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The Apocryphal Acts Of Thomas

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I. The Acts of Thomas Revisited

A.F.J. KLIJN

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 flourishing¹. Although he started as a scholar in the field of Syriac studies², 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*³.

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'⁴, 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).

See W.C. van Unnik, *Nestorian Questions on the Administration of the Eucharist, by Isho'yab IV. A Contribution to the History of the Eucharist in the Eastern Church* (Diss. Leiden = Haarlem, 1937).

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.

⁴ See C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythos* (Göttingen, 1961).

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 Plooi, 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 Tlomas*. 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 Text of the Gospels and Acts* (Diss. Utrecht, 1949).

⁶ See D. Plooi with the assistance of C.A. Phillips, 'The Liège Diatessaron', *Verh. Kon. Nederl. Akademie van Wetenschappen*, Afd. Lett., NR XXXI, Part I-IV 1929-35; D. Plooi, C.A. Phillips and A.H.A. Bakker, Part V-VI 1938 and 1963, and D. Plooi and C.A. Phillips, A.H.A. Bakker, Part VII and VIII 1965 and 1970.

⁷ See G. Bomkamm, *Mythos und Legende in den apokryphen Thomas-Akten* (Göttingen, 1933).

⁸ Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden, 1962).

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 Christianity⁹.

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 over¹⁰, 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 prepared¹².

⁹ Especially the so-called 'Hymn of the Pearl' (*ATH* 108-13) was supposed to be 'eines der schönsten Originalzeugnisse der Gnosis', according to Bornkamm, *Mythos und Legende*, 111 and cf. 117: 'Das Lied bringt also die Sendung und die prototypische Erlösung des selbst unter die Erlösergottheiten aufgenommenen Mani, indem auf ihn der alte, iranische Mythos vom erlösten 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); Luttikhuisen, this volume. Ch. VIII.

¹⁰ Here I may refer only to H.J.W. Drijvers, 'The Acts of Thomas', in *NTA* II, 322-411, and H.J.W. Drijvers und G.J. Reinink, 'Taufe und Licht. Tatian, Ebionaeerevangelium und Thomasakten', in T. Baarda *et al.* (eds), *Test and Testimony. Essays on New Testament and Apocryphal Literature in Honour of A.F.J. Klijn* (Kampen, 1988) 91-110, repr. in Drijvers, *History and Religion in Late Antique Syria* (Aldershot, 1994) Ch. IV.

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 text¹³. This decision was taken because I wanted to emphasize the Syriac origin of the *ATh*. 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 edition¹⁴.

However, a commentary on the text of the *ATh* cannot be based on the Greek text only¹⁵, 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 environment¹⁶.

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.

¹³ I used W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols (London, 1871; repr. Amsterdam, 1968) II.146-298.

¹⁴ *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha II* (Leipzig, 1903) 99-288, cf. the translations of M. Erbetta, *Gli Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento II: Atti e Legende* (Torino, 1966) 313-74; L. Moraldi, *Apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento II* (Torino, 1971) 1125-1350; Drijvers, *o.c.*; J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1993) 439-511; F. Bovon and P. Geoltrain (eds), *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens I* (Paris, 1997) 1321-1470.

¹⁵ See A.J. Festugibre, *Les Actes Apocryphes de Jean et de Thomas* (Geneva, 1983) 43: 'J'ai donc eu constamment sous les yeux la traduction (*scil.* of the Syriac text) de A.F.J. Klijn...'

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 *ATh* had originally been written in Syriac. However, in his 'Syriac Culture in Late Antiquity. Hellenism and Local Tradition', in *Mediterraneo Antico* 1 (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 Anima*¹⁷. 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 Text

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*¹⁹. Nevertheless a number of interesting contributions to the translated versions of the *ATH* have been published recently²⁰. But even if we use the Greek version as the *texte de base* we shall have to have continuous recourse to the Syriac version.

¹⁷ J.H. Waszink, *De Anima* (Amsterdam, 1947).

¹⁸ It seems to me, however, that the contribution to the commentary of recently discovered writings is limited.

¹⁹ E. Junod et J.-D.Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 2 vols (Tumhout, 1983); J.-M. Prieur, *Acta Andreae*, 2 vols (Tumhout, 1989).

²⁰ For the Greek text see M. Lipinski, *Konkordanz zu den Thomasakten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988). See also K. Zelzer, *Die alten Lateinischen Thomasakten* (Berlin, 1977); M. van Esbroeck, 'Les actes apocryphes de Thomas en version arabe', *Parole de l'Orient* 14 (1981) 11-77; P.-H. Poirier, *La version copte de la Prédication et du Martyre de Thomas*; avec une contribution codicologique au corpus copte des Acta Apostolorum apocrypha. par Enzo Lucchesi (Brussels, 1984); L. Leloir, *Écrits apocryphes sur les Apôtres. Traduction de l'Édition Arménienne de Venise* (Tumhout, 1992) 531-646.

