

TOBIAS NICKLAS

# The Canon and Beyond

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament  
525*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

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Tobias Nicklas

# The Canon and Beyond

Collected Essays on the History and Hermeneutics  
of Biblical and Parabiblical Traditions

Mohr Siebeck

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## Foreword

The essays within this volume document some twenty years of my involvement with the biblical canon, especially the New Testament canon and, closely related to it, the concept and significance of Christian apocrypha. My interest in the biblical canon was first sparked by hermeneutical questions in connection with the increasingly intense discussion at the turn of the millennium about canonical-intertextual approaches to biblical texts or so-called “biblical interpretation.” In my habilitation thesis, which I wrote in the early 2000s, I devoted myself to the concept of “Christian apocrypha.” Since then, my work on and with these texts has not let me out of its grip. I was not only interested in the discovery and development of (largely) unknown texts, but became more and more interested in the role and function of texts which are closely connected to the biblical canon but never became a part of it. This interest has been given a particularly new impetus by the “Beyond Canon” (FOR 2770) project, which has been funded by the DFG since 2018. This has facilitated far more than ever before intense interdisciplinary work with wonderful colleagues from all over the world. I have learned more in these past years than ever before.

I have therefore deliberately prefaced the volume with a contribution that programmatically summarizes decisive aspects of the fundamental insights that the work in “Beyond Canon” has yielded in recent years. Additional contributions deal quite fundamentally with the history of the New Testament canon. Two thoughts are especially relevant to me, and I return to them again and again in variations: (1) The history of the New Testament canon – and thus also of the biblical canon in general – does not simply end with the conclusion of the canon. This can be seen on many different levels. (2) If we want to deal with the history of the canon in an appropriate way, we must distinguish very precisely between the canonical status of a text, its authority (or its claim to authority), its function and its use in different situations and contexts. Also important to me is the relationship between Christian apocrypha and biblical, especially New Testament, literature. (1) I take up my old definition of Christian apocrypha, which sees these texts as part of a literary universe created by the biblical writings, and develop it further. Many Christian apocrypha are part of more extensive parabiblical traditions that are characterized by the interaction between different media (text, image, rite, things, etc.). Understanding them and their historically changing functions is only possible with the help of intermedial approaches that do not start from the texts alone. (2) It seems to me

to be increasingly decisive that the image of a linear boundary between canonical and parabiblical traditions is inaccurate: using a series of examples on various levels, I attempt to show that we should instead speak of a space of communication (or rather an unmanageable variety of such constantly changing spaces) that connect the Bible and parabiblical traditions with one another.

I have intervened only minimally in the actual contributions, instead appending to them brief appendices in which I reflect on what has changed in research and scholarship since the first publication of each respective essay and how I look back on my older theses today. I hope that these appendices will help readers understand the developments in my own thinking.

My heartfelt thanks go out to all who have made this volume possible: Prof. Dr. Jörg Frey, the editor in charge of the series, has repeatedly encouraged me to publish my collected essays. As always, the staff at Mohr Siebeck provided uncomplicated and at the same time highly competent support for this volume, especially Elena Müller, Tobias Stäbler and Jana Trispel. I would like to thank Dr. Friederike Kunath and her team at “SchreibStimme” for their editorial work, as well as Charlotte von Schelling, the coordinator of the “Beyond Canon” project. My friend Haim Weiss invited me to a research stay at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel, where I was able to finish the first draft of this volume. Jacob Cerone was responsible for the English translations. I dedicate this volume to the two friends who initiated and manage the “Beyond Canon” project with me, namely Harald Buchinger and Andreas Merkt, as well as to all those who make working on the project a great pleasure every day.

