

INTRODUCTION

In June 1919, exactly a hundred years ago as I write, the great German Coptologist Carl Schmidt published a lengthy monograph entitled, *Gespräche Jesu mit seinen Jüngern nach der Auferstehung: Ein katholisch-apostolisches Sendschreiben des 2. Jahrhunderts*; ‘Conversations of Jesus with his Disciples after the Resurrection: A Catholic and Apostolic Epistle of the Second Century’.¹ At the heart of the monograph lies Schmidt’s reconstruction and transcription of a damaged and incomplete Coptic manuscript of the fourth or fifth century, containing a translation into the ‘Akhmimic’ dialect of a work much of whose original Greek vocabulary it preserves in the form of loan-words – around 160 of which are listed in Schmidt’s index. The surviving material gave no evidence of the work’s title.

In the years after Schmidt first encountered this work, in Cairo in 1895, evidence of a Latin translation came to light in a Vienna palimpsest (1908), and – more significantly – a complete Ethiopic text was published, with French translation, by Louis Guerrier (1912). Guerrier’s edition had been based on four Ge‘ez manuscripts, none older than the sixteenth century. Evidently dissatisfied with Guerrier’s work, Schmidt arranged for the Ethiopic text to be re-edited and translated by the Polish scholar Isaak Wajnberg, and Wajnberg’s translation of the Ethiopic and Schmidt’s of the Coptic (where available) face each other on opposite pages near the beginning of Schmidt’s monograph, with extensive linguistic notes provided by both scholars.²

By correlating the surviving Coptic pagination with the full Ethiopic text, it became clear that the Ethiopic preserved not only

¹ Carl Schmidt (with Isaak Wajnberg), *Gespräche Jesu mit seinen Jüngern nach der Auferstehung: Ein katholisch-apostolisches Sendschreiben des 2. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1919; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967). The history of the rediscovery of the *Epistula Apostolorum* (*EpAp*) is covered in detail in Chapter 1, below.

² Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu*, 23–155.

2 Introduction

the lost Coptic opening of the work (now chapters 1–6) but also a long preliminary section of eschatological prophecy that was never part of the Coptic manuscript. This preliminary section is manifestly a secondary addition to the text-form preserved in Coptic. It is included as an integral part of the Ethiopic text in Guerrier's edition, where it forms chapters 1–11, and its Galilean setting accounts in part for the title Guerrier gave the entire work: *Le Testament en Galilée de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*. The Coptic manuscript in its intact form would have begun at Guerrier's chapter 12 ('What Jesus Christ revealed to his disciples...'), and Schmidt and Wajnberg renumber Guerrier's chapters in the format 'Cap 1 (12)' and so on, relegating the secondary material to an Appendix under the heading 'Apokalyptische Rede Jesu an seine Jünger in Galiläa'.³

The synoptic presentation of the two translations makes it clear that variations between the Ethiopic and the extant Coptic are frequent but mostly inconsequential. With a few exceptions, the Ethiopic variants consist in little more than alternative nuances, minor expansions within a limited semantic range, different decisions by the original translators, and errors in transmission – many of which come to light in variants within the Ethiopic manuscript tradition itself.

I

In the title of his monograph, Schmidt characterizes the work as a *katholisch-apostolisches Sendschreiben*, a catholic and apostolic epistle. It is 'apostolic' because its supposed authors are eleven named apostles, it is 'catholic' in that it is addressed to all Christians everywhere, and it is an 'epistle' because it employs the standard epistolary format in which author and addressee are identified and differentiated at the outset, together with the communication of a greeting or blessing (here unusually placed first):

In the name of God, ruler of all the world, and of Jesus Christ, grace be multiplied to you. John and Thomas and Peter and Andrew and James and Philip and Bartholomew and Matthew and Nathanael and Judas the Zealot and Cephas to the churches of the east and the west, to those in the north and the south. . . . (EpAp 1.5–2.2)

³ Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu*, 47*–66*.

