

INTRODUCTION

The Rise of Christian Literature

I. ORAL TRADITION AND PRELITERARY FORMS

Twenty years passed between the death and resurrection of Jesus ca. 30 C.E. and the emergence of the earliest Christian literature. Jesus' proclamation of his teaching had been exclusively oral, and even the earliest communities initially did not see any need for a literary record, all the more so since the eyewitnesses who personally knew and heard Jesus lived among them and authentically attested to his gospel. Furthermore, they expected the promised return of the Messiah and the ultimate establishment of his kingdom to be realized in the lifetime of the first generation of disciples (imminent expectation). During this period of time, however, as is probably true of all peoples whose oral transmission of stories, myths, and wisdom gives rise to peculiar structures, there developed so-called pre-literary forms, which we know to the extent that they found their way into later literature. They grew in the soil of the five most important contexts of life of the early communities composed of Jewish and Gentile Christians with their mixtures of culture and environment:

a. In everyday life, as exhortations and instructions for the Christian life (paraenesis), among them the famous catalogs of vices and virtues (Gal 5:19–23), the household codes (Col 3:18–4:2), as well as the doctrine of the two ways, which originated in Judaism, as reflected in the *Letter of Barnabas* and the *Didache*, challenging Christians to walk in the way of good or evil, of light or darkness. The literary paraenesis has its roots and parallels in the popular wisdom tradition of Judaism and in Hellenistic popular philosophy and basically serves to recall and repeat the oral paraenesis.

b. In liturgy, as prayers, hymns, and acclamations, such as “amen,” “hallelujah,” “hosanna,” the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9–13), the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), and the Benedictus (Luke 1:68–79).

c. In catechesis, for the purpose of passing on the faith within the community and instructing new converts, especially in preparation for baptism, such as the earliest short forms of the confession of faith (Acts 8:37) and the baptismal formula (Matt 28:19).

d. In missionary proclamation, as kerygmatic formulas summarizing missionary sermons (1 Thess 1:9f.) or delimiting Christian monotheism, by polemics and proclamation, over against polytheism (εἰς acclamations, 1 Cor 8:6).

Study: P. Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur: Einleitung in das Neue Testament, die Apokryphen, und die Apostolischen Väter* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1975), 9–57.

e. The oral tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus, representing a separate literary category that has largely, though not entirely, found its way into the four canonical gospels. There are the so-called *agrapha* (ἄγραφοι = unwritten), dominical sayings that are not preserved in the canonical gospels but in other, often much later sources, such as the remaining writings of the NT (e.g., Acts 20:35: “remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’”), the NT apocrypha, the writings of the church fathers, and even Islamic works. The papyri excavated in 1897–1927 in Oxyrhynchus (130 miles south of Cairo) and the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, representing a collection of 114 dominical sayings (cf. ch. 1.I.C) and discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, are particularly profitable.

Many *agrapha* came about as free, tendentious fabrications of certain groups and sects in order to support their own heretical teachings, while others developed as embellishments and derivations of the canonical gospels. Nevertheless, a small number remain that are considered authentic and may be placed alongside the canonical gospels. Although they do not yield any new insights beyond those of the canonical gospels, they do confirm the authentic witnesses to the proclamation of Jesus.

In the *agrapha*, what is true of the entire oral tradition of Christianity becomes especially clear, namely, that it does not end with the rise of Christian literature but instead parallels it, especially in liturgy and catechesis throughout the centuries. Thus we must continually reckon with oral tradition’s influence upon the writings and the theology of the Fathers.

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II. LITERARY GENRES OF APOSTOLIC LITERATURE

The earliest work of Christian literature we possess is the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, written in 51/52 in Corinth, followed by the remaining authentic Pauline letters to the Galatians, Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans. Here it is easy to see how Christian literature came about: not with the intention of writing a work of literature but for reasons of practical necessity. The growing expansion of Christianity made personal contact increasingly more difficult; it had to be replaced by the literary form of the letter. The primary letter, however, is not itself considered literature. It becomes so only as it is preserved. This does not mean that letters need to be nonliterary in their form. Long before Christianity existed, Greek and Roman society had developed a culture of writing letters with established literary criteria to which a trained writer adhered, quite apart from such forms as prescript, salutations, forms of greetings, etc. (cf. ch. 4.IV.exkursus 2). At the same time, the primary letter demonstrates a certain range, from the private letter, addressed to an individual, to the public letter, addressed to the entire population. Occasionally the author already knows or assumes that his letter will be preserved and given literary status and thus stylizes it accordingly. These distinctions can also be observed in the early Christian letters, some of which are addressed to entire communities, intended to be read publicly in the church service and to be passed on to other communities. Hence they bear the marks of a general Christian letter of proclamation and exhortation.

