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Christian Apocrypha and the Exegesis of the New Testament

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Abstract

The present article discusses why the study of Christian Apocrypha and Parabiblical Traditions is crucial not only for the understanding of early Christian History but also for the theological field of New Testament Exegesis. It starts with the author's definition of Christian Apocrypha and Parabiblica and offers examples for the heuristic value of such an understanding. It discusses the impact of apocryphal writings and parabiblical traditions for the reception history of the New Testament and for the understanding of the history, understanding and development of genres of ancient Christian writings like apocalypses and Gospels. After this it develops and discusses three major theses about the impact of Christian Apocrypha for the understanding of the New Testament canon, its fundamental openness and history even after its formal closure. Finally, it offers opportunities of inter-theological interdisciplinary dialogue.

Keywords: apocrypha; New Testament canon; reception history; open canon

1. Introduction

To this day, in the eyes of many scholars who study the New Testament or even the history of early Christianity, the so-called apocrypha play only a marginal role. The apocrypha are usually understood as writings that seek to imitate the texts of the New Testament but have not been accepted as part of the biblical, especially the New Testament canon. This is often linked with further prejudices: the texts are said to be heretical, and thus not appropriate for the faith defined by the majority church, not interested in high theology, simply poorly told, or even written in bad taste. These writings are also more or less worthless for the reconstruction of early Christianity—and thus historically uninteresting per se.[1] The number of persistent prejudices could easily be continued. However, when a group of sources is treated in this way, it cannot develop the significance that it rightly deserves. A large part of the work on Christian apocrypha consists of repeatedly dispelling prejudices. In the volume *Reading Christian Apocrypha* (Nicklas and Spittler 2025), Janet Spittler and I have shown how much our image of Christianity—not only of antiquity—deepens and broadens at the most diverse levels as soon as we also take a look at little-known apocrypha that are marginal from our perspective. There, we aimed to demonstrate by way of examples how much more complex discourses about Jesus, the origins of Christianity, time and history, the structure of the cosmos, and much more become as soon as we include apocryphal testimonies in our constructions. The question about the relationship between Jews and Christians in antiquity—often treated somewhat simplistically with the paradigm "the parting of the ways"—also becomes significantly more exciting and complex when we include the apocrypha.[2] This article,

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however, addresses a different question: what does working on apocrypha mean for the subject of "New Testament exegesis," which tends to see itself as a *theological* subject and which, quite deliberately, already seems to presuppose a limitation to the canon (or the writings of the New Testament canon) in its self-designation? Is it possible, useful, or perhaps even necessary to work with the apocrypha at all within the framework of such a discipline? And if so, can they play more than an extremely marginal role? It is obvious that this field does not work with the New Testament *alone*. It is generally recognized that it uses the writings of the Old Testament as privileged intertexts, alluded to and quoted beginning with the first lines of the New Testament. But does something comparable apply equally to the apocrypha? Before I get to the bottom of these questions, I must first briefly describe what I understand by "(Christian) apocrypha" and, connected with it, Parabiblica or "parabiblical traditions".

2. A Definition of Christian Apocrypha and Parabiblical Traditions

The so-called "Christian apocrypha" is a fundamentally open group of texts that are repeatedly referred to as "New Testament apocrypha" in order to distinguish them from the apocrypha of the Old Testament, i.e., texts such as Judith, Tobit, or the books of Maccabees. While in Protestant churches the term "Old Testament Apocrypha" refers to the writings that belong to the Septuagint canon but not to the Hebrew Bible, i.e., the texts that are referred to as deuterocanonical in the Roman Catholic Church, it is not easy to define the group of texts called the Christian apocrypha.[3] One necessary, but not sufficient criterion is that these texts did not become a part of the biblical canon. In addition, it makes sense to place them in a close intertextual relationship with the writings of the Bible, including, particularly often, the New Testament.[4] This can have a variety of reasons: it is often mentioned in this context that Christian apocrypha represent the genres that we also find in the New Testament, that is, the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, apostolic letters, and Revelation.[5] In many cases, this is true as long as we do not simply understand the apocrypha as texts that imitate the New Testament genres. Above all, however, there are apocryphal texts that do not really correspond to any New Testament genre: lists of apostles, journeys to the otherworld, collections of the teachings of Jesus, gospel meditations, collections of the miracles of Mary, etc. It is therefore helpful to bear in mind that the apocrypha share important aspects of the narrative world of the Bible:[6] starting with the God of Israel[7] and Jesus of Nazareth, but also including the apostles, Pilate, Simon Magus, and others, the same characters in them as in the writings of the Bible. These may include prominent figures such as Noah, Abraham, Solomon (among others) from the Old Testament.[8] Furthermore, the apocrypha usually share the narrative logic of the biblical scriptures and many of the motifs found in them: many of them tell of the miraculous works of God in the world, of people who convert to Christ, etc.[9] If we want to avoid an overly technical definition of the term apocrypha, this may suffice for the present purposes.[10]

Since the word "apocryphal" was not only prejudiced in modern times but was already associated in ancient times with many prejudices (see, e.g., Nicklas 2011), attempts are repeatedly made to avoid the word "apocryphal" and replace it with other terms. After all, the word "apocryphal" literally means "secret" or "hidden"[11]—and since ancient times "apocryphal writings" have repeatedly been equated with forgeries or heresies. However, many of the writings to which I refer here are and were anything but secret. At least at certain times and in certain regions, some of the were very influential, and even played important roles in ecclesiastical-political decisions.[12] To categorize these texts as "heretical" would not even begin to do justice to their role.

