

New Testament Apocrypha: Orthodox Acts

This is the third in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the so-called New Testament Apocrypha, books that dealt with Jesus and His Apostles which are not included in the [New Testament canon](#). Because there is so much material here, I have decided to break the discussion of apocryphal Acts into two parts. This one will discuss works that are considered orthodox. Previous installments have been an [Introduction](#) (ET&N 34) and [Gospels](#) (39). The purpose of the series is to examine what these works tell us about the diversity of belief in the early church. Some apocryphal works are considered heretical, while others were valued but failed to meet the test of apostolicity required for the canon. Additional installments of this series will discuss letters and apocalypses.

Then

With the exception of Paul and, to a much lesser extent, Peter, the book of Acts is the only source of information on the post-resurrection activities of the Apostles and other disciples, and that information is scarce indeed. It is natural that Christians of the post-apostolic period would be interested in the lives of their predecessors, and a body of work emerged to fill that gap. Although they were unanimously repudiated as inauthentic by early church leaders, many of these non-canonical works were wildly popular with the run-of-the-mill believer. Apparently deciding to join them, in a sense, rather than fighting, early leaders therefore edited these works to remove what were considered heretical ideas. With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, a number of additional non-canonical Acts came to light, although these made distinctly Gnostic overtones.

The Apocryphal Acts can therefore be classified into two categories: Gnostic (and therefore heretical) and Orthodox (but spurious). This essay will deal primarily with the following Acts. If you are so inclined, the links will lead you to complete texts for each of these works. One reason these works are so interesting is because they may contain kernels of historic truth, although most (particularly the Gnostic ones) are colored with fantastic events.

Orthodox: [Paul](#) (mid 2nd century), [Perpetua and Felicitas](#) (203), [Philip](#) (4th century), [Peter and Paul](#) (early 5th century), [Thaddeus](#) (early 5th century), and [Barnabas](#) (5th century)

Gnostic: [Peter](#) (late 2nd century), [John](#) (late 2nd century), [Andrew](#) (late 2nd century), and [Thomas](#) (early 3rd century) - these will be discussed in ET&N 69 (March 20)

[The Acts of Paul](#)

If *The Greatest Hits of the New Testament Apocrypha* were to be compiled, the section of *The Acts of Paul* known as "Paul and Thecla" would certainly be included. It was wildly popular in its day, and the legend of Thecla has persisted through the ages (she is designated as a "Saint" of the Roman Catholic Church). Much of *The Acts of Paul* is lost, only about half of the original 3,600 lines (according to the ninth century [Stichometry of Nicephorus](#)) have survived. The "Paul and Thecla" section was so frequently excerpted that it has come down to us intact. In addition to "Paul and

Thecla," spurious correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian church (sometimes referred to as 3 Corinthians) and a section on Paul's martyrdom have also survived. The letters will be discussed in the next installment of [this series](#).

The date of *The Acts of Paul* seems to be sometime in the middle of the second century, for Tertullian (145-220) comments that the story of Paul and Thecla was composed shortly before his time by an Asian presbyter (elder). Because "Paul and Thecla" relates how Thecla baptized herself and was commissioned by Paul to preach the Gospel, Tertullian claims that the author "after being convicted, and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office" (*On Baptism* XVII). Thecla is also mentioned in a later work, *The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*, which is known from an eleventh century Paris manuscript.

[Paul and Thecla](#) purports to occur during Paul's first missionary journey (AD 48-49) in Iconium, although the narrative conflicts with Luke's account. As Paul teaches in Iconium, Thecla, a beautiful virgin, accepts his decidedly ascetic message. As a consequence, she faces two sentences and is miraculously delivered from both. Sentenced to die by fire in Iconium because she rejects her impending marriage, she is condemned to fire, but a sudden violent storm quenches the flames, and she is released. Later, traveling with Paul to Pisidian Antioch, she catches the eye of a local official, who tries to force himself on her. When Thecla fights off his advances, she is sentenced to die in the arena fighting wild beasts. A lioness protects her from both a bear and a male lion, giving up her own life in killing the latter.



