

## New Testament Apocrypha: Acts (Gnostic)

This is the fourth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the so-called New Testament Apocrypha, books that dealt with Jesus and His Apostles but which are not included in the [New Testament canon](#). Because there is so much material concerning apocryphal Acts, I decided to break the discussion of into two parts. This one covers works that are not considered orthodox. Previous installments have been an [Introduction](#) (ET&N 34), [Gospels](#) (39), and [Orthodox Acts](#) (65). The purpose of the series is to examine what these works tells 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

The previous installment in this series dealt with the apocryphal Acts that were considered more or less orthodox; that is, they portrayed the church and early Christians in ways similar to the canonical books of the New Testament. Works like [Perpetua and Felicitas](#) portrayed events that were probably factual to a large degree, while the [Acts of Paul](#), [Philip](#), [Peter and Paul](#), [Thaddeus](#), and [Barnabas](#), while often clearly legendary in nature, nonetheless reflected the thought of early church leaders. They ultimately failed the authenticity tests, but they were highly regarded and sometimes even included in collections of early church literature. These were discussed in [ET&N 65](#).

Another class of Acts, however, emerged from the Christian-Gnostics who spread throughout much of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries. This issue of *ET&N* highlights four of those works: [The Acts of Peter](#) (late 2nd century), [John](#) (late 2nd century), [Andrew](#) (mid 3rd century), and [Thomas](#) (early 3rd century). The links above take you to complete texts if you're interested in reading them.

Whereas the orthodox Acts can be viewed as innocent attempts to fill in the gaps left by Luke's Acts, particularly about apostles other than Paul, the Gnostic Acts were written to justify clearly unbiblical doctrines. Peter dominates the first half of the canonical Acts, John gets a few brief mentions, and his brother James' execution is documented, but other than the list in Acts 1:13, the other remaining eight apostles are completely absent. This not only left the field open for pious imaginings, but also for total distortions. The four works discussed here present the Christian story in distinctly different ways than Luke, sometimes subtly, and like all good fiction, they may include some historically-accurate events.

### [The Acts of Peter](#)<sup>1</sup>

This book, originally almost as long as Luke's, but with only about two-thirds surviving, includes most notably, Peter's miracle contest with Simon the Magician in Rome and Peter's legenday upside down crucifixion. This Simon is the same one whose first contact with Peter is found in Acts 8:9-24. He attempted to purchase the

apostle's miraculous gifts, was rebuked, and supposedly repented. The portrayal of the contest is sprinkled with a talking dog, a reconstructing statue, a resurrected fish, a talking infant, and a flying man. Besides these fantastic elements, there are three broad themes of the work: ascetic overtones, upper class church membership, and an implied superiority of Peter over Paul.

### **Asceticism**

It is the first vignette that most clearly exposes the ascetic values held by the author, not to mention his view of the reasons for sexual sin. Peter is busily healing people in Jerusalem when someone accuses him of child neglect for failing to heal his own virgin daughter, who is half paralyzed. To prove God is capable of doing so, Peter heals the girl, but then immediately returns her to her crippled state, claiming her infirmity "is expedient for her and for me."

Why? It seems that the girl was precociously lovely, drawing the attention of a wealthy suitor named Ptolemaeus even at age ten. Wanting her and unwilling to wait until she comes of age, Ptolemaeus kidnaps her. Hearing the disturbing news and having had a vision on the day of her birth that she would 'bring hurt unto many souls if her body continue whole," Peter asks God to protect her, which He does by striking her with palsy. Ptolemaeus isn't interested in her in this state, so he returns her home, where Peter and his wife "praise the Lord which had preserved his handmaid from defilement and shame."

This attitude—that destruction of the body was better than sexual activity—pervades one major strain of Gnosticism. What is also interesting to note is the suggestion that Ptolemaeus' sin is the girl's fault. This mirrors societal attitudes, not just in the first century but for many afterwards—that sexual sin was the result of women being too tempting for men, not necessarily because of any particular sensual behavior, but just because of their nature. It was this attitude, probably combined with a misunderstanding of Paul's comments about marriage, that introduced celibacy as a supreme value of piety.