The attempt to replace the term "apocrypha" with a generally accepted new term has also had little success so far. I often use the word "Parabiblica" as a largely interchangeable alternative to "apocrypha."[13] When I have talked about parabiblical *traditions* for some time, then, unlike with "Christian apocrypha," I am not only referring to writings alone, but also to the interrelations between the representations of apocryphal stories and motifs in different media, e.g., in images.[14] I imagine how these representations virtually intertwine and enter into dialogue with each other; these are therefore "Entangled Traditions."[15] It turns out that it is not always texts that form the starting point of a parabiblical tradition, but that this (e.g., in the well-known miracle of Peter's creation of a well in the Mamertinian prison)[16] can also lie with images or other media, which are followed by the literary representations of the story, only much later.

Perhaps it is also important to briefly address some of the consequences that arise from this understanding of the apocrypha: the origin of the apocrypha is not *per definitionem* tied to a specific time period. A few of them may be older than some of the writings of the New Testament, but most of them were certainly written later. However, I see no chronological limit to the origin of such texts (or traditions and representations in other media). It may even make sense to interpret writings of our time—e.g., Jesus novels—in a broad sense as apocrypha.[17] Of course, they were created under very different conditions than the writings of antiquity and the Middle Ages, and of course they are simply not the same. Nevertheless, depending on the question, it can be extremely useful to understand them as apocrypha (or parabiblica) and bring them into dialogue with the canonical writings. But even for the ancient world, the result is exciting: where the boundary of the origin of apocrypha is roughly equated with the broad closing of the New Testament canon,[18] the possible material is unnecessarily and artificially restricted.[19] I can only illustrate this with an example: with the still frequently encountered chronological limit in the fourth century, research concentrates on five apocryphal acts of the apostles (Acts of John, Paul [and Thecla], Andrew, Peter, and Thomas) in their only fragmentarily preserved original form.[20] The texts are thus reduced to fragmentary testimonies of alleged marginal phenomena within Christianity. However, this not only overlooks the fact that dozens of other apostle narratives were created after the fourth century, but above all that and how much the old five acts of the apostles were not only handed down in ever new guises, but also remained influential in new contexts.[21] In other words, when we speak of apocrypha, we are not just dealing with a few marginal testimonies of obscure popular piety, nor with fragmentary remains of heretical byways of Christian theological history, but at least in some cases with highly influential writings and traditions that have shaped and continue to shape cultures and societies. In principle, the actualization and new production of such writings and traditions have never come to an end. Where interest does not stop at written testimonies and opens up to the representation of apocrypha in images, music, film, space, rites and performance, etc., which in turn are in intermedial dialogue,[22] an enormous, hitherto little-explored, yet fascinating field emerges, which is relevant in different ways for the various subjects interested in the study of the Bible.

3. Apocrypha and Exegesis of the New Testament

When I speak of New Testament exegesis, I am describing a subject that is often found in decidedly theological faculties and institutes and that are first and foremost dedicated to the study of the writings of the New Testament canon, their tradition, origin, and interpretation, but at the same time also to the canon itself, its origin, and history, as well as the hermeneutics of the appropriate handling of canonical writings and the canon itself. The first scholarly points of contact for this subject are to be found in the theological disciplines, although exegesis is unthinkable without close interdisciplinary cooperation

with a wide range of subjects, from philology to literary studies, from history to philosophy. Within theology, it is also dependent on the exegesis of the Old Testament because of the deep intertextual links of the New Testament to the Old; the Old Testament in the form of the Septuagint plays a prominent role here.

At least at first glance, concentrating on the writings of the canon seems appropriate in this structure, preferably in a reconstructed form that is as close as possible to the original text.[23] Nevertheless, it is not only the case that New Testament apocrypha is also of interest to this subject, but it can also make a decisive contribution.

