XI. The Reception of the *Apocalypse of Peter* in Ancient Christianity

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According to Richard Bauckham', the *Apocalypse of Peter* (*ApPt*) 'deserves to be studied for the following reasons':

1) 'It is probably the most neglected of all Christian works written before' the middle of the second century.

2) It 'derives from Palestinian Jewish Christianity during the Bar Kokhba war of 132-135 C.E. [...] It deserves an important place in any attempt to consider the very obscure matter of what happened to Jewish Christianity in Palestine in the period after 70 C.E.' The date and provenance suggested by Bauckham are generally accepted by scholars (Dennis D. Buchholz', Paolo Marrassini³ and Enrico Norelli⁴).

3) 'Outside Palestinian Jewish Christianity, the *Apocalypse of Peter* evidently became a very popular work in the church as a whole, from the second to the fourth centuries'.

4) And finally, this work should be studied because it 'preserves Jewish apocalyptic traditions'.

This paper provides a chronological and geographical analysis of the reception of the *ApPt*, following Buchholz' distinction 'between

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direct and indirect witnesses'. Our survey will enable us to test Bauckham's third thesis, namely, that the ApPt was 'a very popular work in the church' with a 'considerable influence in the early Christian centuries'.

2nd century

Direct Witness

The Muratorian Canon 71-72 writes, 'We receive only the apocalypses of John and Peter (scripta apocalypse etiam Iohanis et Petri tantum recipimus) although some of us are not willing that the latter be read in church'.

From this fragment we can conclude that the ApPt was known before 200 in Rome and read in church. For the author of the catalogue there is no difference between the two texts (John and Peter). Some Christians, however, objected to its liturgical use. The reasons for their objection are unknown. We do not know if they rejected the text because of its content, its authenticity, or for some other reason.

Indirect Witnesses

1) The Sibylline Oracles 2 (Syria, ca. AD 150) probably used the ApPt as a source. Buchholz proposed ten parallels between the two texts.

2) There are also parallels between the Epistula apostolorum (Syria, second half of the second century) and the ApPt:

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5 Buchholz, Your Eyes, 20, writes, 'Direct witnesses are references in which the document is mentioned by name or quoted directly. Actual texts of the apocalypse are also included here. Indirect witnesses are those which use, refer to, or allude to the apocalypse without revealing that this is their source.' In my contribution I quote the ApPt in Buchholz' translation.

6 Bauckham, The Fate, 6.


9 Buchholz, Your Eyes, 45.
Conclusion: In the second century the ApPt was known only in Rome and Syria. It was probably read in the Christian assembly in Rome, but some Christians disapproved of its use. There is no witness to its use in Syria.

3rd century

Direct Witnesses

1) Clement of Alexandria, Eclogue propheticae (Ecl. proph.). This work consists of quotations and was written after the author’s departure from Alexandria (202), probably in Palestine (Jerusalem).

Ecl. proph. 41: According to Clement, "The Scripture says that the children exposed by parents are delivered to a protecting (tēmēlouckos) angel, by whom they are brought up and nourished". [...] Wherefore Peter also says in his Apocalypse (Πέτρος ἐν τῇ Αποκάλυψις): "and a flash of fire, coming from their children and smiting the eyes of the women".

Ecl. proph. 48: 'Peter in the Apocalypse says that the children born abortively receive the better part. These are delivered to a protecting (tēmelouchos) angel'.

Ecl. proph. 49: 'the milk of the mothers which flows from their breasts and congeals, says Peter in the Apocalypse, shall beget tiny flesh-eating beasts and they shall run over them and devour them'.