### **Upper Class Christianity**

The author of the *Acts of Peter* goes to considerable lengths to portray the church in Rome as significantly populated with the wealthy elite. The primary action in the *Acts of Peter* seems to occur in about 63-64 A.D., a time when the Roman church would be fledgling, probably not more than a couple of hundred among a million residents. Yet we are told about "many of the senate and many knights and rich women and matrons...being confirmed in the faith." Two senators (Demetrius and Marcellus) and two knights (Dionysius and Balbus) are named. Marcellus is a central figure in the books central act—a miracle contest between Peter and Simon.

While the gospel eventually spread across every strata of Roman society, there certainly weren't a large number of Christian senators and knights in Rome in the middle of the first century. Christianity initially appealed primarily to the underclasses—women, slaves, the poor—because it offered a hope that the world did not. It is a testimony to the power of the gospel that any well-heeled Roman citizen would be drawn, and there certainly were relatively wealthy individuals in the early church. It has been suggested, for example, that Ampliatus (Romans 16:8) came from the noble Aurelian family that eventually spawned the emperors Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Philemon seems to be a man of some means, as does Gaius, who served as host of the entire church in Corinth (Romans 16:23). The church

included wealthy individuals, but certainly not in the numbers suggested in the *Acts of Peter*. Roman citizens were deeply ingrained with a distaste for anything new. Judaism was tolerated because of its antiquity; Christianity was viewed as a pernicious superstition.

Repentance is far too quick and universal in the book to be realistic. To accept the accounts of the work would require seeing Romans as amazingly fickle—converted by Paul, turned by Simon, restored by Peter—all without blinking an eye. Marcellus' only hesitation comes when a young man possessed of an evil spirit hanging around Simon smashes a statue of Nero in his courtyard. Fearing reprisals from the Emperor, Marcellus wrings his hands, but Peter tells him to sprinkle water on the pieces, and the statue reconstitutes itself.

There is also a curious little incident involving a very wealthy woman named Chryse, who delivers ten thousand gold pieces to Peter, claiming to have had a dream that she owed him this sum. Peter comes under fire for accepting the money, however, because of Chryse's reputation. "She is ill spoken of throughout all Rome for fornication...she even hath to do with the young men of her house." Such behavior would not have been terribly shocking to the upper levels of Roman society, but Peter's response is interesting. First, he laughs. "I did it not foolishly," he says, "for she did pay it as a debtor unto Christ and giveth it unto the servants of Christ..." I seem to recall a church refusing a large bequest from a member because it was the proceeds of a lottery. It appears that Peter would have had no problem with such money when it served the needs of the church and the poor.

### **Petrine Superiority**

The implied superiority of Peter may not be surprising in a work about Peter, but it is somewhat surprising in a Gnostic work. Paul, with his supposed rejection of Judaism, was appealing to many Gnostics. From the perspective of the canonical books, Paul never turned his back on his heritage—he continued to claim both his Jewish and Pharisaic roots throughout his life, but Gnostics pulled many Pauline passages out of context to support their views.



*Martyrdom of St. Peter*, Gaspar de Crayer, mid 17th century  
[State Heritage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia](#)

In the *Acts of Peter*, Simon the magician has caused all but seven Roman Christians to fall away—an elder named Narcissus (see Romans 16:11), two women, and four shut-ins. The author reports that Romans, facing Simon's seductive magic, "were not a little offended...that Paul was not in Rome." More importantly, the degree to which the church is portrayed as having crumbled strongly implies a weakness in Paul's message, one that Peter has to sail in to fix. The contest itself is of little importance except to say that it is portrayed as a major spectator event—special scaffolding was erected in the Julian forum and admission was charged for the best seats.

A second implied criticism of Paul in the *Acts of Peter* comes with Peter's martyrdom and the source of the *Quo Vadis* legend. Paul had left the Capital to travel to Spain, despite the pleas of Roman Christians. Peter has stirred up trouble in the city by successfully preaching a message of chastity (exclusively to women, it seems). There women include the concubines of the prefect and Xanthippe, the wife of Albinus, a friend of Nero. When Xanthippe overhears Albinus'

plot to kill Peter, she warns the apostle, and the restored Christians urge Peter to flee. Peter objects, but they prevail upon him. Leaving the city, Peter encounters Jesus going in and asks, "Lord, whither goest thou?" (Latin, *quo vadis?*). "I go into Rome to be crucified," Jesus answers, and Peter gets the message. He returns to Rome where he is to be executed, but he insists that it be upside down because he considers himself unworthy to experience precisely the same fate as Christ Jesus.

