

The study of Christian apocrypha has been facing a renaissance in scholarship over the past few decades. Although in the past those texts were treated as merely intriguing curiosities from late antiquity or medieval Christianity, we are now seeing a surge of scholarly interest and attention to these significant texts. This renaissance in apocrypha studies is most notable (and welcome) in North American scholarship, which has often lagged behind its European counterpart where apocrypha studies has had far greater attention than in Canada and the United States until recently (cf. Burke 2013; 2015). As with any increase in the scholarly gaze, we are also seeing new and challenging perspectives coming to bear upon the apocrypha, shattering many assumptions in past scholarship while illuminating the biases that have driven past scholarship.

The debates over terminology alone is indicative of shifting paradigms. Rather than speaking of “New Testament apocrypha,” many of us are now using “Christian apocrypha.” Such a change indicates a dissatisfaction with seeing such texts as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Letter to the Laodiceans*, the *Apocalypse of John the Little*, or the various *Acts* of the apostles as merely supplements to canonical texts. Often NT apocrypha are seen as texts that “imitate” the canonical gospels, epistles, Acts, and Revelations—assuming, thereby, that these non-canonical texts are merely derivative works and thus of less significant for historians than the “sacred” texts of the Christian tradition. Challenges to this canonical bias has been part of the field for nearly fifty years, but it is really in the last twenty years that challenges to the canonical bias in scholarship have impacted the study of apocryphal works.

The shift also encourages us to broaden our field of vision, to explore “apocrypha” not only as a cognate area for biblical studies, but to explore the creative reworking and activation of the various legends, stories, and figures in a wide range of historical and geographical contexts. In the recent More New Testament Apocrypha project (MNTA), with the second volume coming out in 2020 and a third in the works, there was a conscious effort to extend the date range of texts included into the tenth or twelfth century. Many scholars have been discussing if the category needs to extend even further to include not only medieval but also modern narrative articulations of the apocryphal material. I could see films, novels, comics, music, and

art works being objects of study in Christian apocrypha studies—and my hope is that scholarship will embrace such cultural data along with ancient and medieval works.

As with any category, “apocrypha” remains problematic. Beyond a canonical bias that often dismisses non-canonical texts as derivative fictions or even as heretical manifestations, there is the further problem of drawing boundaries. Like modern Christian groups, ancient and medieval Christians wrote a great deal, were very creative in their official and unofficial works of literature and art, and often the genres transgressed each other. Should apocrypha—which means “hidden” or “secret”—be discarded entirely as a category? Should we be inclusive of martyr accounts, liturgical works, or philosophical treatises? Is a homily on a significant biblical figure an “apocryphal” text? Do works such as the *Golden Legend*, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, or *An Alexandrian World Chronicle* belong in apocrypha studies? Is it helpful to maintain categorical distinctions between apocrypha, martyrologies, hagiographies, travel narratives or should such distinctions be discarded? What is at stake and for whom? Should the Qur’an, or sections of it at least, be included as “Christian” apocrypha, especially given likely influences upon the Qur’anic material by apocryphal infancy narratives of Jesus’ birth (see Tite 2017; 2016)? Beyond the inclusion of sources is a recent push to include non-textual sources into the apocrypha studies. Janet Spittler, in her much-anticipated edited volume arising from the 2018 NASSCAL Conference at the University of Virginia (Spittler forthcoming), has been advocating the study of material culture as fair game in the study of Christian apocrypha. Given the high levels of illiteracy in the ancient and medieval periods, artistic representations and retellings of stories all would have played a significant role in the religious lives of ordinary peoples—perhaps more so than “official” sacred texts.

As I tell my students each year, categories are not benign; they are moments of creating centers and thus creating fringes, moments of illuminating certain particulars by obscuring others. A critical and self-reflective approach necessitates asking what is at stake when social actors—and scholars are social actors playing in particular sandboxes—create, modify, or contest categories? What power dynamics are a play in our epistemologies? The study of Christian apocrypha is a ripe field for such self-reflectivity, not only

in regard to studying “apocryphal” texts and artifacts, but also with regard to those scholars who ignore or dismiss the validity of studying such cultural and historical data.