3.1. Apocrypha and the History of Reception

Some points are obvious: New Testament exegesis that is not interested in topics related to the history of reception is in danger of believing that it is possible to simply leap over the historical gulf that separates today's people from the time of the New Testament writings.[24] When we speak of such a "historical gulf," we must not imagine it to be empty, but full of interpretations of New Testament texts and motifs that influence our understanding of the New Testament today. If we want to be aware of where and how this happens, the history of the reception of the New Testament cannot be ignored. In recent decades, this has indeed led to a boom in studies and projects in which apocrypha have not always received the space they deserve.[25] And yet there are numerous examples that show how much the apocrypha influences our understanding of the New Testament writings to this day: of course, most exegetes are aware that the Magi of the East who pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews (Matt 2:1–12) are not the three holy kings, as they are usually depicted iconographically. It is less obvious that the lake of fire in the book of Revelation (Rev 19:20 and 20:15), for example, has nothing to do with what later Christian tradition came to call hell.[26] The Christian ideas of the damned being punished in an (eternal) hell find their roots in apocrypha such as the now almost forgotten Apocalypse of Peter and later highly influential writings such as the Visio Pauli (in the West) or the Apocalypse of the Virgin Mary (in the East). It was only the presence of such notions of hell in the "cultural memory"[27] of Christian groups that led to these ideas repeatedly *also* entering into the interpretations of the book of Revelation as a matter of course:[28] in other words, later, apocryphal ideas entered into the interpretation of the New Testament in the course of history. The examples could be continued. Be that as it may, it is clear that Christian apocrypha constitute an important part of the history of the reception of New Testament writings. In many cases, they are not simply marginal additions to New Testament writings but have offered the spectacles through which the writings of the New Testament were and are viewed.

3.2. Apocrypha and the History of Genres

A second example: if at least some Christian apocrypha represent genres that we also find in the writings of the New Testament, then it makes sense to include them if we want to understand the origin, development, and meaning of New Testament genres. This is particularly evident in the case of the genre of "apocalypses," which, although named after the first word of the book of Revelation, includes many texts that bear only a very superficial resemblance to Revelation. While the problem has been recognized for a long time in the case of the apocalypses because the oldest of them—such as 1 Enoch—can be assigned to the apocryphal early Jewish literature,[29] the situation is quite different for gospels. The most influential attempt to define the genre of the "gospel" is that of Richard Burridge, who understands the New Testament "gospels" in the context of ancient biographies.[30] One of the major problems with this approach, however, is that Burridge's fundamentally *genre-historical* approach focuses solely on the Gospels of the New Testament, a collection

that artificially selects four texts from the number of gospels that were actually handed down historically. One could counter that the canonical Gospels are the oldest examples of the "gospel" genre. This assumption is not improbable, but it is also not certain.[31] But I see the bigger problem in the fact that even the later production of (in this case apocryphal) texts, which in many cases bear the title "gospel," shows what ancient people apparently understood by gospels. The fact that such different writings like the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of Jesus logia, or the Gospel of Mary, essentially a dialogue with the risen "Soter," can be found, shows that the criteria for reading a text as a gospel in ancient times were probably different from those applied by Burridge.[32] In other words, where one seeks to define and understand the genre of "gospel" *solely* on the basis of the four Gospels of the New Testament, which are also interdependent in literary terms, one overlooks the decisive factor, namely the diversity of what ancient Christianity actually understood by "gospel."

3.3. Apocrypha and the Understanding of the Canon

Work on apocryphal and parabiblical traditions becomes especially exciting, however, as soon as it is placed in relation to the understanding of the canon. I will illustrate this with three theses:

3.3.1. Thesis 1

Although the list of texts that make up the canon of the New Testament is practically closed in most Christian communities,[33] this does not mean that there is something like a clear dividing line between canonical and non-canonical material. For this reason, I speak of a communicative space that connects canonical and non-canonical material.[34] That means—the canon is not as closed as we may think.

That the New Testament canon is at least in some places open to the infiltration of apocrypha is already evident from the fact that Jude quotes from 1 Enoch and seems to allude to an apocryphal writing related to Moses (Jude 14).[35] It has also been known for a long time that some kind of literary dependency exists between 2 Peter and the apocryphal Apocalypse of Peter. Wolfgang Grünstäudl has now shown that the canonical 2 Peter is not the source of the apocryphal text. Instead, it can be assumed that the Apocalypse of Peter was the source of 2 Peter (Grünstäudl 2019, pp. 289–308). But there are also exciting discoveries to be made beyond this: Kelsie G. Rodenbiker, for example, has shown that the depiction of the character of Job in the Epistle of James does not simply go back to the canonical book of Job, but is influenced by the early Jewish apocryphal Testament of Job (Rodenbiker 2017). Other examples can be found at the level of textual tradition: the most famous example of an apocryphal text that has found its way into most Bible editions to this day is the so-called Pericope de Adultera from John 7:53–8:11.[36] But this is by no means the only such passage. One can think of the so-called Agrapha, i.e., apocryphal words of Jesus that can be found in some manuscripts of the New Testament, e.g., in Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D),[37] or also of reminiscences of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, which have found their way into some manuscripts of the Pastoral Epistles (see in great detail in Kraus 2021, pp. 118–50). In his fascinating volume *Words Are Not Enough*, Garrick Allen has shown how much (sometimes very different) paratexts (from titles to introductions and reading instructions), chapter divisions, cross-references, maps, and images have also been part of what we call the Bible since antiquity (Allen 2024). Not one of these paratexts is canonical, and it hardly makes sense to simply label all of them "apocryphal" in the traditional sense. They are extra-canonical, perhaps not part of the biblical texts or the Bible, but they are part of (many) Bibles (plural!).[38] All of this becomes even more interesting when we open our perspective to parabiblical traditions (including not only textual representations but images, etc.) and look at illustrated Bibles. For example, if John the evangelist is depicted

