

Narratives of Jesus's
Passion and Resurrection
between the Second and the
Seventh Centuries

Edited by
TOBIAS NICKLAS
and KONRAD SCHWARZ

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Tobias Nicklas and Konrad Schwarz

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Tobias Nicklas, born 1967; 2000 Dr. theol.; 2004 Habilitation Universität Regensburg; 2005–07 New Testament Professor, Radboud Universität Nijmegen; Chair of New Testament Studies, Universität Regensburg; Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies “Beyond Canon” at the Universität Regensburg, Research Associate at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1021-6994>

Konrad Schwarz, born 1983; 2003–11 Studies of Protestant Theology in Berlin and Pietermaritzburg (South Africa); 2011–13 research associate, Universität Hamburg; research associate, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; 2018 Dr. theol.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5575-9829>

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www.mohrsiebeck.com, info@mohrsiebeck.com

Introduction

The contributions collected in this volume go back to a conference held in April 2022 at the Ateneu Universitari Sant Pacià in Barcelona. The conference was jointly organized by colleagues of the hosting institution, the DFG-financed Centre for Advanced Studies “Beyond Canon” at Universität Regensburg (FOR 2770), and the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

The conference in Barcelona was held in honor of Jens Schröter, Professor of Exegesis and Theology of the New Testament and Ancient Christian Apocrypha at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. It is almost impossible to give an overview of Jens Schröter’s immense and immensely influential contribution to the study of early Christianity. One could speak about his work on Q, the Gospel of Thomas, Paul (and especially 2 Corinthians and Romans), the development of early Jesus traditions, canonical and apocryphal acts of the apostles, “memory” studies, and much more. But first and foremost we would like to highlight his contribution to the study of extra-canonical gospel literature, texts that he describes as “creative reinterpretations” of the early Jesus tradition in their specific ways.¹ The organizers of this conference therefore concluded that the topic of “Narratives of Jesus’s Passion and Resurrection” would be apt for a symposium held in honor of Jens Schröter, an outstanding scholar of worldwide reputation whom we also believe to be a brilliant teacher and a good, long-time friend. *Ad multos annos!*

Our sincere thanks go to the local organizers of the conference in Barcelona, Armand Puig i Tarrèch, Marcos Aceituno Donoso, and Begonya Palau. The publication of the present conference volume was supported by Charlotte von Schelling, whom we would also like to thank. Moreover, we are grateful to the editorial team of the WUNT series for accepting this volume and Markus Kirchner and Tobias Weiß of Mohr Siebeck for their supervision of the publication process.

¹ See Jens Schröter, “The Contribution of Non-canonical Gospels to the Memory of Jesus: The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter as Test Cases,” *NTS* 64 (2018): 435–454, at 453; and id., *The Apocryphal Gospels: Jesus Traditions outside the Bible*, trans. Wayne C. Coppins, Westar Tools and Translations/Early Christian Apocrypha 9 (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade, 2021), 7.

1 Exploring Narratives of Jesus's Passion and Resurrection between the Second and the Seventh Centuries

Recent scholarship has thoroughly studied apocryphal gospels and gospel fragments from the second and third centuries in an intense and productive way.² The remarkable interest in these texts has resulted in a number of new editions, introductions and translations,³ important commentaries,⁴ as well as monographs⁵ and articles on individual texts, including proceedings of conferences.⁶

² Regarding the current paradigm change in the study of Christian apocrypha and parabiblical traditions, see, for example, Tobias Nicklas, "Neutestamentlicher Kanon und christliche Apokryphen: Trends, Themen und Thesen," *Zeitschrift für Neues Testament* 51 (2023): 5–26.

³ See, for instance, Pierre Geoltrain and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, eds., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997–2005); Christoph Marksches and Jens Schröter, eds., *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, vol. 1: *Evangelien und Verwandtes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Peter Nagel, *Codex apocryphus gnosticus Novi Testamenti*, vol. 1: *Evangelien und Apostelgeschichten aus den Schriften von Nag Hammadi und verwandten Kodizes: koptisch und deutsch*; vol. 2: *Briefe und Apokalypsen aus den Schriften von Nag Hammadi und dem Codex Tchacos mit einer Neuausgabe der "Epistula Apostolorum"*, WUNT 326 and 503 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014 and 2023); Tony Burke (and Brent Landau), ed(s.), *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2016–2023).

⁴ See, for example, Christopher Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, Oxford Early Christian Gospel Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Thomas J. Kraus, Michael J. Kruger, and Tobias Nicklas, *Gospel Fragments*, Oxford Early Christian Gospel Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Paul Foster, *The Gospel of Peter*, TENTS 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, TENTS 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Alexander Toepel, *Das Protevangelium des Jakobus* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2014); Andrew Gregory, *The Gospel according to the Hebrews and the Gospel of the Ebionites*, Oxford Early Christian Gospel Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Johanna Brankaer and Bas van Os, *The Gospel of Judas*, Oxford Early Christian Gospel Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Lorne R. Zelyck, *The Egerton Gospel (Egerton Papyrus 2 + Papyrus Köln VI 255)*, TENTS 13 (Leiden: Brill, 2019); and David Brakke, *The Gospel of Judas*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁵ See, for example, Erik M. Vanden Eykel, "But Their Faces Were All Looking Up": *Author and Reader of the Protevangelium of James*, The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries 1 (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Alin Suciu, *The Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon: A Coptic Apostolic Memoir*, WUNT 370 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017); Sarah Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour: The "Gospel of Mary" among Early Christian Dialogue Gospels*, SNTSMS 176 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Francis Watson, *An Apostolic Gospel: The "Epistula Apostolorum" in Literary Context*, SNTSMS 179 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Konrad Schwarz, *Gleichnisse und Parabeln Jesu im Thomasevangelium: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Form, Funktion und Bedeutung*, BZNW 236 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020); Tobias Nicklas, *Studien zum Petrus-evangelium*, WUNT 453 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

⁶ For example, Jens Schröter, ed., *The Apocryphal Gospels within the Context of Early Christian Theology*, BETL 260 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013); Francis Watson and Sarah Parkhouse, eds., *Connecting Gospels: Beyond the Canonical/Non-canonical Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jens Schröter, Tobias Nicklas, and Joseph Verheyden, eds., *Gospels and Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Experiments in Reception*, BZNW 235 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019); Jörg Frey, Claire Clivaz, and Tobias Nicklas, eds., *Between Canonical and Apocryphal Texts: Processes of Reception, Rewriting, and Interpretation in Early Judaism and Early Chris-*

This approach has put the studies of New Testament Gospels in a much broader historical and theological context. It has become clear that gospels that later became part of the New Testament were transmitted and interpreted together with other gospels and gospel-like literature. As a consequence, the distinction between “canonical” and “apocryphal” (or “non-canonical”) gospels became blurred. As is widely accepted today, non-canonical gospels and gospel traditions contribute to the reception and transmission of Jesus-related material and the memory of Jesus in different ways.⁷

In recent years, the focus has broadened: attention, for example, has shifted to texts that existed and perhaps were even composed in the Coptic church of the sixth or seventh century. It has even been suggested that these texts might represent a distinct genre of Jesus narratives, called “apostolic memoirs.”⁸ These texts – at least some of them – apparently presuppose dogmatic traditions that originated only after the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), many of them even in the early Islamic period. An important feature of these texts is that they are characterized by the attempt of the Egyptian miaphysite church to link its specific traditions with Christian origins. Another type of (even later) Jesus stories can be found in the so-called Lives of the Virgin, gospel-like texts that tell the story about Jesus from the perspective of his mother Mary.⁹ And, finally, there is growing interest in paraphrases of Jesus stories by ancient Christian authors: many of these texts offer highly interesting material that can be compared to developments in apocryphal gospels.¹⁰

Many of these texts, which are quite different in scope, may be described as “reenactments”¹¹ of Jesus stories. They are not usually considered important for the history and interpretation of Jesus traditions in New Testament texts or for

tianity, WUNT 419 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019); Joseph Verheyden, Jens Schröter, and Tobias Nicklas, eds., *Texts in Context: Essays on Dating and Contextualising Christian Writings from the Second to the Early Third Centuries*, BETL 319 (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), and the numerous volumes of the series *Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha* (Leuven: Peeters).

⁷ For a broad overview, see Chris Keith, Helen K. Bond, Christine Jacobi, and Jens Schröter, eds., *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries*, 3 vols. (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

⁸ Cf., for example, Suciú, *Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon*.

⁹ The oldest of these writings is attributed to Maximus the Confessor. For more information, see Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Maximus the Confessor: The Life of the Virgin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ See, for example, Tobias Nicklas, “Eine ‘Passionsgeschichte’ in Ps-Cyprians *De duobus montibus Sina et Sion*,” *Humanitas* 76 (2021): 74–85; id., “Der göttliche Lehrer und seine Schüler: Eine Erzählung über Passion, Ostern und die Anfänge der Kirche in Tertullians *Apologeticum*,” in *The Gospels and Their Receptions: Festschrift Joseph Verheyden*, ed. Henk Jan de Jonge et al., BETL 330 (Leuven: Peeters, 2022), 501–532; and id., “Apocryphal Jesus Stories in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: The Syrophoenician Woman (Hom. 2.19) and the Dispute with the Sadducees (Hom 3.50.1 and 3.54.2),” in *In Search of Truth in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, ed. Benjamin M. J. De Vos and Danny Praet, WUNT 496 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 133–144.

¹¹ Regarding this term, see Tobias Nicklas, “Zwischen Redaktion und Neuinszenierung: Vom

the textual transmission of the Gospels because they appear to be free retellings of the Jesus story related to the situations in which they were performed. They also only play a subordinate role in the reconstruction of theological developments by modern patristic scholars and researchers interested in the developments of doctrines of the Christian church. Since these passages are usually not classified as “apocrypha,” research on apocryphal writings until today has hardly taken an interest in them either. Although such paraphrases are not “gospels” in a narrower sense, and although they are often (to varying degrees) based on traditions of the New Testament Gospels, they frequently show phenomena of remodeling individual episodes, narrative embellishment, focusing on individual elements, and thus “new performances” not only of canonical texts but in a similar way also of traditions that can be found in apocryphal gospel fragments. Unlike the latter, however, the passages from ancient Christian literature mostly appear in the context of a more extensive work and, in many cases, can also be classified historically more accurate than apocryphal gospel fragments.

2 Summary of the Individual Chapters

Armand Puig i Tàrrach opens the present collection with an analysis of the passion and resurrection narrative in the Gospel of Peter. As Puig i Tàrrach explains, the Gospel of Peter is a carefully composed text from the second century that aims to reaffirm Christian identity among believers who do not have a Jewish background. The author of this gospel rewrites and reenacts the four Gospels that later became canonical with significant revisions, especially in comparison to Luke’s Gospel. According to the Gospel of Peter, Pontius Pilate openly refuses to participate in Jesus’s case, whereas Herod Antipas appears as the wicked representative of the Jewish people and finally becomes responsible for Jesus’s death. Different from the Gospel of Luke, which states that Pilate and Herod became “friends” during Jesus’s trial (Luke 23:12), the Gospel of Peter sets Pilate and Herod in sharp contrast. This aims at reducing the scope of Pilate’s – and ultimately Rome’s – intervention in Jesus’s death.

