

Early Christian Apocrypha: A Bibliographic Essay

by William H. Shepherd

INTRODUCTION: COMMON CONFUSION

According to the noted biologist and despiser of religion Richard Dawkins, “The Gospel of Thomas ... has numerous anecdotes about the child Jesus abusing his magical powers in the manner of a mischievous fairy, impishly transforming his playmates into goats, or turning mud into sparrows, or giving his father a hand with the carpentry by miraculously lengthening a piece of wood.”¹ This will come as a great surprise to readers of the *Gospel of Thomas* because it contains no anecdotes about the child Jesus, and is short on anecdotes of any kind—it’s a collection of sayings, with minimal narrative elements. Of course from his description it’s obvious that Dawkins means the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. But even the corrected paperback edition doesn’t get it quite right, citing the “Infant Gospel of Thomas.”²

The reason Dawkins is confused is that it is confusing. When dealing with early Christian apocrypha (or “New Testament apocrypha”), there is no standard English translation. Different titles are used for the same texts, and the same titles used for different texts. Collections of apocrypha vary in depth and breadth of coverage, not every text is translated in full, and there can be wide disagreement on authors, dates, geographical origins, and theological orientations. Even the original language of many of these works is debatable, as widely differing versions are extant in various languages. In addition, there are piles of overlapping and related literature: the Nag Hammadi scriptures and so-called “Gnostic Gospels”; the Apostolic Fathers and patristic writers; the Old Testament pseudepigrapha, some of which show Christian origins or influence; early “church orders” and hagiography. In addition, there are “modern apocrypha” sometimes mistaken for ancient writings, such as the *Letter of Lentulus*, a medieval description of Jesus purporting to be the work of a first-century Roman official, or the *Archko Volume*, containing accounts from biblical figures such as Pilate, Caiaphas, and Gamaliel, which though proven a hoax is still in print.³ This can make study of these texts vexing, even for people familiar with the material. Someone just wanting a ready reference to check the citations of a famous atheist—or determine the difference between the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Apocalypse of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*—may find it daunting.

So what’s a librarian to do? This is unfamiliar territory for most of us, who if pressed would probably claim that there’s no such thing as *Third Corinthians* (there is, it is part of the *Acts of Paul*). Patrons looking for a simple English translation of a particular work may have already searched and found plenty of information about the text, yet the text itself remains elusive. Or they may have found only foreign language works. Or texts with similar titles that might be the same thing—they guess. To provide adequate service, librarians need to become familiar with the basic resources in the field; to give superior service, we need to know a bit more about why it is so complex. Our task is complicated by the transitional state of research on these texts.

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 96.

² Boston: Mariner Books, 2008, 121-22.

³ W. D. Mahan, *The Archko Volume, or, the Archeological Writings of the Sanhedrim and Talmuds of the Jews* (New York: Cosimo, 2007; original 1875-87). The *Letter of Lentulus* was commonly printed in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century family Bibles, and can now be found in J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 542-43. On modern apocrypha, see Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Modern Apocrypha* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956) and Per Beskow, *Strange Tales About Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

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A FIELD IN TRANSITION

The problem begins with the definition, scope, and terminology of the collection itself, which has recently undergone a tremendous shift. The terms “Early Christian Apocrypha” or “New Testament Apocrypha” refer to a diverse set of early Christian writings that bear some connection or resemblance to the canonical New Testament books: they are letters, gospels, acts, epistles, and other writings that purport to be by or about important figures from the apostolic age. Definitions of this collection—which is not an ancient one, but a modern, artificial, and somewhat arbitrary construct—have varied. Until the last few decades, scholars have emphasized chronology, canonicity, and exclusion. James Charlesworth, for example, defined “New Testament Apocrypha” as “a modern collection of writings that were composed before the end of the fourth century, when there was not yet an accepted definition of orthodoxy, heresy, or canon, and that were usually written in imitation of the documents eventually considered canonical.”⁴ Wilhelm Schneemelcher wrote, “New Testament apocrypha are writings which originated in the first centuries of Church history, and which through title, *Gattung* or content stand in a definite connection with the NT writings.”⁵ Often the documents were distinguished by what they were not: Charlesworth excluded six categories from his definition (Apostolic Fathers, Nag Hammadi codices, Old Testament pseudepigrapha, early Syriac writings, New Testament versions, and fakes); J. K. Elliott excluded Rabbinic and Islamic traditions about Jesus, plus church orders; while Schneemelcher tagged anything after the fourth century as hagiography rather than apocrypha, despite formal similarities to older works.⁶