11 ApPt 8.4: 'When the babies call out to God, lightning comes out from them, burning into the eyes of the women who managed their destruction with this adultery'. Akhmim Greek Fragment 26: 'and flames of fire came out from them and struck the women in the eyes'.
13 ApPt 8.8-9: 'Their mother’s milk runs from their breasts. It thickens and becomes putrid. Meat-eating animals are in it, and they go in and out of it, and they are punished forever, with their husbands.'
For Clement of Alexandria, the _ApPt_ had a certain authority in some moral questions, especially concerning the attitude to the undesirable children. But it is not so clear if he considered this work as Scripture. Nevertheless, the difference between Clement and Eusebius of Caesarea is important. According to Eusebius (Hist. eccl. 6.14.1) Clement included the _ApPt_ in the books (τῆς ἐνδιαθήκης γραφῆς) upon which he commented in his _Hypotyposeis_. For Eusebius, however, the _ApPt_ was a disputed writing (ἀντιλεγόμενον), together with the _Epistle of Jude_, the remaining Catholic Epistles, and the _Epistle of Barnabas_.

2) A further witness is the 'pagan writer', quoted by Macarius Magnes. Macarius was probably the bishop of Magnesia (Asia Minor) at the beginning of the fifth century\(^1\). In the _Apocriticus_, written in a dialogue form, there is a debate between a pagan philosopher and a Christian. The attack on Christianity provides a summary of the fifteen books of Porphyry's _Against the Christians_, written sometime before AD 270. According to Buchholz\(^1\), 'while quoting passages from the New Testament, after he has repudiated the saying from the Synoptics "Many will come in my name saying I am the Christ" and before he attacks some of Jesus' parables, Porphyry digresses to treat the topic of the destruction of heaven and earth. He quotes twice from the _ApPt_ in order to refute two of its teachings'.

_Apocriticus_ 4.6: 'By way of superfluity let this word also be quoted from the Apocalypse of Peter. He introduces the view that the heaven will be judged along with the earth in the following words, "The earth will present before God on the day of judgment all men who are to be judged and itself also will be judged with the heaven that encompasses it”\(^1\).

_Apocriticus_ 4.7: 'And again he says this statement which is full of impiety, saying "And every power of heaven shall bum, and the

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15 Buchholz, Your Eyes, 30-1.
16 _ApPt_ 4.13: 'The earth will return everyone on judgment day because then it will have to be judged at the same time, and heaven too.'
heaven shall be rolled up like a book and all the stars shall fall like leaves from a vine and like leaves from a fig-tree”17.

Provided that these references are from Porphyry, it can be concluded that the ApPt was known in the West (in Rome) in the second half of the third century, and still used as a work with authority (as Scripture) by some Christians. It is possible that Macarius never read the ApPt (see Apocriticus 4, 16). In any case, he did not consider it as Scripture.

Indirect Witnesses

1) In Hippolytus of Rome (died AD 235) we can find two allusions. The first allusion is found in his On the Universe (Περὶ τοῦ παντός)18, written before 225. The second reference is found in The Refutation of all Heresies (Elenchos) 10.34.2, written after 222, where the author uses the adjective ταρταροῦχος19. These two references suggest that Hippolytus knew the ApPt.

2) The Acts of Thomas 51-58 (Edessa, first half of the third century). The 'sixth act' of the book is about a young Christian who killed his girlfriend because she refused to live in celibacy with him. The girl is raised from the dead by the apostle and gives (chs. 55-57) a description of the hell, which she had visited. This description suggests that the author of the Acts of Thomas was acquainted with ApPt 7-12.

3) Pseudo-Cyprian, De laude martyrii (On the Glory of Martyrdom) 19-2120. This is a sermon attributed to Cyprian and presently dated to the early 250s21. Judging by the details of the punishments, the author probably knew the ApPt.

17 Cf. ApPt 5.4-5.
21 For date and place see the concise discussion by J. Doignon in R. Herzog and P.L. Schmidt (eds), Handbuch der lateinischen Literatur der Antike IV (Munich, 1997) 578.
4) Pseudo-Cyprian, *Adversos aleatores* (Against Dice-Throwers) 8. The dependence of this sermon from North Africa at the end of the third century on the ApPt (cf. 12.5-6: 'wheels of fire') is likely but cannot be proven.

