

## Reviews

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*The Apostles Peter, Paul, John, Thomas and Philip with their companions in late antiquity.*

Edited by Tobias Nicklas, Janet E. Spittler and Jan N. Bremmer. (Studies in Early Christian Apocrypha, 17.) Pp. xiv + 340 incl. 7 colour and black-and-white ills and 2 tables. Leuven: Peeters, 2021. €74 (paper). 978 90 429 4553 1  
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The mysterious biographies of the Apostles that characterise the *corpus* of apocryphal Acts continue to interest scholars who stagger around the innate historical challenges and fanciful texts that comprise it. This book claims to be the first modern collection of studies on the reception of the Apostles and their companions developed from the early and medieval eras, centring on manuscripts but intersecting with the canonical Acts, social environments and liturgy. The names of the editors are immediately recognisable by those familiar with scholarship around early Christian apocryphal texts, offering the promise of quality research and reflection for anyone specifically interested in source and literary criticism of these early legends.

The lead chapter by Tobias Nicklas considers the nature of story, including its attempt to give reason to Christian identity. The active writing and editing of various Acts of the Apostles up through the fourth century sought ‘to transport the characteristic attitudes [of triumph] back to the very beginnings of the Christian movement’ (p. 2). Four theses for Nicklas guide the enterprise marking the authors in this volume: contemporary experiences were projected into foundational stories, contemporary identities were associated with ancient place, contemporary space became associated with collective identity and contemporary rituals were projected onto ancient topographies. Fourteen chapters follow that explore the phenomenon of story and its identity activities in the apocryphal Acts texts related to Peter, Paul, Thecla, John, Timothy, Thomas and Philip. Each author offers a proficiency and thoroughness to their topic. A partial sample of evaluation comes below.

Andreas Merk explores the hetero-topography of the *Forum Romanum*, particularly around the supposed site where Simon Magus fell to his destruction in a duel of miracles with Simon Peter. The late ancient Forum saw the placement of a memorial marker commemorating Peter’s victory that offers a contrast between its monuments of imperial self-representation and this stone of commoners that is uniquely Christian. A peculiar and anachronistic illustration marks the chapter, however, as ancient Christians walking the Forum are compared to modern Pokémon Go players moving about public spaces today. He

articulates the role of place powerfully: 'All these topographical markers place the Peter legend in a traditional cityscape of commemoration that evokes the cultural heritage of ancient Rome' (p. 25).

The difficult scrutiny and imagination required for evaluating such texts is illustrated in the chapter, 'The Acts of John by Prochorus in Patmos 188: a test-case illustrating the composition and development of later apocryphal Acts'. Spittler presents the complex nature of textual fluidity among apocryphal Acts by using a single manuscript, Patmos 188, as a test case that 'clearly evinces multiple layers and multiple types of editorial activity' (p. 193). She provides ample evidence of four layers including the adding of material, blending episodes, appending missing material and correcting perceived mistakes. While the evidence is rather straightforward, the motivation and role of the individuals behind it is more multifaceted. For example, an *Acts of John* later editorial addition with a second account of the destruction of the Artemis temple reveals either a clumsy editor, simple archivist or narrative inventor. In the end, while Spittler speculates on the editorial activity in a single manuscript masterfully, she offers no conclusive answer, but hits the wall of uncertainty around the editions of the various apocryphal Acts of the Apostles.

One of the most interesting features of this book is the variety of apostolic legacies offered by the range of chapter topics. The transmission of nine manuscripts of the *Acta Thomae* receives a new chronology, as Muñoz-Gallarte and Narro recognise that a shorter, liturgical version abbreviated earlier versions. The confrontation of paganism and discipleship ideals mark the theology contained in the *Acta Philippi*, illustrating Berglund's claim that such Acts 'are more likely to be complementary writings, aiming to edify, educate and entertain early Christian readers without intention to replace or correct any canonical material' (p. 314). Bremmer provides a running commentary on the *Acta Timothae* by systematically comparing Latin and Greek translations along the themes of patriarch, metropolis and apostolic. Van Pelt compares the *vita* of Leo the Wonderworker with the *Acta Petri* to demonstrate how magical and miraculous polemics characterise the agenda of ancient apocryphal Acts.