## The Acts of John<sup>1</sup>

Most of the action in the *Acts of John* purports to occur after John's return from exile on the island of Patmos, where he was sent by Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD). Besides being peppered with formulaic speeches and prayers that stand in stark contrast to those of the canonical books of the New Testament, two features of the work are notable: spectacularism and docetism.

### **Spectacularism**

One of the clear characteristics of Jesus' earthly ministry is how little He tried to attract large crowds. In fact, while He taught to large groups on occasion (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7), He often sought to avoid crowds. No publicity accompanied His teaching—crowds gathered as word-of-mouth spread about His remarkable message. The same can be said of apostolic teaching in the New Testament—people came to them. Furthermore, when Jesus healed, He was motivated by compassion for the sick, not by some opportunity to display His power. By contrast, in the *Acts of John*, the apostle is portrayed as arranging spectacular stunts designed to impress people into belief.

For example, after healing the palsied wife of the Ephesian praetor and resurrecting the praetor (a Roman judicial official) himself, who had apparently (the text is corrupt) committed suicide in his grief, John calls for the sick old women to be brought to the theatre, where he intends to perform a mass healing before cheering throngs. "There are some of them that will come unto this spectacle," John says, "Whom by these healings I will convert and make them useful for some end" (30).

John goes on to give a good old "fire and brimstone" speech, condemning the vain, adulterous, stingy, passionate, drunkard, quarreler, greedy, poisoner, sorcerer, robber, defrauder, sodomite, and thief as heading for "unquenchable fire." Only after berating the crowd does John heal "all the diseases."

A small miracle portrayed in the *Acts of John* serves as a counterpoint for the dominant spectacularism. During one excursion, John's companions prepare a makeshift bed of their cloaks, which were apparently infested with bugs. Unable to sleep, John rebukes the creatures: "I say unto you, O bugs, behave yourselves, one and all, and leave your abode for this night and remain quiet in one place" (60). The bugs dutifully cluster at the doorway until the next morning, when John permits them to return to the bed, "since ye have well behaved yourselves in hearkening to my rebuke..." (61). Such trivial, self-serving "miracles" are absent from the canonical books.

### **Docetism**

By far the most important section of the *Acts of John*, and the one which merited its heretical label, is a lengthy docetic discourse. The term *docetism* derives from the

Greek word **dokeo**, *to seem*. Docetic doctrine stemmed from the dualistic notion that spirit and flesh can in no way coexist. Hence, if Christ was indeed God, and God is a spiritual being, Christ too must be spirit and therefore cannot be flesh. At most, He can only *seem* to be flesh. He can only *seem* to be born of woman, He can only *seem* to possess a corporeal body, and, most importantly, He can only *seem* to have died on the Cross.

This notion is expressed by the Gnostic author of the *Acts of John* in comments by John and in quotes attributed to Jesus Himself. For example, in a lengthy conversation with other believers, John tells them, "Another glory also will I tell you, brethren: Sometimes when I would lay hold on him, I met with a material and solid body, and at other times, again, when I felt him, the substance was immaterial and as if it existed not at all" (93). In other words, Jesus only *seemed* to have a body. Then "John" puts these words into the mouth of Jesus: "...neither am I he that is on the cross..." (99) and "Nothing, therefore, of the things which they will say of me have I suffered."

The very real sufferings and the death of Christ Jesus on the Cross are central to Christian doctrine. If those events were unreal and only *seemed* to occur, then God's substitutionary sacrifice is not real, and the sin debt owned by humanity remains unpaid, leaving no hope of reconciliation with a holy God. This is why the docetic position was so vehemently opposed by the early church fathers, who saw it for what it was: a satanic invention designed to divert humanity from the truth.



Orthodox icon of Andrew  
[Click for a larger image](#)

### [The Acts of Andrew](#)<sup>1</sup>

The *Acts of Andrew*, exists only as some late (10th-11th century) fragments and a summary composed by Gregory of Tours (538-593), who accused the original of "excessive verbosity." Despite that, I might have preferred to read the original were it not for having already sloughed through the tediously formulaic verbosity of the *Acts of John*. Consequently, I am grateful for Gregory's abstract.