Regensburg, March 2024

Tobias Nicklas

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# The “Beyond Canon” Project

## Questions, Topics, and Results\*

In October 2018, the Centre for Advanced Studies “Beyond Canon” was established at the University of Regensburg – to date one of the largest projects ever funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) in the area “theology.”<sup>1</sup> On the basis of a positive interim evaluation in the Spring of 2022, the project received word that it will continue to be funded until 2026. Two simple and not at all trivial observations form the starting point for the research in “Beyond Canon”: (1) Even after the emergence and the completion of the canon, especially the New Testament canon, neither the production nor the use of parabiblical – or apocryphal – traditions come to an end. On the contrary, it seems to explode. We assume that this is not a coincidence but that the various traditions are important. In many cases, it can also be seen that and how these texts claim authority partly alongside, partly in complex connections with, but partly also against canonical traditions. (2) In many cases, the meaning of such traditions can be represented better if we do not concentrate on texts alone but observe how different types of media interact within a tradition, i.e., in addition to a text, ritual or (even more broadly) performance, as well as aspects of material culture, from things to spatial structures to representation in images (and other media). Although it is often methodologically easiest to begin with written traditions, within the interplay between the constellation of signs conveyed by different media, texts should not have a fundamental priority; rather, we generally use the image of “entangled traditions.”<sup>2</sup>

The initial thesis of “Beyond Canon” is that the functions of many of these traditions can be described in terms of the concept of “heterotopia” coined by Foucault.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we understand them as “effective places” in the

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\* Many of the results presented below are a result of the close collaboration with my colleagues and friends Harald Buchinger and Andreas Merkt, with whom I am leading the project presented here.

<sup>1</sup> A short presentation of the goals of this project can be found in Tobias Nicklas, “‘Beyond Canon’: Eine kurze Erläuterung des Projekts,” *Early Christianity* 12 (2021): 265–75.

<sup>2</sup> The term was developed by our colleague Stephanie Hallinger (verbal conversation).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “Andere Räume [1967],” in *Aisthesis: Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik. Essays*, ed. Karlheinz Barck (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993), 34–46 (as well as id., “Von anderen Räumen [1967],” in *Raumtheorie: Grundlagentexte aus Phi-*

function of “abutments,” i.e., as counterweights to the canon that can counteract and destabilize it but also balance and strengthen it. Structurally, on the one hand, we align our work with established text groups (and associated rites as well as aspects of material culture), and on the other hand, we undertake in-depth research in specific regions or locations that attempts to elicit the meaning of parabiblical elements in their local or regional context. In particular, we have worked on the following groups of texts: (1) Narratives about the (apostolic) founding of particular churches, i.e., in most cases late antique narratives about apostles and their companions (in rare cases including women), (2) traditions about Jesus’ birth and childhood, (3) otherworldly journeys, (4) historical apocalypses, (5) pilgrimage literature, and (6) poetic realizations of biblical material. In addition, the following have come into focus in recent years: (7) paraphrases of Jesus narratives, (8) apostolic memoirs,<sup>4</sup> (9) lives of the Virgin Mary, (10) collections of miracle narratives, and (11) traditions surrounding the creation of the world. Regional emphases to date have focused on Rome, the “Holy Land,” and the Caucasus region in its broader regional inclusion.

In this context, our approach to key concepts such as (1) canon, (2) authority, (3) apocrypha/parabiblica and (4) heterotopia has deepened and changed in recent years. This will be illustrated below with the help of a number of examples.

## 1. The Space of Communication between Biblical Canon and Parabiblical Traditions

Observations in connection with the term “canon” seem particularly important, first of all the canon of the New Testament, but beyond that basically the entire two part Christian Bible consisting of Old and New Testaments.<sup>5</sup> It certainly has to do with our deeply rooted idea that the Bible is a tightly bound book that we gladly incorporate perspectives on the canon which were, if not unthinkable, at least unlikely in antiquity. Our idea that a clear delineation can be drawn between the canon and non-canonical traditions is wrong. Much better justice is done to the sources by the idea of a space of communication generated by the writings of the Bible and writings related to them, within which traditions

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*losophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel, 9th ed. [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp: 2018 (2006)], 317–29.