Roughly twenty years later, beginning ca. 70 C.E., a second genre of Christian literature—the gospels—emerged as a result of a different need for communication, namely, the preservation of the authentic teaching of Christ for posterity. Forty years after Christ's death and resurrection, the Christians were disappointed in their “imminent expectation” of the soon return of the Messiah. More and more of the eyewitnesses died, and with increasing frequency individual groups appealed to divergent oral traditions. This led to the need for the true gospel to be recorded, a task that different authors undertook at different locations and with different presuppositions. Thus the Gospel of Mark was the first one to emerge, in a Hellenistic community ca. 70 C.E., followed by the Gospel of Luke ca. 80 C.E., the Gospel of Matthew in a Jewish-Christian community between 90 and 95, and the Gospel of John ca. 100. They provide an account of the life and teaching of Jesus from his birth, or from his first appearance, to his resurrection, not from a chronological and historicizing interest but inspired by belief, based on the communities' theological reflection and experience, and for the purpose of a theological and catechetical statement of faith. Mark, for instance, in-

tends to explain the messianic secret and for this reason begins with John the Baptist's preparation for the first appearance of the Messiah and with the baptism of Jesus. By contrast, Matthew intends to explain how the OT is fulfilled in the NT, emphasizes the divine Sonship and sovereignty of Jesus, and therefore begins with the genealogy of Jesus, starting with the patriarchs. All of the gospels offer their own selection of content, structure, and manner of presentation, at the same time using the pieces of tradition available to them.

Luke's intention can be seen in that he wrote his gospel as the first book of a two-volume work, of which the Acts of the Apostles was an integral part. The book of Acts itself created a new, third literary genre of the NT. As Luke himself specifies in the proem of his gospel (1:1–4), he intends to provide an accurately researched, historical account of salvation, beginning with the proclamation of the Messiah and culminating with his ascension and the resultant spread of salvation in the whole world through the apostles' actions.

Finally, the fourth genre of apostolic literature to arise was the apocalypse, the first one being Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, at the end of the first century. Such prophetic revelations of the end times are meant to warn of the impending end of the world but also to provide encouragement during the persecutions and sufferings of this end time. In content and style, they follow the literary examples of apocalyptic writings developed largely in late Judaism.

CHAPTER ONE

Biblical Apocrypha

Studies: L. Leloir, “Utilité ou inutilité de l’étude des apocryphes,” *RTL* 19 (1988): 38–70. – E. Junod, “La littérature apocryphe chrétienne constitue-t-elle un objet d’études?” *REA* 93 (1991): 397–414. – J.-D. Kaestli and D. Marguerat, eds., *Il mistero degli apocrifi: Introduzione a una letteratura da scoprire* (Milan: Massimo, 1996); trans. of *Mystère apocryphe: Introduction à une littérature méconnue* (Geneva: Labor & Fides, 1995).

INTRODUCTION: FORMATION OF THE BIBLICAL CANON

A. New Testament

Although the twenty-seven writings making up today’s canon (κανών = “standard”) of the NT belong to the earliest Christian works of literature, the development of the canon took several centuries. The first five centuries yielded multiple works of the four literary genres of the NT, all of them with the initial intention of providing a literary record of the authentic teaching of Christ. The apostolicity of a writing became the decisive criterion of reliability, since it was able to appeal directly to Christ. Hence, if a writing did not originate from an apostle or an apostolic associate, it was attributed to them, not in the sense of a forgery or a deception but rather to subordinate it to apostolic authority and to indicate that it vouched to contain faith-related truths. Granted, not all writings demonstrated the same quality and reliability, with the result that individual communities, with local variations, admitted only a portion of these writings for public proclamation in the liturgy and acknowledged them as Holy Scripture. By the middle of the second century, therefore, an initial consensus emerged from the tradition, forming a decisive criterion in the formation of the NT canon.

