

ROXANNE BÉLANGER SARRAZIN

Apocrypha, Magic, Liturgy

The Multiple Identities of Coptic Prayers
in Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt

*Studien und Texte zu
Antike und Christentum
150*

Mohr Siebeck

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Foreword

This monograph is the result of five years of research. The first three years (2021–2024) I spent at the University of Oslo, as a postdoctoral research fellow for the project *Storyworlds in Transition: Coptic Apocrypha in Changing Contexts in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods* (APOCRYPHA), funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 865971); the fourth year (2024–2025) at the University of Regensburg, as a junior fellow with the DFG Centre for Advanced Studies “*Beyond Canon_*”: *Heterotopias of Religious Authority in Ancient Christianity*, funded by the German Research Fund (Project-ID 392798726); and the last year (2025–2026) at the University of Würzburg, as a junior fellow with the DFG Centre for Advanced Studies *MagEIA – Magic between Entanglement, Interaction, and Analogy*, also funded by the German Research Fund (Project-ID 470815550). I am grateful to the three institutions that housed me during that time and the two bodies that funded these projects.

The book's topic was somewhat constrained by the parameters of my research responsibilities within the APOCRYPHA project, which involved exploring the relationships between apocryphal literature preserved in Coptic and related practices in Late Antique and early Islamic Egypt, including (but not limited to) magical and liturgical practices. However, it became for me a way to address questions that had been at the center of my interests for many years, namely: 1) debates about typologies and taxonomies, and how to best use categories, especially those that are challenging such as “magic” and “apocrypha”, from a scholarly-driven perspective; and 2) the monastic (and ecclesiastic) provenience of Coptic magical texts. I am grateful to Hugo Lundhaug, Tobias Niklas, and Martin Stadler for the opportunity to conduct this research, and I hope this monograph and my conclusions will offer new perspectives and some answers for those likewise interested in these questions.

I wish to thank all my colleagues and fellow scholars, at the University of Oslo, the University of Regensburg, the University of Würzburg, and elsewhere, who contributed in many ways to the completion of this book, by listening to papers, inviting me to conferences, reading chapters, answering questions, or discussing hypotheses: Lloyd G. Abercrombie, Eirini Afentoulidou, Garrick Allen, Lajos Berkes, Christian Bull, Luc Bulundwe, Dylan Burns, Claire Burridge, Samuel P. Cook, Alain Delattre, Jitse Dijkstra, David Frankfurter, Florian

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Oslo, 27 February 2026

Roxanne Bélanger Sarrazin

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Abbreviations

Papyrus editions, corpora, and series are cited according to the abbreviations (italicised) in the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets, available online at <http://papyri.info/docs/checklist>. For papyri and magical texts not published in such corpora and series, I use the collection's inventory numbers (not italicised). Other abbreviations are:

AM	APOCRYPHA database Manuscript ID
AW	APOCRYPHA database Work ID
ACM	<i>Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power</i> . Edited by Marvin W. Meyer and Robert Smith. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
AKZ	<i>Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte</i> . Edited by Angelicus M. Kropp. 3 vols. Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine Elisabeth, 1930–1931.
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> . Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972–
APF	<i>Archiv für Papyrusforschung</i>
ARG	<i>Archiv für Religionsgeschichte</i>
ASAE	<i>Annales du service des antiquités de l'Égypte</i>
BARC	Anaphora of the Barcelona papyrus
BAS	Anaphora of St Basil
BASP	<i>Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists</i>
BIFAO	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale</i>
BL	British Library
BM	British Museum
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
CANT	Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti
cc0000	Clavis Coptica (PATHs work ID; https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/works).
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina
Černý, <i>CED</i>	<i>Coptic Etymological Dictionary</i> . Edited by Jaroslav Černý. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
CLM	Coptic Literary Manuscripts (PATHs manuscript ID; https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts).
CMCL	Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari
CPG	Clavis Patrum Graecorum. Edited by Maurits Geerard. 5 vols. Turnhout: Brepols, 1974–1987.
Crum, <i>CD</i>	<i>A Coptic Dictionary</i> . Edited by Walter E. Crum. Oxford: Clarendon, 1939.

CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
Erman and Grapow, WB	<i>Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache</i> . Edited by Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow. 6 vols. 2nd edition. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1957.
GCS	Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
GEMF	<i>Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies: Text and Translation. Volume I</i> . Edited by Cristopher A. Faraone and Sophia Torallas Tovar. Berkeley, 2022.
GREG	Anaphora of St Gregory
Hay	<i>The Hay Archive of Coptic Spells on Leather: A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Materiality of Magical Practice</i> . Edited by Elisabeth R. O'Connell. London: British Museum, 2023
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Coptic Studies</i>
JdE	<i>Journal d'entrée</i>
JJP	<i>Journal of Juristic Papyrology</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KYP	Kyprianos Database of Ancient Ritual Texts (https://www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/index.php/manuscripts-search/)
LSJ	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . Edited by Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
MARK	Anaphora of St Mark
MC 5	Cyril of Jerusalem, <i>Mystagogical Catechesis</i> , chapter 5
MTH	Anaphora of St Matthew
NHC	Nag Hammadi Codex / Codices
NT	New Testament
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
OT	Old Testament
PATHs	Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths: An Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature (https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/)
PCM	<i>Papyri Copticae Magicae. Coptic Magical Texts, Volume 1: Formularies</i> . Edited by Korshi Dosoo and Markéta Preininger. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023.
PG	<i>Patrologia graeca</i> . Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 162 vols. Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1857–1886.
PGL	<i>Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> . Edited by Geoffrey W.H. Lampe. Oxford: Clarendon, 1961.
PRE	<i>Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i>
PGM	<i>Papyri graecae magicae</i> . Edited by Karl Preisendanz and Albert Henrichs. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973.
PSBA	<i>Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology</i>
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
TC	<i>Trends in Classics</i>
THS	Anaphora of St Thomas
TM	Trismegistos Database (https://www.trismegistos.org/)

ZÄS
ZPE

Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache
Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik

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Introduction: Some Thoughts on Categories and Boundaries

“This is the twenty-first prayer of Mary the Virgin, (that she) spoke on the day of her falling asleep. It works on every power of the Adversary; it heals every sickness and every disease, in peace, amen.”

The text quoted above is the initial title found in a 10th-century Coptic manuscript from the Fayyum, in Egypt (P.Heid.inv.Kopt. 685), for the so-called *Prayer of Mary at Bartos*. This prayer, and the traditions attached to it, has been a long-standing interest in scholarship and comes with its own baggage that needs to be untangled by any scholar now attempting to study it. Before delving deeper into the work, its evolution, textual attestations, and the manuscripts bearing them – which will be done in chapter one of this monograph – I pause here to consider only the title and what it tells us. First, it says the work is a “prayer”, a category of texts that one would usually associate with liturgy and liturgical (or para-liturgical) practices, especially in Christian contexts. However, this prayer is meant to protect against the “Adversary” (that is, the Devil) and to heal every sickness and disease. These types of prayers are also common in “magical” practices in Late Antique and early Islamic Egypt. The prayer is attributed to the Virgin Mary and presents the words she supposedly spoke before she died. It thus provides additional information not found in the Bible, making the prayer apocryphal in nature.

The title alone, therefore, demonstrates the difficulty in classifying these types of texts. In the past, the *Prayer of Mary* has been primarily classified as a “magical” prayer and analyzed solely from that perspective. Conversely, I argue – and seek to demonstrate in this book – that using several scholarly categories as different lenses to analyze the *Prayer* (and other similar texts and works) might help us to better understand how it was used and conceptualized by people in Late Antique and early Islamic Egypt. However, choosing and using these categories presents its own complications, which need to be approached with care. This will therefore constitute the point of departure of the present study.

Typologies and categories, and how to define, delimitate, and provide taxonomies for them, are growing concerns in all scholarly discourses. As scholars,

we need these categories to organize, analyze, and discuss the materials we work with, especially when dealing with sources and practices that transcend religious and linguistic boundaries. The studies of ancient literature, ritual texts, and practices are no exception. One difficulty with categories is that their definitions and the practices and texts they encompass may vary across studies, depending on their chronological and geographical scopes. It is thus always good, if not necessary, to first establish these parameters before engaging in any discussion. Therefore, I shall begin by stating that this monograph will be concerned primarily with Christian literature and material culture – works, their individual textual versions, and the manuscripts and artefacts preserving them – from Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt.

Here, “Christian literature” is already a category that needs to be delimited. In general, we distinguish “literary” from other types of sources.¹ Documentary sources, for example, include private and public correspondence, accounts, private legal documents (contracts, wills), public legal documents (imperial decrees, edicts, orders, compilations of legal instructions), petitions, notifications of birth or death, lists, inventories, and similar documents. Literature usually refers to the major genres such as poetic works (epic, lyric, elegy, and so on), drama (tragedy, comedy, satyr), history, oratory, epistolary, and philosophy. Even among literary sources, we tend to set apart a subcategory, that of the technical literature (often termed in older scholarship “paraliterary” sources), which includes school exercises, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, medicine, and magic.