<sup>4</sup> On this little known literary genre, cf. the foundational work by Alin Suciu, *The Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon: A Coptic Apostolic Memoir*, WUNT 370 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 70–138.

<sup>5</sup> Here and in what follows I am speaking of “the” Christian Bible in the singular, even though I am aware that there is of course not just *one* Christian Bible.

that are neither clearly canonical nor non-canonical can move. This space of communication – or better, these spaces – are multidimensional. They change continuously in a highly dynamic way:

(1) This observation already can be made at the level of the concrete New Testament text or the textual history of the New Testament: Well-known are passages like the narrative of the adulteress (usually found at John 7:53–8:11) and the longer ending of Mark (Mark 16:9–20). But there are also non-canonical sayings of the Lord which have crept into the text of some New Testament manuscripts such as the agraphon of the Sabbath worker (Luke 6:4 D) as well as others. The decision whether such texts should be understood to be a part of the New Testament or not is not at all trivial; clearly, however, they were held to be canonical by some scribes as well as readers. Somewhat different is the case of individual manuscripts of the Pastoral Epistles, into which motifs from the Acts of Paul and Thecla have made their way.<sup>6</sup> Thus, at 2 Tim 3:11, after the words “in the persecutions and sufferings to which I was subjected ... in Antioch,” the 9<sup>th</sup>-century majuscule K (18) offers the marginal gloss “these are the [sufferings] which he endured on account of Thecla: from the Jews against those who believed in Christ.” A similar gloss on this verse can be found in the 10<sup>th</sup>-century minuscule 181 (“which he suffered on account of Thecla”). We find additional examples in connection with 2 Tim 4:19. Where such manuscripts are illuminated, we can see this influence at another level: Thus, at the beginning of the epistle to the Romans (fol. 269v), Dumbarton Oaks MS 3 offers the image of Paul writing intently, with a female figure without a nimbus standing behind him and looking down on him (or rather on the text he is writing down). Thomas J. Kraus has identified this figure as Thecla with good reason.<sup>7</sup> Finally, biblical texts are occasionally handed down in a form that does not permit any conclusion about their canonical status. For example, Garrick Allen refers to the manuscript tradition of Revelation, especially in the East.<sup>8</sup> Even far beyond antiquity, this continues to give the impression that the Apocalypse, while significant, was not necessarily considered canonical, but rather

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<sup>6</sup> On the following and in greater detail (accompanied by images), cf. Thomas J. Kraus, “Thecla and the Acts of Thecla: Searching for Traces in the Manuscript Tradition,” in *The Apostles Peter, Paul, John, Thomas and Philip with their Companions in Late Antiquity*, ed. Tobias Nicklas, Janet E. Spittler, and Jan N. Bremmer, *Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha* 17 (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 118–50, here: 125–37.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kraus, “Thecla and the Acts of Thecla,” 135–43 [with image on p. 139].

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Garrick V. Allen, “The Sociology of the Book of Revelation in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,” in *Manuscripts of the Book of Revelation: Philology, Paratexts, Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 156–92. On the special features of the status of Revelation, cf. also the contributions in the volume by Thomas J. Kraus and Michael Sommer, eds., *Book of Seven Seals: The Peculiarity of Revelation, Its Manuscripts, Attestation and Transmission*, WUNT 363 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

on a par with texts from the corpus of literature attributed to Dionysius Areopagita and others.

