

COMMENTARY

DECEMBER 14 2016



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A thirteenth-century manuscript page from an Infancy Gospel
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Beyond the Bible

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When, in the fourth century, the Church, East and West, finally agreed its canon of Scripture, the twenty-seven books that made up the New Testament were not the only early Christian writings in circulation.

Comparable books excluded from that canonical collection were then branded “apocryphal”.

The narratives that make up the bulk of the New Testament apocrypha shed light on our understanding of popular and widespread religious practices and

beliefs, enlarge our grasp of doctrine and history, and offer insights into how the Christian story was developed, received and embellished. Seldom can any other body of literature have had such a profound influence on religious thought. From these texts may be seen the origin of teachings on celibacy and virginity, asceticism and poverty, intercession by Mary, the role of women, patron saints, the veneration of relics, monasticism and Christianity's negative reactions to Judaism.

Beyond the theological realm these texts influenced art, as may be observed in many cycles of Mary's or another saint's life, for example, in the cathedrals of Venice, Chartres and Bourges, or in the Arena Chapel in Padua. The poetry of Milton, Dante and Herder reveals the inspiration of apocryphal Christian writings. Drama in the York and N-Town mystery plays was also obviously influenced by them. So, too, was music: Holst's *Hymn of Jesus*, performed at the Three Choirs Festival in 1921, took its libretto from the apocryphal Acts of John. Even the Hollywood blockbuster *Quo Vadis?* dramatized an episode from the apocryphal Acts of Peter.

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Unlike Jewish intertestamental writings commonly designated as “The Apocrypha” in Protestant Bibles, and referring to an agreed number of texts, the title “New Testament apocrypha” applies to a huge and amorphous collection of Christian or quasi-Christian texts written in different languages and in several countries over many years, starting from the second Christian century. The definite article in this title suggests a fixed collection, which is not the case – modern scholarly compendia of such writings differ over what is included. Not only that: very few of the texts commonly assembled under this umbrella actually

claim to have been apocryphal in its literal meaning of “hidden”. In theory, a cumbersome expression such as “early non-canonical Christian writings” may be more accurate, but common usage has stabilized a term that tells would-be readers what to expect when turning to a collection of texts with this conventional title on its spine.

The popularity of the apocrypha in antiquity and their wide geographical spread gave them a powerful influence on Christian thinking, imagination and practice, despite ecclesiastical disapprobation.

Unsurprisingly, the censoring of books and their being placed on a blacklist always have the opposite effect to that intended.

The Bible itself may proclaim in Ecclesiastes 12:12 that “of the making of books there is no end”. It is a statement that rings particularly true for early Christian apocrypha.

The number of apocryphal texts already published and thus readily accessible to a general readership has been increasing in recent decades. Even more texts are in the

pipeline. A new book by Tony Burke and Brent Landau – *New Testament Apocrypha: More non-canonical Scriptures* (Eerdmans, 2016) – is the first in a projected multi-volume series. It contains several previously unknown or unfamiliar texts. Those writings published here originated in the earliest Christian centuries and they are preserved in a variety of languages: Coptic, Syriac, Arabic as well as Armenian, Georgian, Old Irish and Ethiopic. Some of them add to the known repertoire of tales about the Magi, John the Baptist and other dramatis personae from the New Testament, such as Barnabas, Judas, Mary Magdalene, Titus and Pilate.

There are many more apocryphal texts still to edit, publish and discuss in continuing attempts to explore the multifaceted nature of early Christianity. Some, including a number recently edited and published, are known today from only a few manuscripts or even only a single copy sometimes found in an archaeological dig. It is not surprising, however, that some texts have disappeared completely, perhaps leaving only their titles in writings by the Church Fathers and other sources; brief extracts from others are known only from quotations. In contrast to these sparse examples,

though, several supposedly fringe apocryphal texts remarkably survive in a good number of extant manuscripts. For example, a Greek work, the Protevangelium of James, written in the second century, has been preserved in its entirety in over a hundred manuscripts today. Additionally, its manuscripts range in date over several centuries, thus betraying the abiding appeal of this work. Translations of other early Greek or Latin apocrypha also survive in the ancient Christian languages – Syriac, Coptic, Georgian, Armenian, Slavic or Arabic, thereby also indicating their increasing and widespread popularity.

Students of Christian history and doctrine neglect this literature at their peril. Some of the texts may indeed have been influenced by what were to be called heresies by disapproving authorities, but that is not surprising as many originated in the syncretistic world of the second and third centuries. But the majority of these New Testament apocrypha – superstitious, magical, unsophisticated though many are – can, however, be properly termed proto-orthodox.

As well as the Protevangelium of James, surviving

apocryphal gospel texts include the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, the Arabic Infancy Gospel, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Nicodemus. Then there are numerous apocryphal Acts centring on the derring-do of Paul, Peter and other early apostles. There are also a large number of apocryphal apocalypses and several epistolary works.

