

Durham E-Theses

The Ascetic Imagination and the Reception of Early Christian Texts

GEBREANANAYE, MERON,TEKLEBERHAN

How to cite:

GEBREANANAYE, MERON,TEKLEBERHAN (2023). *The Ascetic Imagination and the Reception of Early Christian Texts*, Durham e-Theses. <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/14849/>

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in Durham E-Theses
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full Durham E-Theses policy](#) for further details.

The Ascetic Imagination and the Reception of Early Christian Texts

Meron Tekleberhan Gebreananaye

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Durham University to the Department of Theology and Religion

2023

Abstract

The interplay between reception and the creation of ascetic meaning in early Christian writings has been the subject of a diverse range of studies. Much of the focus in this regard, has however, been limited to studying commentary on or citation of biblical texts in ‘exemplary readings’ (the Patristic Fathers) preventing us from accessing the full gamut of the rich history of ascetic interpretation. This thesis demonstrates the utility of looking beyond these limitations by intentionally engaging with texts that are outside of normative Christian tradition and by looking beyond direct citation or explicit commentary to access the diverse modes of reception and meanings inspired by the Christian ascetic imagination.

Accordingly in chapter one, I looked at the Acts of Paul and Thecla, noting the appropriation and development of Pauline traditions and the utility of the peculiarly vulnerable body of the female virgin Thecla as the locus for ascetic conversion and transformation. In chapter 2, I identified the creative reception of literary forms and motifs to develop an ascetic discourse intended to enable the elect to overcome embodiment, in the Book of Thomas the Contender. In chapter 3, I turn to the classical text of Christian monasticism, the Life of Antony, to establish developments in interpretive practices in a context where the Christian scriptures, ecclesiastical structures, and ascetic praxis was being formalised.

In the second part of my thesis, I went on to compare and contrast these traditions with a focus on the reception of figures, selected discourse, and the processes of ascetic formation to highlight the productivity of mapping the diachronic development of meanings without privileging some readings or seeking to establish genealogical relationships between successive readings.

Declaration

This thesis is the product of my own work and does not include work that has been presented in any form for a degree at this or any other university. All quotation from, and references to, the work of persons other than myself have been properly acknowledged throughout.

Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rest with the author. No quotation from it should be published in any format, including all electronic formats, without the author's prior written consent. All information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Professor Francis Watson without whose understanding, patience, and support in every way it would have been impossible for me to complete this thesis. No one can have a better supervisor and mentor.

I am also grateful to my Durham support network: Dr Ruth Watson, who has become an anchor and wise counsellor to me in the worst of times; Dr Kelsie Rodenbiker who is an ever present and ever reliable encouragement; Dr Sarah Parkhouse and Dr Kimberley Fowler who are not only good friends but conversation partners to whose scholarship I owe quite a lot; and Professor Anna Rowlands, who has helped me immeasurably in the last year.

To my “Tigray Adina” family who have helped me weather the storm of the last two years, thank you. እንኳስ ናትና ኮንኩም!

I am grateful to the Green Scholars Initiative for awarding me the Edwin M. Yamauchi Award for Excellence in Textual Studies. I am also grateful to the Jerusalem Trust, the Langham Partnership, the Scholar Leaders Initiative, the Durham Centre for Catholic Studies, and all others who have made my academic journey possible with financial grants.

Last but not least, I am grateful to my family, my beloved children, my father, and my brother, my studies have always been at the cost of family, thank you for your patience, love and unending faith in me.

This thesis is dedicated to my son Christian, who has grown up way too fast.

Table of Contents	
Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Statement of Copyright	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Abbreviations	1
Introduction.....	4
1. The Ascetic Imagination in the Acts of Paul and Thecla	20
1.1. Provenance and Transmission of the Act of Paul and Thecla	20
1.2. Literary Influences and Relationship	28
1.2.1. Greco-Roman Literature (The Ancient Novel)	29
1.2.2. Christian Literary Influences	31
1.3. The Acts of Paul.....	35
1.4. Virgin from Iconium to Apostle: the narrative development of APT.....	40
1.5. Reception and the Ascetic Imagination	43
1.5.1. Apostolic Legacy: ‘The Received Paul’	43
1.5.2. Paul vs Paul: Contradicting Legacies?	48
1.5.3. Ascetic Discourse in the APT: The Gospel of Paul	55
1.5.4. Ascetic Performances	62
1.6. Thecla: Gender Imagined and Re-Imagined	70
1.6.1. Proto-Feminist Church Leader?	71
1.6.2. A Rhetorical Tool?	73
1.6.3. Made Masculine?	74
1.6.4. Androgynous Realisation of an Eschatological Existence?	76
1.6.5. Inviolable Exemplar?	78
1.7. Summary	80
2. The Ascetic Imagination in the Book of Thomas the Contender.....	81
2.1. Provenance, Composition, and Genre of the Book of Thomas.....	82
2.2. “Writing to the perfect”: Literary Content of Book of Thomas.....	86
2.2.1. Readers of the Book of Thomas	90
2.2.2. The Dialogue	94

2.3.	The Broader Literary Context: The Book of Thomas within NH II	97
2.4.	Reception and Ascetic Imagination	102
2.4.1.	Woe to you (ΟΥΘΕΙ ΝΗΤΝ□)	106
2.4.2.	Blessed are you (ΝΑΕΙΑΤ ΤΗΝΕ)	128
2.5.	The Ascetic Jesus and Christian Existence that Transcends Embodiment	132
2.5.1.	Human embodiment and the two realms	132
2.5.2.	The saviour and the elect	133
2.6.	Summary	134
3.	The Ascetic Imagination in the Life of Antony	136
3.1.	Provenance and Transmission of the Vita Antonii	137
3.2.	Literary Influences and Context.....	151
3.2.1.	Two Trajectories of Literary Influence	152
3.2.2.	Literary Context – the letters of Antony, the Apothegmata and the Athanasian Ascetica	156
3.3.	Narrative Development.....	168
3.4.	Reception of Scripture	173
3.4.1.	The Reception of Literary Forms	173
3.4.2.	Defining Ascetic Discipline	177
3.4.3.	An Ascetic Programme for the Church	183
3.5.	Ascetic Exemplars	194
3.6.	Summary	199
4.	Reception and the Creation of Ascetic Meaning (s).....	201
4.1.	Apostolic Figures in Transition: “All Things to All People”	202
4.2.	Discourse in Transition: The Reception of the Matthean Beatitudes	209
4.3.	Ascetic Practice in Transition	219
	Conclusion	236
	Bibliography	238

Abbreviations

Frequently Used:

1 Cor	1 Corinthians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Acts	Lukan Acts of the Apostles
AP	Acts of Paul
APT	Acts of Paul and Thecla
AT	Acts of Thomas
BookThom	Book of Thomas the Contender
CII	Nag Hammadi Codex II
GThom	Gospel of Thomas
Jn	Gospel of John
Lk	Gospel of Luke
Matt	Gospel of Matthew
Mk	Gospel of Mark
NH	Nag Hammadi
NHL	Nag Hammadi Library
VA	Vita Antonii

Other Ancient Sources

ApJohn	Apocryphon of John
Clem. Strom.	Clement of Alexandria Stromata
De Baptismo	Tertullian's Homily on Baptism
Ep. Amm.	The Letter of Ammon

EpAP	Epistula Apostolorum
ExSoul	Exegesis on the Soul
GPhil	Gospel of Philip
Hist. Eccl.	Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica
HypArch	Hypostasis of the Archons
OrigWorld	On the Origin of the World
Panarion	The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salmais

Other Abbreviations

AP	Apocrypha
AR	Archiv für Religionsgeschichte
ATR	Anglican Theological Review
CH	Church History
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSQ	Cistercian Studies Quarterly
FT	Feminist Theology
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HTS	HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature

JECS	Journal of Early Christian Studies
JFSR	Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
JHC	Journal of Higher Criticism
JR	Journal of Religion
JRS	The Journal of Roman Studies
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
NoVT	Novum Testamentum
NTS	New Testament Studies
Stud.Rel	Studies in Religion
TJR	The Journal of Religion
VC	Vigiliae Christianae
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament

Introduction

The influence of the ascetic imagination in shaping Christian theological discourse and practice can be discovered from the earliest writings. This extends back to the portrayal of the ascetic rigour of Jesus and his earliest followers as well as aspects of his teachings in the gospel tradition.¹ The ascetic content of these early accounts ranges from “undetermined and suggestive”² to explicitly articulated practices and injunctions³ indicating ascetic debates and asceticising influences within the earliest Christian communities which have shaped the development of received materials.⁴ Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, for example, demonstrates the development of the Markan material in the Lukan gospel illustrating this process at work in the synoptic tradition.⁵ His analysis particularly demonstrates how the writer of Luke reframes and

¹Unless expressly distinguished ‘gospels’ here refer to traditions about the life and ministry of Jesus that circulated in earliest Christianity, including but not limited to the canonical four-gospel collection.

² Antony J. Saldarini highlights this in relation to the gospel of Matthew noting that although not generally identified as ascetic or asceticism in modern New Testament scholarship the gospel contains laws and practices that demanded ‘a type of asceticism of the mind and body’. Antony J. Saldarini, ‘Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew’, in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 11–28.

³ Stephen J. Patterson, ‘Asceticism in the Gospel of Thomas and Q: The Peculiar Practice of the Early Jesus Tradition’, in *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins: Essays on the Fifth Gospel*, ed. Stephen J. Patterson (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 175–96. Based on an analysis of selected materials from Q and the Gospel of Thomas, Patterson argues that the “itinerant social radicalism of the early Jesus movement” depicted in these sources reveals “a conscious decision to lay down the script, to step outside of conventional roles, outside of the familiar world of commonly assumed values, activities, plans, agendas” and promised a “newly imagined reality, drawing others to it in a radical display of otherness” which may productively be categorised as *askesis*.

⁴ Wayne Meeks notes that the suggestive or “uneasy tension” in the gospel of Matthew reflects the struggle between the impulse for a rigorous imitation of Jesus and teachings that “warn against premature attempts to purify the church” existing within the Christian communities in which the Gospel came to being. Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 143.

⁵ Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, ‘Engelsgleiche, Abstinente - und ein moderater Weintrinker. Asketische Sinnproduktion als literarische Technik im Lukasevangelium und im 1. Timotheusbrief’, in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 21–68.

recasts the received content to shape celibate exemplars and promote an abstinent existence with the promise of a reward in the hereafter.⁶

The significance of the ascetic impulse in earliest Christianity is also preserved in the writings of Paul which reflect a tension in the early churches that he is addressing through his letters. This tension arose from a confluence of factors including challenges from without (the religious, political, social order) and within the church (variegated socio-economic status, differing ethos, and doctrine, etc).⁷ Paul's own efforts to define Christian existence, community, and mission were therefore nuanced to take into account the manifestation of these factors in different contexts and times.

In spite of the ambivalent nature⁸ of the ascetic content of the earliest writings - or arguably *because* of the interpretive space created by this ambivalence – these texts served as

⁶ Weidemann, 48. Weidemann's argument for an asceticised retelling of the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-18) is particularly noteworthy. He argues that Jesus passing on the wine until the coming of the Kingdom of God, in the Lukan Last Supper represents an oath of renunciation and serves as one important example of the asceticisation of the Last Supper. Weidemann, 46. Mary Ann Tolbert's study confirms that this abstinent character is missing in the gospel of Mark, which she argues, focuses on the process of becoming 'perfect disciples' mediated by listening and believing the gospel message. Rejection by the world or persecution, in Mark, are by products of this faith commitment and not active programmes of renunciation or discipline, according to Tolbert. Mary Ann Tolbert, 'Asceticism and Mark's Gospel', in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 43–45.

⁷ Vincent L. Wimbush, *Paul, the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding According to I Corinthians 7* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 95–98. Other studies reveal the contextual nature of the ascetic content of the Pauline literature: Ronald F. Hock, 'God's Will at Thessalonica and Greco-Roman Asceticism', in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 159–70; Robin Scroggs, 'Paul the Prisoner: Political Asceticism in the Letter to the Philippians', in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 187–208; Robin Scroggs, 'The Letter to Philemon and Asceticism', in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 209–10; Richard Valantasis, 'Competing Ascetic Subjectivities in the Letter to the Galatians', in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 211–30; Neil Elliott, 'Asceticism among the "Weak" and "Strong" in Romans 14-15', in *Asceticism and the New Testament*, ed. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 1999), 231–55.

⁸ In recognition of this ambivalence and relative to the more throughgoing ideology that was developed through an ascetic reading of these texts, the ascetic content in the gospel tradition and the Pauline letters can be considered proto-ascetic.

productive ground for the development of rigorous and robust ascetic programmes by a significant sub-set of their earliest recipients.⁹

In this thesis I aim to look at this process more closely by looking at the modes of reception and the production of ascetic meaning and praxis in three Christian texts from the 2nd to the 4th centuries. My study is positioned at the intersection of the study of biblical reception history and the study of Christian asceticism, which have independently inspired significant theoretical reflection. With this in mind, my attempt to deploy reception history and asceticism as analytical categories here will begin with a brief definition for these terms as they function within the context of my study. I will then move on look at some previous research into the ascetic reception of early Christian texts with a view toward establishing the immediate

Asceticism

Studies of asceticism as an element of cultural or religious systems concede the difficulty of articulating a precise definition of the term.¹⁰ Broadly speaking asceticism can be defined as a program of self-discipline designed to equip the individual and/or the collective for a specific purpose. This description encompasses what Richard Valantasis refers to as the human impulse for individual and collective improvement.¹¹ More refined definitions that can support analytical or comparative study of asceticism as a cultural and/or religious phenomenon range from understanding asceticism as “a primary transcultural structuring force” undergirding all

⁹ Tolbert, ‘Asceticism and Mark’s Gospel’, 32; Saldarini, ‘Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew’, 24.

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 14.

¹¹ Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008), ix.

cultures¹² to a “disciplinary *technê* of the body as the specific means deemed most likely to permit the achievement of a stipulated end.”¹³

Valantasis productively mines both sides of this spectrum to develop a functional definition of asceticism that takes into account both the self (as the locus of ascetic activity) and culture - understood as the system of meanings which makes human experience intelligible.¹⁴

Accordingly Valantasis posits:

at the centre of ascetical activity is a self who, through behavioural changes, seeks to become a different person, a new self; to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture.¹⁵

The transaction between the old and new subjectivities is mediated through “performances” which encapsulate the systematic programme of activities that signify a realignment of the self from the old subjectivity and culture that are being deconstructed toward the new subjectivity and culture that are being constructed.¹⁶ The new culture, in turn, becomes the normative locus for all social experiences, activities and relationships for the reconstructed person.¹⁷

¹² Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Harpham argues that asceticism can be understood as a sub-ideological element common to all cultures – in as much as there is an ethical structure undergirding all cultures, asceticism can be considered “as a primary, transcultural structuring force” which makes cultures comparable. Harpham, xi–xvii.

¹³ Leif E. Vaage, ‘Ascetic Moods, Hermeneutics, and Bodily Deconstruction’, in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 251.

¹⁴ Richard Valantasis, ‘A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism’, in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 547. Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*.

¹⁵ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 7.

¹⁶ Valantasis, ‘A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism’, 548.

¹⁷ Valantasis, 549.

Valantasis suggests four social functions for asceticism with this definition as a framework; first asceticism enables the person to function within the newly re-envisioned culture; second, asceticism offers a means for translating theoretical and strategic concepts into practice; third asceticism facilitates a transformation of perception whereby basic experiences and activities are re-defined; and fourth asceticism functions as a framework that “gives the old knowledge a new interpretative environment so that the context provides the frame of reference for understanding and meaning.”¹⁸

My comparative study of the creation of ascetic meaning in diverse contexts will utilise this functional definition of asceticism as a framework. Let us now briefly define the second main term deployed in this study; reception.

Reception Theory and Modes of Reception

Reception proposes a model of reading and interpretation that acknowledges historical readings and interpretations in the contemporary dialogue between reader and text allowing us to study the influence of different interpretations on subsequent generations of interpreters. This approach is undergirded by literary theories alive to both the otherness of the text and the lived praxis of the reader’s experience, transcending the ‘closed past’ of positivist historiography.¹⁹ A significant contribution in this regard by Hans Robert Jauss takes into account the historically mediated and socially formative characteristic of literature as noted by Marxist literary theory as well as drawing upon Formalism's advances in the realm of aesthetic perception.²⁰ In countering historical objectivism and excessive focus on the production of texts as opposed to their

¹⁸ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 551.

¹⁹ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1982).

²⁰ Jauss, 10–18.

historical consumption Jauss developed methodological guidelines to assess the development of discourse as a result of the dialogical relationship between texts and readers over time.

Central to the guidelines developed by Jauss are the concepts of ‘tradition’ and the ‘fusion of horizons’ appropriated from the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer defines tradition as the sum of what “we understand [about] ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live.”²¹ Accordingly, each individual is located within formative traditions and cannot remove to a vantage point outside of history for the purposes of objective reflection.²² The presuppositions or fore-understandings which interpreters possess describe the familiarity or bond with the subject matter which, according to Gadamer, is the most basic precondition of the hermeneutic event.²³

Therefore, within Gadamer’s hermeneutics, conscious acceptance of what he terms as ‘legitimate prejudices’ or presuppositions serves to give proper credence to the historically mediated nature of all understanding.²⁴ This affirmation, however, does not necessarily imply unyielding captivity to traditions, because traditions are themselves fluid and horizons are always broadening in interaction with the inherent strangeness of the “historically intended and distant object.”²⁵ Gadamer, proposes that the hermeneutic event occurs in the ‘*in-between*’ space between the unfamiliarity of the text and the interpreters prejudices or presuppositions which

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Second, Revised Edition (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 278.

²² Stanley Porter and Jason Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2011), 88. Gadamer’s conception of tradition is formulated against the Enlightenment antithesis between tradition/authority and reason.

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 294–95.

²⁴ Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics*, 91.

²⁵ Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 71.

facilitate understanding.²⁶ He describes this event as the fusion of horizons. This fusion assumes that “understanding happens through a gradual and perpetual interplay between the subject matter and the interpreter’s initial position – a fusion of one’s own horizon and the horizon of the text or other.”²⁷ The horizon of the text – the given subject matter - and the horizon of the interpreter, which constitutes the sum of the traditions and prejudgments which they bring to the text, thus interact in a dynamic dialogue.²⁸

According to Gadamer this interaction allows not only for the reproduction but also the production of meaning extending beyond the author.²⁹ The ‘*otherness*’ of the text – or its potential to continually evolve in light of the new questions brought to it by successive interpreters – results in the dynamic and unfinished character of texts. This character allows texts to reveal new meaning in reaction to the new horizons of expectations brought to the process of interpretation by successive readers.³⁰ This, however, does not imply relativism or aesthetic subjectivism as every text has a fixed boundary or ‘*givenness*’ which limits the potential range of meanings that can be derived from it at any given time.³¹

Gadamer’s idea of the fusion of horizons – or the co-creation of meaning between text and reader – means that the historical distance between the interpreter and the text is no longer a problem which requires correction. On the contrary this distance serves as the productive ground for interpretation whereby the interpreter can experience the meanings and understandings of the

²⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295.

²⁷ Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics*, 86.

²⁸ Porter and Robinson, 82.

²⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 296.

³⁰ Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics*, 91.

³¹ Porter and Robinson, 91.

subject matter in previous interpretations enhancing her ability to understand the potential of meaning that is to be discovered in the text.

Jauss takes up these two concepts in developing a theory for the reception of literature.

He notes that:

It is only through the process of its mediation that the work enters into the changing horizon of experience of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them.³²

Thus, Jauss, like Gadamer, understands the dialogue between work and audience as not only reproductive but also productive of meaning.³³ He envisions a reciprocal relationship between text and reader whereby a literary work is understood both in terms of its influence on its readers and in relation to how encountering successive generations of interpreters with new horizons of expectation leads to new production.³⁴ On this basis, Jauss proposes methodological guidelines for the synchronic and diachronic analysis of the interaction between text and reader that have been adopted in the study of the reception of the bible.³⁵

The study of biblical reception has diversely looked at strategies of reception and interpretation employed in specific periods and/or individual interpreters as well as the meaning created by successive interpreters. These studies have ranged from commentary series on

³² Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 19.

³³ Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 28–32.

³⁴ Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, 19.

³⁵ Antony C. Thiselton, 'Reception Theory, H. R. Jauss and the Formative Power of Scripture', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 3 (2012): 137. David Paul Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics*: 107 (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

individual books of the biblical corpus focused on ancient interpretations³⁶ or bringing historical interpretations in conversation with contemporary biblical exegesis and popular culture³⁷ to monographs studying the reception of biblical books,³⁸ figures³⁹ and theological motifs. As the focus of this study is processes of reception in the creation of ascetic meaning let us briefly look at some examples of studies in the ascetic reception of biblical texts.

Ascetic Reception in Contemporary Study

Studies in the ascetic reception of biblical texts can be broadly divided into two based of the approach they take. The first group comprises of synchronic analyses of particular instances of biblical reception and the creation of ascetic meaning focusing on a specific writing, a writer, historical period, or a theological tradition. This approach is itself characterised by a lot of variety in as much as scholars have focused on diverse aspects of the literature with which they engage. Let us look at some examples in this regard.

In the first instance, synchronic studies have looked at the use of scripture in the creation of ascetic meaning in one specific work as for example seen in Johan Leemans' thorough catalogue of the use of biblical texts and how they function in the development of ascetic praxis in Basil of Caesarea's *Asketikon*.⁴⁰ Other studies develop this approach by looking at the range of ways the same author uses scripture across different writings. We can see this in the different

³⁶ For example: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Series, Chief ed. Thomas C. Oden (I -XII vols) from InterVarsity Press.

³⁷ For example: Blackwell Bible Commentaries, John Sawyer (Editor in Chief), Ian Boxall, David M. Gunn, Judith Kovacs, Andrew Mein, Christopher Rowland, Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer – 20 volumes published to date and others forthcoming.

³⁸ For example: Sherwood, Y. A Biblical text and its afterlife. The survival of Jonah in Western culture. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2000).

³⁹ For example: The Early Reception and Appropriation of the Apostle Peter (60-800 CE). (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁴⁰ Johan Leemans, 'Biblical Interpretation in Basil of Caesarea's *Asketikon*', in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 246–67 Leemans, particularly highlights the interpretive horizons opened by the scriptures and their role as an authoritative 'continuous conversation partner' in the development of ascetic rules.

studies of Origen’s writings by Catherine Chin⁴¹, Andrew Jacobs⁴², and Virginia Burrus⁴³ which reveal the various ways he utilises scripture to build facets of his ascetic discourse – including his views of scripture and the role of exegesis in the process of ascetic and spiritual formation.⁴⁴ David Brakke’s study of Evagrius of Pontus also focuses on how he develops a holistic reading of the Old and New Testaments as stages of the ascetic formation of the Christian.⁴⁵ Similarly Samuel Moawad studies how Shenoute utilises scripture to address daily concerns of spiritual life and to refute pagan or ‘heretic’ teachings.⁴⁶ These studies all offer us in depth insight into one instance of reception but tend to be limited inasmuch as they do not take into account other receptions, laterally or serially.

Approaches to the synchronic development of ascetic meaning that engage with the potential for dialogue between different interpretive trajectories in the same historical context address this limitation by looking at the lateral development of meaning. One representation of

⁴¹ Catherine M. Chin, ‘Who Is the Ascetic Exegete? Angels, Enchantments, and Transformative Food in Origen’s Homilies on Joshua’, in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 203–18.

⁴² Andrew S. Jacobs, ‘Sordid Bodies: Christ’s Circumcision and Sacrifice in Origen’s Fourteenth Homily on Luke’, in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 219–34.

⁴³ Virginia Burrus, ‘“The Passover Still Takes Place Today” Exegesis, Asceticism, Judaism, and Origen’s on Passover’, in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 235–45.

⁴⁴ These studies particularly reveal Origen’s understanding of scripture and exegesis. Accordingly, we note that for Origen Scripture (the word) is a full representation of God, analogous to the incarnate Christ (the Word). Jacobs, ‘Sordid Bodies: Christ’s Circumcision and Sacrifice in Origen’s Fourteenth Homily on Luke’, 219. Additionally we learn that he sees exegesis as an integral element of ascetic discipline, “the spiritualisation of the letter – the goal of exegesis – and the spiritualisation of the embodied soul – the goal of ascesis – are inseparable processes”. Burrus, ‘“The Passover Still Takes Place Today”’: Exegesis, Asceticism, Judaism, and Origen’s on Passover’, 235.

⁴⁵ Brakke notes how for Evagrius the Old Testament develops ethics governing actions while the New Testament transcends this to develop a means by which the Christian can eliminate sin by controlling the intellect. David Brakke, ‘Reading the New Testament and Transforming the Self in Evagrius of Pontus’, in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 284–99.

⁴⁶ Samuel Moawad, ‘Shenoute von Atripe und die Auslegung der Heiligen Schriften’, in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 320–33. Moawad particularly notes the contextually determined nature of Shenoute’s interpretation.

this is Judith Kovacs' study of the use of scripture in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*.⁴⁷ Kovacs identifies the ways in which Pauline texts were used to produce diverse ascetic interpretations in that period by analysing Clement's response to his interlocutors.⁴⁸ Other studies look at the use of a single biblical text across different bodies of literature to the same end. Brian J. Matz for example traces the ascetic readings of the gospel of Matthew 13.1-48 in Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus⁴⁹ while David Hunter compares the use of 1 Corinthians 7.5 in Jerome and his contemporaries.⁵⁰ These studies offer windows into the rich diversity of interpretation in a specific period, although their focus is almost exclusively limited to readings emerging from 'orthodox' interpreters. Taking into account that, as Elizabeth Clark notes, there is no evidence of a "distinctively 'heretical' or 'orthodox' mode of reading" it seems this disproportional focus owes more to dogmatic bias as to what qualifies as a truly Christian reading which has influenced the selection of texts that are considered to be appropriate sources for studying the reception of biblical texts.⁵¹

The second group is comprised of those studies that take up a diachronic approach, tracing the development of ascetic meaning by tracing the reception of a single biblical text in different times and places. The paradigmatic example of this approach is the study of the

⁴⁷ Judith L. Kovacs, 'Was Paul an Antinomian, a Radical Ascetic, or a Sober Married Man? Exegetical Debates in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis* 3', in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 186–202.

⁴⁸ Kovacs, 200. Kovacs identifies three trajectories of ascetic interpretation: the radical ascetic interpretation, the antinomian interpretation, and Clement's own efforts to refute the other trajectories of interpretation and promote 'single marriage between continent spouses'.

⁴⁹ Brian J. Matz, 'Ascetic Readings of the Agricultural Parables in Matt 13.1-48 in the Cappadocians', in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 268–83.

⁵⁰ David G. Hunter, 'Asceticism, Priesthood, and Exegesis: I Corinthians 7.5 in Jerome and His Contemporaries', in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 413–27.

⁵¹ Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*, 11.

asceticised history of effects (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of biblical texts in late antiquity, by Elizabeth Clark.⁵² Clark's study offers significant insight into this process as it particularly pertains to commentaries from the 2nd to 5th centuries. In addition to offering a comprehensive overview of the use of 1 Corinthians 7 and other Pauline and deutero-Pauline texts dealing with marriage in the creation of ascetic meaning, Clark's findings make the important contribution of highlighting the intersection between the interpretation of scripture and the lives of early Christian communities. Moreover, her study offers a significant methodological re-orientation by engaging with receptions of diverse genres and from across the theological spectrum thus transcending limiting taxonomies. Where Clark follows the reception of a text, Martin Meiser, adopts a similar approach to trace the reception of a biblical figure – John the Baptist, in different times and traditions.⁵³ His diachronic analysis reveals how John the Baptist is increasingly used alongside other biblical figures (e.g., Jesus, Elijah, and Elisha) to demonstrate continuity between contemporary ascetic praxis and the bible.⁵⁴

These two examples reveal the potential of a diachronic approach to offer a much broader perspective as compared to an exclusively synchronic analysis. When deployed exclusively, however, a diachronic analysis runs the risk of ignoring the original context of reception. As David Hunter rightly argues, this can de-historicise and atomise the reception history of these texts.⁵⁵ Moreover a diachronic approach, which focuses on tracing selected texts or figures, can fail to fully take into account interpretive strategies that create meaning through reading together diverse texts. Finally, the focus on a macro-analysis of the development of meaning (s) across

⁵² Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*.

⁵³ Martin Meiser, 'Johannes der Täufer als Asket', 78–91.

⁵⁴ Meiser, 'Johannes der Täufer als Asket', 81.

⁵⁵ Hunter, 'Reception and Interpretation of Paul', 164. Hunter, however, suggests utilising a framework of "orthodoxy" and "heresy" thereby reimposing the dogmatic taxonomies Clark had rightly avoided.

the history of reception can potentially have a ‘totalising’ effect that focuses disproportionately on the genealogical relations between successive interpretations, thus undermining the heterogeneity of receptions serially and the possibility of multi-linear development of meaning synchronically.

The studies that we have looked at in this brief and limited review of previous research into the ascetic reception of biblical texts offer valuable insights that will support my analysis here. It is however important to reiterate the shortcomings that we have noted with these approaches to indicate how I aim to avoid similar limitations.

In the first instance synchronic approaches are temporally limited, while exclusively diachronic approaches potentially dehistoricise the examples of reception with which they engage. Secondly, almost all studies – synchronic and diachronic - focus on the same corpus of Christian writings: the Patristic fathers, thereby explicitly or implicitly confining the locus of study to a pre-defined corpus (canon). This may prevent us from accessing the full gamut of the rich history of ascetic interpretation.

Finally, most of the studies that we have looked at identify reception in terms of explicit commentary or intentional textual references or quotations and clear allusions.⁵⁶ This can, however, neglect the appropriation of literary aspects such as figure, forms, settings and motifs and unconscious and unintentional echoes revealing the diverse and creative ways authors developed elements of the biblical literary universe that saturated their thinking.

⁵⁶ The distinction between quotations, allusions, and echoes as categories of textual reference has been painstakingly defined. Quotation or citation can be used interchangeably to describe the verbatim (or close to verbatim) duplication of a reasonable body of text from the source text with or without a quotation formula marking it as such. An allusion on the other hand is understood to be a less explicit or shorter reference that is nonetheless a recognizably intentional effort by the author to direct the reader to the source text. Finally, an echo, reflects appropriation of elements of the source text that, unlike a quotation and an allusion, does not presume an intentional act of reference by the author. References to literary quotations, allusions, and echoes in this study will be made as per this hierarchy. Christopher A. Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 15–24.

With these limitations in mind, my study here will attempt to aim to contribute to the study of biblical reception by:

1. demonstrating the utility of looking at different modes of reception, such as the appropriation of figures, literary forms, and other indirect echoes as well as direct and systematic textual references (citations and quotes), for a better understanding of the meanings created
2. engaging with texts outside of the ‘canon’ of interpretations that have thus far been almost exclusively the locus of study (e.g., the Patristic Fathers) for biblical reception studies by looking at two para-scriptural texts (the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Book of Thomas the Contender*) alongside an example of a classical text of Christian asceticism (the *Life of Antony*) to better appreciate the diversity in modes of Christian reception and the creation of ascetic meaning.

To this end I will first look at each text as a specific instance of reception in relation to its social, historical, and literary context (synchronic analysis) before moving on to offer a comparative analysis.

It is of course impossible to engage with the myriad of ascetic writings from the early Christian centuries, within the limitations of one thesis. Such a task would require a large and ongoing project. Therefore, as noted above, this study will be limited to the following three texts: the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, and Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*.

This thesis is organised into four main chapter, as well as an introduction and a conclusion.

In the *first chapter*, I begin my study by looking at the reception and appropriation of earlier Christian traditions in the development of ascetic thought in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

My study will particularly focus on the ascetic ‘gospel’ delivered by Paul at the beginning of this episode which reveals the appropriation of the figure of the apostle and the literary form of the beatitude to framework the ascetic performances, culture, social relationships, and subjectivity that are developed in this text. Thecla represents the idealised virgin, who renounces all normative categories of social status, wealth, and gender to become a liminal figure and embodiment of resistance against this ‘world’ and exemplar of the newly inaugurated reality. Her solitary journey of self-construction, which is marked by her retreat from the world, fighting off temptation, overcoming the weaknesses of the body, and finally achieving transformation serves to exemplify the processes of ascetic self-construction. In engaging with this text, I hope to highlight the modes of reception and development of ascetic traditions in an early text which is generally relegated as legendary or a distortion of the Pauline legacy⁵⁷ and hence rarely regarded as an appropriate source for the study of reception.⁵⁸

My *second chapter* will look at the final tractate of Codex II of the Nag Hammadi Collection, the Book of Thomas the Contender. I will again look at the appropriation of the figure of the apostle, Thomas in this instance, and the use of woes and beatitudes in the saviour’s final monologue. I will argue that this section serves as a summary of the new subjectivity that centres around enabling an elect group to attain a spiritual existence transcending embodiment revealing one trajectory of Christian ascetic thought and praxis that has long been side-lined in

⁵⁷ Dennis R. MacDonald, for example argues that “the Paul” of the epistles is so distorted in narrative reception like the acts – due to literary considerations – that the content is un-Pauline. Dennis Ronald MacDonald, ‘Apocryphal and Canonical Narratives about Paul’, in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 69.

⁵⁸ A possible exception is Jeremy Barrier’s look at the impact of the inclusion of Matthew 5.7 in the Greek version of the Acts of Paul and Thecla affected its ascetic discourse. Jeremy W. Barrier, ‘Asceticism in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’s Beatitudes: The Coptic Heidelberg Papyrus as an Exegetical Test Case’, in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 163–85.

the academic study of Christian texts as a representation of non-Christian “Gnosticism.” My study here will take up recent critique which has deconstructed this bifurcation of early Christian traditions and engage with this text as one trajectory of early Christian reception.

In the *third chapter* of my study, I will turn to look at Athanasius’ Life of Antony (*Vita Antonii*) and the development of Christian ascetic thought in a (if not *the*) classical text of Christian monasticism. The Life of Antony was developed in a period when the scriptures, ecclesiastical structures, and liturgical praxis of the church were being defined and as such offers us unique insight into the formalisation and standardisation of Christian ascetic thought and praxis. In developing his narrative Athanasius extensively cites and alludes to scripture with little exegetical effort to circumscribe the appropriate locus of ascetic activity within the ecclesiastical framework. From within this framework, Athanasius goes on to craft an ascetic programme for the church, articulating performances like fasting, sexual renunciation, renunciation of wealth, prayer, vigil, reading and memorisation and envisioning a new culture whereby the ascetic replaces worldly connections and relationships with a new monastic community.

In my *fourth chapter*, I offer a comparative survey of the modes of reception and the ascetic ideologies identified in our study with a view to identifying the commonalities and diversities in these writings. In doing so I hope to indicate the utility of engaging with diverse interpretive traditions and modes of reception in our quest to fully understand biblical reception in specific contexts (synchronically) and across time (diachronically).

1. The Ascetic Imagination in the Acts of Paul and Thecla

The Acts of Paul and Thecla (APT) is an early Christian account of the conversion and subsequent journey of formation of Thecla, a female Christian convert from Iconium, under the tutelage of the apostle Paul. Historically this account was transmitted both as an independent account and as part of the larger work known as the Acts of Paul (AP).¹ The AP brings together a range of traditions about the ministry and missionary journeys of the apostle Paul circulating amongst the earliest Christian communities in Asia.

I will begin here by looking at the general historical, textual, and literary characteristics of the APT, in relation to the broader Acts of Paul before attempting to offer a close analysis of the interpretive strategies employed in the appropriation of earlier traditions and the production of ascetic meaning. My study here will particularly focus on the sermon delivered by Paul at the beginning of the Thecla episode which, as I will demonstrate, serves as the ascetic framework guiding the rest of the narrative and the characterisation of our two protagonists.

In doing so I aim to access some insight into the modes of reception deployed in the production of the narrative and the ascetic meanings created.

1.1. Provenance and Transmission of the Act of Paul and Thecla

The earliest historical reference to the APT/AP is discovered in a reference by Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17) dated between 198 – 206 CE.

To round off our slight treatment of this subject it remains for me to advise you of the rules to be observed in giving and receiving baptism... But the impudence of

¹ The Acts of Paul is identified as part of a wider corpus traditionally known as the “Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles” which also includes the Acts of Andrew, John, Peter, Thomas, and Philip. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction*, (Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2008), 1–14.

that woman who assumed the right to teach is evidently not going to arrogate to her the right to baptise as well - unless perhaps some new serpent appears, like that original one, so that as that woman abolished baptism, some other should of her own authority confer it. But if certain Acts of Paul, which are falsely so named, claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptise, let men know that in Asia the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add of his own to Paul's reputation, was found out, and though he professed he had done it for love of Paul, was deposed from his position. How could we believe that Paul should give a female power to teach and to baptise, when he did not allow a woman even to learn by her own right? Let them keep silence, he says, and ask their husbands at home.²

Tertullian, according to the introduction of *de Baptismo*, (1) wrote this treatise in response to the teachings of a certain (female) “viper of the Cainite heresy” against the value of baptism. Within this broader polemical context, he refers to Thecla, and the *APT*³ in response to debates about who can administer this sacrament, which Tertullian sees as one potential issue that can lead to the breakdown of episcopal hierarchies. While acknowledging that, in the absence of ordained ministers, *laymen* may administer this sacrament, he, however, strongly rejects that a woman could exercise this same right. His argument, as seen in the quote above, is that any claim that Paul gave a woman authority to teach or baptise would contradict his known teachings which admonished women to be silent in the congregation and to learn privately at

² Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism: The Text Edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 36–37.

³ The possibility that the reference by the Tertullian may not be to the AP but to another lost pseudonymous letter is suggested by S. Davies but is convincingly refuted by Thomas McKay. Stevan L. Davies, ‘Women, Tertullian and the Acts of Paul’, *Semeia* 38 (1986): 139–45. Thomas W. Mackay, ‘Response’, *Semeia* 38 (1986) 145–49.

home from their husbands (1 Cor 14: 33-35). Tertullian bolsters this argument by denouncing the credibility of the APT, clearly anticipating counterarguments based on the example set there.

Assuming that this reference is authentic, which has been problematised due to the fragmented textual history of *de Baptismo*, it contributes significantly to our understanding of several important literary elements including dating, authorship, and readership. Let us briefly look at what we can learn from Tertullian about these elements.

First dating. Tertullian's refutation serves to establish a *terminus ante quem* in the late-second century when it is believed that *de Baptismo* was written. The *terminus post quem*, however, is less easy to establish leading to various hypotheses. The first of which being the suggestion that the APT must have been written not long before Tertullian wrote *de Baptismo*, on the basis that his comments indicate the absence of a firmly established tradition as to its authorship. This coheres with the date posited for the broader *Acts of Paul* (c. 160 – 190 CE).⁴

The argument for a much earlier dating has been respectively presented by A. Hilhorst and Peter W. Dunn. Hilhorst makes this argument based on a reference from Jerome (*De viris illustribus*, 7.3):

Therefore the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* ... we reckon among the apocryphal writings, for how is it possible that the inseparable companion of the apostle in his other affairs [referring to Luke and the Lukan Acts], alone should have been ignorant of this thing. Moreover Tertullian who lived near those times, mentions a certain presbyter in Asia, an adherent of the apostle Paul, who **was**

⁴ R.I. Pervo for example narrows this down to between 170-75. Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul* (Cascade Books, 2014), 41.

convicted by John of having been the author of the book, and who, confessing that he did this for love of Paul, resigned his office of presbyter.⁵

If we assume that the John referenced here is the apostle John then, according to Hilhorst, the *APT* was written after the death of the apostle Paul (since he was not alive to refute the false account himself) but before the death of the apostle John – i.e. 68 – 98 C.E according to Jerome’s calculations.⁶ Hilhorst further argues that unless one is to assume Jerome was making a false attribution, this tradition can be traced back to Tertullian – which he considers to be entirely plausible in light of the poor textual transmission of *De baptismo*.⁷ Peter W. Dunn, takes up this argument and further adds that since internal evidence indicates the text was written after Thecla’s passing, and assuming she was around 18 years of age when Paul first came to Iconium (around 48CE) and lived to between 65 – 90 years of age the *APT* could have been written between the 95 – 120 CE.⁸

These arguments relying primarily on early traditions are certainly not contradicted by the internal evidence of the AP. Its theological concerns – including in the Thecla episode – particularly its lack of concern with the Christological debates of later eras and its remoteness from some of the issues characterising the primitive church (particularly interaction with Judaism) can for example be used to support this argument. Similarly, the prominence of the

⁵ Jerome, ‘Lives of Illustrious Men’, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and H. Wace, vol. 2 (New York, 1892), 363.

⁶ A. Hilhorst, ‘Tertullian on the Acts of Paul’, in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. J.N. Bremmer (GA Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1996), 160.

⁷ Hilhorst, 160.

⁸ Peter W. Dunn, ‘The Acts of Paul and the Pauline Legacy in the Second Century’ (Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1996), 8–9. In a later article however he modifies his conclusion here slightly noting that taking into account the ecclesiology of the AP, which reveals theological similarities with the *Didache*, 2 Clement and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, while its seeming unawareness of later theological debates serves as evidence for a mid to late second century dating. Peter W. Dunn, ‘The New Testament in the Acts of Paul’, in *Christian Apocrypha: Reception of the New Testament in Ancient Christian Apocrypha*, ed. Jean-Michel Roessli and Tobias Nicklas, vol. 26, *Novum Testamentum Patristicum* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

house congregation as opposed to the ecclesiastical structure, supports an early dating, although this setting can, of course, be replicated by a later author setting his narrative in an earlier period.

Wilhelm Schneemelcher dismisses such early dating on the basis that the AP is dependent on another Acts, from the corpus traditionally known as the ‘Apocryphal Acts,’ the Acts of Peter, and suggests that it is more fittingly dated to between 185 – 195 CE.⁹ This claim, however, relies solely on a specific chronology of the five major ‘Apocryphal Acts’ (The Acts of Paul, the Acts of Andrew, Peter, Thomas, and John) which as rightly argued by Jan Bremmer, is difficult to establish absolutely.¹⁰

It, therefore, seems possible to conclude that based on early traditions (Tertullian, Jerome) and the theological and ecclesiological motifs reflected within it the AP was most likely written by the second half of the second century.

Next, authorship. The only historical reference to the author of the APT is discovered in Tertullian. Tertullian claims that it was written by a presbyter in Asia, who was sanctioned for writing it even though he had done this ‘from love of Paul’ (*de Baptismo*, 17). In the absence of alternative theories, most scholars accept this ascription as true. Even so, however, it seems unlikely that the presbyter wrote this narrative from his imagination as claimed in Tertullian’s polemical ascription. It seems more likely that, as demonstrated by previous studies, the writer of the Acts of Paul and Thecla utilised pre-existing traditions circulating amongst the earliest

⁹ Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, vol. 2 (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992), 235.

¹⁰ J. N. Bremmer, ‘The Five Major Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership’, in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (Leuven: Utigeverij Peeters, 2001), 153. Macdonald for example argues for the precedence of the Acts of Paul based on a literary analysis which leads him to conclude that it served as a literary source for the Acts of Peter as well as the Acts of John. Dennis Ronald MacDonald, ‘Which Came First? Intertextual Relationships Among the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles’, *Semeia* 80 (1997) 11–42.

Christian communities in Asia.¹¹ In which case the presbyter referenced is better characterised as an editor or compiler (as is potentially suggested by Tertullian himself) than an author.

Finally, readership.¹² Tertullian's reference reveals two significant things about the potential readers of the APT. We can first note that Tertullian assumed that this text was serving to bolster the 'heretical' teachings of a female preacher (*de Baptismo* 1) who was influencing the congregations he was addressing. He particularly notes that the example of Thecla was being used to condone the right of women to teach and possibly baptise in this context. Since the anti-baptism female preacher who had inspired Tertullian's discussion is unlikely to be doing any baptising herself, this seems to suggest other female preachers, who were pro-baptism, were also known to him. At the very least Tertullian must have been aware of the potential for women to be in ministerial positions allowing them to administer baptism in the congregations he was addressing.¹³ This would in turn suggest that at least some of his intended readers were women in (or with the potential to be in) such a position. Tertullian's own knowledge of this text and his reference to its possible origins in Asia¹⁴ also serves to establish at least two locales where it was known and read.¹⁵

¹¹ Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 17. Stephen J. Davis agrees with MacDonald, noting that "the Acts of Paul and Thecla itself also exhibits standard marks of oral form, including features of plot movement, characterisation, and the presentation of typical scenarios." Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 14.

¹² The issue of readership is also closely related to that of genre, which I will look at in more detail below.

¹³ So MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 19.

¹⁴ The origins of the Thecla tradition in Asia minor is also supported by the location of the earliest known shrine dedicated to her at Seleucia which was a popular site of pilgrimage by the 4th century. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*, 36–39.

¹⁵ Tertullian's identification of the readership of the APT amongst women finds further circumstantial support from general discussions about the readership of novels (as we will see below the APT can be categorised as the Christian development of the ancient novel.) In this line ¹⁵ Ewen Bowie notes that there are at least two academic positions on the target audience of Roman novels; 1. this genre of literature was "designed for a new category of reader, men and women who were literate but not intellectual, residents of huge Hellenistic cities." 2. They were intended for the "intellectual élite who read Plutarch and historians or attended philosophy lectures" Ewen Bowie and Gareth Schmeling, 'The Ancient Readers of the Greek Novels', in *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Brill, 1996), 87.

Before moving on to look briefly at the textual transmission and literary characteristics of the APT it is important to note that in addition to the references to the *Acts of Paul* and/or the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* in other early witnesses.

In addition to Tertullian and Jerome, the AP is cited by Hippolytus (*Commentary on Daniel* 3.29) Origen (e.g., *De Principiis* 1.2.3; *Commentary on John* 20.12), and Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.25). In addition, the stichometric canon catalogue of the Codex Claromontanus¹⁶ includes the AP in its list. Alongside these, and particularly significant for the purposes of this study, we can also note the attestation of the Thecla episode, in particular, in several glosses and historical interpolations made to the pastoral epistles.¹⁷ This strongly suggests that readers of both the pastoral epistles and the Acts of Paul and Thecla have recognised an intertextual link between the two, from the earliest times.¹⁸

The figure of Thecla acquired increasing significance, as a saint and martyr of the early church. An important literary witness of this is discovered in the Life and Miracles of Saint

McLarty notes that it is likely that “the readership was quite mixed, both in gender and class, in line with the readership implied for Paul’s letters and potentially more mixed than the readership for the romantic literature.” J. D. McLarty, *Thinking with Thekla: Narrative and Emotion in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2018) 13.

¹⁶ The catalogue of the Codex Claromontanus included books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and Christian texts. Of the 27 books of the New Testament canon, it omits Hebrews, Philippians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians but includes the Shepherd of Hermas, the Revelation of Peter, and importantly for our purposes here the Acts of Paul. In addition to the Codex Claromontanus the later Stichometry of Nicephorus (approx. 9th century), which also catalogues books of the Old and New Testaments along with the apocryphal Christian writings, has the length of the AP (recorded as the Circuit of Paul) at 3600. Based on this evidence it is estimated that a third of the AP has not survived. For more on canon catalogues, see Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed), R. McL. Wilson (trans.) *New Testament Apocrypha Volume I: Gospels and Related Writings*. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 34-42.

¹⁷ Most significant in relation to 2 Timothy 3.10-11: “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.”

¹⁸ For a more complete survey of early attestations of the AP see Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014) 42 – 51.

Thecla from the mid-fifth century which expands upon the APT.¹⁹ Thecla is also received in art promoting her cultic status as an exemplar of female piety.

These attestations highlight some examples of the contexts in which the APT was being read and appropriated. It also speaks to the uninterrupted influence that the different parts of the AP have had on the development of Christian thought.²⁰ Finally, we can also note, from the extensive history of the reception of the Thecla narrative, that the APT has circulated widely and developed on its own as well as within the larger AP.²¹

I will now turn to briefly look at the history of the textual transmission of the APT and the text as we now have it before moving on to look at the various literary influences that can be identified in the genre of the apocryphal acts.

The complete AP – which according to the stichometry preserved in the Codex Claromontanus was 3560 lines²² – has unfortunately not survived intact. The text that we have today is mainly a composite of various incomplete witnesses.²³ Fortunately, for our purposes here, the textual witnesses for the Thecla episode are significantly more completely, and reliably

¹⁹ We can also note the reception of the figure of Thecla and/or the cult of Thecla in a wide range of sources from across the theological spectrum like the *Symposium, or on Virginité* by Bishop Methodius of Olympus (300 CE) where Thecla is one of the ten virgins promoting the merits of virginity; the *Manichaean Psalm Book II* (ca. 4th century CE) and Pseudo-Chrysostom's *Panegyric to Thecla* (ca. early 5th century CE). A comprehensive discussion of the reception of the figure of Thecla can be discovered in Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*.

²⁰ In addition to the APT, other parts of the AP, like the correspondence known as 3 Corinthians and the Martyrdom of Paul, have been transmitted and developed separately and have had their own history of influence outside of this corpus. J. Keith Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 354.

²¹ Willy Rordorf, 'Tradition and Composition in the Acts of Thecla The State of the Question', *Semeia* 38 (1986): 43–52. The history of reception and development of the APT is discussed in detail in: Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla*; Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*; Léonie Hayne, 'Thecla and the Church Fathers', *VC* 48, no. 3 (1994) 209–18. Susan E. Hulen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

²² For purposes of comparison, the Lukan Acts are allocated 2,600 lines.

²³ Important witnesses include Greek Papyri (Hamburg; Michigan; Berlin), Coptic Manuscripts and Papyrus fragments (Heidelberg; Rylands, Bodmer P. XLI) manuscripts; Latin Manuscripts and Papyrus fragments (Codex Casinensis; Codex Latinus; Codex Digbaeno) as well as Syriac and Armenian versions. A detailed list of the textual witnesses to the AP can be discovered in: Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, xiii–xv.

transmitted than other parts of the AP. The earliest witnesses to the reconstruction of the APT are Greek and Coptic. For example, the edition of the APT edited by Lipsius-Bonnet was based on 11 Greek manuscripts.²⁴ Since then several more Greek witnesses have been discovered – Hans-Josef Klauck notes that there are approximately eighty Greek manuscripts known at this time, including relatively recent findings such as the Antinoopolis fragment and P. Oxy. 6.²⁵ In addition to the Greek witnesses an important witness to the APT is discovered in the Coptic Heidelberg Papyrus.²⁶ There are also important translations in Latin²⁷, Syriac, and Armenian.²⁸

The apparatus to the Lipsius-Bonnet edition evidences the separate transmission history of the APT, seemingly reflecting the popularity of the cult of Thecla and her characterisation as a model for martyrs (as evidenced in the for example the manuscripts designated **B E and F**) and as an apostle (**K**) in specific contexts.²⁹

My study here will be based on the Lipsius-Bonnet critical text and will follow the numbering system developed by Willy Rordorf which I have found to be more widely used in recent literature.³⁰

1.2. Literary Influences and Relationship

A great deal of the academic discussion surrounding the Acts of Paul and Thecla has been devoted to the genetic or intertextual relationship between the noncanonical Acts as a

²⁴ R.A Lipsius and M. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 1959 Hildesheim reprint (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1891), 235–69.

²⁵ Mauritius Geerard, *Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamentum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 119–22. Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 49.

²⁶ Carl Schmidt, *Acta Pauli: Aus der Heidelberger Koptischen Papyrushandschrift, Issue 1* (J.C. Hinrichs, 1904) 6–28.

²⁷ Oscar von Gebhardt, *Passio S. Theclae Virginis: die lateinischen Übersetzungen der Acta Pauli et Theclae: nebst Fragmenten, Auszügen und Beilagen* (J.C. Hinrichs, 1902).

²⁸ For a complete list of editions and modern translation of the AP see Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 357–62. A more complete edition which makes use of all major Greek and Coptic witnesses available today is expected in the *Écrits Apocryphes Chrétiens* series.

²⁹ Lipsius and Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 235.

³⁰ Willy Rordorf, *Actes de Paul*, vol. 1, *Écrits Apocryphes Chrétiens* (Saint Herblain: Gallimard, 1997).

corpus,³¹ and other writings from the same era and milieu. Studies in this regard have looked at two trajectories of influence: Greco-Roman literature and earlier Christian writings. I will here briefly look at these discussions for a better understanding of the literary characteristics of the APT.

1.2.1. Greco-Roman Literature (The Ancient Novel)

Studies into the influence of Greco-Roman writings on the Christian Acts (both canonical and non-canonical) fall into two general trends, based on their understanding and definition of matters related to the genre.

The first trend which tends to present genre as a fixed category focuses on whether or not the Acts exhibit enough identifiable literary characteristics to be considered part of or a sub-genre of the ancient novel. Jeremy Barrier builds upon a long history of previous studies in this line, mainly based on identifying literary characteristics such as the development of chronological timeline, plot, climax, etc - to conclude that the noncanonical Acts fit the category of the Ancient Novel.³² Niklas Holzberg, on the other hand, acknowledges that early Christian novels appropriate literary motifs and narrative techniques common to the ancient novel, but argues that the Acts exhibit significant variations in motif and ideology that preclude us from concluding that they are just one example in this genre. He suggests, instead, that they are better understood as representing an example of the reception and influence of this genre.³³

Both these arguments seem to rely on a strict delineation of genre according to static conventions and an assumption that one genre develops into another in linear stages. As rightly

³¹ Also known as the Apocryphal Acts, this corpus generally includes the Acts of Paul, Thomas, Peter, Andrew, and John.

³² Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 7–10.

