

Pedagogical reflections on New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures, volume 2

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**Sean Hannan** 

Humanities Department, MacEwan University, Canada

Abstract

In this review article, the author makes the case for Tony Burke's recent second volume of *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (Eerdmans, 2020) as a publication that can help historians and scholars of religion navigate the convoluted warrens of ancient Christian literature. Adopting a pedagogical lens, the author argues that this volume goes deeper than standard tomes like Marvin Meyer's *Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (HarperOne, 2007), offering its audience a more rigorously up-to-date picture of the state of Apocrypha research. The level of rigour and detail on display here might also make the volume more suitable for graduate or upper-level undergraduate courses. In order to support his presentation of the pedagogical value of Burke's work, the author draws on specific examples rooted in several primary sources contained therein, from the Old Uyghur *Adoration of the Magi* to the Byzantine *Life of Mary Magdalene*.

Résumé

Dans cet article d'analyse, l'auteur présente le deuxième volume de *New Testament Apocrypha : More Noncanonical Scriptures* (Eerdmans, 2020) de Tony Burke comme une publication qui peut aider les historiens et les spécialistes de la religion à naviguer dans les dédales de la littérature chrétienne ancienne. Adoptant un point de vue pédagogique, l'auteur soutient que ce volume va plus loin que les tomes standard tels que *Nag Hammadi Scriptures* de Marvin Meyer (HarperOne, 2007), offrant à son public une image plus à jour de l'état de la recherche sur les Apocryphes. Le niveau de rigueur et de détail présenté ici pourrait également rendre l'ouvrage plus adapté à des cours de deuxième cycle ou des cours supérieurs de premier cycle. Pour étayer sa présentation de la valeur pédagogique du travail de Burke, l'auteur s'appuie sur des exemples spécifiques ancrés dans plusieurs sources primaires contenues dans l'ouvrage, de l'ancienne adoration des mages ouïghoure à la vie byzantine de Marie de Magdala.

Keywords

New Testament Apocrypha, noncanonical texts, pedagogy, Zoroastrianism, Mary Magdalene

Corresponding author:

Sean Hannan, MacEwan University, 10700 104 Avenue NW, Edmonton, AB T5J 2P2, Canada.

Email: hannans@macewan.ca

Mots clés

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I approach the second volume of Tony Burke's *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* primarily as a pedagogue. Accordingly, I am framing this review from a pedagogical perspective, inspired by recent work in what is called SoTL, or scholarship on teaching and learning (Foster, 2002; Hutchings, 2000).¹ To put things straightforwardly, I cannot pretend to have the linguistic, literary or textual knowledge to evaluate how the manuscripts involved here were used or to adjudicate their translations. In a way, this is freeing, though I acknowledge at the same time that it places a pre-emptive limit on how wide-ranging or relevant my analysis can be in the eyes of those who specialize in the Apocrypha or alternative strands of ancient Christian literature.

Nevertheless, I do teach apocryphal sources (in translation) semi-frequently at MacEwan University, my home institution in Edmonton, Canada. On a two-year cycle, I teach a fourth-year seminar on early and late ancient Christian Apocrypha, which addresses the formation of the canon(s), the debates over the definition of orthodoxy, and the problems involved in the use of terms like 'gnosis' or 'Gnosticism' or 'proto-orthodox'. In alternate years, I teach a mysticism and gender course, which emphasizes the voices of medieval women, but which can – from time to time – draw on ancient forerunners of these later visionaries. In either case, my goal is to invite students to approach the study of Christianity from vantage points they might not have previously considered. My aim is, in other words, to get them to think outside the usual channels through which they might have received their prior notions of what 'Christianity' is or what 'Christian' communities were up to in the premodern period.

From that point of view, I would have to judge this recent volume a success. It features numerous idiosyncratic yet uniquely relevant texts, most of which touch on topics that are likely to interest not just 'insider' students in a Christian-centric setting, but also students with other religious backgrounds or even no religious background whatsoever (as is the case with many of the students I happen to teach). These manuscripts have been drawn from both antiquity and the Middle Ages, vastly expanding the chronological range covered by the term 'Apocrypha' (which some might prematurely limit to the first few centuries of the history of Christianity). And, in that respect, this collection adds a new dimension not just to the study of the Apocrypha in a sense restricted to specialists, but also to the production of pedagogical resources that can be used in upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate seminars alike.