The subsequent essay by Ángel Narro explores the reception of Jesus’s passion and resurrection in the five major apocryphal acts, which are commonly thought to have been composed between the middle of the second and the middle of the third century CE. The Acts of John plays a special role in this context since only this text describes Jesus’s death in an elaborate way, while there is no explanation that John died as a martyr. John’s proclamation reveals that Jesus appeared to him at the same time when he was crucified, and the sign of a cross of

Umgang erzählender Evangelien des 2. Jahrhunderts mit ihren Vorlagen,” in Schröter, Nicklas, and Verheyden, *Gospels and Gospel Traditions*, 311–330, at 312–313.

light affirms the truth of Jesus's crucifixion. As Narro explains, the appearance of Jesus as an "intellectual spirit" that has departed from Jesus's body indicates that the text is related to the gnostic idea of the distinction between soul and flesh. The other apocryphal acts mentioned before reveal a specific reception of Jesus's passion and resurrection in certain elements in the description of each apostle's martyrdom. For instance, in the Acts of Paul, Thecla remains silent during her interrogation, and the theater where she is martyred is overshadowed. These examples and a number of other passages in the apocryphal acts of the apostles reflect the idea of the *imitatio Christi*, where motifs from the accounts of Jesus's passion play an important role.

Tobias Nicklas explores the traditions of Jesus's death and resurrection in Pseudo-Hippolytus's homily *Peri Pascha*. Composed by an anonymous author perhaps in the fourth century, this text draws on various traditions from the canonical Gospels, but it also integrates certain motifs from the Epistle to the Hebrews, the tradition of Christ's *Descensus ad inferos*, liturgical traditions, and references to the Pentateuch. The homily freely selects and adapts passages from its sources in a distinct way, which Nicklas describes as a reenactment ("Neuinszenierung") of the foundational narrative about Christ's death and resurrection in early Christianity.

As a starting point of the following study, Jörg Frey briefly outlines the reception of the figure of Nicodemus in Christian texts and visual arts from antiquity up to the Italian Renaissance. In the Gospel of John, where Nicodemus appears as a minor character for the first time, he does not quite understand Jesus (John 3:1–10). Later in the narration, he provides him a dignified burial (John 19:38–40), yet still without ever speaking something like a confession of faith. Nicodemus thus remains a somewhat ambivalent figure. He becomes prominent, however, in a popular text that is known as the "Gospel of Nicodemus" since the twelfth century onwards, while earlier authors refer to it by titles such as *Acta Pilati*. Given the complex textual history of the Gospel of Nicodemus/Acts of Pilate, Frey focuses on the recension Greek A, which is dated approximately to the early fifth century. Compared with the canonical Gospels, the Gospel of Nicodemus presents an extended renarration of the canonical passion and resurrection accounts. However, it does not harmonize the canonical narratives but selects and prioritizes different sources for different sections. Although theological aspects are rather limited in this gospel, it nevertheless presents a dramatic, "entertaining" narrative.

Chris Keith reflects on the Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea, a text whose time of origin is debated, with dates ranging between the third and the twelfth centuries CE. Taking up a concept developed by Jens Schröter, Keith approaches this text as a "creative reinterpretation" of Jesus's passion¹² where the "epis-

¹² Cf. above, n. 1.

tolary Jesus” is a distinctive aspect. The narrative elaborates on the role of the two criminals Gestas and Demas, who are crucified with Jesus. While hanging on the cross, Jesus dictates a letter to the cherubim in which he orders that the penitent criminal Demas should receive an immortal body and enter paradise. As Keith shows, the tradition of Jesus dictating a letter appears already in Rev 1–3 and later in the Abgar legend. In the Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea, however, this feature contributes to the text’s portrayal of Jesus as a king in a unique way.

The essay by Jean-Daniel Dubois offers an insight into the preparation of a new critical edition of the Acts of Pilate, which is complicated because of the variety of versions of this text in the ancient and medieval manuscripts. Dubois shows that the Acts of Pilate has been rewritten several times throughout its history of transmission. According to Dubois, certain details in the text and in particular its use of theatrical aspects suggest that Justin Martyr and Tertullian were acquainted with some early version of the Acts of Pilate in the second century and denigrated it as a forgery. Dubois therefore concludes that the Acts of Pilate originated as a Jewish apocryphon during an early period in which the separation between Jews and Christians had not yet been completed.

Anna Van den Kerchove gives an overview of how Mani and his followers describe the last events in the life of Jesus, who is regarded as the “Apostle of Light” according to the complex Christology of Manichaeism. She pays particular attention to Manichaean liturgical texts, focusing on the arrest of Jesus, Jesus’s trial before the Sanhedrin, his trial before Pilate, his crucifixion and death, and other main items. The Manichaean authors make a deliberate selection from these items while relying on sources such as the four canonical Gospels, but also Tatian’s *Diatessaron* and the Gospel of Peter. In the Manichaean texts, Jesus controls his passions and endures against the evil forces of darkness, which are particularly identified with the Jewish authorities. The texts show an obvious tendency toward dramatization, and the death of Mani is described in the same way as that of Jesus, the “Apostle of Light.”

The contribution by Sarah Parkhouse focuses on the identities of the women who watch Jesus’s crucifixion, visit his tomb, and encounter the risen Jesus. As the identities of these women change from gospel to gospel, this is an interesting topic for exploring how ancient Christian authors in different theological contexts retell the canonical accounts and interpret the identities of the women. Parkhouse examines a selection of texts from different languages and genres, including the canonical Gospels and several apocryphal gospels, Ephrem’s Syrian commentary on the *Diatessaron*, Latin and Greek poetry and tractates. While early apocryphal gospels such as the Gospel of Peter and the *Epistula apostolorum* often pay little attention to these women, later texts tend to replace the priority of Mary Magdalene by Mary, mother of Jesus. This tendency is particularly striking in texts from the late fourth century onwards, in which Jesus’s mother is increasingly revered as “Theotokos.”

Dylan Burns discusses three Coptic apocrypha ascribed to Evodius of Rome, in which anti-Judaism is a central theme (*Homily on the Passion and Resurrection*, *Homily on the Dormition of the Virgin*, and *Homily on the Life of Jesus and His Love for the Apostles*). Burns argues that two of these texts were probably composed by the same author in the second half of the sixth century CE, while in the third text the name “Evodius” is used by a different author writing in the sixth to eighth century CE. In these texts, the polemical representation of the Jews is much more detailed than, for instance, in the earlier works of Shenoute. As Burns explains, the Evodian apocrypha should be considered particularly valuable for studying Egyptian Jewry and Christian-Jewish relations in parts of the Byzantine Empire that were lost to the Arab conquest.

The soteriological meaning of the cross of Jesus is reflected in three Coptic texts explored by Jens Schröter. Two of these texts are part of the Qasr el-Wizz codex from the ninth century. The first text recounts an instruction of Jesus to the apostles that takes place between Jesus’s resurrection and ascension, whereas the second text contains four hymns that Jesus directs at the cross some time before the crucifixion. The third text is the “Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon,” which is known from two poorly preserved manuscripts that represent perhaps two separate writings relying on the same tradition or source. This represents probably some kind of a gospel that narrates several scenes and different settings of Jesus’s last encounter with his disciples. As Schröter shows, all three texts reinterpret the cross of Jesus in such a way that the cross is primarily not an instrument of torture but part of the divine plan of salvation.

In the final essay, Thomas Kraus illuminates ancient and medieval traditions concerning what Jesus Christ did when he was dead, that is, during the time between his crucifixion and resurrection. After reviewing the statements concerning the *Descensus Christi ad inferos* in the ancient creeds and possible precursors in the New Testament, Kraus focuses on the third part of the Gospel of Nicodemus (chs. 17–27). This part about Christ’s “Descent into Hell” is probably a later addition, perhaps composed in the fifth or sixth century. The dramatic narrative includes a remarkable dialogue between Satan and Hades, where the latter doubts that Satan will succeed, and eventually Hades becomes obedient to Christ. Moreover, the gospel reflects a specific Christology that shows Jesus as the “King of Glory” with omnipotent authority, who liberates Adam, the patriarchs, and many others from the underworld. Thus, it provides an explanation for the presence of prominent characters from the Old Testament in heaven, as they appear in the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul.

Table of Contents

Introduction	V
Abbreviations	XV
<i>Armand Puig i Tàrrach</i>	
The Figure of Jesus in the Gospel of Peter	1
<i>Ángel Narro</i>	
Jesus's Death and Resurrection in the Eyes of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles	35
<i>Tobias Nicklas</i>	
Traditionen über Jesu Passion und Auferweckung in Pseudo-Hippolyts <i>Peri Pascha</i>	55
<i>Jörg Frey</i>	
The Late Career of Nicodemus: The Reception and Expansion of the Gospel Story in the Acts of Pilate/Gospel of Nicodemus (Recension Greek A)	77
<i>Chris Keith</i>	
The Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea and the Epistolary Jesus	103
<i>Jean-Daniel Dubois</i>	
The Passion of Jesus in the Coptic Version of the Acts of Pilate	117
<i>Anna Van den Kerchove</i>	
Jesus's Endurance within Some Manichaean Documents	135
<i>Sarah Parkhouse</i>	
Mary and/or Mary: The Changing Traditions of the Marys at the Cross and the Tomb in Early Christian and Late Antique Gospel Retellings	169
<i>Dylan Michael Burns</i>	
Pseudo-Evodius of Rome's Anti-Judaism in Its Byzantine Context	195

Jens Schröter

Dancing around the Cross: The “Theology of the Cross” according
to the Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon and the Qasr el-Wizz Codex
within the Jesus Tradition 219

Thomas J. Kraus

Traditions of the Descent of Christ into Hell (*Descensus Christi ad inferos*)
with a Focus on the Gospel of Nicodemus 235

List of Contributors 257

Index of Ancient Sources 259

Index of Modern Authors 273

Index of Subjects 277

Abbreviations

Abbreviations in the present volume follow *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), except for the German contribution, which uses the abbreviations of the *Abkürzungen Theologie und Religionswissenschaften nach RGG*⁴ (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). Papyri editions have been abbreviated according to the “Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets” (<https://papyri.info/docs/checklist>). Additional abbreviations are listed below.

