The Acts of Thomas (ATH) is usually studied from the perspective of religious history\(^1\). It is thus considered as an important link between Gnostic-Christian and Manichean texts. If, however, its literary character is discussed, such discussion concerns its place within the Hellenistic-Oriental novel\(^3\). We, on the other hand, are concerned about an issue not yet fully elaborated, notably the mainsprings of the plot of ATH. Our hypothesis is that the plot of ATH is motivated by human nature and human character as influenced by the Platonist Christians of the period.

We wish to start from the anthropological perspective of the work. This apostolic novel, in accordance with its world-view, sees human nature (natura, physis) as contradictory. According to this, man, on the one hand, due to his bodily nature, lives subject to mortality, while on the other hand, due to his spiritual nature, he is connected with God and is therefore called to everlasting life. This provides the mainspring: man is to give up his mortal and sinful bodily nature and put it at the service of his spiritual nature.

But the derivation of its plot from abstract human nature would make ATH a mystery drama and not allow for its being considered as

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a novel. Its novelistic character, and sometimes even its dramatic character, is a result of the fact that its plot is motivated not only by abstract human nature, but also by human character. Here we face not abstract man but the major characters, an apostle, a demon, saved men and impenitent men, in a 'drama' of salvation history as interpreted by Platonist Christians. If ancient drama was reinterpreted myth, then the \( ATh \) – and generally the \( AAA \) – were Hellenistic salvation myths reinterpreted by Christianity in dramatic or narrative form. In the following we hope to demonstrate our thesis by analysing the plot and selectively considering the text.

\textit{Man subject to mortality: the drama of the body}

A.F.J. Klijn begins his introduction to the teaching of the \( ATh \) by stating: 'The doctrine of these \textit{Acts} is dominated by the contrast between corruptible and incorruptible\(^4\). In \( c.37 \) the apostle preaches to the crowds on how 'the whole body... becomes dust, returning to its own nature.' Two seemingly contradictory modes of action might derive from this: the corruptible body is to be denied and at the same time it is to be put to the service of the incorruptible.

The corruptible and at the same time sinful nature of the body is particularly manifest in three aspects: infatuation with sexuality, debauchery and power. In respect of sexuality, the whole \( ATh \) is imbued by \textit{enkrateia} – ascetic piety. The author rejects sexual relation in the \textit{married} lives of the main characters\(^5\). In \( c.12 \), he calls wedlock 'filthy intercourse', and even objects to having children. \( Cc.89-103 \) relate how the wife of King Charisius, Mygdonia, becomes the disciple of the apostle Thomas and tells her husband: 'Henceforth thou \textit{hast} no place with me' (98). Upon this, the king attributes to Thomas the teaching that 'a man should not live with his own wife, and what the nature requires and the deity has ordained he


\(^5\) If we are justified in maintaining that this was an excess of the Encratic-Christians sect or movement, we should nevertheless take into account the fact that since the \( AJ \), \( AA \) and \( ATh \) reject marital union only in respect of the main characters this might mean a call to a special mode of life and does not claim to be a universal ethic. It certainly does not appear in the apostolic exhortations to minor characters and crowds.
overthrows' (96). In his sermons to the people and the crowds, the apostle is far more restrained: he only condemns adultery, points to the mortality of the body and praises the virtue of purity (28).

Debauchery and boastfulness also belong to the sins of the body, whether in respect of food and drink or wealth and fame. In his first sermon to them, Thomas exhorts the members of the newly converted and baptised congregation as follows: 'And the service of the belly plunges the soul into cares and anxieties and sorrows, since it becomes anxious lest it come to be in want and reaches out for what is far from it' (28). Outsiders describe Thomas' behaviour by saying 'continually he fasts and prays, and eats only bread and salt, and his drink is water, and he wears one garment whether in fine weather or in foul' (20). As what we gain by debauchery is waste, so it is vain to boast with bodily beauty. 'For it is not beauty that is enduring with men; for those who rely upon it, when old age takes hold of them, shall be suddenly put to shame' (66). Wealth is similarly wasteful, since while seeking possessions we might damage others and fill our souls with vain desires. Therefore 'raise yourselves out of... the wealth which is left here, and the possession which comes from the earth and grows old' (37).

The characters have to give up their bodily oriented lives, and the story of this provides the bulk of the plot. However, it is equally important that they are to put their bodies to the service of their spirit and God, to make them the instruments of the Good. But how can the sinful body become the servant and instrument of God?