During the second century, heterodox strands in the church—especially the gnostics—began to write and revere “holy books” that they likewise placed under apostolic authority in order to legitimate their heretical doctrines. For this reason, the church was forced to determine authoritatively what books contained the authentic truth of the faith, deserved reverence as Holy Scripture, and could be used in public proclamation. By the end of the second century, this process was

largely complete, even if the final boundary of the twenty-seven canonical books was not established until the fourth century. Until then, individual communities or regions had to reckon with minor divergences in what was considered to be canonical. The earliest witness of the NT canon, which demonstrates a remarkably final form, is the *Canon Muratori* (Muratorian Canon), named after Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750), who discovered it before 1740 in an eighth-century codex in the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana in Milan. This is a list, probably written in Rome ca. 200,¹ that already contains twenty-two of the twenty-seven canonical writings; the only ones missing are Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and one of the Johannine letters. The final shape of the NT canon of the Greek church is found first in the thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* of Athanasius at Easter, 367. Its counterpart in the West is contained in part two of the *Decretum gelasianum*, the first three parts of which probably originated in a Roman synod under Pope Damasus in 382, as well as in the documents of a synod held in Hippo Regius in North Africa in 393.

All other works that, in their titles, content, or form, are related to the NT and likewise claim apostolic authority but are not part of the canon are called “apocrypha” by the church. The church thereby adopted a concept that Gnosticism, in continuity with the esoteric mystery religions of antiquity, used for its own sacred writings. Gnosticism held them in such high esteem that only the fully initiated members of the gnostic communities were allowed to attain knowledge from them; they were withheld from everyone else as secret (ἀπόκρυφος). Whereas the term “apocryphal” therefore signified the highest regard within Gnosticism, this term took on, for the orthodox church in its defense, the meaning of “false, heretical, reprehensible.” The term was then further applied to all the writings whose origin was unknown, whose attribution was false, or whose content was heretical and finally to all the extracanonical writings in general. The term “apocryphal” itself therefore does not necessarily mean “heretical”; many apocryphal writings contain reliable bases of ecclesiastical theology and piety, such as Mariology, but they were not canonized, partly because they are overgrown with legends and abstruse miracle accounts and, on the whole, therefore do not demonstrate the same reliability as the canonical books.

According to their genre, the biblical books, both canonical and apocryphal, belong to the Christian history of literature, even though this classification is certainly subject to debate. Because of their own significance as foundation for the Christian faith, the biblical writings are treated as a separate theological subject; for this reason, the canonical books of the NT, unlike the apocryphal writings, are not considered part of patrology.

With the fixing of the canon of Scripture, naturally the purpose of the subsequently emerging writings changed, but they continued to relate to the NT in

¹For the most recent argument in favor of a Syrian or Palestinian origin at the end of the fourth century, see G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

terms of their attribution, content, and form. Beginning with the second century, there are three types to be distinguished:

- a. books, especially gospels and acts of apostles, that in many ways intend to supplement the incomplete accounts of the canonical books, motivated by theological interests or popular piety (e.g., the childhood of Mary and Jesus, or the fate of an apostle);
- b. writings in competition with the canonical books, seeking to legitimate the heretical doctrines of specific groups or sects, or even local customs and traditions;
- c. a later group of writings seeking to solve current apologetic or dogmatic problems on the basis of an assumed apostolic authority.

In the most recent edition of his translation of the NT apocrypha, Wilhelm Schneemelcher provides the following summary definition of this literary type:

The New Testament apocrypha represent those writings which originated in the earliest centuries of the history of the Church and have a certain relationship with the New Testament writings in terms of title, type or content. In the individual apocrypha the relationship with the canonical works is quite varied and has to be determined in each case. Likewise the motives that led to the development of the apocrypha are by no means uniform. The determination of what constitutes New Testament apocrypha has to be particularly attentive to the essential historical framework. This applies not only to the boundary with regards to the hagiographic literature but is especially significant with reference to the relationship to the developing or closed canon of the New Testament. The literature in question involves the following:

Gospels, which are not only conspicuous because they did not become part of the New Testament but, more importantly, which in part wanted to claim the same position as the canonical gospels (this applies to the earliest texts) or in some way intended to augment the canonical texts.

Pseudepigraphic letters that were largely intended to disseminate doctrinal supplements and corrections.

Acts of the apostles, in which the information and legends of the apostles was shaped like a novel (often in great detail) and thereby intended to supplement the inadequate understanding of the apostles' destiny to be gained from the New Testament. This was often influenced by propaganda-related motives of certain theological teachings.

Apocalypses which partly reworked Jewish texts but partly also further developed the form of "revelations" assumed from Judaism.²

²W. Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha* (trans. R. McL. Wilson; 2 vols.; 2d ed.; Cambridge: J. Clarke; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991–1992), 1:61.