³³ Niklas Holzberg, *The Ancient Novel: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 17.

noted by R. Price, however, generic conventions can “impede fruitful analysis when we use them as standards to which we think individual texts must conform (so that we judge them aberrant of inferior the farther they diverge).”³⁴ He argues that genre itself is defined by change (gradual or sudden), both in terms of reader expectations and the influence of environmental factors. Therefore, according to Price, genre should be understood in light of these factors instead of standards measuring adherence or nonadherence to conventions.³⁵

The second trend we can identify in discussions regarding the genre of the *Acts of Paul* picks up on this corrective. Most particularly we see increased attention to the significance of context, as it relates to the social and political milieu and the influence of other writings, in determining both the content and reader expectations. Virginia Burrus, for example, offers useful insight in this regard. She highlights the historical and social context of such interaction, namely imperial Rome and the status of the Christian community as a liminal community in tension with the dominant social system, to explain the emergence of the Christian novel as a ‘hybrid’ innovation bringing together diverse political and social discourses.³⁶

The most significant social and ideological discourse framing the Acts of Paul, and the other two texts that we will look at in this study, is that which is discovered from within the writings and traditions of the Christian community which leads us to the second trajectory of influence on the development of the noncanonical Acts, that we will look at here.

³⁴ Robert Price, ‘Implied Reader Response and the Evolution of Genres: Transitional Stages Between the Ancient Novels and the Apocryphal Acts’, *HTS* 53 (1 January 1997): 911.

³⁵ Price, 911.

³⁶ Virginia Burrus, ‘Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance’, *Arethusa* 38, no. 1 (2005) 49–88.

1.2.2. Christian Literary Influences

As the reception and appropriation of earlier Christian traditions in the Thecla episode will be the main focus of my discussion below, I will only briefly look at the development of literary styles and themes here. With this in mind let us briefly look at the diverse types of Christian writings that could have potentially informed the APT and framed reader expectations and authorial objectives.

First, in this regard, the non-canonical Acts have fruitfully been compared with the Christian gospel genre. An obvious similarity is that like the gospel narratives, the non-canonical Acts follow the religious ministry of one central figure. The experiences of this figure are generally closely modelled on that of Jesus in the gospel tradition.³⁷ To this end, the Acts deploy familiar tropes and scenes discovered in in the gospel tradition such as an itinerant ministry, miracles, martyrdom, etc. (We will look at this in more detail below in relation to the narrative characterisation of Paul).³⁸

In addition to the gospels, another obvious comparand from earlier Christian literature - both by virtue of the shared designation as “Acts” (πρῶτα) in subsequent tradition and because of a shared focus on the apostle Paul - is the Lukan (canonical) Acts.³⁹ The nature of this potential literary relationship has inspired a significant amount of academic debate. These

³⁷ Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, 2.

³⁸ Prevo presents a detailed list of the parallels from initial ‘epiphany to post-mortem appearances.’ Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 160–62. A.J. Mattill notes that this parallel between Jesus and Paul also appears in the canonical acts where “the similarity of the two figures themselves and the comparableness of both to the ‘man of God’ of the Old Testament and the ‘divine man’ of Graeco-Roman antiquity.” A. J. Mattill, ‘The Jesus-Paul Parallels and the Purpose of Luke-Acts: H. H. Evans Reconsidered’, *NovT* 17 (1975): 20.

³⁹ It is generally accepted that the gospel of Luke and the canonical Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author, who is traditionally believed to be Luke a physician and companion of the Apostle Paul – e.g., Philemon 1.24. I will here refer to it as the Lukan Acts, following this tradition. For a brief summary of contemporary discussions on the authorship and dating see Frank Dicken, ‘The Author and Date of Luke-Acts: Exploring the Options’, in *Issues in Luke-Acts: Selected Essays*, ed. Sean Adams and Michael Pahl (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 7–26.

arguments have centred around two basic issues, the first of which being whether or not the AP is related to the Lukan Acts (or even if the author of the former had any knowledge of the latter) and the nature of the literary relationship (presuming one) between the two.⁴⁰

Concerning the first question, Willy Rordorf, argues that the disparity in the accounts of the AP and the Lukan Acts can only be explained if the writer of the former was completely unaware of the latter but possibly used traditions that were commonly known.⁴¹ While it is no doubt probable that early Christian traditions circulated amongst Christian communities in diverse ways, including orally and as part of devotional/liturgical language, it is almost impossible to establish the nature and extent of these for the purposes of contemporary study. Moreover, even given such traditions, it is impossible to deny that there exist commonalities between the Lukan Acts and the AP that would suggest literary dependence.

Thus, assuming some form of literary relationship, the question naturally turns to the second issue of the nature of this acquaintance. Studies in this line have come up with a diverse range of conclusions as to the nature of this acquaintance and the interpretive stance of the writer of the AP. Let us briefly look at these.

Julian Hills makes the case for direct literary dependence based on his analysis of a list “of examples of devotional language and of rare expressions.”⁴² He argues that these examples demonstrate linguistic ties that cannot be attributed to common liturgical traditions. However, taking into account that both writings, the Lukan Acts and the Acts of Paul, are essentially

⁴⁰ Representative examples of various debates are handily presented in Volume 80 of *Semeia*, pages 137-184. Further and more detailed discussions can also be discovered in Dunn, ‘The Acts of Paul’, 36–44.

⁴¹ Willy Rordorf, ‘Paul’s Conversion in the Canonical Acts and in the Acts of Paul’, *Semeia* 80 (1997): 137–44.

⁴² Julian V. Hills, ‘The Acts of Paul And the Legacy of the Lukan Acts’, *Semeia* 80 (1997): 145–59.

shaped by the same religious discourses an argument for dependence that relies exclusively on common wordings and phrases, seems to be somewhat tendentious.

Other studies have attempted to assess the character of this potential literary dependence without necessarily seeking to establish specific genetic links based on common words or phrases. Instead, they have looked at the rationale influencing the writer of the AP and the interpretive strategies he employs.

One proposal in this line is that the AP was intended as a continuation of the Lukan Acts and that the writer was seeking to creatively supplement a text known to him.⁴³ In this line, Richard Bauckham, for example, suggests the possibility that the writer of the AP is writing a sequel picking up the life of the apostle Paul where the Lukan Acts stops off. Bauckham also argues that the writer of the AP is also attempting to harmonise the Acts with narrative content about the apostle discovered in the Pauline writings (1 & 2 Corinthians; 2 Timothy, Titus).⁴⁴ This would, however, presume an interpretive stance (on the part of the AP) that is actively aware of and sensitive to the priority and authority of not just the Lukan Acts but also of the Pastorals. In essence, the writer of the AP is working with a proto canon of sorts. While this is an interesting argument, it is not a completely convincing one in as much as it fails to fully take into account the many obvious discrepancies that would mitigate the possibility of such an interpretive stance. One significant point in this regard, is that the AP starts with the conversion of Paul and not from

⁴³ M. R. James, 'A Note on the "Acta Pauli"', *JTS* 6, no. 22 (1905): 244–46; Donald Guthrie, 'Acts and Epistles in Apocryphal Writings', in *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 328–45; Richard Bauckham, 'The Acts of Paul: Replacement of Acts or Sequel to Acts?', *Semeia* 80 (1997): 159–68; Richard Bauckham, 'The Acts of Paul as a Sequel to Acts', in *The Book of Acts: Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1993), 105–51.

⁴⁴ Bauckham, 'The Acts of Paul: Replacement of Acts or Sequel to Acts?'

where we find him at the end of the Lukan Acts, as we would expect with a sequel that is not only aware of but acknowledges the Lukan account.

Highlighting this and other narrative differences, Pervo argues that the writer of the AP aimed to replace or at least correct the Lukan account with one more acceptable to himself.⁴⁵ He holds that this reveals a literary strategy by the writer to replace the Lukan Acts through expansion and revision much in the same way Matthew or Luke used and developed Mark in the synoptic gospels tradition.⁴⁶ This would in turn imply that instead of supplementing and explicating an existing authoritative corpus the writer saw himself as partaking in the process of developing such a tradition.

Daniel Marguerat, utilises the idea of ‘hypertextuality’ to develop a more nuanced articulation of the relationship between the AP and the Lukan Acts. More specifically he argues that the AP evidences a ‘re-reading which ‘re-composes’ and ‘re-interprets’ the source text (i.e. the Lukan Acts) revealing both “the veneration of the apostle within the Pauline movement” and the creativity of the Christian imagination instrumental in the re-composition of the figure of the saint.⁴⁷

This view acknowledges the literary and narrative similarities between the two texts and suggests some acquaintance without necessitating any presumption of literary dependence based on tendentious linguistic links or hypotheses about interpretive design. Accordingly, it seems plausible to assume that the writer of the AP was aware of the Lukan Acts he nonetheless developed an independent narrative in line with his own context and theological and literary

⁴⁵ Richard I. Pervo, ‘A Hard Act to Follow: The Acts of Paul and the Canonical Acts’, *JHC* 2 (1995): 3–52; Daniel Marguerat, ‘The Acts of Paul and the Canonical Acts: A Phenomenon of Rereading’, *Semeia* 80 (1997): 169–84.

⁴⁶ Pervo, *The Acts of Paul*, 67.

⁴⁷ Marguerat, ‘The Acts of Paul and the Canonical Acts: A Phenomenon of Rereading’, 181.

aims.⁴⁸ As Schneemelcher notes “...the writer of this apocryphal work [is] a great a compiler. He gave a fixed written form to legends which were current and inserted them into a larger composition; many a section he probably invented himself.”⁴⁹ Even taking into account Schneemelcher’s stated low opinion of the intellect, desire for consistency, and claims to the historicity of the author of the AP this still offers a more satisfactory explication of the similarities and discrepancies in the literary form and content that is apparent in the two texts.

This brief discussion of the primary literary backgrounds – the ancient novel and early Christian literature – highlights the complex intersections between different writings that fail to be described by broad categories such as genre.⁵⁰ Based on these discussions, it seems most productive to view the AP – and within it the APT - as a development of the Christian literary imagination that both reflects and transcends previous literary categories. This allows us to take into account the reception and appropriation of motifs and themes from earlier writings, innovations to common tropes subverting the reader's expectations, and the creation of new meanings within the specific narrative context.

1.3. The Acts of Paul

In this section, I will briefly summarise the content of the Acts of Paul, as the primary literary context which has framed the reception and transmission of the APT.

As noted above the account of the AP follows Paul’s missionary journey as an itinerant missionary much as in the Lukan Acts. Consequently, the AP is made up of distinct narrative episodes identified by the apostle Paul’s arrival in a particular location. According to Paul

⁴⁸ Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:212–70.

⁴⁹ Schneemelcher, 2:219–20.

⁵⁰ Richard I. Pervo, ‘Introduction’, in *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, ed. Marília P. Future Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, and Richard I. Pervo, vol. 16, *Ancient Narrative* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing, 2012), xv–xx.

testimony in Ephesus (AP 9.5) we learn that he had embarked on his career as an itinerant missionary after a conversion experience in Damascus. The details of his conversion are, however, different from the account detailed in the Lukan Acts where we learn that he is converted when the exalted Christ encountered him on the road to Damascus. Here he reports that his conversion occurs in Damascus where he was hosted and mentored by Jude the brother of Jesus. Unfortunately, the full account of this experience in the first chapter of the AP is fragmentary.⁵¹ He subsequently begins his career as an itinerant minister and his very first convert seems to have been a lion (AP 9.7). Following this Paul travels across a range of cities, Antioch (AP 3); Iconium (AP 4); Myra (AP 5); Sidon (AP 6); Tyre (AP 7); Jerusalem to Smyrna (AP 8); Ephesus (AP 9); Philippi (AP 10 -11); Corinth (AP 12) his final journey to Rome (AP 13) and finally his martyrdom there (AP 14).

Although the fragmented nature of the extant witnesses makes it difficult for us to read the complete account, we can nonetheless identify several characteristic elements of Paul's journey and ministry. Amongst these is that although Paul travels to these cities much as he does in the Lukan Acts, here his travels are not primarily missionary (church planting) journeys but visits to already established churches. There are at least a few believers and a house congregation wherever he arrives. His ministry in this context is therefore mainly one of affirming and bolstering the faith. To this end, he preaches in front of large groups of unbelievers and/or powerful and wealthy opponents, serving either to demonstrate the superior power of God (channelled through Paul) in their demise or to augment the status of Christianity through the

⁵¹ According to Schneemelcher a Coptic fragment (P. Ryland) made available by C. Schmidt reports the Christophany on the road to Damascus. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:218.

conversion of notable patrons. His teachings are generally accompanied by works of wonder including healings. He is also miraculously delivered from persecution until his final martyrdom.

As we will see below, we can discover all of these elements in the APT, but before turning to look at that episode in closer detail let us look at how it fits in relation to the broader narrative of the AP.

The APT makes up chapters 3 and 4 of the Acts. The writer connects this episode – which as we have noted above also has a history of being transmitted on its own – with narrative links. At the end of chapter 2, Paul is beaten and expelled from Antioch (in Syria). The beginning of chapter three picks this up; Αναβαίνοντος Παύλου εἰς Ἰκόνιον μετὰ τὴν φυγὴν τὴν ἀπὸ Ἀντιοχείας (*As Paul was going up into Iconium after the flight from Antioch*). We find a similar narrative bridge at the end of the APT and the storyline following Thecla's experience in Antioch that is picked up at the beginning of the episode in Myra where Paul returns to centre stage.

Ἡ δὲ Θέκλα Παῦλον ἐζήτει αὐτὸν
περιπέμπουσα πανταχοῦ· καὶ ἐμηνύθη
αὐτῇ ἐν Μύροις εἶναι αὐτόν.

AP 4.15

But Thecla was seeking after Paul and was
sending people around in every direction.
And it was made known to her that he was
in Myra.

ταρε παγλος τσβω · ερηει εμ · μυρα
μπωεχε μπνογτε ...
p. 28 of Heid P.

And when Paul was teaching the word of
God in Myra ...

In addition to these literary bridges, there are also other stylistic and thematic links that connect the APT to the broader AP. The first thing we can note in this regard is the narrative style. As noted above the *AP* adopts some common features discovered in the gospel narratives as it follows the career of the apostle Paul from his conversion and call to ministry to his martyrdom. In chapters 3-4 a similar style is followed in the telling of Thecla's life. She is called to ministry through Paul's teachings, is equipped for ministry⁵², receives divine empowerment that enables her to perform wonders which in turn confirm the authenticity of her call, and experiences near martyrdoms.

We can also identify a replication of themes throughout the AP including the all-important one of renunciation, particularly fasting and celibacy (which I will look at in detail below). Another common is the house church as the appropriate setting for the apostle's (Paul and Thecla respectively) activity. These congregations not only welcome, support, and encourage the apostle they are the idealised witnesses and subjects of their ministry.

We can also find several other parallels that indicate the literary coherence of the AP, including relatively unique motifs like the fantastical case of the lions. The first of these is a male lion, which according to Paul's account at Ephesus [AP 9], he encountered on his first missionary trip out of Damascus. This lion was not only a talking lion, but he was a talking lion that understood and desired baptism (and thus presumably was able to seek and obtain salvation). Moreover, once he is baptised, he also becomes celibate, clearly comprehending this was the higher path of Christian existence. And this is not the last that we see of this lion. Later on, in the Ephesus episode when Paul is brought into the arena to meet an almost certain death the lion

⁵² As we will argue in detail below that this process of training is shaped by the ascetic character of the APT as well as Thecla's gender.

that is set loose to devour him turns out to be this self-same lion. As a result, Paul is saved from death. Although, without a similar back story, Thecla too encounters a pious lion when she is put in the arena as a death sentence. The lioness who was to be the instrument of delivering this sentence instead dies defending her from the attack of a male lion [AP 4].

Another motif that is sustained throughout the narrative is the role of female characters in quite prominent 'speaking' roles which is not necessarily the norm in early Christian literature. In addition to Thecla herself, we also find Philia (AP 2); Theocleia (AP 3); Tryphanea (AP 4); and Eubula and Aretemila (AP 9).

A third and for our purposes here final theme demonstrating the literary coherence of the AP is the characterisation of relationships within families. Interestingly in the AP the household is a very unreliable and potentially treacherous institution. In the APT, for example, this is evidenced in the relationship between Thecla and her mother Theocleia. Theocleia is not just opposed to her daughter's religious conversion and her commitment to celibacy she calls outright for her execution (see the summary of the narrative below). And even at the end of the narrative arc when Thecla returns home to her mother she only does so as to confirm that she had made the right choice and display her new identity as a Christian minister. The writer does not allow Theocleia the opportunity to repent or even respond. She is supplanted as the ideal maternal figure by Tryphaena. Theocleia thus serves as a symbol of the stereotypical woman and mother as configured by the norms of the dominant social order which is contrasted with the new identity, relations, and cultures that are being inaugurated.

In a similar way in Myra (AP 5) a young man named Hermippus demonstrates cruel filial disloyalty by being disappointed and angry that Paul had healed his father Hermocrates. This relationship is only repaired when he responds positively to the apostle's teachings and comes to

faith. In this instance, the writer of the AP allows for a renewed family relationship made possible only because of shared faith. Read together these two episodes develop a coherent message that for the new Christian family relationships are to be defined not by the normative connections established by birth, marriage, or other units of the social order but by shared faith – i.e., in-group status in the new community of faith.

While it may not be right to make too much off this last theme it does seem an interesting one needing further reflection in light of the general ascetic ideology of the AP which encourages sexual renunciation at the cost of the household.

1.4. Virgin from Iconium to Apostle: the narrative development of APT

Before turning on to look more closely at the ascetic ideology of the APT and its reception and appropriation of earlier sources let us briefly look at the narrative development of this episode.

The central plot of the APT follows the story of Thecla, a virgin from Iconium, who is converted through the apostle Paul's discourse on asceticism. The story begins with an introductory section that presents some of the primary characters Paul, his companions Demas and Hermogenes (3.1) and Onesiphorus (3.2). This initial episode is set in Iconium. The initial cast, along with a reference to Titus early in the introductory section, serves to locate the APT within the narrative 'universe' of early Christian traditions as, for example, discovered in the Lukan Acts and the pastoral epistles, which establishes the proper context for reading and understanding its content.

This is further strengthened by the development of the character portraits delivered by the narrator which parallels the depiction of these characters elsewhere. Thus, for example, Demas (2 Tim 4.10) and Hermogenes (2 Tim 1.15), who we are told deserted Paul in 2 Timothy, are

described as corrupt and false figures in the APT. Similarly, Onesiphorus, who is commended for showing the apostle hospitality in 2 Timothy 1.16 is characterised by similar activity in the APT.

This initial set-up focuses on reaffirming (within the context of the broader AP) or re-introducing (for the readers/listeners of this episode) Paul as the ‘servant of the blessed God’. He is recognised as such by a believing community upon his arrival in Iconium and is immediately and appropriately welcomed. Having thus affirmed Paul’s status as a preacher and apostle through the reception he receives in a Christian congregation the narrator goes on to introduce the other protagonist of the narrative, Thecla.

In this initial description, the narrator establishes her social status and her relations; she is a virgin, a daughter to Theocleia, and the betrothed of Thamyris. This portrayal is important to the narrative in as much as Thecla’s abandonment of this identity and the process she undergoes in the formulation of a new identity will become the central element of the plot.

Following the introductory section, the narrative moves to the initial episode in which Thecla ‘falls in love’ with the ascetic message and demeanour of Paul. Her instant and absolute commitment to this message leads her to abandon her life completely, rejecting the privilege and security of marriage and wealth. She sheds the last of her old life when she follows Paul to the prison where he is sent by the accusations of a vengeful Thamyris. This chain of events serves as the first narrative conflict emerging from the resistance of the political, cultic, and social order to Paul’s teachings and Thecla’s conversion.

Thecla is herself brought before the tribunal along with Paul. Although the governor is touched by Paul’s teaching and sentences him to just a scourging and expulsion from the city, he is less merciful to Thecla. Rejected by her relations, including her own mother, she is

criminalised by the larger political and social order, both for her revolt against the norms for a daughter, fiancée, and an upper-class female and to serve as a warning to other would-be transgressors Thecla is condemned to be burned at the stake. Facing martyrdom with courage, Thecla is abandoned by all, including Paul, except God.

Thecla's miraculous delivery from the stake and her subsequent re-unification with Paul serve to introduce the next part of the narrative which takes place in Antioch. In this section, Paul drops out of the story almost immediately and Thecla takes centre stage. The storyline here shifts from the relationship between Paul and Thecla to focus on her acts as a Christian convert in a social order that is hostile to Christianity. Although she had renounced her sexuality and social markers of her gender, by cutting her hair and dressing as a boy to follow Paul, her commitment to chastity is put to the challenge almost immediately by the advances of an influential man, Alexander. This establishes the primary conflict of this part of the narrative. Humiliated by her rejection, he brings her before the governor thus setting a very public stage for the wonders that save Thecla from increasingly horrific attempts to execute her. Through this process, she is able to proclaim the gospel and acquire followers, who are at this stage exclusively female and mainly unnamed. An important figure that comes to the foreground in this episode is Tryphaena. She forms an important contradistinction to Thecla's mother – and also serves to highlight the means by which wealth can be deployed in the service of an ascetic ideology [see below]. Thecla also claims the sacrament of baptism – previously denied to her by Paul on account of her beauty and her susceptibility to temptation – via auto-immersion.

Thecla is ultimately saved from various trials and humiliations. She is vindicated, both as a result of the wonders that prevent her death and the impassioned support of her followers. The narrator indicates her vindication by employing a recognisable formula from other Christian

writings including the gospels, the *Lukan Acts* and later martyrdom narratives; she is given the opportunity to testify to her faith before an influential figure – the governor. This, and Alexander’s abject surrender all point to the triumph of Thecla and through her the gospel over the powerful figures of the empire. Thecla is finally heralded as “Θέκλαν τὴν τοῦ δούλην” (Thecla, the slave of God) and she is able to preach and make converts – seemingly of both genders at this juncture. Finally, she sets out to look for Paul and finds him at Myra where he affirms her vindication through the apostolic commission; “Υπαγε καὶ χροῦσον ἐπεμψεν αὐτῇ (Go and teach the word of God).” Thecla, the virgin from Iconium, is at the end rewarded by what amounts to an apostolic commission to teach the word of God, by adhering to the ascetic gospel (see below) she first heard from her window and prevailing over quite incredible challenges that threatened her chastity and tried her faith.

1.5. Reception and the Ascetic Imagination

In this section, I will turn to look more closely at the reception and development of Christian traditions in the APT toward a better understanding of the interpretive strategies that it employs and the ascetic meaning that is produced. To this end, I will begin first by looking at the characterisation of Paul and the appropriation of his legacy in this context.

1.5.1. Apostolic Legacy: ‘The Received Paul’

In attempting to retrieve ‘the received Paul’ in the APT here, the first thing I will look at will be the characterisation of the apostle.⁵³ As noted above in our review of the AP, Paul is here

⁵³ A great point of interest in this regard has been the depiction of Paul’s physical appearance in APT 3.3 which I will look at a briefly in chapter 4. For a more detailed discussion see: Robert M. Grant, ‘The Description of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’, *VC* 36, no. 1 (1982): 1–4; A.J. Malherbe, ‘A Physical Description of Paul’, *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986): 170–75; Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996); J. Bollok, ‘The Description of Paul in the Acta Pauli’, in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. J.N. Bremmer (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 1–15.

characterised primarily as a preacher and itinerant minister travelling to existing Christian churches in different cities following the model of Jesus in the gospel traditions.⁵⁴ We can productively compare aspects of the depiction of Paul in the *AP* with tropes and narrative scenes in the canonical gospels by utilising the demonstrative schema developed by Pervo.⁵⁵

Accordingly, the first gospel parallel that Pervo identifies in the *APT* is that of the commissioning scene. In the gospel of *Mark* 6.7-13 we find that Jesus sent out his disciples in groups of two, on a travelling ministry. Pervo argues that Paul recruited and sent out Thecla as a disciple “who follows his path of preaching (baptising) and persecution.”⁵⁶ While this parallel may seem to be contradicted by Paul’s initial hesitation to allow Thecla to follow him or to even be baptised – the narrative reveals that this reluctance is alleviated at the end of the narrative when Thecla had demonstrated the genuineness of her conviction and the divine empowerment that sanctioned her activities. And in the end, he does indeed commission her with what amounts to an apostolic commission. Moreover, Thecla, like Paul himself, follows the characterisation of the ideal disciple in the gospel literature such as *Luke* 9.62 and *Mark* 10.21 - were giving up family and wealth are important conditions of following Jesus. Thecla does this without any compunction forgoing her entire old life of wealth and protected status as an upper-class woman as well as her future security and comfort as a respectably married woman. She leaves all of this behind to follow Paul.

⁵⁴ Pervo presents a detailed list of the parallels from initial ‘epiphany to post-mortem appearances.’ Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 160–62. A.J. Mattill notes that this parallel between Jesus and Paul also appears in the canonical acts where “the similarity of the two figures themselves and the comparableness of both to the ‘man of God’ of the Old Testament and the ‘divine man’ of Graeco-Roman antiquity.” Mattill, ‘The Jesus-Paul’, 20.

⁵⁵ Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 160–62.

⁵⁶ Pervo, 160.

Paul is also characterised as a shepherd – which is a very common metaphor used in the depiction of Jesus in the gospels (ἡ δὲ Θεκλα ὡς ἀμνὸς ἐν ἐρήμῳ περισκοπεῖ τὸν ποιμμένα, οὕτως ἐκείνη τὸν Παῦλον ἐζήτει (3.21). Another and more obvious gospel parallel can be discovered in Paul’s use of macarisms in his preaching, (c.f. Matt 5:3-12) which I will discuss in more detail below. The five loaves that Paul supplies to feed the family of Onesiphorus are also reminiscent of the five loaves and the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:38-44. In addition to these demonstrative examples proffered by Pervo, we can also note that Jesus appears to Thecla in the form of Paul in a sort of reverse reading of the transfiguration (Mk 8:2-4; Matt 17:1-3; Lk 9:28-29) where the glory of the Father is made manifest in the Son.

Another aspect of the characterisation of Paul in the *APT* is developed through the depiction of his relationship with Thecla. One aspect deserving closer investigation in this regard is the romantic/erotic undertones of the initial passion that seems to overwhelm Thecla. Jennifer Ely notes that this reflects a common trope of Greek romance novels, ‘love at first sight’, but with one important distinction – Thecla does not see Paul, she only hears him.⁵⁷ This inversion of a common trope of the genre serves to displace the expectations of an erotic relationship and centres the instantaneous connection between Paul and Thecla on hearing and thus on what is being heard.

As the inspiration of this “new desire and fearful passion” (...κρατεῖται ἐπιθυμία καινῆ πάθει) Paul supplants the traditional hero – the fiancé or husband cementing the apostle as a

⁵⁷ Jennifer Ely, ‘Why Thekla Does Not See Paul: Visual Perception and the Displacement of Erōs in the Acts of Paul and Thekla’, in *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, ed. Marília P. Future Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, and Richard I. Pervo, vol. 16, Ancient Narrative (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing 2012), 4.

new, Christianised, romantic hero.⁵⁸ In this capacity, Paul is consistently depicted as ξένος (stranger), a figure that is completely ‘other’ from the social and political ‘world’ that served as a point of reference making the narrative intelligible to the reader. Cast in this world his teachings promoting celibacy are perceived as a threat to the core social unit of the household which is attested to in the accusations levelled against him; “this is the man ... who does not allow virgins to marry.” (APT 3.16). Similarly, his disruptive message and miracles are met with deep unease; “the crowd ... cried out ... ‘He is a magician, take him away!’”. As I will attempt to show below this depiction plays into the main aim of the narrative to inscribe a new way in which the embodied renunciant can relate to the world and society.

Another aspect of the characterisation of Paul in relation to Thecla is his ‘abandonment’ when she encounters various trials (particularly evident in the Antioch episode). Even at the end when she comes to him as a baptised and fully equipped Christian missionary in her own right, he shows no inclination to accept her as a co-traveller. The theme of Thecla searching for a disappearing Paul has been identified as a repeated motif in the narrative and has been interpreted diversely. Beate Wehn, for example, notes that not only does Paul leave Thecla at crucial turns of her discipleship, he rejects her when she asks to follow him and when she requests baptism.⁵⁹ Sarah Parkhouse also follows this line of argumentation concluding that although Thecla abandons everything for Paul, he ‘cannot bring himself to trust her’ even at the very end.⁶⁰ Barrier, on the other hand, argues that while the text does suggest that Paul abandons

⁵⁸ Kate Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 52.

⁵⁹ As it relates to the issue of baptism in particular Benjamin Edsall argues that Paul’s refusal should be seen in light of “early Christian initiatory practices and, more specifically, in light of early interpretations of Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 1:17.” Benjamin Edsall, ‘(Not) Baptizing Thecla: Early Interpretive Efforts on 1 Cor 1:17’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 71, no. 3 (8 May 2017): 236.

⁶⁰ Sarah Parkhouse, ‘The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas’, *NTS* 63, no. 4 (October 2017): 579.

Thecla this has more to do with “Thecla [being] chosen by God to face these trials alone” thus suggesting a theological reason for why Paul repeatedly leaves Thecla.⁶¹

Although his discussion is particularly focused on the issue of baptism, Benjamin Edsall offers a similar but more nuanced and productive ideological rationale. He argues that Paul’s ‘abandonment’ in the AP reflects attitudes about baptism in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.⁶² He also notes that 1 Corinthians 1 reveals a tradition discovered in Paul’s known writings which revealed that he was particularly careful about administering the sacrament of baptism in light of the divisions being fuelled within congregations as a result of contesting allegiances to diverse missionaries as opposed to the gospel message: “For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1.17).

Building upon these backgrounds and the possibility of a theological reason suggested by Barrier, Edsall goes on to suggest that Paul is deferring Thecla’s baptism in line with the “portrayal of Thecla as an initiate with a prolonged initial stage leading up to baptism.”⁶³ In light of the ascetic message of the narrative, we can further nuance this to argue that Paul’s abandonment of Thecla, reveals peculiarly ascetic initiatory practices which required the renunciant to retreat from the world, fight off temptation, humiliate and overcome the body leading up to complete transformation. Seen in this light it can be argued that Paul’s ‘abandonment’ of Thecla was necessary in as much as ascetic initiation and transformation is a

⁶¹ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 124. Within the context of the Iconium episode where Paul denies knowing Thecla, Barrier argues that this reflects the use of a typical motif in the ancient novel, where the hero and heroine have to dissemble in the face of external threats. Barrier, 140.

⁶² He particularly notes that prevailing attitudes about the gravity of post-baptismal sins during this period serve as the proper context for understanding Paul’s reluctance to baptise Thecla who was yet to fully experience all of the trials that a Christian conviction was likely to invite. Edsall, ‘(Not) Baptizing Thecla’, 245.

⁶³ Edsall, ‘(Not) Baptizing Thecla’, 246.

journey of self-construction and not one which is granted by a mentor.⁶⁴ It is possible to argue that Paul fully expected Thecla to accomplish this transformation in as much as he promises: “Be patient, Thecla. You will receive the water” (APT 3.25).

This is ultimately achieved at the end of the narrative when she has completed her initiation stages and seeks Paul out so he can affirm her transformation which he does by commissioning her as a missionary/apostle in her own right. Contra Parkhouse,⁶⁵ Paul’s reaction at this final stage is wrongly interpreted as mistrust or rejection in as much as he is anointing her for solo ministry, which is particularly significant in light of his ambivalence earlier in the narrative when he doubted that she could even be a worthy disciple in his entourage. At this final stage, however, Thecla has been constructed as an ascetic subject and Paul recognises her as such.⁶⁶

1.5.2. Paul vs Paul: Contradicting Legacies?

In looking at the characterisation of Paul in the APT, a significant amount of academic interest has been invested in investigating the relationship of the “Paul” of the Acts of Paul to the ‘Paul’ of the pastoral epistles. This interest is justified by the apparent literary continuities – e.g., characters, geography, etc and motifs such as marriage, celibacy, gender, etc feature in both

⁶⁴ Johannes N. Vorster, ‘Construction of Culture Through the Construction of Person: The Construction of Thecla in the Acts of Thecla’, in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, vol. 11, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* (Cleveland: T & T Clark International, 2006), 115. While arguing that Paul’s actions constituted a betrayal, Vorster notes that they ironically result in confirming Thecla’s autonomy.

⁶⁵ Parkhouse, ‘The Fetishization of Female Exempla’, 579.

⁶⁶ For example, in the Acts of Thomas, also characterised by an ascetic ideology, the resurrected Jesus sells the Apostle Thomas into slavery in India. This opens the door for Thomas, a reluctant missionary to head into India with the message. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

bodies of literature, as well as the common background of these texts in 2nd century Asia Minor.⁶⁷

I will first look at the potential insight we can receive from shared narrative elements such as the names of characters, and places.

Characters

Demas (APT 3.1; 3.14 cf. 2 Tim 4.10)

Hermogenes (APT 3.1; 3.14 cf. 2 Tim 1.15)

Onesiphorus (APT 3.1-7; 3.23; 3.25 -26 cf. 2 Timothy 1.16; 4.19)

Alexander (APT 4.1 -2; 4.5; 4.8 -11 cf.

Alexander the copper smith in 2 Tim 4:14-15; 1 Tim 1:19-20)

Places

Iconium, Antioch (cf. 2 Tim 3.11)

Dennis R. MacDonald argues that these shared narrative elements indicate that the APT and the pastoral epistles, or at least the traditions behind them, were developed in relation to one another. To support this he notes several factors including; a) in all of early Christian literature Onesiphorus only appears in the APT and the pastorals b) Demas is described as a deserter in both contexts and c) a figure called Alexander is cast as an antagonist.⁶⁸ Moreover, he notes, the APT includes and elaborates on ‘the persecutions (διωγμός) and sufferings (πρόθεσις)’ that the Paul of the pastorals reports to have suffered in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra (2 *Tim.* 3.11). However, significant discontinuities exist in the larger narratives of the APT and the pastorals

⁶⁷ As discussed above this was recognised from the earliest of attestation of the APT discovered in Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17.5).

⁶⁸ MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 60.

that either precludes direct literal dependence or suggest an intentional effort by one author to subvert elements discovered in the other writing. MacDonald suggests that the parallels noted are likely due to a shared knowledge of oral traditions.⁶⁹

Richard Bauckham, on the other hand, argues against this view and instead suggests that the writer of the APT was aware of the Pastoral writings. According to him the divergences evidenced in the APT in its deployment of elements which are familiar from the pastorals reveals a creative exegesis, on the part of the writer of the APT, of texts like 2 Timothy 1.15 (Phygelus and Hermogenes) and 2 Timothy 2.17 (Hymenaeus and Philetus) inspired by common motifs (in this instance desertion)⁷⁰ with some intentional subversion. This, however, is not completely convincing because if the writer of the APT accepted 2 Timothy as inspired (as Bauckham assumes) the license that he takes in his 'creative exegesis' is difficult to justify. On the other hand, if the writer of the APT was acquainted with but was seeking to contradict the portrayal of Paul in the pastoral epistles it seems improbable (although not impossible) that he would have so faithfully rendered the *dramatis personae* and/or their characterisation.

Another and more obvious point of discontinuity between the 'Paul' of the APT and the 'Paul' of the pastoral epistles can be discovered in the seemingly contradictory development of motifs like ascetic renunciation (particularly as it relates to marriage and chastity) and gender. This is particularly true when we read the *APT* in parallel with 1 Timothy.⁷¹ Demonstrative examples of what seem to be contradictory positions in the two texts are:

⁶⁹ MacDonald, 65. MacDonald offers a useful catalogue of three different models proposed to explain the relationship between the APT and the AP; 1. The author of the AP knew and used the PE; 2. The author of the PE used a written source behind the AP and 3. The authors made use of the same oral legends. MacDonald, 62–66.

⁷⁰ Bauckham, 'The Acts of Paul as a Sequel to Acts', 129. Bauckham forwards other examples from other sections of the AP including to the reference of the lion in 2 Timothy 4.17 and the lion encountered by Paul in Ephesus.

⁷¹ Bauckham makes the important note that "we should not suppose that an ancient writer had to think of the Pastorals letters as an indissoluble group of three. Bauckham, 124.

a) Marriage vs Renunciation

The teachings of Paul in the APT (discussed in detail below) promote the chastity of the flesh (ἀγνὴν τὴν σάρκα) and self-control (ἐγκράτεια) as well as proclaiming a special promise to the bodies of virgins; “Blessed are the bodies of virgins, for they will please God and not lose the reward of their purity” (3.6). This message of sexual continence and virginity seems to be directly contrary to 1 Timothy 4:1-3 which asserts that those who ‘forbid marriage’ do so only because they are inspired by deceitful spirits and demons. This difference is quite significant considering that these ascetic teachings are the primary focus of the sermon that serves as the ethical/hermeneutical framework of the APT (as I will argue below).

b) A Woman who teaches

As we have seen above in our summary of the APT, the Thecla episode concludes with Paul commissioning Thecla to teach the word of God. This seems to be a dramatically different attitude to the command in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 which, as noted by Tertullian in his efforts to discredit the Pauline origins of the AP, prohibits a woman from teaching.⁷²

On this basis, MacDonald argues that the writer of the Pastoral Epistles was intentionally seeking to offer a corrective to two traditions taken and developed in the APT. The first of this is a reception of the apostle Paul which characterised him as radically ascetic. Secondly, according to MacDonald, the Pastorals were opposing a practice, at least amongst some Christians, of women teachers and leaders. He supports this argument by noting that unlike the Paul of the APT, who is opposed to social institutions such as the household and the city and who is an itinerant and charismatic missionary, the Paul of the Pastorals is characterised as being pro-

⁷² 1 Timothy 2:11–12: “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.”

marriage and the household order as seen in 1 Timothy, strict ecclesiastical succession and order as found in 1 Timothy and Titus and passive martyrdom as developed in 2 Timothy.⁷³

Contra MacDonald, Bauckham argues that the influence is in the opposite direction whereby the writer of the APT is reacting to aspects of 1 Timothy, with which he disagreed and likely reflecting the writer's theological interpretation of Paul's letters. He concludes, however, that "his Paulinism is an idiosyncratic interpretation of Paul, but it is clear that he made a genuine attempt to attribute Pauline themes and language to his Paul."⁷⁴ These views, although diversely developed by MacDonald, Bauckham and other scholars all lead to the conclusion that the APT and the Pastoral Epistles reflect thoughts held by two different and possibly conflicting Christian traditions.⁷⁵

Other scholars, however, argue that the seeming contradictions between the APT and the Pastorals is largely the making of contemporary scholarship. In this line Dunn argues (primarily against MacDonald's thesis), that the conflicts are only surface level, proposing instead that the Pastorals are simply legislating Christian ethics that are realised in narrative format in the AP.⁷⁶ Particularly as it relates to the APT, Dunn attempts to reconcile the various contradictions one by one, suggesting that the writer of 1 Timothy was offering practical solutions to contextual issues, such as the financial burden widows posed, marriage as a remedy for sexual immorality and a

⁷³ This argument seems to be more convincing than the possibility raised by Bauckham and developed further by Matthijs den Dulk who argues that the writer of the AP took up parts of the Pauline corpus that fitted his ideology while ignoring other parts. Through this method of selection, he sought to promote the image of the 'Paul' of 2 Timothy versus the 'Paul' of 1 Timothy, likely because he did not accept 1 Timothy as authoritative. den Dulk, 'I Permit No Woman to Teach Except for Thecla: The Curious Case of the Pastoral Epistles and the "Acts of Paul" Reconsidered'.

⁷⁴ Bauckham, 'The Acts of Paul as a Sequel to Acts', 139.

⁷⁵ So den Dulk, 'I Permit No Woman to Teach Except for Thecla: The Curious Case of the Pastoral Epistles and the "Acts of Paul" Reconsidered'; Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* by Ross Shepard Kraemer (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷⁶ Dunn, 'The Acts of Paul', 47–100.

concern for women having authority over men instead of postulating theologies of virginity, sexual renunciation/asceticism and the ministry of women in the Church.⁷⁷

Susan E. Hylan, also argues against the notion that the APT and the Pastorals represent competing Christian traditions.⁷⁸ She notes that while the two texts have different “genres, aims, and intended audiences” they nonetheless reflect similar assumptions about cultural norms, conventions and gender roles and reveal prevailing tensions arising from expectations of women to be both modest and active in their households and communities.⁷⁹ Hylan also argues that variety in perspective does not necessarily suggest two or more discrete groups as a variety of views can and generally do exist within the same interpretive community.⁸⁰

These harmonising efforts offer interesting insights, especially as it relates to the complexities that exist within the same interpretive traditions as well as the common cultural and normative frameworks that are shared amongst different communities in the same milieu.⁸¹ Even so they do not offer a convincing enough explication for the readily observable differences in the ideological orientation of the two ‘Paul’s. Building upon the work already done by Outi Lehtipuu, I will here argue that the variety of interpretations and appropriations of ‘Paul’ and seemingly contradictory characterisations of Paul arise from an ambivalence that exists in Paul’s own writings that are being used as a source in the 2nd-century appropriations of the apostle.⁸²

One example of such ambivalence, particularly relevant for our discussion of the appropriation of the apostle in the ascetic imagination, is 1 Corinthians 7, This text has been at

⁷⁷ Dunn, 59–68.

⁷⁸ Hylan, *A Modest Apostle*.

⁷⁹ Hylan, 89–90.

⁸⁰ Hylan, 10.

⁸¹ Hylan in particular offers great insight in this regard. Hylan, *A Modest Apostle*.

⁸² Outi Lehtipuu, ‘The Example of Thecla and the Example(s) of Paul: Disputing Women’s Role in Early Christianity’, in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer, vol. 263, WUNT (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 359–60.

the centre of Christian discourse on marriage and celibacy from at least the early second century.⁸³ As I will argue in detail below, the APT reflects a narrative exposition of a distinctly ascetic reception of Paul, complete with an Encratite apostle. In this context the character of Thecla is developed as the embodiment of the woman described in 1 Corinthians 7.34: the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit.

This same text, however, also contains material that could be and indeed was used in the development of responses to curtail ascetic interpretations – potentially including what can be discovered in the pastorals. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. 8-15 gives instructions to the married, as well as acknowledging, that widows could remarry. It can be argued that the APT recognizes this ambivalence through its characterisation of Onesiphorus and his family, but it seems equally likely that the received tradition about Onesiphorus included a household (cf. 2 Tim. 1:16-18 4:19).

In a similar vein, the Pauline tradition also contains examples of female leaders (e.g. Euodia and Syntyche mentioned in Philippians 4.2) and potentially even a female apostle (Junia mentioned in Romans 16.7) as well as the very important exhortation in Galatians 3.28 which recognizes Christian identity as something surpassing gender distinction (see below) which could have served as ready inspiration for the development of the female apostle, Thecla. The writer of 1 Timothy, on the other hand, takes up other Pauline texts to develop a ‘Paul’ who speaks to the role and place of women in the church (1 Cor 11. 7-9 14.33-36). This Paul also makes reference to the Genesis creation myth in much the same vein as 1 Corinthians 11: 7-9 but interestingly he

⁸³ Hunter, ‘Reception and Interpretation of Paul’, 164 - 69. David Hunter, offers a useful catalogue of the diverse range of positions about marriage and celibacy inspired by this text in the first three centuries of the Christian era.

ignores or ‘edits’ the Paul of 1 Corinthians who assumes women will ‘pray’ and ‘prophecy’ in church.

In this sense, we can argue that both texts employed ‘creative exegesis’⁸⁴ (as argued by Bauckham) to receive and appropriate earlier Pauline writings, which themselves reflect multiple and seemingly conflicting attitudes about sexual ethos as well as the role of women in service to the specific ideological needs of the author. With this in mind, I argue that reading the texts solely in contradistinction to one another or with the intention to harmonise their differences to create a unified ‘Paul’ only serves to obscure their particular reception of Paul and what this can reveal about the interpretive potential of the texts used.

Having briefly looked at the characterisation of Paul in the APT both in terms of internal literary development and as it relates to its reception and appropriation of aspects of the Pauline legacy, I will now move on to look more closely at the ascetic imagination of this text as revealed through both to its discourse and the praxis it depicts.

1.5.3. Ascetic Discourse in the APT: The Gospel of Paul

The ascetic discourse of the APT is handily summarised in the sermon that Paul gives in Iconium at the very start of this narrative (3.5-6). Delivered in a series of macarisms I will argue that this sermon serves as the hermeneutical and ethical/theological framework of the APT.

Paul gives his sermon in a house church ministering to a congregation that had enthusiastically welcomed him. For a reader familiar with other Christian literature, this is a recognisable setting for a missionary apostle and would lead to the expectation that this sermon will articulate the central message of Christian missionaries, the gospel. The narrator strengthens

⁸⁴ Bauckham, ‘The Acts of Paul as a Sequel to Acts’, 132.

this sense by introducing the message as the “λογος θεοῦ περὶ ἐγκρατείας καὶ ἀναστάσεως” (the word of God about self-control and resurrection). This introduction anticipates the conditional form that the message will take as well as its content. Accordingly, ‘self-control’ (ἐγκρατεία) becomes the condition for the ultimate Christian prize ‘resurrection’ (ἀναστάσεως) and as a consequence the structuring framework for the ensuing parenthesis and the Christian praxis promoted by the narrator in the rest of the narrative.

APT 3.5-6

Μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ
τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they
shall see God.

μακάριοι οἱ ἀγνήν τὴν σάρκα τηρήσαντες,
ὅτι αὐτοὶ ναὸς θεοῦ γενήσονται.

Blessed are those who have kept the
flesh chaste/pure, for they will be a
temple of God.

μακάριοι οἱ ἐγκρατεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοῖς λαλήσει
ὁ θεός.

Blessed are the self-controlled, for
God will speak with them.

μακάριοι οἱ ἀποταξάμενοι τῷ κόσμῳ
τούτῳ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ εὐαρεστήσουσιν τῷ θεῷ.

Blessed are those who have
renounced/taken leave of the world,
for they will be pleasing to God.

μακάριοι οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ
ἔχοντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὸν
θεὸν.

Blessed are those who having a wife
are as those not having a wife, for
they will inherit God.

μακάριοι οἱ φόβον ἔχοντες θεοῦ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ
ἄγγελοι θεοῦ γενήσονται.

Blessed are those who fear God, for
they will be angels of God.

μακάριοι οἱ τρέμοντες τὰ λόγια κυρίου, ὅτι
αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

μακάριοι οἱ σοφίαν λαβόντες Ἰησοῦ
Χριστοῦ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ ὑψίστου
κληθήσονται.

μακάριοι οἱ τὸ βάπτισμα τηρήσαντες, ὅτι
αὐτοὶ ἀναπαύσονται πρὸς τὸν πατέρα καὶ
τὸν υἱόν.

μακάριοι οἱ σύνεσιν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
χωρήσαντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐν φωτὶ γενήσονται.

μακάριοι οἱ δι' ἀγάπην Θεοῦ ἐξεληθόντες
τοῦ σχήματος τοῦ κοσμικοῦ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ
ἀγγέλους κρινούσιν καὶ ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ
πατρὸς εὐλογηθήσονται καὶ οὐκ ὄψονται
ἡμέραν κρίσεως πικρᾶν.

μακάρια τὰ σώματα τῶν παρθένων, ὅτι
αὐτὰ εὐαρεστήσουσιν τῷ Θεῷ καὶ οὐκ
ἀπολέσουσιν τὸν μισθὸν τῆς ἀγνείας
αὐτῶν· ὅτι ὁ λόγος τοῦ πατρὸς ἔργον
αὐτοῖς γενήσεται σωτηρίας εἰς ἡμέραν τοῦ
αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἀνάπαυσιν ἔξουσιν εἰς αἰῶνα
αἰῶνος.

Blessed are those who tremble over
the words of the Lord, for they will be
consoled.

Blessed are those who receive the
wisdom of Jesus Christ, for they will
be called the sons of the most high.

Blessed are those who kept their
baptism, for they will rest with the
father and the son.

Blessed are those who have an
understanding of Jesus Christ, for they
will be in light.

Blessed are those who because of their
love of God come out of the image of
the world, for they will judge angels
and they will be blessed on the right-
hand God and will not see judgment's
bitter day.

Blessed are the bodies of virgins, for
they will please God and not lose the
reward of their purity, for the father's
word will be the work of salvation on

the day of his son and they shall rest
forever.

The opening beatitude is a verbatim quotation of Matthew 5.8 demonstrating direct continuity with the gospel tradition, known to the writer and most likely his intended readership.⁸⁵ For such a reader this marker of continuity would undoubtedly serve as an additional marker of reliability. Another, although less explicit, echo of gospel literature is discovered in the fourth beatitude: “Blessed are those who have renounced/taken leave of the world ...”. This calls to mind Luke 9.62; Mark 10.21 (see above) and even more Luke 14.33 which presents ‘renouncing all’ as a precondition of being a disciple of Jesus. Within the context of this central discourse, this injunction becomes an urgent and definitive call for total renunciation as demonstrated in the rest of the narrative.

In addition to this use of materials from the Gospels, the beatitudes in the APT also take up and develop metaphors and themes recognisable from other Christian literature. The second beatitude, for example, takes up the imagery of the believer as the temple of God (ναὸς θεοῦ) discovered in many other Christian writings (1 Cor. 3.16-17; 6.19-20; 2 Cor. 6.16; Eph. 2:21; 1 Peter 2:4-10 Rev. 3:12). This is a particularly potent imagery developing conceptions of holy space in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. the Jerusalem Temple) as the sole embodiment of the potent presence of God.⁸⁶ As such it was the primary focus of Israel’s worship and purity practices.⁸⁷ In

⁸⁵ Jeremy Barrier argues that this quotation may have not been included in the Coptic version of the APT, which has unfortunately survived in fragmentary form, therefore this remains only a theoretical argument. Barrier, ‘Asceticism in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’s Beatitudes: The Coptic Heidelberg Papyrus as an Exegetical Test Case’.

⁸⁶ Levine, ‘On the Presence of God in Biblical Religion,’ 83.

⁸⁷ Philip W. Comfort, ‘Temple’ in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (eds.) *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 923.

Christian literature, this imagery was taken up and developed in diverse ways.⁸⁸ It is for example used to refer to a spiritualised realisation of the eschatological temple⁸⁹ or to depict the Christian community and the Jewish temple in terms of being holy and consecrated.⁹⁰ It is also used to signify divine immanence in the re-configured relationship between God and humanity according to the Christian gospel. In this line Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 3.16

<p>Οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι ναὸς θεοῦ ἐστε, καὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα τοῦ Θεοῦ οἰκεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν</p>	<p>Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?</p>
--	---

1 Corinthians 6.19

<p>ἢ οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι τὸ σῶμα ὑμῶν ναὸς τοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν ἁγίου πνεύματός ἐστιν οὗ ἔχετε ἀπὸ θεοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐστὲ ἑαυτῶν;</p>	<p>Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own.</p>
--	---

In these verses, Paul applies the temple metaphor diversely. In the first instance, he utilises temple imagery to refer to the sanctity of the church as a collective to stress that any division or factionalism is a threat to the sacred space that is the Christian community. His use of temple imagery in 1 Corinthians 6.19, on the other hand, seems to be specifically about the

⁸⁸ Mark Bonnington, 'New Temples in Corinth: Paul's Use of Temple Imagery in the Ethics of the Corinthian Correspondence' in T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole (eds.), *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

⁸⁹ For example, Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia, 77 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1975); Bertil Gartner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament*, SNTS 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). With qualifications as to theological ramifications Nicholas Perrin seems to also fall in this camp: Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Temple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

⁹⁰ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 120 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

individual. More specifically Paul describes the human body as the temple of God which is defiled by sexual immorality Paul. This echoes the language of cultic purity that is associated with temple imagery in the Hebrew bible.

The APT similarly picks up on the requirements of cultic purity particularly associated with sexual behaviour in its use of temple imagery. Unlike Corinthians, however, the Paul of the APT sets up purity/chastity as a condition to become the temple of God as opposed to it being used to describe the present reality of the believer. This is a significant nuance that establishes a sort of ascetic initiation as a condition for fully attaining sanctity. This serves to further underscore the theological basis for Thecla's delayed baptism as discussed above.

The fifth beatitude also takes up 1 Corinthians, this time alluding to its instructions to practice continence within marriage (1 Cor 7.5) It goes on to directly quote 1 Corinthians 7.29 which counsels' chastity even to those already married: "From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none." Read in conjunction with the previous three beatitudes which are focused on the chastity of the body (as discussed above), the importance of self-control, and renunciation of the world this injunction loses the ambivalence that it may have had within the original context of 1 Corinthians 7 where it is immediately preceded by verses that establish that this counsel is from Paul and not a command of the Lord (1 Cor 7.25); that it is better to marry than to be sexually tempted (1 Cor 7.9) and that the married are not categorically more sinful than the unmarried (1 Cor 7.28). The APT, on the other hand, allows for no such room making chastity/ascetic renunciation a condition for inheriting God and thus the ultimate end for all of the faithful.

The final beatitude is the strongest articulation of the ascetic message that we discover worded in various ways in the rest of the sermon. Key in this regard, are the references to the

body (σῶμα), virgins (παρθένος), and salvation (σωτηρία). The summary here underscores the focus on the body as the locus for self-control. Virgins are the most perfect example of realised ἐγκρατεῖα. Through self-control the ‘virgin’ empowers her body liberating it from all ties to the ‘world’ and thus preparing it for the ultimate victory over embodiment – resurrection.⁹¹

The significance of virginity as an emblem of self-control becomes even more important when the subject is female - because in choosing to retain virginity a woman is relinquishing an important currency that is conventionally bartered for social status and economic security.⁹² A woman who forgoes marriage is thus essentially entering a liminal state – whereby she does not attain the equivalent of the age of majority. A sermon that makes virginity a key condition to salvation, therefore, entails renegotiating every aspect of individual and social existence.