(2) We could now cite many other examples – for instance, the question of when and up to what limits a biblical figure can continue to be understood as such if it begins to lead a “life of its own” even outside of the Bible.<sup>9</sup> This is exciting, for example, at the moment in which a minor character from biblical texts is given a major role in a non-canonical writing and in the process new character traits are assigned to it. This is especially clear with Simon Magus, who is given a minor role in Acts (8:9–25), but who is developed into the antagonist of the early Christian movement *par excellence* in non-canonical writings such as the Acts of Peter or the Pseudo-Clementines. In some passages of the Pseudo-Clementines, in turn, he can merge with the figure of “Paul,” which is seen here in a highly negative light, without having to mention the name “Paul.”<sup>10</sup> Traces of Simon Magus in later literary history can be recognized all the way up to the Faust character.<sup>11</sup> *Despite these connections* hardly anyone would call Dr. Faust a biblical figure, and yet at the same time one is inclined to understand the Simon Magus of the Acts of Peter as such (or at least the literary development of one). However, drawing a clear, unambiguous boundary is basically impossible and probably also makes little sense: Instead, the received Simon Magus moves in a space created by communication that connects the canonical and non-canonical.

But what seems really exciting to me is what happens when texts are transferred to other media. Here is one example: the interior of the famous cathedral of Vézelay in Burgundy with its entire architecture points to the place where – following apocryphal traditions – the mortal remains of Mary Magdalene can be venerated:<sup>12</sup> This goes so far that on days of the summer solstice, rays of

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<sup>9</sup> Related questions were addressed at the conference in Bonn (February 8–10, 2023) chaired by Jan Rügemeier and myself entitled *Characters in Mind: The Migration of Characters in Ancient Jewish, Ancient Christian and Greco-Roman Literature and Art*. Cf. also the contributions in the volume by Michal Bar-Asher Siegal et al., eds., *Women in Biblical and Para-Biblical Jewish and Christian Literature = ETHL 96.3* (2020): 423–581 (here especially the theses on pp. 423–4).

<sup>10</sup> Additional information on this can be found in Jürgen Wehnert, “Antipaulinismus in den Pseudoklementinen,” in *Ancient Perspectives on Paul*, ed. Tobias Nicklas, Andreas Merkt, and Joseph Verheyden, NTOA 102 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 170–90 as well as Frédéric Amsler, “La construction de l’homme ennemi ou l’anti-paulinisme dans le corpus pseudo-clémentin,” in *Receptions of Paul in Early Christianity: The Person of Paul and his Writings through the Eyes of his Early Interpreters*, ed. Jens Schröter, Simon Buttica, and Andreas Dettwiler, BZNW 234 (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2018), 729–47.

<sup>11</sup> This is demonstrated in a rather exciting way in Bernard Poudéron, *Métamorphoses de Simon le Magicien: Des Actes des apôtres au Faustbuch. Wie ein lebendiges Gestirn / Comme un astre vivant*, Collection Christophe Plantin (Paris: Beauchesne, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Both the church and the city hill have been recognized as part of the UNESCO World Heritage since 1979. The foundation of a Benedictine abbey can be documented as early as

light create a trail toward the (alleged) tomb of Mary Magdalene. In the Romanesque nave itself, the core of which dates back to 1120–1140, about one hundred capitals are fascinating, many of which depict very different scenes; another nearly fifty capitals are found in the narthex, added between 1140 and 1150.<sup>13</sup> Unlike some church guides, who therefore describe the cathedral of Vézelay as a Bible in stone,<sup>14</sup> I would speak of the fact that the space enclosed by the church should itself to be understood as part of a space created by communication in which motifs developed from the Bible play a weighty but by no means the only role. To put it even more precisely: through the interconnection of what is expressed in the capitals, the church space (already) spans not just one, but a multiplicity of such spaces. These do not simply exist in themselves but are generated by viewers in the act of receiving them. Viewers relate what is pictorially represented to each other on the one hand, but also to the narratives represented by the images on the other. The church of Vézelay thus enables the creation of mental spaces through the complex structures generated in the pictorial worlds of the capitals. With the help of intermedial references between the signs represented by the images, the meaning potentials of these signs are actualized – new, initially virtual narratives can emerge. Since they focus on the juxtaposition of different illustrations and do not yet consider their position in the overall structure,<sup>15</sup> the following concrete observations are certainly simplistic; their aim, however, is simply to illustrate what can be understood by the idea of a space of communication between biblical and parabiblical traditions. First, it is interesting to note that by no means do all of the depicted motifs originate in the Bible: in the northern aisle, for example, we find the depiction of a basilisk, the burial of the hermit Paul, the legend of Saint Eugenia, or motifs surrounding the monk-father Anthony; in the southern aisle we find a group of animals venerating the cross, Martin of Tours cutting down a pagan cultic tree, a warning against secular music, or the so-called “mystical mill,” which is meant to represent the intertwining of Old Testament law and