Schmidt devised the title *Epistula Apostolorum* on the basis of the header ‘Epistula’ in the Latin palimpsest, and this passage – not known to him at the time – might seem to confirm that he was right.⁴ Yet the only other epistolary feature in this text is the consistent use of the first person plural, and the text initially presents itself not as an epistle but as a revelation or apocalypse: ‘What Jesus Christ revealed to his disciples and to all’, perhaps ὁ ἀπεκάλυψεν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῖς πᾶσιν in the original Greek. This announcement of a revelation with a deferred epistolary opening recalls the *Book of Revelation* (where John is the sole author rather than the lead author): Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἣν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει (*Rev* 1.1), followed by the author’s greeting to ‘the seven churches that are in Asia’ (*Rev* 1.4–6). The content of the ‘conversations of Jesus with his disciples after his resurrection’ is revelatory from beginning to end; Schmidt’s term, ‘Gespräche’, is too casual for the contents of a work that preserves instruction delivered by Jesus ‘after he rose from the dead, when he revealed to us what is great and wonderful and true’ (*EpAp* 1.2). It is fundamental truths about the heavenly world and the future that ‘our Lord and Saviour revealed to us and showed us, as we likewise do to you’ (6.1). On three occasions the disciples give voice to the text’s own sense of its revelatory significance:

Lord, great indeed are the things you have now revealed to us! (16.1)

Lord, in everything you have been merciful to us and you have saved us and you have revealed everything to us! (20.1)

Lord, what great things you have spoken to us and announced to us and revealed to us, things never yet spoken, and in everything you have comforted us and been gracious to us! (34.1)

This text is an *Epistula Apostolorum* from the perspective of its communicative intention, but in terms of its content it is an *Apocalypsis Apostolorum* to complement or compete with the *Apocalypsis Iohannis*.

The Johannine apocalypse is delivered by the exalted Lord, a figure of transcendent majesty (cf. *Rev* 1.12–20), and the same is true

⁴ There is direct address from authors to readers in *EpAp* 7–8, at the start of the extant Coptic.

4 Introduction

of a further Johannine text of the second century, the *Apocryphon of John* (cf. *ApocrJn* 2.18–4.20). The apocalypse is concerned with the present situation of the Asian churches and the eschatological events that must soon come to pass whereas the apocryphon is oriented towards primordial origins, contextualizing and correcting the flawed *Genesis* narrative. Neither work has much in common with the gospel genre developed by early Christian authors to record significant aspects of Jesus' human existence (events, acts, teaching, in one combination or another).

Works with this 'biographical' focus all locate themselves within the sequence that runs from Jesus' birth and its antecedents through to his ascension. They may be limited in scope, consisting in birth stories alone in the case of the *Protevangelium of James* or sayings alone in the *Gospel of Thomas*. In other cases they are more comprehensive, influenced in this by Graeco-Roman biographical conventions. The *Gospel of Luke* begins before Jesus' birth and includes a story from his adolescence before recounting his adult ministry and his death, burial, resurrection, appearances, and ascension. The *Gospel of John* lacks either an ascension account or birth stories, but it traces Jesus' existence far back behind the time of the emperor Augustus (cf. *GLk* 2.1) to the beginning of all things (*GJn* 1.1–4). Comprehensiveness of scope does not mean comprehensiveness of detail, however. The Johannine prologue merely sketches an eternal existence, and the Lukan ending reports the fact of the ascension with minimal circumstantial detail (*GLk* 24.50–51). All early gospels or gospel-like texts reflect their authors' choices about which areas to prioritize: the ministry and passion in some cases (e.g. *GMark*), post-Easter events in others (e.g. *GMary*).

The (so-called) *Epistula Apostolorum* fits comfortably within this profile. Its use of the first person is unusual within early gospel literature but not unique (cf. *GPet* 7.26–27; 14.59, 'we, the twelve disciples of the Lord...'). The single passage of epistolary discourse in *EpAp* 1–2 serves not as an indicator of overall genre but as an articulation of the text's communicative strategy, which is to make the apostles' collective testimony as accessible to later generations through their writing as it was to their contemporaries through their speech (cf. *EpAp* 2.3). The scope of *EpAp* is unusually comprehensive. Like *GJohn* but at greater length, it acknowledges the role of the pre-existent Son in the creation of the world (*EpAp* 3.1–10). Like *GLuke*, it speaks of the annunciation, the miraculous conception, and the swaddling clothes (*EpAp* 3.13–15; 14.1–7). Like all four

canonical gospels it contains a collection of miracle stories (4.1–5.21), then proceeding to speak briefly of Jesus’ death and burial (9.1) and at much greater length of his appearance to his female and male disciples on Easter morning (9.2–12.4). After the long dialogue (13.1–50.11), the work concludes with an account of the ascension that is relatively full and entirely independent of *Luke–Acts* (*EpAp* 51.1–4). Setting aside the assumption that the only ‘real’ gospels are the canonical four and bearing in mind the fluidity of ancient genre boundaries, there is no good reason not to regard this text as a gospel.⁵