However, a good deal of what was commonly known as “New Testament apocrypha” failed these definitions on most counts. Elliott noted the inadequacies of the designation even as he used it: it implied that there was a recognized, fixed body of texts; that all these texts had an obvious relationship to genres found in the New Testament canon; and that they were all secret, spurious, or heterodox writings.⁷ His collection, and that of Schneemelcher, included documents that fell outside of the stated chronology, bore little or no formal relation to the writings of the New Testament, or by the proposed definitions—of either inclusion or exclusion—should have been ruled out-of-bounds. Given these problems, other scholars proposed replacing “New Testament apocrypha” with terms such as “rewritten Bible” or “parabiblical writings,” but even these designations relied too much on what the documents were not—canonical New Testament writings—rather than what they actually were.

More recently, scholars such as Éric Junod have argued that viewing early Christian apocrypha through the lens of canonicity is anachronistic and serves to distort more than illuminate. Further, they proposed that some texts may have been considered “scripture”—authoritative religious texts—by some communities, apart from the larger process that produced a biblical “canon”—a list of authoritative texts. (Thus the popular expression “books of the Bible that are not in the Bible” would more properly be “scriptures that are not part of Scripture”). They have also questioned the arbitrary time limitations imposed by traditional definitions, arguing that the scope of Christian

⁴ James H. Charlesworth, *Authentic Apocrypha: False and Genuine Christian Apocrypha* (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1998), 23.

⁵ Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 1:61.

⁶ James H. Charlesworth, *The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha: A Guide to Publications, with Excursuses on Apocalypses* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 49-58; Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, xii-xiii; Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:57-61.

⁷ Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, xi-xii.

apocrypha should include late medieval and even modern texts, as the religious impulse behind such works is the same.⁸

A shift in terminology reflects the redefinition of the field: the preferred designation is now “Early Christian Apocrypha” rather than “New Testament Apocrypha.” The newer, wider definition holds that anonymous or pseudepigraphical books need only maintain some connection with biblical books—by relation to people, events, or literary genre—to be considered Christian apocrypha. Thus, the field has been opened to accommodate texts from a wider time range, greater formal variation, and a wider definition of “scripture.”

COLLECTIVE RESOURCES

The practical implications for the librarian are clear: the field is in a certain amount of flux, older sources may be inadequate, and there is certainly more ground to cover than before. There will be no one source that will answer every question. It is a reflection of the transitional state of scholarship that the two English-language collections that will best serve most patrons are rooted in the older tradition of scholarship.

The most accessible English collection is that of J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Elliott’s collection is based on the classic text of the same title by M. R. James (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), which retains some value—in fact, a few of Elliott’s translations are taken almost verbatim from James. But Elliott’s book is more accessible than the older volume, with introductions and bibliographies clearly labeled and set apart from the translations. The introductions, while not overly technical, assume some knowledge of the field. Elliott does not include translations for every text, nor are all the translations complete; he does cite complete translations (where available), and includes extensive lists of foreign-language translations and ancient versions. Elliott’s clear introductions, extensive bibliographies, good index, and user-friendly formatting make it the first choice for both beginners and experienced students. A digest of this collection is available as *The Apocryphal Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The second important English collection is the two-volume work edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). Based on the classic German work by Edgar Hennecke, it is often cited simply as “Hennecke,” though that name no longer appears on the title page. Schneemelcher’s introductions are much more technical than those in Elliott, but due to Schneemelcher’s chronological restrictions the collection is more limited in the extent of texts covered, giving it the curious impression of being more in-depth but less broad than Elliott. Like Elliott, the works cited are not always translated, and, in any event, the translations are based on the German, which can prove problematic. Schneemelcher does have some translations that are not in Elliott, but since Elliott always lists them, they are easy to find. (Indeed, it is often easier to find the page numbers in Elliott, rather than the dense, Latin-based index in Schneemelcher. One also learns from Elliott that not all texts from the German edition are included in the English version.) The introductions reflect

