguntur per sonum illorum.


Jesus Teaches the Rabbis

Again, Master Zacchaeus, a doctor of the Law, spoke to Joseph and Mary, “Give the boy to me, and I will hand him over to Master Levi, who will teach him letters and instruct him.”

Then Joseph and Mary, soothing Jesus, led him to school, so that he might be taught letters by old Levi. When he had entered, he was silent. And Master Levi said one letter to Jesus, and beginning with the first letter aleph he said to him, “Repeat.”

But Jesus was silent and responded with nothing. At that the instructor Levi was angry, and seizing a storax-tree branch, struck him on the head.

Now, Jesus said to the teacher Levi, “Why do you strike me? In truth you should know that the one who is struck teaches the one striking him more than he learns from him. For I am able to teach you what you are saying. But all these who speak and hear are blind, like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal, in which there is no sense of the things that are understood in their sound.”

And furthermore, Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “Every letter from aleph up to tau,” is discerned by arrangement. Therefore, say first what tau is, and I will say to you what aleph is.” And again Jesus said to them, “Whoever does not know Aleph, how are they able to say Tau? Hypocrites! Say first what is Aleph, and then I will believe you when you say Beth.” And Jesus began to ask the names of each letter and said, “Let the master of the Law say what the first letter is, or why it has

aleph the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet   tau the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet   Beth the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet
Cum autem Levi hoc audisset, obstupefactus est ad tantam dispositionem nominum litterarum.


Tunc Iesus laeto vultu subridens de eo dixit cum imperio cunctis filiis Israel astantisibus et audientibus: Fructificent infructosi et videant caeci et claudi ambulent recte et pauperes fruantur bonis et reviviscant mortui, ut redintegrato statu unusquisque reveratur et permaneat in eo ipso qui radix est vitae et dulcedinis perpetuae.

Et cum hoc dixisset infans Iesus, continuo sunt omnes restituti qui sub malis deciderant infirmitatibus. Et amplius non audebant dicere ei alicui aut audire ab eo. many triangles, gradations, subacures, mediates, obducts, products, erects, strata, curvistrates."

Now, when Levi heard this, he was astonished at such an arrangement of the names of the letters.

Then in the hearing of all he began to call out and to say, “Should this one live on the earth? Certainly he is worthy to be hanged on a great cross. For he is able to extinguish fire and mock other punishments. I think that he lived before the flood and was born before the deluge. For what womb carried him? Or what mother birthed him? Or what breasts nursed him? I flee before him; for I am not able to endure the words from his mouth; no, my heart is astonished to hear such words. Indeed I think that no man is able to follow his words unless God is with him. Now I, miserable, have given myself up to be mocked by him. For when I thought I had a student, I found my master, although I did not know him. What may I say? I am not able to endure the words of this boy; soon I will flee from this town, because I am not able to understand these things. I, an old man, am defeated by a child, because I am not able to find either beginning or end of what he asserts. For it is difficult to discover the beginning of him. Certainly I tell you—I am not lying—that before my eyes the working of this boy and the beginning of his speech and the conclusion of his intention appear to have nothing in common with humanity. Because of this, I do not know whether he is a magician or a god, nor do I certainly know if an angel of God speaks in him. Whence he exists, or whence he came, or who he will be in the future, I do not know.”

Then Jesus, smiling at him with a joyful face, spoke with authority to all the children of Israel standing by and listening, “Let the unfruitful bear fruit, and let the blind see, and let the lame walk right, and let the poor enjoy the good things, and let the dead be revived, so that everyone might return to a renewed state and remain in him who is the root of life and perpetual sweetness.”
Jesus Climbs a Sunbeam

Una autem die temporeimale cum sol in sua uirtute clarus radiaret extendit se radius solaris attingens a fenestra in parietem in domo Ioseph, ubi cum ludent cum Iesu contribules pueri uicinorum per domum discurrentes ascendit Iesus radium solis et positis super eum uestimentis suis sedebat quasi super trabem firmissimum.

Quod cum uidissent colludentes coetanei pueri opinabant se similiter posse facere. Et ascenderunt ut sederent cum Iesu ludentes exemplo illius conterimur.

Jesus autem instantibus Maria et Ioseph lesions omnium attribuit levi flatu aspirando super locum dolentem sanabat omnes et air: Spiritus ubi uult spirat et quos uult sanat et sani facti sunt. Haec omnia nunciauerunt patribus nostris.

Et factum est palam hoc uerbum in Jerusalem et in remoris finibus Iudee. Et multiplicata est fama Iesu per circuitum prouiciarum. Et uenerunt ut benedicerent eum et ab eo benedicerentur et dixerunt ad eum: Beatus uenter qui te portauit et ubera quae suitisti.