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858/59. Pope Leo IX (1049–1054), *epist.* 36 (PL 143,642) confirmed the status of Mary Magdalene as a patron saint of Vézelay, wherein her (alleged) relics had been venerated earlier. In the later struggle over the question of where the real relics of Mary Magdalene were kept, Vézelay fell more and more into the background since the 13th century. Despite the loss of the original relics in the Reformation (1569), however, the veneration of Mary Magdalene in Vézelay never completely ceased. The present church building is Romanesque at its core, but also combines Gothic elements; the final details date back to the restoration of the church in the 19th cent. For further information, see the art guide *Vézelay* (Vézelay: La Pierre d’Angle, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Much of this has been described already in the volume *Vézelay: Führer durch die Basilika* (Paris: Éditions franciscaines, 2006), 16–31.

<sup>14</sup> Thus Yves Patenotre, *Vézelay: Une Bible de pierre* (Vézelay: La Pierre d’Angle, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, there are of course additional medial elements such as liturgical celebrations, which I cannot consider here.

New Testament fulfillment.<sup>16</sup> We even encounter examples that have their roots in Greek mythology: the education of Achilles by the centaur Chiron, the abduction of Ganymede by Jupiter and others. The central tympanum at the entrance to the nave shows the crucified Christ together with the apostles surrounded by images of the various peoples of the earth, including dog-headed people, giants, dwarfs, and big eared people.<sup>17</sup> These are just a few examples which show that the space offers a juxtaposition of biblical, parabiblical, and motifs that have more to do with the knowledge of an educated monk in the High Middle Ages than with the Bible *alone*. In other words, the church of Vézelay constructs an imagined world in which biblical, parabiblical, and non-biblical motifs stand side by side. It evokes (and equally generates) a form of perceiving the world and interpretation of the world influenced at least in part by motifs from the Bible as well as parabiblical motifs. Even the contemplation of the so-called biblical scenes alone, however, leads us into a space that combines the canonical and extra-canonical: First of all, it is not simply “the Bible” that is depicted, but a *selection* of biblical motifs. Of course, this is due to the fact that texts such as the Pauline letters can hardly be depicted pictorially, but it is certainly also due to the fact that certain themes are omitted. Above all, many of the so-called biblical motifs move in an intermediate area where it is not clear whether what is depicted is canonical or non-canonical. Especially impressive is the example of the scene of Judas Iscariot (quite hidden in the upper portions of the southern nave).<sup>18</sup> The capital is divided in its center by the largely symmetrical representation of a tree. On the left side we recognize Judas Iscariot as a hanged man, his eyes wide open, and his tongue sticking out. Unlike the Judas we discover on a similar capital in the Cathedral of St. Lazarus of Autun,<sup>19</sup> also built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, this Judas is not surrounded by demonic figures. The fact that he is naked and covers his shame with his left hand opens the possibility that we interpret the image as Adam, the “man” who recognizes that he is “naked” (Gen 3:7). But the second half of the depiction is particularly astonishing: on the right side of the capital, also under the tree, we discover a male figure moving away from the tree. On its back, it carries a corpse. It embraces it in such a way that the legs, right hand, and head of the deceased are visible. The posture of this figure, however, is clearly reminiscent of that which we have known since antiquity from repre-

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<sup>16</sup> On the latter motif (and with it the explicit anti-Judaism), cf. Heinz-Günther Schöttler, *Re-Visionen christlicher Theologie aus der Begegnung mit dem Judentum*, Judentum – Christentum – Islam 13 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2016), 64–9.