But then, what is “Christian” literature?² This would, one can assume, include works related to the Christian faith, works written by important Christian figures (such as the Church Fathers), and texts produced in Christian contexts or containing Christian elements (I shall return to this point later). Among the genres of Christian literature, we thus find the Bible, theological treatises, Church histories, exegesis, homily, hagiography, and apocrypha.³ We should also include, as Christian technical literature, liturgical texts alongside magic.

¹ On these distinctions, see in gen. Arthur S. Hunt, “Papyri and Papyrology,” *JEA* 1 (1914): 81–92; Timothy Renner, “Papyrology and Ancient Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (ed. R.S. Bagnall; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 282–302; Bernhard Palme, “The Range of Documentary Texts: Types and Categories,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (ed. R.S. Bagnall; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 357–94. This is, generally speaking, a papyrological perspective, but not without relevance for other contexts.

² For this discussion, see e.g., Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth, eds., *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mark Vessey, “Literature, Patristics, Early Christian Writing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (ed. S.A. Harvey and D.G. Hunter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42–65; David G. Martinez, “The Papyri and Early Christianity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology* (ed. R.S. Bagnall; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 590–622.

³ In truth, works belonging to different genres can contain apocryphal material, such as

Attentive readers will have noticed that, to define “Christian literature”, I listed a series of categories that, in turn, need to be defined. Some of these terms and concepts are problematic in and of themselves, and one question often raised is “should we even use these terms in the first place?” Indeed, some of the words we use to designate types of works, texts, and practices are anachronistic, in that they were not used in this way or did not encompass the meaning we now ascribe to them in the time periods we study. Others gained, at some point in history, deeply pejorative connotations, which make scholars uneasy about using them. Finally, another problem with many of these categories is how to delimitate them. For example, where is the line between magic and prayer, apocrypha and hagiography, or Jewish and Christian?

In truth, many of these problems stem from underlying assumptions that may warrant reconsideration. For example, in the case of apocrypha and magic, too much attention has been given to their negative connotations in normative Christian discourses. This obscures how they were also used positively by insiders – that is, people involved in the production, consumption, and use of works and texts belonging to these categories. As for the difficulties in drawing the lines between these terms and categories, it is often assumed that they are rigid and mutually exclusive, and that categorizing a text or practice as a specific type necessarily implies that it cannot be conceptualized at the same time as something else. What if this were not the case?

To reflect upon these critical questions, this chapter will look at three categories: apocrypha, magic, and liturgy – and, more specifically, as it will focus on texts, apocryphal, magical, and liturgical texts. It will offer an overview of how these categories are typically conceived, defined, and used in scholarship: how they are, in some respects, distinct and necessary as separate categories, yet also intrinsically intertwined. This will lead into a more theoretical discussion about the concept of “multiple identities” and how the three categories of “apocrypha”, “magic”, and “liturgy” are not mutually exclusive, but can be used together to describe practices and texts, such as the *Prayer of Mary at Bartos* and other similar Coptic prayers, which will be the subject of this monograph.

Establishing Categories: “Apocrypha”

In the last few decades, concerns have been raised about the appropriateness of using the term “apocrypha” to describe a certain category of Christian literature, given its supposedly pejorative connotation. To avoid this word, scholars have proposed a plethora of new terms and expressions, such as “parabiblical

hagiographies and homilies, but for the purpose of this study, “apocrypha” will be set apart as a separate genre.

texts”, “extrabiblical texts”, or “rewritten scriptures”.⁴ To understand the problem surrounding the word “apocrypha”, it is therefore useful to look at the history of the term, both in ancient sources and in modern scholarship.⁵

The word itself, deriving from the Greek verb ἀποκρύπτω, originally meant something “hidden” or “concealed”.⁶ In pre-Christian Graeco-Roman sources, it was used in the literal, physical sense to denote a hidden object or hiding place.⁷ It was also used in a more metaphorical sense, as riddles, secrets, or hidden mysteries. In this sense, it appears most often in the Greek magical papyri, in reference to the sacred, “secret” knowledge of ritual experts. For example, in a late 3rd- to early 4th-century magical handbook, we are presented with a ritual for a “hidden stela” (στήλη ἀπόκρυφος), a lengthy invocation to multiple deities and spirits, suitable for many purposes.⁸ A 4th-century formulary called the “Unique” or “Eighth (sacred book) of Moses” (βίβλιος ἱερὰ ἐπικαλουμένη μονὰς ἢ ὀγδόη μουσέως), which contains elaborate magical rituals with revelatory aims, also refers to itself as the “sacred, hidden book of Moses” (μουσέως ἱερὰ βίβλος ἀπόκρυφος).⁹ In these texts, ἀπόκρυφος has the positive connotation of something esoterically or mystically hidden, of sacred but secret knowledge, accessible only to specialists.