together with his scribe Prochorus, then this adds an aspect to the respective Bible that goes back to an apocryphal writing, namely the Acts of John by Prochorus.[39] This work, in turn, takes up at least parts of the well-known older Acts of John, condemned by the Second Council of Nicaea (787 CE) (see in more detail in Spittler 2023a). In other words, an apocryphal text influences the ideas conveyed in a Bible about the origin of the Johannine writings through images.

Looking at images helps us to go even further. When we look at the representations of canonical texts or textual passages in images or image sequences, we will always discover details that are not presented in the text, and at the same time recognize that the pictorial representation must also reduce the text. It usually becomes clear which specific text is meant—but each image simultaneously says more and less than a text, and it may also set the focus in a different way. *This is simply because narration with the help of the medium of images is not identical to narration with the help of the medium of text*. This applies in principle to any transfer of a text into another medium. This is true for every performance of texts (whether it be a simple reading, a freely narrated re-staging, a liturgical use or in theatre) and continues in all forms of material culture (e.g., the staging of the Passion of Jesus already based on the designation of places on the Via Dolorosa of Jerusalem), in iconography, music, film, etc. Just one small example: in depictions of the resurrection of Lazarus in Roman catacombs, Jesus holds a kind of magic wand in his hand, which is used to suggest his miraculous power with which he brings Lazarus back to life.[40] With the help of iconographic techniques of the time, something is expressed that also plays a role in the Johannine text. The fact that the scene depicted is the resurrection of Lazarus is therefore easily recognizable. And yet, a parabiblical, if you will, apocryphal element plays a role in the depiction: if we were to find a manuscript that tells the Lazarus scene in such a way that Jesus performs the miracle with the help of a kind of magic wand, we would without hesitation classify this text as "apocryphal." This applies not only to the Lazarus images in the catacombs, but basically to every Lazarus representation, as Stephanie Hallinger shows with a focus on the interpretation of the scene by Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio (1571–1610).[41] Even if we do not have to find a concrete reference to existing apocrypha,[42] the use of the medium of "image" means that elements that we would understand as biblical-canonical combine with those that belong to the realm of the parabiblical. This is due solely to the different expressive possibilities of the medium of images. In other words, *every pictorial representation of a biblical text takes place in a space where the canonical and extra-canonical combine*. As already indicated, this can also be formulated in a comparable way for other media.

But if texts alone are, as Umberto Eco claims, "inert mechanisms" (Eco 1998) that can only be brought to life by readers, then ultimately every text (and especially every story) pushes into such spaces because it wants to be imagined visually. This applies even more to the performance of a text. It begins with reading aloud. An exegesis that only refers to the canon or the canonical texts of the New Testament fails to recognize the fundamental significance of such spaces *for the canon itself.*

3.3.2. Thesis 2

But there is a positive aspect to all this: the resulting vitality and openness of what we usually understand as a canonical text or texts of the canon allows the writings of the canon not to degenerate into dead letters—or, in modern times, into meaningless signs.[43] This means that the canon of the New Testament—and, of course, not only the New Testament—must therefore be accorded a history that does not simply end with the conclusion of the canon.[44] An important aspect of this story is the apocrypha, the texts of the New Testament translated into new contexts, i.e., new geographical spaces and

new historical situations. Such "translational acts" can happen in different ways. I have presented examples in other publications in which an attempt is made to transfer the miraculous work of Jesus into worlds and times where the historical Jesus never went and where he had long since ceased to live (see, e.g., Nicklas 2020, pp. 383–98). A miracle such as the transformation of water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11) is not simply a thing of the past. From the perspective of such texts (in a comparable way), this miracle can still be performed in completely different places, such as in Ireland, through the continued work of Christ (for examples of this see, e.g., Nicklas 2023c). The flight of Jesus's family to Egypt can thus be "followed" and "experienced" along itineraries that have changed to this day.[45] Texts and traditions like these can create something like landscapes of memory even in places that have little to do with the Bible, within which biblical narratives are "presented" to this day and can almost be "inhabited."[46] As I have already shown above, such landscapes of memory are never simply "biblical" or "canonical" solely because of the media that interact in them, but they do operate in biblically influenced communication spaces, which are never simply biblical. To ignore phenomena like these (or to relegate them to the realm of popular piety) is to overlook an important, perhaps decisive, aspect of the lasting significance of biblical, in this case the New Testament, texts for cultures and societies in different places and times. It also means missing out on the opportunity to examine these traditions not only with friendly curiosity, but also with the necessary historical and objective criticism: as nice as it is to compile apocrypha on the flight of the holy family to Egypt and to keep discovering new material, it is just as important to recognize that at least parts of this material are connected to the idea that Egypt, and not Israel, is the chosen people of God, an idea that leads to pronounced anti-Semitism in many of the writings mentioned. Of course, one could say that material like that mentioned is relevant first and foremost for Coptology.[47] It is also relevant for this purpose, but not only for this reason. New Testament exegesis would have a lot to say about it—about an infinite number of other, comparable materials.