Unlike most apocryphal works, whose authorship is unknown, the *Acts of Andrew*, according to several ancient writers, was composed by one Leucius in the middle of the third century. It was treasured by the Manichees, a short-lived (but recently resurrected) cult characterized primarily by an extreme dualism. Manichaeism postulates two equally-powerful natures—light and darkness—that war inside every human being. Manichees saw Paul's admission of inner conflict (Romans 7:15-24) as evidence of this dualism.

In our day, George Lucas' *Star Wars* series presents a distinctly dualistic vision of the universe, complete with the dark and lights sides of "The Force." Throughout the series, the internal conflicts experienced by Anakin Skywalker (aka Darth Vader) and his son Luke are highly reminiscent of Romans 7:15-24.

### **Reciprocalism and Spontaneous Conversions**

In the *Acts of Andrew*, this dualistic orientation finds expression in many of the large number of characters introduced. Frequently, they are initially controlled by Darkness, only to be converted to Light by Andrew's teaching or, more often, his

miraculous acts. In many cases, individuals are possessed by evil spirits (Darkness) which Andrew exorcizes.

While Gregory's abstract removes a lot of tedious detail, conversions are still remarkably easy. In one example, we are told about a man named Cratinus and his dysfunctional family, all of whom are ill. His son "bathed in the women's bath and was seized by a demon," Cratinus has a fever, and his wife dropsy (edema). Cratinus appeals to Andrew on behalf of his son. After dispatching the evil spirit, Andrew goes to Cratinus and tells him "he well deserved to suffer because of his loose life" and rebukes the wife for her infidelity. He tells them both to repent, which they do, and in the apocrypha version of happily-ever-after, we learn that the family "relapsed no more into sin" (5).

To modern thinking, such spontaneous conversions seem contrived, but in Roman religion, loyalty to a particular god was a fleeting thing based on what that god had done for you lately. This scratch-my-back, I'll-scratch-yours mentality, sometimes referred to as *pietas*, dominated Roman attitudes toward their gods. There were some exceptions (most notably Vesta, known for her virgin servants), but for most Romans the only god worthy of worship and sacrifice was the one who could provide the most immediate and valuable benefit. This view of deities made it routine for Romans to switch loyalties. It is disturbing, however, that Andrew actually seems to appeal to this reciprocalism.

"If you profess your belief that I can drive (seven devils) out in Jesus' name, I will do so," he tells the residents of Nicaea (6). "What will you do, father, if I restore your son?" he asks a man in Nicomedia (7). "Save the son of Carpius who is ill, and we will believe," the Thessalonian crowd calls to Andrew. This kind of bargaining for souls finds absolutely no voice in the canonical books of the New Testament.

### **More Asceticism**

Each of the four works here considered displays substantial elements of asceticism and a decided distaste for all human sexuality, but it's worth mentioning again here because the ascetic teaching attributed to Andrew in his *Acts* is eventually his own undoing. The problems start when Andrew returns to Patras in Achaia (southern Greece), where Egetes (aka Aegeates or Egeas) is the Roman proconsul. His wife Maximilla is very ill, and Egetes is standing by, prepared to commit suicide if she dies. One of Maximilla's maids, a convert, pleads with Andrew to heal her.

Andrew heals Maximilla, telling Egetes to put away his sword for now, while also prophesying that "there will be a time when thou wilt draw it on me" (30). Maximilla becomes a Christian and a frequent companion of Andrew, and she decides to adhere to his ascetic discipline, denying Egetes her favors. In Gregory's abstract, we learn that Egetes, displeased by this turn of events, has Andrew scourged and crucified.

Evodius, bishop of Uzala, writing a tract against the Manichees, upbraids them for honoring Maximilla's asceticism, pointing out that Paul advised married couples that "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:3). That is, the denial of marital rights is unbiblical and would not have been taught by any apostle of Christ. Furthermore, Evodius relates, Maximilla went a step further and "imposed her maid Euclia upon her husband" (b).