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 AAA²¹. 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'²². The five ancient AAA are presenting a literary *genre* of a narrative character which has to be studied with modern methods²³.

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 Bosch²⁴. 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 courts²⁵,

²¹ See now Bremmer, this volume, Ch. XI.

²² See Drijvers, *o.c.*, 327.

²³ See L. van Kampen, *Apostelverhalen* (Diss. Utrecht, 1990): W. Rordorf, 'Terra Incognita. Recent Research on Christian Apocryphal Literature, especially on some Acts of Apostles', in his *Lex Orandi - Lex Credendi* (Freiburg, 1993) 432-438.

²⁴ See van den Bosch, this volume, Ch. X.

²⁵ See H.J.W. Drijvers, 'Apocryphal Literature in the Cultural Milieu of Osrhoene', *Apocrypha* 1 (1990) 231-47 at 233 = Drijvers, *History and Religion*, Ch. III: 'The royal Court had a central function in local urban culture', and Klijn, 'Der Einfluss der politischen Lage auf die Literatur in Edessa in den ersten Jahrhunderten der christlichen Ära', in J. Irmscher (ed), *Die Literatur der Spätantike, polyethnisch und polyglottisch betrachtet: eine Aufsatzsammlung* (Amsterdam, 1997) 135-44.

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'²⁶.

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'²⁷. However, it seems that Edessa did not show interest in the Apostle Thomas before the fourth century²⁸. 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*.

²⁶ It is evident that at c.62 the story starts again. See also Y. Tissot, 'Les Actes apocryphes de Thomas: exemple de recueil composite', in Bovon, *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres*, 223-32.

²⁷ Neukirchen 1965, but see also the Introduction to the translation of the *ATH* in Bovon and Geoltrain, *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens I*, 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'.

²⁹ See Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 357-409 ('The School of St. Thomas'); P.-H. Poirier, 'Évangile de Thomas, Actes de Thomas, Livre de Thomas. Une Tradition et ses Transformations', *Apocrypha* 7 (1996) 9-26; Klijn, 'John XIV 22 and the Name Judas Thomas', in *Studies in John. Presented to J.N. Sevenster* (Leiden, 1970) 88-96; J.J. Gunther, 'The Meaning and Origin of the Name 'Judas Thomas', ' *Le Muséon* 93 (1980) 113-48.

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 *morphê*-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 encratism³¹.

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 *Liher- Graduum*, Bardaisan and Tatian. It appears that now especially Drijvers is keen to demonstrate the relation between these writers, especially Tatian, and the *ATH*³². Recent works on Tatian and Bardaisan have made it possible to go into the religious background of these Acts.

³¹ See already G. Blond, 'L'encratisme dans les actes apocryphes de Thomas', *Recherches et Travaux* 1.2 (1946)5-25, and especially Y. Tissot, 'L'encratisme des Actes de Thomas', in ANRW II 25.6 (Berlin and New York, 1988)4415-30.

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 literature³³? 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 study³⁴.

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 consideration 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 modern approaches to narrative texts. Since the discovery of a number of writings bearing the

³³ See Klijn, 'An ancient Syriac Baptismal Liturgy in the Syriac Acts of John', *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963) 216-28.

³⁴ See G. Winkler, 'The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and its Implications'. *Worship* 52 (1978) 24-45 and 'Zur frühchristlichen Tauftradition in Syrien und Armenien unter Einbezug der Taufe Jesu', *Ostkirchliche Studien* 27 (1978) 287-306; S. Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Bronx NY, 1979); L. Leloir, 'Symbolisme dans la Liturgie Syriaque primitive. Le Symbolisme dans le Culte des Grandes Religions', in *Homo Religiosus* II (Louvain-la Neuve, 1985) 247-63; H. Kruse, 'Zwei Geistesepiklesen der syrischen Thomas-Akten', *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985) 33-53; G. Rouwhorst, 'La célébration de l'eucharistie selon les Actes de Thomas', in Ch. Caspers and M. Schneiders (eds), *Omnes Circumstantes. Contributions towards a History of the Role of the People in the Liturgy* (Kampen, 1990) 51-77; E. Boone, 'L'onction pré-baptismale: sens et origine. Un exemple dans les Actes de Thomas', *Studia Patristica* 30 (Leuven, 1997) 291-5.

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.