Ioseph et Maria Deo in omnibus gratias que audierant et uiderant persoluerunt.

Jesus Curses a Boy and Blinds the Jews

Alio tempore ambulante Iesu per villam cucurrit unus de infantibus et percussit Iesum in ulnas.

Iesus autem dixit ad eum: Sic sic perfacias iter tuum. Et statim cecidit in terram et mortuus est.

Illis autem uidentibus mirabilia clamauerunt dicentes: Unde est puer iste?
Et dixerunt ad Ioseph: Non opporret esse
nobiscum nec habere talem puerum. Ille au-
tem abit et tulit eum.

Et dixerunt ei: Recede de isto loco et si te
opporret esse nobiscum doce eum orare et non
blasphemare filii autemnostri insensati.

Uocauit Ioseph Iesum et incepit eum
docere Ut quid blasphemas et alciui male di-
cis, habitatores isti hodium habent super nos
de loco isto.

Iesus autem dixit: Ego autem tacebo pater.

Ipsi autem uideant insipientiam suam.

Et ii statim qui loquebantur aduersus le-
sum ceci facti sunt. Et deambulatnies diceb-
abant: Omnes sermones qui procedunt de ore
eius exsecutum habent et effectum.

Et cum uidisset Ioseph quod faceret Iesus
 cum furore apprehandit eum per auriculam.

Jesus Heals a Boy’s Foot

Post hoc ante paucos dies evolutos puer
quidam in eodem loco scindebant ligna per-
cussitque pedem plagam horribilem faciendo,
et cum uenisset turba multa ut uideret eum
lamentem accurit Iesus cum ipsis et deprecati
sunt eum ut leniret dolorem suum. Praeser-
tim cum pater et mater lesi non se caperent
pro dolore Iesus autem mistertus eorum ait:
Credite tantum et fiet quod petistis.

Cumque inalaret magister accessit ad pe-
dem suum Iesus et blandit ad modum medici
fomentantis ait: Surge sanus; in memoria po-
tentie De sanaris.

Ipse autem sanus omnino saltum fecit et
gloriam dedit item in confessione.

Cum autem uidisset turba quae facta
fuerant adorauerunt Iesum et dixerunt: Vere
credimus quia Deus est tu.

for him to live with us, nor for us to have
such a child.”

At that, he (Joseph) went and took him,
and they said to him, “Go away from this
place, and if it is necessary for you to live
with us, teach him to pray and not to blas-
pheme, for our children do not understand.”

Joseph called to Jesus and took him to
 teach him, “Why do you blaspheme and
 speak evil to others? The inhabitants in this
place hate us.”

Now Jesus said, “Then I will be silent, fa-
ther. But let them see their own folly.”

Immediately those who had spoken
against Jesus were made blind. Walking away,
they said, “All the words that go out of his
mouth are followed by weight and effect.”

And when Joseph saw what Jesus had
done, with anger he seized him by the ear.
In an uproar, Jesus said to Joseph, “It is suff-
cient for you to see me, but do not touch
me, for you do not know who I am; and if
you knew, you might not admonish me. Al-
though I am with you presently, I was made
before you.”

Jesus Heals a Boy’s Foot

After this (before a few days went by), in
the same place, a certain child was cutting
wood and struck his foot, making a terrible
wound. When a great crowd came and saw
him wailing, Jesus ran to him along with
them, and they begged him to soothe his pain.

Especially because the father and mother
of the wounded child could not handle his
pain, Jesus had mercy on them and said,
“Only believe and what you seek will be
done.”

After the master (Jesus) went to him, he
breathed on his foot and caressed it, like a
soothing physician, and said, “Arise whole;
remember that you are healed by the power
of God.”

Completely healed, he began leaping and
also gave glory in confession.

When the crowd saw what had happened,
they worshipped Jesus and said, “Truly we
believe that you are God.”
Endnotes

1. Endnotes and translations for all of the passages here have been provided by Brandon W. Hawk. Bibliographic information for each passage is included in the following footnotes.
7. This episode is found in chapter 13 of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew in Tischendorf and Hawk. The translation is based on the newer critical edition, Libri de nativitate Mariae: Pseudo-Matthæi Evangelium, textus et commentaries, eds. Jan Gisel, Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum 9 (Brepols, 1997). The Latin text provided for comparison is from Tischendorf’s edition, although the Latin differs from the English translation presented here in details.
8. This episode is found as chapter 31 (part of the so-called pars altera, a Latin translation of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas) of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew in Tischendorf and Hawk. The Latin text is from Tischendorf’s edition.
9. This episode is found as chapter 58 in Hawk. For this and the two following episodes, the translation is based on Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 11867, which is transcribed here with some modernizations of capitalization and punctuation.
10. This episode is found in Hawk, The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, chap. 61.