

L'Épître apocryphe de Jacques (NH I,2), suivi de l'Acte de Pierre (BG 4)

Author(s):

Roy, Louise
Rouleau, Donald

E.I. Peeters (Leuven)
Presses de l'Université Laval (Quebec City)
«Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi [section «Textes»]», 18
1987
xvi + 237 p.
ISBN: 2-7637-7072-1

The first text treated in this volume is the *Apocryphal Epistle of James*. This text is one of three in codex I that are presented without titles (the other two being the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate*). In a case like this, where no title from antiquity has survived, any modern title must naturally be chosen so as to reflect the priorities of the text. Since our text presents itself as a letter (1,1-2:4) which recounts a secret teaching of Jesus, its present title is appropriate. It is the second text in its codex, although it starts on the first page of the codex, as the *Prayer of the Apostle Paul* which precedes it is written on the front flyleaf of the codex. It is followed by the *Gospel of Truth*, the *Treatise on the Resurrection*, and the *Tripartite Tractate*. It is written in Sub-Akhmimic, a dialect of Coptic, but the language of composition was Greek. Dr. Rouleau says that the translation may have taken place at the start of the fourth century of our era. Unfortunately, the manuscript is in a bad way, full of lacunas, especially at the top of pages, and particularly in the first four pages.

In terms of its date of composition, Dr. Rouleau places it in the latter half of the second century, based on its combination of mild polemic against the institutionalized “orthodox” church and an overall irenic tone. It is the sort of non-threatening, yet nonetheless propagandistic, text that presupposes tension, rather than open rupture, with the established church. It may have been composed in Alexandria, but in any case, it would have circulated there.

In terms of genre, as suggested above, the *Apocryphal Epistle of James* commences as a letter. As frame stories go, its frame story—that is, the assertion that this text is actually a letter sent by James—is quite developed: it claims to be the second text sent by James, and to have been originally written in Hebrew. The recipient is to take care to ensure that it is only divulged to the worthy (1,20-25) – this sort of warning being a common feature of esoteric texts.

At or around 2,4 (there is considerable damage to the lines preceding 2,4, so one cannot be sure exactly where the episode begins) the stage is set for the revelation dialogue which is to occupy the rest of the *Apocryphal Epistle*. It describes a picturesque scene: the twelve disciples are all gathered together after the crucifixion of Jesus, earnestly writing down all that they can remember of his teachings. (We note in passing that all 12 of the disciples are said to have been engaged in this activity, and that they are recording both public teachings and private instructions that any of them might have received: our text is thus explicitly lending apostolic sanction to the existence of an abundance of gospels.) The text affirms that the risen Christ teaches the disciples for 550 days, at the end of which time Jesus calls Peter and James aside, to give them secret teachings. He stresses the importance of filling oneself with the spirit (4,19), and also affirms the necessity of suffering. By suffering, one earns the Father's love and becomes equal to, or even better than (6,19-20), Christ. In response to a question of James, Christ declares that the time of prophecy has ended (6,29-30): one must have knowledge in order to receive the kingdom of Heaven (8,26-7).

An important theme in this revelation is the need for independence, that the disciples must not merely rely on Christ, but must themselves take the initiative. In a moving passage, Christ berates those who have kept silent when they should have spoken, or allowed themselves to sleep when they should have been awake (9,18-10,6).

Throughout, Christ has spoken in parables, using imagery reminiscent of the discourses preserved in

such texts as the canonical gospels and the *Gospel of Thomas*. He ends the main body of his discourse with three more powerful images. The kingdom of heaven is like an ear of grain, that ripens and fills the field with yet more ears of grain (12,22-30), and one must be careful that pride does not turn it into a desert (13,17-23). Christ likens his activity to building a house (13,2-8).

As the discourse ends, Peter complains about the ambiguity of these teachings (13,27-36), for which he is strongly reproved (13,36-14,19). The independence of the true believer is again stressed: not even the Father is able to banish from the kingdom someone who has received life and believed (14,15-19).