If I were to compare it to (for example) Marvin Meyer's (2007) *Nag Hammadi Scriptures* volume, I would have to laud Burke's volume for laying the foundations needed not just to exceed our chronological expectations, but also to go above and beyond in deepening the paratextual apparatus and adding substance to the translators' introductions to each piece.² In a perfect world, I would consider assigning Meyer alongside a Burke volume, although I realize I should probably refrain from pushing the page count to unmanageable levels.

The Adoration of the Magi

Let me turn now to more concrete examples that can back up some of the general praise I have already shared. The very first translated source in the volume is a translation of a text in the Old Uyghur language. It has now been dubbed *The Adoration of the Magi*, prepared for this volume by Adam Carter Bremer-McCollum (2020).³ The text appeals for many reasons: it has been translated out of a language that many of my students would not expect to be a source of fresh Apocrypha; it adds layers to our understanding of how Persian cultural traditions intersected with late antique and medieval Turkic-language Christian communities; and its translator rightly frames the text in light of the ‘colonialist expeditions’ that extracted manuscripts like this out of Turfan, a Silk Road city now located in Xinjiang, China (Bremer-McCollum, 2020: 3).

But what I think my students will really find thought-provoking in this Old Uyghur *Adoration of the Magi* is its contribution to the literature on the infancy of Jesus. In past years of teaching my Apocrypha course, I have noticed that many students are especially interested in *protevangelia* like *The Infancy Gospel of James* (which is, to be fair, more about Mary, the mother of Jesus; Miller, 1994: 380–394) or *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (which contains many strange stories about a young Jesus; Miller, 1994: 369–379).⁴ The Old Uyghur *Adoration of the Magi*, which (the translator notes) may derive from a prior Syriac narrative, touches on elements that might be familiar to readers of such *protevangelia*. The infant ‘Son of the eternal God’ speaks in rather well-constructed sentences, for instance. At one point, he remarks: ‘O Magi! You entered with three kinds of thought. I am Son of God, and I am also king, and I am also physician’ (Bremer-McCollum, 2020: 4). As the context makes clear, those three kinds of thought correspond to the gifts the infant has just received: incense for the Son of God, gold for the king, and the intriguingly phrased ‘grass-cure’ (Bremer-McCollum, 2020: 3 – a Central Asian myrrh parallel?) for the physician.

In a recent iteration of my Apocrypha course, one of my students was a young parent who remarked to me that they could immediately recognize the reality, or at least the verisimilitude, of the depiction of Jesus in texts like *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Having expected some of my students to be surprised by the depiction of the young Jesus there – with his giving life to birds of clay (*The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 2; Miller, 1994: 371; see also Surahs 3:49 and 5:113 of the Qur’an) or his striking down of other children (*The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 3–4; Miller, 1994: 371–372) – I was in turn surprised by this particular student’s glowing reaction. Gradually enough, it became clearer to me that readers of these apocryphal texts do tend to respond positively to the way they integrate their portrayal of Jesus into well-known topoi regarding the raising or rearing of children. The depiction of Jesus as acting out in violent ways or speaking out of turn does not so much alienate these readers as invite them into a world they have always wanted to explore.

This early emphasis in Burke’s volume on a childhood text is therefore most welcome. One could imagine positioning it alongside recent work on the topic of childhood in ancient Jewish cultures. I am thinking here of the research being done by scholars of the history of religions like Shawn Flynn (2018, 2019). At least at my institution, where our students are often themselves parents, historical texts that intersect with child-rearing

and the interpretation of the various facets of childhood can prove incredibly effective as teaching tools.

Even setting the innate appeal of childhood studies aside, the Old Uyghur *Adoration of the Magi* provides fresh fodder for the study of how various Christianities integrated Persian Zoroastrian frameworks – and their Central Asian analogues – into new narratives. As a teacher who is always trying to get my students to think about Christianity in terms other than stereotypical forms of ‘original’ Greek-language gospel-writing and ‘imperial’ Latinized Christian literature, I found this text a godsend. I could perhaps pair it with related primary sources, such as *Zostrianos* or even *The Apocryphon of John*, with its reference to a lost *Book of Zoroaster*.⁵ As the Old Uyghur version tells it, the speaking infant Jesus gives a gift to the Magi in exchange for their own three gifts. In response to the incense and gold and grass-cure, he gives the Zoroastrian Magi a piece of his own stone cradle. Struggling to carry this hunk of hewn stone, the Zoroastrians tossed it down a well, just to get rid of it. When it struck the bottom of the well, however, a ‘terrible light with fire came forth up to the sky and remained’ (*The Adoration of the Magi* 6). And on the basis of this experience (so says the Apocryphon, caring not at all about the blatant anachronism), the Zoroastrians came to revere flames. To quote the primary source again: ‘This is the reason that the Magi honor fire to this very day’ (7). In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the Hymn of the Pearl in *The Acts of Thomas*, the text also emphasizes the unrecognized nature of the fragment of the stone cradle that the infant Jesus gave to the Zoroastrian Magi (Attridge, 2010; Burns, 2013; Ferreira, 2000; Jonas, 2001: 112–129; Parpola, 2001; Poirier, 1986; Young, 2007). It was a ‘jewel’, as it happens, although they did not know it (*The Adoration of the Magi* 7).