⁸ Junod has argued for a wider scope and definition in “Apocryphes du Nouveau Testament ou apocryphes chrétiens anciens? Remarques sur la désignation d’un corpus et indications bibliographiques sur instruments de travail récents,” *Études théologiques et religieuses* 59 (1983): 409-421, and “‘Apocryphes du Nouveau Testament’: un appellation erronée et une collection artificielle,” *Apocrypha* 3 (1992): 17-46. On the relation of ancient and modern apocrypha, see Pierluigi Piovanelli, “What Is a Christian Apocryphal Text and How Does It Work? Some Observations on Apocryphal Hermeneutics,” *Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift* 59, no. 1 (January 2005): 31-40. For a review of recent research, plus an excellent bibliographic essay (to which this one is deeply indebted), see Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Early Christian Apocryphal Literature” in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 521-48.

the older canonically and chronologically oriented perspective; Schneemelcher's successor as editor of the series has promised to extend the scope of the new volume, adopting the title "Early Christian Apocrypha."

Older English collections still have some value, particularly that of James, and also Alexander Walker in Volume 8 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* set edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867; many reprints). The latter texts, which include complete translations not easily found elsewhere, are in the public domain and thus available online (see, for example, the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/>). The major problem with these older translations, however, is that they pre-date the many great textual finds of the last century, most notably the Nag Hammadi codices.

Under the older definition, only a handful of the Nag Hammadi texts would be included in the study of New Testament apocrypha—and thus only a small selection of these texts, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Philip*, are incorporated in Schneemelcher or Elliott. Yet there is no doubt that these texts have revolutionized the study of early Christianity and should be read alongside other texts of the period. The older English translation edited by James Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: E.J. Brill, first published 1977; 4th ed. 1996), has been superseded by a newer volume edited by Marvin Meyer, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (New York: HarperOne, 2007). Meyer has the advantage of including documents such as the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Judas* which, while not found at Nag Hammadi, are certainly part of the Gnostic corpus. For beginners, a better choice is the selective yet still substantial collection edited by Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), which provides both extensive introductions and notes.

Beginners can get started with smaller general collections, such as Elliott's *Apocryphal Jesus*, and Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), which includes brief introductions. Ehrman has also written a useful (if overly sensational) introduction to the literature and its milieu, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Slightly less authoritative, but still a useful orientation for beginners, is Fred Lapham, *An Introduction to the New Testament Apocrypha* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), which reflects recent scholarly trends by taking a geographical approach. More judicious and extensive are the two volumes by Hans-Josef Klauck, written in German but now available in translation: *Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2003) and *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008). Just published is Paul Foster, *The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), which true to its title is concise yet informative.

Advanced students will want to consult the most recent German edition of Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 6th ed. 1990). Those with Italian skills can benefit from the collection edited by Mario Erbetta, *Gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento* (Torino: Marietti, 1966), which has a more complete selection of texts than Schneemelcher, and, while lacking the scholarly introductions, includes an abundance of useful notes. Another broad Italian collection is Luigi Moraldi, *Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento* (Torino: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1971). The French collection edited by François Bovon, Pierre Geoltrain, and J.-D. Kaestli, *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997 and 2005), also known as the "Pléiade" edition due its inclusion in that series of classics, has the advantage of top-quality notes and introductions that reflect recent advances in scholarship; it is almost as extensive as Erbetta, and, like Erbetta, awaits an authoritative English edition.

CRITICAL EDITIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES

The Pléiade edition draws on the collective resources of the *Association pour l'étude de la littérature apocryphe chrétienne* (AELAC), the foremost international organization for the study of Christian apocrypha. The group's French Web site (<http://www2.unil.ch/aelac/>) includes the most extensive bibliography in the field, currently updated to 2007; it boasts both topical and author arrangements. AELAC is also responsible for the *Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum*, a series of critical editions of primary texts which has already resulted in fifteen volumes, with many more planned, including concordances of each text. In addition, the group publishes the only journal dedicated to the subject, *Apocrypha* (now indexed by the ATLA Religion Database, Index Theologicus, and New Testament Abstracts, in addition to the online index provided on the Web site). While the AELAC work is mainly in French, *Apocrypha* includes some English-language articles.