II

It is possible that early Greek manuscripts of *EpAp* bore the title εὐαγγέλιον τῶν ἀποστόλων, or some variant of that. Collective apostolic works were in circulation from an early period. Origen refers to ‘the Gospel entitled “of the Twelve”’ (τὸ ἐπιγεγραμμένον τῶν Δώδεκα εὐαγγέλιον),⁶ and the *Didache* was known by the title Διδαχὴ τῶν ἀποστόλων.⁷ By the time of the first scribe of the Vienna palimpsest, however, *EpAp* could be identified simply as *Epistula*. Later still, an expanded version of this text circulated in Ge’ez manuscripts under the title ‘Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ (a title drawn from the still larger and later work to which it had been annexed). The Ge’ez text opens with the words, ‘The discourse [*or word, nagar*] that Jesus Christ spoke to his twelve disciples in Galilee after he was raised from the dead. . .’ (*Galilean Discourse [GD]* 1.1).⁸ The Coptic title (if any) is unknown, but

⁵ For the view that early Christian gospels constitute a single literary field retrospectively divided by the canonical boundary, see my *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), esp. 1–9, 609–16; also Francis Watson and Sarah Parkhouse (eds.), *Connecting Gospels: Beyond the Canonical Non-Canonical Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–6; Francis Watson, ‘A Reply to my Critics’, in Catherine Sider Hamilton with Joel Willitts (eds.), *Writing the Gospels: A Dialogue with Francis Watson* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 227–48.

⁶ Origen, *Hom. in Luc.* 1 (text in Origenes, *Homilien zu Lukas in der Übersetzung des Hieronymus und die griechischen Reste der Homilien und des Lukas-Kommentars*, Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller, ed. Max Rauer (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1959²), 4–5).

⁷ Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary on the Didache* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 56–57.

⁸ See the Appendix to this volume. For reasons explained there, my chapter enumeration differs from Guerrier’s at this point.

6 Introduction

EpAp would have been read as an ‘apocryphon’ in the context of late antique Egypt within which the Coptic manuscript was produced and read – a member of the category of ‘apocrypha’, purportedly apostolic or prophetic writings outside the canonical boundary, criticized and rejected as spurious by ecclesial authority yet avidly consumed by ordinary Christian readers.⁹

Following the publication of Schmidt’s monograph, *EpAp* was immediately and without question consigned to that same category, as though the qualitative difference asserted and established by the canonical boundary were a mere neutral fact. *EpAp* was made available to modern readers as part of an *Apocryphal New Testament* (M. R. James 1924; J. K. Elliott 1993), or as one more item within an ever-expanding collection of *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen* (Hennecke–Schneemelcher 1959³, 1990⁶) or *Antike christliche Apokryphen* (Markschies–Schröter 2012).¹⁰ Useful and indispensable as such collections are, they conceal the fact that the distinction between the ‘canonical’ and the ‘apocryphal’ is a construct of the early church that should not be anachronistically projected back onto the products of the first hundred years and more of Christian literary activity. The point has been classically formulated by Dieter Lührmann:

The term ‘canonical’ does not represent an attribute inherent to the gospels so designated. Rather, it presupposes that this status has in some way been ascribed to them: canonical gospels have *become* such. Until this occurs, however, there can equally be no gospels that lack this quality from the outset. ‘Noncanonical’ gospels have *become* ‘apocryphal’ through the canonization of the others.¹¹

⁹ As evidenced by Athanasius’s thirty-ninth ‘Festal Letter’ (367), as preserved in Coptic. On this, see David Brakke, ‘Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria’s Thirty-Ninth “Festal Letter”’, *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), 394–419; ‘A New Fragment of Athanasius’s Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter: Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon’, *Harvard Theological Review* 103 (2010), 47–66 (including a full English translation and the Coptic text of a new fragment).

¹⁰ Christoph Markschies and Jens Schröter (eds.), *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, vol. 1: *Evangelien und Verwandtes*, 1–2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

¹¹ Dieter Lührmann, *Die apokryph gewordenen Evangelien: Studien zum Neuen Texten und Neuen Fragen* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 2 (my translation). German: “‘Kanonisch’ ist freilich keine Eigenschaft, die den so bezeichneten Evangelien von sich aus zukommt; vorausgesetzt wird damit vielmehr, dass ihnen ein solcher Rang in

In the case of early gospel literature, ascription of canonical status occurs when a text's claim to authority is validated by a user community – that is, when a text's representation of Jesus' authoritative action and speech is deemed true and reliable and authorized for certain types of communal usage. Ascription of 'apocryphal' status occurs when a text's claim to authority is regarded with caution or rejected outright.