This brief look at Paul’s sermon in the APT reveals that the writer makes use of earlier traditions to develop a decidedly Encratite message. Dunn argues that the example of Onesiphorus and his household is used by the writer of the APT to balance the asceticism reflected here. He suggests that this indicates the conformity of the APT with other Pauline texts including the PE. As noted above, however, the example of Onesiphorus could as easily be explained by the received tradition. If we remove the impetus to harmonise the APT with the PE, it is still possible to argue that the ambivalence that is noted in 1 Corinthians 7 and other Pauline writings suggests itself to interpretation in either direction.⁹³ Moreover, the unfolding of the rest

⁹¹ An important proviso here is that nowhere in the APT is a dualistic anthropology indicated. The body is firmly established as the locus of salvation. This locus is corrupted, but it is possible to ‘rescue’ it by removing threats to its integrity through various acts of ascetic renunciation.

⁹² Elizabeth Castelli, ‘Virginity and Its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2, no. 1 (1986): 61–88.

⁹³ Kathy L. Gaca, ‘Driving Aphrodite from the World: Tatian’s Encratite Principles OF Sexual Renunciation’, *The Journal of Theological Studies, NEW SERIES* 53, no. 1 (2002): 28–52. Gaca notes that one of the cornerstones of Tatian’s argument for sexual renunciation is an exegesis of Paul’s instructions about continence in 1 Corinthians 7.

of the narrative with its focus on the vindication of the ideal virgin Thecla, reveals that this is ascetic discourse is the key interpretive framework for the APT.

1.5.4. Ascetic Performances

As I have attempted to show above the ascetic discourse in the APT is primarily concerned with articulating the boundaries between “the world” and the new ascetic identity that is being (re) formed, with a particular focus on the body as the locus of ascetic transformation. These boundaries are developed by the renunciant in her interaction with the various systems that constitute the world. Within the narrative world of the APT we see this developed in relation to Thecla’s renunciation of all normative aspects of socialised existence including wealth and privilege as well as marriage and procreation. A significant aspect of the characterisation of renunciation within this context is that it is not a one-off act but an ongoing continuum that is tested and affirmed at various junctures. As we have seen above, sexual renunciation – chastity – is a central element in the ascetic discourse framing the APT. We will look at how this unfolds in relation to Thecla in the next section. Before moving on to that, however, let us briefly look at the APT’s treatment of other renunciatory performances.

1.5.4.1. Fasting

Thecla’s first step onto the ascetic continuum is through the renunciation of food and drink.

APT 3.8

Καὶ εἶπεν ἡ Θεοκλεΐα Καινόν σοι
ἔχω εἰπεῖν θεώρημα, Θάμυρι. καὶ
γὰρ ἡμέρας τρεῖς καὶ νύκτας

And Theocleia said, “I have a new spectacle
to tell you about, Thamyris. For three days

τρεις Θεκλα από τῆς θυρίδος οὐκ
ἐγήγεῤται, οὔτε ἐπὶ τὸ φαγεῖν
οὔτε ἐπὶ τὸ πιεῖν ...

and three nights, Thecla has not risen from
the window, neither to eat nor to drink ...

This abstention has largely been identified as a common trope of the genre, demonstrating lovesickness.⁹⁴ This is implied within the narrative, itself, when Theocleia claims that Thecla has developed an immodest, presumably, erotic, attachment to the ‘ἀνδρὶ ζένω’ (foreign man). She blames his ‘deceptive’ and ‘divisive’ teaching which she recognises to be the source of her daughter’s out-of-character and, to her, troubling behaviour. It is significant that she points out the influence of the message and not the man. As rightly argued by Jennifer Eyl, this reflects one example of how the APT subverts the romantic motif of the novel by focusing on ‘hearing’ instead of ‘sight’ as the significant medium for the attachment developed - “*eros* ...because enters the soul via the pathway of the eyes.”⁹⁵

It is also, therefore, plausible to assume that this departure from the familiar template also serves to guide the reader to expect a change in the outcome. In which case, we can argue that what is being depicted is not ‘lovesickness’ – contra Eyl – but a manifestation of a new state of being that is inspired by what is being heard. Accordingly, Thecla’s abstinence, far from being a loss of appetite serving as a reliable indicator of lovesickness, is rather a religiously inspired fast indicating an immediate commitment to Paul’s ascetic discourse. This interpretation is further strengthened if her three days and three nights of fasting is being deployed as a symbolically

⁹⁴ For example, Jennifer Eyl, ‘Why Thekla Does Not See Paul: Visual Perception and the Displacement of Erōs in the Acts of Paul and Thekla’, in *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, ed. Marília P. Future Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, and Richard I. Pervo, vol. 16, Ancient Narrative (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012), 3–20.

⁹⁵ Eyl, 13. Having made this argument, Eyl nonetheless maintains the ascription of Thecla’s renunciation to ‘lovesickness.’

loaded allusion to Christ's time in the tomb followed by resurrection into a new existence.⁹⁶ Moreover, Theocleia, is an imminently unreliable character, unfailingly representing the 'mainstream' misunderstanding and opposition to Paul's gospel. There is therefore no doubt that the reader is expected to understand that Theocleia's interpretation of Thecla's response in terms of erotic love is the wrong interpretation.

The broader narrative context also offers a very interesting insight into the APT's understanding of food within its ascetic framework. Thecla's fast is neatly bookended by two other references to eating. The first context (preceding Thecla's fast) in which we find food discussed is the "breaking of the fast" at the house of Onesiphorus where Paul was welcomed when he first arrived in Iconium.

APT 3.5

Καὶ εἰσελθόντος Παύλου εἰς τὸν
τοῦ Ὀνησιφόρου οἶκον ἐγένετο
χαρὰ μεγάλη, καὶ κλίσις
γονάτων καὶ κλάσις ἄρτου καὶ
λόγος θεοῦ περὶ ἐγκρατείας καὶ
ἀναστάσεως ...

And Paul having entered into the house of
Onesiphorus, there was great joy, and
bending of knees, breaking of bread, and the
word of God concerning self-control and
resurrection ...

The timing and location of this meal, during Paul's initial welcome by the congregation in a house church, is significant. As we have noted above, this not only indicates that a believing church already existed in Iconium but also evidences continuity between the APT and other texts

⁹⁶ So, Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 89.

which establish the household as the locus of earliest Christianity.⁹⁷ In this familiar setting the ‘breaking of the bread’ accompanied by joy and the ‘bending of knees’ is clearly intended to denote a eucharistic meal to the knowledgeable reader.⁹⁸ In this context, the act of eating is elevated to a significant ritual central to Christian social, theological, and ethical identity.⁹⁹ This is the kind of eating that is approved according to the ascetic framework of the APT.

We find the second reference to eating in the APT in a completely different setting. Thamyras, perturbed by Thecla’s rejection and seeking information about Paul invites Demas and Hermogenes to his house.

APT 3. 13

Καὶ ἀπήλθον εἰς πολύτιμον	And they came to the expensive meal with
δεῖπνον καὶ πολὺν οἶνον καὶ	much wine, great wealth, and a splendid
πλουτοῦτον μέγαν καὶ τράπεζαν	table.
λαμπράν·	

There is a clear contrast between the description of the meal laid out by Thamyras and the previous example of ‘Christianised’ (ascetic even) feasting which helps us understand both types of eating within the context of the APT. The acceptable eating in the APT reflects a particularly austere eucharistic tradition practiced amongst ascetics seeking strict renunciation and thus favoured a simple bread and water eucharistic meal representing a dissent from the bread and

⁹⁷ Carolyn A. Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); David L. Balch and Carolyn A. Osiek, eds., *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2003); Carolyn A. Osiek, *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

⁹⁸ Parallels with Mt. 26:17–30, Mk. 14:12–26, Lk. 22:7–39 and Jn. 13:1–17:26 Lukan Acts of the Apostles, 2:42, 2:46) 1 Cor 10.16; 11.24; Didache 9.1 -10.7

⁹⁹ For a detailed discussion of the development and character of the Christian Eucharistic meal, see Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis, MIN: Fortress Press, 2009).

wine model.¹⁰⁰ This austere feasting highlights the decadence of Thamyris' rich and very expensive (πολύτιμος) meal accompanied by excessive drinking and a show of splendour (λαμπρος). Moreover, where the Christian feasting was accompanied by praise and ethical teaching this excess is accompanied by wicked machinations inaugurating the persecution of Paul and Thecla in Iconium.

Thecla's fast, inspired by Paul's ascetic discourse thus denotes her alignment with the ascetic tradition of eating and away from the latter indulgent type of feasting, which she presumably partook off in her former identity. This initial act of renunciation, which causes great consternation to those around her and is followed by persecution paves the way for a fully actualised 'ascetic eating' when she shares in the eucharist with Paul and the family of Onesiphorus following her faithful witness and miraculous delivery in Iconium.

APT 3.25

Καὶ ἦν ἔσω ἐν τῷ μνημείῳ ἀγάπη
πολλή, Παύλου ἀγαλλιωμένου
καὶ Ὀνησφόρου καὶ πάντων.
Εἶχον δὲ ἄρτους πέντε καὶ
λάχανα καὶ ὕδωρ, καὶ
εὐφραίνοντο ἐπὶ τοῖς ὁσίοις τοῦ
Χριστοῦ.

And within the tomb, there was much love,
as Paul Onesiphorus and everyone was
rejoicing. But they had five loaves of bread,
vegetables, and water, and it caused them to
be gladdened concerning the holy works of
Christ.

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly for our purposes McGowan notes that this tradition was more evident in Syria and Asia. Andrew McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999), 254–55. This pattern is also reflected elsewhere in the Acts of Paul (6.1; 9.21; 12.4) suggesting that composition of the Eucharistic meals in the APT is not coincidental.

In addition to the composition of the meal featuring bread and water, the reference to joy and an attitude of worship parallels the depiction of the eucharistic meal described in 3.5.

In this manner, these series of meals serve to establish a distinctive pattern that serves to circumscribe an ascetic way of eating that helps to actualise the central ethos of renunciation and opposition to the world.

1.5.4.2. Wealth

Another form of renunciatory practice that we can identify in the APT is that of wealth. The APT demonstrates that ascetic commitment also entails rejecting wealth – other than of course that which can be made serviceable to the faith community (e.g., Queen Tryphaena). As we have seen above, Paul himself is cast as an *itinerant* preacher dependent on the hospitality of wealthy householders (3.5), much in the same pattern as he is characterised in the epistles and the Lukan Acts. This pattern is also replicated in the relationship between Queen Tryphaena and Thecla (4.2). However, while the APT does retain this familiar relationship between itinerant preachers and wealthy patrons, it not unexpectedly focuses more on the renunciation of wealth as the natural outcome of conversion.

Thus, in addition to her rejecting future wealth and security by refusing to marry the wealthy and influential Thamyris, Thecla also renounces personal wealth when she symbolically divests herself of personal items such as jewellery and a silver mirror when she sets out to follow Paul (APT 3.18). Similarly, and equally pertinent, Onesiphorus, the householder who is Paul's host in Iconium abandons everything to follow him to the tombs with his entire family (APT 3.28). Thecla's patron in Antioch Tryphaena also offers to transfer all of her wealth to Thecla (APT 4.14). This offer is presumably rejected by Thecla because we learn that Tryphaena goes

on to send Thecla wealth to be given to the poor once she had reunited with Paul in Myra (APT 4.16). Significantly, Thecla turns over this gift to Paul.

These depictions all reflect a consistent ethos promoting detachment from personal wealth as a component reflecting true commitment, a liberation from the world, and an integral step on the road to ascetic self-transformation.¹⁰¹ While fostering this understanding, however, the writer of the APT remains very cognizant of the role played by wealthy patrons, reflecting the significance of such persons in early Christian missions, as reflected in the rest of the AP as well as other Christian writings. Accordingly, the APT is careful to differentiate between wealth and privilege as arrogantly wielded by characters like Thamyris and Alexander, the love of wealth and status as symbolised by Theocleia versus the righteous use of wealth, in the support of ministers and the poor that is embodied by Onesiphorus and Tryphaena. This reflects a similar type of nuance as we have seen developed in relation to food and the practice of eating above in that in the same way as there is “bad eating and good eating” there is acceptable wealth and wealth that is to be rejected.

1.5.4.3. Status

Another aspect of renunciation – related to wealth but slightly different – that is developed in significantly more detail in the APT is that of status. Thecla’s commitment to Paul’s ascetic message is met by immediate resistance from those around her because it signalled a repudiation of the social and political order sustained by clear demarcations of status and role. In her newly adopted identity, Thecla, formerly the virgin daughter of Theocleia and the betrothed of Thamyris, is now in the words of her own mother an outlaw deserving of death by immolation. Thus, persecuted and condemned by her own people, she is divested of all status and

¹⁰¹ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

rights. This is nowhere more poignantly described than in her response to Alexander’s assault in Antioch (APT 4.1).

Καὶ ἀνέκραγεν πικρῶς λέγουσα Μὴ	And she cried out bitterly, “Do not force the
βίαση τὴν ξένην, μὴ βίαση τὴν τοῦ	stranger! Do not force the servant of God. I
δούλην. Ἰκονιέων εἰμὶ πρώτη, καὶ διὰ τὸ	am a leading woman of the Iconians, and on
μὴ θέλειν με γαμηθῆναι Θαμύριδι	account of my not wishing to marry
ἐκβέβλημαι τῆς πόλεως.	Thamyris, I was cast out of the city.

In this moment of great danger, Thecla is forced to confront her new liminal status as she attempts to locate her newly adopted identity in relation to the familiar social and political order. She starts by truthfully claiming to be a stranger but must have quickly realised this did not afford her any protection, particularly since Paul was unwilling to claim her as his companion. Having thus been ‘abandoned’ by him she then attempts to identify herself in terms of her new faith and calls herself the servant of God. It seems, however, that she had not come far enough in her ascetic development for this to be a convincing enough claim even to herself. So, desperately, she falls back on the known and guaranteed protection of her previous identity, as a leading woman of the Iconians, affiliated (even if no longer) to a notable male figure, Thamyris.

Interestingly, we can note that this lack of any recognisable status within the social order and not her faith per se is the primary reason why Thecla is persecuted. We see this in both the Iconium and the Antiochene episodes. In both instances, by renouncing the normative practices and roles of the society Thecla becomes the “other.” This “otherness” inspires fear and hate in the society demonstrating the mutuality of the separation of the ascetic from the world – i.e., by rejecting the world, the ascetic is also rejected by it.

The APT's narrative treatment of the praxis of renunciation particularly as it relates to food, wealth, and status that we have briefly looked at serves to actualise the ascetic discourse articulated in the Pauline macarisms above. Having thus looked at the ascetic ideology of the APT and its reception and appropriation of earlier Christian writings I will now turn to look at its peculiar treatment of gender as one aspect of embodiment. This is significant in as much as the APT – as we have seen above – understands the body as the locus in which salvation is realised. With this perspective in mind, it is possible to argue that the depiction of Thecla in the APT offer us insight into its central objective to inscribe a new way in which the embodied and gendered renunciant can relate to the world and society.

1.6. Thecla: Gender Imagined and Re-Imagined

As one of the relatively rare examples of an early Christian text with a female protagonist the Thecla narrative has invited a wide range of academic interest. Much of the academic study of the characterisation of Thecla has focused on how the APT depicts gender and the way in which the conversion and Christian experiences of Thecla are determined by her gender.¹⁰²

¹⁰² As may be reflected somewhat in my discussion below this trajectory of study has been characterised by a great deal of diversity, both in the development of feminist historiography and the responses engendered by such research. To understand the diversity and extent of research in this line see: Virginia Burrus, *Chastity As Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987); Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983); Kate Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*, (Dublin: Bardic Press, 2012); Carolyn A. Osiek, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); Shelly Matthews, 'Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography', *JFSR* 17, no. 2 (2001): 47–53; Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (New York, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011); B. Diane Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth*, (New York, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2010); Susan E. Hulen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Sarah Parkhouse, 'The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas', *NTS* 63, no. 4 (October 2017): 567–87; John C. B. Petropoulos, 'Transvestite Virgin with a Cause the Acta Pauli et Thecla and Late Antique "Proto Feminism"', in *Greece and Gender*, ed. B. Berggreen and N Marinatos (Bergen: Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens 2, 1995), 125–39; Blossom Stefaniw, 'Becoming Men, Staying Women: Gender Ambivalence in Christian Apocryphal Texts and Contexts', *FT* 18, no. 3 (2010): 341–355; Matthijs den Dulk, 'I Permit No Woman to Teach Except for Thecla: The Curious Case of the Pastoral Epistles and the "Acts of Paul" Reconsidered', *NovT*

Building upon this earlier scholarship, I will here primarily attempt to look at the characterisation and transformation of Thecla in relation to the ideological motives of the writer discussed above.

With this in mind, the key question I will seek to answer here is what is the telos of ascetic transformation with regard to Thecla and how is that goal influenced by her gender? To that end, I will engage with the diverse answers to this question that have been proffered in contemporary scholarship before proposing what I find to be the most convincing alternative.

1.6.1. Proto-Feminist Church Leader?

A reading of Thecla emerging from a feminist theological and historical school of thought which utilises the text as an entry into the world of 2nd-century Christian women and their communities has proposed that she represents a suppressed tradition of female church leaders. In this process of retrieval Thecla has been understood as an idealised member of an early Christian community which repudiated normative social and sexual roles to embrace a liberated Christian identity.¹⁰³ As particularly argued by MacDonald, the thoughts and artifacts of this community were transmitted by women through oral legends and folklore, however, this community did not survive because they were censored and erased with the formalisation of a patriarchal ecclesiastical order. Critique of this line of interpretation has come from two different angles. The first line of argumentation has primarily focused on the rejection of the ideologies

54, no. 2 (2012): 176–203; Lynne C. Boughton, 'From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License From Apostolic Practice in the "Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla"', *TJR* 71, no. 3 (1991): 362–83.

¹⁰³ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*; Burrus, 'Mimicking Virgins'; MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*; Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows*. Within this framework the possibility that this community was comprised of female converts – the 'widows' referred to in 1 Timothy and/or that the narrative was written by female writers has been proposed. The pre-dominantly female cast of characters, particularly in the Antiochene narrative, and the positive characterization of women versus male aggressors and representatives of a patriarchal order is used as an example for withing the text to support this possibility. Reviews of the primary representatives of this view can be discovered in: Matthews, 'Thinking of Thecla'; Peter W. Dunn, 'Women's Liberation, the Acts of Paul, and Other Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles A Review of Some Recent Interpreters', *AP* 4 (1 January 1994): 245–62.

(feminist historiography) and methodologies (folkloric analysis) employed in reaching these conclusions.¹⁰⁴ Lynne Boughton, for example, dismisses the possibility that the APT can serve as a resource to retrieve early Christian traditions by arguing that it represents a second century misunderstanding of 1st century scriptural and normative teachings. She also argues that the APT does not necessarily reflect the lived realities of early Christian communities, which makes it not only doctrinally dubious but also ahistorical.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Margaret Howe argues, that the APT is wrongly being used as a manual for female liberation or as evidence for an egalitarian early Christian community when in actual fact its Encratite ideology is actually more restrictive and controlling of women than traditionally accepted Christian teachings. She argues that contrary to feminist arguments Thecla is prohibited from sexual and social fulfilment through marriage.¹⁰⁶ This line of argumentation, however, seems to be determined by canonical and confessional bias in favour of the ‘orthodox’/‘proto-orthodox’ – and a predetermination that whatever is perceived as ‘unorthodox’ is automatically suspect. Such a bias is even more difficult to ignore in studies that are seeking to be offering a corrective for perceived ideological motivations (feminist) clouding the process of interpretation.

A more credible correction to earlier efforts that sought to retrieve a female led and proto feminist early Christian community (communities) from the narrative of the APT is proposed by Esther Ng.¹⁰⁷ She notes that some of the assumptions that need to hold to support such a

¹⁰⁴ Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:220–22; Dunn, ‘Women’s Liberation, the Acts of Paul, and Other Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles A Review of Some Recent Interpreters’.

¹⁰⁵ Boughton, ‘From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License From Apostolic Practice in the “Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla”’. Boughton, unaccountably, puts to question Thecla’s chastity by claiming she ‘flirted’ with Paul and that she wore male clothing. Boughton, 378.

¹⁰⁶ E. Margaret Howe, ‘Interpretations of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’, in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F.F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 33–49. Howe’s argument, fails to take into consideration an alternative whereby sexual, bodily, and potentially social autonomy is more fulfilling than marriage.

¹⁰⁷ Esther Yue L. Ng, ‘Acts of Paul and Thecla Women’s Stories and Precedent?’, *JTS* 55, no. 1 (2004): 1–29.

correction are difficult to sustain. Amongst these she notes that the circulation of an earlier substratum of oral stories is not supported by evidence. Nor is there a gender-based dichotomy between good and bad characters, which has been presumed to be evidence for the development of this story amongst women, reflected in the APT, where both female and male characters play good or bad roles. Ng concludes that “the main purpose of the APT is more likely to uphold the value of chastity and demonstrate the power of God to the helpless, not to show the equality of the sexes or advocate the liberation of women.”¹⁰⁸

1.6.2. A Rhetorical Tool?

Developed as a critique of feminist attempts to retrieve the lived experiences of second century women from the narrative of the APT, this line of argumentation proposes that Thecla was a narrative cipher designed to further the goals of the male writer. According to this perspective women, and the bodies of women – both known and other; potentially vulnerable and inviolate - were useful to ancient thinkers seeking to reflect upon the liminal status of the church.¹⁰⁹

As ‘marginal’ persons to begin with, bounded with a number of socially validated restrictions including sexual ones, women can be used symbolically as ‘liminal’ or ‘threshold’ figures that can stand outside society either to critique it or to bring its values more sharply into focus.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ng, 'Acts of Paul and Thecla Women's Stories and Precedent?' 29.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 153–59. Brown coined the useful term ‘think with’ to describe the process by which male thinkers utilized female characters as a tool to aid reflection.

¹¹⁰ Gail P.C. Streete, ‘Buying the Stairway to Heaven: Perpetua and Thecla as Early Christian Heroines’, in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, vol. 11 (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 188.

In this light, Thecla is proscribed by the ideological motives and cultural orientation of the male author and her characterisation in the narrative does not necessarily reflect the ideologies, lived experiences and practices of any particular woman or women in general from that time or context. Kate Cooper builds upon this to offer a more nuanced argument. She suggests that the rhetorical deployment of women serves to demonstrate the struggle between the existing political and social institutions – represented in this instance by Thamyris - and the “apostle” representing the emergent church.¹¹¹ The female body thus becomes a locus of struggle between the existing patriarchal systems and an equally androcentric message represented by the person of the apostle. S. Nolan, has most recently developed this interpretation further in his proposal that APT should be seen as a narrative embodiment of strategic resistance to the systems of power – in this light he argues that Thecla’s body is developed as a site of resistance being re-written according to the new norms and conventions.¹¹²

1.6.3. Made Masculine?

A third reading of Thecla arises from one of the more interesting aspects of the transformation of Thecla in the APT, her gradual adoption of attributes proscribing masculinity in her context. This starts with Thecla giving up her feminine accoutrements (APT 3.18) and cutting her hair to follow Paul (APT 3.25). She goes on to overcome trials by demonstrating traditionally male qualities like bravery, assertiveness, and strength (APT 4) and the story culminates with her donning masculine clothes (σχῆματι ἀνδρικῶ) and leading young men and

¹¹¹ Cooper describes this as a re-figured “love triangle. Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride*, 51–56. Cooper also notes the rhetorical utility of Thecla as a model for a young girl of a later period who would be expected to metaphorically “seek after Paul,” Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), 86.

¹¹² S Nolan, ‘Narrative as Strategic Resource for Resistance: Reading the Acts of Thecla for Its Political Purposes’, in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts*, ed. G.J. Brooke and J.-D Kaestli (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 225–42.

women. This process can be understood in several ways. The first is that it denotes a simple matter of practical convenience – i.e., it was easier and likely safer for her to travel alone if her femininity was not too obvious. In this light, her crossdressing can be seen as a protective armour – a sleight of hand to confound the masculine forces aligned against the extremely vulnerable female body. It could also be understood as one aspect of the imitative quest whereby Thecla seeks to become as like her mentor Paul – who is both the apostle and ascetic par excellence - as possible.¹¹³

Alternatively (or in addition), however, this process can be read as a narrative realisation of a female attaining masculinity according to an “‘ontological continuum’ where the masculine, although not at the top of the continuum, is definitely above the feminine.”¹¹⁴ This sentiment is for example articulated in the Gospel of Thomas:¹¹⁵

Logion 114

ΠΕΧΕ ΣΙΜΩΝ ΠΕΤΡΟΣ ΝΑΥ ΧΕ ΜΑΡΕ	Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary Leave us, for
ΜΑΡΙΖΑΜ ΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΖΗΤἸ ΧΕ ΝΣΖΙΟΜΕ	women are not worthy of life.”
ἸΠΥΑ ΔΝ᾽ ἸΠΩΝΖ ΠΕΧΕ ἸΧΕ ΕΙΣΖΗΗΤΕ	Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her in order to
ΔΝΟΚ᾽ ἴΝΑΣΩΚ᾽ ἸΜΟΣ ΧΕΚΑΔΣ ΕΕΙ- ΝΑΔΣ	make her male, so that she too may become a
ΝΖΟΟΥΤ᾽ ΨΙΝΑ ΕΣΝΑΨΩΠΕ ΖΩΩΣ ΝΟΥΠΝᾶ	living spirit resembling you males. For every
ΕΦΟΝΖ ΕΦΕΙΝΕ ἸΜΩΤἸ ΝΖΟΟΥΤ ΧΕ ΣΖΙΜΕ	woman who will make herself male will enter the
ΝΙΜ᾽ ΕΣΝΑΔΣ ΝΖΟΟΥΤ᾽ ΣΝΑΒΩΚ᾽ ΕΖΟΥΝ	kingdom of heaven.
ΕΤΜΝΤΕΡΟ ΝἸΠΗΥΕ	

¹¹³ Stefaniw, ‘Becoming Men’, 348.

¹¹⁴ Glenn E. Snyder, *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus*, 1st ed., vol. 352, WUNT 2. Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 140.

¹¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, text and translation of Gospel of Thomas is based upon Bentley Layton, *The Coptic Gnostic Library: Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7*, vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 92–93.

In this context Jesus seems to affirm that a woman needs to embody masculinity to become a “living spirit”. While this may at first reading seem like a radically different idea than what we would expect from the otherwise straightforward anthropology of the APT it is important to note that the underlying concept of religious authority as something related to gender is one which is discovered in other Christian writings both canonical and non-canonical including 1 Timothy 2.8-15 and 1 Corinthians 11.7-9. A similar idea is also discovered in the Gospel of Mary where being ‘made into men’ (*GosMary* 5.2-5) is the key to the spiritual authority endowed to the disciples, Mary included.¹¹⁶

In this light the innovation of the APT may just be that it offers a narrative account of a female, Thecla, taking practical steps to transcend her femaleness and put on masculine ‘garb’ (literally and spiritually) so as to ultimately be legitimized as an apostle and a leader.¹¹⁷

1.6.4. Androgynous Realisation of an Eschatological Existence?

An alternative hypothesis based on the same transformation of Thecla from an idealised high-status virgin to an apostle who travels around in masculine attire suggests that she is best understood as the realisation of the eschatological androgynous existence anticipated in other Christian texts.

Gospel of Matthew 22.30

ἐν γὰρ τῇ ἀναστάσει οὔτε γαμοῦσιν οὔτε	For in the resurrection, they neither marry
γαμίζονται, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ	nor are given in marriage but are like
εἰσιν.	angels in heaven.

¹¹⁶ James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, trans. George W. MacRae and R. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

¹¹⁷ Blossom Stefaniw, rightly notes that “the maleness of the female persons in question appears to be understood as something specific and limited to their spiritual life and to the behaviour resulting from their spiritual development.” Stefaniw, ‘Becoming Men’, 348.

Galatians 3.28

οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλληγ, οὐκ ἔνι δούλος
οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ·
πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἷς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is
neither slave nor free, there is no male and
female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Gospel of Thomas Logion 22

αἰτ̄ ναγ αἰρ̄κογει εγχι ερωτε πεχαα
ἡνεμαθητης δε νεεικογει ετχι ερωτε
εγτῆτων ανετβηκ̄ ερογν ατμητερο
πεχαγ ναγ̄ δε εειε (ε)νο ἡκογει
τῆναβωκ̄ ερογν ετμητερο
πεχε ιη̄ς ναγ̄ δε ροταν ε- τετῆψαῖ̄ πσναγ
ογα αγω ετετῆψαῖ̄ πσανρογν ἡθε
ἡπσανβολ αγω πσανβολ ἡθε ἡπσανρογν
αγω πσα(ν)τπε ἡθε ἡπσαμπιτῆ
αγω ψινα ετετῆψειρε ἡφο̄ ογτ̄ ἡἡ
τςριμε ἡπιογα ογωτ̄ δεκαας νε φοογτ̄ ῖ̄
ροογτ̄ ἡτε τςριμε ῖ̄ ςριμε
ροταν ετετῆψαειρε ἡρῆβαλ επμα
ἡογβαλ̄ αγω ογσιχ̄ επμα ἡνογσιχ̄ αγω

Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to
his disciples, “These infants being suckled
are like those who enter the kingdom.”

They said to him, “Shall we then, as
children, enter the kingdom?”

Jesus said to them, “When you make the
two one, and when make the inside like the
outside and the outside like the inside, and
the above like the below, and when you
make the male and the female one and the
same, so that the make not be male nor the
female female; and you fashion eyes in
place of an eye, and a hand in place of a
hand, and a foot in place of a foot and a

ΟΥΕΡΗΤΕ ΕΠΜΑ ἩΟΥΕΡΗΤΕ ΟΥΖΙΚΩΝ` ΕΠΜΑ likeness; then will you enter [the
 ἩΟΥΖΙΚΩ(Ν) ΤΟ- ΤΕ ΤΕΤΝΑΒΩΚ` ΕΖΟΥΝ kingdom].”
 [Ε]ΤΜ[ἩΤΕΡ]Ο`

Our brief look at the Pauline beatitudes above revealed both the writer’s acquaintance with the gospel of Matthew and the significance of marriage and resurrection in the APT. The imagery of an androgynous and consequentially asexual existence in the resurrection discovered in Matthew 22 is therefore one that cannot be discounted as a potential influence on both the discourse of chastity in the APT as well as in its depiction of the ideal ascetic convert, Thecla. In addition to this imagery from Matthew, which promises an androgynous reality in the resurrected state, Galatians 3.28 proclaims an alternative reality in the present world where gender – or at least the distinctions thereof – is nullified. The text from the Gospel of Thomas goes even further suggesting a gender integration.

All of these texts suggest the possibility that through Paul’s ascetic discourse Thecla is empowered to remove the overtly gendered aspects of her being so as to grasp the promise of eschatological androgyny – an existence “untrammelled by gender stereotyping.”¹¹⁸

1.6.5. Inviolable Exemplar?

All four options discussed above offer insight into the various ways Thecla can be imagined and re-imagined in various receptions. Building upon these readings to diverse degrees I will here attempt to suggest how I understand her characterisation exclusively in relation to the

¹¹⁸ Petropoulos, ‘Transvestite Virgin with a Cause’. Petropoulos suggests that the ideal of an eschatological androgynous existence: “may explain why a transvestite androgyne like Thecla promised allure to early Christians, mainstream and nonmainstream alike: her membership of a third, anomalous category brought her very near to the holy angelic state - a sexless and bodiless condition which however remained closely aligned to the male sex, as may be inferred from the names and military interests of angels.” Petropoulos, 127.

governing ethical and theological framework of the ascetic discourse of the APT. In this context, it seems to me that Thecla is depicted as the ideal virgin – a living realisation of the final beatitude. What is in focus in this regard is her chastity – and more particularly her ability to retain her chastity and not necessarily her gender. Her gender, while not incidental is only useful as a rhetorical tool to the writer. At the start of the narrative, she is a highborn virgin, with all the social and economic currency that this afforded her. In choosing to retain her virginity Thecla has to forgo everything else and, in the process, subverts the existing social structures while postulating alternative structures of the resurrected life. The writer strips Thecla of everything, including virginal modesty leaving her with her chastity as the only source of her spiritual power and authority.

Ultimately Thecla is a vehicle, a malleable and weak figure – a woman who starts of the ascetic quest searching, needing Paul. His is the voice of authority in the narrative. He at the same time embodies the virtuoso that exemplifies the life she seeks as well as voicing the expected objections from the reader: can a weak and vulnerable female be able to work out the ascetic transformation? She defies this expectation through her resolute commitment to the discourse of asceticism – particularly her choice to retain her virginity even in the face of unimaginable trials - and is thus able to reinscribe her identity and attain an embodiment free from sexuality and the expectations of gendered existence.

As such “Thecla was not a role model that only Christian women were expected to follow. Her intact body spoke to both men and women.”¹¹⁹She becomes an inviolate exemplar existing outside of the governing social and cultural reality and realizing a new form of resurrected existence.

¹¹⁹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 1988, 159.

1.7. Summary

My discussion in this chapter sought to look at the interplay between reception and the ascetic imagination in the Acts of Paul and Thecla as evidenced in its appropriation of earlier Christian traditions and its development of an ascetic ideology that amongst other things redefines normative categories including that of gender. We started by looking at the textual and historical character of this text as well as its history of reception. This served to reveal the independent transmission and influence of this narrative in a wide range of contexts.

Having established this, we then moved on to look at the modes of reception deployed in the APT noting in particular the development of the figure of the apostle Paul as an ascetic exemplar in relation to other examples of the reception and appropriation of aspects of the Pauline legacy. We also looked at the reception of the literary form of the beatitudes to promote an ascetic gospel. Although the APT does not have any significant textual citations or commentary material the author utilises these elements to intentionally direct the reader to the earlier traditions and to appropriate their authority and legitimacy for his own writings.

Finally, we noted that the ascetic ideology of the APT centres around self-control particularly as it relates to the body and the boundaries that keep it impenetrable from the world. Thecla represents the idealised virgin, who renounces all normative categories of social status, wealth, and gender to become a liminal figure and embodiment of resistance against this 'world' and exemplar of the newly inaugurated reality.

Let us now turn to look at the modes of reception and the development of ascetic meaning in the Book of Thomas the Contender.

2. The Ascetic Imagination in the Book of Thomas the Contender

In our discussion of the Acts of Paul and Thecla in the last chapter, we were able to identify an ascetic ideology that establishes the body as the primary locus of ascetic transformation. The writer of the APT defined the ascetic journey as one of constructing boundaries to keep the body impenetrable. In this chapter, I turn to look at the Book of Thomas the Contender (BookThom), that has at its centre not the redemption of the human body but a total liberation from embodiment.

The Book of Thomas the Contender is the final tractate in Codex II of the Nag Hammadi collection (NHII). It contains a pre-ascension dialogue between the Apostle Thomas and the risen saviour. As we will see in our study below this text employs familiar motifs and literary devices from earlier Christian writings to develop a radical ascetic ideology. By looking at this text I aim to highlight the literary and theological imagination of a trajectory of Christian ascetic thought and practice that had long been side-lined due to being labelled “gnostic” and thus a corruption of what is ‘truly’ Christian¹ toward a more complete understanding of the processes of reception and production of ascetic meaning in diverse Christian contexts.

I will first begin by looking at the general historical and literary characteristics of the Book of Thomas in relation to the broader literary context of Codex II of the Nag Hammadi corpus. I will then move on to closely look at the development of the main themes of the text, with particular focus on the appropriation of motifs from earlier Christian writings and the production of ascetic meaning. I will here particularly focus on the last section of the Book of Thomas, the saviour’s final monologue which utilises the beatitude and woe structure, which we

¹ I will briefly look at the deconstruction of this unproductive taxonomy in recent scholarship below.

also encountered in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, which – as I will argue - serves as a summary of the main themes raised in the rest of the text.

2.1. Provenance, Composition, and Genre of the Book of Thomas

The Book of Thomas is believed to have been composed in the second half of the third century. It is thought to have originally been written in Greek and later translated into Coptic. The only surviving copy of this work is discovered as the final tractate of Codex II of the Nag Hammadi Library, and it is nowhere else attested in ancient sources.² My study here will focus on the Nag Hammadi corpus in general and Codex II in particular as the primary context of the Book of Thomas as we have no way of accessing its history apart from this corpus.

With the Acts of Thomas and the Gospel of Thomas, this writing represents the Thomasine tradition that is believed to have developed in “eastern Syria where traditions in connection with the name ‘Judas Thomas’ were cherished, and literary works or legends were attached to this twin brother of Jesus.”³ Thematically, texts in the Thomasine tradition are linked together by common motifs, including, as we will see in detail below, an ascetic ideology which is developed with varying degree in all three works.

When we move on to look at the composition of BookThom, John D. Turner suggests that it is a composite of two previously independent sources brought together by a subsequent author.⁴ Accordingly, he posits that 138.4 -142.21 (which he labels A) represents a revelation dialogue and that the rest of the tractate (labelled B) preserves a collection of sayings of Jesus

² John D. Turner, ‘Introduction’, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7, Together with XIII, 2** Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1) and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 173.

³ James is also addressed in very similar terms in the 1st Apocalypse of James ‘James, my brother. For not without reason have I called you my brother, although you are not my brother materially ...’ (1 Apoc. Jas. 24.12-25). William R. Schoedel, ed., ‘The (First) Apocalypse of James’, in *Nag Hammadi Codices V and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 65–103.

⁴ Turner, ‘Introduction’, 174.

attributed to Mathaiias.”⁵ Turner makes this argument primarily based on what he perceives as the absence of the dialogue format in the latter parts of the text which he labelled B.⁶

Without denying the possibility that the author of BookThom did indeed appropriate aspects of earlier traditions known to him in the composition of his text – it nonetheless seems unwarranted to conclude that the text is a composite of two distinct sources for a few reasons. Firstly, as Turner himself notes in proposing his argument for a composite text, if ‘B’ reflects an earlier collection of sayings this original material has been the subject of significant interpretive activity suggesting:

a late and decadent reflection of the literary genre of sayings of Jesus in which original sayings have been so expanded with interpretations that whatever may have been the original saying has been obliterated by accretion of the interpretation⁷

This level of interpretive re-working seems to be more productively understood as the reception and appropriation of earlier traditions which are then developed in this new context, to make up a new whole.

Second, although the section starting at 142.2 (styled B by Turner) does indeed consist of a monologue by the saviour this monologue is a long response to a final question by Thomas in the previous section. Such monologues by the saviour are not uncommon in other Christian writings. We can here for example look at the Gospel of John 12-16; and the *Epistula Apostolorum* 18-28; 25.8 – 28.2; 31.4 -35.1.⁸

⁵ Turner, ‘Introduction’, 173.

⁶ Turner, ‘Introduction’, 174.

⁷ Turner, ‘Introduction’, 175.

⁸ Francis Watson, *An Apostolic Gospel: The ‘Epistula Apostolorum’ in Literary Context: 179* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Moreover, the final monologue in the BookThom picks up and develops motifs from the earlier section (See discussion below) demonstrating clear literary coherence. This alongside the use of the blessings and woes format would suggest that this concluding section was intended to replicate the familiar form of a sermon warning of eschatological judgment and proclaiming eschatological blessings that is familiar from other Christian writings including the canonical gospels.

Third, Turner's conclusion that BookThom is a composite seems to stem naturally from his definition of its genre as the 'Gnostic revelation dialogue.'⁹ Considering that genre informs what we expect from a text in terms of its literary content and form as well as how we understand interpret it, let us look a bit more closely at the genre of the Book of Thomas.

In her discussion of the Gnostic revelation dialogue, Pheme Perkins notes that this genre is peculiarly identified with Christian 'Gnostics'.¹⁰ She notes some examples of shared content and style amongst texts thus classified including the centrality of revealed gnosis, ascetic motifs, focus on soteriology, scriptural interpretation the role of the revealer figure, and the question-answer format.¹¹ She divides texts that fit this genre into four sub-groups; those associated with a gnostic revealer, ascetic texts, the gnostic-apostle (Peter) traditions, and those that privilege non-apostolic disciples (e.g. Mary).

With this definition in mind, Perkins identifies The Book of Thomas as one example of the ascetic type of Gnostic revelation dialogue. She rightly argues - contra Turner - that considering the thematic coherence of the entire text it is likely that "the whole dialogue is

⁹ Turner, 'Introduction', 173.

¹⁰ Pheme Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 26.

¹¹ Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 59–73.

derived from a single ascetic homily”.¹² Having thus rightly argued for the literary integrity of BookThom, Perkins, however, does not address the need to widen the definition of the genre of the Gnostic revelation dialogue to allow for distinctions in form and content such as those evidenced in BookThom which informed Turner’s argument for a composite text.

A much-needed corrective in this regard – and one which also looks beyond the limiting and outdated ‘Gnostic’ category - is to be found in the nuanced re-definition of this genre by Sarah Parkhouse.¹³ Parkhouse adopts a ‘non-structural rhizomatic approach’¹⁴ – which takes into account literature related with overlapping teachings and complex connections to those identified as revelation dialogue. Parkhouse proposes “reading the texts as coherent and complete works and to destabilise outdated boundaries of ‘orthodox’ and ‘gnostic’ in order to recognize dialogue gospels within a rhizomatic network of early Christian literature.”¹⁵

With this last in mind, she proposes a more flexible taxonomy; “the dialogue gospel” which “must contain two things: (1) Jesus as revealer on the verge of departure, and (2) dialogue with one or more disciples.”¹⁶ This definition acknowledges the fluid boundaries between genres allowing for the possibility for texts like BookThom to exhibit diverse forms and content without necessitating that they are composites.

In light of the above discussion and in the absence of additional evidence or textual witnesses to support the idea of a composite text my discussion here will presume the literary integrity of the extant form of *BookThom* as one example of a dialogue gospel.

¹² Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 103.

¹³ Sarah Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour: The ‘Gospel of Mary’ among Early Christian Dialogue Gospels: 176* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 13–67.

¹⁴ Rhizome, from the Greek ρίζωμα meaning mass of roots references in botany a modified stem which sends out roots and shoots from its nodes horizontally, as well as growing new shots upward.

¹⁵ Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 25.

¹⁶ Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 37–38.

2.2. “Writing to the perfect”: Literary Content of Book of Thomas

The opening of the Book of Thomas¹⁷ - the incipit - is very similar to that of the Gospel of Thomas. Both openings introduce the two main characters Jesus and his ‘twin’ Thomas, the apostle. As noted above the Thomasine tradition is characterised by a focus on ascetic renunciation intended to empower humans to negotiate or transcend embodiment. The depiction of Thomas as the twin brother of Jesus (BookThom 138.1-21) is another motif common to this tradition. We find an early use of this motif in the Gospel of John where Thomas is referred to as the ‘Twin’ (John 11.16; 20. 24; 21.2).

The origin and background of the twinship tradition have not been established.¹⁸ The following are some of the several plausible hypotheses that have been offered. Risto Uro, suggests that twin symbolism likely developed from early traditions that employed kinship language to depict the ideal disciple of Christ.¹⁹ Such language may contain the memory of a dynastic tendency – Christian leadership by way of actual blood relationship to Jesus - in some trajectories of nascent Christianity. A similar tendency can for example be reflected in the development of traditions about James the brother of Jesus.²⁰ Alternatively, the use of kinship language may just reflect a metaphorical kinship similar to the more popular use of sonship and other familial metaphors used to describe the relationship between Jesus and his followers.

¹⁷ The text I will use here will depend on that edited by Bentley Layton and translations will depend on English language translation of John D. Turner unless otherwise noted. Layton, *The Coptic Gnostic Library: Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2-7.

¹⁸ Paul-Hubert Poirier suggests that this tradition likely originated in the Acts of Thomas which develops the twin symbolism in a much more apparent manner than the gospel of Thomas: e.g., the talking colt in *Acts Thom 39* addresses Thomas as "Twin brother of Christ". He argues that the book of Thomas borrowed this (and according to him not much else) much in the same way it borrowed the incipit from the gospel of Thomas. Paul-Hubert Poirier, ‘Évangile de Thomas, Actes de Thomas, Livre de Thomas. Une Tradition et Ses Transformations’, *Apocrypha* 7 (1 January 1996): 25.

¹⁹ Risto Uro, *Thomas: Seeking the Historical Context of the Gospel of Thomas*, 0 edition (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 96–97.

²⁰ One reflection of this tradition can for example be discovered in the Gospel of Thomas (Logion 12). John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 162.

Another possible idea being referenced here could be the concept of a heavenly double (e.g., Gospel of Thomas 84) – the idea that the transient corporeal person has an immortal heavenly counterpart or image.²¹ Uro also notes that this tradition may have contributed to Thomasine twin symbolism.²² Finally, the development of this tradition could have potentially emerged from a simple word play building upon the similarity of the word for twin in Syriac (*tāmā*) and the name of the apostle.

For our purposes, the significance of the twinship motif is twofold. In the first instance it is a theme that shows acquaintance and appropriation of an earlier tradition that we also find in the canonical Gospel of John. Secondly, within the context of the narrative, this depiction functions to highlight the legitimacy of Thomas himself as someone who could claim special closeness with the saviour – be it literally or metaphorically – and therefore a reliable recipient and conduit of secret revelation.²³ It bears noting, however, that the reference to this tradition in BookThom, although very clear, seems to be non-committal in that the saviour does not directly affirm it: “since it **has been said** that you are my twin” (138.8). This could suggest that the writer of BookThom appropriated this motif as a trope of the Thomasine tradition to establish continuity but that it did not have much significance to his discourse otherwise. Alternatively, and to my mind more convincingly, he is establishing a condition to “twinship” defining it as an aspirational kinship that Thomas can only attain by overcoming ignorance and becoming fully self-aware (138.10).

²¹ Simon James Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary, The Gospel of Thomas* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 513–14.

²² Uro, *Thomas*, 96–97.

²³ "The implication is that as Jesus' "twin" Thomas has special insight into not only Jesus' identity as the saviour, but also his teachings.'" Kimberley Fowler, 'From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender: Nag Hammadi Codex II in Its Fourth-Century Context' (Manchester, The University of Manchester, 2013), 207.

Jesus himself is identified as teacher and revealer of “secret words” (Ἰησοῦς ἐδιδάχθη) much in the same way that he is in the Gospel of Thomas. As we have seen above this helps to establish both the Gospel and the Book of Thomas as examples of dialogue gospels.

Gospel of Thomas (32)²⁴

ΝΑΕΙ ΝΕ ἸΗΣΟΥΣ ΕΘΗΠ` ΕΝΤΑ ἸΤ ΕΤΟΝΕ ΧΟΟΥ
 ΑΥΩ ΑΥΣΕΡΑΪΣΟΥ ἸΒΙ ΔΙΔΥΜΟΣ ἸΟΥΔΑΣ ΘΩΜΑΣ

These are the secret sayings which the living
 Jesus spoke, and Didymus Judas Thomas
 wrote them down.

Book of Thomas (138. 1-4)

ἸΗΣΟΥΣ ΕΘΗΠ ΝΑΪ ΕΝΤΑΥΨΑΔΕ ἸΜΑΥ ἸΒΙ ΠΣΩΡ
 ἸΝΙΟΥΔΑΣ ΘΩΜΑΣ ΝΑΪ ΕΝΤΑΙΣΑΒΟΥ ΔΝΟΚ ΒΩΩΤ
 ΜΑΘΑΙΑΣ ΝΕΕΙΜΟΟΥΕ ΕΕΙΣΩΤῆ ΕΡΟΟΥ ΕΥΨΑΔΕ
 Μῆ ΝΟΥΕΡΗΥ

The secret words that the saviour spoke to
 Judas Thomas which I, even I Mathaiias,
 wrote down while I was walking, listening to
 them speak with one another.

The main difference in these introductions is the role of Mathaiias as an amanuensis in the Book of Thomas. Mathaiias could potentially be an idiosyncratic spelling of Matthaios (Ματθαῖος) and thus a reference to the apostle, Matthew. If so, then it is likely that this well-known character from early Christian writings was appropriated in this context, much in the same way as Thomas functions, to extend legitimacy to the revelation.²⁵ It is however, more likely that Mathaiias is a variant of Matthias (Μαθθιας) referencing the apostle who replaced Judas as one of the twelve in the Lukan Acts 1:12-26. If so, this could potentially be an

²⁴ All references from Codex II here unless otherwise specified are from James M. Robinson, ed., *The Coptic Gnostic Library: A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

²⁵ Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 194. Gathercole notes that Thomas functions in the same way in the Gospel of Thomas.

interesting development of ascetic teachings associated with the apostle Matthias. An important example of this tradition is discovered in Eusebius' church History (Hist. Eccl. 3.29):

λέγουσι δ' οὖν καὶ τὸν Ματθαίαν οὕτω	But they say that Matthias also taught in the
διδάξαι, σαρκὶ μὲν μάχεσθαι καὶ	same manner that we ought to fight against
παραχρᾶσθαι μηδὲν αὐτῇ πρὸς ἡδονὴν	and abuse the flesh, and not give way to it for
ἐνδιδόντα, ψυχὴν δὲ αὐξεῖν διὰ πίστεως	the sake of pleasure but strengthen the soul
καὶ γνώσεως.'	by faith and knowledge.

In this chapter Eusebius is discussing the Nicolaitan sect (Rev 2.6 - 15), who claimed to have originated from Nicolas from Antioch, one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles in Acts 6.5. According to Eusebius this sect was given to licentiousness – as told in Revelation – due to a misunderstanding of the teaching of the deacon who had given over his wife to the early Christian community. He cites Clement of Alexandria (*Clem. Strom.* 2. 118) to argue that this act by the deacon was a renunciation of his love for his wife and a commitment to self-control (celibacy). This self-control alternatively described as the “abuse of the flesh” he notes was also taught by Matthias. His teaching, according to Eusebius, established a clear dichotomy between giving way to the flesh and strengthening the soul. In light of this, the reference to Mathaiias in the Book of Thomas may preserve a tantalisingly early witness and development of an ascetic tradition associated with the Apostle Matthias.

Along with introducing the *dramatis personae* the writer of Thomas the Contender also establishes a setting that is important for understanding the authoritative claims of the rest of the text. In the first instance we learn that the text is a reproduction of a dialogue between Thomas and Jesus – with Mathaiias walking alongside them (maybe a step behind them?) as a mobile stenographer of sorts.

We are told that this dialogue is occurring before the ascension (138.25). This setting is particularly important for several reasons. Firstly, we feel the urgency of Thomas' questions – his ability to speak about (teach) the “hidden things” and to live in “the truth” after the saviour's anticipated departure is dependent of this revelation (138. 24-25). Secondly, this revelation just before his imminent departure can be understood as the saviour's final and thus definitive instructions to the followers he is leaving behind to carry on with his work.²⁶ Finally, the anticipated revelations are all the more significant because the risen Jesus has more authority and liberty to reveal secrets heretofore hidden from his disciples.

For narrative purposes, it bears noting that this text is set in the time between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus when the gospel traditions tell us he spent time with and taught his disciples. The Book of Thomas thus implicitly appropriates the earlier traditions (incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection) as a background and establishes itself as an authoritative sequel.

2.2.1. Readers of the Book of Thomas

Having thus established the narrative character of the Book of Thomas let us now look at what we can surmise about the authorship and intended readership of the Book of Thomas from internal witness.

The subscript title “πχωμε ν̄ωμας πᾱλητης ε̄ς̄ᾱῑ ν̄ ν̄τελειος” (The Book of Thomas the Contender writing to the perfect) serves to define the ideal readers of this text as well as highlighting the ascetic context in which it was produced. The metaphor of the athlete (ᾱλητης) is a familiar one from other ascetic discourse and serves to denote the continuous struggle of the

²⁶ Parkhouse, *Eschatology and the Saviour*, 70–78.

individual through physical renunciation and mental exercise to attain spiritual and/or physical perfection.²⁷ The (intended) readers, of this text are therefore most likely ascetics in general and more specifically those – as we will see below – who ascribe to the very particular modes of renunciation that are developed in the Book of Thomas.

In addition to this we are also able to make deductions about the actual readership as well as the context of the early dissemination of the Book of Thomas by looking at the corpus in which we find it preserved. Let us briefly look at that here.

The Book of Thomas was transmitted to modernity only as part of Codex II of the Nag Hammadi collection, so named after the place in Egypt in which this ancient trove of writings was discovered in 1945.²⁸ Based on codicological research – particularly papyri used in the covers of the codices²⁹ – it is possible to determine that these codices were constructed no later than 350-400 CE. Some of the papyri in the bindings and the proximity of the find site to the Pachomian monasteries of Seneset and Pbow also suggest that this library was owned (copied and transmitted) in this context.³⁰

There have however been arguments made against the likelihood of the codices being owned in a Pachomian context. The two main arguments in this regard are as follows. The first is that the claim for monastic origins based on some examples of papyri discovered in the cartonnage is tendentious at best. John Shelton for example argues that the preponderance of

²⁷ As we will see in detail in the next chapter this metaphor is discovered and developed in a wide range of ascetic texts including the Pauline corpus and later monastic writings.

²⁸ James M. Robinson, 'The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 11 (2009): 1–11; James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Story: The Discovery and Monopoly*, vol. I, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies; Volume 86) (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1–119.