The articles in this issue of the *Bulletin* engage a wide range of subjects on the study of Christian apocrypha. Tony Burke, who has spearheaded the MNTA project and has been a leading voice in the establishment of the North American Society for the Study of Christian Apocryphal Literature (NASSCAL), offers a follow up review of the state of apocrypha studies (Burke 2012) by reporting on the second volume in this landmark anthologies of apocryphal texts. Brandon Hawk, building on his recent book *Preaching Apocrypha in Anglo-Saxon England* (2018; see also Hawk 2019), offers an insightful overview of current trends in the study of apocrypha in early medieval England. Tyler Tully then offers an analysis of the literary figure Mary Magdalene, intersecting canonical and non-canonical readings through a postcolonial theoretical lens. Isidora Stambolic expands our focus to include Serbian scholarship on medieval Christian apocrypha. Often the study of Christian apocrypha centers on Western European and North American academic circles, yet Stambolic illuminates the rich scholarly heritage in the study of apocrypha in Eastern Europe. My hope is that this article will encourage even greater cross-cultural dialogue in future scholarship. Marijana Vuković finishes off this set of articles with a look at scholarship on the lives of saints and apocrypha, with a special focus on childhood and family motifs. This closing article arises from the University of Warsaw’s “The Cult of Saints Project.” Finally, this issue of the *Bulletin* closes off with two review essays by Justin Henry and Drew Durdin.

Our contributors are at the forefront of Christian apocrypha studies. They offer us several correctives in how we have studied these data sets, while promoting fresh directions for us to engage such material. Let me briefly add a few reflections on where we are and where we still need to go in the study of apocryphal literature.

**(1) The need to shatter canonical and non-canonical distinctions.** The canonical bias is an ongoing problem in the study of religious literature, especially in early Christian studies. Not only is important historical data ignored or dismissed, but we forget that for many social actors their religious life worlds were infused with a mixture of apocryphal and canonical images.

**(2) The need to extend the time period studied.** I am in full agreement with scholars advocating that we study Christian apocrypha as more than just “texts related to the biblical texts”. If we are going to study how people activated identities and negotiated their

social interactions through their religious imaginations, then we need to study motifs within a wide range of forms, locations, and time periods.

**(3) The need to expand our data to include non-textual sources.** Material culture has been a significant tool that social actors use to shape space, convey stories, reinterpret scriptural motifs, and, to borrow from Catherine Bell and Donovan Schaefer, to perform religious interaction in affective rather than logocentric ways. The affective qualities of religious performance necessitate that non-textual data needs to be studied—be that data art, music, food, architecture, clothing, or other material objects. To extend this to the modern era would result in the inclusion of cinematic formats (movies, television, online videos, etc.).

**(4) The need to expand beyond the “Christian” in Christian apocrypha.** Biblical motifs, stories, characters, and interpretations are all found in non-Christian traditions. The study of Christian apocrypha must include Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and even atheist narratives.

**(5) There is a need to enhance the theoretical frameworks applied to Christian apocrypha.** Although Tully offers a more theoretically sophisticated look at the figure of Mary Magdalene, his work is unique. Often non-canonical Christian works lack the application of critical theories that have arisen in the academic study of religion over the past thirty years. When Matthew Whitlock and I were developing his forthcoming edited book *Critical Theory in Early Christianity*, we ran into a wall when we tried to find scholars able and willing to apply critical theories to the study of Christian apocrypha. At present, most scholarship is focused on critically engaging manuscript traditions and producing useful and accessible translations of these often-ignored texts. Although such work is vital, we can also gain so much from careful application of critical theory to these sources. For example, the rhizomatic theory proposed by Gilles Deleuze offers an excellent basis for theorizing and challenging assumptions underlying the role of the originary and simulacra in the activation of texts (see Whitlock and Tite forthcoming).

The study of Christian apocrypha is facing a renaissance in modern scholarship. I am delighted that this issue of the *Bulletin* includes several voices exploring these new developments in the field. Beyond the study of early and medieval Christianity, these transformations in scholarship should resonate with scholars working more broadly in the study of religion, including theorists of religion. The self-reflexivity that is triggering this reshaping of apocrypha scholarship is a vital part of the study of religion in general. All knowledge arises from historical, cultural, and ideo-

logical contexts—and it is only through self-reflexive moments that theorization of such epistemological production can be engaged.