The term, in its positive sense of mystical knowledge or wisdom, also appears in early Jewish-Christian literature, in the Old and New Testaments. In Isaiah (45:3), God promises to give to the anointed ones dark treasures and “hidden unseen” ones (ἀποκρύφους ἀοράτους). Paul, in 1 Corinthians (2:7), uses the verb to talk about the “secret and hidden wisdom of God” (θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην).¹⁰ It is therefore not surprising that the term continued

⁴ See e.g., the recent article by Mary K. Farag, “Rewriting Scriptures as a Homiletic Practice in Late Antique Egypt,” *JCS* 23 (2021): 47–61.

⁵ For good overviews, see in part. Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Early Christian Apocryphal Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (ed. S.A. Harvey and D.G. Hunter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 521–48; Péter Tóth, “Way Out of the Tunnel? Three Hundred Years of Research on the Apocrypha: A Preliminary Approach,” in *Retelling the Bible: Literary, Historical and Social Contexts* (ed. L. Dolezalová and T. Visi; Frankfurt: Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2011), 45–84; Annette Y. Reed, “The Afterlives of New Testament Apocrypha,” *JBL* 133 (2015): 401–25; Tony Burke and Brent Landau, “Introduction,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (ed. T. Burke and B. Landau; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 1.xx–xlv.

⁶ See LSJ, s.v. ἀπόκρυφος.

⁷ See e.g., Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.35, where he writes that Egyptians do unseemly things in secret (τὰ μὲν αἰσχρὰ ἀναγκαῖα δὲ ἐν ἀποκρύφῳ ἐστὶ ποιεῖν χρεόν).

⁸ PGM IV 1115–66. For the edition of the Greek text, see Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1928), 1.110. For the English translation, see Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation. Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 60–61.

⁹ PGM XIII 1 and 243–44; Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 2.87 and 105; Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 172 and 182.

¹⁰ For the Greek text of the OT and NT, I use Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, *Septuaginta*

to be used with a positive connotation in other early (and later) Christian literature. In the *Acts of Thomas*, for example, it is used repeatedly as an epithet for the mystery of Christ (τὰ μυστήρια ἀποκαλύπτουσα τὰ ἀπόχρυφα).¹¹ In the Coptic evidence, the Greek word ἀπόκρυφος and its cognates appear frequently in works from the Nag Hammadi codices. Some include it in their titles, such as the *Apocryphon of John* (κατὰ ἰωάννην ἡ ἀποκρυφή).¹² The so-called *Apocryphon of James* identifies itself as a “secret (ἀποκρυφή) book”.¹³ Finally, other works likewise identify themselves as “secret” or “hidden” books by using Coptic equivalents like ϣωπ. For example, the incipit of the *Gospel of Thomas*, preserved in the Coptic version, reads “These are the secret words (ϣα.ϣε εϣηπ) which the living Jesus spoke”.¹⁴

These later works all belong to the category we, as scholars, designated as “apocrypha” (or “New Testament” / “early Christian” apocrypha). This brief overview, therefore, shows that the “insiders”, the people producing and reading the texts belonging to that tradition, considered ἀπόκρυφος as a positive term, appropriate to describe their knowledge and writings. As for the negative connotation that rendered the word problematic, it comes from the “outsiders”, that is, people who were not involved in the production or consumption of this literature (and who, for the most part, were against it).

In the course of their debates with alternative or “heretical” doctrines, Christian authors endeavoured to distinguish “legitimate” and “illegitimate” works. It is in this context that the word ἀπόκρυφος was used pejoratively for the first time. One of the most prolific heresiologists of the 2nd century, Irenaeus of Lyons, claimed that the Marcosians created “apocryphal and spurious writings” (ἀποκρύφων καὶ νόθων γραφῶν) to deceive the innocent.¹⁵ Irenaeus’ association of “apocrypha” with “heresy” was later picked up when systematic attempts at listing the content of Christian Scriptures were made. The

(Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006); Eberhard Nestle and Kurt Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

¹¹ See Albertus F.J. Klijn, ed., *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 77, 119, 206, and 247. For the edition of the Greek text (CANT 245.II), see Richard A. Lipsius and Maximilien Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1903), 2.99–291.

