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**The Infancy Gospel of Thomas** (an apocryphal document), from **Section 4:**

*From there he went off with his father Joseph. Suddenly a boy came running and bumped into Jesus' shoulder. 'Cursed be the soul that guides you,' Jesus said. And immediately the boy died.*

**The Infancy Gospel of Thomas: *The Boy Who Kills.***

Before I begin, remember that “apocryphal” refers to a document of doubtful authenticity. Although the Infancy Gospel of Thomas was widely read, beginning in the second century A.D. and through the fifth century A.D., medieval, renaissance, early modern, and modern biblical scholars have always considered it to be apocryphal and out-and-out fictional. But in the early centuries of our church, it was very widely believed to represent the true childhood stories of the boy Jesus, from the age of 5 to 12. This is why we are looking at it, to get some insight into what early Christians believed about the child Jesus.

There are many books, with names like the Gospel According to the Hebrews, the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Mary that were not included when the canonical Bible was officially recognized in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. The overriding reason for rejecting various books was the belief that

they were written long after the life of Jesus and/or that they did not represent the true teachings of Jesus and those who followed him. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is not about the infancy of Jesus; the word that is translated to “infancy” from Greek, “*infantia*”, really means “childhood”. Importantly, this is not a long-lost manuscript that was discovered in recent times. We have known about this book for almost two thousand years. Here is a summary of the book:

Section 1 is a Prologue that many people believe was added later. It says the book was written by “Thomas the Israelite”. We do not believe that this is the Apostle Thomas; he was probably long dead before this was written. But this might have been an attempt to symbolically associate the book with the Apostle.

Section 2 tells of the five-year-old Jesus making a dozen sparrows out of mud. It is apparently the Sabbath, and Joseph comes along and tells Jesus that he should not be doing this on the Sabbath. (However, we know of no religious constraint preventing Jewish children from manufacturing their own toys on the Sabbath). Then Jesus claps his hands – and the sparrows turn into living birds and fly away. A Pharisee witnesses this and is amazed.

In Section 3 the son of a high priest annoys Jesus, and so Jesus causes him to become paralyzed. In Section 4 is a story that contains this:

*From there he went off with his father Joseph. Suddenly a boy came running and bumped into Jesus' shoulder. 'Cursed be the soul that guides you,' Jesus said. And immediately the boy died.*

In Section 5 people have been complaining about the things Jesus has been doing, and Joseph tries to discipline him, but then Jesus blinds some of the other adults who have complained. In Section 6, Jesus heads off to school. A teacher named Zacchaeus assures Joseph that he will be able to teach Jesus, despite Joseph warning that it is hard to keep the boy under control. We get the first true glimpse of the mature Jesus emerging when Zacchaeus tries to teach Jesus the alphabet and Jesus warns the teacher that he, Jesus, existed long before Zacchaeus existed, and then Jesus begins teaching deep spiritual truths about the Greek alphabet to the teacher. The text is a bit puzzling, as it seems almost like something from a magical story. This incident is witnessed by others. In Section 7 the teacher is so shamed by Jesus' vast knowledge that he concludes that Jesus perhaps did exist before creation, and that he might be an angel or a god. The teacher decides to retire.

In Section 8, we see Jesus beginning to understand his powers and who he is. He brings back to life those he has killed and cures those he has injured. In Section 9, Jesus is playing on a roof with another boy, who falls off and is killed. People, since they have seen Jesus do violent things, accuse Jesus of killing him.

Jesus brings the boy back to life and has the boy testify to the adults that Jesus did not harm him. In Section 10, Jesus' mother Mary breaks her clay water pot. Jesus then fetches water in a cloak, which of course, should not have been able to hold water. Mary is thankful for the miracle and kisses him. Again, others witness this. Jesus performs another helpful miracle in Section 11. Joseph plants for the season, and so does Jesus, alongside him. But what Jesus plants yields a hundred times what Joseph plants. Jesus helps Joseph again in Section 12. Joseph is making something from wood, but one piece of wood is cut too short. Jesus stretches the wood for him.

In Section 13, Jesus seems to revert to his younger, meaner self, but there is a twist. Another teacher gets frustrated with Jesus seeming to be too smart for a boy, and so he beats Jesus. Jesus then curses the teacher and the teacher dies. But in this scene, he has punished someone who has done wrong, not an innocent person. Still, afraid of what might happen, Mary and Joseph decide to keep Jesus in the house.

In Section 14, yet another teacher takes on Jesus as a pupil. This time, the teacher listens in pleasant awe as Jesus teaches him about the Law of God. The teacher speaks well of Jesus. Jesus decides to bring the teacher he killed back to life. Why Jesus decides to do this, we do not know. But it meshes with what we

know about the adult Jesus. He never remains angry. Just after Jesus overturns the tables of the moneychangers, he begins to heal the sick and raise the dead.

In Section 15, a deadly viper bites his uncle James, but Jesus cures him. In Section 16, a young boy who is chopping wood accidentally cuts his foot and bleeds to death. In front of a crowd, Jesus brings him back to life.

The final Section, 17, has Jesus at the age of 12. The author retells the story of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus slips away from his parents on the way home from Jerusalem after Passover. His worried parents find him back in the Temple, teaching the rabbis. Mary is angry with him, but Jesus tells him that it is time for him to go about his father's work.

