BETWEEN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION:
THE MARIAN APOCRYPHA OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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In the study of ancient Christianity one frequently meets a tendency to regard early Christian apocryphal literature as rejected scriptures, produced largely by a variety of heterodox movements to rival or even replace the collection of New Testament writings that gave proto-orthodox Christianity its core identity. Such a mindset is reflected, for instance, in the title of Bart Ehrman’s recent collection of apocrypha, Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament, a companion volume to his Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew.1 Presumably, the important discoveries at Nag Hammadi and perhaps the Dead Sea Scrolls as well have fueled this widespread perception of the early Christian apocrypha as rejected scriptures. These dramatic textual finds of the mid-twentieth century vastly enriched our knowledge of the extra-biblical literatures of early Judaism and Christianity, revealing an astonishing diversity of early traditions that previously could only be imagined from the polemics of their opponents. The excitement of these new discoveries and the recovery of the lost traditions that they embody has meant that much work on apocryphal traditions over the last several decades has focused on extra-biblical literature as a window into the repressed diversity of formative Judaism and Christianity—and rightly so. Yet equally significant in fostering a perception of apocrypha as failed scriptures is the parallel influence exerted by the (Hennecke-)Schneemelcher collection of early Christian apocrypha.2 Schneemelcher’s conceptualization of this corpus is essentially designed around the theme of Christian apocrypha as rejected scriptures, intended for inclusion in the canon but

excluded on the basis of their contents or doubts about their authenticity. To be sure, such a view was not invented in the mid-twentieth century, as evidenced not only by the titles of earlier collections (such as Hone’s *The Lost Books of the Bible*) but also by the polemics of certain early Church Fathers, including for instance Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus, and later Eusebius, Athanasius, and Augustine, who charged their opponents with inventing false scriptures. Nevertheless, this conception of Christian apocrypha fails to do justice to the historical diversity of the apocryphal traditions themselves or their varied usage within the Christian faith. As we will see, not all early Christian apocrypha are simply rejected scriptures, and indeed some are better understood as an accepted part of ecclesiastical Tradition, such as, for example, the Marian apocrypha of early Christianity.

Schneemelcher’s widely adopted description of “New Testament” apocrypha largely ensured that for much of the last century early Christianity’s extra-biblical traditions would be regarded as unsuccessful, frequently heterodox, candidates for inclusion in the Christian canon. According to his rather narrow definition,

the New Testament Apocrypha are writings which have not been received into the canon, but which by title and other statements lay claim to be of equal status *gleichwertig*) to the writings of the canon, and which from the point of view of Form Criticism further develop and mold the literary genres *Stilgattungen*) created and received in the NT, whilst foreign elements certainly intrude.

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