University of
St Andrews

St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology

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First published: 1 June 2023

https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianApocrypha

Citation

Nicklas, Tobias. 2023. 'Christian Apocrypha', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianApocrypha
Accessed: 5 September 2026

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ISSN 2753-3492

Christian Apocrypha

Tobias Nicklas

The Christian Apocrypha refers to a collection of ancient texts associated with Christian traditions that are not included in the canonical New Testament. These writings reflect diverse theological perspectives and practices within early Christianity. Contrary to the notion that these texts were hidden or heretical, many apocryphal writings were widely circulated and utilized in early Christian communities, as evidenced by their incorporation into ecclesiastical practices. After a discussion of several terminological problems, it provides criteria for a definition of apocryphal literature and related traditions. After that, it discusses aspects of the question of why it may be meaningful to study Christian apocrypha. The article closes with an overview of the fields of the reception of apocrypha until today.

Keywords: Apocryphal texts, Bible, Canon, Heretical texts, Orthodox, Traditions, Translation, Pseudepigrapha

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1 Introduction

In very simplified terms, ‘Christian apocrypha’ (sometimes also called New Testament apocrypha) refers to writings that are not part of the biblical canon of the Old and New Testaments but which show a clear literary relation to biblical – especially New Testament – writings. Many of these writings represent genres related to those found in the New Testament. That is, we know of several dozen gospels or gospel-like writings, five early apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* (plus many more in later periods), several apocryphal Apostolic Letters, and dozens of ancient apocalypses (plus many more in later times). Besides these, there are other writings which do not relate to New Testament genres, like the literature around the *Dormition of Mary*, lists of apostles, *Lives of Mary* or traditions about the Magi mentioned in Matthew 2. These can still be called Christian apocrypha because they deal with figures, stories, and motifs related to the New Testament.

Until the second half of the twentieth century (especially its final decades) most Christian apocrypha were, on the whole, considered to be of secondary importance for the understanding of Christianity. This has changed a lot during recent decades. While most Christian apocrypha are not reliable sources regarding the historical Jesus or the apostolic period, they help scholars understand how later generations of Christians perceived and rewrote the stories about the origins of the Christian movement. When scholars deal with Christian apocrypha, they can learn about the varieties of ancient Christianities, ancient Christian groups’ struggles for power, their pieties and ‘lived religion’, and their construction(s) of Christian identities. In other words, reading Christian apocrypha enriches our understanding of ancient Christianity enormously, as well as our understanding of subsequent Christianity. This article will deal with terminological problems (genres of apocrypha, different meanings of the terms ‘apocrypha’ and ‘Christian’, etc.) and then offer examples of texts and their function.

2 Terminological problems

2.1 New Testament apocrypha and New Testament genres?

Following the pattern of the New Testament canon, many modern collections of Christian apocrypha distinguish between apocryphal gospels (or gospel-like writings), *Acts of the Apostles*, epistles, and apocalypses. This may make sense for pragmatic reasons, but risks creating prejudice against the apocryphal writings. The idea that they are ‘New Testament apocrypha’ has repeatedly led to the apocrypha being interpreted only or mainly in comparison to New Testament parallels. At the same time, the fact that they have not become part of the canon often meant that they were regarded as unsuccessful, irrelevant and inferior to the New Testament writings. All this makes an unprejudiced study of these writings no longer possible. A closer look, however, shows that by no means all

apocrypha simply tried to copy the writings which came to be part of the New Testament, or to fill the narrative gaps in those writings. Many apocryphal gospels, for example, are formally very different from what we find in the New Testament: the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, probably a second century text, which is fully extant in Coptic only, shows itself to be a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus without narrative connection. The same applies to other texts such as the so-called *Protevangelium of James*, a writing probably from the late second century. It is often understood as a gospel about the childhood of Jesus, but is primarily interested in the prehistory of the birth of Jesus and especially the figure of Mary. The ancient self-designation of this writing as *Birth of Mary* is therefore much more appropriate than the more well-known title *Protevangelium of James*.

The case of apocalyptic literature is even more problematic. The New Testament book Apocalypse of John (also known as the book of Revelation), from which the term 'apocalypse' was coined for the genre, is certainly not representative of the broad genre of apocalyptic writings. Apocalypses in the form of 'otherworldly journeys' – tours of Heaven and Hell, for example – are not represented in the New Testament, but many of them are found among the apocrypha. Ancient and medieval accounts of otherworldly journeys, however, are not merely marginal phenomena. Although they were apparently nowhere recognized as part of the New Testament, they were nevertheless very successful: the number of manuscripts, textual forms, and translations in which, for example, the late antique *Apocalypse of Paul* (a text including extensive descriptions of otherworldly places) has survived is hardly inconsiderable (Jirouškova 2006: 37–149). Above all, however, the *Visio Pauli* has probably influenced ideas of hell and the hereafter (at least in the Latin West) more than the Apocalypse of John, which nowhere speaks of a hell in the narrow sense of the word. Finally, too rigid an orientation towards New Testament writings means overlooking texts that do not represent any genre recognizable in the New Testament: while the New Testament book of Acts is not interested in the martyrdoms of its protagonists Peter and Paul, martyrdoms are the focus of many apocryphal apostle stories. Other writings representing genres which not found in the New Testament are texts like the *Dormition of Mary*, lists of the apostles and their professions, cycles of writings revolving around the magi mentioned in Matt 2:1–12, and many more. Observations like these make a precise definition of the term 'New Testament' or 'Christian apocrypha' difficult.

2.2 The term 'apocryphal' and its different meanings

But this is not the only problem. The term 'apocrypha'/'apocryphal' itself is also highly problematic, since, depending on one's perspective, different fields of association are related to it: the word itself (Greek: ἀπόκρυφος) means first of all 'hidden, concealed', but also 'secret'. In ancient non-Christian literature it could denote books that signified secret wisdom not accessible to everybody. *4 Ezra*, for example, an early Jewish apocalypse

from the end of the first century CE, differentiated between writings that were generally accessible and those that contained secret revelations (4 Ezra 14:45–47). In Christian literature, a double usage of language developed many early church authors, such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and others, related 'apocryphal' writings to groups they understood as 'heretical', i.e. not orthodox. Later ecclesiastical authorities and councils developed lists of apocryphal writings (see, for example, the *Decretum Gelasianum* or the *Stichometry of Nicephorus*) which were not allowed to be read (for a detailed overview see Markschies and Schröter 2012: 115–180). In other words, in many cases where the term 'apocryphal' was applied in an etic manner – i.e. 'from an outside perspective' – it was used in a derogatory way and led to a condemnation of the respective text.