### **The Passion of Andrew**

The only section of the *Acts of Andrew* to have survived intact (but only from a 10th or 11th century Vatican manuscript) is the depiction of his Passion (martyrdom) at the hands of Egetes. In lurid detail, we learn of Egetes' attempts to lure Maximilla back to the marriage bed, but when she seeks Andrew's advice, he praises her desire "to be quit of a foul and polluted way of life" (Gr. 808.5). In a statement akin to the last verse of the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* ("For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven," attributed to Jesus), Andrew tells Maximilla, "I entreat, therefore, the wise man that is in thee that thy mind continue clear seeing" (9).

Egetes, unable to lure Maximilla back to his bed, confronts Andrew. "Wherefore hast thou thought good to intrude into places that are not thine?" he asks (James' reconstruction of Andrew's Passion), making a valid point, although he doesn't wait for any answer. After scourging, Andrew is rescued by Stratocles, Egetes' brother, who was converted when Andrew healed his beloved slave. Learning this, Egetes sends the executioners back, and this time, Andrew tells Stratocles not to intervene, saying, "...remove thyself from this temper, and neither be inwardly disposed thus toward the things that seem hard to thee, nor be inflamed outwardly; for it becometh the servant of Jesus to be worthy of Jesus."

Andrew then makes a lengthy address to his cross, which has been set by the seashore. "But how long delay I," he finally says, "...that by the cross I may be made alive." With that, Andrew is bound to the cross—but not nailed, for Egetes wants to prolong his suffering. Andrew preaches from the cross for the rest of the day and through the night, but upon seeing him still hanging from the cross on the next day, an outraged crowd of about two thousand demands that Egetes release the apostle. Egetes is not so inclined, but he fears violence from the people and goes to the cross. Andrew, however, does not want to be taken down, praying "Jesu Christ, whom I have seen, whom I hold, whom I love, in whom I am and shall be, receive me in peace into thine everlasting tabernacles..." He died, according to tradition on November 30, ca. 70 AD.

Maximilla and Stratocles remove Andrew's body, prepare it, and bury it nearby. Maximilla continues to deny Egetes, and he eventually kills himself by jumping from a height. This apparently mollifies the people, who were "glad at the amazing and untimely and sudden fall of the impious and lawless Aegeates."

Passion stories and martyrdoms were exceedingly popular in the early church, encouraging the faithful with the courage and steadfastness of the martyrs. Martyrdoms were again popular during the Protestant Reformation, when many anti-papists met similar fates. The etching shown here comes from Jan Luiken's (1649-1712) set, preserved in *Martyr's Mirror* in the Mennonite Archives at Bethel College. You can view all hundred or so martyrdom images at <http://www.bethelks.edu/services/mla/images/martyrsmirror/>.



The Crucifixion of Andrew  
[Click for a larger image](#)

While I can understand the joy at the prospect of being united with Christ in Paradise, it inappropriate to seek death. In the case of Andrews' Passion, the ascetic character of the *Acts* is again revealed. When Andrew learned that the local Christians had sought his release, he bemoaned, "O the dullness and disobedience and simplicity of them whom I have taught! How much have I spoken, and even to this day I have not persuaded them to flee from the love of earthly things!... What meaneth this affection and love and sympathy with the flesh?"

## [The Acts of Thomas](#)<sup>1</sup>

The *Acts of Thomas* is the only primary apocryphal acts that has come down to us in its entirety, although there are several versions with some substantial differences. Probably written sometime in the third century, this book consists of some thirteen acts and the martyrdom. It is less tedious than the other apocryphal Gnostic acts, but it is still substantially ascetic in character and borrows vignettes and quotes from both canonical and other apocryphal works. It concerns Judas Thomas' exploits in India, most notably with King Misdaeus, his confidant Charisius, and their wives, Tertia and Mydonia.



Apostle Thomas  
Nicholaes Maes, 1656  
[Click for a larger image](#)

Like the portrayals in the *Acts of John*, Thomas is also said to have preached a message that focused on absolute sexual purity, including abstinence of married couples.

