Introduction

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The explosion of interest in ancient Jewish and Christian narrative and in the ancient novel began in the last quarter of the twentieth century. "Explosion" is a preferable word, for movements abounded. To the extent that these areas were separate one can identify similar motive forces, all characteristic of their era(s) and all of permanent value. The most important of these forces was that called "postmodernism," more a loose coalition than a monolithic enterprise, and fittingly so, since monolithic enterprises were among the leading targets of the postmodern impulses. Postmodernism was a reasonable development in a transitional era that saw a number of "posts": a postcolonial era, the end of European cultural hegemony, cracks in the bipartite metaphysic of the Cold War, and a general perception that things were less tidy than had been supposed. The scientific model that had dominated since the nineteenth century looked for cause and effect in the context of a well-articulated developmental history. What worked for plants could also work for religion and for literature. Aberrations were left to one side. Many scholars of the last three decades have devoted their careers to examining discarded hulks left at the side of the (putative) evolutionary road.

The road included a number of recommended, if not compulsory, stopping places, all well out of view of those unappealing wrecks. Those places constituted a canon. In religious literature the concept of canon is official: sacred and authorized texts. The canon of belletristics is a metaphor, but it is taken with considerable seriousness and has been policed with unremitting zeal. In one sense canon is the boundary marker of the endless cultural war: what can be read in public schools, for example, or what constitutes suitable edification in various circumstances. An important critical point made by the opponents of canons is that one cannot understand history—literary, cultural, ecclesiastical, etc.—if what has been excluded is ignored. Canonization has

an unfortunate effect upon both what is within the canon and what is relegated to the outer darkness.

Books within the biblical canon cannot be entertaining; entertainment is likewise a major reason for excluding items from literary canons. Elite suspicion of entertainment, "bread and circuses," is, well, elitist. The study of light reading may not find hitherto overlooked Goethes, but it will yield interesting cultural information. This is to say that the rise of cultural studies, a complex phenomenon involving the application of generally postmodern theory to texts and other cultural artifacts, was an additional stimulus to the examination of literature on the margins. If, to state one of the most successfully applied axioms of deconstruction, truth is determined by power, let us hasten to examine the false, the rejected, the non-canonical. Outside of a somewhat adolescent, if not unjustified, suspicion of authority, the newly created level playing field gave texts a different look, or in literary terms an alternative "viewpoint."

Disapproval of the rejection of the non-canonical was the underlying force that stimulated and was stimulated by the great post–World War II discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library. The powers had condemned heretical books, which, it transpired, could be interesting. The study of early Christianity had two canons, one official, the Bible, and another, the vast corpus of patristic writings. Patristics was a generally conservative discipline, dominated by the philological goals of producing and elucidating texts. New Testament Studies had experienced two centuries of harsh ideological warfare, leading to refined and complex methods applied to a narrow body of data. Between these two fell the Christian apocrypha, non-canonized texts generally similar in form to biblical genres. The apocrypha thrived in the soil of emerging admiration for the non-canonical, particularly the Apocryphal Acts, fictional narratives with long recognized similarities to, as well as major differences from, romantic and other novels.

This intersection of the ancient novel and non-canonical religious texts proved fruitful, although it contributed to efforts to draw a firm, "canonical" line around five Greek romantic novels as the norm and standard of the type. Nonetheless, (Jewish and) Christian material now began to receive attention in surveys of ancient fiction (e.g., Pervo, 1996). To an extent the Apocryphal Acts belong to the reception of the romantic novels, for they imitate them, but ancient fiction is a broad phenomenon, and Christian writings were not always the imitators. If the narrative about Apollonius of Tyana does not

imitate Christian gospels, it is in various ways responsive to Christian texts and claims.

Greek novels did not have an easy time moving from the drainage ditch onto the highway. The pioneer modern study, Erwin Rohde's *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer*, first published in 1876 and still of value, viewed Greek novels as a problem to be explained, a task he performed through the classically modernist method of pursuing its development. Ben Edwin Perry (1967) succeeded in transcending this exclusive attention to the question of antecedents. In promoting his point of view Perry took pains to denounce early Christian literature as fanatic propaganda, of value only for what it stole. Perry had helped give new life to the Greek novels, but he left Christian fiction far off the main road. Christian fiction with its more than five hundred years of development and intersection with Jewish as well as polytheist literature had still to wait for serious literary attention.

The division of disciplines also kept Jewish fiction out of the picture, as Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholarship is generally oriented toward the ancient Near East. This is most unfortunate, as Jewish fiction extends from Ruth and Jonah to *Aseneth*, over centuries of interaction with Persian (Achaemenid), Egyptian, Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Roman culture. Interactive models are preferable to those emphasizing dependence; Jewish literature shows cross-cultural interaction at work. One ready means of comparison is to set Greek Esther alongside of the standard Hebrew edition, as both are translated and can be found in Bibles. Among the differences can be seen the influence of Greek literary values. The Greek Esther has elements of the sentimental romance.

In sum, Jewish and Christian fiction indicates not only the success of Greek fiction but also the capacity of the novel to develop in manifold directions and to adjust itself to many cultures. Once viewed as a mark of decadence, this fluidity is now admired as a sign of vitality and creativity. If Jewish and Christian fiction were not maintained in separate, albeit no longer sealed, boxes, comparisons of the Syriac (?) *Acts of Thomas* to the Latin *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius would flourish, to the general betterment of scholarship.