²⁹ The documents discovered in the cartonnage have been published here: John Barnes, Gerald Browne, and John C. Shelton, eds., *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

³⁰ Fowler, 'From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender', 21–28.

papyri dealing with financial transactions, contracts, private letters, ordinances etc., as part of the writings preserved in the cartonnage.³¹ This argument is, however, not completely convincing in as much as such documents can easily have originated in monasteries which are known to have been complex social structures with significant financial and other interaction with surrounding communities. As described by Brown, coenobitic communities functioned as an “alternative village in the midst of the settled world.”³²

The second argument relies on the early definition of the nature of the Nag Hammadi texts as ‘gnostic’ documents which must have originated from a “gnostic” community. Recent scholarship has, however, established, that this classification is not only inhibiting but based on misleading assumptions. The first of these assumptions is that there is a clearly distinguishable (non-Christian or superficially Christian) tradition known as Gnosticism with a specific point origin and strict boundaries.

As noted by critics this categorisation is problematic on several fronts. Firstly, Gnosticism has been used as an umbrella category for a multiplicity of traditions with certain views on human embodiment, creation and demiurgical myths. These views are however discovered in a diverse range of complex articulations based on distinct hermeneutical approaches.³³

Secondly, the identification of the beliefs and practices described in modern scholarship as gnostic is disproportionately reliant on polemical descriptions (sometimes written about movements decades in the past) with no other archaeological or historical evidence to support or

³¹ John Christian Shelton, ‘Introduction’, in *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage* 1–14.

³²

³³ Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 263–64.

even refute conclusions.³⁴ For these reasons, as Michael Williams right concludes, Gnostic/Gnosticism is a dubious category that serves no useful taxonomical purpose in as much as it can and has been used to described very divergent texts and traditions on the basis of interpretative stance (challenging traditional and/or literal interpretations) or theology (views on creation and the human body in particular).³⁵

Looking beyond such problematic and definitive categorisations we are able to allow complexity in the development of religious traditions. A nuanced study allows us to recognise that religious beliefs do not originate in a vacuum, nor do they develop uniformly and unanimously establishing “orthodoxy” and rejecting “heresy.” It is, therefore, more useful to take into account the ongoing processes through which a religious tradition is constructed “in the face of both contested power relations within, and porous, overlapping boundaries with traditions without.”³⁶ As a result relics of a religious tradition - such as the Nag Hammadi corpus - are more productively understood as reflecting a snapshot of the state of its formation and governing discourses in a specific period without necessarily implying that this portrait reveals a fixed reality.

In this light, Pachomian ownership of the Nag Hammadi texts would reflect a social context whereby traditions that may seem conflictual to later Christians were read together to answer the concerns of a specific context. We will see in greater delay below the various concerns that could have arisen within a monastic context to lead to the development or compilation of these texts, with a particular focus on Codex II.³⁷

³⁴ Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism'*, 236–37.

³⁵ Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism'*, 263–64.

³⁶ Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 229–30.

³⁷ Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’, 29–44; Lance Jenott and Hugo Lundhaug, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices: 97* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015) 8.

2.2.2. The Dialogue

The body proper of the BookThom contains the dialogue between Jesus and Thomas – mainly formulated as a series of questions from Thomas and long answers from Jesus. At the outset of their dialogue Thomas is not himself necessarily ‘perfect’ but in need of self-examination and learning to know “who you are, in what way you exist, and how you will come to be.” These three questions describe the central concerns of the quest for self-knowledge which is an important motif in the Book of Thomas which we can also discover in the Gospel of Thomas (Logion 3).³⁸ The saviour reveals to Thomas that all men are essentially ignorant of these questions until the knowledge of the truth (139.14) is revealed to them.

The answers to these questions are subsequently developed in a series of answers that focus particularly on the contrasting forces influencing human action and go on to address the ultimate fate of those who choose to remain under the power of the wrong forces. Building upon the divisions for the text suggested by Turner³⁹ and Perkins⁴⁰, we can outline the literary contents of BookThom as follows:

The visible vs. the invisible (138.27 – 139.34): The initial section of the dialogue focuses on the distinctions between the visible and the invisible. Thomas is seeking knowledge of the hidden things, but the saviour wishes him to first understand fully the visible. The saviour states that there are “deeds of the truth” that are in the visible world which are obscure to

³⁸ Robinson, *The Coptic Gnostic Library: A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, 2:53.

³⁹ Turner, ‘Introduction’, 176.

⁴⁰ Perkins, *The Gnostic Dialogue*, 104.

Thomas.⁴¹ This seemingly echoes the idea of general revelation much in the same line of other Christian writings like Romans 1.20; 2.14-15 and Matthew 5.45.

The saviour particularly highlights ignorance about the perishable human body as it exists in the visible world, and stresses that this understanding is necessary for his followers to attain the highest perfection and be called labourers. This brings to mind Matthew 9.37 (Parallel Luke 10.2) where Jesus refers to the harvest and labourers to describe the work of his apostles. Thomas asks again about the invisible things, but the saviour persists in teaching him about the human body which is created and perishes much in the same way as the beasts and is therefore incapable of anything more until the human person attains perfection.

In his next question, Thomas introduces the motif of light. In the Book of Thomas there seems to be three types of light. The first is the saviour himself. Thomas asserts that seeking to understand the invisible from this current state is like shooting “arrows at a target at night” but that the success of this will only be revealed when the light comes forth. He identifies the saviour as this divine light (echoes Jn 3.19) and asks for enlightenment.

The second light is the heavenly light in which the light of the saviour exists: “It is in light that light exists” (138.21) We will look at this in a bit more detail below when we look at the woes catalogue contained in the final monologue.

The third type of light is the “visible light” seemingly referring to the sun (139.25). Thomas asks about this light that rises and sets on behalf of men (confer Matt 5.45). The saviour teaches him that this light shined so that the elect could come forth from the world it illuminated and that it will return to its essence (the heavenly source of all light) once “the elect abandon

⁴¹ This seemingly echoes the idea of general revelation much in the same line as Romans 1.20; 2.14-15, Matthew 5.45 and other early Christian writings.

bestiality.” He then goes on to discuss the opposite of the divine light which is the fire that “blazes in the bodies of men and in their marrow, kindling in them night and day” and which made their minds drunk, and their souls deranged (139.35 -140.6). I will look a bit more closely at the use of fire imagery in the Book of Thomas, below. This section concludes with the saviour exhorting those who seek the truth to flee from lust (the fire): “Everyone who seeks the truth from true wisdom will make himself wings so as to fly fleeing the lust that scorches the spirits of men”. Wings here likely refers to ascetic exercises. Although a specific programme of renunciation is not developed in the Book of Thomas, we can surmise from its contents that reflection (self-knowledge), fasting (possibly renouncing meat products as we will see below), and sexual renunciation are assumed.

The second section (140.6 – 141.5) looks a bit more closely at what constitutes true wisdom which is the “doctrine for the perfect.” The saviour does not, however, articulate this doctrine but reflects on how the wise man observes these things (presumably those things that are of the truth that can be observed in the visible world) and is nourished by the truth while the fool ignores them and remains in the “illusion of the truth” resulting in “insatiable lust” which is “like a stake in their heart which they can never dislodge. And like a bit in the mouth, it leads (drags) them according to its own desire.”

Having thus discussed the fate of the wise and the fools in this life the third section 141. 6 – 142.7) goes on to look in more detail at the eschatological fate of those in the second category (fools), which include at least three different types of people. Accordingly, in 141.6-18 the saviour discusses the first type of “fools”; those that having had sight of the things that are invisible lose their first love as a result of “concern for this life and the scorching of the fire.” These, he says, will forever be souls attached to the decaying and long dead body even after the

visible things dissolve. Next the saviour turns to look at the final disposition of those who remain in the 'bestial nature' (141.25 – 142.18). These are by nature evil and “fulfil the lust of their fathers” and are destined to burn in the fire. The third type are those that claim to have understood the message and committed to a path of renouncing the 'fire' but are revealed in the final outcome to have been harbouring evil (142.19 – 143.7). This seems to reference those that are already within the broader faith community suggesting the possibility of intra community struggle.

The final section takes up all of the themes in the previous parts in a concluding sermon (143. 8 – 145.16) which we will look at in great detail below.

In this brief overview of the literary content of the Book of Thomas, we have been able to identify its continuities with related Christian literature including the Thomasine tradition and the Gospel tradition. We were able to note how it echoes familiar themes from these traditions including motifs like general revelation, the harvest and the labourers, and light as a metaphor of the divine. We have also identified the writer's specific concern with self-knowledge as it relates to understanding the implications of human embodiment and the need to overcome its natural 'bestial' inclinations to ensure salvation.

2.3. The Broader Literary Context: The Book of Thomas within NH II

Codex II of the Nag Hammadi Library consists of the following tractates: The Apocryphon of John (ApJohn), the Gospel of Thomas (GThom), the Gospel of Philip (GPhil), the Hypostasis of the Archons (HypArch), On the Origin of the World (OrigWorld), the Expository Treatise on the Soul (ExSoul), and the Book of Thomas the Contender (BookThom). While these works were likely originally composed in a range of different contexts, and for a diverse readership it has been plausibly argued that they were likely collated together with

editorial purpose and logical coherence. As we will see in greater detail below the order in which the tractates are discovered is the strongest argument in this regard:

the codex flows logically from beginning to end as an enriching companion for its monastic readership who desired to attain to the highest realms of spiritual excellence, both individually and as part of their community, largely through a regime of ascetic devotion.⁴²

Additional support for the argument that the tractates were collated with intention is suggested by the colophon discovered at the end which does not seem to a part of the last tractate in the codex (Book of Thomas) but a final appeal from the pious editor of the collection:

ἀΡΙ ΠΑΜΕΕΥΕ ΘΩ ΝΑΣΝΗΥ ἘΝ ΝΕΤῆΠΡΟΣΕΥΧΗ	Remember me also, my brethern in your
ΕΙΡΗΝΗ ΤΟΙΣ ἄΓΙΟΙΣ Μῆ ΝΙΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΟΣ	prayers: peace to the saints and those who
	are spiritual

Our discussion so far, has thus demonstrated that Codex II was most likely intentionally collated, potentially in a monastic context.⁴³ Having established this we now need to look at the various hypotheses that have been forwarded as to why this group of texts were gathered together. These suggestions have ranged from proposals that suggested that these texts were collated together for reference by those intent on apologetic or heresiological purposes to the possibility they could represent a counter scripture reflecting the beliefs of a particular sect.

The former argument was generally proposed based on the outdated view (that we have already looked at above) that strict delineations between Gnostic ‘heresy’ versus Christian

⁴² Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’, 19.

⁴³ The colophon gives further credence to the idea that this collection originated and was read within a monastic community - of “spiritual” (ascetic) Christians. Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’ 209.

‘orthodoxy’ existed meaning that it would be impossible for these texts to be read for edification or even as revelation alongside other Christian writings. With this presupposition in mind, it would seem that the only reason for these texts to have been collected or even read within a monastic context would be apologetic.

Moving away from these confining and anachronistic assumptions, other scholars have suggested that Codex II is seeking to emulate scripture if not necessarily replace it.

In this line, Williams suggests that the collection mirrors a ‘Christian Scripture’ with the alternative cosmology of the Apocryphon of John serving as the governing framework, followed by Gospels, teachings, eschatology, and a final concluding dialogue.⁴⁴ This layout, according to I. H. Gilhus, reflects an “interlocking of the biblical demiurgical myth with a Jesus-tradition; the promotion of ascetic values; and the construction of a selected in-group identity”.⁴⁵

If we assume this intentional arrangement informing the literary context in which the Book of Thomas has been preserved and in which we now discover it, it is probably worth our while to briefly look at the contents and characteristics of the other texts before moving to look at our text in more detail.

As noted above the ApJohn contains a cosmological myth⁴⁶ consisting of what Williams helpfully dubs as “biblical demiurgical traditions”. These traditions offer an alternative creation narrative (to that discovered in Genesis) revealed by the saviour to the disciple John in a post-resurrection appearance. In this re-telling, the creator god of the Genesis narrative is not the

⁴⁴ Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’*, 254.

⁴⁵ Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, ‘Historiography as Anti-History: Reading Nag Hammadi Codex II’, *AR* 20, no. 1 (2018): 81.

⁴⁶ The Apocryphon of John utilizes a wide range of resources including ‘Hebrew Scriptures, Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom traditions, Platonizing philosophy, Stoicism, astrological treatises, Johannine literature’ Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 180.

highest ‘God’ but a lesser being. This demiurge, Yaldabaoth, was himself created outside of the will of the highest God and without the knowledge of her male consort by his mother Sophia (II 9.34-35). As a result, the realm that he created is contrary to the will of the highest God resulting in only suffering and death for humans. Thus, ApJohn explains the human condition – a struggle between the divine spirit unknowing imparted by Yaldabaoth in need of salvation from the corporeal and imperfect creation.⁴⁷

The next two works are gospels – GThom and GPhil – strengthening this interconnection. GThom preserves a collection of secret Jesus Sayings written by Didymus Judas Thomas. The collection begins with the promise that “whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death” (GThom 1). These individual sayings in their current form⁴⁸ come together to form a programme for the ascetic struggle informed by religious transformation (as a result of salvific experience) by developing themes like fasting, wealth, and a solitary (monastic) life.⁴⁹

GPhil, while also a collection of sayings seems to be more interested in the elevation of saved existence (re-generation) and becoming like the perfect Christ through rituals such as baptism. This ritual union with Christ and faithfulness to that union is described through the metaphor of marriage. This Gospel is also more interested in social responsibilities and relationships than the other texts in NHII.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Karen King offers a clear schema of the salvation history of the ApJohn: The ideal (the divine realm) → The problem (rupture) → The result (the situation of humanity in the world) → The solution (salvation). Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 85–122.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the compositional history and the ‘Thomasine’ community behind this collection see: April D. DeConick, ‘The Original “Gospel of Thomas”’, *VC* 56, no. 2 (2002): 167–99.

⁴⁹ Stephen Paterson makes an interesting argument that Gospel of Thomas along with parallel material discovered in the canonical gospels reveals an ascetic tendency in the early Jesus movement with renunciation serving to describe entering the ‘alternative symbolic universe, and the inauguration of a new subjectivity’. Stephen J. Patterson, ‘Asceticism in the Gospel of Thomas and Q: The Peculiar Practice of the Early Jesus Tradition’, in *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins: Essays on the Fifth Gospel*, ed. Stephen J. Patterson (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 175–96.

⁵⁰ Hugo Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul, Images of Rebirth* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 410–11.

The next two tractates the HypArch and OrigWorld are apocalyptic texts. They offer their own account of the demiurgical traditions and stress the imminent destruction of the malignant forces (the Archons). Conversely, the texts stress that the spiritually perfected humans will be glorified: “For everyone must go to the place which he has come. Indeed, by his acts and his acquaintance (gnosis) each person will make his nature known” (OrigWorld 150).

The last two texts the ExSoul and BookThom (as we have seen above) pick up on this theme of individual accountability and develop further the eschatological expectations of individual souls. The ExSoul traces the journey of the soul – characterised as a woman – which fell from heaven into a corporeal existence (which is likened to a life of prostitution) and the remorseful path to redemption through union with the saviour -husband.⁵¹

These distinct texts that make up NHII share a common concern with ascetic values, expressed in diverse ways and to various degrees. For example, as Fowler rightly notes, the Gospel of Philip most closely reflects the type of ascetic hierarchy that is also discovered in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 which holds celibacy and self-transformation as the ideal while at the same time recognising marriage and social responsibility as also being important.⁵² Other texts however are much less nuanced, requiring radical ascetic renunciation from everyone. In the *ApJohn* for example sexual desire is at the root of the original failing by the female consort and has been implanted in humans as means by which the demiurge can attack and keep them from self-knowledge. The other texts reflect a similar attitude which is developed through ascetic programmes that renounce bodily needs including that of social interaction so as “to transcend mundane life and death, which means that human biological conditions must give way to a type

⁵¹ Lundhaug, *Images of Rebirth*, 66–67.

⁵² Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’, 130.

of wished for supra-biological life. This type of life can be partially or completely realized on earth.”⁵³

In addition to this thematic connection which runs through these texts it is also significant, for our purposes, to note the strong apostolic link that is reflected in the collection. Four of the seven tractates in NHII claim apostolic authorship – John, Thomas, and Philip. This betrays not only acquaintance but also reliance on the central narratives of the Christian tradition for legitimacy and authority. The author (s) to whom these texts are attributed invest the pseudepigraphic text with authority and also serve as an ‘organising principle’ – i.e., rationale for inclusion in the corpus.⁵⁴ Within the context of Christian literature apostles have the highest level of authority as a result of a unique access to the foundational figure Jesus. For the readers who believes this attribution therefore it would have great significance. Moreover, texts attributed to the apostles can legitimately be organised together as they are essentially records of similar encounters and teachings.

With the broader literary context and programme of the NHII in mind, let us now turn to look more closely at the discourse of the BookThom to better understand how this text functions, on its own and within the corpus in which it has survived.

2.4.Reception and Ascetic Imagination

In this section, I will look more closely at the literary characteristics of the Book of Thomas with a particular focus on the catalogue of woes and beatitudes (143. 8 – 145.16) that are discovered in the final section. In much the same way that we were able to demonstrate that the Pauline macarisms serve as the ethical and ideological framework of the Acts of Paul and

⁵³ Gilhus, ‘Historiography as Anti-History: Reading Nag Hammadi Codex II’, 80.

⁵⁴ Irene Peirano, *The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake: Latin Pseudepigrapha in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, August 2012), 5.

Thecla, I will here argue this catalogue – the woes in particular – serve as a handy summary of the major themes and motifs that are featured in the rest of the book. The appropriation of the familiar woes and beatitudes structure also means that this section can possibly be more easily and productively compared and read alongside other Christian writings employing the same style including the APT.⁵⁵

The section containing the woes and beatitudes is the final sermon of the saviour delivered in one long monologue. As argued above this monologue is essentially a long answer to the final of the series of questions posed by Thomas driving the rest of the dialogue. So what did Thomas ask to elicit this long response?

Book of Thomas 142.20

<p>αγορωωβ̄ δε̄ ν̄βῑ θωμας̄ χε̄ ακριθε̄ μεν̄ μ̄μον̄ πχοεις̄ αν̄ρ̄νοεῑ ζ̄μ̄ π̄ν̄ζητ̄ αγω̄ σογον̄ζ εβολ̄ χε̄ ταεῑ τεθε̄ αγω̄ πεκω̄αχε̄ ο̄ ν̄ατφ̄θονος̄ αλλᾱ νιω̄ᾱ χε̄ εκ̄κ̄ω̄ μ̄μοοῡ ν̄αν̄ ζεν̄σωβε̄ νε̄ μ̄πκοσμος̄ αγω̄ ζ̄ν̄λ̄κω̄δεῑ ν̄σωοῡ νε̄ επεῑᾱη σεσοοῡνε̄ μ̄μοοῡ αν̄ ναω̄ β̄ε̄ ν̄ρητε̄ εν̄ναω̄βωκ̄ αταω̄ε̄ οειω̄ μ̄μοοῡ επῑᾱζ̄ χε̄ σεωπ̄ μ̄μον̄ αν̄ ζ̄μ̄ πκοσμος̄</p>	<p>Thomas answered: You have certainly persuaded us, Lord. We realize in our heart, and it is obvious, that this [is so] and that your word is sufficient. But these words that you speak to us are ridiculous and contemptible to the world since they are misunderstood. So how can we go preach them since we are not esteemed in the world?</p>
---	---

⁵⁵ Turner, notes that “its concluding woes and blessings bear a striking structural and functional resemblance to the blessings and cures in Moses testamentary speech in Deuteronomy 27-28.” Turner, “Introduction” 175. The Beatitudes can also be read alongside the Matthean Beatitudes, the Pauline Beatitudes in the Acts of Paul and Thecla that we looked at in the previous chapter as well as selected sayings from The Gospel of Thomas (Sayings 49; 54; 58; 68-69).

As we are told by the scribe Mathaias, at the very beginning of the BookThom contains “secret words” imparted to Thomas by the saviour. As we have seen above in our short summary the dialogue leading up to the final monologue, Thomas drives the dialogue with his questions, mainly focused on accessing the “hidden” and “invisible” things. These questions, are however, not directly answered by the saviour who is more focused on leading Thomas to an understanding of the visible world and of himself.

At the outset, Thomas much like the reader coming to the text fresh is himself ignorant. He had not yet fully comprehended the knowledge of the truth that had been revealed through Jesus (138. 11ff). He had however embarked, metaphorically (literally too, according to the setting recounted by Mathaias) down the road to knowledge by virtue of being a follower of the saviour. Through their dialogue the saviour guides Thomas to the understanding that the revelation which he sought entailed overcoming (transcending) the visible things – particularly the flesh – and achieving self-knowledge (learning “who you are, in what way you exist, and how you will come to be”).

It is armed with this newly acquired perspective (“You have certainly persuaded us, Lord”) that Thomas asks his final question about how to articulate this new revelation and convince others. This concern, which within the broader context of early Christianity can potentially be understood as an evangelical or missional concern, had also been reflected in his first question when he had asked about the hidden things so that he “can speak about them” (138.26). The saviour does not directly address Thomas’ missional concern. This is in line with the tone of the rest of the Book of Thomas which is very much framed as specialised knowledge for the in-group: those that are already apprentices but “have not yet received the height of perfection” (138.35).

Thomas, in his final question, also reiterates anxiety about how social perceptions will affect the reception of the message; since we are not esteemed [in] the world?”. The anxiety of the “in-group” articulated in this question is also something that is discovered in other early Christian writings reflecting the ideologically and ethically conflictual relationship minority Christian communities had with the beliefs, values, and structures of the larger society in which they were embedded.⁵⁶ It is quite possible that the writer was part of an even smaller group of renunciants who were at odds with others in the larger group. This is suggested by verses that castigate those who formerly possessed love for the faith (141.6-18) and those whose false faith will be revealed by the light (142.19 – 143.7). Importantly the inclusive wording here (we) draws in the reader/listener who has a common understanding and ideological commitment to identify directly with Thomas.

In response to this anxiety, the Saviour bolsters the confidence of the in-group by declaring that the implied opponents are destined for ultimate condemnation by the “ruler above”⁵⁷ who will ensure they are “imprisoned in a narrow and dark place” amongst other unpleasant things. The punishments detailed here evoke the traditional Christian imagery of eschatological judgment and punishment (see for example Matt 13.50; 2 Thes 1.9; Rev 21.8) which involve being cast down into a very real netherworld characterised by fiery suffering and bitterness. This potent imagery is also similar to the saviour’s depiction of the final fate awaiting those that choose to remain in the flesh and the bestial nature (141. 6 – 142.7).

⁵⁶ The Matthean woes in Matthew 23. 13-33 for example are focused on castigating the Pharisees and Sadducees as representatives of the larger Jewish community hostile to the teachings and values of the Christian in group.

⁵⁷ The identity of the “ruler above” here is not clear, but he fulfils the role of the powerful tormentor who is in charge of eschatological punishment discovered in other Judeo-Christian writings. David Sim, “Angels of eschatological punishment in the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions and in the Gospel of Matthew” *HTS* 55, no. 2 & 3 (1999) pp. 693-718.

It is amidst this rather long reflection of the eternal implications of the hidden revelation, including the potential consequences of rejecting it in this life by choosing to remain in the body and in thrall to the bestial nature, that we discover the catalogue of woes. The woes are followed by three beatitudes, which we will look at after looking at the woes a bit more closely.

2.4.1. Woe to you (ΟΥΟΕΙ ΝΗΤἼ)

The “woe oracle” is a familiar genre in Hebrew and Christian writings. In the Hebrew Bible, we find examples in the prophetic literature and in Second Temple Jewish Writings like the Book of Enoch. In the Hebrew Bible the most obvious examples of woe (וָאֵן) are found within the context of lamentations (e.g. 1Kings 13.30) and in indictments found in the prophetic literature⁵⁸ (e.g. Isaiah 5.8-23, Micah 2.1-5). A potential background to the development of the interjection here could be the cultic curse as, for example, discovered in Deuteronomy 27.15-26. A notable distinction between the cultic curse and the prophetic woe is that that where the former is focused on breaches to the covenant relationship between God and his chosen people the latter are more focused on injustice and unrighteousness in human social relationships. As a result, the lament function of the interjection, as opposed to the warning of impending judgment is stronger as the prophet mourns those who will experience certain punishment as a result of divine judgment. If we assume that the prophetic reflections were recorded in hindsight – as they most likely were – the use of the woe genre serves to frame explications for the travails of God’s

⁵⁸ Erhard Gerstenberger notes that the emphasis and frequency of the use of woe oracles in the prophetic literature suggests that this formula adopts an older woe form and that “the woe-form as used by the prophet shifts more and more from an essentially objective pronouncement of the misfortune which will be inherited by certain evildoers to a genuine indictment”. Erhard Gerstenberger. "The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets." *JBL* 81, no. 3 (1962): 255.

people – theodicy even - by noting that such sufferings are a result of the breach of socio-religious codes of conduct, and are, hence, self-inflicted.⁵⁹

A similar pattern seems to be reflected in the use of woes in Second Temple Jewish writings, as for example, can be discovered in 1 Enoch 94 – 100, which offers one example of the use of this form. Here, according to Robert A. Coughenour, the commentary on injustice and unrighteousness that is discovered in the woe tradition is further developed by association with wisdom traditions.⁶⁰

The woe (οὐαί) interjection is also discovered in several places in early Christian writings. In the canonical gospels for example we find it deployed polemically in the Gospel of Matthew 23.13-33. Jesus stands in the prophetic tradition to castigate the Pharisees and the Sadducees, for misinterpreting the Mosaic law, thus serving to underscore the new revelation or interpretation of the Law being inaugurated by Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke woes (Lk 6.24-26) are placed in close conjunction with the beatitudes (Lk 6.20-22) in what is traditionally referred to as the Sermon on the Plain.

The woes in the Book of Thomas follow in this tradition. Structurally the woes generally follow the familiar form identified by Erhard Gerstenberger.⁶¹ Accordingly, each unit begins with οὐοει/ οὐοι followed by a description of the class of person that is the subject of the lament. This is followed by more indictments, laments, or rhetorical questions. As is the case with the use of this form elsewhere, the woes appear in a series. The discussion below will attempt to identify the addressees, concerns, and thematic links with the rest of the BookThom to

⁵⁹ John D. W Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 1-33*. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002 (Word Biblical Commentary 24) p. 63

⁶⁰ Robert A. Coughenour, "The Woe-Oracles in Ethiopic Enoch." *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 9, no. 2 (1978): 197.

⁶¹ Gerstenberger. "The Woe-Oracles of the Prophets"

demonstrate how this catalogue serves as a parenetical ‘digest’ of the rest of the text and strengthening arguments for literary unity.

2.4.1.1. The godless ones

The first lament addresses the “godless ones”.

ΟΥΟΕΙ ΝΗΤ̄Ν̄ Ν̄ΑΤΝΟΥΤΕ ΕΤΕ Μ̄ΝΤΕΥ ΖΕΛΠΙΣ	Woe to you, godless ones, who have no
ΕΠΤΑΔΡΑΙΤ ΕΒΡΑΙ ΕΔ̄Ν̄ ΝΕΤΝΑΨΩΠΕ ΔΝ	hope, who rely on things that will not
	happen!

This first woe is an obvious continuation of the saviour’s condemnation of those who rejected “your [Thomas’] word” and are hence destined for eschatological judgment. This group is here referred to as the “godless ones.” But what is meant by “godless”? Since there is no cosmological framework discovered in the text, we do not have direct information about the conception of God in the BookThom other than what is revealed to us by the saviour, accordingly we need to look a bit more closely at the primary motif that is utilised by the saviour to represent God, which is that of light. This light is mainly depicted in contrast to the deadly fire of the flesh – which we will discuss in more detail below.

But before we turn to look at that let us first try to look more closely at the motif of light in the BookThom in relation to the development of the same metaphor to describe God in the GThom so that we can better see how this metaphor helps us to understand the identity of the godless in the first woe.

More specifically let us look at Logion 50 and Logion 83 which offer quite close parallels to the conception of light found within the Book of Thomas.

Gospel of Thomas Logion 50.1

ΠΕΧΕ ΤΣ ΧΕ ΕΥΨΑΝΧΟΟΣ ΝΗΤῆ ΧΕ ἸΤΑΤΕΤῆΨΩΠΕ
ΕΒΟΛ ΤΩΝ ΧΟΟΣ ΝΑΥ
ΧΕ ἸΤΑΝΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ Ζῆ ΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΠΜΑ ΕΝΤΑ ΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ
ΨΩΠΕ ΜῆΜΑΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΙΤΟΟΤϚ ὀγαατϚ ὀαωζ ε
ΕΡΑΤϚ ΑΥΩ ΑΦΟΥΩΝΖ Ε[Β]ΟΛ Ζῆ ΤΟΥΖΙΚΩΝ

Jesus said, ‘If they say to you, “From where have you come?”’, say to them, “We have come from the light, where the light came into being all of its own accord and stood and appeared in their images.”

Logion 83.1 – 2

... Ζῆ ΘΙΚΩΝ ἸΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ ἸΠΕΙΩΤ ὀ
ϚΝΑΒΩΛΠ ὀ ΕΒΟΛ ΑΥΩ ΤΕϚΙΚΩΝ ΖΗΠ ὀ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΙΤῆ
ΠΕϚ ὀ ΟΥΘΕΙΝ

In the image (or, reflection) of the light of the Father it will be revealed, but his image is hidden by his light.

We can see here that in both the BookThom and in the GThom, the representation of God as “light” reflects the idea of the highest God as the genesis. In Logion 50 the Gospel of Thomas asserts that the elect themselves originate from this light. The book of Thomas makes a similar point although in that context the reference is specifically about the saviour who is himself the

Book of Thomas (139.18-21)

ΖΟΤΑΝ ΔΕ ΕΡΨΑΝ ΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΕΙ ΕΒΟΛ ἸϚ ΖΩΠ
ἸΠΚΑΚΕ ΤΟΤΕ ΠΖΩΒ ἸΠΟΥΓΑ ΠΟΥΓΑ ΝΑΟΥΩΝΖ
ἸΤΟΚ ΔΕ ΠῆΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΕΚῤΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΠΧΟΕΙΣ
ΠΑΧΕϚ ἸΒῆ ΤΣ ΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΕϚΨΟΟΠ Ζῆ ΠΟΥΘΕΙΝ

Yet when the light comes forth and hides the darkness, then the work of each will appear. And you our light, enlighten, o lord.”
Jesus said, “It is in light that light exists”.

light (Jn 8.12) that exists in the heavenly light. Logion 83 describes the light as emanating from the Father, which reveals and obscures him at the same time. With this context in mind, therefore those who are impervious to light - i.e., reject the enlightenment that is being revealed by the saviour are “godless” because the light is synonymous with God (the Father).

In choosing to remain in the dark they do so with false expectations and beliefs, according to first woe: “who rely on things that will not happen”. In both the Gospel of Thomas and the Book of Thomas, we learn that in the final outcome the light will overcome the darkness to reveal the works of individuals – i.e., the light is the agent of the eschaton. Therefore, those that have rejected the light ‘have no hope’.

This is very much in line with the soteriological interest of the Book of Thomas, in general,⁶² and reflects the use of other descriptors to describe those that are being compared as the “other” to the “us” or the “we” elsewhere in the Book of Thomas such as “visible bodies” (139.2); the “ignorant” (140.12); “the fool” (140, 14, 15) and “beasts” (141.26). We will look at some of these more closely in relation to the other woes below.

2.4.1.2. Those who hope in the flesh

ογοι νητην νετρηελπιζε ατσαρσ αγω πωτεκο	Woe to you who hope in the flesh and the
ετνατεκο ψαντε ογ ψωπε ετετνωβω αγω	prison that will be destroyed. Until when
ναττεκο ετετνωμεεγε εροογ σε σενατακο αν	will you be oblivious? And how long will
ετετνωελπις ταδρηγ αδνη πκοσμος αγω	you think the imperishable will perish too?
πετνωουτε πε πεειβιος ετετνωτακο	Your hope is set upon the world and your
νωετνωψχοογε	

⁶² Simon Gathercole notes that the predominant theological focus of the GThom is likewise soteriological. Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 145.

god is this life. You are corrupting your
souls!

The flesh is a categorically evil thing in BookThom. As noted above, the early dialogue between Thomas and the saviour is characterised by Thomas's persistent request for hidden revelation which the saviour seems to ignore. Instead, he focuses on explaining the "visible" things which Thomas must understand and 'perform' before he can "perform those that pertain to the exalted height and to the pleroma, which are not visible" (138.35).

The initial step that "apprentices" need to take to receive "the height of perfection" is to first know and address the nature of the "visible body". The saviour describes this by utilising the metaphor of beasts to describe embodied existence and that of fire to represent the destructive power of human sexuality. We will look in more detail at the fire imagery below but let us first look at the former metaphor.

The saviour details the features that describe beasts (ἄβητα) to highlight the extent to which they are also shared by the human body. Key amongst these is that the human body is begotten through sexual intercourse and that it survives by consuming others that were begotten just like itself (138. 40; 139.3). BookThom thus puts the human body on a self-perpetuating continuum of decay which begins at conception (via the reproductive activity) and progressively gets worse. This process of decay is promoted by the consumption of animals⁶³ (see discussion

⁶³ Turner, *The Book of Thomas the Contender*. 158. Contra Turner, Kimberley Fowler argues that this may be best understand as metaphorically describing the bad influence that those who do not heed the saviour's teachings have upon one another. Fowler, "From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender", 218. While this is also possible, the focus in the Book of Thomas on the individual's journey to self-knowledge and the depiction of the body with all of its impulses as an oppositional force to this journey as well as what we know of monastic abstaining it seems more likely that it is the consumption of meat that is in mind.

below) that actually transforms the body to such an extent that “it has no life of life from then on, since that body is bestial” (139.5-6).

This is a significant metaphor in the Book of Thomas deserving of a closer look. To this end it is productive to note how this metaphor is used in other contexts, particularly within NH II. We find that this imagery is quite common in this corpus being found in ApJohn, OrigWorld, GPhil as well as in GThom.

In the ApJohn bestial imagery is associated with Yaldabaoth, primarily to describe the physical manifestation of his innate imperfection and grotesque nature (II 10.6-9).⁶⁴ This use refers back to traditions which theriomorphize human passions.

That tradition stems from the likeness that Plato has Socrates paint of the human soul in the ninth book of the *Republic*: the soul comprises an immortal, human element, a many-headed beast, who represents the basest of drives, and thirdly a lion, who is, for Plato, the potentially salvageable passion of *thumos*, the sum of all that is spirited, aggressive and courageous in man. The Greek philosophical tradition, especially Stoics like Poseidonios, kept this Platonic metaphor alive, but under astrological impetus in its inevitable assimilation to the passionate, theriomorphic archons of Gnostic myth it was more and more pessimistically interpreted.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Six of the seven archons that Yaldabaoth creates also all have the faces of beasts; sheep, donkey, hyena, seven headed serpent, serpent, monkey faces. (II. 11. 26 -35).

⁶⁵ King, *Secret Revelation*, 206.

The OrigWorld builds upon this a little more and tells us that the humans were created with some of these beastly qualities - presumably from their creators who had the form of the beasts (ΜΜΟΡΦΗ ΝΘΗΡΙΟΝ) – which led their “erring ignorantly like beasts” [118.6-9].

In the GPhil we discover another mythos that further develops the idea that humans possess an innate bestial nature.

GPhil. 71.22-26

οὐ̅ν̅ ψ̅η̅ν̅ σ̅να̅υ̅ ρ̅η̅τ̅ ε̅μ̅ π̅πα̅ρα̅δ̅ι̅σ̅ο̅ς

πο̅υ̅α̅ δ̅πε̅ θ̅η̅ρι̅ο̅ν̅ πο̅υ̅α̅ δ̅πε̅ ρ̅ω̅μ̅ε̅

α̅α̅δ̅α̅μ̅ οὐ̅ω̅μ̅ ε̅βο̅λ̅ ε̅μ̅ π̅ψ̅η̅ν̅

̅ν̅τ̅α̅δ̅δ̅πε̅ θ̅η̅ρι̅ο̅ν̅ α̅ψ̅ω̅πε̅ ̅ν̅θ̅η̅ρι̅ο̅ν̅

α̅ψ̅πε̅ θ̅η̅ρι̅ο̅ν̅ ε̅τ̅βε̅ παι̅ σ̅ε̅ρ̅σε̅βε̅σε̅ε̅

α̅ν̅θ̅η̅ρι̅ο̅ν̅ ̅ν̅β̅ι̅ ̅ν̅ψ̅η̅ρε̅ ̅ν̅α̅α̅α̅μ̅.

There are two trees growing in

Paradise. The one bears animals,

the other bears men. Adam ate

from the tree which bore animals.

He became an animal, and he

brought forth animals. For this

reason, the children of Adam

worship animals.

These two texts together strengthen our understanding of the use of the beast metaphor in BookThom by underscoring that the bestial nature is innate to the “visible body” (GPhil) – a default setting of sorts - and by indicating that the primary manifestation of this nature is sexual activity (OrigWorld).

In Logion 7⁶⁶ the GThom utilises the woe/blessing format and likens the flesh (the bestial nature) to a lion.

⁶⁶ A slightly different is discovered in Logion 112 which reads: “Jesus said, ‘Woe to the flesh which depends on the soul. Woe to the soul which depends on the flesh.’” This reference, while retaining the idea of the body and the soul as two different and bifurcated spheres that should not influence one another it nonetheless seems to suggest that in its own sphere the body being fine in its own sphere. Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas*, 602.

Logion 7

πεχε τ̄ ουμακαριος πε πμογει παει ετε	Jesus said, ‘Blessed is the lion which the
πρωμε ναογομϷ αγω ν̄τε πμογει ψωπε	man eats, and the lion becomes man.
ρ̄ρωμε	And cursed is the man whom the lion eats
αγω Ϸβητ̄ ν̄βι πρωμε παει ετε πμογει	and the ⟨man⟩ becomes ⟨lion⟩.
ναογομϷ αγω⟨πρωμε⟩ ναψωπε ⟨ν̄μογει⟩	

The writer characterises the relationship between the human and bestial natures in stark terms – one will consume the other completely resulting in blessings or curse.

The Book of Thomas takes up these ideas and focuses particularly highlighting the ways in which the bestial nature – which is understood as the default setting of the body - can consume the human. Here as in the OrigWorld the main mechanism by which this default nature asserts control on the human is through sexuality. The BookThom also discusses the conflictual relationship between the body and the soul - enhancing the idea of the body as a locus which is opposed to the soul (the hidden self).⁶⁷ The second woe, highlights this noting that the imperishable soul is imprisoned and liable to be corrupted by the perishable body that is doomed to destruction.

The idea of godlessness that we noted in the first woe also features here with the saviour declaring that those that are oblivious believe in this life (your god is this life) and as a result they have set their hope on the world.

⁶⁷ This is also developed through the use of other metaphors including that of fire which is picked up in the next several woes which I will look at separately below.

2.4.1.3.Those within the Fire

As we have noted above, in the Book of Thomas fire is a decidedly negative metaphor that alternatively describes human sexual desires and the fires of punishment in the afterlife.

ΟΥΟΕΙ ΝΗΤῆ ΖΡΑΙ Εῤ ΠΚΩΞΤ ΕΤΡΩΚΞ Εῤ ΤΗΝΕ
ΧΕ ΟΥΑΤΣΙ ΠΕ

Woe to you within the fires that burns
within you, it is insatiable.

ΟΥΟΕΙ ΝΗΤῆ ΕΒΟΛ ΖΙΤΟΟΤῆ ῀ΠΚΑΤ ΕΤΚΩΤΕ Εῤ
ΝΕΤῆΜΕΕΥΕ

Woe to you because of the wheel that turns
in your minds.

ΟΥΟΕΙ ΝΗΤῆ ῀ΤῆΟῆΤῆ ῀ΠΜΟΥΞ ΕΤΞῆ ΤΗΝΕ ΧΕ
ΟΥΑΥΩΜ ῀ΝΕΤῆΣΑΡΞ Εῤ ΟΥΩΝΞ ΕΒΟΛ ΑΥΩ
ΟΥΑΠΩΞ ῀ΝΕΤῆΨΥΧΟΟΥΕ Εῤ ΟΥΞΩΠ ῀ΥΣῆΤΕ
ΤΗΝΕ ΖΡΑΙ Εῤ ΝΕΤῆΡΗΥ

Woe to you in the grasp of the burning that
is in you. It will devour your flesh visbly
and it will tear your souls in secret and
prepare you for your companions.

ΟΥΟΙ ΝΗΤῆ ῀ΔΑΙΧΜΑΛΩΤΟΣ ΧΕ ΤΕΤῆΜΗΡ Εῤ
῀ΣΠΗΛΑΙΟΝ ΤΕΤῆΣΩΒΕ ΕΤΕΤῆΡΑΥΕ ΖΡΑΙ Εῤ
῀ΣΩΒΕ ῀ΛΙΒΕ ΤΕΤῆῤΝΟΕΙ ΔΝ ῀ΠΕΤῆΤΑΚΟ ΟΥΤΕ
ΤΕΤῆ ῤΝΟΕΙ ΔΝ Εῤ ΝΕΤΕΤῆῆΞΗΤΟΥ ΟΥΤΕ
῀ΠΕΤῆῆΜΕ ΧΕ ΤΕΤῆΥΟΟΠ Εῤ ΠΚΑΚΕ Μῆ ΠΜΟΥ

Woe to you prisoners, because you are
bound in caverns! You laugh. In mad
laughter you rejoice. You do not consider
your destruction, nor do you consider your
circumstances nor realize you dwell in
darkness and death.

Fire in this context is a clear reference to sexual passion. This fire, we are told, originates from within the person and the body is the locus of “burning”. Other parts of the person are also – as we learn a little lower down – within the fire and are hence susceptible to its destructive power to “tear your souls” and also to controls the mind. Thus all parts of the human person can be irrevocably damaged by this fire.

The first thing we need to note here, as a matter of interest, is the focus on the individual as the source and the victim of this fire. This serves as an interesting contrast to the associations of the female alone (even if symbolically) with sexual desire and sexuality even in other texts in NHII (e.g., ApJohn and ExSoul) and as a singular source of sexual temptation in later Christian traditions.⁶⁸

A second interesting point that is highlighted in relation to the fire of sexual desire is that it is insatiable – an ever-present need. The imagery of the ever-turning “wheel” that keeps the mind oblivious and unreflecting is particularly significant in explicating this. The human person is depicted as being caught in a hamster wheel of sorts that delivers temporary gratification keeping the subject perpetually in the same cycle. The fire metaphor, like that of the beast metaphor we have seen above thus serves to depict an ontological reality that needs to be understood through revelation and self-knowledge.

Elsewhere, we find other metaphors to describe the extent of human helplessness – without divine revelation – “hidden knowledge”. One such metaphor is that of the ‘bit in the mouth’ that ‘leads them according to its desire’ (140.29-30). The only escape from this state of captivity is to “make wings so as to fly, fleeing the lust that scorches the spirits of men” (140.1-4). This reflects a very familiar theme of fleeing from or removing temptation that we can discover in the gospel (e.g., Matt 5.29-30; 26.41) the Pauline literature (e.g., 1 Cor 6.18), and other early Christian writings (e.g., 1 Tm 6.11; 2 Tm 2.22; Js 1.14). The counsel to flee within the context of BookThom is likely an allusion to the practice of removing oneself from the ‘visible’ world which becomes a common feature of ascetic enlightenment and transformation in

⁶⁸ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

later monastic writings, including, as we will see in the next chapter, the Life of Antony. This call would thus resonate with a monastic origin for this text, be it Pachomian or other circles.

Thirdly, sexual desire imprisons the human person in that it hinders self-knowledge. We learn elsewhere in the book of Thomas that this is further reinforced by the false data from the body which has the “illusion of truth” (ΝΟΥΦΑΝΤΑΣΙΑ ΜΗΕ) and which deceives all the senses with false sweetness, fragrance, and light (140. 21 - 31). This ‘false data’ results in madness and joy that masks the darkness in which the soul is dwelling and thus contributes to the continued bondage of the person. The motif of self-knowledge (true and hidden knowledge) versus the illusory knowledge will be discussed further below but before we turn to look at that, let us look more closely at the depiction of the destructive ‘fire’ in other texts.

The description of the fire as something that is naturally implanted within human brings, in the Book of Thomas, is reminiscent of the fire of the Demiurge in the *ApJohn*, which is put in contradistinction to the pure divine light. This fire is imparted to his seven progeny (*ApJohn* II 12.5)⁶⁹ and when these powers saw that the man that they had created as a composite being had exceeded them because the Demiurge had been tricked into sharing with him the divine spirit (*ApJohn* II 19.26) they acted to bring:

Adam into the shadow of death in order that they might form him again from earth and water and fire and spirit. The one that originates in matter which is the ignorance of darkness and desire and their counterfeit spirit. This is the tomb of the form of the body with which the robbers clothed the man, the fetters of forgetfulness. (*ApJohn* II 21.4 -13)

⁶⁹ Versions of the *ApJohn* in Codex II and the Berlin Codex add that he did not share the pure light which he had received from his mother (III. 18.14; BG 42. 16-17)

The depiction of embodied human existence as being bound in a cavern or tomb that we see here is also reflected in the Thomasine woes. There we find the saviour laments that humans remain unaware of their true circumstances and do not realise that they are in the dark, presumably because the body presents powerful distractions that induce forgetfulness of the true nature. Strikingly, the writer of BookThom also uses the same imagery of being imprisoned and entombed to describe the place of punishment awaiting the one that sneers at his message:

I tell you he will be handed over to the ruler above who rules over all the powers ... and [he will] cast him from heaven down to the abyss, and he will be imprisoned in a narrow dark place ... If he flees westward, he finds the fire. If he turns southward, he find it there as well. If he turns northward, the threat of seeting fire meets him again. Nor does he find the way to the east so as to flee there and be saved, for he did not find it in the day **he was in the body**, so that he may find it in the day judgment (142.30 – 143.7)

This potent imagery of being imprisoned or entombed is used to describe both embodied existence and eternal punishment for the recalcitrant.

Similarly, the fire metaphor, as we have noted, is also used to describe the final punishment in a variety of ways. Let us turn to look at this second use of this imagery briefly.

In the first instance, BookThom develops the fire of condemnation in the underworld in relation to the ‘sweet’ fire of sexual desire which has possession of the human body and faculties in life:

On the contrary, they are deprived of [the kingdom] since the sweetness of the fire and are servants of death and rush to the works of corruption. They fulfil the lusts of their fathers. They will be thrown down to the abyss and be

afflicted by the torment of the bitterness of their evil nature ... But it is the fire that will burn them!”

As Fowler rightly notes the depiction of the punishment in the underworld here is similar to that reserved for the rulers⁷⁰ in the HypArch and OrigWorld with one crucial difference, humans – unlike the rulers - can save themselves.⁷¹ This imagery of fiery judgment is of course also reflected in other Christian traditions including the canonical literature –e.g., in the Gospel of Matthew 13. 40-43 where interestingly the fire of condemnation is contrasted with the light that will shine from the righteous who will: “shine forth like the sun”. In other instances, we learn that this fire of condemnation is not reserved just for humans and rulers but for the entire creation which is liable to eschatological condemnation (2 Peter 3. 7-12).

Along with thus establishing the central pillar of the ascetic program of the Book of Thomas – i.e., the veniality of the body and bodily desires and the final disposition of the human soul should it be consumed by these desires, the woes also recap the other main theme of the book, self-knowledge.

The importance of self-knowledge is a motif that runs throughout the dialogue between the saviour and Thomas. As we have looked at above, the saviour answers Thomas’ questions about the secret and invisible things by reorienting his focus toward self-knowledge which is alternately identified as the “height of perfection” (ΜΠΜΕΓΕΘΟΣ ΝΤΜΝ 138. 27ff) and the “doctrine for the perfect” (ΤΕΣΒΩ ΝΝΤΕΛΕΙΟΣ 140.10). Let us briefly look at the woes dealing with “false knowledge.”

⁷⁰ We could possibly wonder if the ‘lust of your fathers’ is a reference to the role of the rulers who are said to have implanted their own passions into humanity at the time of the creation of the body according to the demiurgical myths. In the absence of other evidence, however, it is probably best to assume that this is a reference to biological fathers that pass on lusts as a matter of the reproductive process.

⁷¹ Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’, 218.

2.4.1.4.Those Who Dwell in Error

ογοει νητῆν νετωοοη εῃ πωρῃ ετετῆβαυτ	Woe to you who dwell in error, not
αν απογοειν ῃπρη πετκρινε ῃπτηρη ετβαυτ	perceiving the light of the sun that judges all
αδῆν πτηρη γε φνακωτε αδῆν ῆεβηγε τηρου	and which looks upon all because it will
ατρεῆδαδε ρ εμεδῆλ αγω οη τετῆρνοει αν	encircle all things so as to enslave the
ῃποοε γε ῆαυ ῆεε ῆτογυη μῆ φοογ	enemies. And you do not understand the
εγδαυτ εεραι ανσωμα ῆνετῆεεβε	moon, how it looks down by night and day
	at the bodies of your slaughters.

The saviour turns here to address the (false) knowledge that serves as a framework for human existence that is characterised by the flesh and the fire of sexual desire. Expanding on the motif of ‘illusory truth’ we briefly mentioned above this woe laments the power that this false knowledge has over the minds of those who reject this message. This power is like a shade that is keeping them from “perceiving the light of the sun”. Let us look at some of the imagery associated with the effects of these erroneous teachings and understandings in the rest of BookThom.

The first such imagery, which resonates with the light/darkness motif which we also discover in this woe, is that of blindness. One example of the use of this metaphor is the following:

141.21-25

η ογ πετῆναδοοη ῆβῆλεεγε ῆρωμε η αυ	What shall we say to blind men? What
ῆσβω τετῆναδοοε ῆνιταλααιπωροε ῆθηητοε	doctrine should we express to these
	miserable mortals who say, ‘we come to

ΝΕΤΣΩ ἸΜΟC ΔΕ ΔΝΕΙ ΔΡΠΕ ΤΝΔΝΟΥϞ ΔΓΩ [do] good and not to curse' and yet [claim],
 ΔΥCΑΘΟΥ ΔΝ ΠΑΛΙΝ ΔΕ CΕΝΑΔΟΟC ΔΕ ΕΝΕ 'Had we not been begotten in the flesh, we
 ἸΠΟΥΧΠΟΝ ΕἸ ΤCΑΡῚ ΝΕΝΝΑCΟΥΩΝ ΨΑϞΤΕ ΔΝ would not have known [iniquity]?
 ΠΕ

The metaphorical reference to the 'blind' picks up on the idea of something that is native to the human condition that has to be transcended through special revelation. We see here that Thomas's opponents apparently also recognised that their 'problem' is innate and used this to justify their inability to change. This gives us a glimpse of the doctrinal "error" (mentioned both here and in the woe, we are looking at) which in turn allows limited insight into the identity of the opponents.

Based on what we can gather here, therefore, the crucial ideological difference seems to be that Thomas's opponents rejected the idea that the flesh needed to be completely abandoned since humans "were begotten in the flesh". Instead, they argued, what matters is that they had 'come' to do good works and to speak good things. This suggests a distinctly different soteriology than what is developed in the Book of Thomas. For the opponents the locus of human salvation is social while in the Book of Thomas salvation is individual-focused soteriology. Moreover, where in the Book of Thomas the human essence is saved through self-knowledge and self-control, the opponent's theology is predicated on actions affecting others – doing good and not cursing.

In addition to identifying, some aspects of the doctrinal differences driving BookThom the reference to 'coming' here could also indicate the identity of the opponents. If we understand coming to mean joining a group or a community, it may mean that the BookThom addresses ascetic disputations within a monastic community. There is also other evidence that suggests

Thomas is referencing a group, likely within the same community, which the writer considers to be apostate. We see this for example in the reference to those who suffer “on account of love for the faith they formerly possessed” (141.10ff). The saviour goes on to note that they at some point had sight “among things that are not visible “will perish in the concern for this life and the scorching of the fire” because they are without their first love. It seems safe to assume that those who had “sight” of those things that are not visible – as opposed to the blind who are congenitally unable to see anything - must refer to monks who had taken up an ascetic commitment but had seemingly apostatised from the ‘correct’ ideology and may even have succumbed to the “fire” and married.

Possible further support for this seems to be suggested quite evocatively here in 140.19-20: “some who, although having wings, rush upon the visible things, things that are far from the truth.” Wings, as we have seen above, are a metaphor for the spiritual aptitude that the ascetic must develop in himself to build the capacity to flee from temptation and the most ideal condition for this is a radical separation from the visible world – i.e., monastic withdrawal. Some, however, according to the saviour, having thus acquired wings for themselves and fled (presumably into the desert or a monastery) were unable to sustain total ascetic separation and continue to embrace “worldly” practices.⁷² They are, therefore, unable to comprehend the secret revelation – ‘truth’ even though they may technically be a part of the monastic community.

These indications of intra-group contentions between a ‘Thomasine in-group’ of enlightened ascetics and a wider faith or monastic community that has not completely subscribed to the ideology of the in-group are further strengthened by designations like the “perfect” (e.g.,

⁷² As we have noted in the previous chapter, when we looked at arguments surrounding the use of wine or water in communion such distinctions amongst ascetic groups can revolve around things like eating practices.

140.11) and the “elect” (139.29). These designations identify and reassure the likely smaller group of enlightened ascetics that the “secret words” have not only been revealed to and understood by them but that they are specifically destined to understand them.⁷³ The out-group on the other hand are “ignorant” (140.12) and “fools” (140. 14 - 15).

The Book of Thomas appropriates the form of the parable incorporating elements that are familiar from those discovered in the gospels, to further elaborate distinctions between the “Thomasine” and the “non-Thomasine” groups.