### Primacy of Chastity

The *Acts of Thomas* presents chastity (often referred to a holiness) and the primary virtue, even greater than faith itself. "No man cometh unto (God) that is unclean and vile," Thomas says (XI.136), insisting that one must cleanse one's self **before** approaching the Father, whereas Scripture teaches that one approaches that Father through faith in Christ Jesus, and we are cleansed by God's grace, not by our own actions. Paul writes "*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23). Holiness is the **result** of God's grace, not of man's efforts that **merit** God's grace.

Like *Andrew*, Thomas' teaching about chastity is not fidelity to the marital relationship, it is total abstinence, a rejection of the marriage bed. Such a claim completely rejects God's explicit and implicit commands about human sexuality. Paul certainly seems to be uncomfortable with the subject, apparently preferring celibacy, but he clearly recognizes both the lure of sex and its role in God's creation. His clearest teaching on marital sex comes in a letter to the church in Corinth:

*"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. Now as a concession, not a command, I say this"* (1 Corinthians 7:3-6).

What is the source of the "conjugal rights" to which Paul refers? Surely he must be discussing the God-given rights of marriage, for he would not be concerned about some worldly rights. He claims that each partner in the marital relationship has authority over the other's body for sexual purposes. Again, he would not make such a claim from a worldly perspective. Such mutual authority is ordained by God since marriage itself is His creation. Some claim that conjugal rights and authority are the "concession" Paul makes in verse six, but this does not fit with the immediate context. The concession Paul makes is depriving one another **for a limited time**. He suggests that a brief period of abstinence enhances prayer, but that a lengthy period would be counterproductive, giving Satan a foothold.

Not so, however, for the Gnostic version of Thomas or even of Jesus Himself. From the moment Judas Thomas arrives in India (traditionally in about 52 A.D.), he embarks on a concerted campaign to rid the world of human sexuality. At one point, Jesus appears to a group of new believers to ratify and reinforce Thomas' teaching: "Remember, my children," He says, "what my brother spake unto you and what he delivered before you...that if ye abstain from this foul intercourse, ye become holy temples, pure, being quit of impulse and pains, seen and unseen, and ye will acquire no care of life or of children, whose end is destruction..." (I.12). What a perversion of God's creation and of Jesus' attitude toward children!

This Thomas has some questionable ethics as well. He promises to build a palace for one King Gundaphorus, taking substantial funds for that purpose. He knows the king expects a physical building, yet he gives his money away (to the poor) and, despite telling the king he's making progress, never does any work on a building. Eventually, he tells the king he's building a heavenly palace, but his words hardly seem to justify such deception.

The bulk of the *Acts of Thomas* (Acts VII-XIII) involves Thomas' activity around Madras, where in an episode reminiscent of Cornelius (Acts 10), he first converts King Masdaeus' (or Mizdai) captain of the guard, Siphor, along with his wife and daughter, who were possessed or assaulted by two devils. These devils are described as black men, displaying some distasteful prejudice. "Look at those hideous men, whose teeth are like milk and their lips like soot," Siphor's unnamed wife says to her daughter when she first sees them.

There follows an episode with talking wild asses, one of which gives a lengthy speech attesting to the truth of Thomas' preaching. This ass claims to be related to Balaam's, as well as the one on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. Thomas then converts Mygdonia, the wife of Charisius, who is a kinsman and close associate of King Misdaeus. Mygdonia accepts Thomas' ascetic message and refuses to share a bed with Charisius, calling their relationship "a partnership of corruption" (X.124). Eventually, Charisius appeals to the king who, unsuccessful in his own attempts to throttle Thomas, sends his wife Tertia to talk sense into Mygdonia. Predictably for this kind of apocryphal literature, Misdaeus' plan backfires when Tertia too converts and refuses her husband sex.

One has to feel a little sorry for poor Charisius in particular. Clearly, he adores (and desires) his wife, trying repeatedly to restore their former relationship: "What must I do?" he pleads. "Who can endure to lose thy sweet ways? The fragrance of thee is in my nostrils and thy bright face is fixed in mine eyes. They are taking away my soul, and the fair body which I rejoiced to see they are destroying...and cutting off my right hand: my joy is turning to grief and my life to death" (IX.115). While Charisius approaches his problem from a worldly perspective, he is nonetheless correct—Thomas had no right to interfere with their marital relationship and to convince Mygdonia to separate from her husband. The writer of the *Acts of Thomas* displays considerable familiarity with canonical books, but he is either ignorant of and cares not about God's instruction on marital issues.