¹² *Apocryphon of John* (cc0648; NHC II.1, III.1, and IV.1; BG 8502.2); for editions and translations of all manuscripts, see Michael Waldstein and Frederik Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

¹³ *Apocryphon of James* (cc0659; NHC I.2); edition and translation in Francis E. Williams, “The Apocryphon of James: Text and Translation,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex I (The Jung Codex)* (ed. H.W. Attridge; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 28–53.

¹⁴ *Gospel of Thomas* (cc0661; NHC II.2); edition and translation in Helmut Koester, Bentley Layton, and Thomas O. Lambdin, “The Gospel According to Thomas,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7, Together with XIII, 2* Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1) and P. Oxy. I, 654, 655* (ed. Bentley Layton; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1.38–128.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.20.1 (CPG 1306).

4th-century Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, in his Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter (367 CE), recorded the earliest list of the “canonized” (κανονιζόμενα/κανωνιζε) books of the Old and New Testaments. Against those, he set the “apocryphal” (ἀποκρύφων/ἀπογραφον/ἀποκρύφον) books, qualified as “inventions of the heretics”.¹⁶ The same association was perpetuated in the 5th century by Shenoute, the leader of the White Monastery federation, who, in his anti-heretical treatise *I Am Amazed*, called his audience to “withdraw from (the texts) that are called ‘apocryphon’ ([ἀ]ποκρύφον)”.¹⁷

But even then, the works that belonged to the category “apocrypha” varied. Athanasius, for example, mentioned apocryphal works related to Isaiah and Moses, figures from the Old Testament. The later, 6th-century Gelasian Decree included, in its list of apocrypha, the *Testament of Job*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, acts attributed to Andrew, Thomas, Peter, and Philip, gospels associated with James, Peter, Thomas, and Bartholomew, as well as writings of Tertullian, Eusebius, and Lactantius.¹⁸ Furthermore, many Christian authors were not so dichotomic and rather distinguished three categories of scriptures: those “accepted” (ὁμολογουμένα), “disputed” (ἀντιλεγόμενα), and “rejected” (νόθα).¹⁹ The disputed category comprised works that would later be regarded as canonical (Revelation), apocryphal (the *Gospel of the Hebrews*), or something else entirely. Even Athanasius seemed to have this third category in mind when he wrote about “other books”, not canonized but useful for the instruction in piety, among which were Esther, Judith, Tobit, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, the *Teaching of the Apostles*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

In the 6th century, John, bishop of Parallos (ca. 540–620), wrote his *Homily against Heretical Books* (cc0184), which is described, in its title, as a treatise “about the holy archangel Michael and about the blasphemous books of the heretics (ἡρώδωμε ἡμῆς τρεχιοῦα ἡνεραιεῖκος)”.²⁰ In the homily, John complains that

¹⁶ Athanasius, *Ep. fest.* 39, §19–21 (CPG 2102; cc0054); cf. the complete translation in David Brakke, “A New Fragment of Athanasius’s Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter : Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon,” *HTR* 103 (2010): 47–66.

¹⁷ Shenoute, *I Am Amazed*, DS 221 (cc0637). This comes from a passage where Shenoute quotes Theodosius of Alexandria’s Sixteenth Festal Letter of 401, which is extant in the manuscript MONB.DS; cf. the edition and translation in Stephen Emmel, “Theophilus’s Festal Letter of 401 as Quoted by Shenoute,” in *Divitiae Aegypti. Koptologische und verwandte Studien zu Ehren von Martin Krause* (ed. C. Fluck; Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1995), 93–98. See also Hugo Lundhaug, “Shenoute’s Heresiological Polemics and Its Context(s),” in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights Over Religious Traditions in Antiquity* (ed. J. Ulrich, A.-C. Jacobsen, and D. Brakke; Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012), 239–61.

¹⁸ See the edition in Ernst von Dobschütz, *Das Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1912).

¹⁹ This tripartite division is found, for example, in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.22.9 (CPG 3495). On the subject, see in part. François Bovon, “Beyond the Canonical and the Apocryphal Books, the Presence of a Third Category: The Books Useful for the Soul,” *HTR* 105 (2012): 125–37.