When speaking of 'apocrypha' today, it is necessary to exclude as far as possible these negative connotations. In order to clarify this conceptually, Dieter Lührmann has made the helpful suggestion to speak not simply of 'apocryphal texts' but of writings 'that came to be apocryphal' (Lührmann 2004: 1–54). This rightly expresses the fact that in many cases the attribute 'apocryphal' has nothing to do with the original function and intention of a text, but was only attached to it in the course of its history of transmission. But it should not be overlooked that there is also a second, emic (taking an inside perspective) way of using the term in Christian literature: at least some texts do understand themselves as apocryphal in the sense of 'secret' (Nicklas 2011a). They thus want to signal that they contain secret knowledge that is not accessible to all people. Writings that call themselves apocryphal in this way address an audience that sees, or wants to see, itself as elite because of such superior knowledge. The aforementioned *Gospel of Thomas* could be counted among these texts, since it describes itself as 'the hidden words' (λόγοι ἀπόκρυφοι: *Logoi apokryphoi*) spoken by the living Jesus. In addition to texts that 'came to be apocryphal', it is therefore also meaningful to speak of texts 'conceived as apocryphal'.

It is important to note that the word 'apocryphal' has different connotations in both cases. In the first case, it stands for writings which at a certain point in time, from the point of view of representatives of so-called 'orthodoxy' or the developing majority church, were described as 'apocryphal' in the sense of being heretical and not orthodox; and whose reading, or use in liturgy or theological debates, was not permitted. In the second case, it stands for writings that contained secret knowledge accessible only to a certain group. The problem is magnified again when we consider that today we only have the statements of individual early church authors – these, however, do not always represent what other people thought. For example, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a late second-century apostle story concentrating on Paul and his female follower Thecla, are usually considered 'apocryphal' because of the opinion of the North African author Tertullian. Tertullian, in his *On Baptism* 17.5, condemned the book as a fabrication by an Asian presbyter and criticized the way that the example of Thecla in this text seemed to authorize women to

teach and to baptize (see Pervo 2014: 43). Tertullian thus concretely referred to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a part of the larger *Acts of Paul*. Even though this text was hardly anywhere regarded as part of the New Testament at the time, Tertullian's statement did not detract from the book's circulation or use. Its protagonist, the figure Thecla, was at times so successful in late antiquity and the Middle Ages that she can be considered, along with the Virgin Mary, the most revered female figure in ancient Christianity (Davis 2001 and Barrier et al. 2017).

2.3 Towards a definition of 'Christian apocrypha'

Despite all its difficulties, the term 'apocrypha' continues to be used today – primarily for the simple reason that it is so widely used as to be impossible to excise from scholarly discussion. However, the term should be applied as neutrally as possible to writings which, on the one hand, are not part of the biblical canon but, on the other hand, are in some way closely related to at least parts of the canon. The criterion 'extracanonical' is thus necessary, but not sufficient. This is because commentaries on the New Testament, titles of the gospels, homilies, liturgical manuals, church orders, etc., are also not canonical, but neither are they considered apocrypha. The decisive problem of today's definitions of the term 'apocrypha' is to describe the second, then sufficient criterion in an appropriate way (for a history of those definitions see Markschies and Schröter 2012: 90–114). If we do not want to fall into the trap of formulating a definition from the genres of the New Testament alone, it becomes difficult to use appropriate categories. Perhaps that is why a concrete definition in the sense of a demarcation is not possible. Instead, an attempt at an approximation of the term 'apocrypha' should be ventured: in such an approximation it is not a question of describing what apocrypha 'are', but of saying which texts can be meaningfully regarded as 'apocryphal'. A possible way forward may then be to speak about Christian apocrypha as writings participating in the narrated (and imagined) world of what we understand as the Christian Bible today. That is, Christian apocrypha renarrate and further develop (not only) New Testament stories and/or deal with figures, themes, and motifs related to the Christian Bible.

Such an approach to the concept of Christian apocrypha is therefore not intended as a definition that draws boundaries but as a way of deciding when it is meaningful to speak of Christian apocrypha. The literary world of apocrypha is thus understood as a still growing, changing literary 'universe' that revolves around what we today call the Christian Bible. This, of course, does not mean that apocrypha cannot also be attracted by other literary worlds. It is clear that such a concept of apocrypha is 'etic', and attempts to evaluate the idea in purely literary terms. Aspects of critical historical classification, and questioning of the corresponding texts, are by no means excluded.

2.4 Problems with the term 'Christian'

2.4.1 Who is properly ‘Christian’ and who is not?

Even if the designation ‘Christian apocrypha’ reduces the impression that apocryphal texts are only unsuccessful imitations of those writings that ultimately became part of the New Testament canon, this does not mean that all problems are thereby solved. There are also problems with the term ‘Christian’. While Jews and Christians may be considered fairly distinct faith communities today, this has not always been the case (see Desreumaux 2014). ‘Christian’, as a designation apparently initially applied ‘from outside’ to the movement of Jesus’ followers (cf. especially Acts 11:26; 26:28 and 1 Pet 4:16), is not found in most early apocryphal writings. Of course, it is not forbidden to use this category etically, i.e. from an external perspective, and for modern people to refer to these texts as ‘Christian’. However, such an approach poses problems on several levels. First of all, it must be considered that today we associate the term ‘Christian’ with a more or less stable belief system, which in turn is supported by groups that often call themselves ‘churches’. These groups in turn define, in different ways, what may be understood as ‘Christian’ and what may not. The term ‘Christian’ is thus not simply ‘innocent’ but is a category which, depending on who uses it, can set very different boundaries to the outside world. Depending on their perspective, different groups or representatives of these groups define who is appropriately ‘Christian’ and who is not. Therefore, the various constructions of Christian (or even ‘truly Christian’) identity are not conceivable without discourses of power, some of which are highly problematic.