Byzantium icon of Thecla
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Discovering that Paul has gone to Myra in Lycia, Thecla disguises as a man and joins him. Marveling at the story she related, Paul commissions her to preach the Word back in Iconium. After a time, she goes on to Seleucia, where she preached the gospel. In a lengthy appendix found in some Greek copies, we are told that Thecla, fearing the native idolaters, withdrew from Seleucia to a nearby mountain, where many came to be healed by her. Facing the loss of business, Seleucian physicians sought to destroy Thecla (a story reminiscent of Paul's confrontation with the Ephesian silversmiths). Concluding that her power lay in her virginity, they sent a gang to rape her. Thecla prayed for deliverance, and a rock opened. She stepped inside, and it instantly closed around her.

Besides the story of [Paul and Thecla](#), there are several remarkable passages [The Acts of Paul](#), including a description of the Apostle, who is said to be "of a low stature, bald (or shaved) on the head, crooked thighs, handsome legs, hollow-eyed; had a crooked nose" (*The Acts of Paul and Thecla* 1: 7, Jeremiah Jones translation). During his preaching in Iconium, Paul offers some beatitudes, including:

- "Blessed are they who keep their flesh undefiled (or pure); for they shall be the temple of God" (1:13).
- "Blessed are the temperate (or chaste); for God will reveal himself to them" (1:14).
- "Blessed are they who have wives, as though they had them not; for they shall be made angels of God" (1:16).
- "Blessed are the bodies and souls of virgins; for they are acceptable to God..." (1:22)

This distinctly ascetic tone is characteristic of many apocryphal works and serves as the backdrop for the story of Thecla. The notion that chastity is a virtue is consistent with authentic Pauline writings. In 1 Corinthians, he responded to an inquiry from

Corinthian Christians (probably in response to an earlier letter he had written), saying "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman'" (1 Corinthians 7:1). But the authentic Paul is realistic and goes on to write, "because of the temptation to sexual immorality... (t)he husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2-3).

Most notable among the quotes attributed to Thecla is her response to the Pisidian governor when he asks her why none of the beasts touched her. "I am a servant of the living God;" she says, "and as to my state, I am a believer on Jesus Christ his Son...He is a refuge to those who are in distress; a support to the afflicted, hope and defence to those who are hopeless; and, in a word, all those who do not believe on him, shall not live, but suffer eternal death" (9:18-19).

What is most remarkable (and scandalous to those who denied women significant roles in the church) is that claim that Thecla baptized herself and that Paul commissioned her to preach the Gospel. Tertullian, writing in the late second century, rejects the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* precisely because of those claims, saying "For how credible would it seem, that he who has not permitted a woman even to learn with over-boldness, should give a female the power of teaching and of baptizing!" (*On Baptism* XVII)

[Perpetua and Felicitas](#)

This work differs from the others in this issue of *ET&N* because it is not truly apocryphal but rather an apparently genuine account of the martyrdom of two Christian women who were executed, along with three men, on March 7, 202, in Carthage. The bulk of the work purports to be Perpetua's own diary, while it has been suggested that the entire work was edited and assembled by Tertullian. A measure of the popularity of the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* can be found in the fact that Augustine (*On the Soul and its Origin*) warned others not to put the book of the same level as the canon.

Their imprisonment lasted for months before they were finally taken into the arena on Caesar's birthday. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan nearly one hundred years earlier, Pliny the Younger, then governor of Bithynia, sought approval for his approach to trying Christians. "I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians," he wrote. "(T)hose who persisted I ordered executed." Hilarianus, the procurator of Carthage, does the same with Perpetua and the others. "Are you a Christian?" he asks. "I am a Christian," Perpetua responds. Hilarianus condemns them to the wild beasts.



Saints Felicitas & Perpetua, bronze sculpture by Christopher Slatoff, San Marino, CA

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Perpetua, according to the introductory chapter of *Perpetua and Felicitas*, was "respectably born, liberally educated, a married matron, having a father and mother and two brothers, one of whom, like herself was a catechumen (one studying for baptism), and a son an infant at the breast" (1:1) and "of delicate frame" (6.3). Perpetua entrusts her child's care to her mother and brother. Only Perpetua's father was not a Christian, a fact that causes her considerable distress when he continually pleads with her to turn away from her faith. Felicitas, her servant, was pregnant when they were first jailed and delivers a daughter (at eight months) only three days

before her execution following a prayer session with her fellow prisoners. Her daughter was raised by a Christian sister.

