I. The Acts of Thomas Revisited

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The title of this contribution supposes a previous visit to the Acts of Thomas. First of all I would like to tell how this first visit came about. In the mid-fifties I was appointed as a lecturer in New Testament studies at the University of Utrecht. It was at the time that Van Unnik was flourishing. Although he started as a scholar in the field of Syriac studies, he was intimately acquainted with the international New Testament scene and was widely invited to lecture abroad. In this same period Quispel was appointed to the chair of early Christian literature. Before long he became famous for his work on the Nag Hammadi writings and in particular the Gospel of Thomas.

It was also the time that German New Testament studies were dominated by the ideas of Bultmann, whose pupils held the most important New Testament chairs in Germany. All of them indulged in gnostic studies, especially Manichaeism and Mandaeism, at the basis of which they supposed to have discovered the system of the ‘erloste Erlöser’, an approach which was strongly rejected by Van Unnik in spite of his excellent personal relationship with Bultmann and his followers.

1 See Woorden gaan leven. Opstellen van en over Willem Cornelis van Unnik (1910-1978) (Kampen, 1979). This book was published on behalf of the Theological Faculty in Utrecht by A.J. Bronkhorst, O.J de Jong and J. Reiling and contains Van Unnik’s bibliography. See also W.C. van Unnik, Sparsa Collecta, 3 vols (Leiden, 1973-83).


3 See his bibliography in R. van den Broek and M.J. Vermaseren (eds), Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions presented to Gillis Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday (Leiden, 1981) 1-12.

Quispel was tending more and more to the idea for a Jewish background of gnosticism; but initially, as a classical scholar, he lacked both the necessary knowledge of Semitic languages and – this especially applies to the study of the Gospel of Thomas – basic insights into New Testament textual criticism in general and into the harmonies of the Gospels in particular. Under these circumstances it was my privilege to work in the shadow of these two great scholars, although I originated from a quite different angle. The contents of my dissertation, which I defended in 1949⁵, were in the tradition of another great Dutch scholar, Daniel Plooij, who devoted the greater part of his scientific work to the study of the text of the Liège Diatessaron which was, according to him, ultimately of Tatianic and Syriac origin⁶.

My interest in textual criticism happened to be of some importance for the study of the contents of the Gospel of Thomas. However, it did not take long before Quispel was able to find his own way in the field of Diatessaric studies. I, therefore, decided to continue my work into a different direction. And it was in that period that Van Unnik drew my attention to the ATH and I decided to write a commentary on this work. It was his idea that these Acts had to be studied in the light of early Syriac literature. This meant that I had to keep some distance from Mythos und Legende in den apokryphen Thomas-Akten written by G. Bomkamm⁷ who approached this work from a gnostic point of view in the tradition of Bultmann.

This was my first visit to the ATH. The results of my work were published in 1962⁸. I am thoroughly aware of its shortcomings and the occasional sloppiness of its contents. Nevertheless, after some forty years I am convinced that I happened to investigate some subjects that are still at the centre of scholarly interest.

⁵ See Klijn, A Survey of the Researches into the Western Test of the Gospels and Acts (Diss. Utrecht, 1949).
⁷ See G. Bomkamm, Mythos und Legende in den apokryphen Thomas-Akten (Gottingen, 1933).
According to the Contents the following subjects are dealt with in this book: the text of the *Ath*; a comparison with other *AAA*; the question whether Thomas visited India; the beginnings of Christianity in Edessa; the doctrine of the *Ath*; the Acts and Syriac Christianity, and, finally, baptism and *eucharist* in the Acts. In any new commentary on the *Ath* these subjects would still have to be studied. At the moment it is almost universally accepted that the *Ath* have to be approached as a genuine product of Eastern Christianity.*

In 1967 I was appointed to the chair of New Testament studies in Groningen and I had to direct my attention to different subjects. But at that time I also became a colleague of such outstanding scholars as H.J.W. Drijvers and G.J. Reinink of the Groningen Semitic Institute who also happened to be interested in early Syriac Christianity and who were able to take over, where I decided to go a different way". I am, nevertheless, grateful that I have been invited to revisit the *Ath* during a conference dealing with the AAA in general and at present especially with the *Ath*. It might seem to be reckless, but it is also appropriate to wonder what alterations would have to be made if a second and revised edition of my Commentary on the *Ath* of 1962 had to be prepared.