144.20

πρη μ̄ν πο̄ς νᾱϋ ς̄ηνοϋϋε η̄ητ̄η μ̄ν πᾱηρ μ̄ν	The sun and the moon will give a fragrance
ππ̄νᾱ μ̄ν πκᾱς μ̄ν πμο̄οϋ πρη γαρ̄ εϋτ̄ιπ̄ρριε	to you together with the air and the spirit
ᾱχ̄ν̄ ν̄ιςωμᾱ ς̄εναλοϋλεϋ̄ ν̄ςετακο̄ ἱ̄πρητε	and the earth and the water. For if the sun
ε̄ωωϋ̄ ν̄οϋ̄ ν̄ηθ̄β̄ η̄ οϋχορτο̄ς εϋωπε̄ με̄ν	does not shine upon these bodies, they will
ε̄πρη̄ π̄ρριε̄ ᾱχ̄ωϋ̄ ϋ̄αϋβ̄ηβ̄αμ̄ ν̄ϋωβ̄τ̄ ν̄τ̄ω	wither and perish just like weeds or grass. If
ν̄ελοο̄λε̄ εϋωπε̄ δε̄ εςϋανβ̄ηβ̄ομ̄ ν̄β̄ῑ τ̄ω	the sun shines on them, they prevail and
ν̄ελοο̄λε̄ ν̄ς̄ρ̄ ε̄αιβ̄ες̄ ᾱχ̄ν̄ ν̄ῑη̄ηθ̄β̄ μ̄ν̄ ν̄ικεϋ̄να	chose the grapevine; but if the grapevine
τηροϋ̄ ε̄τρη̄τ̄ ε̄ραῑ ν̄μ̄μᾱς̄ ν̄ς̄π̄ωρϋ̄ ε̄βολ̄	prevails and shades those weeds and all that
ᾱϋ̄ω̄ ν̄ς̄οϋο̄ς̄τ̄η̄ ε̄βολ̄ ϋ̄ᾱς̄ρ̄κ̄ληρο̄νο̄μ̄ει	other brush growing alongside and spreads
ἱ̄πκᾱς̄ ο̄γᾱᾱτ̄ς̄̄ παῑ ε̄τ̄ς̄ρη̄τ̄ ε̄ραῑ ν̄η̄ητ̄ῆ̄	and flourishes, it alone inherits the land in
	which it grows;

⁷³ As noted by Gilhus this allows the reader to identify themselves with the “type of identity, characterised by being elected and potentially saved ... This also means that readers will get textual support to establish themselves as an elite in group in relation to other groups.” Gilhus, ‘Historiography as Anti-History: Reading Nag Hammadi Codex II’, 80.

The first thing we can note here is the use of the grapevine imagery which is a common symbolism associated with the elect and the faithful in both Hebrew (e.g., Psalm 80. 8-9; Isaiah 2.21. Hosea 10.1, etc) and Christian writings (Mark 12.1-12; John 15.1-5). The image of the grapevine that flourishes so that '*it alone inherits the land in which it grows*' seems to be used to similar effect here to evoke the special and nurturing relationship the divine Father (represented by the sun in this context) has with the elect.

In addition to the grapevine, we can also find allusions to the parable of the sower (Matt 13. 3-8) and the parable of the weeds (Matt 13.24-29). These two parables both deal with false believers that are initially difficult to distinguish from the 'true' believers or apostates unable to go the distance in the journey of faith. The parable of the weeds (Matt 13.24-29) closely parallels what we find in BookThom in that in both contexts, the false believers/apostates are likened to weeds that are growing alongside the wheat and the vine respectively.⁷⁴In the Matthean parable of the sower, this group is likened to a seed that fell on shallow ground and seemed to grow fast "But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root" (Matt 13.6).

Sun-related symbolism is found in other places in BookThom including in the fourth woe, however, the sense conveyed seems to be different based on context.

In places we find that the sun is depicted as a life-giving force, without which the "*bodies will wither and perish*" and not as a force of judgment. This is in line with the general identification of the sun and light in general with the saviour in the Book of Thomas.⁷⁵ This light

⁷⁴ 'The juxtaposition of weeds and wheat in Jewish parables frequently represents the nations and Israel.' Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis, MIN: Fortress Press, 2001), 255.

⁷⁵ Turner, "Introduction" 176.

is put in contradistinction to both the darkness and the fire of the human passions, as we have seen above. It is not a metaphorical realm that exists as opposed to the darkness, but it is a force, that disperses the darkness once the “fire” that animates it is extinguished (144.17-23).

Controlling the fire and allowing the light to work, however, seems to be very much within the domain of the individual and the choices that he makes. The in-group and their adversaries are struggling for access to the metaphorical sun which makes it essential for the elect to ‘prevail’.

Within the context of this woe, however, the motif of judgment as discovered in the Gospel of Matthew seems to be more pronounced: “*the light of the sun that judges all and which looks upon all because it will encircle all things so as to enslave the enemies.*”

The light of the sun here is characterised as a power that is omniscient and omnipotent. This builds upon the visible qualities of the literal sun which are translated to explain the nature of the divine light. The reference to the moon strengthens this impression. Even when the sun may seem absent, the moon is there with its light to watch over what is done in the darkness – i.e., the literal absence of light. The sun and moon here can be understood both literally as representatives of the heavens or as metaphors to the same effect.

But what does the enigmatic phrase “bodies of your slaughter” mean? This could potentially be speaking about the persecution of the in-group by the larger out-group – even martyrdom. This may also be reflected in Thomas’ reference to the “one that is being given over” – which seems to echo martyrdom language. It could also, however, be a condemnation of the consumption of animals, which is also suggested elsewhere.

As noted above we can find evidence of this in (139.5-6) which speaks of the body surviving, “by devouring creatures similar to them, with the result that the bodies changes. [And] that which changes will decay and perish, and has no hope of life from then on since that body is

bestial.” While we have shown above the metaphorical utility of bestial imagery in the Book of Thomas, in this context the reference seems to be to the literal consumption of meat. This is very much in line with other aspects of the Book of Thomas which characterises the natural impulses of the body, which it shares with other animals, as something that is opposed to the quest for self-knowledge.⁷⁶ Moreover, as is noted in this woe, food literally and metaphorically nourishes the flesh (the bestial nature), hence aiding in its decay and eventual demise. We can note that the link between the appetites, sex, and food, is a recurring motif in the broader NHII.⁷⁷ Renunciation of food, particularly meat and wine, is also an important feature of the broader ascetic tradition as we have already seen to some extent in the Acts of Paul and Thecla and which we will see in more detail when we look at the Life of Antony.

The “bodies of your slaughter” therefore likely addresses another trajectory of distinction between the “Thomasine” and the “non-Thomasine” groups.

2.4.1.5. The Final Woes (Powers of the Body)

<p>ΟΥΟΙ ΝΗΤ̄Ν ΝΕΤΜΔΕΙΕ Ν̄ΤΣΥΝΗΘΕΙΑ Ν̄ΤΜ̄Ν̄ΤΣΕΙΜΕ Μ̄Ν̄ ΠΕΣΥΩΠΕ Ν̄Μ̄ΜΑΣ ΕΤΣΟΟϚ</p>	<p>Woe to you who love intimacy with women and polluted intimacy with them.</p>
<p>ΑΥΩ ΟΥΟΕΙ ΝΗΤ̄Ν Ν̄ΤΟΟΤΟΥ Ν̄Ν̄ΕΞΟΥΣΙΑ Μ̄ΠΕΤ̄Ν̄ΣΩΜΔ ΧΕ ΝΕΤ̄Μ̄ΜΟ ΓΑΡ ΣΕΝΔΘ̄Μ̄ΚΕ ΤΗΝΕ</p>	<p>And woe to you in the powers of the body for they will afflict you.</p>
<p>ΟΥΟΙ ΝΗΤ̄Ν Ν̄ΤΟΟΤΟΥ Ν̄Ν̄ΕΝΕΡΓΕΙΑ Ν̄Ν̄ΔΔΙΜΩΝ Μ̄ΠΟΝΗΡΟΝ</p>	<p>Woe to you in the grip of the forces of evil demons.</p>
<p>ΟΥΟΙ ΝΗΤ̄Ν ΝΕΤΣΩΚ Ν̄Ν̄ΕΥΜΕΛΟΣ Θ̄Μ̄ ΠΚΩΘ̄Τ</p>	

⁷⁶ Bentley Layton, ed., ‘The Book of Thomas The Contender’, in *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7, Together with XIII, 2* Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1) and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*, trans. John D. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 158.

⁷⁷ Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’, 56.

Woe to you who beguile your limbs with
fire.

In the last woes, the saviour returns to the theme of sexual desire, which as noted above, is one of the two central concerns of the ascetic program of BookThom. An interesting element introduced in relation to this motif in these woes is that of the influence of demonic forces.

The role of demons in orchestrating and influencing sexual temptation that becomes an integral element of later Christian monastic writings⁷⁸ is not very prominent in BookThom. The reference here, however, suggests (as mentioned above) the influence of non-human forces of darkness that are aligned against the light but in the absence of an apparent cosmological framework, within the Book of Thomas, it is difficult to determine what these forces might be. Read from the framework of the broader NH II, however, we can find some parallels. As convincingly argued by Fowler, the ApJohn “outlines what NH II will elaborate, upon, mapping out central themes.”⁷⁹ With this in mind, we can posit that these forces are synonymous with the Archons – malignant spiritual forces. In the ApJohn, as in the woes above the influence of these forces is particularly potent in inspiring lust and disseminating false knowledge.

The literary structure, here, however, reveals that the forces of evil demons are almost synonyms for the “powers of the body” and “intimacy with women” in the other woes suggesting that by repeating the same idea in different ways these woes come together to deliver a very powerful condemnation of human sexuality. The language used in these woes evokes the idea of

⁷⁸ We will discuss this in more detail in relation to the Life of Antony in the next chapter.

⁷⁹ Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’, 82.

being in the power of the body and resonates with the depiction of embodiment as being an imprisonment in something that is “other” to the human.

Having thus handily summarised the main themes of the rest of the book in the series of woes the saviour then delivers three beatitudes which we will briefly look at below.

2.4.2. Blessed are you (ΝΑΕΙΑΤ ΤΗΝΕ)

At first glance, it may seem that the three beatitudes are more of a stylistic than a substantive addition to the final monologue. This sense is strengthened by what seems to be a discordant shift from the themes that are the focus of the woes (sexual desire, the body, eschatological condemnation, etc.) and the introduction of motifs (e.g. stumbling block, the love of the lord, etc) that are less apparent in the rest of this particular text. I would argue that despite this seeming incongruity the beatitudes do demonstrate continuity as well as additional insight into the peculiar reception of the beatitude literary form in BookThom.

ΝΑΕΙΑΤ ΤΗΝΕ ΝΕΤῚϣῚῚΠῚΝῚΜΕ ΔΝΣΚΑΝΔΑΛΟΝ

ΑῒΩ ΕΤΠΩΤ ΖΗΤῚ ῚῚΑΛΛΟΤΡΙΟΝ

Blessed are you who have prior knowledge of the stumbling blocks and who flee alien things.

ΝΑΕΙΑΤ ΤΗΝΕ ΝΕΤΟΥΝΟΒΝΕῚ ῚῚΜΟΟΥ ΑῒΩ ΕῒΩΠ

ῚῚΜΟΟΥ ΔΝ ΕΤΒΕ ΠΝΑΕΙΕ ΕΤΕῒῚῚΤΑῒῚ ΕΞΟΥΝ

ΕΡΟΥῒ ῚῚΒΙ ΠΟΥΧΟΕΙΣ

Blessed are you who are reviled and not esteemed on account of the love their lord has for them.

ΝΑΕΙΑΤ ΤΗΝΕ ΝΕΤΡΙΜΕ ΔΥΩ ΕΤΟΥΡ̄ΘΛΙΒΕ Π̄ΜΟΟΥ	Blessed are you who weep and are
ΘΙΤ̄Ν ΝΕΤΕΜ̄ΝΤΕΥ ΘΕΛΠΙΣ ΧΕ ΣΕΝΔΒΩΛ ΤΗΝΕ ΘΙΤ̄Ν	oppressed by those without hope, for you
Μ̄ΡΡΕ ΝΙΜ	will be released from every bondage.

As we have already discussed in the previous chapter, Beatitudes are a peculiar construction discovered in the Hebrew scriptures, Jewish writings from the Second Temple period, and subsequent Christian writings. They serve to introduce both ethical exhortation and eschatological promises. In adopting this style BookThom also appropriates themes discovered in other early Christian beatitudes as we will see below.

The first beatitude carries on with the theme of knowledge which is an important motif in the Book of Thomas, as we have already seen. In this context, however, the focus is specifically on knowledge about the stumbling blocks and not self-knowledge. Appearing in conjunction with an exhortation to ‘flee’ the stumbling blocks in this context seems to refer to false (alien) teachings that could derail the enlightened listener unless they have ‘prior knowledge’. In this light, we can conclude that prior knowledge here is synonymous with the ‘secret words’ or knowledge about the invisible things that the saviour is imparting which equip the listener with an advantage over the unenlightened person. This beatitude, thus affirms the specialised knowledge of the in-group and draws lines keeping out alternative teachings as ‘alien’ and ‘stumbling blocks.’

The second beatitude which deals with persecution has close parallels with macarisms discovered in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Thomas:

Gospel of Matthew 5.10

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Book of Thomas

Blessed are you who are reviled and not esteemed on account of the love their lord has for them.

Gospel of Thomas Logion 68

Blessed are you when they hate you and persecute you.

As we can see here the beatitude from the BookThom addresses the issue of persecution by others brought about not because of personal sins or relationships but as a result of the larger social group rejecting the new faith or ethical commitment in much the same way as the beatitudes discovered in the other two texts. In all of these contexts what is highlighted is that persecution is a marker of divine favour and not of divine opprobrium. A slight difference, that may be interesting to note, with regard to the Book of Thomas, is that the persecution is due to the “love their lord has for them” possible offering possible insight into an “in group” within a wider faith or monastic community that claims special election.

The third beatitude also picks up on a familiar motif from other Christian writings - this time that of mourning and weeping. We can once again look at parallels from Matthew and the GThom.

Matthew 5.4

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Book of Thomas

Blessed are you who weep and are oppressed by those without hope, for you will be released from every bondage.

GThom Logion 69

Blessed are those who have been persecuted
in their hearts.

As we see in these texts, mourning due to external agents (i.e. at the hands of others that are opposed to the newly acquired religious commitment) and induced internally as a result of coming to a state of consciousness of the true nature of the current existence, is a virtue. The Matthean macarism and Logion 69 both highlight the latter – focusing on the distress of the new believer at unrighteousness within and without. The Book of Thomas takes this up but focuses more on external persecution. This is interesting in as much as a great part of the rest of the BookThom is focused on the need for self-knowledge understood as full awareness of the extent to which embodied human existence is debased. Here, however, the saviour takes time to address oppression by others, offering possibly the strongest evidence that the Thomasine in-group was experiencing or anticipating persecution. These persecutors are identified as those “without hope” indicating eschatological hope. In as much as this hope depends on accessing the enlightenment revealed by the saviour, the oppressors are without hope because they reject this message. The enlightened, however, have hope that their mourning and the oppression that they are experiencing will be rewarded by the promise of eschatological “release” which parallels the promise of being comforted in the Matthean beatitude.

The three macarisms come together to establish clear boundaries between the in-group and the broader community or the world at large underscoring the need for separation from the world. They specifically characterise the elect status of those who flee unacceptable (alien) teachings and practices (stumbling blocks). The beatitudes also construe, what would normally be negative social experiences (being reviled and oppressed), as positive markers of being elected thus making members of the in-group impervious to such pressures.

2.5. The Ascetic Jesus and Christian Existence that Transcends Embodiment

As we have seen in our discussion thus far, much of the teaching of the Book of Thomas focuses on exhortations about the destructive powers of the body. The central knowledge imparted by Jesus herein centres around knowing and existing according to the essence of the person – which is the soul. The body on the other hand is defined as something that entombs the “real person” and is actively opposed to the full development of the essential human.

The conflictual relationship between the body and soul posited in the Book of Thomas is central to understanding the role of the saviour, human embodiment, and the relationship of an enlightened subject with the rest of the world.

2.5.1. Human embodiment and the two realms

A recurring theme in Thomas’s early questions (138. 22-26; 138. 37-39; 139.13-21) is the quest for an understanding of the hidden things – the invisible realm. In answering these questions, the saviour establishes the path to accessing the invisible is liberation from the visible realm. These are two contrasting realms. The latter (the visible) is the natural sphere of embodied creatures who ‘devour’ each other in an ever-worsening continuum of decay (139. 1-14). The human being is a captive in this realm by virtue of existing in the body. Humans are not aware of their captivity because it has “the appearance of beauty” and “dark sweetness and fragrant pleasure” (140.25-30). The body is not only the locus of captivity, but also the instrument of bondage that “fettered them with its chains and bound all their limbs with the bitterness of the bondage of lust for those visible things that will decay and change and swerve by impulse” (140.31-37). The body is categorically a negative entity in the Book of Thomas. It is compared to a cavern, a tomb, a beast ready to consume the human soul, a fire – prefiguring the everlasting fire of punishment.

BookThom makes no concessions for sanctioned embodiment – such as marriage, acceptable eating, or existence within the visible realm. Bodily existence is depicted as a purgatory of sorts where the soul is either embracing perdition by living according to the flesh or learning to escape from it by renunciation of its practices and influences and thus experiencing the full actualisation of the human person without the corrupting influence of the body and the systems of the visible world.

This envisions a radical degree of individual autonomy which is notable even from an ascetic context. Although, as we have seen in relation to the Acts of Paul and Thecla and will look at in more detail in the next chapter when we look at the Life of Antony, temporary or periodic isolation is part of the ascetic journey of transformation. Even so, however, the ascetic is generally depicted as being very much dependent on the surrounding community, both to support her/his quest as mentors, patrons, disciples, and agents of persecution validating the journey. The book of Thomas, however, envisions radical, and unwavering separation from the visible world anticipating full existence in the invisible realm. The enlightened ascetic will only depend on the truth, which will nourish him” like a tree growing by the meandering stream” (140.16ff).

2.5.2. The saviour and the elect

The saviour is the central figure of the Book of Thomas. He is the source of the truth and light that is shining through the darkness of the visible world. Liberation from the visible world and the salvation of the soul is only made possible through his enlightening guidance (139.25-28). His disciples “are like seeds that require the sun’s nourishment to flourish and rise above their physical and material desires that would choke them like weeds.”⁸⁰ As Fowler notes this is

⁸⁰ Fowler, *From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender*, 221.

reminiscent of Paul's reflection on bodily resurrection and the transformation of the perishable flesh into the imperishable resurrected vessel in 1 Corinthians 15. 35ff.⁸¹

Another element that is significant in trying to understand the role of the saviour in the Book of Thomas is understanding his mission. The saviour ignoring Thomas' question about missions and the focus on the elect suggests that there is a predetermined group to whom the message is directed. This is, however, belied by texts that suggest that all people have access to some knowledge from what they can observe in the visible world (138.27 – 139.34). Moreover, as we have seen in our look at the woes above, those that are condemned are depicted as having free choice in remaining in their current state: "You darkened your hearts and surrendered your thoughts to folly and filled your thoughts with the smoke of the fire that is in you" (143. 30-36).

It would therefore seem that the Book of Thomas envisions a limited but not predetermined group as the elect who are the subjects of the saviour's ministry: "And whenever all the elect abandon bestiality, then this light will withdraw up to its essence, and its essence will welcome it, since it is a good servant" (139.29-32). Entry into this group is very much dependant on individual commitment to the path of renunciation: "One must become perfect through one's own efforts."⁸²

2.6. Summary

In this chapter we looked at the modes of reception and the ascetic imagination in the Book of Thomas. To this end we looked at the content of the BookThom in relation to the broader NHII to understand its teachings in relation to the corpus in which it has survived.

⁸¹ While the two texts have a similar view of the transformation of the body, Paul has a more forgiving understanding of the earthly body which he sees as being different from the from other animals and having its own splendour, albeit be weak, inglorious, dishonourable, and limited when compared to the spiritual body.

⁸² Fowler, 'From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender', 223.

In doing so we were able to discover that the writer appropriates and develops themes that we can discover in the gospel traditions and the Pauline writings. Like the Acts of Paul and Thecla the Book of Thomas appropriates and develops an apostolic figure linking its teaching to the body of earlier writings and traditions and the authority they exude. We compared the development of the apostle Thomas in the BookThom with other examples of Thomasine literature revealing the influence of the peculiar understanding of BookThom about the human body and its relationship with the visible realm and the soul on the reception and development of the figure of Thomas. We also noted the use of the woe and blessings form to promote this teaching.

As we have also seen with the APT, these modes of reception allow the author to attach his text to the broader narrative universe of earlier Christian writings and the presumed authority these have for their reader. This is particularly striking with regard to the BookThom which at seems to consciously subvert ideas about embodiment in other trajectories of Christian asceticism.

Let us now turn to look at the modes of reception and the development of ascetic meaning in our last text, the Life of Antony.

3. The Ascetic Imagination in the Life of Antony

I will now turn to look at my final text in this study, the Life of Antony (*Vita Antonii*/VA) to look at the development of Christian ascetic thought in a different historical period and context than the two other texts that we have looked at already.

Styled by its author as the biography of the eremitic Christian monk Antony, the VA is recognised as an influential text articulating the transition from the martyr to the monk as the pinnacle of Christian commitment.¹ It is also widely accepted to have inaugurated Christian hagiography as a new literary genre and arguably serves as a template for subsequent writings in this form.² As such, it is inarguable that the Life of Antony is one of the classics of Christian monastic writing. Moreover, the VA was developed in a period when the scriptures, ecclesiastical structures, and practices of the church were being defined and as such offers us unique insight into the formalisation and standardisation of Christian ascetic thought and praxis.

For these reasons, the *Vita Antonii* marks a distinct development in the Christian ascetic imagination and expression which we will look at more closely in this chapter. In line with my aims here, I will particularly seek to look at its reception and appropriation of motifs that we have identified in our previous chapters and the development and articulation of ascetic ideology in this context. I will begin by looking at the historical, textual, and literary characteristics of the Life of Antony.

¹ David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 23–27.

² James Corke-Webster, 'The First Hagiographies: The Life of Antony, the Life of Pamphilus, and the Nature of Saints', in *The Hagiographical Experiment: Developing Discourses of Sainthood*, ed. Christa Gray and James Corke-Webster, vol. 158, *Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements* (Brill, 2020), 29.

3.1. Provenance and Transmission of the *Vita Antonii*

In academic study, the Life of Antony has been the subject of significant interest, mostly in relation to questions of its authorship and historicity.

Although the original title of the *Vita* has been lost, consistent elements in extant witnesses suggest that it was likely close to what is found in some of the surviving manuscripts of Evagrius' Latin translation (*Athanasius episcopus ad peregrinos fratres*).³ The Coptic and Greek versions of the Life of Antony also circulated with incipits asserting that the *Vita* was written by the Alexandrian Bishop Athanasius:⁴

Coptic Life of Antony

The life of our holy father Abba Antony the Anchorite which Abba Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria set down for us in a letter he wrote to the brothers in foreign lands.

Greek Life of Antony

A letter by Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, to the monks living abroad concerning the life of blessed Antony the Great.

This ascription was, however, problematised as far back as the debates surrounding the Protestant Reformation when the theological legitimacy of the Christian tradition including monasticism came under scrutiny.⁵ In modern scholarship, questions raised about the Athanasian authorship of the *Vita Antonii* have particularly focused on the textual history

³ G.J.M. Bartelink, offers a comprehensive list of the different titles used in the main witnesses to the Greek text. G.J.M. Bartelink, *Athanasie d'Alexandrie: Vie d'Antoine* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), 124.

⁴ Text and translation: Athanasius, *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2003), 50–51. In 328 CE, a very young Athanasius was elected to be Bishop following the death of his mentor Alexander. The controversy that accompanied his consecration would presage his tumultuous on-again, off-again four decades tenure as Bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius was deeply influenced by and influential in addressing the theological and political disputes of his time. Born to “pagan” parents Athanasius converted to Christianity and to an ascetic lifestyle in childhood. Although he is not believed to have had extensive formal education the Bishop of Alexandria at the time, Bishop Alexander took him under his wings teaching him the Christian scriptures, and his knowledge and use of the scriptures would become one of the most significant elements of his writings and legacy. See: David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 2012).

⁵ Bartelink, *Athanasie d'Alexandrie*, 2004, 28.

and the possibility of written versions of the life of Antony that pre-date the Greek version believed to have been composed by Athanasius.⁶ It had previously been assumed that this version, which was the basis for the Latin, Coptic, Armenian, and Old Slavonic translations as well as for all editions before the 20th century, was the earliest form of the text.⁷ Studies of two extant Syriac versions, however, suggested the possibility that they potentially preserved an even earlier version of the *Vita* written in *Coptizing* Greek “of a type characteristic of the early, bilingual monastic environment.”⁸ If this is true, then it would in return suggest that Athanasius, whose other known writings reveal no such linguistic patterns, could not have written the original version of the *Vita*.⁹

In this line, T.D. Barnes proposes that the *Vita* was “originally composed in Coptic by someone close to Antony for the benefit of the Pachomian communities in the Thebaid” and that the Syriac represents a close translation of this original text.¹⁰ Based on this argument, the Syriac represents a proto- *Vita Antonii*, which was developed in an earlier monastic context than the one generally presumed. Barnes goes on to suggest that the Greek version that has survived into modernity represents a significant reworking of the earlier Coptic (proto-*Vita Antonii*) that was re-written to fit the needs of the context in which it was developed.

Upon closer study, however, this hypothesis has proven to be untenable, mainly because:

⁶ Bartelink offers a comprehensive list of all manuscripts, versions and editions of the text. Bartelink, 77–108.

⁷ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis, MIN: Fortress Press, 1995), 127.

⁸ Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony* 128. This theory was originally proposed by R. Draguet, in *La vie primitive de S. Antoine conservée en syriaque* [CSCO 417–8] (Louvain 1980).

⁹ T. D. Barnes, “Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate? The Problem of the ‘Life of Antony,’” *JTS* 37, no. 2 (1986): 353–68.

¹⁰ Barnes, ‘Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate?’, 357 Agreeing with the basic premise of the arguments forwarded by Barnes, Louth suggests that it is still possible that Athanasius could be credited with editing the original text - preserved in the Syriac - into the Greek version that was ultimately received and retained in the Western Church. Andrew Louth, “St Athanasius and the Greek ‘Life of Antony,’” *JTS* 39, no. 2 (1988): 504–9.

examination of the supposed anomalies in the Syriac text has now made it clear that ...any anomalies that do exist cannot be explained by Coptic.

Furthermore, comparison of the contents of the Greek and Syriac versions has suggested that the Syriac is a fifth-century revision of the Greek.¹¹

Recent scholarship is more inclined to give credence to early attestations and traditions that have accompanied the text from its earliest known reception and transmission history, all asserting that the Life of Antony was written by Athanasius.¹² Put quite simply, Athanasian authorship of the text is integral to its reception and hence transmission from the earliest known readers and should thus be given due consideration. Moreover, the literary and theological character of the composition is very much in line with what is known of Athanasius from his other works contributing to the general consensus in current scholarship that he wrote or significantly re-worked¹³ traditions about the monk Anthony into the form that we have received.¹⁴

A second, issue of academic discussion has revolved around the reliability of the historical content found in the text, especially as it pertains to biographical details and the peculiar historical and social context of the central character Antony.¹⁵ Athanasius, himself

¹¹ Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 128; Bartelink elaborates upon arguments originally proposed by R. Lorenz Bartelink, *Athanase d'Alexandrie*, 2004; David Brakke basis his conclusions here on a close parallel reading of the Greek and Syriac texts. David Brakke, 'The Greek and Syriac Versions of the Life of Antony', *Le Muséon* 107, no. 1/2 (1994): 53.

¹² Such attestations include, Evagrius of Antioch, Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzus, Rufinus, John Chrysostom and Life of Pachomius.

¹³ One such potential source is an earlier life written by Serapion of Thumis. (Martin Tetz, 'Athanasius und die Vita Antonii')

¹⁴ See Bartelink, *Athanase d'Alexandrie*, 2004; David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, New Ed edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Arthur Urbano, "'Read It Also to the Gentiles': The Displacement and Recasting of the Philosopher in the Vita Antonii", *Church History* 77, no. 4 (2008): 877–914; Paul van Geest, "... Seeing That for Monks the Life of Antony Is a Sufficient Pattern of Discipline." Athanasius as Mystagogue in His "Vita Antonii", *Church History and Religious Culture* 90, no. 2/3 (2010): 199–221.

¹⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the text historical debate see: Bartelink, *Athanase d'Alexandrie* and Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*.

presents his text as a historical account of the life of the Saint, written by himself to answer questions posed by his recipients:¹⁶

μαθεῖν θέλοντες ὅπως τε ἤρξατο τῆς
ἀσκήσεως καὶ τίς ἦν πρὸ ταύτης καὶ
ὁποῖον ἔσχε τοῦ βίου τὸ τέλος καὶ εἰ
ἀληθῆ τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ λεγόμενά ἐστιν, ἵνα
καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἐκείνου ζῆλον ἑαυτοῦς
ἀγάγητε, μετὰ πολλῆς προθυμίας
ἔδεξάμην τὸ παρ’ ὑμῶν ἐπίταγμα.

Since you have asked me about the life of
the blessed Antony, clearly wishing to learn
how he started his training and who he was
before that and how he concluded his life
and whether what is said about him is true,
in order to emulate his zeal, I have taken up
your questions with great enthusiasm.

This claim has however been problematised on several fronts. Firstly, modern readers noted aspects of the *Vita* that rely on formulaic content familiar from both Greco-Roman and earlier Christian writings as we will see in greater detail below when we look at literary influences. Secondly, it was claimed that perceived disjunctions between the characterisation of Antony in the *Vita* and the portrait of Antony discovered in the seven letters which have long been believed to be written by him suggest that the narrative was primarily an invention designed to fit Athanasius’ literary and theological aims.¹⁷ I will briefly look at this debate here.

In an in-depth analysis of the Letters of Antony, Samuel Rubenson argues that the uneducated spiritual virtuoso that has been transmitted to posterity in the *Vita* is notably different from the Antony who wrote the letters:

¹⁶ Greek text of the *Vita* of Antony is taken from the critical edition by Bartelink, *Athanase d’Alexandrie*.

¹⁷ For example, Jerome, attests to both the Athanasian authorship of the *Vita* of Antony and the existence of the seven letters of Antony: “Antony the monk, whose life Athanasius bishop of Alexandria wrote a long work upon, sent seven letters in Coptic to various monasteries, letters truly apostolic in idea and language, and which have been translated into Greek.” Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus*. 88.

The idea of perfect life portrayed by the bishop, as well as Antony's long sermons and his concise discussions with the philosophers in the *Vita*, certainly reveal more about Athanasius' hagiographical and theological intent than about Antony himself. As a consequence, Antony has disappeared into the obscure background of early monasticism, and of the *Vita* little more than a few uncertain dates and some uncontroversial statements on his background are left as reliable evidence of Antony's life and work.¹⁸

He notes that in this light the letters become very important not only for their potential to offer us limited access to the 'real' Antony (although he notes that it cannot reveal an alternative biography) but also because they serve to reveal the extent to which his image has been shaped by the transformational process that goes into "the making of a saint."¹⁹

Philip Rousseau, however, argues that this disjunction between the 'Antony of the letters' (the real Antony) and the 'Antony of the *Vita*' (a character crafted to fit the literary and theological goals of Athanasius), arises from the wrong assumption that Athanasius characterises Antony exclusively as an ascetic exemplar. According to Rousseau in addition to being depicted as an ascetic virtuoso, the *Vita* reveals an Antony "who taught in ways familiar to 'philosophical' or neo-Pythagorean pedagogues of the age."²⁰ This aspect of the characterisation of Antony, he argues, coheres with the teacher writing to his disciples that we discover in the letters more than is generally presumed.²¹

¹⁸ Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 9–10.

¹⁹ Rubenson, 12.

²⁰ Philip Rousseau, 'Antony as Teacher in the Greek Life', in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 89–109.

²¹ Rousseau, 105.

This argument is difficult to discount in as much as it is indeed possible and likely that the *Life of Antony* faithfully conveys some aspects of the biography of the monk. It is, however, impossible to extricate any such components from the ‘narrative world’ created by the writer with any degree of certainty. What is striking is that the Antony of the *Life* is highly stylised to fit the narrative intention of the author. In this regard, for example, we can note that while the narrative does indeed allude to the Antony’s status as a learned teacher with disciples, as rightly argued by Rousseau, we are also told elsewhere that he is uneducated.

These features along with the clearly articulated intention of the author to develop a narrative that can be used as a template for the monastic life suggest strongly that Athanasius reworked the figure of Antony to communicate a specific vision of reality.²² While this does not take away from the historical utility of the *Vita Antonii* for understanding the ideological framing and practices of the ascetic world inhabited by both Antony and his biographer, the imagination shaping this narrative is undoubtedly that of Athanasius.

With this in mind, let us briefly look at the historical context in which the VA was developed and the intended readership.

As we have briefly seen in relation to the *Book of Thomas*, the origins and development of the Christian community in Egypt before the third century is one that is difficult to establish because of the relative paucity of documentary evidence. There is some indirect evidence that suggests the possibility that some of the earliest Christians in Egypt were likely Jews based in Alexandria.²³ Possibly the earliest evidence in this regard is the reference to pilgrims from Egypt amongst the “Jews, devout men from every nation under

²² Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 202 Sa.

²³ Birger A. Pearson, ‘Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations’, in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, *Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MIN: Fortress Press, 1986), 132–60.

heaven” in attendance on the day of Pentecost, in the Lukan Acts (2.1-12). Also, in the book of Acts (18.24ff) we learn of Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, a preacher or orator who “powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18.2).

Based on a survey of the earliest Christian manuscripts in Egypt, Colin Roberts argues that “the original Christian mission to Egypt, addressed to the Jews and particularly to the Jews of Alexandria, came from the Church in Jerusalem.”²⁴ Later church tradition also seems to support this. The first homily of the Pseudo-Clementine literature for example refers to a Christian called Barnabas who meets Clement and instructs him on the faith in Alexandria before taking him to Peter in Judea (*Pseudo-Clementine Hom.* 1.9 – 15.9). A tradition extending at least back to Eusebius also claims that Saint Mark the Evangelist founded and was the first bishop of the Alexandrian Church (*Hist. Eccl.* 2.16.1).²⁵ What we know of the later Christian schools including the ones in Alexandria demonstrated the influence of Hellenistic Jewish traditions.²⁶

Eusebius believed that the *Therapeutae* described by Philo, in his treatise *On the Contemplative Life*, represented the earliest converts of the evangelist Mark in Egypt [*Hist. Eccl.* 2.16.1- 16.2]. He understood the ascetic rigour demonstrated by this group as representing the ultimate expression of an elite form of Christian existence, from the earliest emergence of Christianity.

²⁴ Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: New York: OUP/British Academy, 1979), 71.

²⁵ Birger Pearson argues that the tradition associating Mark with early Egyptian Christianity may extend to the second century based on an early dating of the Acts of Mark. Pearson, ‘Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations’, 144.

²⁶ Robert M. Grant, ‘Theological Education at Alexandria’, in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, *Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MIN: Fortress Press, 1986), 180.

Despite these tantalising fragments, however, the history of earliest Christianity in Egypt remains relatively obscure.

From the 3rd century onward, however, we have a much more complete picture of the character and development of Christianity in Egypt supported by historical evidence including the writings of prolific writers like Clement and Origen that have survived and the treasure trove of manuscripts and other artifacts discovered.

The picture we get from these sources demonstrates that Egyptian Christians, like other Christian communities of the time, were attempting to articulate a distinctive identity on two fronts. On the first front, like Christians from the earliest period (as seen in our discussion of the Acts of Paul and Thecla), Christians in Egypt were in a continuous process of defining the boundaries of the group against the dominant culture. The second front constituted a gradual process of standardisation of the ideologies, practices, and structures of the church. This process was characterised by highly polemical interactions between competing receptions and interpretations of the fundamental account of the Christian message.

Many of these internal debates amongst contending Christian traditions have only come to us through the writings of polemicists like Clement of Alexandria and Origen who shaped what would become Christian orthodoxy in subsequent centuries. Outside of what we learn from these sources, records for other traditions from this period are very fragmentary. As we have seen in our brief look at the NHII in our previous chapter, even when we have extant writings, they have survived without the all-important record of the context in which they were developed making it challenging for us to fully understand the interpretive and religious matrix in which these texts were formulated.

Relevant to our purpose here, amongst what we do know from this period, is that self-control and renunciation were a crucial aspect of defining Christian identity over and against

the pagan world as well as in internal polemics around radical renunciation. We find both these elements for example articulated by Clement of Alexandria in his third *Stromateus* on marriage (*Clem. Strom.* 3.7.57).

The human ideal of continence, I mean that which is set forth by Greek philosophers, teaches that one should fight desire and not be subservient to it so as to bring it to practical effect. But our ideal is not to experience desire at all. Our aim is not that while a man feels desire, he should get the better of it, but that he should be continent even respecting desire itself.²⁷

This higher ideal of continence – not just in deeds but in thought – is very much reflected in the earliest Christian writings (Matt 5.27-30; 18.9; Js 1.14-15) and posited a paradigm which challenged the “social order adjusted to its [the body’s] unchanging needs” because in the Christ event “the Highest God had reached down to make even the body capable of transformation.”²⁸

Even so, however, Clement is strongly opposed to those “teach that one must reject marriage and begetting of children and should not bring others in their place to live in this wretched world.” (*Clem. Strom.* 3.6.45) He argues that this is blasphemy against “creation and the holy Creator” masquerading as piety. Instead, Clement attempts to re-define marriage to include continence while at the same time acknowledging: “if both can have no anxiety, he who chooses incontinence and he who chooses abstinence, yet the honour is not equal” arguing for an ascetic hierarchy of Christian virtue.

By the 4th century, the internal debates of the Christian church became even more important following the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine (312 CE). Influential

²⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis III*, ed. Henry Chadwick, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics: Alexandrian Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 66.

²⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 1988, 31.

ecclesiastics and political leaders at this time shared the aim to “create a worldwide Christian church, one that would be, in their words, ‘catholic,’ that is universal.”²⁹ This, fuelled efforts to standardise Christian scriptures, theology, and practices. Amidst the ensuing rivalry for recognition as the representative of the ‘catholic’ theological expression and ecclesiastical structure, another force — that of Christian monasticism — took shape.

A diverse range of elements contributed to the flourishing of monasticism in Egypt at this time. One such factor is the existence of precursors to the development of the monastic movement in the 4th century. The most obvious influence is of course the literal influence of the example of figures and teachings discovered in earlier Christian writings. As we have seen in our previous discussion, the gospels and apostolic literature offer templates for ascetic separation by recounting the lived experiences of Christian exemplars including Jesus³⁰ (Matt 4.1-11; Lk 4.1-13), John the Baptist (Matt 3.1-6; Lk 3.2-6), and the Apostle Paul (Gal 1.7-18). As we have seen in the previous chapters, these traditions had inspired ascetic practices in diverse contexts and amongst various groups.³¹

In an age where Christians were no longer called upon to endure externally imposed persecution and even martyrdom self-imposed suffering and denial of the body and the world became even more significant. Gregory the Great expressed this new call to a spiritual martyrdom as follows:

For although the opportunity of persecution is lacking, nevertheless
our time of peace has its own peculiar martyrdom. For even though we do

²⁹ David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2.

³⁰ Brown particularly notes the significance of the figure of Christ as the exemplar par excellence upends any previous such constructs set by Greco-Roman Paideia and sets up a new paradigm. Peter Brown, ‘The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity’, *Representations* Spring, no. 2 (1983): 6.

³¹ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 81. In 4th century Egypt this included the renouncers (αποτακτικοί as opposed to μοναχοί) who dwelt in the cities and focused on ethical separation.

not bend our bodily neck to the sword, nevertheless with the spiritual sword
we slay in our soul carnal desires.³²

Transitional figures such as Paphnutius of Dendara an anchorite monastic martyred in the Dicoletianic Persecution (303) modelled ἄσκησις as training for eventual martyrdom and their stories served to inspire renunciants in subsequent centuries and to legitimise monastics as successors to the martyrs.³³

The most innovative element of 4th-century monasticism, both eremitic and coenobitic was most likely the singular focus on anachoresis (withdrawal).³⁴ There are several reasons motivating this commitment to flee to the ‘desert’ embodying actual physical separation in addition to the ethical separation practiced by ascetics that opted to remain within the ‘city’. The metaphorical dualism represented by the ‘desert’ and the ‘city’ as two contrasting spheres is an important element of early monastic discourse. Peter Brown notes the influence of the desert itself as a symbol of separation antithetical to settled land or cities in Egyptian imagination — as playing a crucial role.³⁵ As noted by James E. Goehring, Egyptian monasticism realised the power of the desert as a space expressing a complete separation from society.³⁶

To enter the Desert was to assert ones freedom to extricate oneself from the suffocating bonds of that society, from the claims of property relationships, of power and domination, of marriage and family, and to re-create a life of

³² Alfred C. Rush, ‘Spiritual Martyrdom in St. Gregory the Great’, *Theological Studies* 23, no. 4 (1 December 1962): 569.

³³ Aaltje Hidding, *The Era of the Martyrs: Remembering the Great Persecution in Late Antique Egypt, The Era of the Martyrs* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 127.

³⁴ Kallistos Ware, ‘The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?’, in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4-5. Ware, argues that anachoresis can be either be complete separation from the world or a temporary separation followed by a return, whether physical or spiritual in the form of the ascetic making himself accessible to disciples and others seeking ministry.

³⁵ Peter Brown, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity’, *JRS* 61 (1971): 83.

³⁶ James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, *Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 87.

primal freedom, whether in solitude or in an alternative and freely chosen social grouping.³⁷

It bears noting here, however, that ‘desert-based’ monasticism was not completely cut off from society as one would imagine. Monastic settlements were within walking distance of settled lands, ensuring that those ascetics had access to their support network – disciples and other believers who saw to their needs – while still enjoying “a sense of measureless imaginative distance.”³⁸In the “desert” monastics created their own alternative society that was no less interdependent than the cities they had fled.

The *Epistula Ammonis*, believed to have been written to Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria at about 400 CE by Ammon who had spent three years in a Pachomian monastery, describes a community of what he estimates to be 600 monks living together under a strict order.³⁹ Even anchorites, like Antony as we will see in our discussion below, still acted as spiritual mentors and had disciples and patrons who supported them and sought their intercession.⁴⁰ The eight letters to the anchorite Paphnutius preserve the correspondence between a monk and his disciples.

To the beloved and most pious and dear to God and blessed father
Paphnutius, Ammonius greeting in the Lord God. I always know that by
your holy prayers I shall be saved from every temptation of the Devil and
from every contrivance of men, and now I beg you to remember me in your
holy prayers, for after God you are my salvation. Our brother Didymus

³⁷ Robert Austin Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 165.

³⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 1988, 215.

³⁹ James E. Goehring, *The Letter of Ammon and Pachomian Monasticism, The Letter of Ammon and Pachomian Monasticism* (De Gruyter, 2011), 124, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110859508>.

⁴⁰ Tim Vivian, ‘Holy Men and Businessmen: Monks as Intercessors in Fourth-Century Egypt as Illustrated by the Papyri and Ostraca’, *CSQ* 39, no. 3 (2004): 235–69.

came to see me, and I met him according to your instructions in the matter

[*P. Lond.* 1923].⁴¹

In looking at the development of monasticism in this period it is important to underscore that it was by no means a monochrome movement. Much as in earlier periods, the emergent monasticism in the 4th century was defined diversely by the ideologies and praxis of teachers and communities. Some examples of these variegated trajectories have survived to us in the polemical writings of their opponents. Amongst these we find Hieracas (and his followers) and the Melitians. The story of Hieracas is discovered in the *Panarion*, by Epiphanius. According to the polemical description of Epiphanius, Hieracas was “awesome in his asceticism” but he denied the bodily resurrection and the validity of marriage in the new dispensation. According to the *Panarion*

He [Hieracas] does not countenance matrimony, and claims this is an ordinance of the Old Testament ... but since Christ’s coming marriage is no longer acceptable and [the married?] cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven.⁴²

Epiphanius’ opposition to these teachings very much resonates with what we have already seen in relation to the writings of Clement of Alexandria who sought to put a premium on continence without invalidating the institution of marriage. Athanasius, own writings address this teaching in much the same way, as we will see below.

⁴¹ H. Idris Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt the Jewish Troubles in Alexandria and the Athanasian Controversy. Illustrated by Texts from Greek Papyri in the British Museum* (London British Museum, 1924), 103–4.

⁴² Epiphanius, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, trans. Frank Williams, Books II and III, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 79 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 317.

In addition to organized groups such as the one around Hieracas, there were also the individual *αποτακτικοί*, some who co-habited with renouncers of the opposite sex in consensual continence in so-called spiritual marriage.⁴³

Other communities practicing renunciation in the same 4th-century milieu in which Egyptian monasticism flourished include the Melitians and the variegated groups whose witness has been passed on to us in the Nag Hammadi codices. As we have noted in our previous chapter, contemporary re-evaluation of categorisations of “Gnostic” versus “Christian” as strictly delineated religious traditions has allowed us the opportunity to relocate these writings in relation to the broader 4th century historical, theological, and literary context.⁴⁴ With this in mind, and on the basis of codicological evidence as well as their discovery near a Pachomian monastery has allowed us to look into shared ascetic ideologies and practices to reveal the “degree to which religious and intellectual culture in this period influenced and filtered into one another.”⁴⁵

This brief review helps us to describe important aspects of 4th century Egyptian Christianity which is characterised by diversity and evolution of Christian communities, internal polemics, and the changing relationship of the church vis-à-vis the political and social structures.⁴⁶ In this period “the Christian religion itself entered into a formative age of re-definition. Church and architecture and liturgy, clerical hierarchies, doctrinal creeds, and the canon of Scripture increasing took recognized forms”⁴⁷ Athanasius, himself, was deeply influenced by and influential in addressing the theological and political disputes of his time.

⁴³ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 31–32.

⁴⁴ Fowler, ‘From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender’, 226.

⁴⁵ Fowler, 237.

⁴⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*; Averil Cameron, *Christianity, and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

⁴⁷ Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, 2.

As we are told from the very outset the intended readers of the *Vita* were monks seeking to outdo the monks of Egypt in their ascetic zeal and who were seeking a reliable pattern (1-2). From this we can infer that the real or ideal readers addressed by Athanasius were seeking an authoritative ascetic to serve as a template for their own practice from within a context of diverse ideologies informing ascetic praxis. The epilogue [94.2] also raises the possibility that the intended readers were in a location where they may be engaged in polemical interaction with non-Christians and may find the *Vita* as evidence of Christian excellence.

3.2. Literary Influences and Context

As discussed above the attestation attached to the Life of Antony from the earliest times, the internal claims of the text and theological coherence with his known works all support that this work was likely composed by Athanasius. A close reading reveals that in doing so Athanasius made use of earlier traditions. Here I want to look at two trajectories of literary influence - Greco-Roman Literature and canonical texts of the Christian scriptures. As our discussion above will show, that while Athanasius does appropriate the literary forms of Greco-Roman literature, he does so with the intention to reinscribe these forms a vehicle for his ideology for acceptable Christian ascetic living. On the other hand, he not only explicitly appeals to Christian literature but does so in line with his own efforts to standardise what qualifies as Christian scripture – i.e., a canon. I will also look here at the literary context of the Life of Antony by looking at some examples of writings from the same milieu, including the Letters of Antony and other ascetic writings by Athanasius. In doing so I hope to access some insight into the literary content, ideologies, and ascetic practices that we discover in the *Vita*.

3.2.1. Two Trajectories of Literary Influence

As with the Acts of Paul and Thecla, studies have generally identified Greco-Roman literature and Christian writings as the two main trajectories of influence that have shaped the literary form and content of the Life of Antony. As our overview below will reveal, however, the latter is not only demonstrably more significant in shaping the Vita, but we can also argue that the Letters of Antony are intentionally crafted as an interpretation of the corpus that Athanasius identifies as Scripture.

3.2.1.1. Greco-Roman Literature

As we have seen in our discussion of the APT, there are diverse genres of Greco-Roman literature that have influenced early Christian writings. In relation to the Life of Antony, we are able to identify the influence of Greco-Roman *Bios*, particularly the philosophic lives of late antiquity which inscribe for posterity the thinking and way of life – which together add up to *philosophia* – of philosophers.⁴⁸

For sympathetic audiences, biographical literature (*Bios*) served as a sort of social charter that crafted a series of relationships among subjects, authors, and audiences, locating particular communities of intellectuals within lineages of descent that were linked to narratives of the origins and transmission of philosophy.⁴⁹

In Late Antiquity, *Bioi* were being written by Christians who adopted the genre and terminology of Greek philosophy in the shaping of a Christian intellectual culture.⁵⁰ The *Vita Antonii* could be categorised as one example of a Christian philosophic life in as much as Athanasius recounts the dogma and praxis of his subject. Moreover, as rightly argued by

⁴⁸ Arthur P. Urbano, *The Philosophical Life: Biography and the Crafting of Intellectual Identity in Late Antiquity*, Patristic Monograph Series 21 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 1.

⁴⁹ Urbano, 3.

⁵⁰ Urbano, 3.

Rousseau the Antony of the *Vita* is in parts depicted in the familiar mould of a teacher of philosophy.⁵¹

A closer look at the Life of Antony along with other examples of the Christian forms of the philosophic lives would, however, suggest that Athanasius is consciously subverting the expectations of a reader familiar with this genre. A good comparison in this regard is Eusebius' account of the life of Origen.⁵² Eusebius stresses the dual proficiency of Origen, both in the 'divine scriptures' and in 'Greek sciences'⁵³, and was thus able to teach and give evidence of a philosophic and ascetic life.⁵⁴ Origen, in his teaching and life, was a better example of the philosophic life than his Greek contemporaries evidencing the superiority of Christian philosophy.⁵⁵

This seems a distinctly different strategy from the one employed by Athanasius in the *Vita Antonii* where he seems to consciously develop not a Christian philosopher but a new Christian paradigm – the ascetic virtuoso who is actively hostile to the world and society including philosophic instruction. Unlike Eusebius' Origen who matches and surpasses his non-Christian contemporaries in understanding, critiquing, and more virtuously embodying the philosophic life, Athanasius' Antony is cast outside of the boundaries of the familiar to offer an alternative model. His contestation with the philosophers arguably reflects a defence for the new class of Christian teacher that owed more to divine endowment than to *paideia*, and who exhibited a radical break from what had gone before in the way they "organised themselves, the culture they created, the standards of behaviour they preached, even the places where they preferred to congregate."⁵⁶

⁵¹ Rousseau, 'Antony as Teacher in the Greek Life', 89.

⁵² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6. 2.2 – 6.3.13.

⁵³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.2.7

⁵⁴ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.3.2

⁵⁵ Urbano, *The Philosophical Life*, 206.

⁵⁶ Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 98.

To this end Athanasius also utilises literary motifs from the genre. Some examples of this identified in previous scholarship include the suggestion that the chapters detailing the miracles performed by the saint possibly reflect the influence of aretalogy.⁵⁷ This influence could obviously have been mediated or informed by earlier Christian writings and traditions (including the gospels) as well as the narratives about the Hebrew prophets which utilise miracles to demonstrate divine empowerment.⁵⁸

A more direct comparison has been drawn with the lives of philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plotinus.⁵⁹ More specifically Paul van Geest, refers to similarities with the physical depiction of Pythagoras by Porphyry as “physically beautiful, temperate, and restrained.”⁶⁰ Additionally, he notes the parallel values between Antony in the *Vita Antonii* and Porphyry’s *Plotinus*:

like Plotinus, Anthony is for instance ashamed of having to eat, because in doing so he maintains his treacherous body. Like Plotinus, Anthony reminds the great of the earth – in his case the emperor Constantine and his sons – of the primacy of the eternal over the temporary (VA 81).⁶¹

As noted above, however, even though Athanasius may have utilized recognisable literary forms and stylistic depictions from earlier lives of philosophers his account of the life of Antony goes on to subvert expectations. He does so in line with his goal to cast his protagonist not as a learned and sophisticated representation of Greek philosophy and education but as a new type of role model endowed with higher wisdom that needs no formal instruction. Thus, although Athanasius does not acknowledge this influence, he nonetheless

⁵⁷ van Geest, “... Seeing That for Monks the Life of Antony Is a Sufficient Pattern of Discipline.” Athanasius as Mystagogue in His “*Vita Antonii*”, 203.

⁵⁸ For a more detailed and nuanced look at the influence of Greek and Hebrew literature in the development of early Christian miracle traditions see Howard C. Kee, “Aretalogy and Gospel,” *JBL* 92, no. 3 (September 1, 1973): 402–22.

⁵⁹ Urbano, *The Philosophical Life*, 80–162.

⁶⁰ van Geest, “.... Seeing That for Monks the Life of Antony Is a Sufficient Pattern of Discipline” 203.

⁶¹ van Geest, “.... Seeing That for Monks the Life of Antony Is a Sufficient Pattern of Discipline” 203.

employs the literary template of the philosophical *Bios* in the *Vita* both to establish Anthony as a bona fide teacher of philosophy and to redefine the popular conceptions of a teacher and a philosopher.

In doing so Athanasius utilises the Christian Old and New Testaments to framework his narrative to a much more significant degree and with explicit and intentional citations. Let us turn to look at this.

3.2.1.2. Scripture as a Source Book – Defining and Deploying Scripture

Athanasius uses earlier Jewish and Christian writings both as a sourcebook of literary styles and ideologies. This appropriation is explicitly articulated in direct quotations, allusions, and interpretation of theological motifs. As I will closely look at the reception and appropriation of earlier Jewish and Christian writings in his development of an ascetic program in detail below, I will only briefly look at how Athanasius defines Scripture and his approach in deploying it within his discourse.