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B. Old Testament

The formation of a “New” Testament canon inevitably paralleled the establishment of a canon of the “Old” Testament, the Jewish biblical writings that, until then and on account of the Jewish origin of Christianity, had been its only Scripture. Indeed, the Hebrew canon was not established until close to the end of the first century, that is, at a time when the differentiation between Judaism and Christianity was already progressing. Second-century Christianity, already largely shaped by the Greek language, did not use the Hebrew text as its authentic OT text but instead used its Greek translation, the Septuagint (LXX), which originated in the Judaism of the Hellenistic diaspora between the third and the first centuries B.C.E. The Septuagint was given this name on the basis of the tradition (preserved for us in the *Letter of Aristeas*) that seventy-two inspired scribes from Palestine translated the Pentateuch on behalf of the Egyptian king Ptolemy II (286–285 B.C.E.). Since the Hebrew canon at that time had not yet been finalized, however, it also included a number of OT writings that subsequently were not adopted in the Hebrew canon and that Christianity considered as so-called deuterocanonical works. These comprise the Greek additions to Daniel and Esther, Baruch, the Epistle of Jeremiah, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Protestantism removed them again, deeming them apocryphal, but the Council of Trent, in the *Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis* (DH 1501), on April 6, 1546, once more affirmed them as component parts of the Holy Scripture of the Catholic Church. Protestantism designates the deuterocanonical books of the OT as apocrypha, and all the remaining extracanonical writings of the OT as pseudepigrapha (ψευδῶς = “falsely,” ἐπιγράφειν = “to attribute”). The Catholic Church, conversely, considers all the extracanonical OT writings as apocrypha.

Since the canon was not yet closed, the number of OT books Christianity considered to be canonical varied locally in the early centuries. To the extent that the church fathers used them and many of them were reworked and expanded from the Christian perspective, they too are part of the subject of patrology.

Septuagint

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I. GOSPELS

A. Literary Genre

Following the pattern of the canonical gospels, the literary genre of the gospel is shaped by the initially orally transmitted sayings and narrative materials of the life, deeds, and teaching of the earthly Jesus. An editor then arranged them to-

gether with theological and community-related reflections so as to preserve them authentically as well as to strengthen and spread the faith in Christ. Thus, whereas the shaping of the genre encompasses criteria of content and form, the term εὐαγγέλιον originally described only the message itself—a meaning that was not extinguished when it became common, around the mid-second century, to use this designation for the book containing the message as well. Hence there are many NT apocrypha that have been handed down under the label of “gospel” although they do not fit the definition of the genre. At the same time, writings that do fit the gospel genre are given different titles. Schneemelcher summarizes this in the broadest sense under “Gospels: Non-biblical Material about Jesus” and comes to the following conclusion: “Overall it may be said that there is no independent and standard genre called ‘apocryphal gospels.’”³ Nevertheless, the texts compiled here under this designation belong together, not only because their content is the person and work of Christ, but also because what characterizes them is the diverse way in which they are determined or influenced by the genre of gospel. An overall perspective therefore has to take the following criteria into consideration: content, literary forms, authors, origin, intention, indebtedness, history of transmission, etc., content being the most important aspect on account of the theological nature of the literature.

a. Closest to the canonical gospels are those likewise following the *synoptic tradition*, partly by drawing upon the same sources and partly by assimilating the three canonical gospels, such as the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, and the *Gospel of the Ebionites*.

b. Concerning their origin, the latter two gospels belong to the *Jewish Christian gospels*, which are close to the Gospel of Matthew and which preserve primarily Jewish traditions or originate from Jewish Christian sects.

c. *Heterodox gospels* aim to legitimate their doctrines that diverge from those of the church at large. This is particularly true of the gnostic movement, from which we possess a wealth of gospel writings since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, such as the *Pistis Sophia*, the two *Books of Jeu*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, and many others.

d. Since, in many ways, the canonical gospels did not satisfy popular piety’s thirst for knowledge nor later desires for more detailed theological clarity, there arose a large group of writings that *supplemented the canonical gospels*.

They concern mostly the prehistory of the birth and childhood of Jesus because the canonical gospels leave considerable room in these areas. The *infancy gospels* not only answer the questions about Jesus’ ancestors and the more detailed, marvelous circumstances of his birth and the years of his childhood; in their theological intent they also stress the deity of the child, which was evident from the beginning, and the true virginity of Mary before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Most significant among them is the *Protoevangelium of James*, followed by the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, and the

³W. Schneemelcher, 5th ed., 5:72.

Infancy Gospel of Thomas. The circle of people treated is then expanded to the parents and relatives of Jesus, such as in the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*. No infancy gospel, however, goes beyond Jesus at the age of twelve; the conception of Jesus' development, as indicated in Luke 2:52, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature," has no place in the apocryphal infancy gospels for a God-man (θεῖος ἀνὴρ).