Ancient Works

4 Her. 6	Psalm of Herakleides 6: Hymn to the Son of the Living God
APTh	Acts of Paul and Thecla
BSA	Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon
Disc. Crucif.	Discourse on the Crucifixion
Disc. Judg.	Discourse on the Judgment
<i>Hom. Dorm. Virg.</i>	<i>Homily on the Dormition of the Virgin</i> (Ps.-Evodius)
<i>Hom. Life Jes.</i>	<i>Homily on the Life of Jesus and His Love for the Apostles</i> (Ps.-Evodius)
<i>Hom. Life Pass.</i>	<i>On the Life and Passion of Christ</i> (Ps.-Cyril of Jerusalem)
<i>Hom. Pass. Res.</i>	<i>Homily on the Passion and Resurrection</i> (Ps.-Evodius)
Keph.	Kephalaia of the Teacher/Master
Man. Hom.	Manichaean Homilies
<i>Mart. Andr. alt.</i>	<i>Martyrium Andreae alterum</i>
Nar. Jos. Arim.	Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea
Ps. Wand.	Psalms of the Wanderers
PsB II	Manichaean Psalm-Book (ed. Allberry)

Bibliographical and Other Abbreviations

AcA1	Christoph Marksches and Jens Schröter, eds., <i>Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung</i> , vol. 1: <i>Evangelien und Verwandtes</i> (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012)
CC	Clavis Coptica
CCSA	Corpus Christianorum: Series apocryphorum
DH	Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, <i>Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum: Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen</i> , 45th ed. (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2017)
HP	Hamburg Papyrus
LXX.D	Wolfgang Kraus and Martin Karrer, eds., <i>Septuaginta Deutsch: Das griechische Alte Testament in deutscher Übersetzung</i> (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2009)

NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NTApo ⁶	Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., <i>Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung</i> , 6th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990–1997)
PM	Pierpont Morgan Library, New York
QWC	Qasr el-Wizz codex
WA	Martin Luther, <i>Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe)</i> (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009)

The Figure of Jesus in the Gospel of Peter

Armand Puig i Tàrrach

The Gospel of Peter's treatment of the figure of Jesus gives the impression that the author set out to have a particular impact on Christology. As a general rule, and according to canonical passion accounts, it must be said that in the Gospel of Peter, the figure of Jesus is passive and not active. He speaks only once, at the time of his death (v. 19), and his actions progress based on what other actors do to him or on what he receives from them. Jesus appears as a Romanesque *maiestas Domini* who endures the torments and the cross with absolute control over that which, humanly, can be characterized as suffering. At the moment of crucifixion, the presumed height of physical pain, the author says: "He was silent as if he did not feel any pain" (αὐτὸς δὲ ἐσιώπα ὡς μηδὲν πόνον ἔχων, v. 10). The text does not say that there is no pain in what they did to Jesus or that he did not feel it, as if he was not himself or was sustained by some substance. Rather, despite feeling pain, he was silent; he did not scream, express himself, or protest. Verse 10 shows that for the Gospel of Peter, Jesus is not a martyr, as Peter Head thinks,¹ nor a hero. Rather, as Matti Myllykoski states, Jesus is a character who showed absolute strength against those who led him to death.² This sovereignty, which rules over even the pain, is a demonstration of his divinity.³

1. Christological Titles

In this frame of Jesus's sovereignty in suffering, it is possible to interpret the titles used for him in the Gospel of Peter. The narrator of the Gospel of Peter alone uses the title "the Lord" (ὁ κύριος) to refer to the figure of Jesus (13 times). The terms "Jesus" and "Christ" are completely absent. Even the expression "the

¹ Peter M. Head, "On the Christology of the Gospel of Peter," *VC* 48 (1992): 209–224, at 211–213.

² Jesus's silence in Gos. Pet. 10 is also found in Matt 26:63 par. Mark 14:61 (referring, however, to the questioning before Caiaphas) and in Matt 27:14 par. Mark 15:5 (also referring to the questioning and trial before Pilate). In Isa 53:7 the context of the silence refers, as it is in Gos. Pet. 10, to the torments inflicted on the Servant of the Lord.

³ Matti Myllykoski, "Die Kraft des Herrn: Erwägungen zur Christologie des Petrus-evangeliums," in *Das Evangelium nach Petrus: Text, Kontexte, Intertexte*, ed. Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas, TU 158 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 301–326, at 326.

body of Jesus” in the canonical gospels (cf. Matt 27:58; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:52; John 19:38), referring to Jesus’s corpse, becomes “the body of the Lord” (Gos. Pet. 3). It should be noted that the title “the Lord,” referring to Jesus, is equally common in the Judeo-Christian gospels. However, while no character addressed Jesus with “Lord” – this title is used exclusively by the narrator – the good thief does refer to him as “Savior” or, more precisely, “the Savior of mankind” (σωτήρ ... τῶν ἀνθρώπων, v. 13). This is clearly a confession of faith.

The third christological title is “Son of God,” which appears four times in the Gospel of Peter. Once, it appears in Pilate’s mouth and should be understood as Pilate’s recognition of Jesus’s divine condition, though without necessarily implying an act of faith on his part: “I am clean of the blood of the Son of God” (v. 46). Likewise, the soldiers and the nobles, who came running from the tomb full of agitation, explained to Pilate how Jesus had risen, and recognized that this only meant that God viewed him as son (v. 45). They did not, however, believe. Neither did those who made fun of Jesus and his status. Jesus was a Son of God who allowed himself to be dragged along like a scarecrow and was “honored” by his executioners with flagellations (vv. 6 and 9).

However, there are three other titles used for Jesus that must be considered. In the same mockery scene, they made Jesus sit in a judge’s seat (cf. John 19:13, interpreted as “[Pilate] seated him”) and invited him to judge, as the “king of Israel” (Gos. Pet. 7). He is, therefore, the Messiah, king, and judge of his people. The irony is that the inscription over the cross bears exactly the same words (“this is the king of Israel”; cf. Matt. 27:37: “this is Jesus, the king of the Jews”).

On the other hand, after Jesus’s death, the people called him “righteous,” seeing the extraordinary signs that occurred with his death. These signs were evidence that God judged him to be righteous and innocent, and therefore Jesus did not deserve death (v. 28). The resurrection, as a great sign, would show that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 45) – something that Jewish leaders will reluctantly recognize, even though they do not believe in it. There is a christological progression between death (Jesus as “king” and “righteous”) and resurrection (Jesus as “Son of God”). Similarly, we read in Acts 3:14 that the Israelites “denied the Holy and the Just” one and demanded his death before Pilate.

The last title is indirect, but no less real. It is incorporated in the message of the young man whom the women saw sitting “in the middle of the tomb” (Gos. Pet. 55). This is a heavenly character, who has come down from heaven, and who authoritatively said of Jesus: “He has risen and has gone there from where he had been sent” (ἀνέστη γὰρ καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἐκεῖ ὅθεν ἀπεστάλη, v. 56). This phrase reflects the theme: Jesus as the one sent by the Father, in line with the Gospel according to John. Jesus rose and ascended to heaven (v. 40), from where the Father had sent him (cf. John 6:38: “I have come down from heaven to do ... the will of the one who sent me,” and also John 8:42: “I have come out of God ... it is he who sent me”).

In short, the Christology in the Gospel of Peter proposes six titles that refer to Jesus: Lord, Savior, Son of God, King, Righteous, and Envoy. The christological arch covered by these titles encompasses elements that are also found in the four canonical gospels.

2. The Sequence: Death – Preaching to the Dead – Resurrection/Ascension

The Gospel of Peter proceeds chronologically: (1) Jesus's death/burial, (2) Jesus's preaching to the dead, (3) Jesus's resurrection/ascension. Therefore, in addition to gathering sources and references in early Jewish literature and ancient Christian literature, it is worth considering the Gospel of Peter narratively and worth verifying the existing inference between the three elements that make up the thematic and narrative sequence of the story. This elaborated sequence includes: (1) Jesus's death (v. 19), with three cosmic effects (vv. 20–22) and three reactions of the people (vv. 25–28);⁴ (2) Jesus's preaching to the dead, which gives logic to the talking cross (vv. 41–42); (3) Jesus's resurrection/ascension to heaven (vv. 35–40, 55–56), cosmic actions (vv. 35–37), and three reactions of the people (vv. 45–46, 57, 59).

There is a sequence similar to this, but not identical on all themes, which is outlined in other texts: First Peter (4:6 and 3:18–22) and Ephesians (4:8–10), from the years 70–90 CE; the Gospel of Nicodemus (Acts of Pilate and *Descensus*), from the second to fourth century; the ancient Roman Creed, the nucleus of the later Apostles' Creed, which, according to J. N. D. Kelly, is from the late second century.⁵ Precisely in the Apostles' Creed, originally from the second century but formalized in its current stage in the fourth to fifth century, we find also a sequence close to that of the Gospel of Peter: (1) "he suffered under the power of Pontius Pilate, was crucified, killed and buried," (2) "descended into hell," (3) "rose on the third day from the dead, went up to heaven."

⁴ These are the three effects: the curtain of the sanctuary is torn "immediately" in two pieces (Gos. Pet. 20; cf. Matt 27:51, where the curtain is only torn); the earthquake and the fear when the deceased Jesus is put on the ground (Gos. Pet. 21; cf. Matt 27:51, which does not mention that Jesus is left on the ground); the end of the darkness that lasted between noon and three o'clock in the afternoon and the fact that the sun shines again (Gos. Pet. 15, 22; cf. Matt 27:45–46). To these three cosmic effects, three personal reactions can be added: the reaction of the leaders (Gos. Pet. 25), of the disciples (vv. 26–27) and of the people (v. 28).

⁵ See J. N. D. Kelly, "Apostles' Creed," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90. Kelly is of the opinion that the Apostles' Creed is quoted by Tertullian and Irenaeus. We note, however, that one of the two versions of the Creed of Aquileia, known through Rufinus, does not contain the article relating to Jesus's descent into hell (cf. PL 21:3358). Neither did Aristides of Athens mention it in his *Apologia* 2.

Regarding 1 Peter – the document that unfolds the tradition that refers to Peter as an *auctor* and which includes 2 Peter, the Gospel, the Apocalypse and the Acts of Peter – there are interesting similarities that suggest its influence on the Gospel of Peter. It is significant that Jesus is called “the righteous one” (δικαιος) in 1 Pet 3:18 and in Gos. Pet. 28 – although the context is not the same – and that he had to “endure punishments suffered unjustly” (1 Pet 2:18), which evokes Jesus’s silence amid torments (Gos. Pet. 10).

As for Jesus’s passion and death, 1 Peter refers to the “sufferings of Christ” (1:11; cf. also 3:18; 4:13), who is the “stone rejected by the builders” (2:7), with special emphasis on his suffering “in the body” (4:1),⁶ Jesus’s death “on the cross” (2:21–24) and his “precious blood” (1:2, 19). As for the resurrection/ascension, they are mentioned in 1 Pet 1:3–4 (“resurrection from the dead ... up in heaven”; cf. also 3:22) and are called “glory that would come after” Jesus’s sufferings in 1 Pet 1:11. Certainly, “God has risen him from the dead and has given him glory” (1:21), he who is “the cornerstone” (2:7).