During the course of her confinement, Perpetua experiences a series of visions. The first comes when she asks God to reveal her fate. She sees a huge ladder affixed with all sorts of weapons that make climbing difficult and dangerous. Underneath the ladder, a massive dragon threatens climbers and waits to devour those who lose heart and fall. At the top of the ladder, Perpetua has a simple, beautiful vision of heaven:

"...I saw an immense extent of garden, and in the midst of the garden a white-haired man sitting in the dress of a shepherd, of a large stature, milking sheep; and standing around were many thousand white-robed ones. And he raised his head, and looked at me, and said to me, 'Thou art welcome, daughter.'" And he called me, and from the cheese as he was milking he gave me as it were a little cake, and I received it with folded hands; and I ate it, and all who stood around me said *Amen*. And at the sound of their voices, I was awakened, still tasting a sweetness which I cannot describe" (1.3)

Her second vision involves her brother Dinocrates, who had died horribly of cancer at seven. First, she sees him desperately unable to drink from a pool of water because he couldn't reach it. Later, she sees Dinocrates transformed--cleansed, dressed, and his cancerous face healed. The pool has lowered and "Dinocrates drew near and began to drink from it. And when he was satisfied, he went away...to play joyously... Then I understood that he was translated from the place of punishment" (2.3-4). Augustine, the great champion of original sin, took great exception to this story:

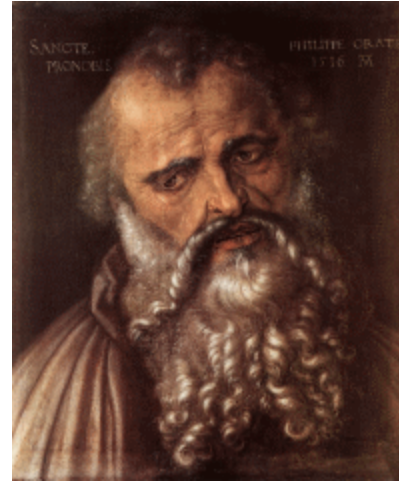
"If you wish to be a catholic, refrain from believing, or saying, or teaching that 'infants which are forestalled by death before they are baptized may yet attain to forgiveness of their original sins.' For the (example) by which you are misled--that of Dinocrates the brother of St. Perpetua--contribute no help to you in defence of this erroneous opinion" (On the Soul and its Origin, III.12).

In Perpetua's third vision, she sees herself led into the arena where, rather than beasts, she fights and defeats a horrible Egyptian, receiving the victor's branch. From this, she understands "that I was not to fight with beasts, but against the devil." (3.2)

Perpetua's diary is appended by a third-person account of the courageous martyrdom of the group. Felicitas gives birth, apparently with such suffering that a servant asks, "What will you do when you are thrown to the beasts...?" Felicitas' response displays her faith: "Now it is I suffer what I suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer for me, because I also am about to suffer for him" (5.2). The Christian prisoners finally face their final fate, each courageously and joyously experiencing the kind of death they requested. Perpetua and Felicitas are not harmed by beasts, and are finally executed by the sword.

[The Acts of Philip](#)

This fictional account of Philip the apostle, dating from the fourth century, is a hodgepodge of borrowed New Testament stories and characters, quasi-magical acts, and more aesthetic teachings. In the books of the canon, Philip, a native of Bethsaida, is named as one of Jesus' apostles in Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:14, and John 1:43. Probably the best known incident involving Philip in the Gospels comes shortly after the Last Supper, when he says to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us," to which Jesus responds, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:8-9) Like most of His disciples, Philip did not really understand who Jesus was until after His resurrection. The last we hear of Philip the apostle comes in Acts 1:13, when he listed among the disciples in the upper room on the day of Pentecost.