In liturgy, popular piety, and art these works have had extraordinary consequences. This is the origin, for instance, of the names of Mary's parents, namely, Joachim and Anna; of the ox and donkey at Jesus' manger; of the number and names of the magi. They have been retold again and again even in modern times—for instance, in Selma Lagerlöf's *Legends of Christ* (1904) and Felix Timmerman's *Das Jesuskind in Flandern* (1917).

By comparison, the number of gospels that *supplement the passion narrative of Jesus* remains small because the canonical gospels address this much more extensively. Theological reflection and popular pious phantasy, however, concern themselves with the fate of the individuals involved and with Jesus' descent into Hades in the *Acts of Pilate* and the gospels of Nicodemus, Bartholomew, and Gamaliel.

These are followed by the *dialogues of the redeemer*, which aim to augment and state more precisely Jesus' instructions to his disciples after the resurrection. They generally use the form of dialogue, although epistolary and apocalyptic elements may also occur. Examples are the Freer Logion, the *Epistle of the Apostles*, and the letter and the two apocalypses of James.

e. Finally, there are a number of *gospel fragments*, from various papyri, that cannot be classified more accurately; the agrapha discussed above; as well as individually handed down expressions of the oral sayings-tradition of Jesus.

This concludes a brief description of the extant material in broad outline. There are indications in the works of early Christian literature, however, that it must have existed in much larger quantities. A more detailed description of some major examples may clarify the contents, forms, and intentions of the apocryphal gospel literature.

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B. Protoevangelium of James

The so-called *Protoevangelium of James* is one of the gospels seeking to supplement the canonical gospels. It originated in Egypt in the second half of the second century and was later expanded. The Western church rejected it as apocryphal in the *Decretum gelasianum* (ca. 500), with the result that it fell into oblivion altogether in the West. The Eastern church, however, continued to cherish it widely, as indicated by its profuse transmission in such versions as the Ethiopic, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, Slavic, and Syriac. It even had its place in liturgy, prompting the French Jesuit humanist Guillaume Postel, who brought it back from a trip to the Orient in 1549/1550 and made a Latin translation, to consider it canonical. He also gave it its name, on the basis that the writer calls himself James at the conclusion of the work (para. 25) and thus probably wanted to be regarded as the Lord's brother. Since it deals with the prehistory of the birth of Jesus, chronologically it would have to be ordered as the first (πρῶτον) gospel.

The work divides into three parts. Part one (para. 1–16) narrates the origin, birth, and childhood of Mary up to the conception of Jesus. Joachim and Anna, a wealthy and devout couple suffering childlessness, are miraculously granted a daughter, Mary, by God. They fully dedicate her to God, and from age three on they have her raised as a virgin in the temple of Jerusalem, where she is fed by an angel. At the age of twelve, when Mary begins to mature from childhood to womanhood, she is entrusted to Joseph, a widower who already has adult sons and whom God chooses through a miraculous sign. When all the widowers in Israel are gathered at the temple, a dove comes out of Joseph's rod and flies onto his head. The gospel summarizes the subsequent years, reporting only that together with other temple virgins Mary weaves a veil for the temple; this is followed by the angel's annunciation, her visit with Elizabeth, and Joseph's consternation, upon his return from his lengthy building project, when he finds Mary six months pregnant. "And Mary was sixteen years old when all these mysterious things happened" (para. 12). In keeping with Matt 1:20–23, an angel instructs Joseph about the divine origin of the child, and Joseph and Mary both pass a trial by ordeal in the presence of the high priest. Part two (para. 17–21) starts with the account of the birth of Jesus, in accordance with the canonical models. On the way to Bethlehem to be enrolled in the census, Joseph has to leave Mary behind in a cave near the town because her time has come, and he proceeds to look for a midwife. The midwife shares the experience of the marvelous birth of the child and, to her amazement, discovers Mary's unchanged virginity after the birth. She shares this with a second midwife, named Salome, who reexamines Mary in unbelief and whose hand withers as a result; the infant Jesus, however, heals her. Part three (para. 22–25) adds an account of the martyrdom of Zechariah. Because Herod was deceived by the magi and is not able to seize either Jesus or John, he has Zechariah murdered.