• • •

As this is my final issue as the editor of the *Bulletin*, I wanted to close with a special word of appreciation for all those amazing people who have been my colleagues over the past nine years. I came on board in the spring of 2011, working closely with Craig Martin and later with Kelly Baker (both serving for a time as my co-editors). My editorial team has been amazing to work with, and I am thankful for those who worked on the blog, offered help in developing new projects, issues, and collaborations with various professional societies and events. Arlene Macdonald has been particularly valuable as a friend and colleague. Of course, Chas Clifton has served as production editor of the *Bulletin* far longer than I as editor—and I thank him for his patience over my meticulous and sometimes demanding editorial corrections as articles moved through the production pipeline. Finally, I am so thankful to Janet Joyce, our publisher, for her constant dedication to the *Bulletin*. We have tried to make the *Bulletin* more than just another academic journal. Rather, we wanted it to serve as focal point for a scholarly community where intense, challenging, friendly, and theoretically sophisticated conversations could erupt within moments of rhizomatic creativity.

I have been so fortunate to have been given this opportunity to serve as editor of this wonderful journal, working with such wonderful people. As some know, editing the *Bulletin* was a vital part of my own growth as an academic and a teacher. When my personal world collapsed in 2013, it was my teaching and my work on the *Bulletin* that kept me going. This was a period in my life when I could barely focus, unable to write or research. I was barely functional. But I could edit and manage—and the *Bulletin* became my oasis. It allowed me to remain anchored in the field I love so dearly while processing the loss that had shattered me. Furthermore, it was through the *Bulletin* that my intellectual curiosity and theoretical development continued. I love to learn and to be challenged. It's why I love teaching and it is what drives my passion as a researcher: to be an active part of ongoing conversations with other academic geeks. As an editor of a journal dedicated to a broad set of methodological and theoretical perspectives on the study of religious phenomena, I found myself constantly challenged and stimulated. I learned from each issue of the journal, as well as through the ongoing conversations with contributors both during and after publication. Those conversations continued into the classroom, where my students and I would theorize the field by using

material in the *Bulletin*. I have grown as a scholar through my nine years with this journal.

And the journal has also grown over the decades. When I first joined the editorial team, I went to the library and read all the issues of the *Bulletin* up to 2011. This journal has grown from a basic newsletter to a dynamic and cutting-edge forum for evoking thought-provoking reflections on the academic study of religion. My hope is that the *Bulletin* will continue to move forward and never backward. It has been a privilege to have been part of that history and I look forward to seeing the *Bulletin* continue its journey as the leading non-refereed journal in the field of religious studies.

Philip L. Tite  
Editor

## References

- Burke, Tony. 2013. *Secret Scriptures Revealed: A New Introduction to the Christian Apocrypha*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. [https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.12234\\_30](https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.12234_30).
- Burke, Tony, editor. 2015. *Forbidden Texts on the Western Frontier: The Christian Apocrypha in North American Perspectives. Proceedings from the 2013 York University Christian Apocrypha Symposium*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524616674646>.
- . 2012. "More Christian Apocrypha." *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41 (3): 16–21.
- Hawk, Brandon W. 2019. *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Nativity of Mary*. Early Christian Apocrypha 8. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- . 2018. *Preaching Apocrypha in Anglo-Saxon England*. Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series 30. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487516970-016>.
- Spittler, Janet, editor. Forthcoming. *The Material of Christian Apocrypha*. Studies in Ancient Religion and Culture. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Tite, Philip L. 2017. "A Merry Muslim Christmas!" *Religion Blog: Blogging Portal for the Bulletin for the Study of Religion*. <https://bulletin.equinoxpub.com/2017/01/a-merry-muslim-christmas/>.
- . 2016. "A Note on Christian Sources for the Muslim Christmas Story." <https://philiptite.wordpress.com/2016/12/30/a-note-on-christian-sources-for-the-muslim-christmas-story/>.
- Whitlock, Matthew G., editor. Forthcoming. *Critical Theory and Early Christianity*. Studies in Ancient Religion and Culture. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Whitlock, Matthew G., and Philip L. Tite. Forthcoming. "The Many Acts of the Apostles: Simulacra and Simulation." In *Critical Theory and Early Christianity*. Edited by Matthew G. Whitlock. Studies in Ancient Religion and Culture. Sheffield: Equinox.