The Apostle Philip,
Albrecht Dürer, 1516
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A second Philip, an evangelist and deacon, appears later in Acts, when he one of those chosen to relieve the Twelve of daily administrative duties (Acts 6:5). When the followers of Jesus scatter after the stoning of Stephen, this Philip preaches in Samaria, winning many converts, including Simon Magnus, who was to become a thorn in Peter's side (Acts 8:5-24). Shortly after Philip returned to Jerusalem, an angel sends him to Gaza, where he baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch, after which he finds himself in Azotus, a Judean city south of Joppa. He preaches his way up to coast to Caesarea (Acts 8:25-40). It is in Caesarea that we last encounter this Philip when he and his four prophetess daughters entertain Paul and Luke (Acts 21:8).

The apocryphal *Acts of Philip* appears to feature Philip the apostle, although the writer seems to confuse him with Philip the evangelist since some of the action occurs in Azotus. Much of the first part of the *Acts of Peter* bears distinct echoes of Pauline journeys: he preaches to philosophers in Athens (Chapter II); he has a vision of Jesus, "his face seven times brighter than the sun" (Chapter II); he stays two years in Athens, similar to Paul's stays in Corinth and Ephesus (Chapter II); and he experiences a Mediterranean storm (Chapter III).

One major section of the work occurs in Nicaterra, Greece, where he converts a wealthy Jewish official, Ireus, and his daughter. Here, there is an echoes of Jesus' encounter with the woman at Jacob's Well in Sychar, Samaria, where after encountering Jesus, she runs back into town and tells the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did" (John 4:29). In the *Acts of Philip*, Ireus invites Philip to his house, but his wife is resistant and skeptical. When Philip recounts Ireus conversation with his wife, Ireus returns to her and says, "Come and see a man who has told me what passed between you and me" (Chapter V.58). This section is also sprinkled with New Testament names—Onesimus (cf Philemon 1:10), [Aristarchus](#) (Acts 19:29 and others), Nereus (Romans 16:15), and Theophilus (Luke 1:3), although these characters are often quite different than their biblical namesakes. The name Stachys (cf Romans 16:9) is used later (Chapter IX.108). Finally in this section, Philip issues a startlingly unbiblical command to Ireus when he is invited to his home. "Do no wrong, and leave thy wife," Philip says (Chapter V.50). While the asceticism of the *Acts of Philip* is undeniable (like many apocryphal works), it is surprising that an author so apparently familiar with apostolic writings would put a statement that is so contrary to Pauline teaching in the mouth of an apostle.

The *Acts of Philip* is also a source for some of the tradition dispersion of the Twelve: Peter and John to Parthia, Andrew to Achaia and Thrace, Thomas to India, Matthew to Africa (Chapter III.32).

The final notable section of the *Acts of Philip* involves a fantastic story about a talking leopard, who had been rebuked by a kid it had captured and was prepared to eat. The story is clearly meant to invoke Isaiah 11:6 ("*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them,*" it is a hopelessly silly rendition, particularly given that Philip and Bartholomew (who has joined him in the Ophiani wilderness), claim that the incident "convince(s) us...to believe more and earnestly fulfill our trust" (Chapter VIII.99).

[The Acts of Peter and Paul](#)

Manuscripts of this work date to the early fifth century, but it may have been composed much earlier. It is primarily a legendary account of the interaction between Peter (and to a lesser extent, Paul) and the magician Simon Magus in Rome. This Simon is traditionally identified with the Samaritan Simon in Acts 8, who was converted and baptized by Philip the evangelist. When Peter and John arrive in Samaria, Simon sees them giving the Holy Spirit through laying on their hands, seeks to buy this gift. Peter rebukes Simon harshly, and Simon seems to repent (Acts 8:9-25), but the testimony of second century church leaders indicates that Simon persisted in his magical arts, earning the title, "Father of Heresies."

The original source of Simon's presence in Rome is probably Justin Martyr (*First Apology* XXVI) who, having observed a statue he believed to be Simon Magus, claimed Simon "did mighty acts of magic" in Rome during Claudius' reign (AD 41-54). But the statue in question, which bore the inscription "Simoni, Deo Sancto" (*To Simon, the holy god*), was actually dedicated to the Sabine divinity Semo Sancus. Nevertheless, the legend of Simon Magus in Rome persisted for centuries and prompted several fictional accounts, among them the *Acts of Peter and Paul*.