²⁰ The homily is preserved in Coptic in one manuscript from the White Monastery (MONB. CM = CLM 320), dated to the 10th–11th centuries. See the edition in Arnold van Lantschoot,

people have “abandoned the light of the holy Scriptures” and instead “read from some writings full of curses and bitterness”, of which he provides a list of examples, including the *Investiture of Michael*, the *Preaching of John*, the *Laughter of the Apostles*, the *Teachings of Adam*, and the *Counsel of the Savior*. While most of these works are otherwise unattested, texts of a work known as the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael* (cc0488) have been preserved in Coptic in three manuscripts from the 9th–11th centuries.²¹ This work, framed as a pre-resurrection dialogue between Jesus and the apostles, talks about the creation, fall, and role of the Devil, and the investiture of the archangel Michael in its place, which took place on the 12th of the month of Hathor. This last point, the date of the investiture, is fervently refuted by John of Parallos, which strongly suggests this is indeed the work he was speaking of.

Although John does not use the word ἀποκρυφον or any cognate, he clearly places himself in the line of Irenaeus and Athanasius by raging against Christians’ continuous interest in extracanonical books. While John’s homily only survives as one fragmentary text, it seems to have made a lasting impression, as it is mentioned in the *Kitāb al-īdāḥ* (“The elucidation”), a catechetical work providing explanations of Christian doctrines in Arabic to Christians that no longer understood Coptic, attributed to the 10th-century theologian Sāwirus ibn al-Muqaffa’, but probably composed in the 11th century. Chapter 9 of the *Kitāb al-īdāḥ* consists of a refutation of a pseudepigraphic, “false” sermon on Abbaton, the angel of death, and his investiture – not unlike John’s own refutation of the *Investiture of Michael*.²² From its detailed description of the sermon’s content, the *Kitāb al-īdāḥ* clearly refers to a work known as the *Investiture of Abbaton the Angel of Death* (cc0405), preserved in Coptic in one manuscript dated by colophon to

“Fragments coptes d’une homélie de Jean de Parallos contre les livres hérétiques,” in *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati* (6 vols.; Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1946), 1.296–326. See also the recent English translation by Christian Bull and Lance Jenott, “Appendix: John of Parallos, Homily Against Heretical Books,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (ed. T. Burke; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 2.553–58.

²¹ These are P.MorganLib. MS M593 (MICH.AW = CLM 223) and M614 (MICH.AX = CLM 224), both from the Monastery of the Archangel Michael at Phantoou and dated to the 9th century, as well as P.IFAO Copte inv. 145–148 (CLM 1936), from the White Monastery and dated to the 9th–11th centuries. For editions of P.MorganLib. MS M593 and M614, see Caspar D.G. Müller, *Die Bücher der Einsetzung der Erzengel Michael und Gabriel* (CSCO 225; Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1962), 1–60. On the work, see the translation with introduction by Hugo Lundhaug, “The Investiture of the Archangel Michael: An Introduction and Translation,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (ed. T. Burke; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 2.499–552.

²² On the *Kitāb al-īdāḥ*, see Mark Swanson, “The Specifically Egyptian Context of a Coptic Arabic Text: Chapter Nine of the Kitāb al-Idāḥ of Sāwirus Ibn al-Muqaffa,” *Medieval Encounters* 2 (1996): 214–27; Mark Swanson, “Kitāb al-īdāḥ,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (ed. D. Thomas and A. Mallett; 24 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3.265–69.

981.²³ The *Kitāb al-īdāḥ*, therefore, shows that the Church authorities' concerns about "apocryphal", "blasphemous" and "false" books remained strong through the whole period of Coptic literary production.

However, it is important to recognize that the designation, in the normative Christian discourses, of a given work as "apocryphal" (or some other pejorative adjective) did not result in its immediate dismissal and disappearance from the Christian literary records. If we look at the Coptic material alone, over 291 apocryphal works – including both those identifying themselves as such and some of those found in the lists of "rejected" books – have been preserved in 415 manuscripts.²⁴ Nearly all of these manuscripts are from monastic libraries, with the largest proportion from none other than the White Monastery.²⁵

On the one hand, this reflects a broader pattern, as most Coptic literary manuscripts from Late Antique and early Islamic Egypt are from monastic or ecclesiastic contexts. This may be a symptom of discovery, preservation, and archaeological biases, as monastic sites in the Egyptian deserts are more likely to be preserved – some are even still operational – more accessible, and more likely to be excavated by archaeological teams interested in Pharaonic tombs and temples, where monasteries were often built. On the other hand, however, book production and scribal training in ecclesiastic and (especially) monastic contexts are well documented,²⁶ and it is telling that several manuscripts produced

²³ The manuscript, which belonged to the Monastery of St Mercurius at Edfu, is BL.Or. 7025 (MERC.AU = CLM 196). See the edition in Ernest A.W. Budge, *Coptic Martyrdoms in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1914), 225–48 and 474–96. On the work, see the translation and introduction by Alin Suciu and Ibrahim Saweros, "The Investiture of Abbaton, the Angel of Death: A New Translation and Introduction," in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (ed. T. Burke and B. Landau; 3 vols.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 1.526–54. Suciu and Saweros also included a new English translation of chapter 9 of the *Kitāb al-īdāḥ*.