Although in a modified form, the complete sequence nevertheless appears in 1 Pet 3:18–22: (1) Jesus’s death (“put to death in the flesh,” v.18a), (2) his resurrection (“brought to life in the spirit,” v.18b), (3) Jesus’s preaching “to the spirits in prison” (v.19), (4) Jesus’s ascension “to heaven, to the right of God” (v.22). We note that in 1 Peter the resurrection and ascension have been separated, unlike in the Gospel of Peter where they belong together (vv. 39–40). The sequence also appears in 1 Pet 4:1–6, although more blurred: (1) Jesus’s death (“he has suffered in the body,” v.1), (2) the proclamation of the gospel “to the dead” (v.6), (3) the coming of Jesus, who must “judge the living and the dead” (v.5), since he has risen and ascended to heaven.

2.1 Preaching to the Dead (Gos. Pet. 41–42)

A new element found in both 1 Pet 4:6 and Gos. Pet. 41–42 is the preaching “to the dead” (νεκροῖς) and “to those who were asleep” (τοῖς κοιμωμένοις), respectively. On the other hand, in 1 Pet 3:19, the recipients of this preaching are “the spirits in prison” (τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασιν). In 1 Pet 3:19 and Gos. Pet. 41 the same verb is used, “to preach” (κηρύσσω), while in 1 Pet 4:6 we find the verb form “the gospel was proclaimed” (εὐηγγελίσθη). In all the cases the announcement refers to the news of Christ’s resurrection, which occurred after his death.

⁶ This emphasis also appears in the Gospel of Peter, see vv. 3–4, (21), 23, 24, (30). We note that in the Gospel of Peter various parts and elements of Jesus’s body are also mentioned: the “head of the Lord” (v.8), the “face,” the “cheeks” (v.9), the “hands of the Lord” (v.21), the “blood” (vv.1, 2, 19). Concern for Jesus’s body seems to indicate a willingness to underline his humanity. The Gospel of Peter cannot, therefore, be considered a document of docetic origin. Cf. also Tobias Nicklas, “Die Leiblichkeit des Gepeinigten: Das *Evangelium nach Petrus* und frühchristliche Märtyrerakten,” in *Studien zum Petrusvangelium*, WUNT 453 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 193–215, at 213.

The recipients of this announcement are those who were in the meta-earthly world, whether they are human beings, now “dead” or “asleep” (1 Pet 4:6; Gos. Pet. 41), or whether they are beings from the infernal world or underground, called “spirits in prison” (1 Pet 3:19). Indeed, the lower world has been “opened” by the fact that Jesus has died and now belongs, though only momentarily, to the world of the dead. The novelty is that there he appears not dead but as a living person, as risen. That is why he now has access to the world of the dead as the conqueror of death – as is broadly dramatized in Gos. Nic. 21–24 (*Descensus* 5–8). It seems clear, then, that the subject of the preaching or of the joyful proclamation in the world of death is Jesus himself, although this extreme is only made explicit in 1 Pet 3:19 and, therefore, it must be assumed that it is an implicit element in 1 Pet 4:6.

This action of Jesus is transposable to Gos. Pet. 41–42, although here the text offers two possibilities: either the cross has been the preacher of the resurrection in the world of the dead, or it has accompanied Jesus on his journey to the underground regions of the cosmos and now acts as a witness and spokesperson for his preaching – in the same way that, previously, it had witnessed his passion and death. It is necessary to prefer the second option. The audible question that came from heaven – which opened as Jesus ascended with the two heavenly men – addressed the cross that had descended with him into the lower world of the dead.⁷

The question about the purpose of Jesus’s journey into the underworld mentioned in Gos. Pet. 41–42 can therefore be resolved with 1 Pet 4:6. The nexus between these two texts invites us to read them in a related way: The objective of Jesus’s journey to the world of death is to preach the announcement of his resurrection to human beings who have died and who are now in Sheol/hades, orphans of hope. Another objective is expressed in 1 Pet 3:18–22, where the “spirits in prison” are understood to be the fallen angels (cf. 1 En. 15 and Jub. 5 and 10, where the sin of these angels, cf. Gen 6:1–4, extended to the flood generation “in the days when Noah built the ark,” 1 Pet 3:20). These “angels” will definitely be subdued by the triumphant journey of the risen Jesus before ascending to heaven (1 Pet 3:22).⁸ Fallen spirits or angels – at least part of them – have been imprisoned, apparently, since the time of their fall. In Rev 20:1–2, 7, which speaks of the thousand-year-old kingdom, Satan is said to have been tied up with a chain in the “prison” of the “abyss.” A similar fate could be assumed for the

⁷ The expression “the lower regions of the earth” (εἰς τὰ κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς) of Eph 4:9 is ambiguous. In his commentary to Ephesians, Heinrich Schlier quotes Thomas Aquinas, who affirmed that the expression can be understood in two ways: *istas partes terrae* or *de inferno qui infra nos est* (see *La Carta a los Efesios*, trans. Constantino Ruiz-Garrido, Biblioteca de Estudios Bíblicos 71 [Salamanca: Sígueme, 1991], 253 n. 35).

⁸ Cf. Jacques Schlosser, *La première épître de Pierre*, Commentaire biblique: Nouveau Testament 21 (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 215–216.

imprisoned spirits cited in 1 Pet 3:19, as the Enochic literature states.⁹ Jesus would have travelled to Hades to proclaim his triumph to the hostile forces, the same ones who, as evil spirits, had been his adversaries during his mission.

These two perspectives of Jesus's preaching, to the world of the dead or to the fallen angels, merge in Gos. Nic. 18–24. In this text, those who had died since Adam and Eve, but also Satan and Hades, personification of the realm of death, are located in "hell." Jesus entered hell victoriously, chained Satan, and commanded Hades to keep him "well locked" until the day of his "second coming" (22:2). Then he ascended to heaven with the company of those who were dead in hell and now were risen "thanks to the wood of the cross" (24:1).

2.2 *Death of Jesus (Gos. Pet. 19)*

The links between 1 Peter and the Gospel of Peter regarding Jesus's preaching to those who slept/were dead lead one to consider the connections that may exist between these two texts in relation to Jesus's death. The Gospel of Peter wants to explain quite clearly how things happened between the day of Jesus's death and the day of his resurrection. That is why the author is interested in dispelling doubts and shedding light on what Jesus did and on what happened to him before the readers/listeners who were eager to know what happened and how it happened. The account covers the three-day time segment: "on the eve of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread" (Gos. Pet. 5) or Friday (cf. John 19:14) when Jesus is condemned, tormented, crucified, killed, and buried; "on the Sabbath" (Gos. Pet. 34) when the text suggests that preaching to the dead takes place (v. 41); and "the day of the Lord" (v. 35) or Sunday when Jesus rises again.¹⁰ The temporal conditions of these three days correspond to spatial conditions: the events that occurred on Friday took place on earth; those on Saturday were carried out in the meta-earthly realm (under the earth or in the lower heavens);¹¹

⁹ Cf. Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 256. Achtemeier does not comment on the location of the prison where the spirits are, but it is obviously an unearthly place, which must be located under the earth or in the lower heavenly regions.

¹⁰ In addition, Gos. Pet. 58 mentions "the last day of Unleavened Bread." The author of the Gospel of Peter shows a special interest in the chronological details within each day: "noon" on Friday, when darkness covers all Judea until "three in the afternoon" (vv. 15 and 22); "early in the morning" on Saturday (v. 34); "during the night" from Saturday to Sunday, that is, "at night" (vv. 35, 45) and "at dawn" on Sunday (v. 50).

¹¹ The tripartite division of the universe frequently appears in Christian texts. Let us quote, as an example, Phil 2:10: "in heaven (ἐπουρανίων), on earth (ἐπιγείων) and under the earth (καταχθονίων)." In hell, one descends or goes down. However, in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts, the fallen angels are in one of the lower heavens from which they exercise their power over human beings; for this reason, Jesus claimed to have seen Satan "falling from heaven" (Luke 10:18), but it is also said that these angels were sunk "in Tartarus," the dark part of hell, until the day of judgment arrives (2 Pet 2:4).

and those on Sunday between earth and heaven. The Gospel of Peter presents itself as a clear and precise report, an account almost built up from written sources.

The account of Jesus's crucifixion, death, and burial in the Gospel of Peter (vv. 10–24) is characterized by the interweaving of scenes and motifs found in the canonical gospels¹² and also by the choices of the one who wrote it. Both oral and written tradition is therefore present in this account. There are two crucial points: the identity of the deceased and the way in which his death happened. As for the identity of the crucified, the most significant element is the title “Savior of humanity” (σωτήρ ... τῶν ἀνθρώπων), which was put into the mouth of one of the criminals as a confession of faith. He also apostrophized the executors and those who induced Jesus's death – the Jewish leaders – reproaching them for killing someone who has done them no harm. The scene, narrated in Gos. Pet. 13–14, presupposes the words of the good thief in Luke 23:40–41, and probably the words of the Samaritans to the woman in John 4:42: “we know that this is really the Savior of the world (ὁ σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου).” Thus, like in Luke 2:11 when the angel announced to the shepherds the identity of the one born in Bethlehem as “savior” (σωτήρ), in Gos. Pet. 13 the criminal announced Jesus's identity as savior to those who brought about his death.¹³

As for the how of Jesus's death, the Gospel of Peter emphasizes the reality of his bodily death. Jesus was nailed to the cross with two criminals amid suffering (v. 10); cruelly the Jewish guards put the clothes in front of him so that he could see how they cast lots for them (v. 12); he was still alive when darkness spread (v. 15); and he died making a great exclamation (v. 19). This exclamation (“My strength, strength, you have abandoned me!,” Ἡ δύναμίς μου, ἡ δύναμις, κατέλειψάς με), which like in Matt 27:46, 50 and Mark 15:34, 37 breaks Jesus's former silence during the crucifixion, replaces the (double?) exclamation that appears in these two gospels: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Θεέ μου θεέ μου, ἵνατί με ἐγκατέλιπες, cf. Ps 22:2).¹⁴

¹² The comparison between the canonical gospels and the Gospel of Peter shows that the author knows the tradition underlying the former and, probably, some texts that narrate the account of Jesus's crucifixion, death, and burial: Matt 27:32–61; Mark 15:21–47; Luke 23:26–56; John 19:17–42.

¹³ Jesus's title as the “savior” of all mankind often appears in texts from the second century: 1 Tim 1:1, 4; 2:3; 4:10 (“savior of all men,” σωτήρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων); 2 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:3, 4; 2:10, 13; 3:4, 6; and 2 Pet 1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18 (“God/Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”). Paul Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary*, TENTS 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 304, following Swete, considers it plausible that the use of “savior” in Gos. Pet. 13 is due to the influence of Luke 23:39 (“save yourself and us”).