This may sound methodologically overcautious, but it is not. The problems arise when looking at concrete texts: for example, at what point should writings from the so-called Nag Hammadi library (a collection of Coptic writings found in close relation to a late antique monastic settlement in Upper Egypt) be considered ‘Christian apocrypha’? From the perspective of an ‘orthodox’ majority church, many of the groups behind these texts were labelled ‘Gnostic’ (for the problems of this term see e.g. King 2003) and understood as ‘heretical’. The question of whether this is justified is not easy to answer: many of the writings from Nag Hammadi were certainly written by people who saw themselves as followers of Christ, but in a way that differed so much from the emerging mainstream church that they were understood as ‘heretics’. At the same time, however, we cannot say whether the group behind a text such as the *Gospel of Judas* would have felt adequately described by the attribute ‘Christian’. After all, the *Gospel of Judas* draws a sharp line of demarcation around all forms of apostolic Christianity that are committed to the God of the Old Testament and the traditions of Israel (Desreumaux 2014: 40–43). Today’s collections of apocryphal literature must be aware that, if the word ‘Christian’ is a decisive criterion in the selection of texts, we are in danger of introducing categories that are indebted to perspectives of those who prevailed in the course of history, and thus excluding the perspectives of the ‘losers’ of history.

2.4.2 Jews and Christians? Christian apocrypha and Old Testament pseudepigrapha

In addition, many ancient Christian writings never use the term ‘Christian’ to describe the identity of its addressees. Thus it always makes sense to look at emic categories, i.e. those categories a text itself uses in its argumentation. This is particularly evident in the research history of a large number of texts that would today be mostly called Old Testament pseudepigrapha (Bauckham, Panayotov and Davila 2013). Whether a particular text appears in a collection of Christian apocrypha or in a collection of Old Testament pseudepigrapha is often decided by the question: is the text Jewish or Christian? In many cases, however, this question is wrongly posed, as it applies categories to the texts that are unlikely to correspond to them.

This is particularly evident in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, an apocalyptic writing that may well have been written in the first decades of the second century and which can be found both in collections of Old Testament pseudepigrapha and of New Testament apocrypha. Large parts of this text describe events in the time of the prophet Isaiah and can thus be read as Jewish. However, the fact that there are also passages that clearly refer to Jesus – here called ‘the Beloved’ – and to his disciples led to the idea that the *Ascension of Isaiah* was originally a Jewish writing which was later redacted (edited) by Christians. Even the alleged Jewish source behind the *Ascension* was reconstructed. To this day, many editions of early Jewish literature contain introductions and translations of this hypothetical source, the so-called *Martyrdom of Isaiah* (Hammershaimb 1973). This *Martyrdom of Isaiah*, however, probably never existed; it is a pure construct of a research project that could not imagine that a Christian text could speak of Old Testament figures without mentioning Jesus. But even if we were to recognize the *Ascension of Isaiah* as a Christian writing, this might not be enough. The text we have today is likely to go back to a group of followers of the Beloved, i.e. of Jesus. At no point do they use the term ‘Christian’ for themselves – instead, they call themselves ‘saints’ or ‘righteous’; they seem to reject anything like ecclesiastical organization, probably engage in ‘mystical’ practices, complain that there are only a few prophets left, and hope for escape from this world dominated by the forces of evil. It is likely the group behind this text would not have been able to do anything with the term ‘Christian’ – and certainly nothing with a term ‘Christian’ as distinct from ‘Jewish’ (Henning and Nicklas 2016).

But this already indicates another problem: if we assume today that the attributes ‘Christian’ and ‘Jewish’ designate two different groups that are clearly separated from each other, and that can also be recognized as such from the outside, neither term applies to many texts of antiquity (for further historical context, see Messianic Jewish Theology, section 2). The *Ascension of Isaiah* is only one text where this gives rise to concrete problems of categorization. One could think of many other texts which are usually called

Old Testament pseudepigrapha but were produced (and used) by people who probably understood themselves as followers of Jesus Christ (see Davila 2005; and Bauckham, Panayotov and Davila 2013). Different problems arise with the so-called Jewish Christian gospels (Gregory 2017). The term ‘Jewish-Christian’ is an artificial word that has been created by scholars to designate groups that saw themselves as Jewish followers of Jesus of Nazareth. It is usually assumed that these groups were not recognized as Jewish by other Jewish groups of the time who did not join the Jesus movement (Schnelle 2019: 160–166). However, the designation not only falsely assumes that one can precisely delineate what is Jewish and what is Christian. It implicitly assigns these groups a role on the margins – or rather, between the decisive groups – from the outset. In the history of research, the term was therefore associated with the idea of an ultimately deficient form of following Christ, which was rightly not given a future alongside Pauline ‘Gentile Christianity’ (Lemke 2001). It is clear that such presuppositions, which are often implicitly anti-Jewish, cannot be accompanied by a neutral or even appreciative view of the corresponding testimonies.

Finally, another problem arises from the fact that many early Jewish texts, often labelled as Old Testament pseudepigrapha, have only been preserved through transmission in Christian – often monastic – circles (see Davila 2005). Some texts were probably handed down more or less unchanged, most with a high degree of fluidity. Others were transmitted only in (relatively free) translations, others in edited form and still others in connection with additions. A text like *2 Esdras*, which is found in some manuscripts of the Vulgate Old Testament, combines – in a not completely stable order – the books *4 Ezra*, *5 Ezra*, and *6 Ezra* into an overall composition. *4 Ezra* is a Jewish apocalypse from the end of the first century CE, originally written in Hebrew but transmitted in Latin. At least some manuscripts offer signs of minor editorial interventions in the text, interventions which were certainly carried out by Christian hands. The Latin *4 Ezra* is followed by *6 Ezra*, another apocalyptic writing which is usually designated as a Christian text, but which at no point clearly suggests such an attribute. Finally, either at the beginning or the end of this composition comes *5 Ezra*. This text, at least in some passages, speaks so clearly of a Son of God, alluding to the Gospel of Matthew and the Apocalypse of John (Schröter and Milbach 2018; Hirschberger 2018), that it is normally designated as Christian. But again the question of how far this text sees itself as ‘Christian’ in distinction from ‘Jewish’ is highly controversial. Finally, until the Middle Ages, the overall composition *2 Esdras* was handed down as an Old Testament text. Rigid adherence to the categories ‘Christian’ and ‘Jewish’, at least in this case, quickly leads to absurdity.

In other words, it is still possible for pragmatic reasons to speak of New Testament or Christian apocrypha. It is, however, necessary to be aware of these problems to avoid the many misunderstandings often connected to them.

2.5 Results of the above approach: beyond historical and geographical limits

The close connection in the history of research of the concept of apocrypha to the emergence of the New Testament canon, which played a role in earlier definitions of apocrypha, led to a distinction between apocryphal and hagiographical literature. Hagiographical literature refers to writings which are mainly concerned with saints, their miracles, sayings, and their death. The study of New Testament apocrypha already lies on the periphery of the field of New Testament exegesis, while hagiography certainly lies outside it. This led, in many cases, to an almost complete neglect of literature (and traditions) that are of the highest importance for the study of apocrypha. Below are only a few examples of consequences of the choice to draw a sharp boundary between apocrypha and hagiographical literature.