While the interaction between the apostles and Simon Magus takes up most of the work, it opens with Paul's arrival in Rome, despite the efforts of Romans Jews to prevent his arrival. Just when this arrival is supposed to have occurred—at Paul's first visit (61-63) or his second (probably 64), is not clear since the details do not jibe with the biblical or historical facts. The *Acts of Peter and Paul* also contains distinctly anti-Semitic elements and the clear depiction of substantial conflict between Jewish and Gentile Romans Christians. When Simon Magus begins to attack Peter and Paul, the conflict reaches the ears of Emperor Nero (reigned 54-68) and he summons the combatants.

As they begin to argue before Nero, the author of the *Acts of Peter and Paul* invents a letter from Pontius Pilate to Claudius which reports the events surrounding the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. In it, Pilate is said to report that he only had Jesus scourged, and it was the Jews themselves who crucified Jesus. Even if everything else in this work were believable, this one contention would be sufficient to serve as *prima facie* evidence of its spurious nature. There is absolutely no way Jews would inflict the cruel and hated form of Roman execution on a fellow Jew, regardless of his crimes. Furthermore, from the historical perspective reported by contemporary Roman historians, by this time in his reign, Nero, who had begun well, had become imbalanced, even declaring himself to be a god and ordering his statue placed in all Jewish synagogues. It is therefore impossible to believe that he would even take an instant to mediate the conflict between these two parties, one of which

(Simon Magus) claimed to be the son of God, while the other (Peter and Paul), claimed to be representatives of Him.

Most of the *Acts of Peter and Paul* boils down to a contest of magic between Simon Magus and Peter. Peter is reported to have performed such trivial miracles as making a brazen serpent move and stone statues laugh and having levitated himself. Simon responds with numerous magical acts, including most incredibly, a shape-changing display to rival any science fiction story of aliens. When asked to explain themselves, Nero calls their words "roundabouts and circumlocutions." Finally, Simon calls for a final test, in which he, standing upon a high tower to be built by Nero, will ascend into heaven. When the day arrives for this display and Simon begins to fly, Paul prays for Simon's failure, but has to goad the apparently startled Peter into calling off Satan's angels in the name of Christ Jesus. Finally, Peter responds, and Simon falls to his death.

Nero, still siding with Simon, has the body guarded for three days, believing he might still rise. When he does not, he condemns Peter and Paul for killing Simon. At first, he orders them to die in a sea-fight. This was one of the more extravagant displays put on to entertain the Roman populace. Some arenas (including the later Colosseum) could be flooded for detailed re-enactments of famous naval battles. The propraetor of Rome, however, objects that they are not worthy of so glorious and end. When he recommends be-heading for Paul and crucifixion for Peter, Nero agrees. Paul is then executed on the Ostesian road.

The execution of Peter is the *Acts of Peter and Paul* echoes the traditional legend of Peter's final hours. Objecting to being treated like Jesus, he asks to be crucified upside down. When a "multitude" assembles seeking to kill Nero for his condemnation of Peter, the apostle quiets them with the "*Quo Vadis*" story. He tells the crowd he had been leaving Rome at some earlier time when he met Jesus on the road. "Where are you going?" (*quo vadis*) Peter asks. "I am going to Rome to be crucified," Jesus answers. "Weren't you crucified once for all?" Peter responds. "I saw you fleeing from death," Jesus says, "and I wish to be crucified instead of you." Humbled, Peter turns back to Rome. According to the *Acts of Peter and Paul*, Peter was crucified "under the terebinth near the place for the exhibition of sea-fights in the place called the Vatican."



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Some of the events depicted in the *Acts of Peter and Paul* are contained elsewhere and found their way into the works of the early church fathers. A different account of the final days of Peter's life is found in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, which will be discussed in the next installment of this series (Gnostic Apocryphal Acts).