Although the *Protoevangelium of James* belongs with the infancy gospels, the focal point of its theological and narrative interest is Jesus' mother, Mary. As the most significant witness of early Christian Marian piety, this writing is meant to serve as evidence of her divine election from birth and of her perpetual virginity. Its foremost purpose is to counter the legend, found in the pagan polemicist Celsus (ca. 178) and in Jewish literature, that Jesus was the son of Mary from an illegitimate relationship with a Roman soldier called Pantera. At the same time, it was meant to forestall an erroneous interpretation concerning the "brothers of Jesus" mentioned in the canonical gospels (Matt 12:46), by identifying them as sons from Joseph's first marriage. Curiously, however, precisely this interpretation led to the rejection of this gospel because, in order to attribute perpetual virginity to Joseph as well, Jerome regarded them as cousins of Jesus and for this reason polemicized against the gospel of James.

Regarding its literary form, we have here a collection of personal legends, but their presentation is quite guarded and cannot be compared with the virtual obsession with miracles seen in other apocryphal writings. They rely upon OT examples (the births of Samuel and Samson) and make use of the canonical infancy

narratives of Matthew and Luke. Their influence upon the foundation of ecclesiastical Mariology can hardly be overestimated.

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C. Coptic Gospel of Thomas

The *Gospel of Thomas* is not to be confused with the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* or with the *Book of Thomas the Contender* (NHC II,7). Until the discovery and publication of the Nag Hammadi Library (1945/1948), it was known only through fragments in Jerome and, without being identified as such, in Oxyrhynchus Papyri 1, 653 and 654. In addition, Origen and Eusebius, among others, reported that it had been used by the gnostics and Manichaeans.

Nag Hammadi codex II,2 contains the complete text of this gospel in a Coptic translation from the original Greek, written in eastern Syria ca. the mid-second century. It contains 114 dominical sayings of divergent literary types: apophthegms (dialogue sayings); *logia* (wisdom sayings); prophetic and apocalyptic sayings; legal sayings and “community sayings”; “I-sayings” and parables, about half of which are paralleled by sayings in the Synoptics, and some of them can be found in the reconstructed sayings-source Q; and the agrapha, some of which have been known for some time while others have been unknown until recently.

The particular significance of the *Gospel of Thomas* is that it represents a collection of Jesus-sayings, demonstrating for the first time the existence of this genre, which previously had been postulated as Q (= *Quelle*, "source") on the basis of the analysis of the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Luke. To what extent the *Gospel of Thomas* is part of the gnostic writings is not yet fully established. Although it shows gnostic tendencies, in the Nag Hammadi Library it appears more like a foreign element.

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D. Epistle of the Apostles

The *Epistle of the Apostles* belongs to the genre of dialogues between the risen one and his disciples; the origin of such dialogues is generally associated with gnostic circles. For this particular *Epistle*, however, precisely the converse is true: it opposes Gnosticism by using Gnosticism's own methods. Secret revelations given to individuals are countered with a dialogue between Christ and all the apostles cited by name, which the latter then publish in the form of a letter. It defends Christ's true deity; the reality of his incarnation and resurrection; the resurrection of the body, together with the soul and the spirit, for judgment; and Jesus' descent into Hades to the saints of the old covenant so as to allow them to share in the forgiveness of sins by baptism. The letter concludes with an apocalyptic view of the end time and with the story of the ascension of Christ.

In literary terms, it is a revelatory address within a framework of evangelistic report and letter. Theologically the *Epistle* offers an orthodox alternative to docetic Christology and to the dualistic anthropology of Gnosticism. In this regard it is, on the whole, successful even if it cannot entirely evade gnostic and syncretistic influences, which, however, can be explained in terms of their place and time of origin, namely, Hellenistic Jewish Christianity in Egypt in the middle of the second century. Beyond this, it contains the earliest attestation of the Christian Passover festival and of the expectation of the Lord's return (Parousia) in the night of the Passover (para. 15[26]).

We do not know whether this writing had any influence in the ancient church, for until the end of the nineteenth century it was entirely unknown; nor was it mentioned anywhere in the remaining literature. It was not until 1895 that Carl Schmidt discovered Coptic fragments of it and J. Bick discovered a page in a Latin palimpsest. Together with Sylvain Grébaud, Louis Fuerrier was able to publish the complete Ethiopic text in 1912. All of the versions, however, are translations of a Greek original.

Editions: *Le Testament en Galilée de Nôtre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (ed. L. Guerrier and S. Grébaud; PO 9.3; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1912; repr., Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 2003). – *Gespräche Jesu mit seinen Jüngern nach der Auferstehung* (ed. C. Schmidt and I. Wajnberg; TU 43; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1919).

Translations: J. K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 555–588. – B. D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 259–63 [selections].