¹⁴ For further details on this development see Tobias Nicklas, “Die Gottverlassenheit des Gottessohns: Funktionen von Psalm 22/21 LXX in frühchristlichen Auseinandersetzungen mit der Passion Jesu,” in *Aneignung durch Transformation: Beiträge zur Analyse von Überlieferungsprozessen im frühen Christentum; Festschrift für Michael Theobald*, ed. Wilfried Eisele, Christoph Schäfer, and Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, Herders biblische Studien 67 (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2013), 395–415.

The interpretative possibilities are at least twofold. The first possibility is that “strength” should be understood as a metonymy for “God.”¹⁵ In this case, the Gospel of Peter wishes to mitigate the difficulty created in Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34, wherein it seems as if Jesus died while reproaching God for leaving him alone on the cross.¹⁶

The second possibility is that “strength” means one’s “life power.” It is that which characterizes living beings while they are free from the arms of death.¹⁷ Indeed, when death comes, the body loses all strength. Then “the breath of life,” which indicates the state of a living being (cf. Gen 2:7: πνοὴ ζωῆς), leaves the body and the person dies. Both expressions, “strength” and “breath of life,” describe the end of one’s earthly, physical life as a loss of vital breath (the person no longer breathes) and, therefore, as a loss of life and bodily strength (the body immediately becomes flaccid and then rigid because of *rigor mortis*). Jesus, dying on the cross, was left without physical life, without life power as far as the body is concerned, but not without spiritual life or strength. He died in the body but did not cease to exist. Otherwise, he could not have preached to those who sleep. Still taking 1 Peter as a point of reference, the Gospel of Peter refers to Jesus as the one who has died in the body – he has lived on earth and participated in “bodily death” (σάρκι) – but now lives in the divine, spiritual realm: “he lives according to God in terms of spirit” (ζῶσι δὲ κατὰ θεὸν πνεύματι, 1 Pet 4:6).

Therefore, although Jesus’s body was hanging from the cross and would be buried in a tomb, Joseph’s tomb (Gos. Pet. 23), before he is resurrected, he would preach to the dead (vv. 41–42), as a spirit among the spirits (see 1 Pet 3:19) but with all the strength (δύναμις) of the one who was living. He would preach with full spiritual corporality (see 1 Cor 15:42–44), which would allow him to announce his own triumph over death to those who were asleep in the realm of death. Then, when he would rise, he would have spiritual and physical corporality, a complete and transformed corporality, for he will ascend “to heaven” wholly (Gos. Pet. 40).

Therefore, the verbal form “was taken away” (ἀνελήφθη, Gos. Pet. 19) must be read within the framework of the narrative of the Gospel of Peter, which unites Jesus’s ascension to heaven with the moment of the resurrection (v. 40) and not with his death – the preaching to those who sleep took place between death and resurrection. Within this narrative context one finds the explanation for why in the Gospel of Peter the life power (δύναμις) abandoned Jesus, resulting in his

¹⁵ The interpretation of the term “power” as a “circumlocution” referring to God is found in Judaism, in Gnosticism, and in the fathers of the church. See Head, “Christology,” 214.

¹⁶ Perhaps the author would have wanted to change the usual text (“God, my God”) to avoid showing conflict between God and Jesus. But Jesus, who died in great dereliction, does not accuse God but rather notes that he did not feel him close. He expresses this in the words of Ps 22, which are in fact an extreme prayer at an extreme moment.

¹⁷ Cf. LSJ, s. v. δύναμις I: “power, might, esp. of bodily strength.”

death, even though the text does not specify where his *dynamis* has gone (cf. v. 19). It certainly has not gone to heaven, for the Lord would only go there after his resurrection (cf. v. 40). In the meantime, it was up to him to go and preach to those who sleep. This must therefore be the “place” where Jesus’s *dynamis* manifested itself, between his death and his resurrection/ascension. In a word, for the Gospel of Peter, the life power (δύναμις) abandoned Jesus’s body when he died, but remained in his spiritual corporality and would only ascend to heaven after his resurrection.¹⁸ The lack of specificity about the location to which Jesus’s *dynamis* went after his death, with no more detail than the statement “he was taken away” (v. 19), excludes other interpretations based on the body-soul dichotomy.¹⁹

2.3 Resurrection/Ascension (Gos. Pet. 39–41)

While the narrative of Jesus’s death tells how the life power leaves the body of the Lord and how he dies after being silent up until the moment of expiration, the narrative of the resurrection points to Jesus’s departure towards God. We are not far from the words addressed by Jesus to the disciples through Mary Magdalene on the day of his resurrection: “I rise (ἀναβαίνω) to my Father, who is your Father, to my God, who is your God” (John 20:17). In Luke-Acts, Jesus goes to God after forty days of being risen and having appeared to the disciples. It is said that he has “been taken to heaven,” both in Luke 24:51 (καὶ ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν) and in Acts 1:11 (ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἀφ’ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν), where it is specified that “a cloud took him away” (νεφέλη ὑπέλαβεν αὐτόν, 1:9). Still, in 1 Pet 3:21–22 the reference to Jesus’s “resurrection” is accompanied by his departure to the heavenly regions: “he went to heaven” (πορευθεὶς εἰς οὐρανόν, v. 22). The resurrection and the ascension constitute a unique event wherein fallen “angels” (ἀγγέλων) and other intermediate powers, who are “subjected” to the risen one who sits at the right hand of God imbued with full authority, are not strange.

¹⁸ The situation is diverse in the texts that explicitly mention that Jesus is taken “to heaven.” Cf. Acts 1:11 which states that “he was taken away (ἀναλημφθεὶς) from among you to heaven (εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν).” Likewise, 1 Tim 3:16 says that Jesus was “taken to glory” (ἀνελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ). These texts refer to Jesus’s ascension. We note that in Jewish literature the theme of ascensions to heaven, with or without return, is present in narratives about many characters, for example, Enoch, Moses, Elijah, Baruch, and Ezra. See Head, “Christology,” 25 n. 46.

¹⁹ If it were thought that Jesus’s life power (δύναμις) is taken upwards, towards heaven (ἀνελήφθη), it would be necessary to understand that it is the soul that goes towards God, according to the traditional representation of the separation of the body and soul. Then, one could imagine that the two heavenly men who came down to look for Jesus (v. 36) carried his soul or life force which would energize that person’s body. This interpretation, which has parallels, for example, in iconographies and medieval texts about the assumption of Mary, has no basis in the Gospel of Peter, where Jesus preached to the dead during the short time interval between his death and his resurrection.

The presence of non-fallen angels is constant in the texts related to the resurrection and ascension. They accompanied Jesus on his triumphant heavenly journey. Thus, *Ascen. Isa.* 3:16–17, a text from the beginning of the second century, speaks of two angels (the angel of the Holy Spirit and Michael, the prince of the holy angels) who opened Jesus's tomb on the third day. In *John* 20:12 two angels were sitting on the stone bench inside the tomb and speaking to Mary, while in *Acts* 1:11–12 two angels also introduced themselves to the stunned disciples who watched as Jesus rose to heaven and announced to them that he would return. In the Gospel of Peter, the motif of a pair of heavenly beings, and still of a third character, also heavenly (a young man), is central to the events of Jesus's resurrection/ascension.

The resurrection event is the highlight of the Christology in the Gospel of Peter (vv. 35–42). The theophany described in *Matt* 28:3–4, starring “the angel of the Lord,” has been magnified by a series of prodigious deeds.²⁰ As for the downward movement, there are three extraordinary cosmic events: a great cry resounded in heaven (*Gos. Pet.* 35); heaven opened so that two heavenly characters surrounded by radiance descended and went to the tomb (v. 36); and the huge stone that enclosed the tomb was removed on its own (v. 37). During the ascent, three more prodigious events unfolded: three characters – not only the two heavenly beings who had descended from heaven! – of an unparalleled height (especially the third, which was inside the tomb!) ascended to heaven (v. 39); they were followed by a cross that moved on its own (v. 39); a heavenly voice interrogated the cross and this cross spoke uttering a resounding “yes” (vv. 41–42).²¹

This spectacular theophany is complemented by a second theophany, which calls to mind *Mark* 16:5–6. Heaven opened again (*Gos. Pet.* 44) and another heavenly character, “a man,” descended from it, who entered the tomb after the other three characters had left and sat “in the middle” of the stone bench of the tomb (v. 55). This is in fact “a handsome young man” wearing “dazzling clothes” (v. 55). When the women reached the tomb and bent down to look inside, this young man from heaven announced to them that the crucified man had risen and “gone” to heaven “from where he had been sent” (v. 56).

²⁰ Cf. Tobias Nicklas, “Resurrection in the Gospels of Matthew and *Peter*: Some Developments,” in id., *Studien zum Petrusvangelium*, 140–176. Nicklas, however, notes that the author of the Gospel of Peter presents the events with a “sensual perception” (175), and this gives them a special characteristic.

²¹ The iconographic representation of this victorious cross appears at the top of the Byzantine icon of the Descent of the Risen Christ into Hell, in which the cross of Jesus is carried by two angels. On the other hand, in *Gos. Nic.* 24, no cross is mentioned, but Jesus blessed “Adam on the forehead with the sign of the cross.” The only cross that appears here is the one on the shoulders of the good thief who, carrying his cross, hopes that Jesus would fulfil his promise and would let him enter paradise (ch. 26).

Index of Ancient Sources

Hebrew Bible/Septuagint

<i>Genesis</i>		21 LXX	61
2:7	8, 62	21:17–19 LXX	127
2:16–17	62	21:19 LXX	64
2:21–22	66	22:2	7
3:7	62	23:7	247
3:17–18	65, 162	23:7–8	73
3:24	108	24:7	248
6:1–4	5	47:3	30
28:12	63	68:22 LXX	66
37:17	123	69:21–22	30
49:11	127	90:4	43
		106:16 LXX	73
		109:3 LXX	68
<i>Exodus</i>		<i>Job</i>	
23:15	15, 104	38:17	73
31:18	116		
34:27	116		
<i>Leviticus</i>		<i>Isaiah</i>	
23:6–8	15	7:14	127, 131
		9:1–2	246, 248
<i>Numbers</i>		22:15–25	123
4:37	116	26:19	248
21:4–9	78	42	130
		44:6	30
<i>Deuteronomy</i>		49:6	130
4:12	71	65:2	128
21:23	125		
28:66	62	<i>Ezekiel</i>	
34:5–6	124	8:10	104
<i>2 Kings</i>		<i>Hosea</i>	
6:13	123	10:6 LXX	199
<i>Esther</i>		<i>Habakuk</i>	
2–3	133	1:6	111
8:8–9	115	2:3	111–112, 126
9:17–19	133		
		<i>Zechariah</i>	
<i>Psalms</i>		9:9	128
1:3	62		

Deuterocanonical Books of the Septuagint

<i>Sirach</i>			<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>	
38:27–39:11	105		18:1	71
<i>Tobit</i>				
1:18–19	107			
2:2–8	107			