3.3.3. Thesis 3

The canon as a normative collection of texts must be brought into a continuous dialogue if it wants to remain discursively relevant.[48] In this process, apocryphal texts and parabiblical traditions play an important role.

Exciting prospects also arise when canonical and apocryphal writings (or even parabiblical traditions) are brought into dialogue with each other. In other words, the idea is to understand canonical writings not simply as texts *in themselves* but as normative statements in an "arena in which points of view and values are contested and opinions are argued out."[49] To establish such dialogues, it is not necessary to prove that Text A is a reception of Text B or even reacts explicitly to it, although this is of course possible. What is necessary, however, is to establish a corresponding intertextual disposition, against the background of which it is possible to meaningfully relate two texts to one another. To bring an apocryphal text or a form of expression from a parabiblical tradition into dialogue with a passage from the canon, canonical writing, or the New Testament (as well as the Bible as a whole) means that both texts (or a text and an image) are brought into conversation with each other on the basis of their intertextual disposition.[50] In this dialogue, the profile of both partners increases; both sides benefit. I have demonstrated this elsewhere, using examples that can be brought into dialogue with the Revelation of John (Nicklas 2026a): although it is difficult to prove a literary dependence on the already mentioned apocryphal Apocalypse of Peter[51] on the canonical Revelation of John (or vice versa), and the two writings seem to have very little to do with each other due to their form, both writings show a common interest in the justice of God in a world in which evil seems to have the upper hand. Revelation places the

great question to God, when he will prove is righteousness, into the mouths of the souls of those who were "slaughtered" because of their faithfulness to the word of God (Rev 6:9–11). Revelation then develops a highly complex answer. In its final chapters—already in the reading of the text—it presents the good end that awaits the righteous in the heavenly Jerusalem where one experiences the deepest relationship with God. It works out the prospect that this *kairos* (time) is already near (Rev 1:3 and 22:10). This probably refers to the point when one experiences a direct encounter with God. The Apocalypse of Peter does not speak of the souls of the slaughtered, but initially of the "figures of the righteous" (vv. 5 and 13), who have already died. These are not only described as being of unearthly beauty (vv. 7–11), but they also correspond to the paradisiacal place where they are (vv. 15–20). If we bring the two texts into dialogue with each other on the basis of this disposition—the question of the fate of the righteous dead—then, to put it simply, the Apocalypse of Peter asks the Revelation of John how it is possible that the "souls of the slaughtered" are still waiting under the heavenly altar of sacrifice when they deserve better. It offers a kind of paradise as a place of hope, which the righteous enter immediately after their death. But the dialogue continues: the following vision of hell in the Apocalypse of Peter describes, among other things, the place where the murderers are, and how they are being horribly punished. They are confronted directly with the "souls of the murdered" (v. 25)[52]—an expression that is quite clearly reminiscent of the "souls of the slaughtered" from the book of Revelation. But let us recognize an additional intertextual disposition: the question of God's just judgement. While the souls of the slaughtered in the Revelation of John call out to God to finally prove his righteousness, the souls of the murdered in the Apocalypse of Peter see the punishment of their tormentors already taking place, and they praise God: "Oh God, righteous is your judgement (δικαία σου ἡ κρίσις)" (v. 25).[53] Both texts, starting from the death of the righteous, deal with the question of God's justice; both texts focus on particularly extreme cases in which evil seems to triumph. Placed in a common "arena," they develop answers that can be understood as statements in a by no means "harmonious" dialogue.[54] To put it simply, the Revelation of John must ask itself whether its concept of divine justice is not, according to human judgement, completely overwhelming. The Apocalypse of Peter, on the other hand, must permit it to be critically questioned as to why God's retributive justice actually requires two additional worlds—paradise and the place of punishment—alongside this world, when God can create justice in this world right now. As I hope I have been able to show, this approach greatly enhances our understanding of both texts—the canonical and the apocryphal. The normativity of the canonical is challenged by the sometimes agonistic, sometimes antagonistic dialogue with apocryphal writings and parabiblical traditions. The examples of how much such dialogues help deepen our understanding of canonical writings in new ways seems endless.

3.4. Open-Minded Exegesis That Engages with Other Theological Subjects and Takes a Fresh Look at the Significance of the Apocrypha

But that is not the end of the story, and there is more that can be said for the field of New Testament exegesis than taking apocrypha and parabiblica into account more and more intensively than before. As far as I can see, working with the apocrypha *also* leads to a deeper collaboration with other theological disciplines. The prejudices against apocrypha mentioned at the beginning are probably even more deeply rooted outside of biblical theology than in the exegetical disciplines. Thus, at the moment I do not see any awakening at this level, but rather a great hesitation to enter into such a dialogue. But where academic theology does not see itself speaking about God, but formulates its questions from the existential inquiries of human beings,[55] then the voices of people recognizable in the apocrypha are also to be taken into account. These people take up biblical narrative worlds and tell them in such a way that their questions and hopes are also reflected in them.