Studies: M. Hornschuh, *Studien zur Epistula apostolorum* (PTS 5; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965). – J. V. Hills, *Tradition and Composition in the Epistula apostolorum* (HDR 24; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). – K. Zelzer, *HLL* 4:412–13. – C. E. Hill, "The Epistula apostolorum: An Asian Tract from the Time of Polycarp," *J ECS* 7 (1999): 1–53.

E. Gospel of Nicodemus

The *Gospel of Nicodemus* is composed of two parts, the *Acts of Pilate* (chs. 1–16) and the *Descensus Christi ad inferos* (“Christ’s descent into hell”), dealing with the descent of Jesus into the underworld after his death (chs. 17–27), and hence is part of the gospels supplementing Christ’s passion. One of the main focal points is Pilate as a person who is to be exonerated and who thereby gains his own significance in hagiography and in the veneration of saints.

In the prologue, the compiler himself notes the date of the final redaction of this work as the “eighteenth year of the reign of our emperor Flavius Theodosius and in the fifth year of the ‘Nobility’ of Flavius Valentinianus, in the ninth indiction,” namely, 425 C.E. The first part, the *Acts of Pilate*, definitely originated before 375/376, since Epiphanius of Constantia (Salamis) cites it. Two references to it in Justin and Tertullian seem to point to an even earlier date of origin, prior to 150. It is possible that its authorship is also associated with the pagan *Acts of Pilate* mentioned by Eusebius, which was to fan the hatred against Christians during the persecution under Maximinus Daia (311/312). In any case, the compilation of 425 is made up of earlier material. Friedrich Scheidweiler questions this merely as far as the *Descensus* is concerned, which he argues was appended later because it is missing in one of the extant Greek versions, whereas the *Acts* is developed in more detail: “The addition is thoroughly out of keeping, since the work is complete and does not admit of any expansion.” He views version B as a revision of the original, expanding chs. 10 and 11 considerably while abbreviating ch. 16 significantly in order to be able to add the *Descensus*.⁴ Scheidweiler does not thereby achieve a more precise determination of this part’s date of origin, however, since he merely deems it a “substantially older fragment” that was “simply added.” There might be an indication that the *Descensus* was composed in the late fourth century: the interpretation of Ps 24:7 in terms of the descent to Hades, “Be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in,” which until Gregory of Nyssa seems to have been applied exclusively to the ascension.⁵

The *Acts of Pilate* is composed of two parts. Chapters 1–11, the actual *Acta Pilati*, are an account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, his crucifixion, and his burial. Theologically they are intended as a defense of Jesus’ virgin birth over against the Jewish slander (cf. the Pantera legend under B above), his divine authority and innocence confirming his miracles, as well as the depiction of Pilate as an opponent of Jesus’ crucifixion; in this context it assimilates a wealth of material from the canonical gospels. Pilate’s positive role continues in later writings and excuses

⁴F. Scheidweiler, in *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. W. Schneemelcher; trans. R. McL. Wilson; 2 vols.; 2d ed.; Cambridge: J. Clarke; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991–1992), 1:447ff., contra Bardenhewer (*Litg.* 1:545, n. 3).

⁵Cf. H. R. Drobner, “Die Himmelfahrtspredigt Gregors von Nyssa,” in *EPMH-NEYMATA: Festschrift für Hadwig Hörner zum sechzigsten Geburtstag* (ed. H. Eisenberger; Heidelberg: Winter, 1990), 106–9.

him for Jesus' death to the extent that the Syrian church venerated him as a saint, and to this day he has a place in the calendar of saints of the Coptic church. The topic of Pilate also evolved in other ways, with him encountering a lamentable end: after his violent death, he was not able to find peace either in the Tiber or in the Rhone because his grave was surrounded by raving spirits from hell, until he was finally cast into a mountain lake. The mountain at that location is therefore named Mount Pilatus in Switzerland to this day.

Originally chs. 12–26 were not part of the *Acta Pilati*. They contain the account of a meeting by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus. During their meeting, the resurrection of Jesus is proclaimed to them, as are his great commission and ascension. As a result, an intense discussion develops, in the course of which Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea testify for Jesus, albeit without being able to persuade the Jews.