As a key figure in the process of defining the Christian canon as we know it now, Athanasius' definition of scripture no doubt served as a sort of boundary determining the texts that he utilised to develop an ascetic programme in the *Life of Antony*. Athanasius' 39th Festal letter (367) contains the list of texts that he believed composed the Old and New Testaments, as well as others he categorised as either heretical or beneficial for instruction although not to be included in the Canon.⁶²

Francis Watson argues, based on the most complete reconstruction of Festal Letter 39, comprising an estimated 90% of the text, that the Athanasian canon list is not composed in a vacuum but in service to his theological argument that Jesus Christ is the only true teacher. He notes that Athanasius focuses on Jesus' as innately a teacher revealing the father and the

⁶² Athanasius, 'Festal Letter for 367', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, vol. 4, II (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 1326–28.

ultimate source of knowledge. Thus, according to Athanasius, those writings that qualify as holy scripture are those that contain the authentic testimonies of the inspired channels of this knowledge the prophets and the apostles. Other writings which falsely arrogate the claim of being divinely revealed or inspired should be rejected outright. Paradoxically, however, Athanasius who identifies himself as a student and not a teacher, nonetheless takes it upon himself to determine the boundaries of the instruction by identifying the textual space for Christian discourse.⁶³

The processes by which Athanasius defines and deploys scriptures to promote his theological agenda is significant for our understanding of his interpretive practices in the Life of Antony on two fronts. Firstly, it reveals the strictly defined textual space governing the ascetic discourse and practice. Secondly, the tension noted by Watson between Athanasius' self-appointed authority to demarcate canon and his insistence that the prophets and the apostles are the only channel of true knowledge is to some extent reflected in the VA, where he seeks to identify himself as a student and heir of Antony while at the same time reinscribing the historical monk within his ecclesiastical and ideological framework.

3.2.2. Literary Context – the letters of Antony, the *Apothegmata* and the Athanasian *Ascetica*

Before moving on to look more closely at the ascetic imagination of the Life of Antony in more detail let us briefly look at other writings from the same milieu which can help us better understand the literary content, ideologies, and ascetic practices that we discover in the *Vita*. To this end, I will particularly look at texts associated with Antony

⁶³ Francis Watson, “‘You Have One Teacher, Christ’: Athanasius on Teaching and Learning” (Conference paper presented at The North American Patristics Society Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois, 2022. Used by permission.

himself – the Letters of Antony and the sayings ascribed to him in the *Apothegmata* – and examples from other ascetic writings by Athanasius.

3.2.2.1. The Letters of Antony

The seven letters generally believed to have been written by Antony, based on early attestation⁶⁴ and the internal witness of all known manuscripts, in the early 4th century survive fully only in a Latin translation, believed to have been translated from a Greek version. Based on text-critical and linguistic elements Rubenson concludes “that the letters were originally composed in Coptic although the early date and speculative content of them would indicate a Greek original.”⁶⁵ According to Jerome, Antony wrote these seven letters in Coptic, later translated into Greek, to diverse monks in monasteries, such as the Arsenoites (*De Viris Illustribus* 88).⁶⁶

Antony directly, addresses asceticism in the first letter.⁶⁷ He begins by looking at the three paths to the ascetic way of life. The first path, he tells us is modelled upon the call received by Abraham to leave his country and people and which he followed in faith (Gen. 12). The second way to the ascetic life emanates from internal conviction inspired by hearing and the final is a response to affliction sent by God to chastise the hard of heart. Once on the

⁶⁴The earliest attestations can be found in the *Epistula Ammonis* and the *Vita Pachomii* as well as in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Goehring, *The Letter of Ammon and Pachomian Monasticism*; Armand Veilleux, trans., *Pachomian Koinonia. Volume 1, The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

⁶⁵Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 12; 24–34. The Coptic version has only survived in two papyrus folios circa 7th century. Partial witnesses are also discovered in Syriac, Georgian, and a Greek version included in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. In a comparative study of the extant Coptic fragment (which includes the end of the 6 and the 7th letter) with the Latin E.O Winstedt also noted the likelihood of a Coptic original to the Letters of Antony much earlier than Rubenson. E. O. Winstedt, ‘The Original Text of One of St Antony’s Letters’, *JTS* 7, no. 28 (1906): 540–45. This was problematised based on the content of the Letters which suggest that the author had acquaintance with Greek thought and questions about Coptic literary culture in the period. This has, however, since been explained by a better understanding of the bilingual nature of the Egypt of the period, the strong influence of Greek on Coptic, and the discovery of early Coptic writings such as the Nag Hammadi codices which reveal a thriving Coptic literary tradition at an early period.

⁶⁶Jerome, ‘Lives of Illustrious Men’, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and H. Wace, vol. 2 (New York, 1892), 363.

⁶⁷Translation of the Letters of Antony referenced here is from: Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 197–231.

path the ascetic is given control over the body and the soul by the Spirit, so that both can be sanctified together.

The body is thus, according to Antony, brought under the authority of the mind and is taught by the Spirit, as the words of Paul testify: ‘I castigate my body and bring it into subjection’. Then mind sanctifies it in food and drink and sleep, and, in one word, in all of its movements, even separating itself from the natural union through its own sanctity.”

He goes on to further explain how all of the senses are taught by the Spirit, the desires of the body are subdued and controlled, and afflictions of the soul such as pride, envy, hatred etc are healed through repentance manifested in “the labours of the body, such as prolonged fasts, vigils, much study of the Word of God and many prayers, as well as the renunciation of the world and human things, humility, and contrition.” As we will see below, this is very much in line with the ascetic programme developed by Athanasius in the *Life of Antony*.

The subsequent letters (2-7), while not dealing with asceticism directly do nonetheless include counsel on aspects of ascetic discipline, including reflection on scripture, overcoming the flesh, ceaseless prayer, etc.

All of the letters are characterised by an extensive use of biblical texts, particularly the Psalms, the Prophets, the Pauline letters, the Pastorals, and Hebrews. Alongside this Antony potentially exhibits the influence of Platonic thought in his focus on knowledge (self-knowledge) and in the sharp distinction he places between the spiritual and the corporeal.

In Antony’s letters, these basic concepts lie behind his teaching on repentance as a matter of purification. The process of purification and the quest for knowledge are aimed ultimately at self-knowledge, a prominent theme in the *Letters*.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Douglas E. Christie, ‘Listening, Reading, Praying: Orality, Literacy and Early Christian Monastic Spirituality’, *ATR* 83, no. 2 (2001): 202.

This focus on self-knowledge is strongly reminiscent of the trajectory of Christian ascetic thought that we looked at in the Book of Thomas the Contender in our previous chapter. In much the same way as the earlier writer, (albeit in an entirely different ideological and historical context) Antony sees corporeality as a challenge to achieving true self-knowledge.

Now, therefore, I beseech you, my beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, not to neglect your true life, and not to confound the brevity of this time with time eternal, nor mistake the skin of the corruptible flesh with the reign of ineffable light, and not to let this place of damnation squander the angelic thrones of judgment (Letter V).

The comparison between the corruptible flesh and the ineffable light we see here reflects a similarly sharp distinction between the bodily passions and the divine light in the Book of Thomas. These similarities indicate the shared sources influencing both trajectories of Christian ascetic reflection. The Antony of the letters is, however, clearly of a later era when knowledge was mediated by the close reading and interpretation of an established set of inspired texts (canon) and not new or hidden revelation. He also takes up and affirms theological conceptions synthesised by contemporaneous and earlier orthodox theologians. We can see this in his use of known motifs such as salvation history, his demonology, and his response to the Arian controversy:

As for Arius, who stood up in Alexandria, he spoke strange words about the Only-begotten: to him who has no beginning, he gave a beginning to him who is ineffable among men he gave an end, and to the immovable he gave movement. (Letter IV)

The Antony that we discover in the letters is therefore very much in line with theological thinkers such as Origen. He is clearly steeped in scripture and very well acquainted with Christian and Greek thought of his time.

3.2.2.2. The Sayings of Antony in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

Peter Brown notes that the *Apophthegmata Patrum* “provided a remarkable new literary genre, close to the world of parable and folk-wisdom”.⁶⁹ These Sayings likely emerged as means of transmission of spiritual direction and teaching from a more experienced “master” to a novice or disciple.⁷⁰ Many of the Sayings came from *Nitria* and *Scetis* where small groups of monks congregated as disciples of an older, potentially more educated “Abbas”.⁷¹ Unlike in the coenobitic context which had a clear structure and pedagogy, these eremitic monks sought immediate direction in relation to specific experiences, thus according to Douglas Burton-Christie, “the Sayings of the Desert Fathers emerged and gained currency as words of power, life, and salvation addressed to particular persons in concrete situations.”⁷²

The *Apophthegmata* have survived in two general collections – the systematic and the alphabetic collections which contain much of the same Sayings and stories as well as additional sets. It is believed these Sayings preserving the experiences of 4th and 5th-century Egyptian monasticism were finally recorded in Greek in the late 5th century, in Palestine. This along with the surviving collections of *Apophthegmata* in many other languages - including Coptic, Latin, Syriac and Ethiopic – speaks to the influence and reach of this tradition in the ancient world.⁷³

⁶⁹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750* (New York, NY: Norton, 1989), 100.

⁷⁰ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, New Ed edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 77.

⁷¹ Benedicta Ward, ‘Foreward’, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Apophthegmata Patrum: The Alphabetic Collection: 59*, Revised edition (Kalamazoo, MI: Liturgical Press, 1975), xviii.

⁷² Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 78.

⁷³ I will be here referencing the Greek Alphabetical Collection translated by Benedicta Ward. ‘Greek *Apophthegmata*’, accessed 31 May 2022,

The Sayings mostly begin with a novice coming to an elder and asking for a word (Αββᾶ λέγων Εἰπέ μοι ῥῆμα). The elder then responds with a parable or teaching that gives direction in relation to the specific situation of the supplicant demonstrating the discernment of the Abba. This direction can mostly be applied widely in relation to other situations.

Antony is one of the most popular figures referred to in the Sayings tradition. There are 38 Sayings under his name in the alphabetical collection, but these represent only a fraction of the more than a hundred Sayings attributed to him across the known collections.⁷⁴ These Sayings are structured as we would expect but interesting at least two Sayings present Antony, the monk *par excellence* as the supplicant. His supplication, however, is not before another Abba but to the Divine Father establishing his access to the most authoritative source of spiritual direction and thus his credentials as an ascetic virtuoso and reliable source of guidance.

Ὁ ἅγιος ἀββᾶς Ἀντώνιος, καθεζόμενός
ποτε ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, ἐν ἀκηδία γέγονε καὶ
πολλῇ σκοτώσει λογισμῶν· καὶ ἔλεγε
πρὸς τὸν Θεόν· Κύριε, θέλω σωθῆναι, καὶ
οὐκ ἐῷσί με οἱ λογισμοί· τί ποιήσω ἐν τῇ
θλίψει μου; πῶς σωθῶ;

When the holy Abba Antony lived in the
desert, he was beset by *accidie*, and attacked
by many sinful thoughts. He said to God,
‘Lord, I want to be saved but these thoughts
do not leave me alone; what shall I do in my
affliction? How can I be saved?’

This example shows the struggle that monks – even Antony - face to maintain the ascetic discipline and control his mind. He comes to God for spiritual direction from within this specific context and the response he receives is similarly personal – he is sent an angel who

http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0400_apophth/greek_alph/00a_start.htm. A comprehensive bibliography of the versions and languages in which the Apophthegmata have survived can be found William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Illustrated edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183–85.

⁷⁴ Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 152.

demonstrates to him the need to keep the mind engaged through work and prayer – which gives him the courage and assurance to persist. He in turn offers direction to other renunciants struggling with specific aspects of the ascetic life. The following example is particularly striking:

Ἀδελφὸς ἀποταξάμενος τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ
διαδοῦς τὰ ὑπάρχοντα αὐτοῦ πτωχοῖς,
παρακατασχὼν δὲ ὀλίγα εἰς λόγον
ἑαυτοῦ, παρέβαλε τῷ ἀββᾷ Ἀντωνίῳ. Καὶ
τοῦτο μαθὼν, λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ γέρον· Εἰ
θέλεις μοναχὸς γενέσθαι, ἄπελθε εἰς
τήνδε τὴν κώμην, καὶ ἀγόρασον κρέας,
καὶ περίθες τῷ σώματί σου γυμνῶ, καὶ
οὕτως ἐλθὲ ἐνταῦθα. Καὶ ποιήσαντος
οὕτως τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ, οἱ κύνες καὶ τὰ ὄρνεα
τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ κατέτεμνον.
Ἀπαντήσαντος δὲ αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸν
γέροντα, ἐπύθετο εἰ γέγονεν ὡς
συνεβούλευσεν. Ἐκείνου δὲ
ἐπιδεικνυμένου τὸ σῶμα
διεσπαραγμένου, λέγει ὁ ἅγιος Ἀντώνιος·
Οἱ ἀποταξάμενοι τῷ κόσμῳ, καὶ θέλοντες
ἔχει χρήματα, οὕτως ἀπὸ τῶν δαιμόνων
κατακόπτονται πολεμούμενοι

A brother renounced the world and gave his goods to the poor, but he kept back a little for his personal expenses. He went to see Abba Anthony. When he told him this, the old man said to him, ‘If you want to be a monk, go into the village, buy some meat, cover your naked body with it and come here like that.’ The brother did so, and the dogs and birds tore at his flesh. When he came back the old man asked him whether he had followed his advice. He showed him his wounded body, and Saint Antony said, ‘Those who renounce the world but want to keep something for themselves are torn in this way by the demons who make war on them.’

This Saying addresses the need for a complete and radical rupture with the world that accompanies the path of ascetic transformation which is echoed in all of ascetic literature. It also highlights the emphasis on demonic activity in ascetic literature from this period. The cosmos is inhabited by angels – as seen in the previous example – and demons that describe the spiritual powers vying to influence the mind. Demons are here, as elsewhere, associated with the world and the flesh. This tension between good and evil (demons and angels) is also a primary motif in the Letters of Antony and the *Vita* as we will see below.

As we will see in greater detail below the Antony of the Apophthegmata is not at odds with either the erudite theologian that we discover in the Letters or the radical renunciant and teacher found in the *Vita* suggesting that these traditions may serve to mediate the presumed rupture between the two that has been posited in modern scholarship.

3.3.2.3. The Ascetic Writings of Athanasius

As we have noted above, another corpus that we can use to broaden our understanding of the literary and ideological content of the VA are the other Ascetic writings of Athanasius. During his intermittent and tumultuous tenure as bishop of Alexandria spanning more than four decades, Athanasius sought to enact his episcopal and ascetic vision on a very variegated milieu. As a young bishop who had come of age in the era of the imperial sanction of Christianity, Athanasius had the overarching mission of bringing together the diverse elements of Christian expression in Egypt under the episcopal authority of the Alexandrian See. Part of his ecclesiastical agenda, informed by his own ascetic commitment and personal contacts with the monastic movements, included articulating and imposing a template for a monasticism that is in line with his own theological and ecclesiastical agenda. This is evidenced in his writings - including the Life of Antony – which sought to offer an orthodox ascetic programme over against alternatives proposed.

The *First Letter to the Virgins*,⁷⁵ where he addresses the teachings of the ascetic teacher and monastic leader Hieracas who rejected marriage and sought to create a “separate ascetic community within the broader Christian community in the city of Leontopolis”⁷⁶ is one such example. Athanasius particularly seeks to contradict Hieracite teaching about marriage arguing that the interpretation of scriptures used to support this view is wrong: “What scripture has he read that says these things ... if he speaks such myths by the wisdom of Greeks, he is foreign to our faith...But it is clear that Paul has not been well understood.”⁷⁷ In opposition to this, Athanasius offers his own ascetic programme which caters to both married and virgin believers:

For just as the fruit of that which produced hundredfold, sixty, and thirty belongs to the same seed, so the Lord is one who has legislated concerning marriage and speaks symbolically about virginity so that the one who condemns one of them does nothing other than commit impiety against the Lord of the twofold grace.⁷⁸

He here utilises the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13.1-2; Mk 4.1-20 and Lk 8.1-15) to assert that all members of the Christian community, both married and the virgins, all bear spiritual fruit, although virgins (renunciants) are more fruitful. This establishes an ascetic hierarchy accessible to all based on the ‘twofold grace.’ Within this framework, virgins symbolised the height of the spectrum of moral development and perfection envisioned in his ecclesiastical vision. As noted by David Brakke, for Athanasius virgins/virginity, in particular, served as “powerful, multivalent religious symbols ... their exceptional control of

⁷⁵ Athanasius, ‘First Letter to Virgins’, in *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, trans. David Brakke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 274–91. David Brakke, convincingly demonstrates that doubts about the authenticity of this letter are largely dispelled by a close study of literary characteristics of the letter including rhetorical devices known from other Athanasian writings, interpretations of scripture, theological content, internal evidence demonstrating the author’s milieu and the traditions attached to its transmission. David Brakke, ‘The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana’, *Orientalia*, Nova Series, 63, no. 2 (1994): 19–20.

⁷⁶ Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, 132.

⁷⁷ Athanasius, ‘First Letter to Virgins’, 282–83.

⁷⁸ Athanasius, 283.

the passions demonstrated Christianity's superiority to other religions."⁷⁹ Nonetheless, he argued emphatically for the spectrum (ascetic hierarchy) which allows Christians at different stages of attaining moral perfection to be equally a part of the Church. This is very much in line with the thinking espoused by earlier writers, including, as we have seen above, Clement of Alexandria.

Athanasius also had more specific guidelines for female virgins. He seemed to believe that female renunciants required more rigor and protection to achieve moral perfection. The obvious exemplar in this regard was of course Mary the mother of Jesus. Athanasius asserts that as a perpetual virgin and the most sacred vessel of the Lord she was the proper model for the virgins who are living images of moral purity as the temples of God.

Additionally, Athanasius also employs the language of marriage, referring to the virgins as the brides of Christ. This depiction serves a dual purpose. The first is that it establishes Christ as the ultimate authority over the virgins. This would in turn suggest that the virgins like the Church are under the direct authority of his symbolic representatives on earth, the bishops – thus placing them firmly within the ecclesiastical order and presumably mitigating the influence of popular monastic teachers wielding authority over virgin disciples. Secondly, this imagery further bolsters his argument for marriage by portraying virginity not as a substitution or an alternative to marriage but as a transcendent form of marriage.⁸⁰

Athanasius is particularly opposed to the practice of spiritual marriage. This practice involved committed ascetics of the opposite sex cohabitating together which was practice amongst Hieracite ascetics who possibly sought out virgins to live with them.⁸¹ Athanasius vehemently discouraged this practice as a form of adultery to the spouse – Christ. He also dissuaded virgins from seeking out learning presumably to discourage suggestible virgins

⁷⁹ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 18.

⁸⁰ So Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*.

⁸¹ Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, 124.

from being influenced by teachers and teachings which he was seeking to combat. In his *Letter to the Virgins*, Athanasius thus established a regimen to control female ascetics by sanctioning a specific ascetic regime centred around seclusion and a focus on the inner mind,⁸² while at the same time, he sought to bring them under episcopal authority by disallowing other figures of authority.

In his other writings, we find that he also sought to exert similar episcopal authority over male ascetics. He attempted to achieve this both through efforts to integrate monks into the formal ecclesiastical structure and through exerting his own authority over ascetic issues. An example of his efforts on the first front is his *Letter to Dracontius*. This letter seems to have been addressed to a monk who was unwilling to be ordained following his election to serve in Alexandria. Athanasius rejects this reluctance, arguing against the Christian merit of monks remaining secluded when they were needed to serve Christian communities in need of instruction and evangelism.

“What can be in store for you if you prove an offense to so many?” asks Athanasius reminding Dracontius of his duty to the Christian community. He goes to strongly argue against real or presumed advisers who were counselling Dracontius to reject ordination, pointing out that if others had adhered to the same type of oath and had not discharged their ecclesiastical responsibility “how would you have become a Christian, since there would be no bishops?” He goes on to add “For we know both bishops who fast, and monks who eat” – making the point that ascetic rigour is a matter of practice and not just an oath.⁸³

Through his reproof of this one recalcitrant monk, Athanasius articulates his censure for those who perceived ascetic withdrawal to be a separate and a higher vocation than the episcopate. He also argues that ascetics, who are further along on the spectrum of spiritual

⁸² Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 34–35.

⁸³ Athanasius, ‘Letter XLIX. Letter to Dracontius’, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, Second Series (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 559.

formation, have a responsibility to ‘feed’ (minister to) the laity much as they themselves received ministry. He also indicates the unity of all believers by referencing baptism and the grace that it imparts. Athanasius also reminds Dracontius to imitate the heroes of the faith including Paul and the Hebrew prophets who did not shirk their duty to the community of faith. He ends by arguing that moral perfection was a matter of personal commitment that is neither conferred by monastic vocation nor diminished by episcopal responsibility. Here again, Athanasius seems to wish to minimize the privileging of asceticism over against the ecclesiastical structure.

Athanasius was also equally keen to push his agenda of incorporating monks into his ecclesiastical structure by establishing himself (and presumably those of his stature) as the proper authority to adjudicate debates on ascetic practice.⁸⁴ He also challenges the “pedagogical authority of his intellectual rivals ... [arguing] the revelation found in scripture is sufficient and needed no supplement.”⁸⁵ Brakke, notes that Athanasius’ anti-intellectual stance likely stemmed from longstanding conflict between:

on the one hand, the episcopate, which was centred around the practices of worship [and] on the other hand, the school, which was centred around the personalities of outstanding teachers and dealt with conflicts scholastically.⁸⁶

As we have seen above in relation to Athanasius’ prescription of a Christian canon, he reflects these sentiments in his teachings arguing that only Christ and the inspired evangelists of his message in the scriptures can claim to be teachers; “For there were first our Saviour’s

⁸⁴ For example, he makes a pronouncement on the debate about nocturnal emissions amongst ascetics. He concludes that these were “the craft of the devil” who “suggests thoughts under the show of purity” so as to derail of “ascetics from their customary and salutary meditation” Athanasius, ‘Letter XLVIII. Letter to Amun’, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, Second Series (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 556.

⁸⁵ Arthur P. Urbano, *The Philosophical Life: Biography and the Crafting of Intellectual Identity in Late Antiquity*, Patristic Monograph Series 21 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 208.

⁸⁶ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 59.

own words, who from the height of his divinity, when conversing with His disciples, said, ‘Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest to your souls.’⁸⁷ As we will see in greater detail below Athanasius most definitively encourages the imitation of exemplars as an alternative to παιδεία in the *Life of Antony*.

As these few examples demonstrate the ascetic imagination of Athanasius was very much influenced by the variegated character of Egyptian Christianity in the 4th century and his own theological and ecclesiastical agenda. This agenda, as it particularly related to incorporating the diverse ascetic elements focused on bringing ascetics firmly under episcopal authority and developing ecclesiastically sanctioned ascetic teaching and practice. My study below will intentionally engage with this framing to better understand both the reception of earlier Christian traditions and the development of an ascetic programme in the *Vita*.

3.3. Narrative Development

The literary structure of the *Life of Antony* is characterised by a three-fold periodisation marked by events indicating a significant transition. This narrative core is bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue establishes that the author is writing in response to the request of monks who have “entered upon a noble contest with the monks of Egypt” seeking to become their equal or to surpass them in training (ασκήσις) and moral excellence. Athanasius commends the ambition they had exhibited in seeking to emulate the zeal of Antony. These monks are located outside of Egypt, suggesting that at this stage Athanasius was interested in expanding the reach of a sanctioned ascetic programme to the broader church.

⁸⁷ Athanasius, “Festal Letter for 330,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, Second Series (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 511.

Athanasius begins the narrative proper by describing the birth and childhood of his main character in the idealised manner typical of the *bios* genre. Antony, according to Athanasius, was born to wealthy, Christian Egyptian parents. As a child, he is described as a paragon of Christian piety rejecting childish frivolity, secular learning, and welcoming moderation. His depiction of Antony’s early life here makes use of allusions to the description of the early lives of biblical characters like Jacob. “His whole desire was, as it is written, to live at home, unaffected by the outside world.” (Gen 25.27).⁸⁸

Antony’s commitment to an ascetic life, as a result of a revelatory encounter with scripture, marks the first period in the narrative development [1-4]. His initial call to an ascetic life is mediated by the words of Matthew 19.21 — “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give them to the poor, and come and follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Antony understands this to be a divine command much like the call received by the apostles who “gave up everything and followed the saviour” (Matt 4.20). The immediacy of his subsequent commitment serves to reflect his unquestioning obedience. This enhances the allusion to biblical exemplars intended by the narrator in that it calls to mind the apostles who similarly responded to Jesus immediately and without question (Matt 4.22).

2.4

<p>Ὁ δὲ Ἀντώνιος, ὡσπερ θεόθεν ἐσχηκῶς τὴν τῶν ἁγίων μνήμην καὶ ὡς δι’ αὐτόν γενομένου τοῦ ἀναγνώσματος ἐξεληθὼν εὐθὺς ἐκ τοῦ κυριακοῦ τὰς μὲν κτήσεις ἅς εἶχεν ἐκ προγόνων</p>	<p>When Antony received from God the remembrances of the saints and realized how that passage had been read for his sake, he immediately left the church, and the</p>
---	--

⁸⁸ Philip Rousseau, notes that the allusion to Jacob calls to mind, the patriarch’s withdrawal from the sinful company of his brother Esau, thus casting Antony’s early choice not to mix with other children not only a commendation of his special status but a condemnation of the society from which he withdrew. Rousseau, “Antony as Teacher in the Greek Life,” 89–90.

possessions he had inherited from his
ancestors.

A potentially significant element of the description of Antony's initial call to an ascetic life is the location of his calling. It seems unlikely that this location is irrelevant as suggested by Philip Rousseau who argues that "we need not exaggerate the implication of the setting: it is what Antony heard that matters in the context, not where he heard it."⁸⁹ As we have noted above, in light of Athanasius' dual intentions to promote ecclesiastical structure and authority as the singular locus of monastic activity in the church, it seems intentional that Antony received his calling in a church. This argument is further strengthened when we note that this motif is picked up elsewhere in the VA. For example, in his description of Antony's charismatic gifting Athanasius notes that the monk showed proper deferral to episcopal authority: "...for he was not ashamed to bow his head to bishops and priests" (67.2). Moreover, as we will see below, at the end of his life Antony clearly bequeaths his authority to the two bishops Athanasius and Serapion [91.8-9]. This final bequest serves to neatly bracket the life and ministry of Antony within the 'authorised' ecclesiastical order: thus, he received his calling through the teaching of the church and the legacy of his extraordinary life and ministry reverts to the church.⁹⁰

Having established the locus and nature of his calling Athanasius then goes on to recount the process of Antony's initial ascetic self-formation under the tutelage of different mentors. He stresses his commitment to the discipline of work to support himself after having given away his inherited wealth. This potentially helps to further develop the parallel with the saint exemplars – Paul in particular. It also highlights the significance of physical labour as a spiritual practice in the process of monastic self-formation. Finally, it could also serve to

⁸⁹ Rousseau, "Antony as Teacher in the Greek Life," 90.

⁹⁰ Athanasius' own sustained interest in executing ecclesiastical control over the disparate trajectories of Christianity in his context also suggests that the location of Antony's calling is far from irrelevant.

make a polemical point against the wandering, begging, and enthusiastic holy men largely condemned by ecclesiastical authorities of the era.⁹¹

Having described the initial stages of Antony's ascetic commitment characterised by renunciation and learning through both studying the scriptures and imitation of both the saints and more experienced renunciants, Athanasius moves on to the second narrative period. This period is marked by the introduction of the central antagonist of the narrative — the Devil [5 - 44]. We follow Antony's contentions with the Devil as he launches attacks against him in different guises. These attacks increase in intensity the further along Antony progresses in his ascetic transformation. This progress is also signified by his retreat further and further into the desert, forming the core plot of this literary period.

In addition to enhancing the dramatic development of the narrative by offering an appropriate setting for the monk's self-formation, this journey into the wilderness serves as an important cue informing the contemporaneous reader's understanding of the characterisation of Antony. This characterisation, according to David Jasper, plays upon perspectives at the time about "the desert as the land of the dead outside of human habitation from which Antony emerges perfected in body and soul."⁹² Thus the physical journey into the desert mimics the journey in which the renunciant dies to the world and is reborn again through strict ascetic training symbolised the harshness of the desert known to the contemporary reader. This time of formation in the desert also recalls Jesus who spent 40 days in the wilderness (we will look at the appropriation of the temptation scene in the *Vita below*) in preparation for ministry and Paul who retreated to the deserts of Arabia after his

⁹¹ Daniel Folger Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Peter Brown, *Society, and the Holy in Late Antiquity*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

⁹² David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art and Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 26–27.

conversion. The retreat and rebirth in the desert could also in some ways the ultimate promise of resurrection that is configured in the Easter story.

This narrative period comes to a climax in a series of sermons (15 - 44). Having emerged transformed after twenty years of battling with the devil and ascetic self-formation Antony is equipped to teach disciples as a sage teacher.

Following this, Athanasius introduces a third literary period characterised by Antony's engagement with the 'world.' He is forced into this engagement not because he returns to the world in any way or form but because he is required by circumstance to confront persecution (46), heal demonic oppression manifesting in the form of illness (e.g. 48; 57; 58; 61; 63), and promote theological orthodoxy against both Christian teachings to which Athanasius was opposed (e.g. notably against the Meletians and Arians, 68 – 69; 82) and Greek philosophy (72 -80).⁹³ Even during this period of engagement, however, Antony retreats further to the inner desert in pursuit of even solitude and hence reaching for an even higher level of spiritual transformation. In this characterisation, Athanasius is able to promote his “vision of monasticism: far removed from the activities of humans”⁹⁴ he nonetheless promotes the social responsibility and communal identity of monastics”.⁹⁵ We also noted this vision in the *Letter to Dracontius* above.

The third and final literary period culminates with the death of Antony. The physical death of the monk is depicted as the ultimate victory against not only the primary antagonist of the plot, the Devil but of death itself by willingly having died to the world and committed

⁹³ His critique of the political and philosophical structures is particularly significant in as much Antony is initially characterised as lacking formal education. Athanasius obliquely references 1 Corinthians 1.24 to establish that the triumphant suit against the governing culture brought by Antony serves as evidence of the wisdom of God which allows an uneducated monastic to overcome against the arguments of trained philosophers.

⁹⁴ Marilyn Dunn, *Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 3.

⁹⁵ This is also supported by the characterisation of Antony as being subservient to ecclesiastical authority: “For though he was such a man, he observed the rule of the Church most rigidly, and was willing that all the clergy should be honoured above himself” (67).

his life to the perfection of his soul. The honour and glory accorded to him in this conclusion are magnified by a striking echo of the death of Moses (Deut 34), in terms of his retreat to the mountains, his charge to his disciples, his health and vigour at the time of his death and the secrecy shrouding his tomb. Antony is thus established as a symbolic patriarch and type for monks according to the template established by Athanasius.

3.4. Reception of Scripture

Athanasius uses scripture and scriptural motifs extensively and diversely in the development of the narrative of the *Vita*. Tim Vivian notes that “the Life of Anthony, a relatively brief work of ninety-four paragraphs, has some four hundred references or allusions to the Bible.”⁹⁶

Here I will particularly focus on Athanasius’ appropriation of literary forms from scripture and the means by which he deploys scripture to define ascetic discipline.

3.4.1. The Reception of Literary Forms

The first example of the reception of literary forms that we will look at is Athanasius’ use of the temptation scene to depict milestones in the ascetic’s process of transformation. As noted above physical separation from the world expressed through the potent desert metaphor serves as a “spatial expression of the ascetic’s decisive break with society.”⁹⁷ Monastic literature also utilises the stark and harsh reality of the desert setting as a symbol for the existence and character of evil. Athanasius develops this motif by drawing upon the form of the temptation narrative from the synoptic gospels (Matt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13).

⁹⁶ Tim Vivian, ‘Introduction’, in *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and The Greek Life* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 2003), xxvi. Athanasius’ familiarity with and study of the Scriptures reveals a portrait of Athanasius as a theologian steeped in the Scriptures. Gregory of Nazianzus speaks of him in a similar vein as “meditating on every book of the Old and New Testament with a depth which no one else has reached with even one of them. Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

⁹⁷ Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, 87.

This parallel is particularly felt in his description of the devil's first assaults on Antony (5) which follows a pattern that closely mimics the temptation of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the Devil tries to use different tests to tempt Antony. He begins by trying to discourage the monk by reminding him of the wealth, family, social position, food, and other comforts of his former life. When this is rebuffed, the devil tries to tempt him with sexual sin and pride. Each time Antony responds with faith, mortification of the body, prayer, and citing scripture reflecting the ascetic program that we will see developed in the rest of the narrative. Ultimately, however, the devil concedes defeat: "I have deceived many, and I have brought down a multitude, but just now I was helpless in employing against you and your efforts I have used against others."

Although the devil continues his attack against Antony throughout his life this first period of temptation marks his initial triumph and sets rules for subsequent encounters with the Enemy that reflect the synoptic temptation narrative: A. the devil's point of attack revolved around physical and social needs/desires) B. fasting and prayer/scripture offer protection against the devil's account C. The devil is persistent but is ultimately thwarted through perseverance.

An interesting element in the temptation scenes that is likely taken up by Athanasius from the scenes in both Matthew/Luke is the use of scripture not just defensively (by Antony) but offensively (by the devil). It seems safe to assume that the use of scripture by the Devil in the synoptics afforded Athanasius the license to follow the same pattern in his narrative. The protagonists - Jesus and Antony - are able to withstand the weaponisation of holy scripture against them because they are divinely empowered to be discerning of the correct interpretation and application.

While noting these basic similarities, we need to of course note the obvious differences indicating Athanasius creative appropriation of this familiar scene. According to

the accounts in Matthew and Luke, Jesus withdrew to the desert for a short period of time and although his subsequent ministry is characterised by periodic withdrawal from the crowds there is no indication that he experiences any more temptation or testing. Antony, on the other hand, is continually tested – indeed it is the primary plot line of the whole narrative. Another important distinction is that while the temptations do focus on similar motifs – physical and social desires - Jesus is never sexually tempted while this is an important and recurring test for Antony in the *Vita*. Finally, Jesus wields the authority of scripture and is credited with his triumph against the enemy in the case of Antony his ability to sustain the temptation “was the triumph of the Saviour, who ‘condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (7.1).

A second literary form that is appropriated and developed in the *Vita* are scenes related to revelation and charismatic gifting. Athanasius demonstrates the ascetic transformation of Antony by depicting his access to the divine and the charismatic gifts that he was able to employ in his ministry. Antony’s use of these gifts, which include prophetic and healing powers, in the *Life of Antony* is depicted in terms that strongly suggest that Athanasius used the setting and content of similar narratives in the scriptures as a source.

Similarly, visions and prophetic foresight are presented as evidence of peculiar monastic excellence (65-66). Antony describes his mystical visions of the spiritual world in terms that suggest an imaginative re-telling of the thinly shrouded personal account told by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12.1-6, about “a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven.” This serves to underscore Antony’s *bona fides* along the lines of the experiences of the great apostle himself. Another manifestation of the charismatic gifting of Antony is his ability to heal sickness. Like the temptation narrative discussed above Athanasius seems to utilise the healing narratives in the gospel literature as a template. I will

look here at three such healing stories that seem to bear direct parallels to similar accounts from Jewish and Christian writings below to further elaborate on this.

The first healing narrative we will look at here is discovered in paragraph 57. This account describes a certain Fronto, a court official who comes to Antony for healing from a particularly terrible skin disease. Antony prays for Fronto and tells him that he will be healed when returns to Egypt. Fronto, at first, finds this difficult to believe and refuses to leave for some time. He however comes to faith, goes away, and is healed as promised.

This narrative seems to bear notable similarities with the story of Naaman, another pagan official who sought help from a disfiguring disease from Elisha in 2 Kings 5. Like Fronto, Naaman resisted the prescription of the holy man but ultimately had to come to a place of faith to receive his healing.

Other healing narratives focus on Antony's ability to heal from a distance. The first has to do with a persistent military official who seeks healing for his daughter and who is recommended for his faith (48).

Εὐθὺς δὲ ἐκεῖνος πιστεύσας καὶ	Immediately the man believed and called on
ἐπικαλεσάμενος τὸν Χριστὸν ἀπῆλθεν	Christ and went away, and his daughter was
ἔχων τὴν θυγατέρα καθαρισθεῖσαν ἀπὸ	cleansed of her demon.
τοῦ δαίμονος	

The story of this official is reminiscent of the centurion in (Matt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10) who is recommended by Jesus for his faith.

The healing narrative of another woman, also healed by Antony from a distance (58) explicitly references the story of the woman who is healed from haemorrhaging found in Matthew 9.20-22; Mark 5.25-34, and Luke 8.43-48. Here again, Athanasius calls to mind a

biblical story that he expects to be well known to his readers as a template and validation for the charismatic activity of his protagonist.

In summary, we can note that like his use of the temptation of Jesus found in Matthew and Luke, Athanasius deploys motifs from healing miracle stories discovered in the Old and New Testaments as a source to develop his narrative. He appropriates familiar themes and characters to enhance the legitimacy of his character and to ensure that Antony's charismatic gifting is properly understood as emanating from the same divine source which enacts similar miracles in the scriptures. Ultimately the power to heal is that of the lord and Antony is only able to access and channel this power because of special charismatic gifting as a consequence of his long-term ascetic training.

3.4.2. Defining Ascetic Discipline

Athanasius employs biblical imagery and exhortations to describe the character of the ascetic pursuit of self-formation. I will now turn to look at how Athanasius takes up one particularly potent metaphor to define ascetic practice, that of athletic training and/or contest. The description of Antony's struggle in the *Life of Antony* in terms of ἀθλήσις calls to mind the imagery associated with the use of the athletic metaphor in other Greco-Roman and Christian texts. This imagery likely readily presents itself considering ἀσκησις was originally used to describe the rigorous physical training undertaken by athletes.⁹⁸

The use of this metaphor in the *Vita* is mediated through citations or allusions to its use in earlier the New Testament. I will therefore very briefly look at the use of this metaphor in the Pauline and Pseudo-Pauline literature, which are referenced and alluded to extensively by Athanasius. and the meaning it conveyed in its original context. I will not here discuss the possible sources of the athletic metaphor in the New Testament except to note the

⁹⁸ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 76.

development of such metaphors from the Greek games through moral philosophy and into popular usage.⁹⁹

Victor C. Pfitzner argues that this development resulted in the divorce of the popular use of athletic imagery from its background in Greek games and philosophy.¹⁰⁰ While his comprehensive discussion serves to illuminate the historical background of the use of athletic metaphors in philosophical discourse as well as the versatility of such metaphors in Pauline usage, his discussion seems to mainly focus on demonstrating that Paul does not seek to articulate a general principle of “striving for the goal of perfection.”¹⁰¹ As rightly noted by Bradley Arnold, Pfitzner’s denial of the influence of athletic practices at the time of Paul seems to have more to do with a theological pre-commitment that personal effort in the quest for moral perfection is out of place in Paul’s thought.¹⁰²

A close reading of some of Paul’s use of athletic imagery however does indicate his aim to encourage the imitation of athletes and athletic contests as “a pattern for Christian character or conduct ... as one who runs, strives, and exercises self-control.”¹⁰³ The most significant verse that comes to mind in relation to this metaphor is 1 Corinthians 9.24-27:

οὐκ οἶδατε ὅτι οἱ ἐν σταδίῳ	Do you not know that in a race all the
τρέχοντες πάντες μὲν τρέχουσιν, εἷς δὲ	runners run, but only one receives the prize?
λαμβάνει τὸ βραβεῖον; οὕτω τρέχετε, ἵνα	So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete
καταλάβητε.	exercises self-control in all things. They do
	it to receive a perishable wreath, but we

⁹⁹ A detailed analysis of the background and development of the athletic metaphor can be found in; Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1967); Bradley Arnold also offers a detailed assessment of the significance of this metaphor in New Testament literature. Arnold.

¹⁰⁰ Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*.

¹⁰¹ Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif*, 141–42.

¹⁰² Arnold, ‘Christ as the Telos of Life’, 56.

¹⁰³ Roman Garrison, ‘Paul’s Use of the Athlete Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9’, *SR* 22, no. 2 (1993): 213.

πᾶς δὲ ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος πάντα
ἐγκρατεύεται, ἐκεῖνοι μὲν οὖν ἵνα
φθαρτὸν στέφανον λάβωσιν, ἡμεῖς δὲ
ἄφθαρτον.

an imperishable. So, I do not run aimlessly;
I do not box as one beating the air. But I
discipline my body and keep it under
control, lest after preaching to others I
myself should be disqualified.

ἐγὼ τοίνυν οὕτως τρέχω ὡς οὐκ
ἀδήλως, οὕτως πυκτεύω ὡς οὐκ ἀέρα
δέρων·

ἀλλ' ὑπωπιάζω μου τὸ σῶμα καὶ
δουλαγωγῶ, μήπως, ἄλλοις κηρύξας
αὐτὸς ἀδόκιμος γένωμαι.

Here Paul presents himself as an athlete in training – exercising diligently so as to earn an ultimate reward. This background seems to influence not only Athanasius' understanding of the ascetic quest in terms of an athletic struggle but also helps to define the programme he lays out to mortify and train the body, which we will look at below. Let us, first look more closely at the different ways in which this motif is utilised in the *Vita*.

In paragraph 21, Athanasius picks up the athletic metaphor as an exhortation from Antony – at this time, a mature ascetic who had emerged, after twenty years of isolation – to inspire and teach a large group of followers seeking to emulate him.

Ἔστω δὲ ἡμῖν ἀγών, ὥστε μὴ τυραννεῖν
ἡμῶν θυμὸν μηδὲ κρατεῖν ἡμῶν
ἐπιθυμίαν.

Let us enter the struggle in such a way that
anger does not rule over us or desire master
us.

The use of ἀγών (struggle, fight) here brings to mind the use of the term in Philippians 1.29 - 30¹⁰⁴ and 1 Timothy 6.12.¹⁰⁵ Read in light of these verses we are able to access another dimension of ascetic discipline not just as a tool for thwarting the devil's influence over the body and his temptation but as a willing sacrifice of faith with cultic significance as Paul articulates in Philippians. With this background in mind, Antony's counsel to master negative emotions (anger)¹⁰⁶ can also better be appreciated as an element of the constructive goal of ascetic discipline (the moral construction of the monk) and not the defensive component (against the devil).

Anthony addresses both these aspects of the ascetic struggle in his teachings, although most of his focus is reserved for the latter, which we will look at now.

In chapter 5 Athanasius depicts Antony's first struggle in terms of a contest or competition with the devil along the lines of 1 Corinthians 9.24-27. He utilises the imagery of wrestling (πάλη) in paragraph 5.3. Within this same context, Athanasius describes Antony's victory in terms of a wrestler being thrown to the mat and being pinned down (καταπαλαιούμενον). The very real physical struggle which Antony is experiencing, and which was visible to onlookers seems to transcend or at least heighten the metaphorical utility of the imagery of wrestling and struggle.¹⁰⁷

προσέρχεται κατὰ τοῦ νεωτέρου, νικτὸς	He advanced against the young man,
μὲν αὐτὸν θορυβῶν, μεθ' ἡμέραν δὲ	disturbing him at night and bothering him so

¹⁰⁴ Philippians 1.30: is an encouraging statement from the Apostle Paul reassuring Christians facing opponents that they are enduring the same struggle - ἀγών - that they had witnessed and continue to witness him endure. This text elevates individual persecution to a shared struggle for a common faith.

¹⁰⁵ 1 Timothy 6.12 is a very well-known exhortation from the writer urging believers to "fight the good fight of the faith". This injunction particularly recalls the imagery of boxing discovered in 1 Corinthians 9.26.

¹⁰⁶ Negative emotions like anger and pride were considered to be vices that could potentially continue to be a danger to the ascetic who may have successfully mastered bodily discipline. This would later inform the development of the seven deadly sins. Clark, *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem*, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Athanasius also utilizes the language of athletic training to depict the possibility that God may be using wealth as temptation to train Antony.

<p>οὕτως ἐνοχλῶν ὡς καὶ τοὺς ὄρῶντας αἰσθέθαι τὴν γινομένην ἀμφοτέρων πάλην</p>	<p>much during the day that even those who were watching could see that there was a struggle being waged between the two of them</p>
---	---

The wrestling here is a very literal battle between a human seeking to retain moral perfection over the ever-present force of evil personified as the devil. As a result, Antony had to be vigilante to resist the continuous temptations and to maintain control of his body through faith, prayers, fasting, and “reflecting on Christ in his heart and the goodness he had through him and reflecting on the spiritual insight given to him by his soul” (5.42). These disciplines are akin to the protection gear (continuing with the wrestling metaphor) and weapons that gave Antony victory over the devil.

Athanasius quotes Ephesians 6.12 to further explicate this: “For we do not wrestle (πάλη) against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” This reference and the image of wrestling are particularly potent in describing the systematic challenges to the ascetic by demonic forces that are opposed to all that is virtuous. The use of this verse performs two important functions. The first is that in line with the use of the athletic metaphor it elaborates the violent struggle against evil forces that characterise the ascetic quest. In many instances the human body is depicted as a battleground for antithetical forces, whereby the program of ascetic self-discipline promoted in the VA seeks to hinder the body’s natural inclination to aid the forces of evil and instead enhance the “... the goodness he [the monk] had through him [Christ] ...” (5.5). In addition to this, the citation of Ephesians 6.12 here serves the additional function of offering scriptural validation for Antony’s life experience through the course of his ascetic pursuit. He was challenged and hindered at every turn by demonic forces that are opposed to his quest for virtue.

Athanasius takes up and develops the theme of struggle and wrestling further in paragraph 51. Antony is an elderly monk at this stage of the narrative and is experienced in the ascetic discipline. Here again, we learn that his contestation is “not against flesh and blood, as it is written, but against opposing demons.” These opponents could be perceived by others – possibly as a result of the ferocity of their attacks on him and his “fighting as though against visible beings and praying against them ...so that the demons fled from him”.

While there is no explicit reference to wrestling the theme of the powers arrayed against the devout is continued in 66.6. Antony has a vision of a giant stretching between the earth and the heavens keeping souls from ascending:

Τοῦτο πάλιν ἔωρακώς καὶ ὡσπερ	When Antony saw this again, he
ὑπομιμνησκόμενος, μᾶλλον ἠγωνίζετο	remembered and fought still more each day
προκόπτειν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν καθ’ ἡμέραν	‘to advance to what lies ahead

Here again, we can note an emphasis on the continuous nature of ascetic training. We can also note a focus on the telos of ascetic discipline which is developed through an allusion to Philippians 3.13-14 – where the Apostle Paul tells us of the constant movement forward along the path of spiritual progression in expectation of the final goal.

This struggle, however, is not one which the ascetic undertakes and completes on his own, according to the Life of Antony. Athanasius establishes clearly that the ascetic struggle is not only rewarded but also empowered by divine support (10):

‘Ο δὲ κύριος οὐδὲ ἐν τούτῳ ἐπελάθετο τῆς	The Lord did not forget Antony’s struggle at
ἀθλήσεως Ἀντωνίου, ἀλλ’ εἰς ἀντίληψιν	the time but came to his help.
αὐτῷ γέγονεν.	

As our brief look demonstrates Athanasius appropriates and develops this rhetorically potent metaphor and the associated imagery to define asceticism within the Vita. But what

does this asceticism entail? We will now turn to look at the ascetic curriculum as devised by Athanasius.

3.4.3. An Ascetic Programme for the Church

As we saw in the letter to Dracontius above, Athanasius is particularly keen to exert authority over ascetics and to bring them under the ecclesiastical structure. In the *Life of Antony*, he deploys the multi-valent figure of the monk to establish an ascetic programme that can serve as a standard. I will here look at how he develops the various components and stages of this programme.¹⁰⁸

3.4.3.1. Fasting

In our discussions of both the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Book of Thomas the Contender* we noted the significance of fasting and what constituted acceptable and unacceptable types of eating. As we will see below these themes arise once more, here.

In chapter 7 we learn that he ate once a day, every other day, and sometimes even fasted for days. Even when he did, Athanasius tells us, all he ate was bread and salt. He stresses, that “it is superfluous even to speak about meat and wine, for noting of this sort could be found among those who are zealous [7].

While not able to completely renounce food we learn that Antony not only - for all intents and purposes – starves himself but that he also restricted the types of food that he ate. Meat and wine are clearly considered a decadence unbecoming the truly committed ascetic, but he outdid the run-of-the-mill monk by eating even less of the bread and salt allowed him. This has become so much ingrained in him that later in life he is embarrassed to be seen eating because he is ashamed that he needs to do so: “Often, therefore, when he was going to

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 217. As will be discussed in more detail below, Brown argues that the *Vita* depicts different levels of ascetic discipline “...seen in terms of the massive antithesis of ‘desert; and ‘world.’”

with the other monks, he would be mindful of spiritual food and ask to be excused; he would go far away from, thinking it would be embarrassing to have other see him eating.” [45.3]

But why would this seemingly extreme view of food, which we would view as evidence of an eating disorder today, signify the pinnacle of ascetic transformation for the monk?

The first possibility is that narrative follows Antony as he emancipates himself from the bonds of social interdependence gradually as metaphorically depicted through his journey away from his home and human habitation and deeper and deeper into the desert. A key feature of this journey his radical renunciation of food. In as much as the need for food and eating practices are elements that tie the individual to the society, we can see this to symbolically represent his renunciation of society.¹⁰⁹

Brown highlights that such renunciation is particularly significant in a context like 4th century Egypt where food insecurity and the fear of starvation shaped everyday reality and governed social relations and the attendant expectations of the individual.

Perched on the edge of the desert along the valley of the Nile, within sight of the settled land, the monks of fourth-century Egypt stood as a perpetual challenge to the situation of hunger and of bitter dependence on the marketplace that characterised the society of a starving and laborious Near East.¹¹⁰

This fear of starvation, which no doubt likely described the experience of a great part of the society was of course not a uniform experience. We are for example told that Antony came from an affluent family. He had an inheritance which he was able to sell and share with

¹⁰⁹ Veronika Grimm, *From Feasting To Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 4–5.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 221.

those who were in need. This raises a question about the social and economic status of those who committed to monastic existence. It would seem that those, like Antony, who came from an affluent background not defined by the stark struggle for survival depicted by Brown are more likely to possess the courage to challenge the structures and relationships that those less privileged would find essential for survival. Additionally, as we have seen above, the monks in the metaphorical desert were nonetheless anchored by a wide network of supporters and mutual interdependence indicating that while forgoing the worldly social order and its patterns – including of eating – ascetics crafted acceptable forms of society, eating, etc.

The second rationale for extreme fasting is that eating or the need for food other than what was allowed by God was the source of the original sin. According to Tertullian (*On Fasting* 3), Adam “yielded more readily to his belly than to God, heeded the meat rather than the mandate, and sold salvation for his gullet!” (3.2) Therefore, he goes on to argue:

from the very beginning the murderous gullet was to be punished with the torments and penalties of hunger. Even if God had enjoined no preceptive fasts...unbidden, I would, in such ways and at such times as I might have been able, have habitually accounted food as poison, and taken the antidote, hunger, through which to purge the primordial cause of death, a cause transmitted to me also, concurrently with my very generation (3.3).¹¹¹

This suggests that fasting allows the monk to attain a state close to the original pristine condition of humanity pre-fall. In which case we can understand fasting in and of itself as a cultic activity that brings the renunciant closer to God. Such strict views of fasting, however, were not the rule. Other writers, like Clement of Alexandria (e.g., *Clem. Strom.*

¹¹¹ Tertullian of Carthage, ‘On Fasting’, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, vol. IV (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

7.12) understood fasting more as practice of moderation to humble and govern the body alongside other good deeds (*Paedagogus*, 3.12).

This rationale for fasting basically understood food deprivation as a tool of discipling and controlling the body and its desires. As far back as Philo proponents of moderation have argued that rich foods “stimulate and stir up the stings of his [mankind] sexual lusts” (On the Creation, 158).¹¹² As Veronika Grimm rightly notes the human body “is not built for celibacy” therefore ascetics had to force the body “into submission by actively denying its other needs too.”¹¹³ In this light, instead of being an end in of itself, as we have seen above, fasting becomes a tool to combat other bodily desires. By weakening the body and denying it of energy the monk was particularly able to deny sexual temptations. This, I believe, resonates more with the ascetic programme laid down by Athanasius, as we will see below.

3.4.3.2. Sexual Renunciation

As we have seen in the ascetic beatitudes of Paul in the APT and the woes in the Book of Thomas sexual renunciation has always been at the core of Christian ascetic practice in diverse contexts. By the fourth century, chastity had come to represent the ultimate “symbol of holiness and, as such, as the basis for entering the Christian ‘avant-garde’.”¹¹⁴ Athanasius, develops this theme through the use of the temptation scene, as we have seen above.

In the first temptation scene, for example, sexual temptation is depicted as the final and most potent weapon that the Devil levels against the young monk.

5.3

Ὡς δὲ εἶδεν ἑαυτὸν ὁ ἐχθρὸς ἀσθενοῦντα But when the enemy saw himself too weak
πρὸς τὴν τοῦ Ἀντωνίου πρόθεσιν, καὶ for Antony’s determination, and that it was

¹¹² F.H. Colson, and G.H. Whitaker, *Philo*, vol. I, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 127.

¹¹³ Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin*, 183.

¹¹⁴ Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin*, 183.