First, the focus on the earliest possible apocryphal literature is related to an interest in literature that is as close as possible to the origins of Christianity. The main question related to such a research paradigm is: what value does a particular text have with regard to research into the historical Jesus or the origins of the Christian movement? Within the so called 'Third Quest' into the historical Jesus, some apocryphal gospels or gospel fragments (such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the unknown *Gospel on Papyrus Egerton 2* or the *Gospel of Peter*) played an increasing role (see for example, Crossan 1985). As soon as it can be shown that these texts must be regarded as secondary with regard to the question of the historical Jesus (see Nicklas 2011b), they are removed from the field of vision. The old prejudice – that apocrypha are of secondary interest – is confirmed when there is too much concentration on only this problem. This is even more the case with infancy gospels (such as the *Protevangelium of James*), apocalypses, or apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*. The latter especially are often regarded, at best, as entertainment literature without theological relevance, or at worst as particularly abstruse and miraculous, often heretical, literature (but see, for example, Spittler 2008). In fact, in the vast majority of cases these texts say nothing reliable about the first decades of the development of Christianity. The focus on this question alone, and the accompanying confirmation of prejudices against apocryphal literature, usually lead to scholars not consulting these texts even when other questions were in focus.

Second, the focus on apocrypha that originated before the end of the fourth century CE is closely related to a focus on the 'original text', or at least the oldest accessible text of a particular scripture. The entry point into work with Christian apocrypha is mostly through manuals and translations that offer a text form that is as old as possible. This obscured for a long time – in many cases until very recently – the fact that, with Christian apocrypha, scholars are very often dealing with literature that was handed down in a much more fluid and diverse way than was the case with canonical texts. Therefore, the textual forms

of many Christian apocrypha offered in most source collections hardly correspond to what is actually available (Nicklas, forthcoming). Scholars tend to interpret the *Gospel of Thomas* as a text of the second century CE (or in some cases even the first century). This is certainly not completely wrong, but it should be borne in mind that large parts of the text are only available in a much later Coptic translation. We can only assume how stable the tradition before until this translation on the basis of the preserved Greek fragments of the text (Oxyrhynchus Papyri [P. Oxy.] 1, 654 and 655; on the textual transmission of the *Gospel of Thomas*, see Gathercole 2014: 3–13).

The situation is even more problematic with the *Acts of John*, which is usually regarded as an apocryphal work of the late second or third century CE. The text included in the usual collections of apocrypha, however, is not actually available in a single manuscript. This is not only due to certain details of the textual transmission; rather, the text of the *Acts of John* on which studies are normally based is compiled from various manuscripts, right down to the order of the scenes. However, as soon as we turn to the (in many cases much later) manuscripts that transmit the *Acts of John* (or better, the one form of *Acts of John*), we find that we must instead select from a kind of 'Acts of John Library' (Spittler 2022). Particularly influential among the texts of this diverse library were, of all things, the *Acts of John by Prochorus*. This is a later form of the *Acts of John* which, although it survives in a large number of manuscripts, is not found in any of the usual handbooks on apocryphal literature (but see Spittler 2021). This has certainly to do with the focus of research on texts that may have been written before the fourth century. The situation is very similar with many other apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*. In the case of the *Acts of Thomas*, an early third-century apocryphal work devoted to Thomas's alleged mission in India, the focus on the original text form has long obscured the view of shorter forms of the text. However, the many late manuscripts – some of which offer significantly abridged versions of the known *Acts of Thomas*, in which no material relevant to the reconstruction of an oldest version can be found – are also interesting: they show the techniques used to redact and rephrase the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* to make them part the liturgical tradition of veneration of the saints, a process which did not conclude until the nineteenth century (Pricop 2021). The once-rejected apocryphal text becomes again part of the tradition defined as orthodox.

Third, this also points to another problem: the focus on writings that originated before the fourth century CE, and the concomitant interest on the oldest text form of these writings, often combines with the question of the original function of a text. However, the fact that a text is, and was, handed down in different text forms and in different contexts also means that the function of the text changed or adapted to these contexts. But to concentrate solely on the function of a text at the time it was written leads to neglect of other aspects of the meaning of a text. This can already be seen in the example of the *Acts of Thomas* just mentioned. There, late liturgical manuscripts offering abridged and rephrased forms of the text show how the text took on a new function in a new form centuries after it was

composed. Only gradually is the study of apocryphal literatures also opening up to this perspective: for example, it seems useful on the one hand to interpret the aforementioned Nag Hammadi writings in the context of their probable time of origin. On the other hand, it is also useful to interpret them as part of the codices in which they have survived to the present day, and in the contexts of monastic settlements where these manuscripts were probably used (see, for example, Lundhaug 2010 and the discussions in Verheyden, Schröter and Nicklas 2021). The apocryphal narrative of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus, usually referred to as the *Gospel of Peter*, is normally read (rightly) as a second-century text, and then as a further development of the canonical gospels, because of its hypothetical context of origin (Foster 2010). However, the only extant extensive manuscript of this text dates from the sixth or seventh century and is compiled in a codex with other non-canonical texts. The discussion of this text thus may involve its possible function in the second *and* in the sixth and seventh centuries (Nicklas 2020e).

Fourth, however, the main problem of concentrating solely on the first four centuries CE has already been indicated: with this restriction, a large number of writings are completely removed from the view of apocryphal research. This has already been shown in the example of the *Acts of John by Prochorus*. However, this is only one example of many. With the restriction to the first centuries, scholars can talk about only five significant apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles*: the *Acts* of Paul, John, Peter, Andrew and Thomas. Where we open the boundary, it becomes apparent that dozens of other writings arose thereafter that revolve around the apostles and their companions. Certain textual forms, which fully correspond to the above definition of apocryphal literature, only appear after this time. One might think, for example, of the so called ‘Apostolic Memoirs’, which are gospel-like texts written in Coptic and, in many cases, embedded in a supposed homily by an important ecclesiastical author (Suciu 2017: 70–132). More than twenty such writings, of paramount importance for the identity formation of Egypt’s miaphysite church (believing in one divine-human nature of Christ only, rather than the two natures, one human and one divine), have come to light in recent years. Another genre of apocryphal literature that only emerged after the fourth century is the *Lives of the Virgin*, quite extensive writings that narrate the life of Mary and, relatedly, the life of Jesus from Mary’s perspective (see, for example, Shoemaker 2012).