At the moment, I see a multitude of possibilities that have hardly been explored to date which could change the discipline as a whole. In dialogue with systematic theology alone, a host of questions arise that can be developed in the dialogue with an exegesis that is open to apocryphal research. The New Testament Gospels already exist in dialogue about the significance of Jeus's baptism.[56] For the Gospel of Mark, which is not interested in the childhood and birth of Jesus, something crucial is obviously happening here (Mark 1:9–11). The significance of Jesus's baptism is clearly relativized in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke (Matt 3:13–17 and Luke 3:21–22), both of which, though in different ways, understand Jesus as the anointed one and/or Son of God even before his baptism. In the Fourth Gospel, the baptism of Jesus is only indirectly narrated (John 1:29–34), and it is necessary to refer to the Synoptics quite precisely to understand what is going on there. But that is not even close to exhausting the palette of ancient texts interested in Jesus's baptism. With significant differences in each case, we read about it in such diverse texts such as the Gospel of the Ebionites, an unknown apocryphal scene on Papyrus Aberdeen 3, in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* (*Dial.* 88.2), and also in the Coptic Gospel of Philip from Nag Hammadi. Additionally, there is a parabiblical tradition represented in texts and images around the so-called Cheirographon of Adam. This tradition interprets Jesus's baptism as the destruction of the covenant that the first man, after his expulsion from paradise, had made with the devil in order to learn from him how to cultivate the land (see further Stone and Timotin 2023). It is not possible here to unfold the full spectrum of interpretations of the baptism of Jesus that these texts develop. Not all of them are per se heretical and should be rejected without reflection. And so, the question arises: to what extent does Jesus's baptism offer the opportunity to recognize a deeper theological meaning (besides incarnation, the cross, and resurrection) that goes beyond crude adoptionism? Another example: both in the Christian West (e.g., the traditions surrounding the Veil of Veronica, but also the Shroud of Turin) and in the East (e.g., the story of the so-called Mandylion, a cloth that supposedly preserves the true face of Jesus), there is always a keen interest in seeing or even touching something that establishes a direct connection with Christ.[57] Many of these traditions have their roots in apocrypha, some of which are little known. It is easy to dismiss this as an expression of naive popular piety, which can also take on traits of fanaticism. At its core, however, the question arises as to whether and to what extent something of the incarnation of the divine Logos has remained tangible even after Easter and the ascension, *even in this world*. One could continue in this way: time and again apocrypha, especially the apocryphal acts of the apostles, are criticized for their alleged "obsession with miracles." In fact, many of these texts—by no means all of them—contain miracle stories that seem unfamiliar to people who only know the New Testament.[58] A great deal of these miracle narratives are entertaining, but in numerous cases they are based on important concerns.[59] In conjunction with the canonical scriptures, this observation also raises a question: is the interest in the marvellous, which is reflected in many apocrypha, really just a sign of miracle-seeking, popular piety? Or could it also indicate a deep human need that theology has to seriously address if it wants to remain relevant? Could it perhaps indicate a way to overcome the blindness of some theologians toward such phenomena in a world in which miracle discourses continue to play a role?[60] Even so-called heretical writings are able to provide fascinating impulses. Even where their answers are not considered theologically sound today, they raise exciting questions. What seems to me to be especially exciting is this question: is the fact that some of the so-called "Gnostic" writings (as well as Marcion, in principle) distinguish between two deities, one of whom, the actual creator of the world, is either stupid or malicious, not a lasting thorn in the flesh of a theology that, despite the challenges of the twentieth century,

has not undertaken to develop a treatise "On Good and Evil"? Be that as it may, the number of possibilities for creatively rethinking theology are vast.

4. Summary

Working with the apocrypha without prejudice therefore represents a departure on various levels—a necessary opening up of the subject of "New Testament exegesis." To understand the significance of this, it is necessary to admit to ourselves that the canon of the New Testament was and is never a completely closed entity. Even if no new books are added, one cannot assume a sharp dividing line between the canonical and the apocryphal, the biblical and the parabiblical. Much more appropriate than the idea of a sharp boundary is the image of dynamic communication spaces that connect the canonical and the apocryphal. Due to their textuality, which constantly demands interpretation, the texts of the canon are forced into a dialogue. This is a dialogue in which Christian apocrypha and parabiblical traditions play a key role. For the discipline of "New Testament exegesis," the very nature of the canon itself and of its writings thus provides a multitude of objects of study that require exciting interdisciplinary constellations.[61] Even within the purely theological disciplines, the role of New Testament exegesis is changing: with the appropriate sensitivity, the voices recognizable in apocryphal writings can help to formulate questions that can be used to make exegesis more of a (sometimes uncomfortable) source of inspiration for other subjects.