<sup>17</sup> See again Vézelay: Führer durch die Basilika, 16–31.

<sup>18</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:V%C3%A9zelay,\\_Judaskapitell.jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:V%C3%A9zelay,_Judaskapitell.jpg).

Christoph Wrembeck, *Judas, der Freund: Du, der du Judas nach Hause trägst, trage auch mich*, 3rd ed. (Oberpfarrmünster: Neue Stadt, 2021 [2017]) also refers to this particular portrayal of Judas Iscariot and makes it the starting point of his interpretation of the Judas figure.

<sup>19</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathedrale\\_von\\_Autun#/media/Datei:Autun,\\_Judas.JPG](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathedrale_von_Autun#/media/Datei:Autun,_Judas.JPG).

sentations of the “good shepherd.”<sup>20</sup> This, however, prompts a multitude of questions: Does the left side of the depiction belong to the right and should they be brought into connection with one another? Is the figure on the right Jesus – and did he, as the good shepherd, take his apostle Judas Iscariot from the tree? Or is it simply the gravedigger taking Judas down from the tree and burying him in unconsecrated ground, as was common not only in the Middle Ages? The fact that the figure on the right is depicted without a nimbus may speak for the latter; that he looks like a good shepherd for the former. Thus, the depiction remains open and ambiguous, and because of this it moves in a space between the canonical depiction in Matt 27:3–10 and non-canonical motifs.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the image can either express hope for the one who is guilty of deepest transgressions – not only for Judas, but all people who can identify with the scene. Or, it can be a warning for all who commit suicide and are considered (from the point of view of medieval theology) as lost.<sup>22</sup> Either way, all the elements of what is depicted on the capital are closely related to canonical texts; in church guides and catalogs, the scene is therefore usually understood to be biblical. However, the interrelation of what is represented in the individual parts is probably more accurately understood as parabiblical – or better as part of a very concrete communication space that connects the biblical and the parabiblical.

This is only one of many examples that arise as soon as biblical motifs are transferred into media beyond scripted texts. This raises a fundamental question: can the representation of a biblical text (or a combination of biblical texts) in liturgy, drama, iconography, or in the combination of textual and iconographic elements claim to fully correspond to what is offered in the narratives of the canon? Or does mediation in a different medium in itself offer elements that lead into a communicative space beyond the canon? I assume the latter is the case. But this again shows how little sense the image of a clear boundary between the canonical and the non-canonical makes. This in turn leads to the fact that even the already formed and completed biblical canon remains alive in geographical as well as historical contexts beyond its formation (or even beyond the formation of its individual texts). In other words, *even the already completed canon has a history that is impossible to write without working on spaces of communication like the one just described, and thus without working on non-canonical traditions.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> So also Vézelay: Führer durch die Basilika, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, this is also true, though in a different way, *even* for the account from Autun. For the Bible, of course, does not tell of demons dancing around the body of Jesus either.

<sup>22</sup> Not yet taken into account in all this is the question of what it means that the image must have been very difficult for the medieval viewer to see – and only today (through photographs or with the help of binoculars) becomes more recognizable.

<sup>23</sup> Additional, basic considerations on the history of the canon that has already been created and completed can be found in Tobias Nicklas, “Kanon und Geschichte. Eine Thesenreihe,”



That the canon has a history even after its conclusion, that, to put it in other words, crucial aspects of the canonical process must continue even after the conclusion of the canon, has reasons. It is true that the writings of the canon represent a plurality of voices.<sup>24</sup> These voices, in turn, are permanently given up to interpretation because of their plurality and polysemy, but also because of the variety of situations into which they speak.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the texts of the biblical canon do not offer answers to every new question that arises in the communities for which the canon is relevant in each of the spaces of thought and discourse that are always changing through history and can be described differently in different geographical spaces (from local to global). Where such questions wish to be answered in connection with biblical textual, motif, and conceptual worlds, they generate spaces of communication “beyond the canon” that nevertheless remain dynamically connected to it in different ways. A large part of the traditions that we call parabiblical today are related to such spaces of communication.