Particularly dramatic, however, are the implications that arise in connection with apocalyptic literature. In many handbooks on apocalyptic, the idea is found almost throughout that apocalyptic literature originated in circles that saw themselves as marginalized and who wanted to present their own worldview as God-ordained by means of these revelatory writings. But this completely overlooks the fact that, from late antiquity onwards, a series of apocalyptic writings emerged whose function – both in Byzantium and in the Latin West – was to legitimize existing political systems. In particular, the idea of an eschatological emperor who would place his power in the hands of God or Christ

at the end of times played an important role (examples in Shoemaker 2018). Above all, however, limiting research on Christian apocrypha to texts originating before fourth century CE also means that apocrypha that originated in certain countries and regions whose production of (Christian) literature only began after the fourth century were largely neglected in apocryphal research, or led a rather isolated, shadowy existence. Because of this, important sources in Armenian, Georgian, Irish, Old Church Slavonic and others have not been edited or have hardly been made accessible so far, and thus the wealth of existing sources can hardly be estimated to this day.

3 Examples of texts and their function

Against this background, it becomes clear that the significance of Christian apocrypha for our understanding of the history of Christianity, and of Christian thought and life, is not simply marginal but makes a decisive contribution. First and foremost, the diversity evident in the apocryphal writings of different times and geographical contexts helps us to broaden our understanding of the complexity and diversity of Christian groups, Christian thought, and Christian piety. Apocryphal writings, as we have seen, do not always represent marginalized voices within the Christian movement. Sometimes, however, even apocryphal writings which represent opposing voices to those that ultimately prevailed demonstrate that things which seem self-evident may be less so than is usually thought. The given framework, in turn, only allows us to highlight in a rudimentary and exemplary way the role that apocryphal writings play and played in various areas of Christian life and thought.

3.1 Apocrypha and Christian practice

Christian apocrypha are informative for understanding lived Christian practice. This, however, should not be misunderstood to mean that apocrypha are primarily writings representing a kind of ‘folk piety’ that is opposed to ‘true theology’ and Christian doctrine. This misunderstanding is contradicted not only by the fact that many apocrypha reflect high and complex – partly also experimental – theologies, but also by the fact that the differentiation between a ‘lower’ popular piety and a higher theology is artificial. Instead, it is helpful to take the approach of a ‘lived religion’ (for an approach to ancient lived religion, see Rüpke 2016). The range of what is offered in this regard in apocryphal writings cannot be grasped in a short contribution alone (see Markschies and Schröter 2012: 77). Aspects of Christian practice on various levels are evident, for example, in the prayers and hymns handed down in apocryphal writings, among which texts that testify to intercession for the dead are particularly important in the history of theology (Kraus 2009). Many writings are interesting in terms of liturgical history. This goes so far that important developments in the practice of (and certainly also reflection on) baptism and Eucharist can be better grasped when the testimony of Christian apocrypha is brought in (Buchinger 2015).

In addition, in the apocrypha we find valuable testimonies of how Christian groups reflected on their diaconal practice of caring for the poor, widows, orphans, and prisoners. They also comprise important sources for the justification and development of forms of liturgical celebrations and the organization of the ecclesiastical year. Here again, a whole range of aspects, between the commemoration of saints and fasting practices, can be considered in relation to the apocryphal texts. The emerging pilgrimages to the Holy Land, to Egypt or to Rome – and in later times also to Santiago de Compostela and other places – are in many cases connected with interpretations of these places that can be traced not only to biblical but also to apocryphal traditions (see Nicklas 2017a; Eastman 2019; Baliñas Perez 2017). Because of the wide range of texts – some of which are deeply rooted in Jewish tradition (see the discussion in Gounelle and Mounier 2015), others of which are neglected or virtually forgotten – Christian apocrypha also offer evidence in many passages in the texts of the adoption and development of Jewish purity practices, such as related to the eating of food, sexuality, etc. (Desreumaux 2014: 165–215).

3.2 Christian apocrypha and Jesus traditions

During the so-called 'Third Quest' for the historical Jesus (beginning in the 1980s), several apocryphal gospels came into the focus of scholarly interest because they seemed to provide independent and previously underestimated information regarding the historical Jesus. The most debated writing was certainly the above-mentioned *Gospel of Thomas*. Besides this, texts like the *Gospel of Peter* (a fragmentary account of Jesus' passion and resurrection) and the *Unknown Gospel on Papyrus Egerton 2* (consisting of several fragmentary Jesus stories) came into focus. However, we should not focus solely on this dimension of the significance of Christian apocrypha, as if their value only relates to our understanding of the historical Jesus. The hope that at least some apocryphal gospels may offer new insights into the historical Jesus has meanwhile given way to skepticism in wide circles (Nicklas 2011b). But in areas where the historical Jesus is not considered the only and decisive starting point of our thinking, apocryphal writings can offer us highly valuable insights. In fact, our understanding of the transmission of Jesus traditions can only grow if we can place it on as broad a basis as possible. Moreover, as soon as we do not only focus on reconstructions of the historical Jesus, the development of Jesus traditions in genres besides the gospels (such as apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* or apocalyptic literature) can also come into view (Snyder 2020).

These basic ideas can also be illustrated in more concrete terms. First, in some quotes by ancient Christian authors, or embedded in some New Testament manuscripts, we find so-called 'agrapha' – that is, extracanonical sayings of Jesus (and in a broader sense Jesus traditions). Until a few years ago, they were examined solely for the possibility that we could learn something new about the historical Jesus from them – the result was and is extremely meagre. But the agrapha are themselves interesting in that they exhibit further

developments of the canonical words of Jesus. If, for example, they are encountered in early church literature as part of a larger context of argumentation, we can learn something about the relation of stability and flexibility in the transmission of Jesus' words through their concrete use in concrete contexts (Bazzana 2020).