As someone who works on Augustine from time to time, I am always trying to find less boring ways to weave Augustinian texts into my own courses. In that regard, I have found only modest success. Take, for example, the pedagogical desire (which I share) to invite students to consider the overlap between Persian Zoroastrian cultural traditions and Latin or so-called ‘western’ Christian traditions. Augustine, considered in isolation from much later intra-Christian disputes (e.g. those of the Reformation era), should serve as an obvious historical case study here. He was an African with a Latin linguistic and cultural education, but he was also a fervent adherent of Manichaeism for many years, demonstrating little discomfort with the Zoroastrian-influenced elements of that Jesus-revering movement (see, for example, Augustine, 1992: 40–41, 48–56). Nevertheless, I have found that students often struggle to appreciate that particular dimension of Augustine. He simply does not strike them as a compelling figure through which to think through the relationship between Persian Zoroastrian influences and premodern Christian culture. The Old Uyghur *Adoration of the Magi*, however, with its reference to King Herod as ‘Khirodees Khan’, might strike students as a more compelling source (Bremer-McCollum, 2020: 5).⁶

Peter, Judas and Mary Magdalene

I have examined the first text of this volume in some detail, but it is followed by numerous other similarly rich texts in this substantial volume. There is the work of J Edward Walters (2020a, 2020b), who has two entries: the Syriac *Exhortation of Peter*

and *Travels of Peter*. Taken together, these texts inform the reader about key themes in Syriac Christianities and shade in otherwise hazy details about the role played by demons in those traditions (some of which deal with disturbing assaults). I can already envision a new version of my upper-level seminar that would combine these translations by Walters with his exciting new collection of ‘eastern’ Christian sources (Walters, 2021).

There is also the rendering of *The Life of Judas* offered by Mari Mamyán and Brandon W Hawk (2020). This is a useful exemplar of a medieval Latin text, probably dating to the twelfth century, which problematizes the notion that the term ‘Apocrypha’ can only be used for very early or late ancient Christian documents. While the translators offer France (in the vaguest possible sense) as the likely site of textual production, the contents of this brief narrative do seem to have been circulated around various vernacular regions of Europe in short order (Mamyán and Hawk, 2020: 213). The content of the text itself suggests a trauma-origin narrative aiming to at once instil sympathy and cultivate disgust in its readers, who will empathize with the Judas who is rejected by his mother but also eviscerate the Judas who betrayed Jesus.

Finally, there is the translation of the Byzantine Greek *Life of Mary Magdalene*, produced by Christine Luckritz Marquis (2020). As mentioned previously, in addition to teaching courses on the Apocrypha, I teach seminars on the theme of gender. Whenever I can find sources in which these themes intersect, I take note. *The Life of Mary Magdalene* is one of those texts. As the translator points out, previous appraisals of the text may have placed it too early: eighth or tenth century. Could it really be a Byzantine creation? It is possible, but not all that likely. Instead, Marquis (2020: 225) argues that it is more likely that high or late medieval Byzantine scribes borrowed from the account of Mary Magdalene’s life given in *The Golden Legend*. That would match up well with the timeline of the Fourth Crusade and the Latin Empire. Could it be that the arrival of those ‘crude Latins’ in thirteenth-century Constantinople occasioned a revival in reverence for Mary Magdalene among Greek Christians?