[The Acts of Thaddeus](#)

This is a very short work supposedly written about Thaddeus, one of the twelve disciples and an apostle, although there is some confusion about the identity of this New Testament figure. The name appears only twice in the New Testament: at Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18, where he is listed as the tenth of Jesus' disciples. In his list of the Twelve, Luke omits the name Thaddeus and mentions Judas, son of James, eleventh. Since all other names from Luke's list (Luke 6:16 and again at Acts 1:13) match up with those of Matthew and Mark, Thaddeus and Judas are clearly the same person. He is mentioned in John's Gospel only as "Judas (not Iscariot)" at 14:22. To confound things a bit more, the *Acts of Thaddeus*, claim this name was also known as "Lebbaeus." Many ancients had multiple names, and it would certainly not be surprising that him to have assumed a name other than Judas after the crucifixion.



The Apostle St Thaddeus (Jude),
El Greco, 1610-14
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He is sometimes considered the author of the book of Jude. If that is the case, he, was the brother of Jesus. The *Acts of Thaddeus* cites him as a learned Hebrew native of Edessa, who came to Jerusalem and became first a disciple of John the Baptist.

The most remarkable element of the work is the inclusion of the legendary exchange between Abgar(us), the governor of Edessa, and Jesus. Abgar, suffering with an unidentified disease and having heard about the healing power of Jesus, writes a letter inviting Jesus to his city. Jesus sends verbal response a response by courier. Since this portion of the *Acts of Thaddeus* involves a letter, I'll save discussion of it until the Apocryphal Letters issue of ET&N (scheduled as #74, May 29).

The remainder of the *Acts of Thaddeus* details the apostle's exploits in Edessa, where Jesus directed him to go after His resurrection, and Syria, including a five-year stay in the city of Amis. Finally, the book relates Thaddeus' peaceful death in the Phoenician coastal city of Berytus. The book contains none of the fantastic elements that are typical of apocryphal works. Thaddeus healed, to be sure, but simply by the laying on of his hands and not in an contest of miracles. His testimony of Jesus is consistent with the New Testament accounts. The evidence that the work came well after the apostolic period lays in a simple comment by the unknown author that at the end of his stay in Amis, "he built a church," but the construction of separate Christians places of worship did not occur until at least the third century.

[The Acts of Barnabas](#)

This is another relatively short work containing accounts in contradiction to the New Testament. The book purports to be written by John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and the son of the Mary, in whose house the disciples met to pray (Acts 12:12). There is a tradition that this was also the house in which the disciples of Jesus were gathered on the Day of Pentecost. He was also the companion of Paul and Barnabas as far as Perga, at which time he returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:5,13). He is also credited as the author of the second Gospel, according to the church historian, Eusebius, he wrote under the direction of Simon Peter.

The fictitious author of the *Acts of Barnabas* is meant to be this Mark, for he introduces himself as John, writes about the change to Mark upon his baptism, and travels with Paul and Barnabas, but it appears the author wanted to give John Mark a better image than he may have had from the *Acts of the Apostles*. That Mark's

departure from the mission was uncalled for is strongly suggested by Paul's reaction when Barnabas wants to take Mark along on the second journey. Luke reports that "Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work," and the disagreement was so sharp that the two missionaries separated (Acts 15:38-40).

The author *Acts of Barnabas* obviously with unfamiliar with (or chose to ignore Luke's *Acts*) since he portrays Mark as a former servant to a pagan priest in Iconium who is evangelized and baptized in Iconium, but the sequence of the narrative indicates this occurred before Paul's first missionary journey, before Paul had ever been to Iconium. The story takes Paul, Barnabas, and Mark back to Seleucia, where they pick up the biblical trail of the first journey. According to this account, when the team reached Perga, Mark chose to remain there for two months (presumably while Paul and Barnabas continued on). "(I wanted) to sail to the regions of the West," Mark then reports; "and the Holy Spirit did not allow me" (cf Acts 16:6). Mark therefore returns to Antioch to rejoin Paul and Barnabas.

The attitude of the author is distinctly anti-Paul. First, he reports that he "found Paul in bed in Antioch from the toil of the journey;" that he "afraid of Paul to come near him...because he was quite enraged against me;" and that Paul "would not endure" his repentance. He claims that Paul's anger lies in Mark "keeping several parchments in Pamphylia." Finally, he reports that an obstinate Paul refused to take Mark along even though others urged him to do so. Barnabas therefore splits with Paul and proceeds to Cyprus with Mark, matching the Lukan account.