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Notes

1 At least in the so-called "Third Quest," some apocryphal gospels have played a certain role in the context of the search for the historical Jesus. I can well imagine that some apocryphal texts (such as the Gospel of Thomas) preserve historically reliable memories of the life of Jesus, but I still consider the direct value of apocryphal texts for the retrospective inquiry to be limited. In the article Tobias Nicklas, The historical Jesus in Non-Canonical Sources, in (Patterson and Standhartinger 2006), I have shown that even this does not mean that the apocrypha are worthless in the context of the retrospective inquiry.

2 The literature on this problem is almost unmanageable. For a current overview of the discussion see (Merkt 2024). For my own view see, e.g., (Nicklas 2014, 2018).

3 For an overview of older attempts to define Christian apocrypha see, e.g., (Markschies 2012, pp. 90–115).

4 The differentiation that is still made between Christian (or New Testament) apocrypha on the one hand and Old Testament Pseudepigrapha on the other hand is largely artificial and only really useful in a few cases. Research into the two corpora of writings, which overlap to some extent, should in any case proceed hand in hand.

5 This is also the pragmatic and certainly sensible division of many, especially older collections of apocryphal writings.

6 The term of the biblical "storyworld" is crucial to Hugo Lundhaug's definition of apocryphal writings. See, e.g., (Lundhaug 2026).

7 From a purely literary point of view, "God" is also a character in the biblical narrative world—and arguably the actual protagonist.

8 Armenian literature, in particular, is rich in writings by Christians that deal with Old Testament characters.

9 This also means that, according to my understanding of apocryphal/parabiblical writings they may be pseudepigraphical, but this is not necessarily the case.

10 I have offered one such technical definition in Nicklas (2024d); see also Nicklas (2023a) [Christian Apocrypha–St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology (https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianApocrypha), accessed on 3 March 2026].

11 More information: Markschies, "Haupteinleitung," 18–22.

12 See, e.g., my chapter on the political significance of late antique narratives in Nicklas (2025, pp. 97–140).

13 This term can also be criticized because it strongly suggests that the texts are related to a Bible (which may already have existed when they were written). On this, Jacob Lollar (personal correspondence).

[14] For more details on this, see (Nicklas 2024c, pp. 1–22), here 18: "*Parabiblical traditions* are constellations determined by the interconnection of different media (texts, things, images, rites, etc.), which participate in the imagined world of the Bible, but are not completely absorbed in it, but rather actualize, even present it in new contexts. These constellations are in no way stable but emerge only through the mental spaces formed in their reception, i.e., in the imagination of those who relate them to one another."

[15] The term goes back to (Hallinger 2026).

[16] For this example, see the material in (Dresken-Weiland 2010, pp. 119–35).

[17] It is very important to note that a text is not said "to be" Christian apocrypha, but rather that it can be meaningfully interpreted as such. I have currently done this in (Nicklas 2026b) discussing Ernst Toller's 1933 novel *Eine Jugend in Deutschland* as a parabiblical writing in dialogue with the canon.

[18] It is important to note that my understanding of apocrypha does not see these writings as texts which were necessarily competing to become part of a Biblical canon.

[19] Traditionally, scholars have differentiated between apocryphal and hagiographic literature, with the result that crucial lines of development since antiquity have never been clearly traced.

[20] Except for the Acts of Thomas, no complete manuscript of any of these writings has survived.

[21] Particularly important observations in (Pricop 2021, pp. 270–94) (on transformations of the Acts of Thomas into the nineteenth century) as well as (Spittler 2023a) (on the Acts of John).

[22] See Hallinger, "Entangled Traditions."

[23] Today, one usually speaks of the "*Ausgangstext*," hardly ever of the original text of the writings of the New Testament.

[24] On the hermeneutical significance of the history of reception (and the closely related *Wirkungsgeschichte*) see (Luz 2014, pp. 397–409).

[25] In the case of the *Novum Testamentum Patristicum*, of which I am co-editor, it was highly controversial at the beginning whether the apocrypha should be considered alongside the receptions of the New Testament by important early church authors. See, however, (Roessli and Nicklas 2014), a volume that unfortunately only deals with examples and has to ignore many aspects because there are hardly any authors for important relevant texts who can participate in such a project.

[26] The thesis that there is no real reference to "hell" or even "eternal hell" in any New Testament text is well supported by (Alkier 2021b).

[27] For a definition of this term see (Assmann 2005). For a discussion of this term and its impact for New Testament Exegesis see, for example, (Huebenthal 2022, pp. 49–53).

[28] On this, see, e.g., the corresponding observations by (Hallinger and Nicklas 2024, pp. 351–78).

[29] See the classic work by (Collins 1979).