²⁴ These numbers come from the database of Coptic apocrypha, built as a part of the ERC-funded project *Storyworlds in Transition: Coptic Apocrypha in Changing Contexts in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods*, at the University of Oslo. Upon completion, this database will be made available on open-access repository platforms.

²⁵ For the monastic origin of manuscripts containing apocrypha, see esp. Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); Hugo Lundhaug, "Apocryphal Literature in Coptic," in *Coptic Literature* (ed. S. Moawad; Cairo: Saint Mark Foundation, 2022), 139–53.

²⁶ On book production and scribal training in Late Antique and early Islamic Egypt, see e.g., Anne Boud'hors, "Copie et circulation des livres dans la région thébaine (VIIe–VIIIe siècles)," in *"Et maintenant ce ne sont plus que des villages...": Thèbes et sa région aux époques hellénistique, romaine et byzantine* (ed. A. Delattre and P. Heilporn; Brussels: Association égyptologique reine Elisabeth, 2008), 149–61; Chrysi Kotsifou, "Books and Book Production in the Monastic Communities of Byzantine Egypt," in *The Early Christian Book* (ed. W.E. Klingshirn and L. Safran; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 48–66; Anastasia Maravela, "Monastic Book Production in Christian Egypt," in *Spätantike Bibliotheken. Leben und Lesen in den frühen Klöstern Ägyptens* (ed. C. Römer and H. Froschauer; Vienna: Phoibos Verlag, 2008), 25–38; Michael J. Kruger, "Manuscripts, Scribes, and Book Production within

there, or kept in monastic libraries and used by the communities, contained apocryphal works. Many manuscripts combine canonical and apocryphal texts, without distinguishing between them in any significant way.²⁷ Some were even used for liturgical purposes, read during feast days, and bear liturgical notes.²⁸ Noticeably, works commemorating investitures (such as those of Michael, Gabriel, and Abbaton) were meant to be read during these angels' feasts, which is something John of Parallos specifically complained about.

One can therefore wonder if the monks were simply unaware of the illicit nature of the works they were reading and copying. That, however, is rather unlikely. Both Athanasius' Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter and John of Parallos' *Homily against Heretical Books* are attested in Coptic in manuscripts from the White Monastery,²⁹ which also housed several manuscripts with apocryphal works, including one version of the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, condemned by John. Famously, too, a homily *On the Passion and the Resurrection* (cc0149) attributed to Evodius of Rome defends the composition (and consumption) of apocryphal narratives by comparing the embroideries added to a king's garments to adornments added to the holy Gospels, which Jesus would certainly not have condemned, but rather commended.³⁰ It is unlikely that the individu-

Early Christianity," in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture* (ed. S.E. Porter and A. Pitts; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 13–40; Lillian I. Larsen, "Excavating the Excavations' of Early Monastic Education," in *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia* (ed. L.I. Larsen and S. Rubenson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 101–24; Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott, "Production, Distribution and Ownership of Books in the Monasteries of Upper Egypt: The Evidence of the Nag Hammadi Colophons," in *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity: The Transformation of Classical Paideia* (ed. L.I. Larsen and S. Rubenson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 306–25; Anne Boud'hors, "The Coptic Ostraca of the Theban Hermitage MMA 1152. 3. Exercises (O. Gurna Górecki 97–161)," *JJP* 49 (2019): 59–60.

²⁷ E.g., the papyrus manuscript BL.Or. 7594 (CLM 1371; 4th–5th centuries) contains the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Elijah* (cc0028), as well as Deuteronomy, Jonah, and the Acts of the Apostles. The parchment manuscript P.Mich.inv. 166 (CLM 67; 6th–9th centuries) has the apocryphal Abgar Correspondence, Paul of Tamma, *On the Cell and Letter*, as well as Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. The parchment codex Coptic Museum 13446 (CLM 6293; 7th–10th centuries) contains Isaiah and the apocryphal *Martyrdom of Peter* (cc0026), although the latter text appears to have been added at a later stage.