So, what do we think of these stories today? When I was reading this apocryphal Gospel, it caused me to think about an incident that happened with one of our kids, Isabelle, when she was four years old. Wendy, Isabelle, and I were at home standing in our dining room, looking out a window. I saw a panel truck drive by. It belonged, I believe, to a plumber. It passed by in a few seconds. Then, Isabelle, who had only been to preschool, repeated, correctly, all the words that had been on the side of the truck. I was dumbfounded. Yes, we had taught her to read some words. We did this with all of our kids at a young age. But I truly did not think that she knew enough to read the dense writing on the side of

the truck. Now, Isabelle was not Jesus. She didn't curse the driver and make him die. She didn't miraculously cure anyone. But I vividly remember, as a young parent, being amazed at what my child could do. When dealing with children as they are growing up, we all learn that kids turn out to have their own gifts, things that we don't teach them, things that we did not predict. They might turn out to be incredible athletes, musicians, mathematicians, linguists, or artists. They are likely to turn out to be gifted at things that we absolutely cannot do. As they get older, we get used to discovering just who they happen to be. We are often humbled by the way they seem to outshine us in amazing ways.

Perhaps this is what motivated someone to write these childhood stories about Jesus. They wanted to more fully understand the development of Jesus. Afterall, the Gospels jump from Jesus' birth to him being twelve. It would make sense that people would be curious. These stories could be – and in fact are mostly likely – based on oral traditions that had been passed around since the crucifixion of Jesus. We see him only incrementally realizing who he is and what he can do. As modern readers, we might wonder about Jesus ever doing something cruel, like killing a playmate. But maybe ancient readers didn't perceive things in the way we do. They thought of Jesus as someone who would eventually humiliate and destroy anyone who stood against the will of God. As a

child, he was learning to do this, in fits and starts. Remember that he did eventually heal everyone he hurt. What we do know is that although these tales of Jesus the child do not date to the first century A.D., like the “real” Gospels, they do date to the second century. We believe the original was written in Greek, and we have found versions in Syriac, Latin, Ethiopian, Armenian, Arabic, Gaelic, Slavonic, and Georgian. Clearly, they were very widely read. People wanted to know about the child Jesus and just what the son of God was like as he matured.

Here are some things we should note. First, the Section numbers were added after the book was written, just like the chapter and verse numbers in our Bible were added long after the Scriptures were written. The existing ancient manuscripts of this book consist of a string of quick tales about Jesus with no organization and no analysis. And the book is almost totally lacking in any sort of theological development. It is much shallower than the four Gospels of our Bible. This has caused some people to suggest that it was in truth written for children, so that they could relate to Jesus. The bottom line is that if this was a simple book written for children, then instead of portraying Jesus as a holy and obedient child, like we might have thought, it portrays Jesus like Dennis the Menace.

Early Christian scholars thought that the book was blasphemous. It was never seriously considered for inclusion in the Bible. This is because of two

things: First, Jesus acts cruelly at times, and this was hard for people to accept. Second, at one point Jesus starts preaching seemingly magical things about the Greek alphabet. This caused the Infancy Gospel of Thomas to be viewed as being very anti-Christian, and in fact, out and out Gnostic. Remember that Gnostics believed that there are special magical things that we need to learn to make our way to Heaven, and that only some of us are capable of this.

Back to Isabelle. When I expressed to Isabelle how impressed and how surprised I was at her being able to read what was on the side of a van, and in fact, capturing it all more quickly than I could have, she simply looked at me like I was making a big deal out of nothing. She was making use of the skills she had. That's what kids are like before adults poison them. They don't brag. They are innocent. They just humbly show their powers.

Here is what probably matters for us the most about the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Consider what we are told in the Gospel of Luke right after Mary and Joseph find the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple preaching after he disappears from the procession making their way home after Passover:

*<sup>50</sup> And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. <sup>51</sup> And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.*

*<sup>52</sup> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.*



Notice that Jesus at the age of twelve is said to warm his mother's heart, and that he continues to grow in wisdom and in his stature as the Savior.

These are the final words of 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter:

*<sup>18</sup> But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

We have talked about 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter (even more so than 1<sup>st</sup> Peter) likely not being written by Peter. Early church leaders like Eusebius (who lived from 263 to 340 A.D.) and Jerome (who lived from 340 to 420 A.D.) strongly believed that Peter did not write it. We must remember that ancient people did not consider it to be improper to assign the name of a famous religious leader to a document: it was considered a way to help spread that person's teachings. This letter did not become fully accepted as scripture until almost the year 500 A.D. Although we call it a letter, it is structured more like a sermon. It is thought to have been written around the year 100 A.D., and it could be the last book of the Bible that was written. What's important for us is that this is a powerful document whose author is very concerned that the corruption and selfishness of the surrounding world will cause Christians to lose their faith. The author urges us to live godly lives and continue throughout our lives to grow our faith. Sometimes I think that this book was planted among ancient Christians so it would be here for modern people to read.

Notice that this book tells us to continue to grow our faith and our knowledge of God and Jesus.

The books that we have in our canonical Bible do not give us much of a feel for the development of Jesus' sense of ministry, of how he came to understand who he was and what he should do. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas reminds us that Jesus was born a human, and it suggests that Jesus did have to go through a substantive period of growth. This would make sense to us and to ancient readers, as we all know that children do have to mature and develop their native skills – and they must also develop their faith. But we must be humble, and as Jesus says in Matthew 18:3, we must “*become like children*” if we want to walk in the Kingdom of God. Humility is important to a Christian, and we must be humble enough to know that we always have room to grow our own faith and to grow our own sense of how God wants us to live out our faith on this planet. No matter how old we are, we can always advance our ability to live with kindness and respect and generosity for others, and to always be forgiving.