## Salvation Patterns

One other interesting feature of the *Acts of Thomas* is the portrayal of sacramental acts. There is a distinct pattern in the book: people hear the message, believe in the message, cleanse themselves (primarily through abstinence), devote themselves to the teacher, and finally receive the "seal of Jesus Christ" through anointing, [baptism](#),

and the [eucharist](#). This pattern is repeated with Siphor (X.131), Mygdonia (X.120), and Misdaeus' son Iuzanes (XIII.157). Iuzanes, however, did not experience an extended wait for the seal, since he testified to Thomas that his wife Mnesara had "lived with me in chastity all (seven years of their marriage)" (XIII.150).

This too stands in direct contrast with the biblical example, where baptism almost always immediately follows belief and faith. In this text, baptism is viewed as a culminating event after a sometimes lengthy period of learning and self-cleansing, earning the right to receive the seal. Notably, Thomas rarely mentions the Holy Spirit nor Its role in guiding the believer.



Martyrdom of Thomas, woodcut, artist unknown

### The Martyrdom of Thomas

The final section of the *Acts of Thomas*, which exists independently and has become part of church legend, describes his death. When King Misdaeus finally tires of Thomas' "sorcery," he escorts him outside of the city and orders four soldiers to kill him with spears. Predictably, Thomas welcomes his death, calling it a "setting free from the body." Curiously, he finds it significant that he is to be pierced by four soldiers, saying, "My Lord and God Jesus Christ being of one was pierced by one, but I, which am of four, am pierced by four" (Martyrdom.165).

The *Acts* reports that Thomas was clothed in "beautiful robes and much and fair linen" and buried in a royal sepulchre. Tradition places Thomas' remains under the Cathedral of Saint Thomas in Chennai.

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the *Acts of Peter*, the *Acts of John*, the *Acts of Andrew*, and the *Acts of Thomas* are from *The Apocryphal New Testament*, M.R. James translation, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924

## Now

While recognizing that sexual purity is important to God, the view of human sexuality in the Gnostic apocrypha diverges significantly from the biblical perspective. In Scripture, human sexuality is presented as a gift from God—normal and desirable in the context of heterosexual marriage.

Over and over, God tells mankind to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:22, 28 (Adam); 9:1 (Noah); 35:11 (Jacob/Israel)). Sex is the only way for men and women to be fruitful and multiply. God commands mankind to multiply, hence He commands human sex. Furthermore, God ordained sexual reproduction for most of the creatures He created. He could just as easily have ordained asexual reproduction. To consider sex a filthy activity, as did the writers of many Gnostic books, is essentially to accuse God of creating filth.

There is no more intimate act in which human beings can engage than to share bodies and become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24), and sex is the glue that cements marital relationships. Christianity has often been uncomfortable with human sexuality, which is not surprising when one considers that degree to which human beings have managed to corrupt this God-given gift, but to consider it inherently filthy is literally blasphemous. Many in the Christian world are still uncomfortable with sex, relegating it exclusively to procreation, but one only has to read *Song of Songs* to recognize that God made human sex to serve an even greater end—

creating a bond between a man and a woman. (The notion that *Song of Songs* is strictly allegorical belies the text itself and is a manmade invention motivated by discomfort.)

That's what's so wrong about adultery. No matter how casually the world may portray sex, it creates a bond, and when a bond is formed with someone other than a spouse, it threatens the marital bond and hence the family. Pre-marital sex creates a bond where no commitment exists, denigrating the relationship. Homosexual sex creates a bond that is outside of God's plan for humanity. Marital heterosexual sex, however, creates the bond that serves and reinforces God's plan for humanity. It was so from the beginning, and it remains so today.

The salvation pattern described in the *Acts of Thomas* is one which was followed in much of the ancient church after apostolic times. A new believer was not baptized until after a period of instruction, during which s/he was referred to as a "catechumen" (from the same Greek root as "catechism"). When the catechumen was deemed ready, s/he would be clothed completely in white, symbolizing purity, for baptism. While this pattern existed in the orthodox church, it did not include the extreme asceticism of the Gnostics, nor was it considered a period to merit salvation.