First, by being healed from its various diseases through the apostle's miracles, which demonstrate his divine calling and the power of God that sent him, and which help the conversion of those who were healed and were witnesses. Therefore the apostle prays as follows: 'In thy holy name raise thou up by thy power her who lies here, to thy glory and the confirmation of the faith of them that stand by' (53).

Second, the dignity of the body might consist in the fact that it can become the carrier of the spirit. In the Fourth Act, the ass's colt, which carried the apostle to the town but dies before the gate, is a symbol for the body; it carries the body through earthly existence to heaven, but is unable to enter there.

Third, the body becomes a servant of God if it serves its brethren. This is what is called deaconship (diakonia) in clerical language, the support of the sick, the poor, the disabled, with financial
means and physical labour. 'But he (Thomas) went about the towns
and the villages round about, distributing it (money) and bestowing
alms on the poor and afflicted, and gave them relief' (19). As crowds
become faithful, one consequence is that 'they brought much money
for the service of the widows' (59).

The fourth opportunity of the body for divine service is martyr-
dom. Thomas' fate is driven in this direction, this being the main-
spring of the plot. How does the apostle, who in the beginning act is
very loath to go on the mission to India, become a martyr of Christ
there? At the conclusion (164-8), the apostle explains the fact that
four soldiers lead him to the place of execution by saying that his
body is composed of the four elements and that these four elements
hold his spirit in captivity. Thus martyrdom for him is liberation from
the captivity of the elements and the reaching of Him whom he
belongs to. This is why he witnesses before his death: 'today do I
receive freedom' (167).

According to the author, however, human nature is constituted
not only of its bodily features and the liberation from them. The other
mainspring in the plot is the aspiration of the soul towards God and
the heavenly world. The heavenly world calls the characters in the
novel in three ways. The man responding to this threefold call is a
Platonic Christian who finally partakes of the heavenly world.

The author of *Ath* sees a metaphor for the heavenly in every
phenomenon of this world. He provides an actual 'hermeneutical
key' to how 'visible things' reflect – though imperfectly, still recogn-
isibly – 'the world above', the heavenly realities. When as he
speaks and sees people paying attention to him and 'lifting them-
selves up that they might see him, and they were going upon high
places' (37), he immediately creates a metaphor out of this very situ-
ation by saying: 'Take an example from this and see that unless you
are lifted up you cannot see me … unless you raise yourselves a lit-
tle from the earth, how can you see him who dwells in the height …
unless you first raise yourselves out of your former condition and
your unprofitable deeds …' (37). Let us mention three particular
metaphors. The first is the building of the earthly and the heavenly
palace. The second one is the comparison between earthly and heav-
enly marriage. And the third one contrasts heavenly and earthly real-
ity in the language of humour: the king’s friend puts the left shoe on
his right foot in the morning. In the middle-Platonist interpretation,
this symbolises the replacement of the wrong earthly orientation by the right heavenly one.6

Divine revelation may come to man by way of dreams too. These may also call man to an encounter with God, and the seeing and interpretation of such dreams as well as following the admonitions in them are also motives in the plot of the novel. For example, a dream was seen by an ill young woman. In her dream, a youth put his hands on her and told her to go to the place where the 'stranger' (the apostle Thomas) was staying and she would be healed. So she did. The dream literally 'moved' the lame woman, for it was what gave her the strength to go to the place of her healing. The dream thus became a 'mainspring' of the plot.

The characters of the novel also receive divine calling through the words of the New Testament and Christian teaching. At the beginning of the story, the apostle Thomas would be happy to go anywhere but India. Upon the word of Jesus, he has second thoughts and says: 'I go whither thou wilt, Lord Jesus; thy will be done!' (Mt 6.10). In c.28, the apostle preaches the Word to those accompanying him. He entreats them not to be anxious for the morrow (Mt 6.34), to receive the yoke of Jesus (Mt 11.29-30). He encourages a converted youth thus: 'But look thou to him (Jesus), and he will not disregard thee; and turn to him, and he will not forsake thee' (36). And he tells the crowd: 'but the merciful and lowly in heart, they shall inherit the kingdom of God' (66; Mt 5.7); 'do not return evil for evil!' (58; Rom 12.17). To the litter-bearers, he quotes the words of Jesus with which he called to himself the heavy laden and those that labour (Mt 11.25-30), and then adds: 'This blessing and this admonition ... is now for you who are heavy laden!' (83). We can say that New Testament quotations as well as apostolic admonitions and exhortations encourage the characters in the AT to plot-motivating conduct: conversion, faith, rectification, and God seeking.