The main text of *The Life of Mary Magdalene* is slightly longer and more substantial than certain other offerings in this volume. It uses that space well. The Apocryphon frames Mary Magdalene as an anointer and miracle worker (1.13), as well as a defeater of demons (at least seven, corresponding to a set of vices) and an outright preacher (9.2). She also seems to possess proto-mystical or visionary capacities, being transported from the middle of the Mediterranean to a safe harbour in Massilia (modern-day Marseilles; 8.4) and even appearing in the visions of other human beings (9.3, 6, 8). To add to all that, Mary baptizes broadly (12.2, 13.5) and plays a leading role in resurrecting a woman who had died after giving birth to a child (12.1–16). The translator sums up the piece in a footnote as appropriating *The Golden Legend* and folding it back into a ‘Greek’ framework that would satisfy Byzantine Christians – for example, by making sure that Mary Magdalene dies in John’s Ephesus (13.8), not in the France of her supposed miraculous journey (Marquis, 2020: 237, 238). From a pedagogical standpoint, I think this text can take us much further than that, outstripping the limited context of its production and reaching out to embrace an impressively broadened spectrum of visions concerning how women contributed to premodern Christian life.

Conclusion

I would be hard-pressed to call Burke's latest volume of *New Testament Apocrypha* anything but a gift to those trying to figure out better ways to teach such challenging material. At the most basic level, it grants post-secondary instructors the chance to connect the (for lack of a better word) 'mainstream' texts they often teach to a richer body of apocryphal literature. Here, I am thinking of when, as I described above, I am teaching Augustine and casting about for ways to demonstrate the rich inheritance of Zoroastrian-influenced Christianities as evidenced even as far afield as North Africa.

In addition, I would like to reiterate the claim that collected volumes like this one do a magnificent job of diversifying approaches to the field. Beyond that, they broaden students' perspectives out in the direction of a global or transregional study of the history of various Christianities. Even if my previously stated desire of integrating 'mainstream' authors with 'less mainstream' authors does not work out, I would still hope that a variegated study of the Apocrypha would open up our collective research projects to horizons not yet previously anticipated. The sheer range of languages engaged by the folks who contributed to this volume – from Syriac to Old Uyghur and beyond – seems to be signing us a promissory note in that regard.

Lastly, I will add that one of this volume's strongest features is the way it integrates itself into the *e-Clavis* database hosted on the website of the North American Society for the Study of Christian Apocryphal Literature,⁷ which, when this volume was published, had 'entries for over one hundred texts and more than 150 *Manuscripta apocryphorum* pages' that continue to be updated 'with new scholarship and new manuscript sources' (Burke, 2020: xix–xx). This is a resource that compiles entries on a wide range of early Christian texts, accompanying them with invaluable introductions and paratexts, while also connecting each primary source to the relevant secondary literature (whether it, too, is available online or only in physical archives). In addition to teaching courses on the history of religions, one of my other tasks at MacEwan is to foster the growth of the digital humanities and encourage digital engagement with primary sources, including all of the primary texts in this volume, two of which I discuss in this review. Burke's volume does not simply lend itself to that possibility; it takes us one step further, asking its readers to continue deepening their study of the Apocrypha by following up with responsible, usable and accessible online sources.

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ORCID iD

Sean Hannan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1531-3467>

Notes

1. Illinois State University's Office of the Cross Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has compiled an exhaustive bibliography. See <https://sotl.illinoisstate.edu/resources/castl/bibliography.php>
2. That is not to slight the extra material found in the Meyer (2007: 777–798) volume. I, along with my students, have gained much from its 'Epilogue', featuring fuller essays on Thomasine Christianity, the Sethians, the Valentinians and Hermeticism by, respectively, Meyer, John D Turner, Einar Thomassen and Jean-Pierre Mahé.
3. There is not as much secondary literature on this text as there should be, but Bremer-McCollum suggests further research avenues in the *e-Clavis* entry. See <https://www.nasscal.com/e-clavis-christian-apocrypha/adoration-of-the-magi/>
4. When I teach the *protevangelia*, I usually depend on Miller (1994).
5. See *The Secret Book of John*, translated by Meyer and Turner (2007: 124): 'This is the number of angels. In all, they number 365. They all worked together until, limb by limb, the psychical and material body was completed. Now, there are others over the remaining passions, and I have not told you about them. If you want to know about them, the information is recorded in the *Book of Zoroaster*'. See also note 89: 'The precise identification of the *Book of Zoroaster* remains uncertain, but the title calls to mind the text *Zostrianos* or else Porphyry's *Life of Plotinos* 16, where Porphyry refers to other texts written under the name of Zoroaster, including a *Book of Zoroaster*'. For *Zostrianos*, see the translation by Turner in Meyer (2007: 585–594).
6. Here, the translator is citing a 1907 letter from Albert von le Coq to Gustaf Richard Raquette.
7. See <https://www.nasscal.com/e-clavis-christian-apocrypha>

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