CHAPTER TWO
THE TEXT: SOURCES, APOCRYPHAL ELEMENTS, AND DATE

1. The ‘Writings of the Apostles’

The most characteristic feature of Pseudo-Cyril’s On the Life and the Passion of Christ is its unrestrained blending of canonical and apocryphal traditions. The basic facts concerning the last dramatic events of Jesus’ life derive, of course, from the Gospels. But their presentation contains so many additions and changes that the Gospel story evidently was not the author’s first and principal source. As a matter of fact, the author himself claims to reproduce the contents of what he calls ‘the writings of our fathers, the apostles.’ These writings are said (§ 5) to have been found at Jerusalem, in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, apparently in the church which had been built on Sion ca. AD 340. The story of this discovery is told in §§ 7 and 8. It narrates how the deacon Theodosius sought among the books, apparently those of the library of the Sion church, for the ‘writings of our fathers, the apostles.’ What he found was a small parchment volume, hardly measuring a span and entirely written in shorthand. He brought it to Cyril in the episcopal palace, who passed it to Apa Bachios, a shorthand expert.

By offering this account at the outset of his work, the author wishes to enhance the credibility of the peculiar views and uncanonical facts he is about to present by ascribing them to an apostolic source. The discovery of an ancient book containing authentic and hitherto unknown information was a familiar literary motif in Antiquity. This device was also frequently applied in Coptic literature, always with a view to invest unfamiliar

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1 See p. 125, n. 14.
ideas with apostolicity and thus reliability. There are several Coptic texts allegedly based for the greater part on writings of the apostles discovered in (the library at) Jerusalem. In an *Encomium on Saint John the Baptist*, by Pseudo-John Chrysostom, the author claims to reproduce ‘the statements that we have found in the ancient manuscripts which the Apostles wrote and deposited in the Library of the Holy City Jerusalem.’ His story of the discovery closely resembles that of Pseudo-Cyril: ‘I went through the books, (...) and I found a little old volume which concerned the Apostles.’ The book turns out to be an account by the apostles themselves about a heavenly journey they had made at the command of Jesus. The same claim is found in two homilies attributed to Timothy of Alexandria, one on the Angel of Death, Abbaton, and the other on Michael the Archangel. In the latter homily, Timothy claims that he found this apostolic writing in the house of the mother of Proclus (= Prochorus?), the disciple of John, where it was used as a phylactery. The *History of Joseph the Carpenter* presents itself as having been written by the apostles and deposited by them in the library at Jerusalem. Other works with non-canonical materials on the Virgin Mary also make reference to apostolic writings allegedly


6 This story is found in Copt. Ms. 36 of the John Rylands Library at Manchester, fol. 2r [= p. 351], a.18–fol. 2vo [= p. 352], b.17 (= No. 72 in W.E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the John Rylands Library Manchester*, Manchester / London: At the University Press / B. Quaritch, and Sherrat and Hughes, 1909, 36) and also in a Coptic Ms. of the University Library at Utrecht (fol. 1vo [= p. 31], a.2–fol. 1vo [= p. 32], b.2). The passage on the pearl in the Manchester Ms. was edited and translated by A. van Lantschoot, ‘A propos du Physiologus,’ in *Coptic Studies in Honour of Walter Ewing Crum* (Bulletin of the Byzantine Institute, 2),