5) The author of the Coptic Apocalypse of *Elijah* (3rd century) was acquainted with the *ApPt*. This is suggested by the following parallels:

| Apoc. of Elijah 13.10-14.9 | ApPt 1.5-7 |
| Apoc. of Elijah 18.1-20.15 | ApPt 2.7-13 |
| Apoc. of Elijah 23.1-10 | ApPt 6.3 |

Conclusion: In third century Christianity the ApPt was better known than it had been a hundred years earlier. We have witnesses for Rome, Palestine (Clement), Edessa, North Africa and Egypt. But we can also see that our treatise is not really a bestseller. In Rome the community no longer read it in the assembly. If we consider the other testimonies we can infer that the use of the ApPt was limited. There is no witness in the greatest centres of ancient Christianity, such as Alexandria, Carthage, or Antioch. We have only one witness from Syria.

4th century

Direct Witnesses

1) The Bodleian (ApPt 10.67) and Rainer (ApPt 14.2-5) fragments of the Greek ApPt derive from the same codex and show that the ApPt was known in Egypt in the fourth century. 'The manuscript is in the same tradition as our Ethiopic text, but the Greek by this time already shows signs of being corrupt'".

2) According to Jerome (De viris illustribus 83, written at Bethlehem in 393), Methodius was bishop of Olympus, then of Tyre, and

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22 For date and provenance see J. Doignon in Herzog and Schmidt, *Handbuch IV*. 505-8.


24 Buchholz, *Your Eyes*, 34.
died a martyr's death in Chalcia in AD 311-312. We do not know any more details of his life. It is possible that he was not a bishop but only a Christian teacher and writer in Lycia at the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century.

In his Symposium (2.6) Methodius quoted the ApPt 'to defend the proposition that all human generation is the work of God, even the births which result from adultery':

Whence, also, we have received from the inspired writings, that those who are begotten, even though it be in adultery, are committed to guardian angels. But if they came into being in opposition to the will and the decree of the blessed nature of God, how should they be delivered over to angels, to be nourished with much gentleness and indulgence? And how, if they had to accuse their own parents, could they confidently, before the judgment seat of Christ, invoke Him and say, 'Thou didst not, O Lord, grudge us this common light; but these appointed us to death, despising Thy command?'

Even if Methodius knew the ApPt and highly regarded it, it is uncertain whether this writing was very widely known by Christians in Asia Minor. Methodius fails to identify the title of his source.

3) Eusebius of Caesarea. The church historian, who discusses the writings of Peter, accepts only the first Epistle. He notes that 'the so-called second Epistle we have not received as canonical, but nevertheless it has appeared useful to many, and has been studied with other Scriptures' (Hist. eccl. 3.3.1). Eusebius continues:

On the other hand, of the Acts bearing his name, and the Gospel named according to him and the Preaching called his and the so-called Revelation (τὴν καλομένην Ἀποκάλυψιν), we have no knowledge at all in the Catholic tradition, for no orthodox writer of the ancient time or of our own has used their testimonies. (Hist. eccl. 3.3.2)

26 Buchholz, Your Eyes, 35.
27 Cf. the quotations of ApPt 8.10 by Clem. Alex., Ecl. Proph. 41 and 48 (see above).
29 Trans. K. Lake (Loeb).
Later in the *Church History* (3.25.1-3), Eusebius *summarises* the writings of the New Testament. Following the list of disputed books (ἐντιλεγόμενα) which are 'the Epistle called of James, that of Jude, the second Epistle of Peter, and the so-called second and third Epistles of John', Eusebius continues with the νόθοι, 'the books which are not genuine'.