μᾶλλον ἑαυτὸν καταπαλαιόμενον ὑπὸ
τῆς ἐκείνου στερεότητος, καὶ
ἀνατρεπόμενον τῇ πολλῇ πίστει, καὶ
πίπτοντα ταῖς συνεχέσιν Ἀντωνίου
προσευχαῖς· τότε δὴ τοῖς ἐπ' ὀμφαλοῦ
γαστροῦ ὄπλοις ἑαυτοῦ θαρρόων, καὶ
καυχώμενος ἐπὶ τούτοις (ταῦτα γὰρ ἐστὶν
αὐτοῦ τὰ πρῶτα κατὰ τῶν νεωτέρων
ἐνεδρα), προσέρχεται κατὰ τοῦ νεωτέρου,
νυκτὸς μὲν αὐτὸν θορυβῶν, μεθ' ἡμέραν
δὲ οὕτως ἐνοχλῶν, ὡς καὶ τοὺς ὀρῶντας
αἰσθέσθαι τὴν γινομένην ἀμφοτέρων
πάλην.

rather he who was conquered by the other's
firmness, overthrown by [Antony's] great
faith and falling through his constant
prayers then took courage from the weapons
strapped around his Belly. Boasting about
these (for these are the first snares that he
lays against the young) He advanced against
the young man, disturbing him by night and
harassing him by day, so that even the
onlookers saw the struggle which was going
on between them.

The depiction of sexual desire as a weapon strapped to the belly is very striking. It highlights that sexuality is something that is quite literally 'built into the system' and impossible to completely remove. As such it can be weaponised against the monk at any time and the only defence the ascetic could muster is a preventative one by incapacitating the 'system' so as to thwart its native tendencies. Once the natural inclinations of the body have subsided the monk has also to deal with the world of the mind which the devil can attack with "foul thoughts" (5.4).

According to Brown, the "preoccupation with the monk's sexual thought-flow in ascetic circles" reflected this pervasive and resilient nature of sexual temptation. "They [sexual thoughts] served as barium-traces, by which the Desert Fathers mapped out the

deepest and most private recesses of the will.”¹¹⁵ We saw this focus on sexual in the Saying of Antony, from the Apophthegmata that we looked at above. Similar reflection is also discovered in Antony’s 6th letter:

In truth, my children, I tell you that every man who delights in his own desires, and who is subdued to his own thoughts and sticks to what is sown in his own heart and rejoices in it and thinks in his heart that it is some great chosen mystery and through it justifies himself in what he does, the soul of such a man is the breath of evil spirits and his counsel towards evil, and his body a store of evil mysteries which it hides in itself: and over such a one the demons have great power, because he has not dishonoured them before all men.¹¹⁶

Antony’s recurrent struggles and triumph over sexual temptation, in the Vita thus serve as the ultimate marker of total ascetic transformation and an existence approximating that of the resurrected and incorruptible body. This in turn aides Athanasius aim to craft a pattern for monastic self-discipline.

3.4.3.3. Detachment from Material Possession and Realignment of Social Relations

Ascetic thought and practice encompass not just the human body but also redefine social relations and structures. Here we will look at these aspects in relation to the call of Antony.

Arguably the most important scene of the entire narrative, this scene is framed by the juxtaposition of Matthew 19.21; Matthew 6.34 and Acts 4.34-35. Matthew 19.21: “Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” is of the most important biblical verses within

¹¹⁵ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 231.

¹¹⁶ Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, 219.

the context of the *Vita*. The quest for ‘perfection’ and the mandate of renunciation that is played out in the ascetic programme can arguably be understood as an interpretation of this verse in the life of the monk in as much as it serves to establish both a telos (moral perfection) and the means by which to achieve that end (renunciation).

The challenge posed by this instruction by Jesus is one which other early Christian writers have also grappled with. Clement of Alexandria for example attempts to soften its demands through a spiritualised meaning arguing that Jesus was not ordering him to relinquish all of his property but to banish the passions and anxieties that wealth excites. Clement argues that destitution is not in of itself something to be desired and is only meaningful in relation to the quest for salvation (*Quis Dives Salvetur*, 11).¹¹⁷ We noted a similarly ambivalent view of wealth in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, in the juxtaposition of avarice (Demas and Hermogenes), extravagance (Thamyris) on one hand and renunciation (Thecla, Paul), and generous patronage (Tryphaena) on the other.

Athanasius makes no such concessions, in the life of the monk exemplar. He goes on to further develop detachment from materiality in this context is Matthew 6.34: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” This verse essentially liberates the monk from social and family responsibility as well as the need to plan or save for the future. It also serves as a reminder of the ‘daily’ character of ascetic commitment which essentially demands withdrawal from all regular social life including social status, family responsibility, and concerns about future welfare.

Having promoted this radical rupture Athanasius then goes on to develop an alternative social model through the juxtaposition of two other NT verses. The first of these,

¹¹⁷ Clement is reflecting on the parallel text from Mark (10.17-22).

Lukan Acts 4. 34-35 serves to both promote and explicate the call for renunciation by recalling the apostolic community where renunciation of material possessions (lands and houses) by individuals who would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales as a gift to the apostolic church serves to highlight the communal as well as personal dimension of ascetic renunciation.

The communal responsibility of the ascetic that is suggested in this verse seems at first glance seem at odds with the ideal of solitude and separation from society that is depicted in the *Vita* as the core of ascetic formation: “Antony spent almost twenty years alone practicing his ascetic discipline in this way, neither going out, nor being often seen by anyone.”

It is in this regard that Athanasius most probably fine-tuned the eremitic ideology that governed the monk to fit with his own agenda of bringing asceticism/monasticism within the framework of the ecclesiastical structure. This likely reflects his wish to preclude the possibility of other teachers and teachings different from those ones he espoused from taking hold amongst monastics by bringing ascetics under a strict ecclesiastically approved programme. As such his, theology of asceticism sought to discourage permanent isolation although it acknowledges a place for it as part of the construction of the ascetic self. Thus, as laid out by Paul Van Geest the different stages of the ascetic progress (including the first call, stages of detachment and isolation culminating in the desert, and total separation from society) are only completed when the ascetic is able to transition into a teacher.¹¹⁸ This is a decidedly social view of the ascetic life that acknowledges ecclesiastical hierarchy, individual responsibility to the community of faith, and ideological purity.

¹¹⁸ van Geest, “... Seeing That for Monks the Life of Antony Is a Sufficient Pattern of Discipline.” 207-214.

3.4.3.4. Labour and Prayer

Early in his elaboration of the different elements of the ascetic programme Athanasius clearly establishes both physical and spiritual labour as necessary attendants of ascetic training [3.6];

Εἰργάζετο γοῦν ταῖς χερσίν, ἀκόσασ· «Καὶ τὸ μὲν εἰς τὸν ἄρτον, τὸ δὲ τοῖς δεομένοις ἀνήλισκεν. Προσηύχετο δὲ συνεχῶς, μαθὼν, ὅτι δεῖ κατ' ἰδίαν προσεύχεσθαι ἀδιαλείπτως.	So he worked with his hands, having heard 'Let the lazy person not eat.' He would spend part of what he earned on bread and part of it he would give to those who were begging. He prayed all the time, having learned that it is necessary to pray by oneself without ceasing.
---	---

The New Testament passages referenced here are 2 Thessalonians 3: 10 and Matthew 6.6; 1 Thessalonians 5.17. The quotation from 2 Thessalonians: “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat”, seems to function in much the same way it does in its original context, to dissuade laziness and prohibit the exploitation of the community by dependent ministers/holy men. Within the specific context of 4th century Egypt, this would also be an implicit condemnation of wandering charismatics and holy men who generally relied on the support of host communities. Antony throughout his life kept to a stern discipline of labour cultivating what he ate thus displaying maximal self-sufficiency (50.6).

In addition to physical labour which disciplined the body, Antony's ascetic program also involved 'prayerful vigil' (αγρυπνεῖν) which is developed through the use of the other New Testament texts cited in this verse; Matthew 6.6 (He prayed all the time, having learned that it is necessary to pray by oneself without ceasing) and 1 Thessalonians 5.17 (pray without ceasing). These verses serve to underscore the not unexpected significance of prayer

in the ascetic life. Elsewhere (51.1) Athanasius elaborates further on prayer as the primary vocation of the monk both in terms of it being his main weapon in the battle against the forces of evil (e.g., 5.3; 9.1; 23.1; 30.2) and the tool by which he acquires divine empowerment (48.1; 56.1; 57.1; 61.1; 63.1-3; 65.2).

In addition to being a component of prayer, vigil in of itself is an important discipline in early Christianity. In the New Testament we discover the command to watch and be vigilant with regard to the Parousia (*Matt* 24.42-44; *Matt* 25.13). In later Christian development continuous prayerful vigil and sleep deprivation become important features of monastic ascetic discipline. Antony, we are told, amazed those around him by continuing in prayer without sleep. We can find this performance in other monastic writings. Just to look at one example in this regard, the Bohairic Life of Pachomius late vigils are part of the monastic life and monks did manual work and wore hair garments to overcome the temptation to sleep.¹¹⁹ Pachomius himself, we are told, “asked the Lord to keep sleep away from him and that he sleep no more until he had put to rout those who were warring against him.”¹²⁰

This suggests that sleep, much like fasting, is a means by which to weaken the body so as to foil sexual temptation.

3.4.3.5. Reading and Memorisation

In addition to physical labour and prayer, reading and memorisation of scripture are also presented as central elements of the ascetic program as envisioned by Athanasius (3.7).

<p>Καὶ γὰρ προσεῖχεν οὕτω τῇ ἀναγνώσει, ὡς μηδὲν τῶν γεγραμμένων ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ πίπτειν χαμαί, πάντα δὲ κατέχειν καὶ</p>	<p>Indeed, he paid such close attention to the reading of Scripture that nothing in the Scriptures was wasted. He remembered</p>
---	--

¹¹⁹ Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia. Volume 1, The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples*, 31; 33; 41.

¹²⁰ Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, 45.

λοιπὸν αὐτῷ τὴν μνήμην ἀντὶ βιβλίων everything, with the result that for him
γίνεσθαι. memory took the place of books.

Reading and memorisation are identified here as crucial elements informing the change of behaviour and attitude that describes the ascetic order. The significance attributed to the act of reading serves to indicate both the central role of Scripture in informing the identity of the monk as well as revealing something about ideas about literacy in relation to the emergent monastic culture being depicted by Athanasius.¹²¹

Reading and memorisation, as ascetic disciplines, play an important part in the central conflict of the narrative; the spiritual and at times actual physical warfare launched against Antony by the primary protagonist the devil, and his demonic cohorts.¹²² As we have briefly seen above this battle is characterised by the use of Scripture by both Antony and his adversaries which seems to be an allusion to Jesus' testing in the wilderness found in Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4.1-3. The use of scripture by the devil and his cohorts here seems to highlight the significance of the reader in acquiring the proper interpretation and application of scripture. Consequently, although the devil truthfully, according to Athanasius, utilises Hosea 4.12 to describe himself as the 'spirit of prostitution' this is neither a laudable nor acceptable use of scripture. Rather, the citation of scripture by improper 'readers' such as the demons can only be understood as mindless repetition without any understanding of its sense: "singing psalms and babbling the word of Scripture" (39).

Antony, on the other hand, exemplifies the appropriate 'interpreter' of Scripture, using it as the 'armour of God' (Eph 6.11), although he is depicted as being uneducated and shunning formal education. This helps stress that Antony is a monk educated by the only

¹²¹ Rebecca Krawiec details the characteristics of emerging monastic literary culture in Late Antiquity. Rebecca Krawiec, 'Monastic Literacy in John Cassian: Toward a New Sublimity', *CH* 81, no. 4 (2012): 765–95.

¹²² Athanasius utilises the symbolic language of military engagement as well as the metaphor of athletic training to discovered in Ephesians 6 as a framework for understanding this contest, as we have looked at above.

reliable teacher, Christ, as evidenced by his calling through the word of Scripture, in the proper locus – in the church, and as one who immediately and with all humility and willingness to learn from others (*imitatio patrum*) all serve to assert his qualifications as a proper interpreter and ultimately teacher of scripture.

Athanasius anchors the ascetic programme he develops through the elements discussed above — fasting, sexual renunciation detachment from material possession, realignment of social relations, labour, prayer, vigil as well as reading and memorisation — by utilising ascetic exemplars, which we will look at next.

3.5. Ascetic Exemplars

As noted by Gohering the production of ascetic literature marks the beginning of the process of *imitatio patrum* —whereby the literary depiction of the ascetic exemplar and the process of the idealised journey from city to desert serves as a template to be followed by subsequent monastic. This tradition, especially as it is conveyed in the Life of Antony demonstrates the use of scripture as a source of characters that can serve as models of ascetic excellence. Such characters include the Hebrew prophets, the apostles, and Christ himself.¹²³ Athanasius references and re-figures these figures deploying the literary depiction of these characters like Paul and Elijah as well as various topoi from the narrative accounts they figure in the scriptures as a model for his characterization of Antony. Athanasius’ use of Paul as an ascetic exemplar in relation to various quotations from the Pauline writings. I will here very briefly look at his use of 1 Corinthians 15.31; 1 Corinthians 9.27 and Romans 8.

In 19.2 he quotes 1 Corinthians 15.31 (I die every day):

¹²³ Robert Brown particularly notes the significance of the figure of Christ as the exemplar par excellence upends any previous such constructs set by Greco-Roman Paideia and sets up a new paradigm. Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” 6.

Εἰς δὲ τὸ μὴ ὀλιγωρεῖν ἡμᾶς καλὸν τὸ
ἀποστόλου ῥητὸν μελετᾶν, τὸ «καθ’
ἡμέραν ἀποθνήσκω».

Now with regard to losing heart, it is good
for us to meditate on the Apostle’s
statement: “I die daily.”

In its original context καθ’ ἡμέραν ἀποθνήσκω (I die every day) references, the threat of physical death Paul faces in his ministry as an affirmation of his faith in the resurrection. Although it is possible that Antony is referencing this literal meaning, in his reference to this statement, as an encouragement against losing hope, the focus seems to be on taking this up as a call to ‘die daily’. This is seen more clearly in the next sentence: “If we too live our lives like this — as though we are going to die each day – we will not sin.” Clearly, Athanasius is using καθ’ ἡμέραν ἀποθνήσκω as a catchall possibly also alluding to Luke 9.23: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”. As such the statement serves as a scriptural mandate for the daily character of ascetic commitment. Athanasius returns to this theme in diverse ways including by developing it in relation to another exemplar, Elijah, as we will see below.

1 Corinthians 9.27: “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” is used to deploy the ascetic commitment of Paul himself as a hero bravely facing physical privation and spiritual warfare in the quest of ascetic transformation. This example is undoubtedly an encouraging one for the monk needing to be assured of the legitimacy of his quest and his ultimate victory. Athanasius develops this further by underpinning it further with other theologically significant texts, including Romans 8 as seen in the first reference from this chapter in the *vita* where it is used in conjunction with an allusion to the 1 Corinthians 9.27. The narrative context is Antony’s initial struggle with the devil seeking to lead him away from the discipline (ἄσκησις) (5-7). Anthony meets this attack with faith, prayers, and fasting. These disciplines reflect Anthony’s will to subjugate the body (1 Corinthians 9.27) because “in the

likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8.3). In this instance, we note the monastic ideal whereby the “monk’s life becomes the hermeneutical medium for understanding the text.”¹²⁴

Antony is deeply conscious of the need to retain discipline over the body and as noted above ties the success of his venture to be the weakness and distress of the body.¹²⁵ The strength that comes from this distress is demonstrated in another reference to the experience of the apostle. Antony was weakened by the attacks of the devil - and presumably by his own discipline – to the point that he is unable to even stand up, but he proclaims, “nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ” (Romans 8.35). In this context, the verses from Romans 8 describe the ascetic quest as: a) the willing abnegation of the world in recognition of the great gift of God in Christ which is both the cause and purpose of ascetic commitment, and b) a conscious effort to weaken the human body susceptible to the temptations of worldliness so as to attain and abide in the love of Christ (8.6-8).

The second part of 1 Corinthians 9.27 stresses the risk of being disqualified from the final prize. The full appropriation of the life inaugurated in the Christ event through ascetic subjugation is “doing something great, for the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward” [17.1]. The redemption from sin acquired through the Christ event precedes and is the foundation for the monk’s ability to commit to and persevere in the discipline. An imitative agenda is discovered, in this instance, in the parallel quests of the apostle and the monk to ‘not be disqualified’ from the ultimate prize. Antony, like the Apostle Paul who had adopted the metaphor of an athlete to

¹²⁴ Christopher J. Kelly, *Cassian’s Conferences: Scriptural Interpretation and the Monastic Ideal* (Abingdon, Ox: Routledge, 2016), 2.

¹²⁵ The converse relationship between the strength of the body and the strength of the spirit thus set up calls to mind 2 Cor 12.10: “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

describe his personal mandate for bringing his body under subjugation, sought to ensure that “he would not after defeating some sins, be dragged down by others” [7.4].

The use of Paul and the schema for the life in Christ discovered in his writings in the *Vita* demonstrates the use of scripture not only to justify renunciation but also to place the ascetic within an immanent framework of biblical characters and promises. As such the ascetic is both following in the footsteps of other more accomplished renunciants as well as more fully inhabiting the new creation inaugurated by the Christ event. Interpretation in this instance is therefore guided not by a desire to impose an ascetic narrative but a commitment to most fully inhabit the new creation inaugurated by the Christ event by the transformation of the monastic body.

Another biblical exemplar referenced in the Life of Antony is Elijah. We can for example note Antony’s commitment to learning from the life of the ‘great’ Elijah [7.13].

Ἔλεγε δὲ ἑαυτῷ· Δεῖ τὸν ἀσκητὴν ἐκ τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ μεγάλου Ἰλίου καταμανθάνειν, ὡς ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ βίον ἀεὶ	He used to say to himself: It is necessary for the ascetic to learn from the way of life of the great Elijah always to examine closely his own life, as in a mirror.
--	---

This is a very clear call for imitation which is mirrored in the call for a new generation of monastics to imitate Antony himself and the pattern for the ascetic life that he represented. Another reference to Elijah is discovered in a slightly different context.

Μνημονεύτε καὶ τῆς φωνῆς τοῦ προφήτου Ἰλίου λέγοντος· «Ζῆ Κύριος, ᾧ παρέστην ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ σήμερον». Παρατηρεῖτο γὰρ ὅτι, σήμερον λέγων, οὐκ ἐμέτρει τὸν	He would also recall the voice of the prophet Elijah who said, ‘The Lord lives, the One before whom I stand today’. He observed that in saying ‘today’ he was not counting time that had passed but was
---	---

παρελθόντα χρόνον ἀλλ' ὡς ἀει ἀρχὴν	always making a new beginning for himself,
καταβαλλόμενος, καθ' ἡμέραν	endeavouring each day to stand with God.
ἐσπούδαζεν ἑαυτὸν τῷ Θεῷ παριστάνειν	

The quotation attributed to Elijah used here seems to be a paraphrase of the Septuagint text of 3 Kings 18.15: ‘καὶ εἶπεν Ἡλίου Ζη κύριος τῶν δυνάμεων, ὃ παρέστην ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, ὅτι σήμερον ὀφθήσομαι αὐτῷ.¹²⁶ If, indeed this is the text being referred to as seems likely we can note that the emphasis which Athanasius seeks to make by calling to mind the Prophet to further strengthen his teaching about the daily nature of the relationship with God (standing before him today). This reading is, however, only possible by reading the verse partially and removing it from the original narrative context. Thus, instead of ‘σήμερον’ being a reference to Elijah’s meeting with Ahab it is exported to the preceding clause to suggest that Elijah stands before the Lord ‘today.’ Through this mechanism, Athanasius communicates both the scriptural basis of the monk’s commitment to the ascetic program, by calling to mind the ascetic *par excellence* of the Old Testament and through asserting his words in a manner which gives them the character of a percept to be followed. This percept is developed further in Antony’s own teaching to his followers [19.2 45.1; 55.7; 66.6].

In addition to this explicit reference, which clearly establishes the usefulness of the Old Testament prophet as a model to be emulated we can also detect an allusion to 2 Kings 2 (11-13 in particular) as Athanasius describes Antony’s final words and the disposition of his legacy. Particularly significant in this regard is the cloak which in the case of 2 King 2 denotes the transfer of authority from Elijah to Elisha: He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. “Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.” This

¹²⁶ [As] the Lord of Hosts before whom I stand lives, to-day I will appear before him.

transfer of authority is confirmed by the contingent of prophets with him who affirmed: “The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha.

A similar transfer of authority seems to be implied in Athanasius’ account of Antony’s bequest of his cloaks to Bishop Serapion and himself (91.8):

καὶ Ἀθανασίῳ μὲν τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ δότε τὴν	To Bishop Athanasius give the one sheepskin
μίαν μηλωτὴν καὶ ὃ ὑπεστρωννυόμεν	coat and the tunic I used for bedding.
μάτιον	To Bishop Serapion give the other sheepskin
Καὶ Σεραπίωνι δὲ τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ δότε τὴν	coat
ἑτέραν μηλωτὴν	

Such a bequest obviously supports Athanasius' ecclesiastical agenda which seeks to incorporate monks into the structure of the church.

3.6. Summary

In looking at the Life of Antony we began with the historical, textual, and literary characteristics of the Life of Antony before moving on to look at the modes of reception employed by Athanasius in his development of ascetic meaning. Unlike the other two texts that we have studied in this thesis the Life of Antony is notable for its use of direct textual references.

We noted his particular definition of canon and how he utilises the Christian textual space that he has identified to promote his theological agenda. The scriptures as defined by Athanasius are at the centre of the narrative, almost as much as Antony himself. He cites and alludes to scripture with little exegetical effort, primarily to support his ideology and enrich the narrative with familiar scenes and characters from the biblical narratives.

As we will see in greater detail in our next chapter the Life of Antony uses the lives and examples of biblical archetypes to reinforce its arguments in a distinctly different manner from the other two texts.

Utilising these means, Athanasius crafts an ascetic programme for the church. He articulates clear practices like fasting, sexual renunciation, renunciation of wealth, prayer, vigil, reading and memorisation and envisions a new social order whereby the ascetic replaces worldly connections and relationships with a new monastic community. The ascetic program, as discovered in the Life of Antony, is firmly ensconced within the church, which serves as both the locus of calling and the primary beneficiary. This is reflective both of the era in which it was written and the central aim of the writer.

4. Reception and the Creation of Ascetic Meaning (s)

My study thus far has particularly focused on looking at specific instances of the reception of early Christian writings by ascetic interpreters in different historical, social, and literary milieus. In doing so I have attempted to identify the ways in which the ascetic imagination has shaped and reshaped aspects of the received texts. I have particularly looked closely at the appropriation of central figures and teachings from the gospel traditions and writings associated with the apostle Paul in relation to the historical, literary, and ideological background that shaped their reception.

In this chapter, I aim to compare and contrast the modes of reception and the ascetic ideologies identified in our study of these specific instances of reception with a view to identifying commonalities and diversities in early Christian ascetic interpretation and creation of meaning. In doing so I hope to tentatively indicate the utility of engaging with a diverse set of writings - transcending the limitations of anachronistic categorisations - both to achieve the object of a reception historical analysis and to give proper credence to the richness and heterogeneity of Christian asceticism.

To this end, I will here begin by surveying the strategies utilised by the writers of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the Book of Thomas the Contender, and the Life of Antony to write, re-write, and re-interpret the key apostolic figures that feature in their writings, as an example of the reception of non-textual elements. Second, I will move on to look at the reception of one text (Matt 5: 3-10) in these writings alongside two Patristic examples so as to highlight the

heterogeneity that we are able to access by stepping outside of the corpus (canon) which has normally been the locus of studies in the ascetic reception of the bible.¹

Third, I will attempt to offer a comparative look at the ascetic meaning that is created in the texts that we have looked at by utilising the analytic categories for defining asceticism proffered by Valantasis.²

4.1. Apostolic Figures in Transition: “All Things to All People”³

My study in the last three chapters revealed the significance of received figures from Jewish and early Christian traditions as templates and the utility of imitation as a vehicle of lived interpretation. We can particularly note the utility of Apostolic figures – which have functioned in a wide range of ways in each context. I will here briefly compare and contrast the ways in which these figures are characterised and developed.

The portrayals of apostolic figures that we have been able to identify in these texts have included depictions that characterise the apostle as a Christ like figure, a witness, an ideal disciple, and an exemplar. Let us look at these portraits a bit more closely starting with the characterisation of the apostle as an *alter Christus*.⁴

We can note this at several important junctures in the Acts of Paul and Thecla. The first such depiction is discovered in relation to the physical description of Paul in APT 3.3. While a

¹ As I have attempted to show in the introduction academic studies have disproportionately focused on Patristic texts betraying methodological and ideological bias.

² The utility of this term is highlighted by Elizabeth A. Castelli who notes that ascetic discipline is essentially a performance over and against the norms and behaviours – i.e., renunciation is of needs played out – figuratively or literally – before and for the benefit of an audience (those inhabiting the system that is being renounced). Elizabeth Castelli, ‘Audience and Resistance’, in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 186.

³ Borrowed from the apostle Paul’s description of himself in 1 Corinthians 9.19-23.

⁴ I borrow this term from Candida Moss, who argues that the characterisation of early Christian saints reflected a presentation of martyrs as ‘Other Christs’ through mimesis. Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

lot of academic debate⁵ has focused on the possible literary conventions that have shaped this description, within the context of the APT what seems significant is the duality – what Pervo refers to as polymorphism⁶ – of Paul who is described as sometimes looking “like a mortal; at other times he had the glowing countenance of an angel” (APT 3.3). This duality reflects the disparity between Paul as physically observed – an unprepossessing man with no beauty, charisma, or wealth to immediately captivate the attention - and Paul as seen through spiritual eyes transfigured as the perfected human.

The identification between Christ and Paul is strengthened in 3.21 when Thecla sees the Lord “looking like Paul” and is encouraged as she faced death at the stake. This has been understood as Jesus taking on the form of Paul in a sort of reverse transfiguration.⁷ It seems that this Christophany serves not only to affirm Thecla’s status as a legitimate martyr (would be martyr)⁸ in that instance but also strengthens Paul’s function as a ‘stand-in’ mediating Christ in the APT.

⁵ The possible background of this description has inspired some academic debate. Scholars have suggested that this depiction is rooted in a convention of Greco-Roman literature and have looked to find parallels in manuals on physiognomy as well as the description of characters in ancient bios to understand the meaning of this depiction. Based on such a study A.J. Malherbe concludes that while this description may seem unflattering to modern readers it cohered with the depiction of heroes in Greek literature Malherbe, ‘A Physical Description of Paul’. Robert Grant argues that this may also reveal the influence of Greek poetry dedicated to military heroes and not necessarily the common physiognomic manuals Robert M. Grant, ‘The Description of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 1 (1982): 1–4. Also see: Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), 100–153. While these studies do reveal interesting parallels, it seems possible that the writer of APT is actually adopting more common assumptions (stereotypes) in physiognomics – the physical appearance of the person reveals his character and disposition – only to subvert these expectations much as he subverts stereotypes and expectations associated with gender in relation to Thecla and her “falling in love” with the message on first hearing and not at first sight with traditional hero of a Greek Romance. Paul is depicted as a new type of hero whose virtue is revealed through spiritual insight and not physical beauty.

⁶ Pervo, *The Acts of Paul*, 94.

⁷ In the Acts of Thomas 11, the Lord similarly appears in the form of one of his apostles; in this context Thomas (his twin) to counsel chastity to a newlywed couple. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, 51.

⁸ We see this as early as the first Christian martyr Stephen who at the time of his martyrdom sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Lk Acts 7.34-60). Candida Moss notes that significance of “narrative mirroring to portray a martyr as particularly Christlike” tracing back to the account of the first Christian martyr Stephen in the Lukan Acts.

As we have noted in chapter one, this characterisation of Paul as a “Christ figure” is also developed in other ways. Particularly of note in this regard are references to him as a shepherd (APT 3.21) and the “servant of the blessed God” (APT 3.4) as well as a preacher and itinerant minister, which are all characterisations of Jesus in the Gospel tradition.

As rightly noted by Pervo:

These images speak for themselves. Paul is a celestial shepherd who comes to succour his sheep. He also finds means for meeting their bodily needs: In the Acts of Paul 3.23-25 the apostle has his cloak sold to buy bread for his starving followers. The yield was five loaves. One doubts that the number was pulled out of a hat.⁹

This identification with Christ does not, however, seem to imply a substitution of Christ. Rather it seems to reflect the ultimate goal of human perfection which is embodying Christlikeness so perfectly as to manifest it in this world. Paul is thus able to mediate Christ to the uninitiated like Thecla and those not as far along on the ascetic continuum like Onesiphorus. The ascetic must, therefore, follow Paul – as Thecla does literally and figuratively, to access Christ through his example.

Aspects of the characterisation of Jesus in the Gospel tradition are also taken up in the Life of Antony, but in this new context they function in relation to Athanasius’ development of Antony. We see this for example, in relation to the temptation scene which mirror the temptation

We note similar mirroring in this context, for example in Thecla’s silence before her accusers. An interesting note in this regard is that Moss argues that Stephen’s speech asking for the forgiveness of his enemies may have influenced the interpolation of Luke 23:34 where Jesus asks for the forgiveness of his enemies (which is absent from some important manuscript witnesses). If as she argues that this prayer was retrojected into the life of Jesus, then it is possible to suggest that Thecla’s silence here is a reception (imitation) of the passion scene as originally transmitted. Moss, *The Other Christs*, 54–56.

⁹ Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 161.

of Christ (Matt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13).¹⁰ The apostle, along with Jesus and a wide range of other characters from within the limits of the canonical universe as envisioned by Athanasius, is another figure that he takes up to develop the figure of the monk. As a result, the figure of the apostle is simultaneously subsumed and developed in relation to a plethora of exemplars, including from the Old Testament, which make-up the full curriculum for the ascetic as devised by Athanasius. Let us briefly look at how the figure of the apostle functions in this context.

Athanasius first refers to the apostles, as a collective example – “on his [Antony’s] way to church, he was thinking to himself and reflecting on all these things: how the apostles gave up everything and followed the Saviour” (2.16). Strikingly, with the exception of this reference, and one mention of Peter (60)¹¹, “the Apostle” in the Life of Antony is Paul (7, 19, 21, 22, 40, 55, 65). In all of these contexts, the example of Paul is mediated exclusively through his writings.¹²

Athanasius uses these texts to justify the ascetic life while at the same time using the Vita as a narrative interpretation of the apostle’s teachings, demonstrating the mutual interplay between textual reception and interpretation in the life of the ascetic. As we have seen in chapter 2 the development of 1 Corinthians 15.31,¹³ for example, serves as a daily affirmation for the ascetic acts as a literary bridge between the sufferings of the apostle and those of the monk. This in turn serves to affirm the promise that by following the apostle’s example the monk too will be

¹⁰ We particularly noted close similarity in the way that scripture is utilised defensively and offensively.

¹¹ The reference to Peter is a fleeting one found within the context of describing the ascetic empowerment of another anchorite monastic (Amount of Nitria) who was reported to have been divinely carried across a river. Athanasius asserts that he was carried because human beings cannot walk on water except for those who are granted permission by the Lord, like Peter.

¹² The Pauline and Pseudo-Pauline texts that Athanasius refers to in this context make an interesting catena of proto-ascetic texts that is deserving of closer study.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15.31: *καθ’ ἡμέραν ἀποθνῄσκω* (I die daily) reflects aspects of the biography of Paul as told in his own words which sets up a template that can be mirrored in the life of the ascetic.

able to attain the spiritual status of the apostle. This sets up a mimetic continuum, whereby Antony's imitation of the apostle (and other exemplars) in turn establishes a template for others to follow. This coheres with the explicitly articulated intention of the Vita to write a new type of exemplar for monastics.¹⁴

Unlike this example in the Life of Antony, where the apostle is one among a range of exempla from scripture, the conceptualisation of the apostle in the Book of Thomas is very much as a solitary and singular figure selected for secret revelation. Let us briefly look at this now. As we have seen in detail in our discussion in chapter 2 the characterisation of Thomas in the BookThom not only as an apostle but as the 'twin'¹⁵ of the saviour, in earlier traditions¹⁶ serves to establish him as someone with special closeness to the saviour and thus an authoritative recipient and channel of new revelation.¹⁷ Despite thus mirroring other traditions in its depiction of the apostle, the Book of Thomas does not sustain important aspects of the characterisation of the apostle. We can for example see this in relation to the apostle's function in relation to the broader society as well as in its depiction of the apostle as an embodied person. Let us look at these two elements a bit closely.

The Acts of Paul and in the Life of Antony are sensitive to the uneasy tension between the apostle (and through his example the ascetic) being separate from the world (the dominant social order that is understood to be opposed to new Christian subjectivity) and the apostle as a

¹⁴ As we have noted Athanasius also introduces another exemplar in line with his ecclesiastical vision. By depicting himself as an heir of the monk par excellence, in the mould of the Old Testament prophets, Athanasius institutes another archetype – the ascetic bishop.

¹⁵ Kimberley Fowler, 'From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender: Nag Hammadi Codex II in Its Fourth-Century Context' (Manchester, The University of Manchester, 2013), 207.

¹⁶ As we have seen these traditions have been preserved in the canonical Gospel of John (John 11.16; 20. 24; 21.2) as well as other texts in the Thomasine tradition.

¹⁷ Fowler, 'From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender', 207.

witness to the gospel in society. In the Acts of Paul this is seen through the relationship between Paul and Thecla which is the single most significant driving force of the narrative.¹⁸ In the Vita this example is delivered through Paul's words conveyed through citations and allusions to his example. This example is subsequently realised in the life of the monk who breaks his isolation to not only teach his disciples but to object to the persecution of Christians by an Arian supporting commander called Balacius (86):¹⁹

Because he [Balacius] was so cruel, he even beat virgins and stripped monks naked, and whipped them. Antony wrote a letter and sent it to him ... But Balacius laughed and threw the letter on the ground and spit on it. Those who had brought it he insulted, and he ordered them to tell Antony the following: "since you are so concerned about the monks, I am now going to come for you too."

Within days of this Balacius is dead. We see here Athanasius deploying the charismatic authority of the monk derived from his separation from the world against the theological and political structures that very much in the world.

¹⁸At the outset of the narrative Thecla is very much a representative of the social order – she is the extreme other to Paul, who represents perfected humanity. His preaching, however, bridges this chasm and through her ascetic journey she is gradually transformed into his likeness by following his path of renunciation. Through the course of her journey Paul is both immanent and distant, his absence and presence paralleling the uneasy tension of the relationship that the ascetic apostle has with the world.

¹⁹ Antony also travels to the city to bear witness (46) with the martyrs under the persecution during the reign of Maximin. In doing so, he not only demonstrates his longing to become a martyr but as a living witness of the gospel. "He thoroughly washed his clothes and the next day stood in front of everyone in a prominent place and showed himself openly to the magistrate. Everyone was amazed at what he was doing. When the magistrate saw him and made a point of walking by him after the proceedings, Antony stood there calmly, demonstrating the resolve of the Christians" (46.4-5).

The Book of Thomas, however, does not reflect this social role. This seems to be a conscious reversal by the writer, in as much as the question of mission is explicitly raised at least twice (138.26; 142.20) but the saviour fails to answer it suggesting this is not particularly significant (or at the very least is not central) for the in-group. The central mission of the apostle in the Book of Thomas is very much inward, to attain self-knowledge and attain radical autonomy from the visible world.²⁰ This is in contrast to the traditions about Thomas, the twin, as we discover them in the canonical literature as well as the other Thomasine texts, the Gospel of Thomas (e.g., Logion 73)²¹ and the Acts of Thomas where the apostle is very much functioning in the role of a missionary – albeit of a very ascetic gospel.

The second example that helps us demonstrate the ways in which the Book of Thomas reconceptualises the characterisation of the apostle in a different way is in its depiction of the ‘apostolic body’ and, through it, human embodiment. As we have noted above in the APT Paul represents perfected humanity to the extent that Jesus appears in his form. Similarly, in the Life of Antony we noted the utility of Pauline texts that detail the quest to perfect the body through continuous ascetic discipline and progression. In the Book of Thomas, on the other hand, the apostolic body corresponds to the visible world which is a sphere that is in direct conflict with the invisible world of the divine. As such it is not only actively opposed to the full development

²⁰ The book of Thomas develops radical and unwavering separation from the visible world anticipating existence in the invisible realm. The enlightened ascetic will only depend on the truth, which will nourish him” like a tree growing by the meandering stream” (140.16).

²¹ Logion 73 reads: “Jesus said, ‘the harvest is great, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord to send out workers to that harvest.’” This saying read separately and alongside others which contain instructions for the apostles in their role as missionaries (e.g., “when you go into any region, and you travel” Logion 14.4) acknowledges the social function of the apostle.

of the essence of the person – the soul – but entombs it. The quest of the apostle is to escape this confinement through self-knowledge.²²

This brief look at the reception of the figure of the apostle in our texts reveals the multivalence of this figure when read in different contexts. Each instance of reception takes up the figure of the apostle and positions him within a new system of references (the historical, literary, and ideological system that frames the narrative world). In this new locus the apostle functions in ways that serve to reinforce and legitimise the text. This dependence on the authority of the apostle to bolster the new writing is a crucial element that ties of all these receptions together, in a non-linear or genealogical chain in as much as they are all presenting themselves to be in continuity with the original Christian traditions.

4.2. Discourse in Transition: The Reception of the Matthean Beatitudes

Our study thus far has revealed the diverse ways in which the writers of the Acts of Paul the Book of Thomas, and the Life of Antony have employed previous Christian texts and traditions in developing their writings. I have particularly highlighted the reception of the canonical gospels and the Pauline (and pseudo-Pauline) writings as an indicator of the mastery of these writers in their source texts as well as to reveal the ways in which similar elements have been re-figured and read together in diverse ways.

Here I want to look at these receptions alongside other early Christian interpretations to better understand the commonalities arising from the ascetic imagination of the writers to

²² As we have noted in chapter 2, the body is the locus of captivity and the instrument of bondage (140.31-37). The body is categorically a negative entity in the Book of Thomas. It is compared to a cavern, a tomb, a beast ready to consume the human soul, a fire – prefiguring the everlasting fire of punishment.

tentatively suggest the use of interpretive orientation as one productive alternative way of mapping Christian writings as opposed to anachronistic canonical or theological taxonomies.

To this end, I will here look at the reception of the Matthean Beatitudes which have been received both in form and content in at least two of our texts, and which have influenced the unfolding of the narrative of the third as I will argue.

Matthew 5.3-11

Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι· ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

Μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες· ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

Μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσι τὴν γῆν.

Μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην· ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται.

Μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες· ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται.

Μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ· ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν Θεὸν ὄψονται.

Μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί· ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ Θεοῦ κληθήσονται.

Μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης· ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

Μακάριοί ἐστε, ὅταν ὀνειδίσωσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ διώξωσι, καὶ εἴπωσι πᾶν πονηρὸν ῥῆμα καθ' ὑμῶν ψευδόμενοι, ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ· χαίrete καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε, ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς· οὕτω γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφήτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Matthean macarisms (along with their Lukan parallel) have invited extensive interpretation across the ages including significant academic discussions in modern times. Hans

Dieter Betz notes that a complete catalogue of the reception history of this text is impossible in as much as its history of interpretation would overlap with the “entire history of biblical interpretation, Christian theology, and even secular philosophy since almost every author during this history had one thing or another to say on the subject.”²³

One of the earliest surviving examples of an exegesis of the Matthean Beatitudes is Clement of Alexandria’s interpretation in *Clem. Strom.* 4.6, 25.- 41.²⁴ Here he offers an analysis of the Beatitudes in relation to his reflection on martyrdom.²⁵ In this context, he utilises the tenth beatitude referencing those “who are persecuted” as an interpretive framework to apply the rest of the discourse to what he considers to be authentic martyrdom by deploying “for righteousness” that is discovered only in the fourth beatitude as an interpretive key (25.1-2; 41.1-4).²⁶ In doing so he moves the focus from the physical states of being hungry, poor, etc. - and hence the renunciation of food or wealth - to the intention that is motivating such deprivation. In his exegesis of Matthew 5.3 where he seeks to qualify what is and is not true poverty, Clement references several other gospel texts including Jesus’ injunction in Matthew 19.21: “if you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor”.

²³ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MIN: Fortress Press 1995), 3. In modern interpretation alone the Matthean Beatitudes have been interpreted in a wide range of ways including as encapsulating an impossible ideal, an ethic of intention a doctrine for spiritual order (as opposed to the civil order), and a revelation of Jesus’ status as law giver and revealer. Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Independent Publishers Group, 1999), 1–26.

²⁴ Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus: Stromata, Buch I-VI* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1939) 260-267.

²⁵ I will not aim to offer a detailed analysis of the interpretation of Clement and Gregory but will limit myself to a brief summary of the main themes and motifs from their discussions that are directly related to our focus here.

²⁶ Judith L. Kovacs, ‘Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa on the Beatitudes’, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, vol. 52, VC, Supplements (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 313.

Clement understands this not as a literal instruction but a condemnation of the hidden lack of generosity of the young leader who had boasted of keeping the letter of the law.²⁷ He argues that in both instances the focus is not material possessions but human disposition toward wealth – “It is not the poor simply, but those that have wished to become poor for righteousness’ sake, that He pronounces blessed”. Clement, similarly, interprets the other beatitudes as principles for guiding the inner world of the believer and not instructions or commandments on material issues of hunger, poverty, and persecution. In this line he argues that the meek (5.5) and the peacemakers (5.9) are not references to social or interpersonal roles but define an inner disposition (ἀπάθεια). Thus, the meek are “those who have quelled the battle of unbelief in the soul, the battle of wrath, and lust” and the peacemakers refers to those who have subdued the passions which seek to control the person and achieved inner equanimity. Clement also carefully defines what constitutes mourning (5.4) arguing that this is a reference to true repentance that is not motivated by fear.

In his exegesis of the Beatitudes, Clement discovers two complementary but different ways to attain the “perfection of salvation” which are mercy (5.7) and purity of heart (5.8) respectively identified with works and knowledge. Knowledge²⁸ in this context is specifically knowledge that leads the soul in a gradual ascent which has as its ultimate end “the pure vision of God.”²⁹

²⁷ This coheres with Clement’s treatment of this parable in *Quis Dives Salvetur* 4.1-2 where he argues that it is not material goods that are in of themselves evil but the passions they excite in humans.

²⁸ Clement of Alexandria’s use of scripture has inspired detailed investigation that we are not able to get into here. Veronika Čermušková et al., eds., *Clement’s Biblical Exegesis: Proceedings of the Second Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria (Olomouc, May 29–31, 2014)* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). What is significant for our purposes is that he envisions two layers of teachings for two different stages of Christian life. The first stage is that of literal teachings that are teachings of faith while the second to do with knowledge refers to a “systematic and speculative theology, based on study of the symbolic meaning Scripture”. Judith L. Kovacs, ‘Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher According to Clement of Alexandria’, *J ECS* 9, no. 1 (3-25): 8.

²⁹ Kovacs, ‘Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa on the Beatitudes’, 320.

In his eight Homilies on the Beatitudes³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa offers a detailed exegesis of the beatitudes in eight homilies.³¹ The key framework that guides his interpretation is his understanding of the Beatitudes as an ascending ladder with each one representing a rung higher than the one before it:

I think the arrangement of the Beatitudes is like a series of rungs, and it makes it possible for the mind to ascend by climbing from one to another. If someone has in his mind climbed to the first Beatitude, by a sort of necessity of the logical sequence the next one awaits him, even if the saying at first seems rather odd (Homily 2).³²

According to this schema, Gregory – like Clement - interprets the instructions in the Beatitudes, not as literal guides for life but as a journey of discipline for the soul. Also, like Clement, Gregory sees the ultimate end of this progression as purity of heart and seeing God, as promised in the Beatitudes (Matt 5.8). Gregory tries to explain what it means to see God – “whom no one has ever seen” (Jn 1.18) and can see (Ex 33.20) – arguing that God is seen through his operations and more particularly reflected in the purity of the soul: “God is blessed, but to possess God in oneself” (Homily 6). This is different from Clement who understands seeing God literally and holds it as the end goal of the progression of moral purification.

³⁰ Stuart George Hall, ‘Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes’, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14-18 September 1998)*, ed. Hubertus Drobner and Albert Viciano (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 21-90.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa followed the Logos centred approach to the interpretation of Scriptures developed by Origen. His approach “valued the literal meaning, as clarified by a fit and proper grammatical investigation and exposition, but one that essentially understood the sacred writings as being full of hidden mysteries that were meant to be seen in their full implication only by those who were spiritually gifted and illumined. The text was charged with meanings on multiple levels.” John Antony McGuckin, ‘St Gregory of Nyssa: Bishop, Philosopher, Exegete, Theologian’, in *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Neil B. McLynn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24.

³² Hall, ‘Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes’, 32.

As noted by Stuart G. Hall, Gregory makes little to no attempt to relate the principles in the Beatitudes with the life of Jesus – “Gregory in fact begins and ends with spiritual morality: the ascent of the soul to God, the upward calling to aspire after the Transcendent.”³³ This reflects his focus on the spiritual meaning and not the contextual meaning of the teachings, both to the original audience and his own readers. Despite this singular focus on spiritual transformation, however, Gregory is neither silent nor negative about the body. Gregory does not envision any strict duality between body and soul – i.e., he did not perceive the body as inherently evil and the soul as innately good.³⁴ In the homilies, we note that the body and the soul together make up the human person who was created in the image of God, as a unified being. However, as a result of human sin “the image of the heavenly is turned to earth, that ranked as royal is enslaved, what was created for immortality is destroyed by death” (Homily 3, 105).³⁵ Hence the path laid out by the Beatitudes allows humanity to once again exist in the ‘real blessedness’ (Homily 1, 80).³⁶ Each stage of this journey requires choice between chastity and immorality because “there is certainly a division in the human character between conflicting impulses.” The materiality of human life makes it impossible to fully eradicate these passions (Homily 2).³⁷

Having very briefly looked at the reception of the Matthean beatitudes in Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, let us now turn to look at these interpretations along with the reception of this episode in the three texts that we have looked at here.

³³ Stuart George Hall, ‘Gregory of Nyssa, on The Beatitudes 18.

³⁴ Peter C. Bouteneff, ‘Essential or Existential: The Problem of the Body in the Anthropology of St Gregory Of Nyssa’, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14-18 September 1998)*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, vol. 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 418.

³⁵ Hall, ‘Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes’, 44.

³⁶ Hall, ‘Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes’, 25.

³⁷ Hall, ‘Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes’, 80; 36.

As we have argued in chapter one, the hermeneutical, ethical, and theological framework of the Acts of Paul and Thecla can be discovered in the series of beatitudes that Paul delivers in his sermon in Iconium at the very start of the Thecla episode. This sermon does not only adopt the form of the Beatitudes but starts with a direct quotation of Matthew 5.7 – “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God”. This verse, as we have seen above, is also very significant in the interpretation of the Beatitudes by Clement and Gregory, serving to articulate the end goal of the soul’s journey of discipline. But where these two writers focus on the promise of “seeing God” as the telos of the soul’s journey, in the Acts of Paul the focus is on the condition that enables the believer to attain this end, which is the purity of the heart.

Moreover, for the ascetic initiate envisioned in the APT, this purity is not an inclination or a disposition of the human soul (as argued by Clement) or a description of the perfection that soul can attain through ascent (Gregory) but a practical demand for chastity, self-control, and renunciation of the world. This is clearly established in the subsequent verses of the Pauline Beatitudes and through the narrative description of the ascetic journey of the idealised virgin, Thecla, who is only able to attain ‘Blessedness’ through the literal and radical performance of renunciation.

The Book of Thomas the Contender, like the Acts of Paul and Thecla, also adopts the literary form of the Beatitudes, in the final monologue by the saviour (142.2). As we have noted in our discussion, this monologue raises key motifs that are central to the preceding dialogue. In addition to taking up the form, the writer of BookThom also cites two of the Matthean Beatitudes. The first example of this is his use of Matthew 5.10: “Blessed are you who are reviled and not esteemed on account of the love their lord has for them”. We see here that the writer has rewritten this verse to exchange the source of persecution from the quest for

righteousness to the love of the lord for his disciples. Nonetheless, the persecution is a marker of divine favour in this context, as it is for the other interpreters, we have looked at above.

The Book of Thomas also quotes Matthew 5.4 with only a slight expansion in the form: “Blessed are you who weep and are oppressed by those without hope, for you will be released from every bondage”. In this reception, however, mourning or weeping does not seem to be used to signify spiritual repentance as we have seen in Clement and Gregory but signifies actual pain and suffering due to physical persecutions and trials at the hands of human others that are opposed to the newly acquired religious commitment. These persecutors are identified as those “without hope” indicating unbelievers or those who have rejected the particular revelation of the Book of Thomas and are thus unable to receive the eschatological reward.

Having thus looked at the reception of the Matthean Beatitudes in the Acts of Paul and the Book of Thomas in relation to the interpretation of these verses by Clement and Gregory, let us now look at how it functions in the Life of Antony.

Athanasius does not directly cite the Beatitudes in his development of an ascetic template in the life of Antony.³⁸ We can, however, surmise how he interprets the Beatitudes by looking a bit more closely at the one clear allusion to the Beatitudes, that we can discover.

17.7

τί οὐ μᾶλλον ἐκεῖνα κτώμεθα, ἃ καὶ μεθ'	Why do we not acquire instead those things
ἑαυτῶν ἄραι δυνάμεθα, ἅτινά ἐστι	that we can take with us; namely, clear
φρόνησις, δικαιοσύνη, σωφροσύνη,	thinking, prudence, righteousness, courage,

³⁸ This is striking when we take into account his extensive use of scripture and serves to indicate the richness of the material that is available to the ascetic imagination which means that even an interpreter as prolific as Athanasius could not mine it exhaustively.

ἀνδρεία, σύνεσις, ἀγάπη, φιλο πτωχία,	understanding, godly love, love for the poor,
πίστις ἢ εἰς Χριστόν, ἀοργησία, φιλοξενία;	faith in Christ, freedom from anger,
Ταῦτα κτώμενοι, εὐρήσομεν αὐτὰ πρὸ	hospitality? If we possess these things, we
ἑαυτῶν ἐκεῖ ποιοῦντα ἡμῖν ξενίαν ἐν τῇ γῆ	will find them going before us, preparing
τῶν προάεων.	lodging for us there in the land of the meek.

This allusion is discovered within the context of an address by Antony to his disciples – monastic initiates that had sought him out to learn from him. He reminds them that their contestations in this world will only be rewarded in heaven for “when we lay aside this perishable body, we receive it back imperishable” (16.8). He argues that those who give up wealth, be it great or small, have no reason to feel pride in their sacrifice or mourn material loss because these are all perishable. Instead, he counsels them to give up these things for the sake of virtue and instead acquire those things that will be of value in the land of the meek.

Even without the reference at the end of this section to the meek and the land that they will inherit (Matt 5.5) we can argue for the influence of the Beatitudes here in relation to Antony’s encouragement in the face of persecution (5.9) and his exhortation to poverty (5.3). His assertion is that the ultimate reward of the faithful is in heaven (5.11).

Another potential echo of the Beatitudes in the Life of Antony is a reference to purity of heart as a condition for appearing before God:

7.12

Παρατηροῦτο γὰρ, ὅτι, σήμερον λέγων, οὐκ	He observed that in saying ‘today’ he was not
ἐμέτρει τὸν παρελθόντα χρόνον· ἀλλ’ ὡς	counting time that had passed but was always
ἀρχὴν αἰεὶ καταβαλλόμενος, καθ’ ἡμέραν	making a new beginning for himself,

<p>ἐσπούδαζεν ἑαυτὸν παριστάνειν τοιοῦτον, οἷον χρῆ φαίνεσθαι τῷ Θεῷ, καθαρὸν τῆ καρδίᾳ, καὶ ἔτοιμον ὑπακούειν τῷ βουλήματι αὐτοῦ, καὶ μηδενὶ ἄλλῳ.</p>	<p>endeavouring each day to stand with God as though he were about to appear before God, pure in heart and prepared to obey only the will of God and the will of no other.</p>
---	---

In this context the monk is reflecting on the example of the prophet Elijah and what it means to stand before the lord today (1 Kgs 18.15). By bringing Matthew 5.8 alongside this text Athanasius is able to draw a cyclic process whereby the monk endeavours each day to appear before God having fulfilled the condition of being pure in heart. According to this interpretation “seeing God” is a state of readiness to live according to the will of God that is attained and maintained through purity of heart. These echoes of the Beatitudes demonstrate the practical interpretation of the beatitudes to guide the mental and physical formation of the monk. This is a very different from the spiritualised interpretation adopted by Clement and Gregory which understood the beatitudes as a charter for the inner transformation of the soul.

This cursory look at the reception of the Matthean Beatitudes in our three texts alongside two patristic interpreters serves to suggest a couple of tentative conclusions that can serve to highlight the utility of our approach here.

In the first instance, by looking at our selected texts alongside other examples from diverse historical and interpretive contexts we are able to note the rich heterogeneity of Christian receptions. We were particularly able to note this in relation to the receptions of Matthew 5.8 which we discovered to be a programmatic text in all the receptions that we looked at (except the Book of Thomas) but one which is interpreted differently and to different ends in every context. Secondly, we can note the peculiar ways in which the ascetic imagination shapes the interpretation of scripture through the commonalities evidenced in the reception of the beatitudes

in our three texts which take up the beatitudes as practical guidelines to be lived out in the life of the ascetic, as opposed to the spiritualised interpretation in the other two examples we have looked at here. Despite this commonality, in interpretive strategy, the practical interpretation of the beatitudes in the life of the ascetic takes different shape in line with the variegated ascetic programme of each text, which we will look at below.