After urging James and Peter to pay heed to what awaits him, Christ departs. James and Peter, kneeling, send their hearts up after him and perceive wars and great turmoil (15,6-13). Their minds continue the ascent, and perceive heavenly choirs and rejoicing (15,14-23). But the ascent of their spirits is interrupted by the arrival of the other disciples (14,23-34). Christ had earlier blessed (14,41-15,3) the ones that will come after the disciples (perhaps intended to refer to the author's own circle). This point is stressed when at the end of the text James declares his hope that those who he enlightens will become in their turn even greater than he is (16,8-19).

This text is fascinating both in its style and in its theology. On the one hand, its parables and its frequent use of blessings and woes make the teachings that it contains seem familiar to anyone with a knowledge of the canonical gospels. On the other hand, when one examines them more closely, those teachings are revealed as being distinctly unusual. The repeated exhortations to be independent of Christ, and even to surpass him, are unprecedented, and there are hints of a well-developed gnostic soteriology underlying the text. For example, at 8,36 Christ reminds James to follow him, and says that he has taught him what to say when confronted by the archons, a teaching with which the author of the text obviously assumes that his readers will be familiar.

Dr. Rouleau also points out the significance of the different portrayals of Peter and James. While the two are both called to receive the secret teachings, at several points Jesus addresses himself solely to James (for example, at 8,36, as mentioned above). Furthermore, while James' interjections serve to advance the discourse, Peter's only show his inability to comprehend the paradoxical teachings of Christ. Peter, as is frequently the case among gnostic texts, is here meant to represent the orthodox church, and in his treatment of Peter our author engages in a polemic against that institution. This polemic is not quite so aggressive as one finds in other texts (such as the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*) – one notes that Peter is second only to James among the disciples. Yet nonetheless, he is second: James is the privileged one, as well as being the ostensible narrator of the whole account.

The second text discussed in this volume, the *Act of Peter*, is not from the Nag Hammadi collection, but rather is the last of four writings in *Papyrus Berlinensis 8502*, also known as *Berlinensis gnosticus*, or BG, which was purchased in Cairo in the last years of the 19th century, and which probably dates to the fifth century of our era. The other texts contained in this document are the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Apocryphon of John*, and the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, versions of the latter two texts also being found in the Nag Hammadi collection. The *Act of Peter* is by far the shortest of these four texts, and it is partly because of this that Mrs. Roy suggests that it may have been included to fill up the space left over from the other three texts. (Another reason for its inclusion, despite its lack of gnostic features, may have been the encratite tendencies it displays.) Be that as it may, the *Act of Peter* is in Sahidic, a dialect of Coptic, although it would have been composed in Greek. The Coptic version that we have was almost definitely based on another Coptic text, rather than being itself a translation of the Greek.

The *Act of Peter*, as mentioned above, is short. It opens on a Sunday, when Peter the apostle is engaged in healing the sick, while his own daughter however is partially paralyzed and unable to rise from her bed. When the incongruity of this is pointed out, Peter says that it is not the result of any incapacity on his or God's part, but rather that his daughter has remained afflicted so as to preserve her virginity. To prove this, he commands her to rise, and she does so. Then he commands her to become paralyzed again, and she does that as well. He tells the assembled crowd how a rich man called Ptolemy fell in love with his daughter, but that his request for her hand was refused. At this point several pages are missing from the manuscript. What seems to have happened is that she was kidnapped by Ptolemy, and then afflicted by God to prevent her from being ravished. Ptolemy returns

the girl to Peter and his wife, and is himself converted to Christianity, after which he dies. The girl, though out of danger, is left paralyzed.

According to Mrs. Roy, the *Act of Peter* would have been a part of a larger text, the *Acts of Peter*, which has not survived. (It has since been argued that the *Act* was not a part of this text.) We do, however, have four attestations of it: the present text, the text preserved in *Papyrus Oxyrhyncus 849*, the *Acta Vercellenses*, and the *Martyrdom of Peter*, which forms the end of the *Acta Vercellenses*, but which also circulated separately, as, Mrs. Roy concludes, did the incident that the *Act of Peter* preserves. St. Augustine (*Contra Adimantum*, XVII.5) records a similar incident, where it is the daughter of a gardener who is killed, rather than afflicted, by Peter, in order to save her virginity, but which shares with our present text the same motif of cruelty and misogyny masquerading as divine love.

In addition to the two texts, given in Coptic with parallel French translations, this volume includes the texts' respective introductions, commentaries, bibliographies, and indexes for both texts.