## 2. The Authority of Parabiblical Traditions

Since the relevant discussions – conducted not only in theology but also in philosophy and the historical, social, and political sciences – have not produced a uniform definition of the second crucial term “authority,” this term is used in the work of Beyond Canon in a broad sense oriented on everyday language. Accordingly, authorities or those who have authority are “persons, but also instances and institutions, who have acquired prestige in a certain field – in the present case, that is, in the field of Christian faith and the conduct of life connected with it – and thus possess decisive influence.”<sup>26</sup> Our first thesis, which seems trivial at first glance but which is often not given adequate attention in

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*Sacra Scripta* 15 (2017): 90–114 as well as id., “The Interaction of Canon and History,” in *Martyrdom: Canonization, Contestation and Afterlives*, ed. Ihab Saloul and Jan Willem van Henten (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 33–54.

<sup>24</sup> The idea of the polyphony of biblical texts is inspired by Michail Bachtin and his observations on the dialogicity of modern literature, but it is also particularly appropriate for the complex “text” of the Bible, which does not fit into the image of a “library” of writings alone. For an introduction, see, e.g., the work of Matthias Aumüller, “Michail Bachtin (1895–1975),” in *Klassiker der modernen Literaturtheorie: Von Sigmund Freud bis Judith Butler*, ed. Matías Martínez and Michael Scheffel (München: Beck, 2010), 105–26.

<sup>25</sup> On this, see further at Tobias Nicklas, “Alle müssen für alle interpretieren und jeder kann irren – eine römisch-katholische Perspektive,” in *Sola Scriptura Ökumenisch*, ed. id., Stefan Alkier, and Christos Karakolis, *Biblische Argumente in öffentlichen Debatten 1* (Paderborn: Brill Deutschland, 2021), 33–54.

<sup>26</sup> This definition goes back to the deceased fellow of our center, Thomas Karmann, who, unfortunately, to my knowledge worked it out in a previously unpublished essay.

the discussion in the secondary literature, is: the authority of a text and its canonical status are to be differentiated from each other. In other words, not every biblical-canonical text has authority in every context. At the same time, there are many cases in which parabiblical texts (and related traditions) successfully claim authority – and do so even beyond the authority of canonical texts. The authority of a text or of a tradition depends not simply on its canonical status but on its function in concrete contexts. Such contexts can be differentiated “multi-scalar” from individual life situations to the problems of a local or regional particular church or larger-scale social issues. Just a few examples: It was apparently the authority of parabiblical texts and related traditions around Barnabas – such as the Acts of Barnabas or the later Barnabas-Encomium – that played a decisive role in the independence of the Church of Cyprus from the Patriarchate of Antioch.<sup>27</sup> What is particularly interesting here is how freely the Barnabas texts, even in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and later, can deal with traditions from the canonical Acts of the Apostles in order to be able to impose their perspective on an inner-church conflict. Something similar can be observed in Egypt. That writings such as the so-called Apostolic Memoirs never claimed canonical status is partly evident from the texts themselves. In many cases, they are based on passages from the New Testament, but combine them with the help of various literary techniques with parabiblical traditions, which in many cases seek to illustrate that the special traditions of the post-Chalcedonian miaphysite church of Egypt already go back to the origins of Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Some texts even go so far as to claim that God’s covenant with Israel was terminated with the death of Jesus and passed on to another people, namely the