[30] (Burridge [1993] 2018). For a discussion of Burridge's theses (which are extremely controversial), see also the volume by (Calhoun et al. 2020). In this volume Burridge also offers an overview of the discussion of his ideas over 25 years.

[31] It would, after all, be possible to speak of a Gospel of Q, a very old Gospel of Thomas, or even Marcion's Gospel as a decisive key to the production of gospels.

[32] Of course, we cannot conclude from the evidence of ancient titles of texts that there was a general understanding of the term "gospel." But this applies to everything we think we know from antiquity.

[33] This is, of course, an undue simplification. As far as I can see, the biblical canon for the Roman Catholic Church has been practically closed since the Council of Trent; but this is less clear for the churches of the Protestant tradition. In turn, the understanding of the canon in many churches of the East, especially in the churches of Armenia, Georgia, and Ethiopia, is to be clearly differentiated once again.

[34] On the following ideas, see also (Nicklas 2023b, pp. 263–78), as well as idem, "Beyond Canon Project," 2–8.

[35] Priscillian of Avila (340–385) had already recognized this fundamental openness and addressed it in his treatise *De Fide et de Apocryphis*. Also important in this regard is (Rodenbiker 2019).

[36] This very catchy scene was certainly received more often and more intensely than some canonical passages from the Catholic Epistles, for example. For an introduction to this text, its tradition, and interpretation, see (Knust and Wasserman 2020).

[37] The "Agraphon of the Sabbath laborer" (Luke 6:5 D) is particularly fascinating.

[38] At the same time, paratexts can be found in all Bibles, but they can differ greatly. The extent to which the differences in the paratexts influence the basic message of the respective Bible is shown by Allen, *Words*, 17–34, using the example of the *Scofield Bible* and the *Green Bible*. An extreme example is also provided by the so-called "Message of God," a heavily edited "New Testament" published by the National Socialist "Institute for the Research and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life." For further information on this text, see (Lorenz 2017).

[39] For an introduction and translation of this highly influential Byzantine writing see (Spittler 2023b, pp. 262–361).

[40] For examples, see the material in (Dresken-Weiland 2010, pp. 213–32), *Bild*.

[41] (Hallinger 2023)—There is also pictorial material on the depiction of Lazarus in the catacombs.

[42] In Caravaggio's painting, however, the Gospel of Nicodemus actually plays a role in the depiction (Hallinger, "Im Raum," 120).
[43] This is also an important concern of Allen, *Words.*
[44] That and to what extent apocrypha can also be exciting testimonies to the development of the New Testament canon is something I have shown in the article (Nicklas 2024a, pp. 77–96). I have formulated additional theses on the history of the New Testament canon, even after its completion, in Tobias Nicklas, "Kanon und Geschichte. Eine Thesenreihe," in *Canon and Beyond*, 141–60.
[45] Helpful in this regard is (Bovon 2013, pp. 249–70).
[46] For further discussion of this idea, see Nicklas (2024b, pp. 279–96).
[47] I am grateful to Alin Suciu for suggesting that Coptic and New Testament approaches to these texts can complement each other (personal conversation). The same applies, of course, to the apocrypha, which come from other contexts or played a role in them. Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential here.
[48] Crucial ideas in the following section are the result of a dialogue with Stefan Alkier.
[49] This formulation is influenced by Michail Bachtin's understanding of dialogicity in Dostoyevsky's novels. See (Bachtin 1971) and (Sasse 2010)—of course, the different voices within the canon, and even within individual writings of the canon, can also be brought into such a dialogue. Important contributions to this can be found in the column edited by (Alkier 2021a).
[50] (Hallinger and Nicklas 2025/26) offer an example of a text and image in dialogue.
[51] I am referring here to the Greek text of the Apocalypse of Peter, which is extant in the so-called Akhmim-Codex of the sixth or seventh century. Edition: (Kraus and Nicklas 2004).
[52] It is unclear from the text where exactly the souls of the murdered are. The only important thing is that they can observe the punishment of those who killed them.
[53] This, in turn, could be linked to passages in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev 15:3; 16:5–7; and 19:2, 11).
[54] It is not initially possible to prove whether and in what way this dialogue actually took place in ancient times between specific groups that referred to these texts. However, the at least agonistic disposition of the two writings is recognizable.
[55] I owe this thought to my colleague Ute Leimgruber.
[56] On the following, see also the more detailed considerations in Nicklas and Spittler, *Reading Christian Apocrypha.*
[57] Similar observations can be made in the veneration of relics and the worship of saints.
[58] Nevertheless, the sweeping and pejorative talk of "miracle addiction" is completely out of place. On this topic see, e.g., (Spittler 2019; Nicklas 2019).
[59] For many important examples, see (Zimmermann et al. 2017).
[60] The dangerousness of such miracle discourses is evident in the talk of miracle weapons or the miraculous rescue of Donald Trump after the assassination attempt on 13 July 2024.
[61] This also applies, of course, to the subject of "Early Christian Studies." On this, see the comments in the volume by Nicklas and Spittler, *Reading Christian Apocrypha*.

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