Second, a look at the development of Jesus traditions outside the canonical gospels shows the lasting importance of narrative interpretation of the scriptures of Israel for the emergence and interpretation of themes and motifs that can be connected with the Jesus narrative. Already in the canonical passion narratives it becomes clear what an important role texts from the prophets and the Psalms play in telling the Jesus story. One can think, for example, of the function of Psalm 22 for the crucifixion scene in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Apocryphal narratives such as the *Gospel of Peter*, or passion traditions in the *Sibylline Oracles*, very clearly show two directions of development. On the one hand, motifs developed from the scriptures of Israel (what we today call the Old Testament) were able to become imprinted in the social memory of Christian groups. So imprinted, in fact, that they could be repeated and retold in a way that shows that – although they were perceived as an indispensable part of the Jesus tradition – their Old Testament origins could recede into the background or be forgotten. At the same time, it is evident that certain clusters of Old Testament writings continued to be used for the development of the Jesus tradition: for example, some references in the passion narratives of the eighth Sibylline Oracle to traditions in Isaiah about the suffering servant of God are more clearly recognizable than references in the canonical gospels to the same traditions.

In addition, new motifs could be inserted into the Jesus tradition through the creative narrative interpretation of Old Testament passages not previously connected with the Jesus tradition (Nicklas 2020b). An example of this is the apocryphal narrative of Jesus in the pseudo-Cyprianic homily *De duobus montibus Sina et Sion*, which understands Jesus' cross as a 'high wood' and places it in a garden. All this is due to an interpretation of Cant 1:6 (Nicklas 2021b). However, similarities can be observed not only in the development of the passion narratives: many aspects of the pre- and childhood history of Jesus, such as those found in the *Protevangelium of James* and related narratives about the childhood of Jesus, can be explained as receptions of texts from the scriptures of Israel (Nicklas 2020d). Many more examples could be mentioned. What is important, however, is the already recognizable insight into the flexibility of narrative 'images' of the remembered Jesus, which, depending on context and function, could be oriented not only to what had been handed down from the past but also to the needs of those whom the writers wanted (and were obligated) to address.

Third, from late antiquity onwards the changing demands on the Jesus tradition could even bring forth new genres of texts that have so far hardly played a role in Jesus research. In this context, one should think of the 'Apostolic Memoirs' mentioned above, which have

only recently come into focus (Van den Broek 2013; Suciu 2017). These are writings comparable to the gospels, composed in Coptic. They were created, from the sixth century onwards, to anchor in the Jesus tradition aspects of the identity of the so-called 'miaphysite' Church of Egypt. This church emerged after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE which defined orthodox faith in the two natures of Christ, one human and one divine. In the writings of this group, textual units known from the canonical gospels are combined with apocryphal traditions; many of the known Apostolic Memoirs are also embedded in a (pseudepigraphical) homily by a great early church author of the past (such as Cyril of Jerusalem, Evodius of Rome and others). Some offer a narrative, about the rediscovery of the text that supposedly disappeared for a long time, told gladly from the perspective of an apostle.

Another genre of late antique gospel-related literature are the so-called *Centones*, poetic writings composed of Homeric or Virgilian verses which were reordered in such a way that they could be read as Jesus narratives (Sandnes 2011). Even later, the hardly known so-called *Lives of the Virgin* emerged, which can at least partly be understood as narratives of the life of Jesus from Mary's point of view, and as testimonies of a developing Marian piety (Shoemaker 2012). If we look beyond the boundaries of Christian tradition, even Jesus traditions in the Islamic tradition – beginning with the Qur'an – play an important role (Segovia 2018).

Fourth, the question of images and narratives of Jesus in apocryphal traditions is also an example of how the study of apocrypha is important for the history of theology. Interestingly, the monumental history of the development of Christology by Alois Grillmeier, laid out in several volumes, only offers a few pages in its first volume on the christologies of apocryphal writings – all of them labelled as 'heretical' in Grillmeier's first volume (Grillmeier 1979: 184–190). This is clearly due to the low esteem in which apocryphal literature is held in systematic theologies, a situation that has changed little despite the paradigm shift evident in historical theologies. Thus, a consideration of Christian apocrypha makes the source material relevant to the history of dogma much broader than is possible with a concentration purely on proto-orthodox and orthodox writings by 'fathers of the church'.

In many cases, a study of apocrypha reveals the lost possibilities of thinking about Christology. It may be interesting – not only historically but also theologically – to understand which concerns lie behind conceptualizations that were rejected as deficient or false in the course of church history (for an overview Dubois 2011). One can think of texts that speak of the polymorphism of Christ in various ways, describe Christ as a kind of angelic figure, thematize Jesus' absolute Torah observance, or reflect on the extent to which Christ's suffering and death can be related to his divinity. An interest in the christological significance of Jesus' baptism can still be observed in some apocryphal

gospels (as in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of Mark). However, this has largely moved out of the focus of today's systematic theologies, probably out of concern for adoptionist forms of Christology (but see Nicklas 2020c: 250–255). Exciting possibilities, on the other hand, could arise from a theology of the 'true face of Jesus', which can be traced back to forms and continuations of the Abgar legend, but also the Veronica figure (legends about the idea that a true image of Jesus has remained in this world; they can be related to Abgar of Edessa – and the so-called mandylion; mainly in the East – and to Veronica and the stations of the Cross – mainly in the West), and which continues to be highly present in Orthodox iconography (Nicklas 2020c: 262–267).

3.3 Apocrypha and the construction of the origins of Christianity

The above-mentioned example of the apostolic memoirs from Egypt already made it clear that many Christian apocrypha can be understood as identity-forming narratives of origins, that is, as narratives that reflect the origins of the Christian movement – or a part of it – and are thus able to establish a local, regional, or even church-wide tradition.

First, already the gospels of the New Testament place emphasis in different ways on dealing with 'origins'. This becomes particularly clear when Mark introduces his gospel with the words *'Archē* [beginning, origin] of the Jesus Christ-Gospel' (Mark 1:1). Matthew, in turn, starts with a genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:1–17), while Luke's preface reminds readers of those who were 'eyewitnesses and servants of the Word from the beginning' (Luke 1:2). John has his gospel begin right at the origin of creation (John 1:1, see Gen 1:1). This trend is less clearly demonstrable in apocryphal gospels – in part this may be because writings such as the *Gospel of Peter* or the '*Unknown Gospel*' on *Papyrus Egerton 2* have survived only in fragmentary form. Nevertheless, an interest in the origins of Jesus himself can be seen in the writings that are usually referred to as 'infancy gospels'. This is particularly true of the *Protevangelium of James*, whose ancient title, *Birth of Mary*, indicates that the interest of this writing is to trace the origins of Jesus more concretely one generation further back. In fact, with its interest in Mary's family, birth, and childhood up to the birth of Jesus, this text offers an embedding of the Jesus narrative in an imagined biblical world and its logic (Nicklas 2020d).