The final part (chs. 17–27) is claimed to be the testimony of two sons of Simeon who in their deceased state encounter Jesus in Hades, then are raised with him and now write this down in the presence of the high priests in Jerusalem. The account begins with the first ray of light penetrating the darkness of Hades, thus raising hope in the patriarchs, the prophets, and John the Baptist that their predictions concerning the Messiah are now being fulfilled. Hades and Satan end up in a feud because the insatiable Hades swallowed up Jesus although Jesus had demonstrated his divine power in his miracles. Then in the words of Ps 24:7 the call goes out to open the gates of the underworld for the ruler; Hades and Satan are conquered, and the OT saints are raised, baptized in the Jordan, and led into paradise with Christ.

In multiple adaptations and transmissions, this depiction of Christ's descent into Hades permeated all of the Middle Ages up to modern times, as illustrated by the numerous translations into Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Latin, and Syriac. An Easter Saturday sermon attributed to Epiphanius (PG 43:439–64) has contributed to this by drawing upon the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and describing the struggle of the descent in even greater detail and more magnificently. Even today some excerpts serve as readings in the Roman Catholic breviary at Easter.

Editions: C. von Tischendorf, *Evangelia apocrypha: Adhibitis plurimis codicibus graecis et latinis maximam partem nunc primum consultis atque ineditorum copia insignibus* (rev. ed.; Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1876), 210–486. – M. Vandoni and T. Orlandi, *Vangelo di Nicodemo* (2 vols.; Milan: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1966). – A. Vailant, *L'Évangile de Nicodème: Texte slave et texte latin* (PCRHP.O 1; Geneva: Droz, 1968). – H. C. Kim, *The Gospel of Nicodemus—Gesta Salvatoris: Edited from the Codex Einsidlensis Ms. 326* (Toronto: Published for the Centre for Medieval Studies by the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973). – *Los evangelios apócrifos: Colección de textos griegos y latinos, versión crítica, estudios introductorios, comentarios, e ilustraciones* (ed. A. de Santos Otero; 7th ed.; BAC 148; Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1991), 396–471.

Translations: A. Walker, trans., "The Gospel of Nicodemus," in *ANF* (Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson, 1995; repr. of 1886 ed.), 8:416–67. – J. K. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 164–205.

Studies: R. P. Wülcker, *Das Evangelium Nicodemi in der abendländischen Literatur: Nebst drei Excursen* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1872). – R. A. Lipsius, *Die Pilatus-Acten kritisch untersucht* (2d ed.; Kiel: Haeseler, 1886). – E. von Dobschütz, “Der Process Jesu nach den Acta Pilati,” *ZNW* 3 (1902): 89–114. – T. Mommsen, “Die Pilatus-Acten,” *ZNW* 3 (1902): 198–205. – J. Kroll, *Gott und Hölle: Der Mythos vom Descensus-Kampfe* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963). – Z. Izydorczyk, “The Unfamiliar *Evangelium Nicodemi*,” *Manuscripta* 33 (1989): 169–91. – J.-D. Dubois, “Les ‘Actes de Pilate’ au quatrième siècle,” *Apocrypha* 2 (1991): 85–98. – K. Zelzer, *HLL* 4:387–90.

II. ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

A. *Literary Genre*

In contrast to the apocryphal gospels, the apocryphal acts, extant for the most part only in fragments, do not parallel the canonical Acts of the Apostles written by Luke, nor do they depend on or compete with the latter. Instead they emerged independently in two later phases and, broadly speaking, intended to supplement the canonical Acts. The five important acts originated in the second and third centuries, namely the acts of Andrew, John, Paul, Peter, and Thomas, which the Manichaeans compiled into a corpus and subsequently were construed as a composite work by an author known as Leucius Charinus. The acts arising from the fourth century on have been handed down in large numbers and either rework the five major acts or deal with other apostles, albeit no longer with the original wealth of material and ideas of the earlier ones. All of them are characterized by the common theme of the person, life (travels, deeds), and teaching of one or more of the apostles as θεῖοι ἄνδρες and trustworthy witnesses of the faith. These acts thereby furnish the starting point of later hagiography by handing down martyrdoms and other individual segments separately and detached.

The literary genre of these acts has yet to be determined uniformly because their stylistic forms diverge widely. In all probability they are associated with the ancient novels, namely, the literature known as περίοδοι and πράξεις, although they differ from the latter in that they use not only fiction but also traditional elements, legends, and stories. R. Söder offers an analysis of five major elements:

- the travel theme;
- the aretalogical element, stressing the marvelous virtues (ἀρεταί) and powers (δυνάμεις) of the heroes;
- the teratological element, exhibiting the world of wonders that the apostles encounter (cannibals, talking animals, etc.);
- the persuasive element, displayed especially in the speeches;
- the erotic element, finding expression in proper love motifs but also in ascetic and enkratite features.