Early Jewish Writings/Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

<i>1 Enoch</i>			<i>Jubilees</i>	
15	5		5	5
			10	5

Ancient Jewish Authors

Josephus			Philo	
<i>Bellum judaicum</i>			<i>De specialibus legibus</i>	
6.452	17		2.28	15
<i>Contra Apionem</i>			4.160	115
2.5	216		4.162	115

Dead Sea Scrolls

<i>11QT</i>				
17.15–16	15			

Rabbinic Literature

Talmud			<i>y. Ber.</i>	
<i>b. Šabb.</i>			5:3, 40a	210
116a	125			

New Testament

<i>Matthew</i>			5:13–14	231
3:16–17	249		7:13–14	62, 74

9:20–22	121	28:9–10	73
12:38–40	237	28:10	20
12:40	72	28:11–15	174–175
13:55	105	28:16	14
16:18	249	28:18	89
17:5	43		
19:28	114	<i>Mark</i>	
20:19	46	1:22	105
20:21–23	231	1:40–45	121
21:2	127	2:1–12	95
21:5	128	6:3	105–106
25:1–13	57	10:36–40	231
26:26–28	60	10:46	121
26:32	18	10:46–52	95
26:39	64	14:1	142
26:41	75	14:27	231
26:56	14	14:28	18
26:57–68	124	14:38	65, 75
26:64–65	147	14:42	231
27	121	14:43–44	144
27:11	114	14:48	155
27:14	43	14:60–64	147
27:19	120	14:66	43
27:24	26, 120, 158	15:1–5	94
27:24–25	28	15:1–15	119
27:25	199	15:3	143
27:26	26	15:14–15	26
27:29	133	15:23	156
27:37	2, 114	15:24	64
27:42–43	97	15:25	152
27:44	67	15:33	69
27:45	44	15:34	7–8, 45
27:46	7–8, 45	15:37	7, 64
27:50	7, 64	15:38	70
27:51	69–70	15:39	122
27:52	69	15:40–47	171
27:56	171	16	15
27:57	24	16:1	20, 171
27:60	25, 123	16:3	21
27:61	171	16:5	22
28	12, 124	16:5–6	10
28:1	22, 171	16:5–7	11
28:2	183	16:6–7	23
28:3–4	10	16:7	18, 20
28:5–7	11, 23	16:8	23, 173
28:6	23	16:9–20	15–16, 19, 23, 97
28:7	18, 20	16:16–18	89
28:9	23		

<i>Luke</i>		24:13–35	201
1:35	43	24:51	9, 23
2	90		
2:11	7	<i>John</i>	
2:25–35	124	1:51	63
2:28–35	96	2:20	96
2:34	128	3:1	79
4:16	112	3:1–10	IX, 93
4:16–32	105	3:1–21	78–81, 243
7:51	198	3:5	95
8:2–3	171	4:42	7
8:41	123	5:1–18	95
8:54	72	5:36–47	110
10:18	6	6:38	2
11	231	7:15	104
13:11–13	121	7:50	82, 93
14:15	231	7:50–51	121, 243
18:35–42	95	7:50–52	79, 93
22:15	60–61	7:53–8:11	104
22:20	60	8:8	111
22:42	65	8:42	2
22:52	155	8:44	38
23:2	162	10	231
23:4	26	11:1–44	96
23:6–13	27, 29, 33	11:16	206
23:12	VIII	11:43	72
23:13–25	26	13:26–27	141
23:15	29	14:6	63
23:31	151	15:13	231
23:33–43	96	16:32	231
23:34–53	122	18	121
23:37	97	18:6–7	95
23:39–43	67, 109	18:10	98
23:40–41	7	18:24–28	148
23:42	114	18:28–19:16	88
23:43	71, 74, 108	18:29–31	120
23:44	45, 69	18:30–38	95, 122
23:44–48	96	18:33–38	89, 91, 94
23:45–46	70	18:36–37	95
23:48	92	18:37	29
23:49	171	18:38	26, 121
23:49–53	96	18:39	29
23:55	171	19	179
23:56	20	19:1–16	26
24:1	20, 171	19:3	29
24:4	11	19:8	119
24:6	23	19:9–12	94
24:9–10	20	19:12	29, 95

19:13	2, 27	1:9–11	23, 73
19:14	6, 29	1:11	9
19:15	29–30, 33, 95	1:11–12	10
19:19	29, 96	1:21–22	24
19:20	153	3:14	2
19:23–24	64	5:15	43
19:25	190	5:34–38	82, 101
19:25–27	90, 172	5:35–37	78
19:29	156	5:39	101
19:30	70	10:38	24
19:33	46	22:3	78
19:34	66		
19:35	182	<i>Romans</i>	
19:38–40	IX, 79	1:24–27	208
19:38–42	107	1:25	125
19:39–40	21	10:6–7	240
19:39–42	244	10:17	240
19:40–41	25		
20	182	<i>1 Corinthians</i>	
20:1	22, 172	10:4	69
20:1–18	185–186	11:25	60
20:2	23, 172	15:3–5	237
20:3–10	183	15:5	19
20:7	96	15:42–44	8
20:11	192	15:55	248
20:11–12	188		
20:11–17	191	<i>Ephesians</i>	
20:11–18	23, 175, 184, 189–190	4:8–10	3, 5, 238–240
20:11–19	72		
20:12	10–11, 22	<i>Philippians</i>	
20:13	23	2:6–11	241
20:14–17	174	2:10	6
20:15	23, 172		
20:15–17	172, 188	<i>1 Timothy</i>	
20:17	9	3:16	9
20:17–18	20		
20:18	175	<i>Hebrews</i>	
20:19	18, 21, 73, 198	1:1–4	11
20:19–23	91		
20:24	19	<i>1 Peter</i>	
20:24–29	73	1–2	4
20:30–31	109–110	3:18–22	3–5
21:1	20	3:19	4, 6, 8, 238–240
21:1–14	19	3:21–22	9
21:25	183	4:1	4
		4:6	3–5, 8, 13
<i>Acts</i>			
1:3	23		

<i>2 Peter</i>		1:18	249
1:16–18	18	6:8	249
2:4	6	12:9	66
		20:1–2	5
<i>1 John</i>		20:7	5
3:16	231	20:13–14	249
		21–22	110
<i>Revelation</i>		21:6	229
1–3	112	22:2	62

Apostolic Fathers

<i>Barnabas</i>		<i>Ignatius</i>	
5:13	61	<i>Smyrnaeans</i>	
7	66	1:2	61
12:9	111	<i>Trallians</i>	
<i>Didache</i>		11:2	62
1:1	62		

Early Christian Writings

<i>Acts of Andrew</i>		<i>Acts of Peter</i>	
	46, 53		47
51	46	16	66
59	47	36–37	48
		40–41	48
<i>Acts of John</i>		<i>Acts of Thomas</i>	
	VIII, 36–42, 51–52		36, 48, 53
87–105	37	32	50
88–102	38–39	164–165	49–50
97	44	169–170	51
97–102	46	<i>Ascension of Isaiah</i>	
98–101	40	3:16–17	10–11
102	41–42		
113	41	<i>Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon</i>	
<i>Acts of Paul and Thecla</i>		(“Gospel of the Savior”)	
	IX, 42, 53	p. 97	231
4:3	158	p. 98.15	231
9:7–8	158	p. 103	232
20–22	42–44	pp. 107–110	232
23–26	158	pp. 109–110	225

<i>Book of Bartholomew</i>		14	92, 97
8–11	185–186	15	93, 96, 101, 123, 126,
9.2	187		133
		16	92, 95, 100, 125, 128,
<i>Dance of the Savior (Qasr el-Wizz Codex,</i>			133, 245
<i>pp. 24–33)</i>		17	88, 245
p. 24–33	220	17–27	243
p. 25.5	229	18	246–247, 249
p. 27–29	223	18–21	248
p. 27.5–10	229	18–24	6
		18–27	245
<i>Didascalia apostolorum</i>		19	246
21.5.14.23–15.1	16	20	247, 251
21.5.18.2–19.3	16	20–27	247
		21	250
<i>Discourse of the Savior</i>		21–24	5
<i>(Qasr el-Wizz Codex, pp. 3–23)</i>		22	249–250, 253
pp. 3–23	220	23	251
pp. 20.5–23.5	225	25	252
		25–26	250
<i>Epistula apostolorum</i>			
7.3	173		
<i>Gospel of Mary</i>			
17.10–18.21	19	1	32
		1–5	26–28, 28–31
		3	2, 24–26
<i>Gospel of Nicodemus/Acts of Pilate</i>		4	32
	IX, 3, 77, 117	5	6, 32
Prologue	118	6–7	2
1	92, 95, 119, 133	9	2
1–11	88	10	1
1–16	86, 243	12	64
2	16, 95, 97, 119–120, 123,	13	2, 7, 109
	131, 204	15	30, 69
3	94, 120	16	157
4	95–97, 120–121	17	30
5	93, 133	19	1, 7–9
5–7	121, 129	20	70
6	84, 95	21	61
8	96	23	8
8–10	122	23–24	24–26
9	16, 84, 91–92, 97	24	172
10	84, 129	26–27	14–20, 32
10–11	96	28	2
11	16–17, 92	28–34	26–28, 32
12	93, 96–97, 133	34–35	6
12–16	89, 124, 243	35–41	172
13	126, 132	35–42	10
		<i>Gospel of Peter</i>	
			VIII

39	11, 109		
39–41	9–13		
40	2, 8, 11		
41–42	4–6, 8		
43–49	26–28		
44	22		
45	2		
45–49	157		
46	2, 32		
50	24		
50–57	20–24		
52–54	172		
55–56	2, 10–11		
58–60	14, 21		
59–60	32		
<i>Gospel of Philip (NHC II,3)</i>			
p. 51.29–32	214		
<i>Gospel of Thomas (NHC II,2)</i>			
24, p. 38,3–10	231		
<i>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</i>			
6:2	105		
14:1	105		
15:1	105		
		<i>Martyrdom of Paul</i>	
		2–3	44
		6	45
		7	46
		<i>Narrative of Joseph of Arimathea</i>	
			IX, 103
		1:1	107
		1:2	107, 111
		1:3	108
		1:4	107–108
		2:4	107
		3:2–3	108, 114
		3:4	108–109, 111–112
		4:1–2	109
		4:3	109, 111–112
		5:1–3	109
		<i>Revelatio Stephani</i>	
		3:27–35	82
		<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>	
		1:374–375	69
		8:305–306	69

Manichaean Literature

<i>Kephalaia</i>			
0	140		
1	137, 143–144, 146, 151, 160, 163, 166		
2	139, 143, 145, 152, 154		
7	135, 137		
11	135		
29	135		
109	135		
<i>Manichaean Homilies (Chester Beatty L., Codex D)</i>			
Homily II			
p. 11.5–15	138		
p. 11.14	143		
		Homily III	
		p. 52.10	153
		Homily IV	
		p. 91.26–33	149
		<i>Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II</i>	
			135, 137–138
		Psalms of the Bema	
		241, p. 43.11–31	150
		241, p. 43.19–20	154
		Psalms to Jesus	
		242–276, pp. 49–97.13	135
		242, p. 49.23–25	153
		Psalms of the Wanderers	
		3, p. 142.10	167