Paul and Thecla receive heavy attention in five chapters, ranging through issues of space, sex and intermarriage. Downie seeks to establish how 'a chronotopic mode of spatiality' between the *Acta Pauli* and the canonical Acts illustrates 'a dynamic process of innovation, elaboration and excerption in which the geographical trajectory of Paul's missionary activities provided a spatial anchor for new stories' (p. 83). Yet his inability to reconcile the two narratological perspectives between modes of spatiality does not necessarily mean 'the creation of new stories' to call *fabula* (p. 99). When Kraus comprehensively summarises the early manuscript attestation of *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, the reader is reminded of the tremendous singular focus offered in the book by its contributors.

The attention to the apostolic apocryphal Acts in this edition is a great gift to the field of study. Manuscript lists and stemmas, colour photographs of church art and architecture, and images of ancient documents offer visual aids to clarify the complex source criticism undertaken in the book. While the phenomenon of story invention characterises the analysis of the book, the question of its place in the construction and perpetuation of faith in historic Christianity is only

intermittent. A lack of bibliography requires a reader to search in dense footnotes to discover the sources underlying this highly technical work. However, the authors certainly unite to prove what the editor Tobias Nicklas declares: ‘These texts should be the focus of more investigations in the study of ancient Christianity than has been the case so far’ (p. 20).

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*A dangerous parting. The beheading of John the Baptist in early Christian memory.* By Nathan L. Shedd. Pp. x+218. Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2021. \$44.99. 978 1 4813 1522 7  
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When your emperor grinningly displays a decapitated ostrich head, you do well to infer that your head might be next. But what communicative aim is served when a Herodian king is coaxed into beheading a popular Jewish prophet? In this revised dissertation, Nathan L. Shedd argues that Mark (vi.17–29) used John’s beheading to exonerate Jesus as a crucified miracle worker, while Justin Martyr (*Dialogus* 49.4) and Origen (*Commentary on Matthew* 10.21–2) used it to embody Jews’ inferiority to Christians.

According to Shedd, previous research on the Baptist’s beheading has focused on chronology, historicity and redactional use of the passage. Scholars have argued that John’s death occurred between 28 and 34 CE, considering John’s public appearance in 27 CE (Luke iii.1–3) and the discussions of his death in 37 CE (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116–19). They have found little historical value in Mark’s account, since he claims that Antipas’s brother Philip married Herodias (Mark vi.17) rather than her daughter Salome (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.136–7). And they have found Mark to use the story to clarify that Jesus is not John, while also prefiguring his death.

Against this background, Shedd uses social memory theory – where the past is viewed as a social construction serving the needs of the present – to discuss how John’s beheading is used to mediate meaning. Shedd argues that although historiographers are never free to create pure fiction, the ways in which they emphasise, suppress or contextualise different aspects of the historical record are always shaped by contemporary concerns. This process is particularly pronounced, Shedd contends, in commemorations of past violence, such as John’s beheading or the atrocities of Rwandan ethnicides, and their use for later identity formation and conflict management.

Studying other beheadings in ancient literature, Shedd maintains that although decapitation was less dishonourable than crucifixion, fire or damnation to beasts, it did not indicate an honourable death. Most beheadings constitute the dishonourable death of a person of higher social status, and may even be combined with prolonged imprisonment, torture or public display of the severed head to increase the humiliation. While Shedd demonstrates that disgraces suffered during the execution were generally thought to be reflected in the afterlife, his claim that beheading, specifically, was thought to impede bodily resurrection is doubtful. As evidence, Shedd presents only resurrection believers who affirm that their Creator is surely able to