Apart from *Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum*, the major collections of primary texts tend to be nineteenth-century editions such as Constantin von Tischendorf, *Apocalypses Apocryphae Mosis, Esdrae, Pauli, Iohannis*, (Leipzig: H. Mendelssohn, 1866; reprinted Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1966) and *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Leipzig: H. Mendelssohn, 1876; also reprinted by Olms); Richard Lipsius and Max Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Leipzig: H. Mendelssohn, 1891; reprinted Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959); and M. R. James, *Apocrypha Anecdota* (Cambridge: University Press, 1893 and 1897).

More recently, the Oxford Early Christian Gospel Texts, with new critical texts, facing translations, and extensive notes, has gotten a promising start with volumes on the *Gospel of Mary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) and several gospel fragments (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Also concentrating on gospel fragments is Andrew Bernhard, *Other Early Christian Gospels* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006). Otherwise, for any particular text, editions of the ancient versions can most conveniently be found in Elliott.

Nag Hammadi texts continue to receive separate treatment. A critical edition of the Coptic texts has been published by Robinson, *The Coptic Gnostic Library* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). Bibliographic needs are well-served by David M. Scholer, *Nag Hammadi Bibliography 1948-1969* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1970-1994* (New York: Brill, 1997), and *Nag Hammadi Bibliography, 1995-2006* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

For a more general English bibliography, James H. Charlesworth with James R. Mueller, *The New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987) has the advantage of clarity of organization and includes secondary literature as well as primary-language editions and translations. It is, however, rooted in the older approach to the subject and uses a cryptic set of abbreviations that (fortunately) never caught on. Also, Charlesworth sometimes fails to exercise critical discernment, as when he includes G. J. R. Ouseley's *Gospel of the Holy Twelve*, a modern apocryphon, in the bibliography for the ancient work cited by Origen and Jerome, the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (now often identified with the lost *Gospel of the Ebionites*). For finding editions of primary texts there is no more thorough source than Maurice Geerard, *Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1992), which, being entirely in Latin may be off-putting for all but advanced students. However, since critical editions sometimes include translations, it is a resource the librarian cannot afford to ignore.

ONLINE RESOURCES

But what to do with that patron who just wants a quick reference to a readable translation? Peter Kirby's "Early Christian Writings" Web site (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>) includes a searchable chronological list of a wide variety of early Christian writings from the canonical Gospels to Origen, with brief introductions and links to

online discussions and translations. Another good collection is available at the Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwest Nazarene University (http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/). For Gnostic writings, there is an extensive online collection at the “Gnostic Archive” (<http://www.gnosis.org/>). A more comprehensive solution, which includes all the major apocryphal works plus the Nag Hammadi texts, is the “Early Christian Apocrypha Alphabetical List,” included in the “Early Christian Apocrypha” research guide from Pitts Theology Library, Emory University (<http://guides.theology.library.emory.edu/eca>, under “Texts and Translations”; the list is accessible independently at <http://guides.theology.library.emory.edu/data/files2/61332/EarlyChristianApocryphaList.html>). This list includes all the titles found in Elliott, Schneemelcher, Meyer, Charlesworth, and more. Texts are listed in alphabetical order using an expanding Javascript menu; clicking on a title reveals a brief description, the original language and century of composition (where known), bibliographic references, and, most importantly, where to find authoritative English translations (even when they are not available in the standard collections). This is perhaps the most complete listing of early Christian apocryphal texts in one place; using it, the librarian need never be stumped by an exotic title again.

CONCLUSION

Early Christian apocrypha comprise just one small corner of early Christian studies, but the corpus proves to be a vast, often unfamiliar territory of its own. It is not, however, entirely uncharted, and, as so often, the librarian need not know all the answers, but only where to find them.

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