9 Especially the so-called 'Hymn of the Pearl' (*Ath* 108-13) was supposed to be 'eines der schonsten Originalzeugnisse der Gnosis', according to Bornkamm, *Mythos und Legende*, 1/1 and cf. 117: 'Das Lied bringt also die Sendung und die prototypische Erlösung des selbst unter die Erlösergott - heiten aufgenommenen Mani, indem auf ihn der alte, iranische Mythos vom erloschen Erlöser übertragen ist.' But see Klijn, 'The so - called Hymn of the Pearl (Acts of Thomas ch. 108-113)', *VigChris* 14 (1960) 154-64, and especially P.-H. Poirier, *L'Hymne de la Perle des Actes de Thomas*. *Introduction, Texte – Traduction, Commentaire* (Louvain-la Neuve, 1981); Luttikhuizen, this volume. Ch. VIII.


11 During my time in Groningen I went into the study of early Jewish Christianity.

12 In the following I shall refer to publications which appeared after 1962. Because the invitation to revisit the *Ath* came as a surprise, I regret to say
1. The Commentary

In the edition of 1962 I decided to comment upon a Syriac text\(^{13}\). This decision was taken because I wanted to emphasize the Syriac origin of the \(AT^h\). However, in order to comment on the original text I had to refer to the Greek text very often, especially because the texts of the Greek manuscripts \(U\) (11th cent.) and \(P\) (11/12th cent.) are much better than the various Syriac texts. Thus I can understand why modern translations of this work are based upon the Greek text of R.A. Lipsius and M. Bonnet, which still is the only and best edition\(^{14}\).

However, a commentary on the text of the \(AT^h\) cannot be based on the Greek text only\(^{15}\), since the Greek text shows that this work was written in an environment in which at least the Syriac language was well known. It appears that sometimes the Greek cannot be understood without the help of the Syriac version. We have to conclude that the work was written in a bilingual environment\(^{16}\).

that I am not able to give an exhaustive summary of everything that has been published during the last forty years, but see Drijvers, 'Acts of Thomas', 322-39.


\(^{16}\) This is the opinion of B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (London, 1987) 364; see also H.W. Attridge, 'The Original Language of the Acts of Thomas', in idem et al. (eds), *Of Scribes and Scrolls. Studies... presented to John Strugnell* (New York, 1990) 241-50 at 250: 'It is, however, clear that the range of witnesses now available to us ultimately depends on a Syriac original'. Drijvers, o.c., 323, supposed that the \(AT^h\) had originally been written in Syriac. However, in his 'Syriac Culture in Late Antiquity. Hellenism and Local Tradition', in *Mediterraneo Antico* I (1998) 95-113, he gives convincing evidence for the influence of Hellenistic culture in this area.
I remember that the form of the Commentary was inspired by that of J.H. Waszink’s De Animal. In the list of Abbreviations at the beginning of my work it is possible to discover what kind of references have been used. It is obvious that this list has to be corrected with the help of recent revisions of earlier editions and later discoveries like the Nag Hammadi writings. Generally speaking, however, it remains necessary to limit oneself to that kind of sources which have been used in the Commentary.

2. Tradition of the Test

The first chapter of the Introduction deals with the tradition of the text. At that time I apparently tried to give a complete survey of all the available texts both in Greek and other languages. I assume that such an effort is now impossible. But it also seems to be unnecessary in order to write a commentary on the text, since most of the Greek manuscripts and those of the translations offer a secondary text which has to be studied in its own right. This appears from some recently published works on the AAA. Nevertheless a number of interesting contributions to the translated versions of the ATH have been published recently. But even if we use the Greek version as the texte de base we shall have to have continuous recourse to the Syriac version.

18 It seems to me, however, that the contribution to the commentary of recently discovered writings is limited.
3. Comparison with other AAA

The second chapter of the Introduction deals with a 'Comparison with other Apocryphal Acts'. At that time my main interest was to discover the chronological relationship between the various AAA. Starting from the oldest dated AAA I tried to discover the origin and possible dependence of the other ones. But here we can speak of a considerable development. And this does not only apply to the ATh but also to the other ones. With regard to the ATh, scholars are aware that its author produced a work of art. He was able to give a 'symbolic presentation of salvation'. The five ancient AAA are presenting a literary genre of a narrative character which has to be studied with modern methods.

4. Thomas and India

The third chapter of the Introduction deals with Thomas and India. I had to decide about a possible visit of Thomas to India. At the moment I very much doubt whether Thomas has ever been in that country, especially because I am impressed by the critical view expressed by Dr. L.P van den Bosch. However, a few questions remain. The most important is why the author neglected the ancient traditional view according to which Thomas visited Parthia. Nevertheless the Parthian influence on the contents of the ATh, especially the Hymn of the Pearl, is considerable. I may suggest that the author deliberately chose a far-away country with imaginary royal courts.