Second, and even more clearly, many apocryphal narratives about apostles and their companions can be understood as founding legends of different regional churches. This is especially true for churches whose origins are not mentioned in the New Testament, but which – for various reasons – wanted to establish themselves as apostolic foundations in the course of their history. It applies, for example, to the church of Edessa, today's Urfa in Turkey. Its founding legend is recorded in the so-called *Doctrine of Addai*, an apostolic narrative probably of the fifth century CE. In it, decisive aspects of ecclesiastical

practice in Edessa – and also the New Testament canon used there (e.g. with Tatian's *Diatessaron*, a second century gospel 'harmony', instead of the four gospels) – are established and related to apostolic origins (Desreumaux 1997 and 2014). This is only one of many examples which show that many of the writings that we classify today under 'apocrypha' were anything but hidden, secret, or even heretical. The same applies to texts with comparable functions, like the *Acts of Titus*, the *Acts of Barnabas*, and the *Martyrdom of Mark* (the founding narratives of the churches of Crete, Cyprus, and Alexandria, respectively; see Nicklas 2017b, Nicklas 2020a and Nicklas 2021a).

At times, and on a regional basis, writings such as those mentioned above played a role alongside the canon that can hardly be underestimated. This can be shown best with examples of traditions, associated with Cyprus, around the apostle Barnabas. According to the fifth century *Acts of Barnabas*, Barnabas established the ecclesiastical organization of Cyprus on a second missionary journey not mentioned in the biblical book of Acts, and suffered his martyrdom there. According to the later *Barnabas Encomium* by the monk Alexander, Barnabas is stylized as one of the most important apostles. The text points to his tomb, which can be visited in the Barnabas Monastery near Salamis. Writings like these could attain the highest political significance. The fact that Cyprus had an apostle's tomb, the existence of which was 'proven' in the above Barnabas traditions, allowed the independence of the Church of Cyprus to be asserted and maintained against claims to the contrary by the Church of Antioch (Nicklas 2020a).

A completely different case can be considered in connection with the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, which is still significant today. Its origins can be found in a time when, after the disintegration of the Visigothic empire through the Muslim invasion, the Kingdom of Asturias allied itself with Galicia. This alliance, which at the same time formed the nucleus of the Reconquista (the reconquest of the Spanish peninsula from the Arabs during the Middle Ages), was able to gain its apostolic legitimacy through founding legends concerning the *translatio* (removal from one place to another) of the apostle's relics (Baliñas Perez 2017). At the same time Constantinople, re-founded by Emperor Constantine I in 324 CE, had greater difficulties in establishing itself as an apostolic seat. As the capital of the Eastern Roman – and later Byzantine – Empire, however, it too had to establish a connection to apostolic origins. Even if such a connection could only be created by the *translatio* of apostolic relics, not by an apostolic founding legend, it was still possible to establish Constantinople/Byzantium as a place where Mary the Mother of God was (and remained) active in a special way. A text that again links this activity to a special place is the *Miracles of the Pege*, a collection of miracle narratives from the tenth century, collecting stories related to a place of pilgrimage associated with the *Theotokos* – that is, the Mother of God – in Constantinople (Talbot and Johnson 2012: xiv–xviii and 293–297).

Finally, a whole web of apocryphal narratives and traditions became significant for the church of Egypt. The New Testament summarizes the flight of Jesus' family to Egypt – and thus several years in the life of the young Jesus – in only a very few verses of Matthew's Gospel (Matt 2:13–15). This gap in the Jesus narrative of the New Testament naturally creates room for further narratives that could be tied to different places in Egypt. These narratives could form the basis of an itinerary of the Holy Family through Egypt, in a dynamically changing juxtaposition of local traditions over the centuries (Davis 2008: 125–148; Bovon 2013). The *Arabian Infancy Gospel* (section 24), for example, recounts of the Holy Family's rest at a sycamore tree at Matariya, where Jesus caused a spring to gush, in which Mary washed his shirt and where the child's sweat, wrung out of his shirt, miraculously turned into balm. This is a typical example of the narrative justification of a local tradition, in the vicinity of present-day Cairo, which can still be traced today.

3.4 Apocrypha and Christian ideas of space and time

Among the fundamental problems of humanity are questions about one's place in time and history, as well as the order of the world. Various genres of texts – including many writings that we would classify as apocrypha – address these questions, beginning with apocryphal writings that offer statements on the creation of the world. Of particular interest in this context are texts that are usually described as 'Gnostic' and whose myths about the creation of the world – today classified as Valentinian, Sethian, etc. – in many cases clearly differ from what we find in the creation narratives of the Old Testament, especially the book of Genesis (Létourneau 2010).

In turn, many early Christian apocalypses offer highly significant voices in the discourse on the questions of time, history, and the end of time. In addition to the Apocalypse of John (also known as the book of Revelation), texts such as the *Ascension of Isaiah* are relevant here. The *Ascension* situates itself in a world which is dominated by evil powers, repeatedly threatened by new incarnations of Belial (Satan), the last of which it understands to be Nero. As explained above, in the course of the history of tradition the two short apocalypses *5* and *6 Ezra* were combined with the Jewish *4 Ezra* to form *2 Esdras*, which at least in some manuscripts of the Vulgate is considered part of the Old Testament. While *5 Ezra* deals with questions of God's faithfulness to the covenant and the true people of God, *6 Ezra*, borrowing from prophetic writings, offers dark visions of the end times. In turn, the Jewish and Christian *Sibylline Oracles*, in the mouth of the pagan prophetess Sibyl, invoke God's wrath against the nations and anticipate a dramatic turn of the times.

Similar to the Apocalypse of John, later writings also eventually offer more or less clear references to historically identifiable events that precede the end of time. Different versions of the same text can grow to include an increased number of allusions to events that are

not encountered in other versions. One can think, for example, of the Latin *Apocalypse of Thomas*, which in its short form presents itself as a description of the last week of the world before its end. In its long form the text is preceded by allusions to historical figures (such as the emperors Theodosius I and his sons Arcadius and Honorius; Nicklas, Geigenfeind and Stettner 2018). The very successful *Tiburtine Sibyl* – not to be confused with the *Sibylline Oracles* just mentioned – has also survived in a variety of text forms, the more recent of which even contain quite clearly decipherable references to the reigns of medieval emperors from the Carolingian and Salian houses (Shoemaker 2016b).