[They are] the Acts of Paul, the work entitled the Shepherd, the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to them the letter called of Barnabas and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles. And in addition, as I said, the Revelation of John, if this view prevails. For as I said, some reject it, but others count it among the Recognized Books. Some have also counted the Gospel according to the Hebrews in which those of the Hebrews who have accepted Christ take a special pleasure. These would all belong to the disputed books, but we have nevertheless been obliged to make a list of them, distinguishing between those writings which, according to the tradition of the Church, are true, genuine, and recognized, and those which differ from them in that they are not canonical but disputed, yet nevertheless are known to most of the writers of the Church. (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.4-6)

We must notice the difference between the author of the Muratorian Fragment and Eusebius. The first accepted both the Apocalypse of John and the *ApPt* as writings with authority: they were read in the church assembly in Rome. For Eusebius, more than a century later, they belong to the disputed books that must be rejected.

4) Like Eusebius, Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 1.5, considered the *ApPt* as a rejected writing.

5) The *Homily on the Parable of the Ten Virgins* is an allegorical explanation of *Matthew* 25.1-13. According to André Wilmart, its discoverer, this is a Latin sermon from the 4th century, probably from North Africa. This homily quotes the *ApPt* by title.

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The closed door is the river of fire by which the ungodly will be kept out of the kingdom of God, as it is written in Daniel and by Peter in his Apocalypse. (lines 58-60)

That party of the foolish shall also arise and find the door shut, that is, the river of fire lying before them3. (lines 77-78)

The author of the homily, an unknown member of a North African church, provides us with an important witness to the use of the ApPt as Scripture.

Indirect Witness

1) Cyril of Jerusalem, Carecherical Lectures (towards AD 350). Lecture 15 contains two parallels with the ApPt, namely, 15.20 (ApPt 6.1-2) and 15, 21 (stream of fire as an instrument of punishment). The bishop of Jerusalem witnesses the use of this writing in Palestine in the middle of the 4th century.

Conclusion: In the fourth century the ApPt was known in Palestine, Egypt, North Africa and probably in Asia Minor (Methodius of Olympus). There is no longer a witness from Rome.

5th century and beyond

Direct Witnesses

1) Sozomen, in his Church History 7.19 (compiled between 439 and 450 in Constantinople), writes about the customs of different nations and churches:

Thus the book entitled 'The Apocalypse of Peter', which was considered altogether spurious by the ancients, is still read in some churches of Palestine on the day of preparation, when the people observe a fast in memory of the passion of the Saviour [on Good Friday]33.

According to this statement our Apocalypse was read as Scripture in the first half of the 5th century.

32 Cf. ApPt 5.8-6.5, 12.4-7.
2) In the stichometry of the biblical writings in the *Codes Claromontanus* (Paris gr. 107, a bilingual Greek and Latin manuscript) the *ApPt* appears in last place. The catalogue was written in Latin between the fourth and sixth centuries. It is probably Western, but we do not have any closer information about its provenance.34

3) The *List of the Sixty Books* names 60 canonical and 25 apocryphal books. This list, which we find in several manuscripts, may be from 600. The *ApPt* is the 16th on the list of apocryphal writings.35

4) The Akhmim fragment of the Greek text of the *ApPt* was discovered in Egypt in 1886-1887. It probably dates from the sixth century. It is different from our Ethiopic text and the texts quoted by earlier Christian writers. The Akhmim fragment demonstrates that the *ApPt* was known in sixth-century Egypt.

5) The *Stichometry of Nicephorus* is a list of canonical books. It probably dates from the middle of the ninth century. The catalogue divides the writings in three groups: recognised, disputed (antilegomena) and apocryphal. The disputed books of the New Testament are: the *Apocalypse of John*, the *ApPt*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Apparently in ninth-century Palestine our writing was valued higher than the apocrypha.36

Indirect Witnesses

1) The *Apocalypse of Paul*, probably written in Palestine between 395 and 416,38 shows the influence of the *ApPt*.39 We can discern that the *Apocalypse of John* is interested in the destiny of the Church in the last days; the *ApPt* in judgement at the end of the world; and the author of the *ApPl* in personal judgement immediately after death. The success of the *ApPl* is probably due to this feature.