Many of the contributions to this volume focus upon comparison. Janet Spittler's "Wild Kingdom" places the long despised animal episodes of various Apocryphal Acts within a cultural framework. Her study will benefit all students of late antiquity. Paola Francesca Moretti looks at two Ephesian matrons, one found in the *Satyrica*, the other in the *Acts of John.* She pro-

poses that the episode of Drusiana in the *Acts of John* represents the transformation of a Milesian fable. The process of transformation across cultures, genres, etc., is well known.

Two writers take up The *Acts of Paul*, chapter 3 of which is strongly influenced by romantic novels. Like many heroes and heroines, Thecla falls in love, albeit at first *audition*, rather than first sight. Jennifer Eyl presents some of the copious evidence from romantic literature, supported by the scientific tradition, of the role and power of sight. Thecla does not see Paul until she has been swept away by his verbal message. Robin J. Greene contrasts the "original" story of Thecla, embedded in the *Acts of Paul*, with a later edition designed to suit her career as patron of a flourishing cult in Seleucia. Thecla had to become a proper martyr, and she did. Greene's essay touches upon the elasticity of hagiography. Stories about saints could be adapted and updated to meet the needs of successive generations and eras. Timo Glaser, "Telling What's Beyond the Known," explores another way of looking toward the martyrdom of Paul, with particular emphasis upon his arrangements for able and right-thinking successors. Glaser builds upon the idea that collected letters are often arranged so as to tell, or at least imply, a story. Epistolary novels were known in Greek from the Hellenistic era onward. Glaser shows how the pseudo-Pauline letters 1-2 Timothy and Titus, known as the "Pastoral Epistles," utilize techniques of the novel in letters to tell their story.

Nina Braginskaya's offering deals with *Aseneth* and is the sole essay in the collection to address Jewish fiction. Her solution to the complicated question of background and genre takes up the venerable thesis of Martin Braun (1938) that postulated national sagas about heroes as a major stimulus toward the development of historical novels. Braginskaya concentrates upon the popular elements, including the Bible, legend, and folklore, behind *Aseneth*, which she postulates as a link between heroic saga and novels proper.

The section titled "Intersections" represents some of the fruit of comparative study. Judith Perkins' "Jesus Was No Sophist" shows what cultural studies can offer. Elite writings reflect elite views of education. Christianity never accepted the elite standard. The so-called *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, a comic-book-like text of probably the second century, portrays Jesus as a child confounding his schoolteachers. Those without higher education love to see the learned trumped by the wise, as in the *Aesop Romance* and a number of early Christian texts.

Oliver Ehlen, "Reading the *Protevangelium Jacobi* as an Ancient Novel," demonstrates that this work about Mary the mother of Jesus utilizes

literary techniques also found in the romantic novels. Rosa M. Andújar, "Charicleia the Martyr: Heliodorus and early Christian Narrative," takes up the most "spiritual" of the romantic novels, Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, to show that its powerful heroine, Chariclea, has taken on some of the qualities of Christian holy women and martyrs, for whom chastity is the source and essence of true beauty. Martina Hirschberger, "Marriages Spoiled: The Deconstruction of Novel Discourse in Early Christian Novel Narratives," works with some of the motifs found in romantic novels and Apocryphal Acts, such as romantic love between two beautiful representatives of the elite, to show how Christian authors utilize these features to criticize the values they embody in Greek romantic novels. Some women of high standing did affiliate with Christianity, generating conflicts vigorously depicted in the Apocryphal Acts.

First-person narration in ancient literature presents vexing problems. It can signal fiction, or at least a means by which narrators evade responsibility; the first person may also authenticate the text by placing the narrator on the scene as an eyewitness. The latter understanding has often been advanced for the "we" that pops up on several occasions in the book of Acts. Warren Smith uses comparative evidence to point toward a different rhetorical solution. "We" makes the implied reader a part of the story; it first appears when Paul reaches the Aegean region, the probable home of author and initial audience. Whereas appeals to a historical purpose have generated more difficulties than they resolved, Smith's literary argument also aligns with the author's purpose.

Petr Kitzler examines the reception of the martyrdom of Perpetua et al., one of the most moving and challenging of early Christian martyr acts. How much of this text is (very skillful) fiction? What is its relation to the New Prophecy ("Montanism")? However these and other questions are adjudicated, the text is not supportive of such social norms as obedience to parents and the paramount demands of motherhood, since Perpetua, a pregnant matron at the other end of the marital scale from Thecla, can be as disobedient to her father as was Thecla to her mother, and surrender her newborn rather than give up her faith. While applauding her courage and heroism, male theologians and church authorities had to deal with these unwholesome (in their view) behaviors. Kitzler shows how Perpetua's story was massaged and molded to suit the desired patterns of emerging normative behavior.

This essay ably illustrates reception via interpretation, many examples of which can be identified in patristic comments upon the various Apocryphal Acts and martyr acts. Very little comment about the romantic novels sur-

vives, and most of it is brusquely dismissive. Christian fiction shows another route by which texts are both revised and interpreted to achieve accord with social and community standards. Christians could turn the works of Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus into something like the opening books of Augustine's *Confessions* by reporting that their authors later converted and took holy orders. They could also take the rough edges off of Thecla and Perpetua through sermons and expositions. Truth would appear to be a product of power.

Some may find irony in the work of those postmodern critics who have labored to demonstrate that the romantic novels were more or less unadulterated—perhaps not a happy choice—affirmations of the civic order. Such critics are to the Greek romantic novel what Augustine was to Perpetua. Perhaps those novels are, here and there, just a wee bit less supportive of conformity than we have now come to believe. Those who like the rebellious and unconventional might spend some time with Jewish and Christian fiction, which can show how to make the conventional rebellious and the rebellious seem conventional.

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