Christian writings castigated as heretical or undesirable often survived in clandestine versions. The various apocryphal Acts, in particular, were largely rewritten, frequently revised or epitomized. (Montague Rhodes James called them *réchauffés*.) For example, the ancient Acts of Andrew was heavily censored, allegedly to avoid “verbosity” and to omit “all that bred weariness”.

There is a considerable body of otherwise unknown sayings attributed to Jesus in patristic writings, biblical manuscripts, and in apocryphal sources; most of these sayings are unparalleled in the New Testament itself. They are often dubbed “Agrapha”, that is “unwritten” (in the canonical gospels). One of the most commonly studied of ancient gospels containing many Agrapha is

that of Thomas. Like many such texts, it claims to be the work of an early disciple, in this case Didymus Judas Thomas; it was rediscovered in its entirety at Nag Hammadi in Egypt as recently as 1945–6. Its opening words speak merely of its being a collection of “secret words”, thus being a rare example of an overtly “hidden” book. It contains 114 sayings, nearly all of them attributed to Jesus. As such, it is one of the few non-canonical texts in which the very words of Jesus himself may survive.

Among narrative texts are gospels about the lives and deaths of Mary and of Jesus. Firstly the Marian gospels, products of the need to amplify the story of Mary and satisfy the natural curiosity of readers of the texts that became the four canonical gospels. Anyone attempting to tell her life story, basing it on only the New Testament, comes across many tantalizing gaps. Biographical queries arise: Where was she born? Who were her parents? How was she reared? What about her death? Other questions are theological: Why was this woman in particular chosen to be the mother of Jesus? What was special and unique about her? What example can she set? It was in order to answer questions such as

these that, by the second century, Christian imagination and piety began producing apocryphal tales about Mary. Many survived.

The Protevangelium of James relates events before Jesus's birth, hence its name "the Proto-Gospel"; it tells of Mary's parents, Anne and Joachim, and of Mary's birth and upbringing. The stories in it reflect a developing tradition that was ultimately expressed in Christian teaching about the perpetual virginity of Mary. In addition, it gave support and impetus to a festival, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple (marked in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches on November 21), and to teachings like the Immaculate Conception.

A later apocryphal work, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, dating from between the fourth and sixth centuries, popularized these legends about Mary's early life in Latin-speaking Christendom well into the Middle Ages. The motive for compiling this gospel also seems to have been to further the veneration of Mary, not least by the inclusion of stories about the Holy Family's sojourn in Egypt. It is in this Gospel that

Jesus's birth is acknowledged not only by shepherds, but also by animals. The well-known Christmas card scene with an ox and ass adoring the newborn Jesus in their manger is due to the influence of the Old Testament, in particular Isaiah 1:3 ("An ox knows its owner and a donkey its master's stall") and the Septuagint version of Habakkuk 3:2 ("O Lord . . . You shall be known in the midst of two living creatures") cited in Pseudo-Matthew 14; it represents an ongoing tradition in which various Old Testament passages were read as Messianic prophecies that were then said to have been fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Then comes the text known as *De Nativitate Mariae* (sometimes, less accurately, called the Gospel of the Birth of Mary) which was also popular in the West. Over 130 manuscripts of this work have been catalogued. The end of Mary's life is retailed in numerous and differing "dormition" accounts which led to the Catholic doctrine, Mary's Assumption, defined only in 1950.

Gospels telling stories from the missing years of Jesus's childhood began with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and then the Arabic Gospel, which relate incidents about Jesus as a young boy. Their main theme

is to show his precocious awareness of his supernatural origin and his control over life, death and nature. They echo contemporary theologians' debates about the nature of Jesus – God and/or man. They are couched in terms of a “normal” human child who works at his father's bench and runs errands for his mother, but who, nevertheless, displays paranormal powers. But modern readers tend to be struck more by the destructiveness of many of Jesus's actions than the piety underlying the stories. He is portrayed more as enfant terrible than Wunderkind.

No sizeable apocryphal gospel reports incidents from Jesus's ministry, it perhaps being felt that accounts in what became the four canonical gospels had said enough, but there are later gospels that fill in gaps about Jesus's death. These Passion gospels include the now fragmentary Gospel of Peter, which tells of the crucifixion in an idiosyncratic way and also the Gospel of Nicodemus – a work that had a profound influence on medieval English literature. The latter tells of Jesus's career between his death on Good Friday and the discovery of his body two days later. In that interim Jesus is said to have been gainfully occupied, visiting

the Underworld. The credal affirmation, “He descended into Hell”, seems to have been based on a particular interpretation of the canonical 1 Peter 3:19 (“In the spirit he went and preached to the spirits in prison”). That verse encouraged later generations of Christians to expand what was meant there by Jesus’s appearance before imprisoned spirits. In addition, the apocryphal material helped to address the Church’s doctrinal concerns about the destiny of those who had died before Jesus’s incarnation and who, as a consequence, seemed to miss the opportunity to be saved. The Gospel of Nicodemus provides a solution to the dilemma concerning those who lived and died before Jesus’s ministry; in it we read that Jesus breaks down the gates of Hades, releases the faithful dead imprisoned there, and leads them to Paradise. This is the scene known from the medieval Mystery Plays as the Harrowing of Hell; more recently it has been retold as a comic episode in Frederick Buechner’s novel *The Lion Country* (1971).