Before the concept of a fourfold gospel achieved dogmatic status, the collective decision about any gospel text remained in principle open. If *EpAp* can be shown to pre-date the canonical dogma, it can take its place within the diverse landscape of early Christian literature as yet undivided by the canon's binary logic. The date and provenance of this text are therefore of more than incidental interest.

III

Schmidt argued that *EpAp* originated in Asia Minor, and his grounds for this are still compelling.¹² Those who favour an Egyptian origin are unduly influenced by the 'gnostic' dialogue gospels known to have circulated in Egypt (e.g. *GMary*, *ApocrJas*, *IApocJas*, *SophJesChr*, *DialSav*, *Pistis Sophia*) and by the unsubstantiated claim that the author of *EpAp* seeks to refute 'gnostic' users of such texts by turning their own preferred dialogue gospel format against them.¹³ In favour of an Asian and perhaps Ephesian origin is the naming of the apostle John first in the list of apostolic authors rather than Peter, relegated to third place (*EpAp* 2.1). The 'false apostles' Simon and Cerinthus are introduced as the occasion for the letter (1.1), although in reality no clear anti-heretical agenda is in evidence. Tradition associates Simon with Peter and Cerinthus with John, and when the heretics are named again it is John's opponent in Ephesus rather than Peter's in Rome who is named first: 'Cerinthus

irgendeiner Weise beigemessen worden ist – kanonische Evangelien sind also zu solchen erst geworden. Solange das aber nicht geschehen ist, kann es ebensowenig Evangelien geben, denen diese Qualität von vornherein abgeht, und "nicht kanonische" sind ebenso durch die Kanonisierung der anderen erst "apokryph" geworden.' Italics original.

¹² Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu*, 361–402.

¹³ Manfred Hornschuh, *Studien zur Epistula Apostolorum*, Patristische Texte und Studien 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965), 6–8, 102–15. Hornschuh's arguments are critiqued by Charles E. Hill, 'The *Epistula Apostolorum*: An Asian Tract from the Time of Polycarp', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999), 8–13.

8 *Introduction*

and Simon have gone out, they go around the world, but they are enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ. . .’ (7.1–2).¹⁴ The commemoration of Easter at the time of the Jewish Feast of the Passover is typical of Asian ‘quartodeciman’ practice (15.1–3).¹⁵

An initial indication of the date of composition is given within *EpAp* itself. Jesus announces his glorious cloud-borne return from heaven to earth, and his disciples ask: ‘Lord, after how many years will these things be?’ (*EpAp* 17.1). In the Coptic text as it stands, Jesus’ reply is mysterious: ‘When the hundredth part and the twentieth part are completed, between Pentecost and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the coming of my Father will take place’ (17.2). In the question-and-answer that follows, it becomes clear that Jesus’ parousia can also be ascribed to the Father because ‘I am in wholly in my Father and my Father is in me’ (17.3–4). The reverse sequence of Pentecost and Unleavened Bread may be intended to emphasize the beginning of the fifty-day period as the key eschatological moment. And the Coptic ογῶν (ογῶ), ‘part’, seems to stem from a Greek reading, τὸ ἑκατοστὸν καὶ εἰκοστὸν (‘the hundred-and-twentieth’) which the translator takes as a mysterious pair of fractions, aware that a parousia after 120 years is no longer credible in his own time.¹⁶ A Greek text in which Jesus promises to return after 120 years would seem to suggest a mid-second-century *terminus ad quem* for *EpAp*.

In the Ge‘ez text Jesus promises to return ‘when the hundred-and-fiftieth year is completed’. This is most probably a correction within the early Greek transmission of this text; it cannot plausibly be ascribed to the much later Ethiopic translator. The correction might stem from the non-occurrence of the parousia 120 years after the Easter event (i.e. in or around the year 150 CE). Yet it is also possible that both the original figure and its correction originated at much the same time, c.170 CE, with an expected parousia date within the decade, and that the correction is based on more accurate chronological information than the original figure. One might speculate that someone within the author’s circle has noticed the chronological information in *GLuke* 3.1, dating the beginning of the ministry of

¹⁴ A tradition linking John, Cerinthus, and Ephesus is attested in Irenaeus’s story about the endangered bath-house (*Adv. haer.* 3.3.4). Peter, Simon, and Rome are linked in the *Acts of Peter*.

¹⁵ Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu*, 577–725.

¹⁶ On this passage, see the *Additional Notes* in Part III of the present work.