The New Testament is silent about Barnabas' activities after his separation from Paul, so the rest of the *Acts of Barnabas* seeks to fill that gap. He and Mark crisscross the island nation, renewing acquaintances with believers and making many new converts. At one point, Mark reports a rather unapostolic reaction by Barnabas to a co-ed nude race, causing injury and even death to many of the participants. Finally, they end up in Salamis, on the eastern end of Cyprus, where Barnabas enters a synagogue where he reads from "the Gospel which he had received from Matthew." This so enraged the Jews, according to the author, that they "took Barnabas by night, and bound him with a rope by the neck...and having gone out of the city...they burned him with fire, so that even his bones became dust."



Ruins in ancient Salamis

Mark and some new companions rescue Barnabas' ashes, which the Jews had intended to throw into the sea, and deposited them, along with Matthew's documents, in a secret place in a cave. They successfully evaded the Jews who were hunting them before gaining passage on an Egyptian ship to Alexandria, where Mark says he "remained, teaching the brethren...the word of the Lord, enlightening them, and preaching what I had been taught by the apostles of Christ."

Numerous additional orthodox apocryphal Acts exist, but all are much later and therefore have nothing to tell us about the pre-Nicaen church.

Now

When one compares most of the apocryphal works with the canonical books of the New Testament, it is readily apparent why the former were excluded from the New Testament. Last week, I watched a documentary on The History Channel entitled "Banned from the Bible." While the production was generally more balanced than most secularly-produced shows about Christianity, its very title discloses its bias and misrepresentation. As usually occurs, it portrayed the selection of the books of the canon as a political move by Emperor Constantine by the Council of Nicæa and ignored the historical truth of the sequential development of the canon (see [ET&N 25](#)) and, more importantly, the hand of God in doing so. The apocryphal books were not "banned from the Bible," most were never given serious consideration at all by knowledgeable Christian leaders.

Also as usual, this cynical and ultimately satanic lie was championed by John Dominic Crossan, the media darling, Jesus Seminar spokesman, and author of numerous deceptive and destructive books. These lies, and others, will be further promulgated later this year with the release of Ron Howard's film version of *The Da Vinci Code*. When this movie is released on May 19, it behooves all Christians to understand and be prepared to counter its lies with the truth. Ironically, both the initial trailers and [website](#) for the movie carrying the tag "Seek the Truth." An honest tag would be "Distort the Truth." It will undoubtedly be a highly entertaining film, but one that will not only aid and abet the enemies of genuine Christianity, but also create uncertainty in uninformed believers. Much of the falacious content of *The Da Vinci Code* derives from Gnostic apocryphal works.

You can read any of the works surveyed here by clicking on the embedded links. For those reading the pdf version, here are those links:

[The Acts of Paul](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actspaul.html): <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actspaul.html>

[Perpetua and Felicitas](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian24.html): <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian24.html>

[The Acts of Philip](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0815.htm): <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0815.htm>

[The Acts of Peter and Paul](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0815.htm): <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0815.htm>

[The Acts of Thaddeus](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0826.htm): <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0826.htm>

[The Acts of Barnabas](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-08/anf08-90.htm): <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-08/anf08-90.htm>

Parts of most of these works found their way into Christian traditions that persist to our day, some of them grotesquely perverted. One of the worst such examples is the assumption of Perpetua and Felicitas catalog of [gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender saints](#), presumably because they kissed one another with the kiss of peace just before their execution (*Perpetua and Felicitas* 6.4). This is the same kind of ridiculous misunderstanding of the "holy kiss" (see [ET&N 3](#)) that led Romans to the conclusion that Christians were promiscuous and incestuous. Ignored in such a presumptuous claim is that fact that both Perpetua and Felicitas were married with children.

In addition, while the works surveyed here were considered orthodox (if often discarded as spurious), portions of them, like portions of the canonical books themselves, were sometimes excerpted and misinterpreted by those wishing to propagate a different gospel. Paul correctly predicted that this would happen (see 2 Timothy 4:3). In the next installment of this series, tentatively scheduled for *ET&N* 69 (March 20), we'll survey the apocryphal acts invented by Gnostic Christians.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Paul's Co-workers: Euodia and Syntyche

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