Of the many surviving apocryphal books of Acts, the most influential are the five oldest: the Acts of Andrew, the Acts of John, the Acts of Paul, the Acts of Peter,

and the Acts of Thomas. The stories themselves, although bearing some resemblance to the genre of literature paralleled in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, with its breathless sequence of stories, journeys, conversions, plots and speeches, are in effect counterparts to the popular reading matter of those literate Roman believers who are likely to have been the main readers of these Christianized novels. Eventually, this type of literature gave rise to Lives of the Saints and to hagiographies, notably *The Golden Legend* by Jacob of Voragine from the mid-thirteenth century, which was translated into several languages and helped popularize many of the apocryphal tales throughout Europe.

The ecclesiastical authorities who officially denounced the apocryphal books of Acts nevertheless allowed their concluding sections to survive and circulate. It is in these that exemplary accounts of the hero's death, usually by martyrdom, are found. The majority of the earlier stories in the apocryphal Acts are concerned with the deeds of the eponymous hero – these are the “acts” themselves; many survive albeit often only in manuscript fragments. Some of the passages are well

known and have had their influence on Christian tradition. The unflattering description of Paul as short, bald and bandy is familiar. Peter's inverse crucifixion occurs in the Acts of Peter, as does his reviving a dead tunny fish. The story of the poisoned chalice is in the Acts of John, as is a humorous account of John's rebuking bed bugs. This Acts tells of a parricide who castrates himself and also features a protracted yarn which ends in an attempted necrophiliac rape.

In the Acts of Paul, Paul baptizes a lion, which coincidentally meets him later when Paul is cast into the arena. We read of the evangelization of India in the Acts of Thomas, a tradition still maintained by the Malabar Christians (forming part of the Oriental Orthodox tradition) in Kerala and Madras. The scene in *Quo Vadis?* in which the resurrected Jesus sees the impending death of the apostle as a repetition of his own crucifixion, comes from the Acts of Peter; a comparable scene also occurs in the Acts of Paul. The story of Thecla, the famed woman apostle and heroine of the Acts of Paul, became very popular with devotees in several centres after her death and burial.

All these Acts provide good entertainment. But despite the fictitious stories, the apocryphal Acts do have a historical value too – although this does not concern the first-century events they purport to relate. Their most obvious importance is that they give an unparalleled insight into the popular folk religion of their own times. But even more important, they reveal aspects of early Christian preaching, teaching and worship. Most of the apocryphal books of Acts are orthodox and stem from Christians who, in writing these stories about the apostles, projected into them their own contemporary faith. Behind the undoubted exaggeration and distortion lie beliefs that develop ideas found in the New Testament in general and the Acts of the Apostles in particular. These apocryphal Acts may be crudely sensational, may promote an unthinking superstition at worst, a simple faith at best, but their creation, enduring existence and undoubted popularity reveal a Christianity that was vibrant, popular and, above all, successful throughout the Dark Ages and beyond.

Turning to the apocryphal apocalypses we note that Christian writers, biblical and post-biblical, concerned themselves, just as their Jewish precursors had done,

with teaching about the future. In general, apocalypses speak of the signs and portents presaging the end of this world and revealing the nature of the next. In the apocryphal literature we may separate these two features. First are writings like the Apocalypse of Thomas, which contains predictions about the ending of the present world and is thus apocalyptic in the sense of foretelling the future. Secondly there are texts that describe what heaven and hell hold in store for the faithful and the unbeliever – always a matter of contemporary interest. Post-biblical writers used this genre of literature, containing guided tours of the other world, with great imagination. Two of the most influential texts were the Apocalypse of Peter, possibly dating from the mid-second century, and the Apocalypse of Paul, probably written in the fourth. The latter work proved to be the most popular of the Western Church's apocryphal apocalypses and it led to the commonly held beliefs about heaven and hell that fuelled the medieval imagination, its literature and art.

Theological and philosophical ideas permeated the thinking behind the apocryphal writings. In turn those texts came to influence or satisfy the unquenchable

curiosity of the Christian imagination. The current searches for a reception history of each piece of literature encourages an investigation into how these Christian apocrypha influenced a wider milieu, both written and artistic. Painting, sculpture, stained glass and contemporary culture often benefited from these extra-biblical tales and themes. Links between the written, rhetorical, texts and the iconic representations of them in the plastic arts are profitable lines of study. This often innovative non-canonical literature, despite the pejorative definitions usually associated with the description of it as “apocryphal”, ought never now to be “hidden”, nor should it be relegated as “spurious”, “secondary” or “of dubious authority”.