
The current interest in apocryphal literature probably lies at the basis of this new translation of the *Acts of John* with a corresponding Greek text by McCollum and Niedergall (henceforth: M&N),\(^1\) even though there is a recent translation of the *Acts* by the late Richard Pervo, which is also cheaper, although it does not contain a Greek text.\(^2\) One would have expected some evaluation by M&N of that translation in order to warrant the publication of this new one, but there is not. The book under review is a volume in the series *Brepols Library of Christian Sources*, which intends, according to the blurb, to enable us to explore what these texts say ‘within our world and language’. The editorial board, headed by Thomas O’Loughlin as director, contains no expert on apocryphal literature. Neither did the translators, who were assisted by several students in their work, make a name for themselves in this area. This may explain why the Introduction is not very helpful in locating the *Acts* in time and place.\(^3\) Moreover, they give a completely wrong idea of what has been happening with these *Acts* as with many other ones.

According to M&N, ‘The *Acts of John* is a second or third-century work belonging to the genre of apocryphal acts narratives. It was most likely composed of “floating” traditions from multiple sources of varying levels of orthodoxy’ (p. 9). Now, to start with, a translation must have some idea of the time and place of composition of the original. Its author (in our case almost certainly male) may use institutional details to characterise one of his characters. For example, when the translators render Lycomedes’ function as ‘stratêgos of the Ephesians’ (c. 19) as ‘the chief magistrate’ arguing that they did not see him as part of the Ephesian military (p. 21 note 2), they not only overlook the fact that there was no Ephesian military in Roman times, but also that Ephesus was governed by a council of magistrates, the *stratêgoi*.\(^4\) In other words, Lycomedes was a member of the executive council of Ephesus, not ‘the chief magistrate’. At the same time, whether a work is from the second or third century makes

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4 See the index s.v. of the *Inschriften von Ephesos*, 8 vols (Bonn, 1979–84).
a difference when we start using terms like ‘orthodoxy’ or ‘heresy’, which are labels used in specific controversies.

It is not the place here to discuss in detail the time and place of the Acts of John, which I have done elsewhere. Let it suffice to say that a date in the 160s or 170s is the most likely, also given its close relationship to the Acts of Andrew. Like the latter, it may well have been written in Nicomedia or, alternatively, somewhere else in Asia Minor. In any case, M&N should have noted that the name of Verus for a servant of the apostle (c. 30) is highly interesting, as it is not found as a personal name in any inscription or text deriving from Asia Minor. As Lucius Verus was co-emperor from 161 to 169, the name of an emperor for a servant of the apostle is not only a subtle dig at the Roman administration but also clearly locates the Acts in the 160s or early 170s, as does its knowledge of two Greek novels, its pre-Valentinian gnostic tendencies, its specific form of docetic Christology, and its seeming ignorance of the Old Testament and perhaps Paul’s Letters.5

We have no idea from what materials the author composed his work, but there is no evidence of ‘floating’ traditions. It would have been helpful if M&N had thought a little more about how to present the origins of the text we now call the Acts of John. Unfortunately, they do not include in their bibliography the authoritative account of Junod and Kaestli of the text’s reception.6 They also do not attract the reader’s attention to the fact that literally all known episodes of the Acts of John, except for §§ 87–105 (which derive from a single Vienna manuscript), have been preserved in a series of manuscripts of the later, probably fifth-century, Acts of John by Prochorus.7 These manuscripts go back to a Vorlage, the early Acts of John, which Vorlage is to be dated sometime

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5 For a fuller discussion, see J.N. Bremmer, Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity = Collected Essays 1 (Tübingen, 2017), 111–14 (this is a new Appendix to my 1995 article on women in the Acts of John), 118–20 (date and place of composition of the Acts of Andrew), 221–25 (dates and places of composition of the five major apocryphal Acts).
prior to the tenth century, as was convincingly argued by Junod and Kaestli,\(^8\) but of which we find no trace afterwards. Apparently, after their condemnation by Photius, the original early major apocryphal Acts, except those of Thomas, seem to have disappeared pretty quickly.\(^9\) In the meantime, though, their textual transmission had been continuously rewritten and rearranged,\(^10\) which resulted in a mosaic of texts, recomposed by the ingenuity of modern editors in order to get as close as possible to the original Acts of John and other major apocryphal Acts. This process of rewriting, resequencing, expanding and abbreviating important Christian texts started with the canonical gospels,\(^11\) but the fact of their gradual canonisation basically stopped them being treated in this manner from the end of the second century onwards, whereas the process continued with some of the apocryphal Acts well into the Middle Ages.

Although the Introduction, then, is far from satisfactory and not very helpful for a proper understanding of the Acts of John, the English translation itself is a different manner. As far as a non-native reviewer can judge, it is a good read and reasonably carefully done. That does not mean that it is impossible to quibble over some passages. For example, when John is approaching Ephesus, he is met by a rich man, Lycomedes, who beseeches the apostle on behalf of his wife Cleopatra: \textquoteleft Ιωάννης ἐστί σοι ὄνομα; ἔπεμψέ σε ὁ θεὸς ὃν κηρύσσεις ἐπ' εὐεργεσίᾳ τῆς ἐμῆς γυναικός, παραπλήγου γεγονότος ἡμέρας ἑπτὰ καὶ ἀθεραπεύτου κειμένης.\(^12\) M&N translate with \textquoteleft Your name is John. The God whom you preach has sent you for the benefit of my wife, who has been stricken down and lying uncured for seven days now', whereas Pervo has: \textquoteleft Your name is John. The god you proclaim has sent you on a mission of kindness to my wife, who has been paralyzed for seven days now and lies without chance of cure\textquoteleft (c. 19). Neither of these is wholly satisfactory. Pervo rightly does not capitalise ὁ θεὸς as Lycomedes is still a non-Christian,\(^13\) but his translation of εὐεργεσία as ‘mission of kindness’ is not only more verbose than M&N’s ‘benefit’, but also less precise. More importantly, M&N explain their translation ‘stricken down’ from the fact that Cleopatra is dead. But if that had been the