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6 Bomkamm, op. cit., 301. See also Bolyki. 'Head Downwards: The Cross of Peter in the Lights of Apocryphal Acts, of the New Testament and of the Society-Transforming Claims of Early Christianity', in Bremmer, Acts of Peter. 111-22. The upside-down crucifixion of Peter also implies that, in this world, 'all has to be turned upside down' for things to get into their proper place, for 'the downwards to become upwards'. 
The one who shakes off the dominance of the body, and puts it to the service of God and the spirit, is a Christian of middle-Platonic spirit. The first stage of his journey is enlightenment. The enlightened princess prays thus: 'Thou... didst show me how to seek myself and to recognise who I was and who and how I now am, that I may become again what I was' (15). From enlightenment, faith proceeds. The believer is freed from the body and his former sins, so as to be in communion with the Saviour. The apostle promises one youth that 'If thou art free... thou shalt both see him and be with him forever' (35). Faith and deliverance bring about enormous changes in the life of men. Freed believers are armed against the temptations of life. Such a man may receive the 'mark' of Christians, baptism, and take part in the eucharist (e.g. 26-27). This is how his road from perdition to salvation ends, which is one of the main lines of the plot.

Character and Plot

As yet, we have been studying man in rather abstract terms; we have been speaking not of individual persons but of 'man' as introduced by a third century middle-Platonic Christian author. We shall now consider in further detail human or trans-human individuality. We shall discuss three types of character: the apostle invested with divine calling and power; the personifications of demonic forces; and finally, freed man, the ideal Christian. As a result, we shall see that this novel also demonstrates the validity of the literary rule that human or demonic character strongly influences both narrative and dramatic plot.

The figure of the apostle in these Acts differs from those of other AAA in that he is a twin brother of Christ (1, 31). The New Testament also knows Thomas to be a twin (Jn 11.16), but does not state whether he is a brother of Jesus or not. With the idea of the twin, the Ath expresses how closely the apostle resembles Jesus. In c.31, even the demon acknowledges: 'Thou art the twin brother of Christ!' This is why someone says to the apostle: 'For thou art a man that has two


8 Mk 6.3 and par.
forms, and wherever thou wilt, there thou art found' (34), which implies the investment of divine omnipresence in the apostle. Thomas is a divine man because he partakes of divine attributes.

However, this apostle, so similar to Jesus, is also Jesus' slave. This turns out so already at the beginning of the novel when Jesus sells him to a merchant. But the Lord gave the purchase-price to Thomas and said to him: 'Let thy price also be with thee, with my grace, whithersoever thou goest!' (3). If a slave had his purchase-money in his purse, he would be able to buy himself freedom from his master at any moment. But Thomas did not do so. This is how the author expresses that the apostle was a voluntary slave of Christ. Later on, this is again what the speaking colt tells Thomas: thou 'who being free didst become a slave and being sold didst lead many to freedom' (39).

The main reason for Thomas' dignity is that he received divine revelations: he is a 'fellow-initiate into the hidden word of Christ, who dost receive his secret sayings, fellow-worker of the Son of God' (39)\(^9\). This is why he is encouraged by the speaking wild ass: 'Thy teacher wishes to show his mighty works by thy hands... thy master wishes to make known the ineffable things through thee' (78). This means that Thomas is not only a bearer of divine revelations, but is also capable of divine acts (miracles). As a consequence, however, he shares not only the revelations and deeds of his Teacher, Christ, but also his fate. The course of his life points towards martyrdom. This is how the character of the hero becomes the mainspring of events related to him. This is true not only of narrative elements, but also of dramatic dialogues. Thomas' prayers are in fact dramatic dialogues with his Master, Jesus. They are animated, passionate and purposeful. And among the genres employed in the novel, they are the most valuable from a literary point of view. In the exorcism scenes, however, he struggles with Satan. Dauntlessness and explosive anger shine through his words; these are truly dramatic conflicts: clashes of the forces of heaven and hell. Flatly opposed to this is the tender, pastoral care with which Thomas treats his spiritual children, those who have become believing Christians. Interestingly

\(^9\) The original Greek word συμβούλος for 'fellow-worker' here meant the counsellor of the ruler. The term 'fellow-initiate' (συμμυστής) derives from mystery religions, cf. Nagel, *op.cit.*, 177.
enough, he makes a deep impression on the crowds as he wants to convince them and justifies his deeds; he is hard on their sins, but he shows them the possibility of repentance and conversion. These dramatic encounters are a consequence of the apostle's character, personality, being mainsprings of action.