John the Baptist to ‘the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar’, and recalculated accordingly.¹⁷

A reason for regarding the higher figure as a more reliable indicator of the date of composition than the lower is the remarkable emphasis on a worldwide plague in the section on the signs of the end (*EpAp* 34–36). Plagues (that is, epidemics) can feature in stereotypical lists of impending disasters, as in *GLuke* 21.11, where it is predicted that ‘there will be great earthquakes and famines and plagues [λοιμοί] in various places, and terrors, and there will be great signs from heaven.’ Vague and generic lists of disasters provide no help in dating a text. Similar lists occur in *EpAp*, where warning is given of ‘great hailstones like raging fire, and sun and moon fighting together, and constant terror of thunder and lightning. . .’ (34.8–9), along with ‘a tumult of clouds, continual drought and persecution of those who believe in me’ (35.3). Yet ‘a great plague’ features here not just as an item in a list but as a significant topic in its own right. A poignant account is given of the intense isolation caused by extreme sickness, even among family members, along with the breakdown of wider social norms:

And the passing of child and parent will be on a single bed, and the parent will not turn to the child nor the child to the parent, and one person will not turn to another. And those who are bereaved will rise up and see those who had departed from them being carried out. For there will be a plague everywhere, hatred and suffering and jealousy, and they will take from one and give to another. (*EpAp* 34.11–13)

The disciples are particularly concerned about future Christians affected by the plague. Jesus replies that Christian plague victims will not generally die, but they will experience severe suffering as a test of their faith. Their suffering will be short-lived, and if they do die they have the hope of resurrection:

And we said to him, ‘Will their departure from the world be through the plague that torments them?’ And he said to us, ‘No, but when they are tormented such an affliction will be to test them. If there is faith within them and if they

¹⁷ Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu*, 398. Schmidt draws attention to Justin, *I Apol.* 46.1, where Justin states that 150 years have passed since the birth of Christ ‘under Quirinius’ (cf. *GLk* 2.2).

10 Introduction

remember these words of mine and obey my commandments, they will be raised. And their situation will be for a few days, so that the one who sent me may be glorified and I with him, for he sent me to you. (*EpAp* 36.3–6)

Underlying this unusual emphasis on a single item from the usual repertoire of disasters is probably the so-called ‘Antonine plague’ that began in the year 165, and that may have been a smallpox epidemic.¹⁸ Writing around two centuries later, Ammianus Marcellinus records how, following the Persian campaigns of the co-emperors Lucius Verus and Marcus Aurelius, an epidemic broke out ‘with the force of an incurable disease’ and ‘polluted the whole world from the borders of Persia to the Rhine and Gaul with contagion and death [*contagiis et mortibus*].¹⁹ *EpAp* similarly emphasizes the extent of the epidemic: ‘There will be a plague everywhere’ (34.13). For Galen, a contemporary, this event is not just an ordinary epidemic but has its own title, ‘the great plague’, to underline its uniqueness. Galen recounts how he left Rome ‘when the great plague started [*ἀρξαμένου τοῦ μεγάλου λοιμοῦ*],’ and how, arriving in Aquileia (168 CE), he found ‘the plague still more devastating than it had been before [*κατέσκηψεν ὁ λοιμὸς ὡς οὐπω πρότερον*],’ with mass deaths caused by the combination of plague and winter.²⁰ For *EpAp* too, this event is ‘a great plague’ causing such ‘widespread death’ that ‘funerals will cease for those who die’ (*EpAp* 34.10). According to another writer, ‘thousands were carried off by the plague’, so that ‘the dead were removed in carts and waggons’, presumably for disposal in a mass grave.²¹ It was said that, on his deathbed, Marcus Aurelius appealed to his friends to weep not for him but for the plague victims.²² The entire period of his rule (161–80) was remembered long afterwards as the era of ‘the great plague’.

¹⁸ See R. J. Littman and M. L. Littman, ‘Galen and the Antonine Plague’, *American Journal of Philology* 94 (1973), 243–55.

¹⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, 23.4.24. On the Antonine plague, see R. P. Duncan-Jones, ‘The Impact of the Antonine Plague’, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 9 (1996), 108–36; R. P. Duncan-Jones, ‘The Antonine Plague Revisited’, *Arctos* 52 (2018), 41–72; Christer Bruun, ‘The Antonine Plague and the “Third Century Crisis”’, in O. Heckster, G. de Kleijn, and Daniëlle Sloopjes (eds.), *Crises in the Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 201–17.

²⁰ Galen, in C. G. Kühn (ed.), *Galen Opera Omnia* (Leipzig: Car. Knoblochii, 1830), 19.15, 18.

²¹ *Historia Augusta, Marcus Antoninus*, 13.5, 3.

²² *Historia Augusta, Marcus Antoninus*, 28.4.