\(^8\) Junod and Kaestli, \textit{Acta Iohannis}, 1.3–25.
\(^10\) This is illuminatingly argued by J.E. Spittler, ‘Apocryphal Apostle Narratives and their Function in the History of Christianity: from Margins to Center’, \textit{znt}, forthcoming.
\(^12\) For the names of the protagonists, see J.N. Bremmer, ‘The Acts of John, the Acts of Andrew and the Greek Novel’, \textit{Ancient Narrative} 17 (2021) 125–43.
\(^13\) See also J. Snyder, \textit{Language and Identity in Ancient Narratives} (Tübingen, 2014) 102–05.
case, there would not have been any need to add that she was ἀθεράπευτος. In addition, it would have been highly unusual, both for pagans and Christians, to let a dead person lie unburied for seven days. In fact, the text stipulates that Cleopatra was τὴν πνοὴν μόνην ἔχουσαν γυναῖκα, ‘barely breathing’. On the other hand, by repeatedly using the terminology of dying and resurrection in this and the following chapters, the author creates an ambiguity in which it seems to make no difference if somebody is dead or nearly dead. What’s at stake is not the physical situation but the spiritual one. Even when one is alive, one can be (spiritually) dead according to the author. That is why the apostle can say; Ἀναστὰς δόξασον τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ ὄνομα, ὅτι νεκρούς νεκροῖς χαρίζεται (c. 24; ‘Arise, glorify God’s name because he graciously gives the dead to the dead’), where neither ‘grants’ (M&N) nor ‘restores’ (Pervo) seems to quite catch the meaning of χαρίζεται, which is rather ‘graciously gives’ (LSJ s.v. II).  

Let us look at another passage that betrays a certain ignorance of institutional and religious language. When John has departed from Ephesus and has arrived in Smyrna, the whole city came together knowing that John ἐπιδημήσαντα (c. 56). M&N translate with ‘had come home’, but this is evidently mistaken as John does not belong in Smyrna. Pervo translates with ‘had arrived’, which is equally wrong, as ἐπιδημέω means ‘of foreigners, come to stay in a city, reside in a place’ (LSJ s.v. III). In Ephesus, they meet a certain Antipatros, Σμυρναίων πρῶτος (c. 56). M&N translate with ‘chief among the Smyrnaeans’, whereas Pervo has ‘their leading citizen’. Neither translation is accurate. Being ‘a first of’ was a qualification of the social elite in a number of cities in Asia Minor. The term originated in Northern Lycia and Southern Caria, and from there it also spread eastwards, witness the canonical Acts of the Apostles (13.50): the Jews stirred up ‘the first of the city’ against Paul in Pisidian Antioch, although the nature of this vocabulary is not recognised in the Bible commentaries. In other words, Antipatros was a but not the leading citizen.

When they meet, Antipatros addresses John as δοῦλε τοῦ θεοῦ (c. 56). Both M&N and Pervo translate these words with ‘Servant of God’. However, this is a misunderstanding of the term, which should be translated as ‘Slave of God’. The qualification is evidently important, as we find it also used in reference to John in chapters 19, 38, 47, 51, 74 and 110. But not only John is a ‘slave of God’. We also find it used for Cleopatra in chapter 19. Here it is told that Lycomedes hears somebody standing next to him (παραστὰς γὰρ τίς) saying: ‘out of pity

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14 For the ambiguity of being dead or nearly dead, I have profited from an unpublished SNTS lecture by J.E. Spittler, ‘Νῦν ἀναστὰς οὐ ζῇς δέντως. Resurrection in the Acts of John’.

15 I have collected the rich epigraphical evidence for the expression in Bremmer, Maidens, Magic and Martyrs, 164f.
for τὴν ἐμὴν δούλην Κλεοπάτραν I have sent from Miletus a man named John. Neither M&N nor Pervo comments on this rather remarkable scene. For who is this unknown bystander? It can hardly be anybody other than Jesus or God, but it is hard to find a parallel for such an epiphany in the apocryphal Acts. John even hopes to find τοῦ Κυρίου οἱ δοῦλοι at the temple of Artemis (c. 37) and speaks of the people assembled there as τοὺς σοὺς δούλους (c. 43). It seems that the expression is even used for prospective slaves of Christ, as John can tell the Ephesians that he stayed in Ephesus for their sake, although he also wanted to go to Smyrna and other cities so that ὁι ἐκεῖ δοῦλοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ will turn to Him (c. 45). It is not the place here to analyse in detail this ‘slavery of Christ’ phenomenon, but comparison with a similar vocabulary in the Acts of Peter shows that the author really means ‘slaves’ and not ‘servants’. It is a way of saying that the faithful are totally devoted to as well as the property of Christ/God.16

As my examples show, the translators lack a certain amount of background knowledge. It should have been the task of the editorial board to see to it that the translation was checked by an expert in apocryphal literature with the necessary historical knowledge. That is a pity because in general M&N’s translation is satisfactory, less free than Pervo’s, which also lacks a Greek text, but also less lively. In the end, the right translation of this fascinating text is still awaiting us.

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