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 **Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the Apocryphon of James**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

***Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the Apocryphon of James***

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Abstract

Early Christians used a rhetorical distinction between Jesus' "plain speech" and his speech in "parables" in order to mark social boundaries. Both the Fourth Gospel and the *Apocryphon of James* record a saying in which Jesus promises that his speaking in parables will give way to plain speech. In the Gospel of John, this distinction marks the separation of the Johannine sect, for whom all of Jesus' speech is plain, from the wider Jewish community, for whom his speech is in parables, at a time when the nascent Christians are turning Jesus' oral speech into a written text. The *Ap. Jas.*, written after a wide variety of Jesus literature had begun to circulate, differentiates between discrete units of Jesus' speech: some sayings are plain, others in parables. Analogously, it distinguishes two kinds of Christians: the majority, who remain at the level of plain speech, and an educated elite, a "textual community," which deciphers the meaning of Jesus' parables. The career of a dominical saying illustrates the transition in early Christian history from Jewish sect to diverse movement, from an oral to a written culture.

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Early Christian writings sometimes present Jesus' teachings as obscure or offensive and attempt to explain these qualities. The Gospel of Mark, for example, claims that to "outsiders" Jesus spoke in enigmatic parables, but to his disciples he gave the "secret of the kingdom of God" (Mk 4.10–12). **[End Page 187]** This simple insider-outsider distinction proved difficult to maintain, however, since the tradition knew instances in which even the disciples could not understand the meaning of what Jesus said (e.g., Mk 8.14–21). In writings like the Fourth Gospel and the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus' words are so odd that the disciples respond with questions of frustration: "Who are you, since you say these things to us?" (*Gos. Thom.* 43).<sup>1</sup> It is appropriate that the author of the Fourth Gospel places his version of Peter's confession in a context in which the obscure and offensive character of Jesus' sayings has driven away some of the disciples; Peter's confession focuses on adherence to Jesus' words, no matter how strange they might be: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6.66–68). Later Christians, such as Origen, turned necessity into virtue, claiming that Jesus and his apostles deliberately left some teachings vague or obscure in order to enable intellectually gifted Christians to advance in spiritual knowledge through biblical interpretation; the obscurity of Jesus' sayings justified

the existence of the schoolroom and its academic elite within the Christian community.

This later example suggests that obscurity and perspicuity are not intrinsic qualities that belong to texts and sayings as such, but rhetorical categories that groups invoke in order to do such things as claim or challenge privileged status with respect to other groups (e.g., to those people, these words are obscure; but to us, they are clear).<sup>2</sup> What, then, were earlier Christians, those at the beginning of the process of turning Jesus' sayings into written texts, doing when they claimed that certain teachings of Jesus were obscure and yet clear to them? The question is not what they thought certain "obscure" sayings individually meant, but how they understood obscurity itself and used the rhetoric of obscurity and perspicuity to differentiate themselves from others. **[End Page 188]**

A striking parallel between the Gospel of John and the *Apocryphon of James* suggests that it would be fruitful to compare how these two early Christian works approach this issue. Both works contain versions of a single dominical saying, which has connections with sayings in the Synoptic Gospels as well (cf. Mk 4.11–12, 32–34 par.):

"I have said these things to you in parables; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in parables but tell you in plain speech of the Father." (Jn 16.25)

"I began by speaking with you in parables, and you did not understand. Now I am speaking with you openly, and you do not perceive." (*Ap. Jas...*)

# *Parables and Plain Speech in the Fourth Gospel and the Apocryphon of James*

DAVID BRAKKE

Early Christians used a rhetorical distinction between Jesus' "plain speech" and his speech in "parables" in order to mark social boundaries. Both the Fourth Gospel and the *Apocryphon of James* record a saying in which Jesus promises that his speaking in parables will give way to plain speech. In the Gospel of John, this distinction marks the separation of the Johannine sect, for whom all of Jesus' speech is plain, from the wider Jewish community, for whom his speech is in parables, at a time when the nascent Christians are turning Jesus' oral speech into a written text. The *Ap. Jas.*, written after a wide variety of Jesus literature had begun to circulate, differentiates between discrete units of Jesus' speech: some sayings are plain, others in parables. Analogously, it distinguishes two kinds of Christians: the majority, who remain at the level of plain speech, and an educated elite, a "textual community," which deciphers the meaning of Jesus' parables. The career of a dominical saying illustrates the transition in early Christian history from Jewish sect to diverse movement, from an oral to a written culture.

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