Patternists still exist in the church today. In our own church of Christ tradition, there are many who insist on a hear-believe-repent-confess-baptize pattern that is an absolute requirement to be considered Christian, but this pattern does not exist as such in the New Testament, any more than the Gnostic pattern exists. Rather, it is a manmade construct cobbled together from sometimes unrelated verses. In my opinion, God's plan of salvation is not so simple, nor so inflexible, but invites us all on a [path](#) to discover God's truth and His will for our lives.

Another feature of Gnostic Acts that persists into our time is the spectacularism I noted in the *Acts of John* and which is present in other works. The grandiose spectacles and the gaudy sets of some television evangelists contradict the simple, unadorned life of Jesus and His earliest followers. I think particularly, for example, of the ostentatious shows of alleged healings by Benny Hinn. Regardless of the faith Hinn may possess, his approach is far more like that of the false characterizations in the Gnostic Acts than the genuine behavior described in canonical books.

The degree to which any historicity exists in these apocryphal books is a matter of conjecture. There is some compelling evidence that Thomas did indeed evangelize in India, but he certainly did not preach a message that contradicted God, Jesus, and the Bible, as the *Acts of Thomas* does. Like all apocryphal works, elements of each story persist in self-serving traditions of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, but there is no historical record whatsoever of Thomas' life. We can be confident, of course, that Thomas, despite his initial doubts, fully accepted Christ's resurrection and went on to share the gospel. The *Acts of Thomas* is a more entertaining book than *Peter*, *John*, or *Andrew*, but they all lack credibility.

One of the primary differences between the canonical and the apocryphal books lies in the simplicity of the former. Apocryphal works are often littered with long, tedious, formulaic speeches and prayers, whereas those in the New Testament are generally straightforward and relatively simple (e.g., Jesus' teaching on prayer, Matthew 6:9-15). It is as if the apocryphal writers were trying to make up for their lack of authority with quantity. This is not a matter of conditioning—the difference between canonical and non-canonical writings is manifest to any reader.

I thank God for His faithfulness in preserving the canonical books and in guiding the early church to its gradual, inexorable acceptance of the authoritative books of the New Testament.

## Discussion

I received this affirming comment from A.C, a long-time subscriber:

I noticed in your latest piece that you mentioned the few responses that you have had about your series on the New Testament cities. My apologies for not commenting! My wife and I appreciate ALL of them! In fact my wife prints them for use in her teaching of a class (of both women and men) on Sunday morning at the Vandelia congregation where we are 'members.' Thank you for your work. Also, I have prayed that your trip to New Orleans will be a growth experience for you, and glorifying to the Father. Our grandson spent his spring break with a group of young Christians from the Lubbock area in similar work in the devastated Mississippi Gulf coast region.

I appreciate A.C. note (and no apology was necessary). I find the cities of the New Testament make fascinating studies and these genuinely enrich my understanding of biblical context. I would love to think I could someday visit the sites all of the cities mentioned in the New Testament. Alas, that is not likely to happen, but I did have the opportunity to visit Rome with my wife a few years ago. I had written Peculiar People a couple of years earlier and it was interesting to see how my imagined (and researched) descriptions of place matched reality (not too badly). In conjunction with a business trip to Athens this summer, I also plan to visit Corinth, God willing, so I guess I shouldn't complain since most Americans will never even get to one New Testament city.

I also got this note, commenting on a remark I made about the *Song of Songs*, from a subscriber from Atlanta who has become a good friend:

In the class that I teach on reading the Bible, we discuss the fallacy of allegorizing, and I use Luther as a famous example of someone who did this with the parable of the Good Samaritan. We also then discuss Song of Songs and how this has been distorted by allegorizing. When I suggested that Song of Songs is really lusty, and about both flaring and tempering that lust, but at the same time recognizing it as a God-given prelude to marriage, you would have thought that I suggested we all go out and fornicate.

I guess that validates my own comment about the allegorization of *Song of Songs* being the product of human discomfort with the subject of our own sexuality. I presume this subscriber meant that our sexual desire, not fornication, is a God-given prelude to marriage. The world likes to joke that marriage is the antidote for sexual desire, but maybe that's one reason there are so many failed marriages.



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: Clement (April 3)**

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