The characters of the demons appearing in the novel also contribute to the plot, to their own fate. The first demon appears in the likeness of a serpent. It is characteristic of this serpent that he wants to appear frightening, thus he screams while speaking (31), and takes pride in his ancient descent, in his former evil deeds. He tells the apostle that he killed a youth out of jealousy. The apostle's punishment is that the serpent is it to suck out the poison which he had put into the youth. The serpent is forced to obey the command, but when it draws up all the gall into it and the youth springs to life, it dies of its own poison. This serpent-demon put on clamorous and threatening airs, but proved to be easy to destroy. There is an element of irony in the story. It is somewhat laughable that the serpent who had fallen in love with the beautiful woman is jealous and in the end has to drink his own poison. The ironic conclusion is clearly a consequence of his character.

The other demon has a 'human form' ('a manlike one': 43), and not only is he far more fearful than the first, but his evil nature and power increase in the course of the action. In normal cases, literature calls this — if human beings are concerned — development of character; theologically, however, this motif expresses the growth of evil. This demon appears in various forms, either as a youth or as an old man: he is thus very cunning. This is also clear from his resistance to the apostle that questions him. And when he realises he cannot but leave he says: 'I shall go to places where the fame of this man has not been heard' (46). Much later in the course of the plot of the novel, we find him again in a distant region. The apostle meets him in the likeness of a demon tormenting two women. The demon wants to torture and kill his victims by painful diseases. Thomas declares that there is no room for mercy with such a ruthless demon. 'God

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10 In AJ, it is not demons, but the polymorphy of Christ that we read of (e.g. 82.6): this is how the author expresses the divine and the human nature of the Saviour: cf. P.J. Lalleman, The Acts of John: A Two-Stage Initiation into Johanine Gnosticism (Leuven, 1998) 166-7.
forbid that there be propitiation or sparing for you, for you know not sparing or compassion' (75). The demon and the apostle are involved in a dramatic dialogue. The former describes his own and the apostle's missions in contrasting parallels. 'For even as thou didst come to preach the Gospel, so did I come to destroy. And even as, if thou fulfil not the will of him who sent thee, he brings punishment upon thy head, so I also, if I do not the will of him who sent me, am sent back before the time and appointed season to my nature' (76). It turns out that he is the Anti-apostle, for as the Anti-Christ counteracts Christ, so the demon counteracts the apostle, whose work he wants to destroy. This once exorcised demon is now commanded by Thomas to leave the two women he has possessed and to live nowhere near a human settlement. He has no more chance of resisting the apostle and his work, which is the greatest punishment he can suffer. Thus is the tragedy that derives from his character fulfilled.

The novel characterises male figures with names and thus with individual traits according to their conduct with regard to the doctrine of enkrateia. King Gundaphorus puts the apostle in gaol because he cannot accept the apostle's spending the money meant for building a palace on the poor. However, when he learns from the vision of his brother on his death-bed that Thomas built a heavenly palace for him from the money spent on the poor, he and his brother become disciples of the apostle and are baptised (21-7). The action is thus about the change in the king's values and the consequential transformation of his whole life. His open and perceptive character leads the action towards a positive dénouement. Captain Siphor's character is much like the various fathers in the Gospels who entreat Jesus to heal one or another close relative of theirs**. The moving factor of action is his love for his wife and daughter. This is what leads him to the apostle, and consequently to the story of his turning to faith, therefore to action (62, 81 and 131). Just the contrary is true of Misdaeus and his friend, Charisius. It is their own selves that they love, and when their wives convert to Christianity and this disrupts their life-styles they become die-hard enemies of the apostle and the Gospel. Their hearts harden ever more intensively, which leads to the execution of the apostle. It is only the apostle's martyrdom that somewhat softens

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11 See Hilhorst, this volume, Ch. IV
12 Mt 8.5-13; Jn 4.46-54
them; they first resign to their wives conduct, then, finally, the king is able to heal his sick son with the dust from around the apostle's grave, and, in the epilogue, he himself becomes a believer (131).

Human nature, the characteristics of man seen abstractly, moves the plot of the *Ath* towards a mystery drama, from hearing the divine word calling man out of sin to the initiation received in baptism. On the other hand, the characters of individuals depicted in the *Acts* lead towards dramatic conflict and thus shape the plot. The function of this drama is identical to that of ancient drama, namely the calling into doubt, the relativisation, of official values. Middle-Platonic Christianity of the third century was very keen on casting doubt on the official values of the Roman Empire. The most important message of this for today's reader is probably that 'man is a being who cannot afford to remain the same as he is'**. Whether the way just depicted is the only one or not that provides an answer for modern man is another question.