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<sup>27</sup> On this, see further at Tobias Nicklas, “Barnabas Remembered: Apokryphe Barnabas-texte und die Kirche Zyperns,” in *Religion als Imagination: Phänomene des Menschseins in den Horizonten theologischer Lebensdeutung. Festschrift für Marco Frenschkowski*, ed. Lena Seehausen et al. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 167–88. The Barnabas-Encomium of Alexander Monachus is now (with a good introduction) easily accessible in Alexander Monachus, *Laudatio Barnabae. Lobrede auf Barnabas*, ed. Bernd Kollmann and Werner Deuse, *Fontes Christiani* 46 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007); for important source material (with a good discussion), but primarily related to the evangelist Mark, see also Bernd Kollmann and Burghard Schröder, *Der Evangelist Markus: Historische Konturen. Altkirchliche Legenden. Hagiographische Zeugnisse*, SBS 257 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2023), 90–101 as well as 159–67.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of an example of the processing of gospel traditions in a text of the Apostolic Memoirs, see Tobias Nicklas, “The Gospel of Peter between the Synoptics, Second Century and Late Antique Apostolic Memoirs,” in *Studien zum Petrusevangelium*, WUNT 453 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 140–62; for the meaning of this text for liturgical traditions of late antiquity Egypt, see Roelof van den Broek, *Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem: On the Life and the Passion of Christ. A Coptic Apocryphon*, VCSup 118 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 39–50.

Egyptians.<sup>29</sup> In both cases, however, it also becomes clear that the parabiblical traditions claim authority in connection with a concrete situation – e.g., in Cyprus (against Antioch) or in miaphysite Egypt (against Chalcedonian Byzantium) – but that this authority was by no means accepted everywhere.

As a second observation, the authority of parabiblical texts and traditions is in many cases not directly related to the differentiation between so-called “orthodoxy” (or proto-orthodoxy) and heresy. Instead, it not infrequently turns out to be completely independent of that differentiation. In other words, it is not always and everywhere so-called “heretics” who referred to non-canonical material in their arguments: The above-mentioned Church of Cyprus, of course, remained within the framework of what would be understood as “orthodoxy” in its time. Authority accorded to parabiblical traditions in certain contexts is also by no means limited to marginalized groups alone: for even the just-mentioned miaphysite Church of Egypt may not have felt marginalized within Egypt at all. And the fact that at least some texts like, for example, the Martyrdom of Mark, which in the first place offers a founding legend of the Church of Alexandria (including a cult etiology), were translated into languages such as Latin, Arabic, as well as Old Church Slavonic (among others), means that the text must have at least been of importance also outside the concrete local church in which it originated.<sup>30</sup>

Where and in what way non-canonical texts and traditions were or are given authority often depends instead on the problems and perspectives under which they operate or toward which they are conceived. In many cases, such authority of non-canonical traditions is certainly limited in time, but also locally or regionally, as can also be seen in the examples just mentioned with regard to Cyprus and Egypt of late antiquity. Unlike the writings of the canon, for example, such traditions by no means claimed “catholic” (in the sense of worldwide) validity.<sup>31</sup> To believe that they played no role outside the actual area of conflict, however, would probably also be naive – as the example of the Martyrdom of Mark shows. The function of these texts and traditions does not simply coincide with the function they had at the time they were written and in the context

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<sup>29</sup> On the anti-Judaism of some Apostolic Memoirs see for example Dylan M. Burns, “A Homily on the Passion and Resurrection,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures 2*, ed. Tony Burke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 41–86, here: 48–50.

<sup>30</sup> Introductory questions on the martyrdom of Mary can be found in Tobias Nicklas, “The Martyrdom of Mark,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures 3*, ed. Tony Burke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 375–92, here: 375–84.

<sup>31</sup> For the importance of the principle of “catholicity” for canonical writings, see Tobias Nicklas, “Catholicity and the Formation of the Canon,” in *The New Testament Canon in Contemporary Research*, ed. Benjamin Laird and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024) [forthcoming].

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