- Ephrem the Syrian
- Commentarius in Diatessaron*
- 4.7 158
- 20.3 143
- 20.17 161
- 20.27 157
- Hymni de crucifixione*
- 5.12 162
- 5.16 157
- Epiphanius
- Panarion*
- 50.1.1–5 126
- 50.1.5 86
- 50.1.8 86
- 70.11.3 16
- Eudocia
- Homerocentones*
- 2050–2053 178
- 2058–2061 179
- 2161–2183 179
- 2221–2225 180
- Eusebius
- Historia ecclesiastica*
- 1.9.2–3 126
- 1.11.9 126
- 1.12.2 115
- 1.13.5 113, 116
- 1.13.5–6 111
- 1.13.6–9 115
- 1.13.9 111
- 3.11 181
- 7.31 136
- 9.5 86
- 9.5.1 126
- Hippolytus of Rome
- De antichristo*
- 59 63
- 61 67
- Irenaeus
- Adversus haereses*
- 3.19.2 66
- 4.33.12 66
- 5.17.4 62
- Epideixis*
- 45 63
- 77 199
- 79 61
- 82 66
- Jacobus de Voragine
- Legenda aurea*
- 78, 83, 101
- 137 78
- Jerome
- Commentariorum in Ezechielem libri XVI*
- 44.29 106, 112
- Commentariorum in Osee libri III*
- 110 200
- De viris illustribus*
- 47 79
- John Chrysostom
- Adversus Judaeos*
- 1.3.1 148
- 1.4.2 148
- Homiliae in Matthaеum*
- 88.2–3 175
- Homiliae in Joannem*
- 24.1 81
- Justin
- Apologia I*
- 7.1 126
- 13.3 134
- 23 127–128
- 27–52 127
- 33 131
- 35 61
- 35.3 128
- 35.8.1–9.2 86

- | | | | |
|---|--------------|--|--|
| 35.9 | 126 | | |
| 36–37 | 129 | | |
| 48.3.2 | 86 | | |
| 54 | 131 | | |
| 66–67 | 131 | | |
| <i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i> | | | |
| 25.1 | 129 | | |
| 29 | 111 | | |
| 97.3 | 61, 64 | | |
| 103 | 199 | | |
| 121–122 | 130 | | |
| Lactantius | | | |
| <i>De mortibus persecutorum</i> | | | |
| 18.13 | 86 | | |
| <i>Divinarum institutionum libri VII</i> | | | |
| 4.3.4 | 143 | | |
| Maximus the Confessor | | | |
| <i>Vita beatae virginis</i> | | | |
| § 71 | 181 | | |
| § 76 | 182 | | |
| § 77 | 181 | | |
| §§ 89–90 | 182 | | |
| § 91 | 181 | | |
| Origen | | | |
| <i>Commentarii in evangelium Matthaei</i> | | | |
| 10.17 | 106 | | |
| <i>Commentarii in evangelium Joannis</i> | | | |
| 13.13 | 200 | | |
| <i>Commentarii in Romanos</i> | | | |
| 2.7 | 200 | | |
| <i>Contra Celsum</i> | | | |
| 1.27 | 106 | | |
| 1.29 | 106 | | |
| 1.62 | 106, 143 | | |
| 1.68 | 143 | | |
| 2.43 | 242 | | |
| 3.5 | 216 | | |
| 6.34 | 106 | | |
| 6.36 | 106 | | |
| Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem | | | |
| <i>Encomium in Mariam Magdalenam</i> | | | |
| 2.8 | 187 | | |
| 10.1 | 188 | | |
| 11.1–18 | 188 | | |
| 11.16–37 | 189–190 | | |
| Pseudo-Evodius of Rome | | | |
| <i>Homilia de dormitione beatae virginis Mariae</i> | | | |
| | 195 | | |
| Boh. 4 | 204 | | |
| Boh. 15–16 | 204 | | |
| Sah. 2 | 202 | | |
| Sah. 3 | 203 | | |
| Sah. 8 | 202, 205 | | |
| Sah. 10 | 202 | | |
| Sah. 11 | 204 | | |
| Sah. 14 | 203 | | |
| Sah. 22 | 204 | | |
| <i>Homilia de passione et resurrectione Christi</i> | | | |
| § 1 | 207 | | |
| §§ 1–36 | 197 | | |
| § 8 | 198 | | |
| § 11 | 198 | | |
| § 12 | 208 | | |
| § 13 | 198, 210 | | |
| § 15 | 183 | | |
| § 16 | 198–199, 207 | | |
| § 17 | 198 | | |
| § 22 | 199 | | |
| § 34 | 202 | | |
| § 35 | 208 | | |
| §§ 40–44 | 183 | | |
| §§ 40–45 | 196 | | |
| §§ 40–53 | 197 | | |
| § 46 | 208 | | |
| § 47 | 199–200 | | |
| § 48 | 198, 204 | | |
| § 61 | 199 | | |
| §§ 63–68 | 197 | | |
| §§ 75–77 | 197, 200 | | |
| §§ 82–94 | 197 | | |
| § 85 | 183, 198 | | |
| § 88 | 183 | | |

§ 89	184	Severus of Antioch	
§§ 90–91	201	<i>Homiliae cathedrales</i>	
Pseudo-Hippolytus		77	175
<i>Peri Pascha</i>		Tatian	
§ 49	59–61	<i>Diatessaron</i>	
§§ 49–61	58	44–45	156
§ 50	60–61	48.41	156
§ 51	74	50	157
§ 52	63–64, 75	51	156, 158
§ 53	64–65	171–172	174
§ 54	67	174.27	175
§ 55	67–68, 75	Tertullian	
§ 56	70–71, 74	<i>Adversus Marcionem</i>	
§§ 57–59	72	4.42	199
§ 60	73, 75	<i>Apologeticus</i>	
§ 88	57	21.24	86
§ 96	57	<i>De anima</i>	
§ 98	63	55	242
§ 99:2	57	<i>De spectaculis</i>	
§ 105	57	30.5–7	132
§ 108	57	Theodoret of Cyrhus	
Romanos the Melodist		<i>Quaestiones et responsiones ad orthodoxos</i>	
<i>Cantica</i>		48	175
25	175	Thomas Aquinas	
Rufinus		<i>Summa theologica</i>	
<i>Commentarius in symbolum apostolorum</i>		3.42.4	106
21	199		
Sedulius			
<i>Paschale carmen</i>			
5.323	177		
5.358–364	177		

Greco-Roman Literature

Cicero		Homer	
<i>Epistulae ad Atticum</i>		<i>Ilias</i>	
2.23	115	22.405–406	178
7.3	115	24.742–745	179

Odyssea

16

179

22

179

Ovid

Fasti

2.533

22

Qur'an

39:68

210

Index of Modern Authors

- Achtemeier, P.J. 6
Albl, M.C. 196, 198–199
Allberry, C.R. 138, 141
Allison, D.C. 69
Alter, R. 159
- Bales, W. 239
Balog, A. 222
Bammel, E. 152
Barnes, T.D. 113
Barrier, J. 42–43
Barth, K. 80
Bauckham, R. 79–80, 172, 243, 249, 252
Baudoin, A.-C. 83, 117, 196
Baynes, N.H. 213
BeDuhn, J. 139, 141
Berg-Onstwedder, G. van den 164
Bernier, J. 112
Bienert, W.A. 37
Bobichon, P. 129, 131
Bockmuehl, M. 107
Bonnet, M. 44
Booth, P. 181
Bovon, F. 46
Boyce, M. 139, 142, 144, 148, 153,
155–157
Brakke, D. 214
Brandes, W. 216
Bremmer, J.N. 36, 249
Brinkley, C.S. 255
Brock, A.G. 187, 192
Broek, R. van den 209–210, 227–228
Browne, G.M. 223
Brox, N. 239
Burfeind, P. 242, 249
Burke, T. 221
Burns, D.M. XI, 195–217
Buzi, P. 196–197, 200, 203, 210
- Cameron, A. 170
Cantalamessa, R. 57–58, 61, 63, 66, 70–72
- Carlile, C. 85
Castagno, A.M. 42, 44, 48
Chapman, P. 195
Charlesworth, J.H. 244
Clivaz, C. 114
Cohen, S.J.D. 200
Connell, M.F. 236
Crawford, M.R. 173–174
Crislip, A. 168
Czachesz, I. 39, 40–41
- Dagron, G. 215–216
Dalton, W.J. 247
Dehandschutter, B. 204, 207, 214, 216
Déroche, V. 211–216
Desreumaux, A. 113, 117
Dilley, P.C. 196, 215, 222–224
Dochhorn, J. 78, 87
Drioton, É. 113
Drobner, H.R. 13
Dubois, J.-D. X, 82, 86–87, 100, 117–134,
135, 137, 141, 215
- Edo, P.M. 11
Ehrman, B.D. 105–106
Elledge, C.D. 210
Elliott, J.K. 35, 43, 85, 87–88, 244–245
Emmel, S. 220–222, 224–225, 228
- Foster, P. 7, 11, 15, 19–20, 28, 30–31, 172
Franzmann, M. 135, 137, 167
Fredriksen, P. 211
Frenschkowski, M. 238, 240–244
Frey, A. 117
Frey, J. IX, 32, 77–102
Friedheim, E. 127
Furrer, C. 85, 87, 93, 117
- Gahbauer, F.R. 63
Gallarte, I.M. 50
Gamble, H.Y. 112

- Gardner, I. 144
 Gathercole, S.J. 112
 Geest, P.J.J. van 243
 Goff, M. 214
 Goodacre, M. 112
 Goody, J. 159
 Goppelt, L. 239
 Gounelle, R. 72, 93–94, 117, 245–246
 Green, R.P.H. 177
 Greer, R. 200, 208
 Griffith, F.L. 223
 Gromacky, G. 239
 Gulácsi, Z. 136, 140, 156

 Hagen, J. 226–228, 231
 Harnack, A. 211
 Head, P.M. 1, 8–9
 Hedrick, C. 221, 226
 Henning, W.B. 144
 Herzog, M. 239–244, 248–249, 251–252
 Heurtel, C. 145
 Hodgins, G. 139
 Horbury, W. 143
 Horsfall, N. 115
 Hubai, P. 222–225, 230
 Hyde, D.R. 239, 241–242

 Ilan, T. 212, 215
 Irshai, O. 211
 Izydorczyk, Z. 83–84, 118

 Jacobs, A. 215
 Jacoby, A. 70, 221
 Johnson, M.D. 246
 Johnson, S.F. 159
 Joosten, J. 125
 Junod, É. 38, 46