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21 See now Bremmer, this volume, Ch. XI.
22 See Drijvers, o.c., 327.
24 See van den Bosch, this volume, Ch. X.
well known in the region in which the Acts originated. In addition to this I would like to draw attention to the composite character of the ATh. For this reason it is impossible to conclude that this work is supposed to be simply a coherent story about a visit to 'India'.

5. The Beginnings of Christianity in Edessa

In the year 1962 I was still convinced that the ATh was written in Edessa. As a title of one of my books I chose 'Edessa, die Stadt des Apostels Thomas'. However, it seems that Edessa did not show interest in the Apostle Thomas before the fourth century. Since we have to study the ATh against the background of newly discovered writings like the Gospel of Thomas and Thomas the Contender, we now realise that stories about Judas Thomas were spread over a considerable time and space with roots in Aramaic-speaking Christianity. I suppose that the situation is much more complicated than is usually assumed. Drijvers writes that the ATh were written in 'East Syria'. If we speak about Edessa we may say that it was located on the cross-roads of various cultures and a variety of religions. We know that here Tatian went to live but he called himself an Assyrian. Earlier we spoke about the Parthian influence in the ATh.

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27 Neukirchen 1965, but see also the Introduction to the translation of the ATh in Bovon and Geoltrain, *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, 1, 1325: ‘Rédigés sans doute à Edesse...’; Bremmer, this volume, Ch. VI.

28 See J. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels: newly translated (from the Latin) with supporting documents and notes* (London, 1971) 224-5. In the Greek text of the ATh the name of the city of Edessa is absent even at the end at which it is said according to the Greek text that the body of Thomas has been brought to the 'West' or 'Mesopotamia'.


30 See Drijvers, *o.c.*, 323, and 'Syriac Culture in Late Antiquity'.
If we look at the literary products of this area like the Odes of Salomon, the Gospel of Thomas and the ATh, we are always dealing with the same problems of original language, date and place of origin. Now we may conclude that 'The Beginnings of Christianity in Edessa' does not help us to solve the problems regarding the origin of the writings connected with the name of Thomas.

6. The Doctrine of the ATh

In a fifth chapter of the Introduction I went into the doctrine of the ATh. Here I tried to give a survey of the contents without going into the question of origin and parallel passages. It clearly showed that we are dealing with Christian doctrines that can certainly not be called gnostic. In my article on John 14.22 and the name of Judas Thomas, mentioned above, I was especially impressed by the influence of what I named the morphé-christology. This means that the heavenly Christ appeared in the 'form' of Jesus. But he can also appear in the form of Judas the apostle. It is clear that the ATh supposes a distinction between the incorrupt heavenly world and the corruptible earthly life. At that time I omitted to define the doctrine of the ATh. At the moment it seems that scholars are looking for a form of encratism.

7. The ATh and Syriac Christianity

In accordance with the idea of an Edessene origin, I dealt with the ATh and Syriac Christianity. I mentioned a number of authors and writings, like the Liber Graduum, Bardaisan and Tatian. It appears that now especially Drijvers is keen to demonstrate the relation between these writers, especially Tatian, and the ATh. Recent works on Tatian and Bardaisan have made it possible to go into the religious background of these Acts.

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32 In addition to articles mentioned earlier I may refer to Drijvers and Reinink, 'Taufe und Licht'. 
8. Baptism and Eucharist

Finally I had to discuss the Baptism and Eucharist in the *ATH*. I was able to show that the order of Baptism in the *Acts* agrees with what is found in ancient Syriac literature\(^3\). I am glad to say that the study of the sacraments in Syria and especially Armenia has now been pursued. However I suppose that the epicleses still require further study\(^4\).

Conclusion

If we consider what has been said here we wonder what would have to be done if a second edition of my commentary on *ATH* had to be prepared. First of all we have to study this work within the wider framework of what we may call Eastern Christianity, with roots going back to the early Aramaic-speaking Church. Next, a number of corrections has to be made, and especially the commentary has to be revised and amplified with references taken from recently discovered writings. It is a matter of dconsideration whether this has to be based upon the Greek or the Syriac text. The evidence of the translations asks for a special treatment. The chapter about the relation with other AAA has to be rewritten in the light of modem approaches to narrative texts. Since the discovery of a number of writings bearing the


name of Thomas, it is necessary to go into their common background and its development. Finally, the \( ATh \) represents one aspect of Eastern Christianity and we have to realise that an apostle who happened to bear the name of 'Twin' was, therefore, bound to attract the interest of various cultural and religious groups in that region.