However, apocalypses and related writings are not only interested in the end of time. In many cases, they also lead their readers into utopian and dystopian 'other worlds'. Many such writings present themselves not only as visions but as otherworldly journeys (mostly of great figures of the past), in which the secrets of heaven(s), hellish places, paradise and/or the heavenly city are revealed. Very often the manifold depictions of other worlds in these writings are in service of the hope of better understanding the order of this world. This is particularly clear in the *Apocalypse of Paul*, originally written in Greek, which was highly influential, especially in its Latin translation as *Visio Pauli* (Jirouškova 2006). It begins with a lamentation by the various non-human parts of creation before God, because humanity alone is sinful. The Pauline journey through the realms of the beyond is thus from the very beginning in service of the question of God's patience in relation to his justice and mercy.

The *Visio Pauli* is only one of many writings wherein otherworldly journeys are encountered; in the Byzantine East, for example, the *Apocalypse of the Virgin* became particularly successful (Shoemaker 2016a). Probably the oldest Christian text in which descriptions of otherworldly places, such as paradise and hell, occupy a large space is the Greek and Ethiopian *Apocalypse of Peter*, dating back perhaps as early as the first half of the second century. The Greek version of this text prefaces the view into the afterlife with the disciples' request

> that he [Jesus] would show us one of our brethren, a righteous one, who had gone forth out of the world, in order that we might see of what manner or form they are, and, having taken courage, might encounter the people who hear us. (v5)

The text is also exciting for theological reasons, as it is quite possible that its original version contained the idea that the stay of sinners in hell was not necessarily eternal, but that they could instead be freed through the intercession of the righteous (Nicklas 2019a; Ehrman 2022).

These few examples offer only some possibilities for the significance of Christian apocrypha for our understanding of ancient Christianity, and many other areas. Christian apocrypha offer important material on the history of the interpretation of the Bible, the further development of biblical figures, questions of Jewish-Christian relations in antiquity, the problem of the so-called ‘Hellenization’ of Christianity. They also contribute to classical theological fields such as soteriology, the organization and self-understanding of the church or ecclesial communities (including the question of the role of women in early Christian communities), questions of angelology, Mariology, and many others.

4 Receptions of Christian apocrypha

Even a brief overview of examples of the reception of Christian apocrypha can show that many of the writings mentioned by no means played only marginal roles. While some of the better-known apocryphal gospels (such as the *Unknown Gospel on Papyrus Egerton 2*, the *Gospel of Peter* or the *Gospel of Thomas*) have only survived in fragmentary form or single manuscripts, a large number of lesser-known apocryphal writings have been handed down not only in multiple manuscripts but also in numerous translations. These include writings such as the *Protevangelium of James*, the early medieval *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, or the various forms of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the cycle of writings around Pilate. The latter, in parts, found its way into the famous and widespread *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus of Voragine (1228/29–1298), a medieval compendium of knowledge about Christian saints and their veneration. An apostolic writing such as the *Acts of John by Prochorus* is much less known today than the ancient *Acts of John*; however, it seems to have enjoyed some popularity in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Finally, several of the aforementioned journeys to hell, such as the *Visio Pauli* or (in the East) the *Apocalypse of the Virgin*, became particularly successful; as did apocalypses such as the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, which is still commemorated today by the *Teste David cum Sibylla* of the Latin Requiem. These texts were broadly received among the majority churches that saw themselves as ‘orthodox’. Others enjoyed particular popularity among groups that existed even in the Middle Ages and were regarded as heretical by the mainstream church (Cathars, Bogomils, etc.). This applies, for example, to the already mentioned *Ascension of Isaiah*, which was read among Cathars and Bogomils (medieval groups considered to be heretic by the Catholic and Orthodox churches).

In many cases, moreover, the textual tradition is so unstable that we have to speak of several versions of the same writing. As such, compiling a critical edition of the tradition that attempts to reconstruct an original text (or *Ausgangstext*) in the classical sense hardly seems possible or meaningful. In addition, some particularly exciting dimensions of the reception of apocryphal literatures should be mentioned:

(1) Christian apocrypha are not only relevant in liturgical history, even though they often describe forms of liturgical actions and celebrations or also reflect on their meaning. In many cases, apocryphal writings were also transmitted as hagiographical literature in liturgical manuscripts, read out on feasts in memory of an apostle or apostle's disciple, or even written and edited for these occasions. This can be shown, for example, by a series of apostolic narratives which, like the *Martyrdom of Mark*, end with a reference to the celebration of the memorial day for the apostle (Nicklas 2019b). One example that shows how writings understood as apocryphal, and explicitly not part of the canon, were 'brought back home' into ecclesiastical use: the *Acts of Thomas*, which in very few cases have survived in the Syriac or Greek long form on which most collections of apocryphal literature are based (Pricop 2021). At the same time, a large number of manuscripts used in the liturgy offer clearly edited short forms of the text. These are hardly of interest for the reconstruction of an original version, but they do testify to the form in which the *Acts of Thomas* remained known far into the Middle Ages. Moreover, in addition to the known version of the *Acts of Thomas*, so-called *Minor Acts of Thomas* were produced, combining material from the old *Acts of Thomas* with new material.

(2) What is better known is the fact that many Christian apocrypha were also received in iconography (Cartlidge and Elliott 2001). This is especially true of texts that we would call 'apocryphal' from today's perspective but which, despite being non-canonical, acquired significance alongside the canon. This significance could be for certain regional expressions of Christianity, or relate to forms of piety that could not appeal to the canon to establish their legitimacy. In particular, motifs related to the childhood story and passion of Jesus (e.g. in the *Protevangelium of James* and later childhood stories up to depictions of the Catholic *Way of the Cross*, including apocryphal motifs such as the Shroud of Veronica) but also eschatology (such as depictions of the afterlife and the end of times) are often influenced by apocrypha. The relationship of images, and sequences of images, to narratives is not always easy to describe, as the images should be considered as having a distinct value of their own alongside the narratives.

(3) Apocrypha are, and were, also received in other media. Prominent examples may be found in important literature such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but the principle also applies to modern novels such as Mikhail Bulgakow's *Der Meister und Margarita* (*The Master and Margerita*) or Amos Oz's *Judas*; movies like Monty Python's *Life of Brian* or Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*; and in many more works and artforms. Depending on how one wants to apply the definition proposed above, these can sometimes be interpreted as a kind of modern apocrypha. What can only be hinted at here – the diversity of forms of reception of apocryphal writings, motifs, and figures in diverse media – highlights the fact that, at least in traditional Christian circles, motifs going back to apocrypha continue

to be part of ‘cultural memory’ to this day – even where the writings themselves may be forgotten.

Attributions

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