²⁸ Together with many works preserved in the manuscripts from the Monastery of St Macarius, we find liturgical notes stating when to read them. From these, ten are apocryphal works. For example, Ps-John Chrysostom, *On Michael A* (cc0431; in MACA.AF = CLM 75) and Ps-Peter of Alexandria, *On Riches / On the Archangel Michael* (cc0311; in MACA.BG = CLM 98) were instructed to be read on the 12 of Meshir and Mesore respectively, as the Commemoration of Archangel Michael was celebrated on the 12 of each month. I thank Samuel Peter Cook for providing data on these manuscripts.

²⁹ Coptic texts of Athanasius' Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter are found in MONB.AS (CLM 279) and MONB.AT (CLM 280), both dated to the 10th–11th centuries. For John of Parallos' homily, see above p. 6 (n. 20).

³⁰ Cf. Hugo Lundhaug, "The Fluid Transmission of Apocrypha in Egyptian Monasteries," in *Coptic Literature in Context (4th–13th Cent.). Cultural Landscape, Literary Production, and Manuscript Archaeology* (ed. P. Buzi; Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2020), 213–27 at 216.

als who composed, copied, and read this work – preserved in Coptic in seven manuscripts,³¹ including three from the White Monastery – were unaware of the polemics. One consequence of the heresiological literature might have been that authors eventually ceased using ἀποκρυφον as a self-designation, while continuing to compose works belonging to the same category. The evidence thus suggests that the vast majority of Christians in Late Antique and early Islamic Egypt did not regard these works as “heretical” or “spurious”, but as legitimate Christian literature.

With that in mind, it becomes possible to re-evaluate the validity of the term apocrypha. In recent years, it has often been stressed that, when studying ancient societies, we should (as much as possible) use emic terminology, that is, language and concepts specific to those societies and cultures.³² For those who wish to discard “apocrypha” because of its “inherent pejorative connotation”, I reply that ἀπόκρυφος was an emic term, used both positively by insiders and pejoratively by outsiders in Antiquity (and the subsequent periods). Furthermore, works included in that category, whether by insiders or outsiders, were in fact generally well received, as evidenced by archaeological and literary sources. It bears reminding, however, that the term ἀπόκρυφος eventually fell out of use, even though works belonging to the same category as those previously described as “apocryphal” continued to be composed, copied, read, and criticized. Moreover, from an emic perspective, individuals may have held different concrete conceptions of what “apocrypha” were and what works ought to be regarded as such.

In other words, from a modern, scholarly perspective, “apocrypha” should be considered as a category that remained fluid, from Antiquity up until today. To discuss this fluid category of literary works, it is therefore more useful for scholars to adopt an etic perspective. The purpose of this discussion was to show that, as far as choosing a word to name our etic category goes, “apocrypha” is as good as any – that is, as long as we are very open about our etic use of the term and do not mix the etic and emic meanings. Consequently, to use “apocrypha” as a productive analytical tool from a scholarly-oriented perspective, it is our task to provide it with a clear etic definition.

³¹ These are GIOV.AM (CLM 57 = Turin Museum 63000.12.1–40), from This, dated to the 7th–8th centuries; BnF Copte 132.1.11 (CLM 1714), from an unknown location, dated to the 8th–9th centuries; MICH.BR (CLM 243 = PMorganLib. MS M595), from the Monastery of the Archangel Michael at Phantou, dated by colophon to 855; MONB.OI (CLM 570) and MONB.LY (CLM 511), both from the White Monastery and dated to the 10th century; Rijksmuseum F1976.4.31.1–2 (CLM 4419), also from the White Monastery, dated to the 10th–11th centuries; Ryl.Copt. 76, undated, unknown provenience.

³² The etic/emic distinction comes from anthropology and social sciences; cf. Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Crowell, 1968), 568–604; Marvin Harris, “Emics and Etics Revisited,” in *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate* (ed. T.N. Headland, K. Pike, and M. Harris; London: Sage Publications, 1990), 48–61.

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I		2319	15n50
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331	15n50	2453	15n50
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210	15.50	1017–18	68n105
243	15.50	XIII	
1115–66	4n8	1	4n9
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5527 (BKU I 23)	24, 54n70, 93, 110–12, 119, 183	5899.1 (<i>P.Lond.Copt.</i> 1007)	57n79
8096	69n108	5987 (AKZ I D)	24, 54n70, 63, 93, 110–17, 119, 139, 144, 150n5–6, 153–54, 183–85
8105	106n46		
8313 (BKU I 1)	108n56	6172 (<i>P.Lond.Copt.</i> 1223)	133n32
8314 (BKU I 3)	23n80	6794 (AKZ I E)	37, 89n41, 102, 119–20
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- O.BYU Mag. 1–3 (*PCM* I 16)
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