4.3. Ascetic Practice in Transition

In this section I will offer a comparative survey of the main themes of the ascetic discourse of our three texts to see the diversity of ascetic meanings created by our writers, in spite of the common sources and similar interpretive strategies that we have identified thus far.

As defined in the introduction our study of ascetic discourse (s) here focuses on understanding the performances, culture, social relationships, and subjectivity that are deliberately designed and deployed to inaugurate a new identity and culture.³⁹ With this in mind I will now explore the different ways each are developed in our primary texts to identify commonalities and diversities in the ascetic meaning constructed through the strategies we have discussed above.

4.3.1. Performances

In the previous chapters we have identified several acts that defined and circumscribed ascetic existence in the Acts of Paul, the Book of Thomas the Contender, and the Life of Antony. Not unexpectedly, we particularly noted the significance of sexual renunciation, fasting,

³⁹ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 8.

renunciation of wealth and detachment from society⁴⁰ as central elements of the initial journey of deconstructing the old subjectivity and training the ascetic into the new way of being.⁴¹ These performances serve as a useful mechanism of comparison. I will begin by looking at sexual renunciation which features as the primary locus of ascetic performance in all of our primary texts. I will look at this performance in relation to the pivotal text shaping discourse on Christian sexuality - 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 - and its reception in other Christian interpreters to tentatively map the interpretations we discover in our texts on the spectrum of Christian views on sexuality.⁴²

As we have briefly mentioned in our discussion, the ambivalence of Paul's views on sexuality and marriage, has served as productive ground for subsequent Christian reflection. Generally accepted as Paul's response to an ascetic group within Corinth⁴³ 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 has particularly played a significant role in this regard:

Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε, καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ
 γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεσθαι·
 διὰ δὲ τὰς πορνείας ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ
 γυναῖκα ἔχέτω, καὶ ἕκαστη τὸν ἴδιον ἄνδρα
 ἔχέτω.
 τῇ γυναικὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἀποδίδότω,
 ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ γυνὴ τῷ ἀνδρί.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.

⁴⁰ We will look at detachment from society as a feature of ascetic discipline in relation to the deconstruction and reconstruction of social relations.

⁴¹ While we note positive ascetic performances, like labour, reading, and memorisation ascetic experience in our primary texts is defined by rejections of governing social expectations as revealed through the renunciation of sexuality, eating practices, social relations, etc.

⁴² Hunter, 'Reception and Interpretation of Paul', 165–69.

⁴³ Antony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Testament*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2000), 498.

ἡ γυνὴ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει
ἀλλὰ ὁ ἀνὴρ· ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ ἀνὴρ τοῦ
ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει ἀλλὰ ἡ γυνή.
μὴ ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους, εἰ μήτι ἂν ἐκ
συμφώνου πρὸς καιρὸν ἵνα σχολάσητε τῇ
προσευχῇ καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ ἦτε, ἵνα μὴ
πειράζη ὑμᾶς ὁ Σατανᾶς διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν
ὑμῶν.

τοῦτο δὲ λέγω κατὰ συγγνώμην, οὐ κατ'
ἐπιταγήν.

θέλω δὲ πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἶναι ὡς καὶ
ἐμαυτόν· ἀλλὰ ἕκαστος ἴδιον ἔχει χάρισμα
ἐκ θεοῦ, ὁ μὲν οὕτως, ὁ δὲ οὕτως.

Λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις,
καλὸν αὐτοῖς εἶναι μείνωσιν ὡς καὶ ἐγώ·
εἰ δὲ οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται, γαμησάτωσαν,
κρεῖττον γάρ ἐστιν γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι.

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.

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each
has his own gift from God, one of one kind
and one of another.

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it
is good for them to remain single, as I am.

But if they cannot exercise self-control, they
should marry. For it is better to marry than to
burn with passion.

This text neither affirms the socially approved prescription of marriage nor does it promote celibacy for all as a proper renunciation of the world. Instead, it sets up the example of the apostle as the higher ideal of abstinence that is a gift from God, while conceding that marriage and sexual relations within marriage as legitimate alternatives.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Paul's teachings about marriage here are framed within the context of a letter that is concerned with multiple issues surrounding the social ethos the Corinthian congregation arising from the central tension of the missional orientation of the church which sought to incorporate diverse people and the need to maintain the distinct counter-cultural identity of the community. Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1995), 29.

It can be argued that the APT recognises and addresses this ambivalence by setting up a spectrum of sexuality whereby Thecla, the idealised virgin exemplar, lies on one end of a spectrum of sexual behaviour which includes sanctioned sexual union like the married house holder Onesiphorus (3.5; 3.23) and promiscuous sexual practices as demanded by Alexander (4.1).⁴⁵

This spectrum is however not reflected in Paul's sermon, which – as I have attempted to show - is the central interpretive framework of the narrative. Here Paul alludes to 1 Corinthians 7.5:

μακάριοι οἱ ἔχοντες γυναῖκας ὡς μὴ	Blessed are those who having a wife
ἔχοντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὸν	are as those not having a wife, for they
θεὸν.	will inherit God.

This counsel to continence within marriage is extracted from the original debate and placed within a framework of a series of beatitudes which promote chastity, self-control, and renunciation of the world losing the ambivalence that it may have had within the original context. Particularly significant in this regard is the depiction of chastity in cultic terms.

μακάριοι οἱ ἀγνήν τὴν σάρκα	Blessed are those who have kept the flesh
τηρήσαντες, τι αὐτοὶ ναὸς θεοῦ	chaste/pure, for they will be a temple of
γενήσονται.	God.

⁴⁵It is important to note that in citing a list of New Testament citations in the Acts of Paul, Julian Hills does not include 1 Corinthians at all. Julian V. Hills, 'The Acts of the Apostles in the Acts of Paul', in *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers*, ed. E.H. Lovering (Atlanta: SBL, 1994), 24–54. It is, however, important to note that his criterion of was limited to direct citations and allusions based primarily on word links and fails to take into account echoes such as the use of 1 Corinthians 7.5 in Paul's ascetic discourse.

As we noted in our discussion in chapter 1 this picks up the language of cultic purity from the Old Testament to establish the human body as a sacred space reflecting the use of this theme in earlier Christian literature.⁴⁶ In this context, chastity – particularly virginity – serves as a boundary protecting the sanctity of the “temple of God.” Origen similarly interprets 1 Corinthians 7:5 by picking up the theme of purity in two Old Testament texts. He first uses Moses’ prohibition ‘do not go near a woman for three days’ as part of the process of consecration to hear God at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:5) as an analogy for similar consecration in prayer. He then refers to 1 Samuel 21:4-6 where the Priest asks David if his men had kept away from women before giving him the holy bread. Origen understands the holy bread to be an analogy of the bread of the Eucharist and counsels that similar if not a greater degree of abstinence is required of Christians before they can partake.⁴⁷

In choosing to remain chaste, therefore, Thecla did not only become an inviolate exemplar but a chaste vehicle of cultic purity and thus a symbol of the resurrected existence in this current reality.

In line with its absolute commitment to sexual renunciation, the Book of Thomas does not engage with the ambivalence reflected in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9. The saviour stresses that sexual intercourse is a dark and deceptive fire that reduces humans to beasts. Sexuality is a quality that is identified solely with the visible body but which has the power to corrupt the imperishable soul (143.14). The essence of the human person (the invisible) is imprisoned within this visible body (143.12). Therefore, the elect (the Thomasine in group) can only be

⁴⁶ As for example discussed in: Mark Bonington, ‘New Temples in Corinth: Paul’s Use of Temple Imagery in the Ethics of the Corinthian Correspondence’ in T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole (eds.), *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

⁴⁷ Origen, ‘Homilies on 1 Corinthians’, in *1st Corinthians Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, trans. Judith Kovacs, The Church’s Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans, 2005), 104–116.

liberate from the prison of the flesh is mediated through sexual renunciation. Therefore, the Book of Thomas has no conception of sanctioned sexuality – bodily existence is – for the initiate – a temporary interlude that should be dedicated to training the soul so as to fully actualise the human person and escape the influence of the body. A similar type of ideology seems to have been reflected in some of the interlocutors that Clement engages with in *Stromateis III*.⁴⁸ Clement uses 1 Corinthians 7 to argue that Paul recognises marriage as precaution against immorality although affirming continence “by agreement” (1 Cor.7:5) thus promoting discipline.⁴⁹ Much closer to the absolute renunciation of sexuality that we discover in the Book of Thomas, Tertullian argues that the temporary abstinence recommended in 1 Corinthians 7:5 is something that should be practiced all the time because prayer is a daily necessity. He argues that the virgin represents the idea state of sanctity that is breached by any form of sexual union. (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 9.3).

Although, sexual renunciation is an importance performance within the Life of Antony, it is depicted differently from the complete rejection that we see within the Book of Thomas. While the Vita does highlight that sexuality is innate to humanity and consequently an ever-present source of temptation⁵⁰, it does not share the stark duality between the body and the soul that is evidenced in the Book of Thomas. We can assume, based on his other

⁴⁸Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis III* in Henry Chadwick, *The Library of Christian Classics: Alexandrian Christianity, Volume II* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 40-92.

⁴⁹ As also noted by Hunter, Clement strengthens his argument against Tatian by reading 1 Corinthians 7 alongside the pro- marriage teachings in the pastoral epistles (1 Tim. 2:15; 4:1-5; 5:14–15). Hunter, ‘Reception and Interpretation of Paul’, 171–72.

⁵⁰ As we have seen in chapter 3 Athanasius quite strikingly depicts sexuality as a weapon that is “strapped to the belly” (5.3).

writings that Athanasius reflects the nuanced understanding of sexual renunciation⁵¹ that is reflected in the spectrum that we discover in 1 Corinthians and some of its interpreters.

We, however, do not see much evidence of this in the Life of Antony. Likely because the addressees of the Vita were monastics, Athanasius also does not make much of Antony's initial commitment to sexual renunciation. This reflects the 4th century relation whereby chastity had become an accepted identifier of entering into the monastic life.⁵² The focus in the Vita, is primarily on the continuous performance of ascetic virtue in the face of relentless sexual temptation.⁵³ Sexual renunciation, in the Vita, is also a weapon against demonic attack: for sexual temptation was the "first snares that he lays against the young" (5.3).

Thus, we can see that sexual renunciation is enacted in diverse ways in our three texts. We find that the radical and absolute renunciation of the Book of Thomas is particularly different from the spectrum of sanctioned sexual behaviour that we discover in the APT. In the Life of Antony, the focus on deploying sexual renunciation as tool to be utilised in the continuous struggle of the monastic against the devil. Let us now turn to briefly look at other ascetic performances.

In the Acts of Paul and Thecla, Thecla's first step onto the ascetic continuum is through the renunciation of food and drink (3.8). Her fasting for three days and three nights demonstrates her immediate commitment to Paul's ascetic discourse strengthened by the

⁵¹ In his Letter to the Virgins for example Athanasius writes that "For just as the fruit of that which produced hundredfold, sixty, and thirty belongs to the same seed, so the Lord is one who has legislated concerning marriage and speaks symbolically about virginity so that the one who condemns one of them does nothing other than commit impiety against the Lord of the twofold grace". Athanasius, 'First Letter to Virgins', 283.

⁵² Veronika Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 1996), 183.

⁵³ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 231.

symbolically loaded three-day interlude into her new existence.⁵⁴ Like its treatment of sexual renunciation the APT also develops a spectrum of ritually approved – eucharistic – eating consisting of bread and water (3.5; 3.13) which is contrasted with worldly feasting (3.13) involving meat, wine and other indulgent foods. This offers a developed ideology of eating that encompasses but is not limited to fasting as an ascetic performance.

We can note a similar type of nuance in the Book of Thomas which speaks of the visible body surviving by devouring other creatures like itself (139.5-6). In both instances we see the development of an acceptable type of eating that renounce indulgent foods like meat and wine. The book of Thomas more clearly articulates that this ascetic performance is necessary so as to not strengthen the flesh by nourishing it and hence aiding in its corrupting influence. While not sharing, the anthropology of the book of Thomas, the Life of Antony similarly promotes a very limited diet consisting of water and bread (7). In this context, what comes to the fore is the use of fasting as a tool to combat other bodily desires. The monk particularly seeks to weaken the body so as to deny sexual temptations.⁵⁵ This performance, comes to characterise the ascetic excellence of the monk to such an extent that Antony is depicted as being ashamed of his need to eat – seeing it as a failing and a poor example to his followers (45.3).

We can thus see that fasting as an ascetic performance, does not only involve limiting food intake but also delineates a strict diet that is a common feature across all three texts.

A third form of renunciatory performance common to the ascetic worlds which we encountered in our primary texts is the renunciation of wealth. While the issue is not directly

⁵⁴ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 89.

⁵⁵ As we have noted in our discussion above this reflects a rationale for fasting as a tool of disciplining and controlling the body and its desires, which have long been argued. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin*, 183.

addressed in the ascetic beatitudes, the rest of the narrative of the APT demonstrates that ascetic commitment also entails rejecting wealth and power – other than of course that which can be made serviceable to the faith community (e.g., Queen Tryphaena and Onesiphorus).⁵⁶ In spite of the importance of this relationship between itinerant preachers and wealthy patrons the APT privileges renunciation – or the will to renounce - as seen through its depiction of Onesiphorus abandoning everything to follow him to the tombs with his entire family (APT 3.28) and Tryphaena offering to transfer all of her wealth to Thecla (APT 4.14).

This ethos of wealth, which promotes charity and renunciation of wealth as a spiritual performance is also something we see in the Life of Antony.⁵⁷ Antony's begins his ascetic journey by giving away "the possessions that he had inherited from his ancestors – there were three hundred fertile and very prosperous acres" and selling "his remaining possessions and, collecting a considerable amount of money, distributed it among the poor" (2.4-5). This account lets us know that Antony had inherited status and wealth much like Thecla, although unlike Thecla he is able to have a say in its dispossession while she, as a woman dependent on her relations for her social and material status was dispossessed by default.

Unlike the APT and the Life of Antony, renunciation of wealth does not feature in the Book of Thomas, which rejects the entire physical realm, which encompasses material wealth.

This brief review of the performances of ascetic renunciation in our three texts revealed shared practices. We, however, noted significant variegation in the ideologies shaping these practices. This divergence ranges from the widely disparate perspectives on the human body and the world between the Book of Thomas and the other two texts. We, however, noted remarkable

⁵⁶ Paul himself is cast as an *itinerant* preacher dependent on the hospitality of wealthy householders (3.5). This pattern is also replicated in the relationship between Queen Tryphaena and Thecla (4.2).

⁵⁷ Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*.

similarity in the ideology of food and eating promoted by all three texts whereby some types of food are characterised as suspect while others are tolerated. Let us now turn to look at the definition of the ascetic culture, that makes these performances intelligible.

4.3.2. Culture

Our study of all three texts engages as much as possible with their historical, social, and literary location of our writings. In all three contexts we discovered the definition of ascetic culture as a counterculture which seeks to inscribe new norms and behaviours, over and against the dominant culture. Let us look a bit more closely at how this developed.

In the Acts of Paul and Thecla the ascetic culture inaugurated by Paul stands in contradistinction to not just to the Roman political and social order but also in stark relief to the false and inconstant Christian ethos of Demas and Hermogenes. The values and performances describing the new culture are revealed through Thecla. As an upper-class female she epitomises the dominant culture. Her conversion forgoing her identity within the dominant culture in lieu of a new identity is, therefore, emblematic of the subversion of the old social order and inauguration of the new ascetic (Christian) culture. Moreover, her ability to withstand great persecution without wavering in her faith and ascetic commitment affirms the triumph of Paul's gospel and ministry and further underscores the dismal decadence and deceit of the pseudo-Christians Demas and Hermogenes.

The ascetic culture of the Book of Thomas is defined in significantly different way. This is primarily due to the locus of the ascetic discourse. Whereas the Acts of Paul and Thecla is developed with the broad Roman world in mind, the Book of Thomas reflects the refinement of boundaries by an 'in-group' of enlightened ascetics within a 'dominant' religious community. Members of the 'in-group' are alternatively identified as the "perfect" (e.g., 140.11) and the

“elect” (139.29). They are characterised as being destined to receive and understand new knowledge. The outer group (“non-Thomasine” groups) on the other hand are described as “ignorant” (140.12) and “fools” (140. 14 - 15). The primary characteristic of the counterculture seems to be radical renunciation of the body while the non-Thomasine members of the community seem to be more accommodating of the body and its failings: ““Had we not been begotten in the flesh; we would not have known [iniquity]?” (141.25).

In both APT and BookThom we can note that identifying with the counterculture inspires persecution. In the former Thecla is for example persecuted because she has renounced the normative practices and roles of the culture and taken up a liminal identity which did not afford her any protection in the Roman world.⁵⁸ In the latter, the elect anticipate persecution at the hands of the larger faith group due to their access to special revelation (145.4-9).⁵⁹ In both instances the new status of “otherness” inspires fear and hate in the society demonstrating the mutuality of the separation of the ascetic from the world or the dominant community – i.e., the ascetic is rejected by the system he or she rejects.

In the life of Antony, the monk does not experience social rejection or persecution. Instead, he represents a new type of elite in a Christianised world – the spiritual virtuoso. By this period monastics’ renunciation of the world was not caused by persecution or a radical response to a dominant pagan social order but a “religious quest combined with an aversion to the disruption occasioned by the worldly concerns of property, social obligation, and the material side of the emerging church.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ This is particularly evident in the Antioch episode, where Thecla discovers she has no protection from the advances of Alexander and his ability to wield the social and political structures against her.

⁵⁹ As we have seen in our discussion, in chapter two and above the final two out of the three beatitudes are particularly concerned about persecution, suggesting that this was an important issue for the writer and his group.

⁶⁰ Samuel Rubenson, ‘Christian Asceticism and the Emergence of the Monastic Tradition’, in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52.

The monk represented the height of the spectrum of moral development and perfection. The “imagined transfiguration of the few great ascetics, on earth, spoke to them [ordinary pious Christian men and women] of the eventual transformation of their own bodies on the day of the Resurrection.”⁶¹ Alongside one such exemplar, Antony, the Vita also develops a highly idealised vision of the culture of the monastic community:

So, there were in the mountains monastic dwellings like tents filled with heavenly choirs singing psalms, studying the bible, fasting, praying, rejoicing in the hope of things to come, working in order to give alms, having love for each other and being in harmony with one another. To see it was truly to see a land like no other, a land of righteousness and devotion to God. No one suffered an injustice there, nor was there a complaint about the tax collector, instead, there were a multitude of ascetics, and the intentions of all of them were one, directed toward virtue. (44.2-4).

This depiction of the newly constructed monastic culture deploys potent imagery that is reminiscent of both prelapsarian existence and the eschatological hope of the “new earth”.⁶²

4.3.3. Social Relationships

Having considered the nature of the ascetic culture developed in our texts, we will now turn to look at the re-definition of the network of social relationships that accompanies renunciation of the dominant cultural matrices.⁶³ This is most clearly articulated in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, although we can note a new definition of social relationships in the other two

⁶¹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 1988, 223.

⁶² Revelation 21.1-4

⁶³ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 10–11.

texts as well. Thecla's conversion immediately results in the permanent rupture of two significant relationships in her life. The relationship with her mother Theocleia and her fiancé Thamyras. These two relationships representing Thecla's past, and future are supplanted by her new relationship with Paul, and through him Christ. Although the book of Thomas does betray some anxiety about being misunderstood by those who would find the new revelation 'ridiculous' and 'contemptible' (142.20-25)⁶⁴ it is nonetheless characterised by a radical degree of individual autonomy which completely rejects dependence on the visible world anticipating existence in the invisible realm. The enlightened ascetic will only depend on the truth, which will nourish him" like a tree growing by the meandering stream" (140.16).

This is significantly different from the complex interplay between ascetic withdrawal from social relations and the construction of the networks that sustain the monastic in the Life of Antony. From the outset the ascetic journey of the monk is characterised by the gradual severance of social ties. For Antony, who was an orphan, the most significant relation which he relinquishes is his sister. Although he initially keeps some money for his sister (2.5) when he gave away his wealth, Antony later completely abandons care of his sister and entrusts her to the safekeeping of "well-known and faithful virgins, giving her to them to be raised in virginity (3.1-1)"⁶⁵ when he committed to a fully ascetic way of life.

This commitment results in a diverse range of new relationships that are defined from within the new ascetic culture. He was, first and foremost loved by everyone (4.1) – i.e., the broader community approved of and supported his ascetic commitment. He also had friends who

⁶⁴ The final question which serves as the launching point for the final monologue by the saviour which we looked at in great detail in chapter 2.

⁶⁵ In his role as an authority figure over her, Antony chooses an ascetic life for his sister. This suggests that he had fulfilled his duty to her not only as a relative but also as a spiritual guide.

would supply him with provisions when he left for the tombs and rescue him when he became to battered in his struggles against the devil (8.3). Later, after twenty years of ascetic formation, he has a large group of disciples (14 -42) eager to learn from him. And at the end his life he passes on surrounded by friends, and his clothing – his only worldly possessions – are bequeathed to Bishops reflecting his status. These relationships all reflect a new type of social existence whereby the ascetic can call upon the support of those who are inspired by his example, and he performs a function as a religiously potent symbol.⁶⁶

4.3.4. Subjectivity (The Ascetic Telos)

The ascetic journey of self-transformation has as its telos the construction of a new subjectivity.⁶⁷ According to Valantasis, “the ascetic subjectivity is multivalent and multcentred in that it bears by nature at least a two-way centeredness (the old person and the ascetically reconstructed person) and possibly more, since people may participate in a number of different coinherent cultures.”⁶⁸

To elucidate this further let us briefly identify the diverse ways in which our texts navigate the two-way exchange. In the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the ascetic telos is very much related to her recognition as a worthy Christian subject and missionary. Thecla’s journey is bracketed by two solitary events that are not directly mediated by Paul. The first is her conversion:

While Paul was delivering his message to the church in Onesiphorus’
house, Thecla, the virgin daughter of Theocleia, who was engaged to Thamyris,

⁶⁶ Vivian, ‘Holy Men and Businessmen’.

⁶⁷ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 11.

⁶⁸ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 11.

was seated at the window of her house that was closest to Onesiphorus' listening without respite to Paul's message about chastity (3.7).

This describes Thecla's subjectivity at the moment of encounter with the transformative message – she is a daughter and a fiancée, but she is also a human subject with agency which she exercises to follow through on her desire to be amongst the “women and girls” she witnessed arriving to learn from Paul.

The next event is her auto-immersion. Having initially been denied baptism by Paul, Thecla had endured great persecution and was once more condemned to death.

While Thecla stood praying with outstretched arms, they launched numerous beasts at her. Her prayer finished, she turned and saw a large pit filled with water. “This is my opportunity to wash,” throwing herself in to the water with these words: “In the name of Jesus Christ I am baptised on my last day.” (4.34).

This depicts the new subjectivity: Thecla reconstructed as a Christian apostle and (would be) martyr. This new subjectivity also redefines her relationships and the milieu she inhabited. We can see as an example in this regard the reformulation of her relationship with Paul and her mother. In the first instance, Paul is not only reluctant to have Thecla travel with him he abandons her in Antioch at the mercy of Alexander. Following her transformation, however, Paul affirms the roles that she had adopted by commissioning her to teach the word of God (5.1).

Similarly, her relationship with her mother is redefined. In her old identity Thecla was denounced by her mother Theocleia who had condemned her to death as an example to others (3.20): “Burn this outlaw! Burn this enemy of matrimony in the middle of the theatre, so that all the women who have been instructed by this fellow might learn some respect!”

Following her baptism, Thecla returned to Iconium and summoning her mother she addresses her in her new identity as an apostle and teacher of the gospel: “Theocleia, mother dear. Can you believe that the Lord lives in heaven? If you desire possessions, the Lord will give them to you, on my behalf. If a child, look: here I am!” (4.18). This episode encapsulates the transformation of Thecla from an abandoned and extremely vulnerable new initiate powerless before the condemnation of her old relations and culture to a fully equipped representative of her new faith community empowered through her ascetic commitments and persecutions.

In contrast, in the Book of Thomas, the construction of the new subjectivity is only fully accessible in the invisible realm when the ascetic is liberated from the visible. The ascetic subject is captive in the visible realm by virtue of existing in the body. The body is not only the locus of captivity, but also the instrument of bondage that “fettered them with it chains and bound all their limbs with the bitterness of the bondage of lust for those visible things that will decay and change and swerve by impulse” (140.31-37). The ascetic, can therefore, live in anticipation of existence in the invisible realm by radical, and unwavering separation from the visible world.

The construction of the ascetic subjectivity is much more complex in the Life of Antony. The monk is very much a narrative cipher designed to perform as a template for other ascetics and serve as a vehicle for establishing Athanasius’ ascetic curriculum. As such Athanasius is not really concerned about giving us access to the internal development of the monk. We can nonetheless note his development in the first sections of the Life where he is encouraged to increasing degrees of ascetic renunciation through his discipleship with other more experienced ascetics (3-4). Through emulation he learns ascetic discipline and practices of detachment from his relations and desires (3.3-7).

More insight into the various stages of the formation of the monk's subjectivity (the transition from the old to the new) could be found in his depiction of the various stages of demonic attacks on the ascetic (23-27).⁶⁹ The first attack (stage) according to Antony is: are sexual thoughts (23.1). Having overcome these through the performance of "prayer and fasting and faith" (23.2) the monk confronts the second stage which are apparitions that are intended to frighten (23.3). The monk can defend himself against this attack with "faith and the sign of the cross" (23.4). The next attack is that of false prophesy and other supernatural abilities which is overcome through "faith and hopeful resolve" (23.5-6). If all of these attacks by the demons fail, another stage is inaugurated whereby the demons attempt to corrupt the monks' ascetic performances, such as the chanting of scriptures and renunciations and even transforming themselves in the likeness of monks to lead them to despair (25). But ultimately, if the monk preserves (26.4) and emulates the courage of the saints (27.1) he will come to the full realisation that the Devil is powerless. This imperviousness to the constant temptation of the demonic describes the fullness of the ascetic subjectivity in the Life of Antony.

Summary

In this section I looked at the central aspects of ascetic formation in our three texts to identify points of commonality and diversity. To this end I utilised the helpful categorisation developed by Valantasis to support the comparative task. In doing so, I was able to identify that variegated nature of the ascetic culture and subjectivity that is developed through the same set of performances. The elements that I looked at particularly revealed the interaction between the writer's unique imagination and the historical, ideological, and literary context they inhabit.

⁶⁹ In chapter 39, Antony assures the monks that his teachings are rooted in his own experience: "so that you will not think that I am speaking in a general and superficial way but will believe that I am relating these things truthfully and from experience" (39.1).

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, I set out to contribute to the study of biblical reception by looking at modes of reception and the ascetic imagination in three texts from distinctly different Christian interpretive traditions. I started by looking at the modes of ascetic reception employed in each text in relation to its specific social, historical and literary context. In doing so I was able to firstly note the utility of the appropriation of the figure of the apostle and the literary form of the beatitudes to legitimate the ascetic message of the APT and the Book of Thomas the Contender. These creative appropriations of early Christian characters, literary forms and motifs reveal the diverse ways in which biblical traditions were received and reshaped in their earliest reception to promote radically different ascetic ideologies.

The Life of Antony provided a clear contradistinction to the other two texts in its extensive use of citation as its primary mode of reception. This difference highlights the significance of a pre-determined authoritative textual space (canon) in shaping modes of reception and the creation of meaning.

Secondly, I moved on to conduct a comparative analysis utilising the schema developed by Valantasis to identify similarities and differences without presuming genetic links or diachronic development. We noted similar performances of ascetic renunciation informed by diversely defined ascetic counterculture, inscribing radically different social relationships and subjectivities.

My study here is neither a comprehensive nor representative survey of the ascetic reception of early Christian texts. Such a task would require a large and ongoing project. It, however, offers limited methodological insight by demonstrating the utility of expanding our

study of ascetic reception to texts outside of the 'canon' of interpretations that have thus far been almost exclusively the locus of study (e.g., the Patristic Fathers) and looking at different modes of reception ranging from direct and systematic textual references to the appropriation of figures, literary forms, and other indirect echoes etc.

Bibliography

Ancient Sources

- Athanasius. 'Festal Letter for 330'. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. Second Series. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- . 'Festal Letter for 367'. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, 4:1326–28. II. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- . 'First Letter to Virgins'. In *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, translated by David Brakke, 274–91. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- . 'Letter XLIX. Letter to Dracontius'. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. Second Series. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- . 'Letter XLVIII. Letter to Amun'. In *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV. Second Series. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- . *The Life of Anthony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*. Translated by Tim Vivian and Apostolos Athanassakis. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2003.
- Barrier, Jeremy W. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.
- Bartelink, G.J.M. *Athanase d'Alexandrie: Vie d'Antoine*. Paris: Cerf, 2004.
- Clement of Alexandria. *Stromateis III*'. Edited by Henry Chadwick. Vol. 2. The Library of Christian Classics: Alexandrian Christianity. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954.
- Colson, F.H. and G.H. Whitaker. *Philo*. Vol. I. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929.
- Epiphanius. *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*. Translated by Frank Williams. Vol. II and III. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Eusebius Pamphilus. 'The Church History of Eusebius: Book II'. In *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Second Series. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- Evans, Ernest. *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism: The Text Edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016.
- Geerard, Mauritius. *Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamentum*. Turnhout: Brepols, 1992.
- Hall, Stuart George. 'Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes'. In *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14-18 September 1998)*, edited by Hubertus Drobner and Albert Viciano. Leiden: Brill, 21-90.

- Jerome. 'Lives of Illustrious Men'. In *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, edited by Philip Schaff and H. Wace, translated by E.C. Richardson, Vol. 2. New York, 1892.
- Layton, Bentley, ed. 'The Book of Thomas the Contender'. In *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7, Together with XIII, 2* Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1) and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*, 180–205. Leiden: Brill, 1989.
- . *The Coptic Gnostic Library: Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7*. Vol. I. Leiden: Brill, 1989.
- Lipsius, R.A, and M. Bonnet. *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*. 1959 Hildesheim reprint. Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1891.
- Origen. 'Homilies on 1 Corinthians'. In *1st Corinthians Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, translated by Judith Kovacs. The Church's Bible. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2005.
- Robinson, James M., ed. *The Coptic Gnostic Library: A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*. Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- Schmidt, Carl. *Acta Pauli: Aus der Heidelberger Koptischen Papyrushandschrift, Issue 1* Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1904.
- Schoedel, William R., ed. 'The (First) Apocalypse of James'. In *Nag Hammadi Codices V and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*, 65–103. Leiden: Brill, 1979.
- Stählin, Otto. *Clemens Alexandrinus: Stromata, Buch I-VI*. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1939.
- Tertullian. 'On Fasting'. In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Vol. IV. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- . 'Of Exhortation to Chastity'. In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Vol. IV. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- Veilleux, Armand, trans. *Pachomian Koinonia. Volume 1, The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980.
- Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Apophthegmata Patrum: The Alphabetic Collection: 59*, Revised edition. Kalamazoo: Liturgical Press, 1975.
- Watson, Francis. *An Apostolic Gospel: The 'Epistula Apostolorum' in Literary Context: 179*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Secondary Literature

- Allison, Dale C. *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination*. New York: Independent Publishers Group, 1999.
- Anatolios, Khaled. *Athanasius*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Arnold, Bradley. ‘Christ as the Telos of Life: Moral Philosophy, Athletic Imagery, and the Aim of Philippians’. University of Exeter, 2013.
- Balch, David L., and Carolyn A. Osiek, eds. *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2003.
- Barnes, John, Gerald Browne, and John C. Shelton, eds. *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers*. Leiden: Brill, 1981.
- Barnes, T. D. ‘Angel of Light or Mystic Initiate? The Problem of the “Life of Antony”’. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37, no. 2 (1986): 353–68.
- Barrier, Jeremy W. ‘Asceticism in the Acts of Paul and Thecla’s Beatitudes: The Coptic Heidelberg Papyrus as an Exegetical Test Case’. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 163–85. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Bauckham, Richard. ‘The Acts of Paul as a Sequel to Acts’. In *The Book of Acts: Ancient Literary Setting*, edited by Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, 1:105–51. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1993.
- . ‘The Acts of Paul: Replacement of Acts or Sequel to Acts?’ *Semeia* 80 (1997): 159–68.
- Beetham, Christopher A. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Bell, H. Idris (Harold Idris). *Jews and Christians in Egypt the Jewish Troubles in Alexandria and the Athanasian Controversy. Illustrated by Texts from Greek Papyri in the British Museum*. London: British Museum, 1924.
- Betz, Hans Dieter. *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*. Edited by Adela Yarbro Collins. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Bollok, J. ‘The Description of Paul in the Acta Pauli’. In *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, edited by J.N. Bremmer, 1–15. Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996.
- Boughton, Lynne C. ‘From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License From Apostolic Practice in the “Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla”’. *The Journal of Religion* 71, no. 3 (1991): 362–83.

- Bouteneff, Peter C. 'Essential or Existential: The Problem of the Body in the Anthropology of St Gregory Of Nyssa'. In *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14-18 September 1998)*, edited by Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, 52:407–19. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- Bowie, Ewen, and Gareth Schmeling. 'The Ancient Readers of the Greek Novels'. In *The Novel in the Ancient World*, 87–106. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Brakke, David. *Athanasius and Asceticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- . *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- . *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- . 'Reading the New Testament and Transforming the Self in Evagrius of Pontus'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, 284–99. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- . 'The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana'. *Orientalia*, Nova Series, 63, no. 2 (1994): 17–56.
- . 'The Greek and Syriac Versions of the Life of Anthony'. *Le Muséon* 107, no. 1/2 (1994): 29–53.
- Bremmer, J.N. 'The Five Major Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership'. In *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 149–70. Leuven: Utigeverij Peeters, 2001.
- Brown, Peter. *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*. University of California Press, 1989.
- . *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- . *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- . *The Making of Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- . 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity'. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.
- . 'The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity'. *Representations* Spring, no. 2 (1983): 1–25.
- . *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*. New York: Norton, 1989.
- . *Through the Eye of a Needle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

- Brown, Peter Robert Lamont. *The Body and Society : Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Burrus, Virginia. *Chastity As Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1987.
- . ‘Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance’. *Arethusa* 38, no. 1 (2005): 49–88.
- . “‘The Passover Still Takes Place Today’ Exegesis, Asceticism, Judaism, and Origen’s on Passover’. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 235–45. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Burton-Christie, Douglas. *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*. Oxford: Oxford University, 1993.
- Cameron, Averil. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Caner, Daniel Folger. *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Castelli, Elizabeth. ‘Audience and Resistance’. In *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 178–87. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . ‘Virginité and Its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity’. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2, no. 1 (1986): 61–88.
- Černušková, Veronika, Judith L. Kovacs, Jana Plátová, Veronika Černušková, Judith L. Kovacs, Jana Plátová, Veronika Černušková, et al., eds. *Clement’s Biblical Exegesis: Proceedings of the Second Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria (Olomouc, May 29–31, 2014)*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.
- Chin, Catherine M. ‘Who Is the Ascetic Exegete? Angels, Enchantments, and Transformative Food in Origen’s Homilies on Joshua’. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 203–18. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Christie, Douglas E. ‘Listening, Reading, Praying: Orality, Literacy and Early Christian Monastic Spirituality’. *Anglican Theological Review* 83, no. 2 (2001): 197–221.
- Clark, Elizabeth A. *Melania the Younger: From Rome to Jerusalem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- . *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

- Cooper, Kate. *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women*. London: Atlantic Books, 2013.
- . *Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Corke-Webster, James. ‘The First Hagiographies: The Life of Antony, the Life of Pamphilus, and the Nature of Saints’. In *The Hagiographical Experiment: Developing Discourses of Sainthood*, edited by Christa Gray and James Corke-Webster, 158:29–62. *Vigiliae Christianae*, Supplements. Leiden: Brill, 2020.
- Davies, Stevan L. *The Revolt of the Widows*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006.
- . ‘Women, Tertullian and the Acts of Paul’. *Semeia* 38 (1986): 139–45.
- Davis, Stephen J. *The Cult of St. Thecla*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- DeConick, April D. ‘The Original “Gospel of Thomas”’. *Vigiliae Christianae* 56, no. 2 (2002): 167–99.
- Dicken, Frank. ‘The Author and Date of Luke-Acts: Exploring the Options’. In *Issues in Luke-Acts: Selected Essays*, edited by Sean Adams and Michael Pahl, 7–26. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2012.
- Dulk, Matthijs den. ‘I Permit No Woman to Teach Except for Thecla: The Curious Case of the Pastoral Epistles and the “Acts of Paul” Reconsidered’. *Novum Testamentum* 54, no. 2 (2012): 176–203.
- Dunn, Marilyn. *Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2003.
- Dunn, Peter W. ‘The Acts of Paul and the Pauline Legacy in the Second Century’. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996.
- . ‘The New Testament in the Acts of Paul’. In *Christian Apocrypha: Receptions of the New Testament in Ancient Christian Apocrypha*, edited by Jean-Michel Roessli and Tobias Nicklas, Vol. 26. *Novum Testamentum Patristicum*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014.
- . ‘Women’s Liberation, the Acts of Paul, and Other Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles A Review of Some Recent Interpreters’. *Apocrypha* 4 (1 January 1994): 245–62.
- Edsall, Benjamin. ‘(Not) Baptizing Thecla: Early Interpretive Efforts on 1 Cor 1:17’. *Vigiliae Christianae* 71, no. 3 (8 May 2017): 235–60.
- Elliott, J. Keith. *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1993.

- Elliott, Neil. 'Asceticism among the "Weak" and "Strong" in Romans 14-15'. In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, 231–55. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Eyl, Jennifer. 'Why Thekla Does Not See Paul: Visual Perception and the Displacement of Erōs in the Acts of Paul and Thekla'. In *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, edited by Marília P. Future Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, and Richard I. Pervo, 16:3–20. Ancient Narrative. Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012.
- Fowler, Kimberley. 'From the Apocryphon of John to Thomas the Contender: Nag Hammadi Codex II in Its Fourth-Century Context'. The University of Manchester, 2013.
- Gaca, Kathy L. 'Driving Aphrodite from the World: Tatian's Encratite Principles of Sexual Renunciation'. *The Journal of Theological Studies, New Series* 53, no. 1 (2002): 28–52.
- Gadamer, Hans Georg. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Garrison, Roman. 'Paul's Use of the Athlete Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9'. *Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (1993): 209–17.
- Gebhardt, Oscar von. *Passio S. Theclae Virginis: die lateinischen Übersetzungen der Acta Pauli et Theclae: nebst Fragmenten, Auszügen und Beilagen*. Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1902.
- Geest, Paul van. "'... Seeing That for Monks the Life of Antony Is a Sufficient Pattern of Discipline.'" Athanasius as Mystagogue in His "Vita Antonii". *Church History and Religious Culture* 90, no. 2/3 (2010): 199–221.
- Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid. 'Historiography as Anti-History: Reading Nag Hammadi Codex II'. *Archiv Für Religionsgeschichte* 20, no. 1 (2018): 77–90.
- Goehring, James E. *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999.
- . *The Letter of Ammon and Pachomian Monasticism. The Letter of Ammon and Pachomian Monasticism*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011.
- Grant, Robert M. 'The Description of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thekla'. *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 1 (1982): 1–4.
- . 'The Description of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thekla'. *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 1 (1982): 1–4.

- . ‘Theological Education at Alexandria’. In *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, edited by Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, 178–89. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Grimm, Veronika. *From Feasting To Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Guthrie, Donald. ‘Acts and Epistles in Apocryphal Writings’. In *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, edited by W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin, 328–45. Exeter: Paternoster, 1970.
- Gwynn, David M. *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 2012.
- Hall, Stuart George. ‘Gregory of Nyssa, on The Beatitudes: An Introduction to the Text and Translation’. In *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14-18 September 1998)*, edited by Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, 52:3–19. *Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- Harmless, William. *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Illustrated edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Hayne, Léonie. ‘Thecla and the Church Fathers’. *Vigiliae Christianae* 48, no. 3 (1994): 209–18.
- Hidding, Aaltje. *The Era of the Martyrs: Remembering the Great Persecution in Late Antique Egypt. The Era of the Martyrs*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Hilhorst, A. ‘Tertullian on the Acts of Paul’. In *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, edited by J.N. Bremmer, 150–63. GA Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1996.
- Hills, Julian V. ‘The Acts of Paul And the Legacy of the Lukan Acts’. *Semeia* 80 (1997): 145–59.
- . ‘The Acts of the Apostles in the Acts of Paul’. In *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers*, edited by E.H. Lovering, 24–54. Atlanta: SBL, 1994.
- Hock, Ronald F. ‘God’s Will at Thessalonica and Greco-Roman Asceticism’. In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, 159–70. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Holzberg, Niklas. *The Ancient Novel: An Introduction* New York: Routledge, 1994.

- Howe, E. Margaret. 'Interpretations of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla'. In *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F.F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday*, 33–49. Exeter: Paternoster, 1980.
- Hunter, David G. 'Asceticism, Priesthood, and Exegesis: I Corinthians 7.5 in Jerome and His Contemporaries'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses*, 413–27. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- . 'The Reception and Interpretation of Paul in Late Antiquity: 1 Corinthians and the Ascetic Debates'. In *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity*, edited by Lorenzo DiTommaso and Lucian Turcesu, I–II:163–91. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Hysten, Susan E. *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015.
- Jacobs, Andrew S. 'Sordid Bodies: Christ's Circumcision and Sacrifice in Origen's Fourteenth Homily on Luke'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 219–34. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- James, M. R. 'A Note on the "Acta Pauli"'. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 6, no. 22 (1905): 244–46.
- Jasper, David. *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art and Culture*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1982.
- Jenott, Lance, and Hugo Lundhaug. *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices*. Vol. 97. Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015.
- Kee, Howard C. 'Aretalogy and Gospel'. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, no. 3 (1 September 1973): 402–22.
- Kelly, Christopher J. *Cassian's Conferences: Scriptural Interpretation and the Monastic Ideal*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- King, Karen L. *The Secret Revelation of John*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- . *What Is Gnosticism?* Revised ed. edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Klauck, Hans-Josef. *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008.

- Klijn. *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
- Kovacs, Judith L. 'Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa on the Beatitudes'. In *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes*, edited by Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, 52:311–29. *Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.
- . 'Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher According to Clement of Alexandria'. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9, no. 1 (3-25).
- . 'Was Paul an Antinomian, a Radical Ascetic, or a Sober Married Man? Exegetical Debates in Clement of Alexandria's Stromateis 3'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 186–202. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Kraemer, Ross Shepard. *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean by Ross Shepard Kraemer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Krawiec, Rebecca. 'Monastic Literacy in John Cassian: Toward a New Sublimity'. *Church History* 81, no. 4 (2012): 765–95.
- Leemans, Johan. 'Biblical Interpretation in Basil of Caesarea's Asketikon'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 246–67. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Lehtipuu, Outi. 'The Example of Thecla and the Example(s) of Paul: Disputing Women's Role in Early Christianity'. In *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer, 263:359–60. WUNT. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010.
- Lipsett, B. Diane. *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Lipsius, R.A, and M. Bonnet. *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*. 1959 Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1891.
- Louth, Andrew. 'St Athanasius and the Greek "Life of Antony"'. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 39, no. 2 (1988): 504–9.
- Lundhaug, Hugo. *Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology in the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis on the Soul. Images of Rebirth*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

- Luz, Ulrich. *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Edited by Helmut Koester. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- MacDonald, Dennis Ronald. 'Apocryphal and Canonical Narratives about Paul'. In *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 55–77. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990.
- . *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983.
- . 'Which Came First? Intertextual Relationships Among the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles'. *Semeia* 80 (1997): 11–42.
- Mackay, Thomas W. Mackay. 'Response'. *Semeia* 38 (1986): 145–49.
- Malherbe, A.J. 'A Physical Description of Paul'. *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986): 170–75.
- Malina, Bruce J., and Jerome H. Neyrey. *Portraits of Paul: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996.
- Marguerat, Daniel. 'The Acts of Paul and the Canonical Acts: A Phenomenon of Rereading'. *Semeia* 80 (1997): 169–84.
- Markus, R. A., and Robert Austin Markus. *The End of Ancient Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Matthews, Shelly. 'Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography'. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (2001): 47–53.
- Mattill, A. J. 'The Jesus-Paul Parallels and the Purpose of Luke-Acts: H. H. Evans Reconsidered'. *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975): 15–46.
- Matz, Brian J. 'Ascetic Readings of the Agricultural Parables in Matt 13.1-48 in the Cappadocians'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, 268–83. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- McGowan, Andrew. *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- McGuckin, John Anthony. 'St Gregory of Nyssa: Bishop, Philosopher, Exegete, Theologian'. In *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical, Theological, and Historical Studies*, edited by Anna Marmodoro and Neil B. McLynn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- McLarty, J. D. *Thinking with Thekla: Narrative and Emotion in Early Christianity*. Cambridge: James Clarke 2018.

- Meeks, Wayne. *The Moral World of the First Christians*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986.
- Meiser, Martin. 'Johannes Der Täufer Als Asket'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 78–91. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Moawad, Samuel. 'Schenute von Atripe Und Die Auslegung Der Heiligen Schriften'. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Discourses*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 320–33. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Moss, Candida R. *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Ng, Esther Yue L. 'Acts of Paul and Thecla Women's Stories and Precedent?' *The Journal of Theological Studies, New Series* 55, no. 1 (2004): 1–29.
- Nolan, S. 'Narrative as Strategic Resource for Resistance: Reading the Acts of Thecla for Its Political Purposes'. In *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts*, edited by G.J. Brooke and J.-D Kaestli, 225–42. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000.
- Origen. 'Homilies on 1 Corinthians'. In *1st Corinthians Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators*, translated by Judith Kovacs. The Church's Bible. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.
- Osiek, Carolyn A. *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- Osiek, Carolyn A., and David L. Balch. *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.
- Painter, John. *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999.
- Parkhouse, Sarah. *Eschatology and the Saviour: The 'Gospel of Mary' among Early Christian Dialogue Gospels: 176*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- . 'The Fetishization of Female Exempla: Mary, Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas'. *New Testament Studies* 63, no. 4 (October 2017): 567–87.
- Parris, David Paul. *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics: 107*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009.
- Patterson, Stephen J. 'Asceticism in the Gospel of Thomas and Q: The Peculiar Practice of the Early Jesus Tradition'. In *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins: Essays on the Fifth Gospel*, edited by Stephen J. Patterson, 175–96. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

- Pearson, Birger A. 'Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations'. In *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, edited by Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring, 132–60. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Peirano, Irene. 'The Rhetoric of the Roman Fake: Latin Pseudepigrapha in Context'. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, August 2012.
- Perkins, Pheme. *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism*. New York: Paulist Press, 1980.
- Pervo, Richard I. 'A Hard Act to Follow: The Acts of Paul and the Canonical Acts'. *Journal of Higher Criticism* 2 (1995): 3–52.
- . 'Introduction'. In *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections*, edited by Marília P. Future Pinheiro, Judith Perkins, and Richard I. Pervo, 16:xv–xx. Ancient Narrative. Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012.
- . *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Petropoulos, John C. B. 'Transvestite Virgin with a Cause the Acta Pauli ET Thecla and Late Antique "Proto Feminism"'. In *Greece and Gender*, edited by B. Berggreen and N. Marinatos, 125–39. Bergen: Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens 2, 1995.
- Pfitzner, Victor C. *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*. Leiden: Brill, 1967.
- Philo, F.H. Colson, and G.H. Whitaker. *Philo*. Vol. I. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929.
- Poirier, Paul-Hubert. 'Évangile de Thomas, Actes de Thomas, Livre de Thomas. Une Tradition et Ses Transformations'. *Apocrypha* 7 (1 January 1996): 9–26.
- Porter, Stanley, and Jason Robinson. *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory*. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2011.
- Price, Robert. 'Implied Reader Response and the Evolution of Genres: Transitional Stages Between the Ancient Novels and the Apocryphal Acts'. *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 53 (1 January 1997).
- Roberts, Colin H. *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*. London: OUP/British Academy, 1979.
- Robinson, James M., ed. *The Coptic Gnostic Library: A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*. Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

- . ‘The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices’. *Journal of Coptic Studies* 11 (2009): 1–11.
- . *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Translated by George W. MacRae and R. Wilson. Leiden: Brill, 1988.
- . *The Nag Hammadi Story: The Discovery and Monopoly*. Vol. I. Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies (Volume 86). Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- Rordorf, Willy. *Actes de Paul*. Vol. 1. Écrits Apocryphes Chrétiens. Saint Herblain: Gallimard, 1997.
- . ‘Paul’s Conversion in the Canonical Acts and in the Acts of Paul’. *Semeia* 80 (1997): 137–44.
- . ‘Tradition and Composition in the Acts of Thecla The State of the Question’. *Semeia* 38 (1986): 43–52.
- Rousseau, Philip. ‘Anthony as Teacher in the Greek Life’. In *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, edited by Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, 89–109. *The Transformation of the Classical Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Rubenson, Samuel. ‘Christian Asceticism and the Emergence of the Monastic Tradition’. In *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 49–57. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*. London: A&C Black, 1995.
- Rush, Alfred C. ‘Spiritual Martyrdom in St. Gregory the Great’. *Theological Studies* 23, no. 4 (1 December 1962): 569–89.
- Saldarini, Anthony J. ‘Asceticism and the Gospel of Matthew’. In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, 11–28. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Schneemelcher, Wilhelm. *New Testament Apocrypha*. Translated by R. McL. Wilson. Vol. 2. Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992.
- Schoedel, William R., ed. ‘The (First) Apocalypse of James’. In *Nag Hammadi Codices V and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502*, 65–103. Leiden: Brill, 1979.
- Scroggs, Robin. ‘Paul the Prisoner: Political Asceticism in the Letter to the Philippians’. In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, 187–208. New York: Routledge, 1999.

- . ‘The Letter to Philemon and Asceticism’. In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, 209–10. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Shelton, John Christian. ‘Introduction’. In *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers*, edited by John Wintour Baldwin Barnes, Gerald M. Browne, and John Christian Shelton. Leiden: Brill, 1981.
- Smith, Dennis E. *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2009.
- Snyder, Glenn E. *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus*. Vol. 352. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.
- Stefaniw, Blossom. ‘Becoming Men, Staying Women: Gender Ambivalence in Christian Apocryphal Texts and Contexts’. *Feminist Theology* 18, no. 3 (2010): 341–55.
- Streete, Gail P.C. ‘Buying the Stairway to Heaven: Perpetua and Thecla as Early Christian Heroines’. In *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, 11:186–205. Cleveland: T & T Clark International, 2006.
- Tertullian of Carthage. ‘Of Exhortation to Chastity’. In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Vol. IV. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. ‘Reception Theory, H. R. Jauss and the Formative Power of Scripture’. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 3 (2012): 289–308.
- . *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Testament*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Tolbert, Mary Ann. ‘Asceticism and Mark’s Gospel’. In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, 29–48. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Turner, John D. ‘Introduction’. In *Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2-7, Together with XIII, 2* Brit. Lib. Or. 4926(1) and P. Oxy. 1, 654, 655*, edited by Bentley Layton. Leiden: Brill, 1989.
- Urbano, Arthur. “‘Read It Also to the Gentiles’: The Displacement and Recasting of the Philosopher in the Vita Antonii”. *Church History* 77, no. 4 (2008): 877–914.

- Urbano, Arthur P. *The Philosophical Life: Biography and the Crafting of Intellectual Identity in Late Antiquity*. Patristic Monograph Series 21. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013.
- Uro, Risto. *Thomas: Seeking the Historical Context of the Gospel of Thomas*. New York: T&T Clark, 2003.
- Vaage, Leif E. 'Ascetic Moods, Hermeneutics, and Bodily Deconstruction'. In *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 246–63. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Valantasis, Richard. 'A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism'. In *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 544–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- . 'Competing Ascetic Subjectivities in the Letter to the Galatians'. In *Asceticism and the New Testament*, edited by Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, 211–30. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- . *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008.
- Veilleux, Armand, trans. *Pachomian Koinonia. Volume 1, The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980.
- Vivian, Tim. 'Holy Men and Businessmen: Monks as Intercessors in Fourth-Century Egypt as Illustrated by the Papyri and Ostraca'. *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2004): 235–69.
- Vorster, Johannes N. 'Construction of Culture Through the Construction of Person: The Construction of Thecla in the Acts of Thecla'. In *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, 11:98–117. *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*. Cleveland: T & T Clark International, 2006.
- Ward, Benedicta. 'Foreward'. In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Apophthegmata Patrum: The Alphanumeric Collection: 59* Kalamazoo: Liturgical Press, 1975.
- Ware, Kallistos. 'The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?'. In *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 3–15. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Watson, Francis. *An Apostolic Gospel: The 'Epistula Apostolorum' in Literary Context: 179*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

- . “‘You Have One Teacher, Christ’: Athanasius on Teaching and Learning’. Chicago, Illinois: unpublished, 2022.
- Weidemann, Hans-Ulrich. ‘Engelsgleiche, Abstinente - Und Ein Moderater Weintrinker. Asketische Sinnproduktion Als Literarische Technik Im Lukasevangelium Und Im 1. Timotheusbrief’. In *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses*, 21–68. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.
- Westphal, Merold. *Whose Community? Which Interpretation? Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.
- Williams, Michael Allen. *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Wimbush, Vincent L. *Paul, the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding According to I Corinthians 7*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.
- Winstedt, E. O. ‘The Original Text of One of St Antony’s Letters’. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 7, no. 28 (1906): 540–45.
- Witherington, Ben. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1995.