 Kaestli, J.-D. 36
 Kaiser, U.U. 105
 Karmann, T.R. 16
 Kasser, R. 44
 Kateusz, A. 175
 Keith, C. IX–X, 103–116
 Kelly, J.N.D. 3, 236, 238
 Kerchove, A. van den X, 135–168
 Kierkegaard, S. 80
 Klauck, H.-J. 253

 Klijn, A.F.J. 50
 Klimkeit, H.-J. 141, 157, 158, 162
 Kraus, T. XI, 235–255
 Kruger, M.J. 226
 Kukota, I. 242

 Lalleman, P.J. 38, 43, 46
 Lampe, G.W.H. 99
 Landau, B. 221
 Lange, C. 162
 Lange, N. de 211, 215
 Langston, S. 200
 Lanzillotta, L.R. 36, 46
 Larsen, M.D.C. 113
 Laughton, A.B. 176
 Lefteratou, A. 178
 Légasse, S. 151
 Leloir, L. 161
 Lémonon, J.-P. 127, 146
 Lieu, S.N.C. 156
 Lipsius, R.A. 44
 Loerke, M.-O. 236, 239
 Lowe, M. 207
 Lucchesi, E. 205
 Lundhaug, H. 197, 202, 214
 Luomanen, P. 114, 198, 207
 Luttikhuisen, G.P. 37–41, 52, 214
 Luz, U. 30

 Maas, W. 237–238, 242–243
 MacDonald, D.R. 36, 178
 Mann, J. 213
 Mara, M.G. 57, 70
 Marcus, J. 16, 172
 Marmardji, A.S. 156, 175
 Marshall, I.H. 27
 Martin, C. 56
 Maunder, C. 191
 Meier, J.P. 103
 Metzger, B.M. 239
 Michel, O. 240
 Mirecki, P.A. 221, 226
 Moloney, F.J. 79
 Monier, M. 173–174
 Moraldi, L. 35
 Morano, E. 135, 137, 139–140, 145,
 148–149, 153, 155–156
 Morard, F. 52

- Murcia, T. 175, 177
 Murray, R. 175
 Myllykoski, M. 1

 Nagel, P. 223–224, 227–228
 Nagel, T. 233
 Narro, Á. VIII–IX, 35–54
 Nautin, P. 56–58, 62, 64–65, 74
 Nicklas, T. VI–VII, IX, 4, 7, 10–12, 14, 32, 48, 55–75, 82, 108, 157, 160, 209, 212, 219

 O’Ceallaigh, G.C. 98
 Omerzu, H. 12–13, 28
 Orlandi, T. 197, 205–206, 208, 210
 Osiek, C. 172
 Outtier, B. 117, 123

 Parkhouse, S. VI, X, 169–193
 Paulsen, T. 249
 Pearson, B. 12, 214
 Pedersen, N.A. 162
 Pervo, R. 36
 Pesce, M. 55
 Pesthy, M. 48, 52
 Petcu, L. 237, 239, 242
 Petersen, W.L. 156
 Pettipiece, T. 163, 203, 205–206
 Piovanelli, P. 39, 134, 146, 160–161, 192
 Pleše, Z. 105–106
 Polotsky, H.J. 138
 Porcu, C. 255
 Prieto, S.T. 117
 Prieur, J.-M. 46
 Puig i Tarrèch, A. VIII, 1–33

 Ratzinger, J. 241
 Reeves, J.C. 208
 Reinhartz, A. 110
 Renz, G. 80
 Richter, S.G. 137
 Ries, J. 164
 Rogers, T.A. 187
 Roquet, G. 117, 120, 125, 133
 Rose, E. 136–137
 Rouwhorst, G.A.M. 242

 Sandnes, K.O. 178, 180
 Schaberg, J. 192

 Schäferdiek, K. 38
 Scheidweiler, F. 87, 244–245
 Schenke, H.-M. 226, 231–232
 Schleif, C. 78
 Schlier, H. 5
 Schlosser, J. 5
 Schmidt, C. 71, 221, 223
 Schmidt, H.W. 240
 Schnackenburg, R. 239
 Schneider, P.G. 38, 40–41
 Schörthl, M. 107, 245
 Schrätzl, M. 85, 245
 Schröter, J. V, IX, XI, 55, 103, 116, 219–234
 Schwarz, K. 112
 Shannon, J.D. 98
 Sharf, A. 212, 216
 Sheridan, M. 202–204, 210
 Shoemaker, S.J. VII, 55, 170, 175, 181–182, 195–196, 200–203, 205, 211, 215
 Sholem, G. 214
 Shrimplin-Evangelidis, V. 77
 Simon, M. 198–199, 205, 210, 212
 Soffer, Y. 215
 Springer, C.P.E. 177
 Stang, C.M. 49
 Stökl Ben Ezra, D. 60
 Strawn, B.A. 158
 Stroumsa, G.G. 212–213
 Suciú, A. VII, 182, 185, 195, 201, 206, 221–222, 224–228, 232
 Sundermann, W. 139, 156–157

 Tardieu, M. 135–139, 144–145, 149–150, 155–160, 163, 168
 Taylor, C.C. 112
 Taylor, J. 173–174
 Theobald, M. 59–60
 Tischendorf, C. 85–86, 106
 Touati, C. 114
 Turcan, M. 131

 Vaganay, L. 23
 Verheyden, J. 18, 31
 Villey, A. 138, 167
 Visonà, G. 56, 58–60, 62, 66, 68, 71–72, 74

Wasserstrom, S. M. 214
Westerhoff, M. 228
Whitenton, M. R. 79
Wieringen, A. L. H. M. van 237
Wilken, R. L. 199

Williams, F. 126
Wucherpfennig, A. 221, 224
Yingling, E. 39
Yoshiko Reed, A. 110, 208

Index of Subjects

- Abgar legend 106, 111, 113, 115–116
Adam 6
Alexandria 36, 197, 212–213
Andrew 17, 19–20, 46–47
angels 5–6, 9–12, 22, 165, 172, 184–185, 188–189, 250
Annas 88, 94, 96, 107, 110, 119, 122, 124, 245
anti-Judaism 196, 198, 200, 205, 211, 215, 230
Antioch 45, 148
apocrypha/non-canonical texts 86, 98, 103, 116–118, 133–134, 159–160, 182, 192, 195–197, 204–208, 214–217, 219, 228, 220
apocryphal/non-canonical acts 35–37, 41–42, 51–54
apocryphal/non-canonical gospels VI–XI, 86, 103, 157–158, 219, 226, 228, 233
Apostles' Creed 3, 236–237
apostolic memoirs see Coptic apostolic memoirs
ascension of Jesus 3–4, 9–12, 23, 53, 98, 124, 223, 228, 232
Asia Minor 36
Athanasian Creed 237

Buddha 135, 166
Byzantium 208–210

Caiaphas 88, 94, 96, 107, 119, 124, 206
canon/canonicity V, VII, 55, 83, 97–99, 140, 157, 169–170, 191, 219–220, 228
Christology 10, 12, 31, 57, 99, 136–137, 164–165, 213, 227–228, 233, 243
Coptic apostolic memoirs VII, 170, 182, 191, 193, 226, 228, 230, 233
Council of Chalcedon VII, 182, 203, 205, 210, 213, 217, 233
cross as symbol 44, 48, 255
cross of Jesus 1–6, 10–12, 39–40, 46–48, 59, 62–64, 108, 114–115, 151, 172, 190–192, 220–225, 229–234, 250–252
cross of light 40, 46, 51, 137

darkness 7, 39, 44, 69, 96, 152, 248
descensus Christi ad inferos IX, 4–6, 8, 72, 236, 244–245, 252–255
docetism 4, 167
Dysmas/Demas 84, 98, 107–108, 111, 114–115, 122

Egypt VII, 196, 203, 212–213, 216, cf. Alexandria
Eucharist 57, 60–62, 74, 141, 227, 232
Eve 6

Falconilla 44
Faustus 153, 163–168

Gamaliel 78, 81–82, 101, 245
Gestas 84, 98, 107–109, 122
Gethsemane 14, 32, 64–65, 122, 153, 232
Gnosticism 38–39, 41, 50–52, 157, 214

Hades 6, 31, 98
Herod Antipas VIII, 14, 25–32, 87, 150, 159, 206

Iconium 42–43, 53
imitatio Christi 37, 42–43, 46, 50–53
Islam VII, 210, 217

Jesus's death VIII–X, 2, 6–9, 16, 26–29, 31–33, 36–54, 91, 99, 137, 141–142, 151–154, 164, 171, cf. cross of Jesus
John Calvin 80
John (disciple of Jesus) 37–42, 44, 51–53, 79, 81, 109, 112, 188, 206
John of Nikiu 211–213

- John the Baptist 30, 229, 235, 246, 248–250
- Joseph of Arimathea 14, 24–26, 29–30, 32, 84, 89–90, 99, 103, 118, 122–124, 153, 172, 182, 206, 243
- Judas Iscariot 107–108, 142, 144–145, 198
- Levi (disciple of Jesus) 17, 19–20
- Levi (witness in the Sanhedrin) 90, 96, 119, 123–124
- liturgy IX, 60, 138–139, 203, 219–220, 224, 230
- Longinus 84, 96, 98
- Manichaeism 135–168
- Mary Magdalene 9, 14–15, 19–24, 72–73, 77, 169, 171–174, 176–178, 181–192
- Mary (mother of Jesus) VII, 169–170, 176, 178–180, 182, 184, 186–189, 191–192, 202
- Michelangelo 77, 102
- Mount of Olives 17, 38–39, 41, 185, 222–224, 228–229, 231
- Nero 45, 251
- Nicodemus IX, 77, 124, 182, 206
- non-canonical texts see apocrypha etc.
- Passover 14–15, 18, 58–59, 61, 91, 108, 142, 242
- Paul 42, 45–46, 48, 53, 60, 74, 145, 253–254
- Peter 14, 47–48, 53, 78, 177, 185, 187–188, 203
- Pontius Pilate VIII, 3, 14, 16, 24–29, 32, 86–89, 91–92, 95–96, 99, 110, 114, 118–124, 134, 146–147, 149–150, 158, 198–199, 205–206, 210
- reenactment/renarration VII, IX, 56, 68, 82, 96–97, 160, 219, 233
- resurrection of Jesus 4, 9–12, 23–24, 31–33, 36–37, 47, 97, 164, 175–178, 182–193, 197, 201, 222–223, 226, 237, 240, 247
- resurrection of the dead 44–47, 50–54, 96, 124, 198, 209–210
- Sanhedrin 79, 82, 87–88, 90, 93, 96, 101, 118–119, 124, 133–134, 142, 199–200, 205
- Satan 5–6, 66, 141, 144–145, 185, 198, 246–255
- Thecla IX, 42–45, 53, 158–159
- Thomas 48–50, 53, 73, 177, 206, 208
- titulus crucis* 96, 114, 122, 152, 155
- typology 63, 72, 78, 161, 197
- underworld see *descensus Christi ad inferos*
- Zoroaster 135, 138, 166