34 *NTA I*, 37.
35 *NTA I*, 42-3.
36 See Van Minnen, this volume, Ch. II.
37 *NTA I*, 41-2.
39 For the parallels see Buchholz, *Your Eyes*, 67-70.
2) The Apocalypse of Thomas is a fifth-century document, surviving in two Latin recensions. The shorter text (Cod. Vindob. Palatinus 16) is generally accepted as the earlier and more original version. According to Buchholz, the 'combination of similarity in form and in details of expression makes it virtually certain that the author of the Apocalypse of Thomas knew, and used the Apocalypse of Peter'. Further, 'the Apocalypse of Thomas is a witness that heretical, probably Manichean-related groups were interested in the Apocalypse of Peter' towards 400.

Conclusion: In the fifth century and beyond, the ApPr was known in Palestine and Egypt, around Constantinople, and probably in the West. We can say with certainty that it was read in a few local churches, but then it disappears before our eyes.

Final conclusion

As a result of this geographical and chronological survey it cannot be concluded that the ApPt was 'a very popular work'. It was only known in some parts of ancient Christianity, and its circulation was limited in time and space. Only in second-century Rome and in some local churches of fifth-century Palestine was this writing read in congregations. As far as its geographical circulation is concerned, it was known in Rome (2nd-3rd centuries), Syria (2nd century), Palestine and Egypt (3rd-5th centuries), Edessa (3rd century), North Africa (3rd-4th centuries), and Asia Minor (probably by Methodius of Olympus at the beginning of the 4th century).

The history of the reception of the ApPt shows that canonicity is not a specific (intrinsic) value of a text. In this respect, Enrico Norelli is right when he claims that canonicity is the result of a historical process rather than being a condition of that process. It is necessary, in my view, to establish periods and contexts in the examination of early Christian literature. If we want to gain an appropriate picture of canonicity.

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41 Buchholz, Your Eyes, 73.
42 See the 'Appendix' below.
43 Norelli, 'Pertinence théologique', 152: 'La canonicité est le résultat d’un processus historique, non pas la condition de ce processus'.
the development and evolution of Christianity in its first centuries, we should study not only the reception of the canonical writings but also of other texts, such as the apocrypha and the authors before the Council of Nicea. In this way we can better understand how Christianity developed its institutions and doctrine, until it became the Religion of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century.

Appendix: Geographical and chronological overview

Rome

2nd century:
   Direct witness: Muratorian Canon 71-72
3rd century:
   Direct witness: The 'pagan writer' quoted in Macarius Magnes
   Indirect witness: Hippolytus of Rome

Syria

2nd century:
   Indirect witness: Sibylline Oracles 2; Epistula Apostolorum

Edessa

3rd century:
   Indirect witness: The Acts of Thomas

Palestine

3rd century:
   Direct witness: Clement of Alexandria, Eclogae Propheticae
4th century:
   Direct witnesses: Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History 3.3.2, 3.25.4; Jerome, De viris illustribus 1.5
   Indirect witnesses: Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures 15 (20 & 21)
5th century:
   Direct witnesses: Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History 7.19; Stichometry of Nicephorus
   Indirect Witnesses: Apocalypse of Paul

Egypt

3rd century:
   Indirect witness: The Coptic Apocalypse of Elijah
4th century:
Direct witnesses: The *Rainer* and *Bodleian Fragments* of the Greek *ApPt*

5th century:
Direct witness: The *Akhmim Fragment* of the Greek *ApPt*

North Africa

3rd century:
Indirect witnesses: Pseudo-Cyprian, *De laude martyr-ii*; Pseudo-Cyprian, *Adversus Aleator-es*

4th century:
Direct witness: *Homily on the Parable of the Ten Virgins*

Asia Minor

4th century:
Direct witness: Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium* 2.6