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## Liebe Leserinnen, liebe Leser,

es ist uns eine große Freude, dass Sie gerade auch in diesen ungewöhnlichen Zeiten eine neue Ausgabe des *Blick in die Wissenschaft* in Ihren Händen halten können.

Die Corona-Pandemie stellt auch die Universität Regensburg und alle ihre Mitglieder vor große Herausforderungen, Belastungen und Planungsunwägbarkeiten. Im Mittelpunkt steht für uns seit Beginn der gegenwärtigen Krisensituation der unabdingbare Schutz der Gesundheit aller Universitätsangehörigen und unser Beitrag zur Eindämmung der Verbreitung des Coronavirus.

Die Universität Regensburg ging im März in einen bisher unbekanntem Zustand des minimalen Präsenzbetriebs und weitgehender Homeoffice-Regelungen. Die Präsenzlehre wurde eingestellt und das Sommersemester 2020 startete digital. Für nicht digital durchführbare Praxisveranstaltungen und Prüfungen wurden Regelungen zur Einhaltung der Hygiene- und Sicherheitsvorgaben erarbeitet. Wir können in diesem Sommersemester nicht – so wie wir es alle an unserer weltoffenen und lebendigen Universität gewohnt sind und lieben – mit mehr als

25 000 Menschen aus mehr als 100 Ländern gemeinsam hier vor Ort auf dem Campus zusammenkommen.

Auch die Forschungsaktivitäten an der Universität Regensburg werden von der anhaltenden Pandemie tangiert. Naturgemäß können nicht alle Forschungen unseres vielfältigen Fächerspektrums ins Homeoffice verlagert werden, und die Notwendigkeit zu räumlicher und sozialer Distanzierung beeinträchtigt den wissenschaftlichen Austausch in unterschiedlicher Art. Es ist bewundernswert, wie die Wissenschaftler\*innen auch mit diesen enormen Herausforderungen umgehen.

Die große Nachfrage nach unseren qualitätsgesicherten Studiengängen sowie die national wie international hoch renommierten Forschungsaktivitäten unserer Wissenschaftler\*innen demonstrieren den großen Erfolg aller Mitglieder in den unterschiedlichsten Bereichen und Tätigkeitsfeldern der Universität Regensburg, gemeinsam diese außergewöhnliche und in der Geschichte unserer Alma Mater einzigartige Situation zu meistern.

Den Studierenden und Lehrenden sowie allen weiteren Mitarbeiter\*innen der Universität Regensburg in den unterschied-

lichsten Tätigkeitsbereichen gebührt großer Dank für ihr außerordentliches Engagement, ihre hohe Motivation und vor allem auch für ihre Innovationsbereitschaft und ihre Planungsoffenheit in diesen Wochen.

In vielem hat uns diese gegenwärtige Krisensituation auch ein Stück weit näher zusammenrücken lassen – viele gute und vertrauensvolle Gespräche wurden geführt – wir alle erfahren viel gegenseitiges Verständnis und viel gegenseitigen Respekt. Die vor uns liegenden Wochen und Monate können und sollten wir nicht als Zeit der Perfektionierung sehen – sondern als Raum zum Nachdenken über Neues und als Zeit zum Experimentieren mit Innovativem. Vor allen Dingen aber sollten wir diese Periode als eine besondere Zeit des gegenseitigen Zuhörens und des Miteinanders nutzen. In diesem Sinne freuen wir uns alle auf eine persönliche und gesunde Rückkehr auf den Campus der Universität Regensburg – auf seine lebendige Vielfalt und auf die Begegnungen seiner Menschen.

Und unser Dank ist ebenso an den Redaktionsbeirat, das Redaktionsbüro und alle Autor\*innen der Ihnen nun vorliegenden Ausgabe des *Blick in die Wissenschaft*

zu richten: Ungeachtet der vielen in Zusammenhang mit der Corona-Pandemie aufgetretenen Herausforderungen erhalten Sie auf den folgenden Seiten in bewährter Weise einen Einblick in das breite Spektrum der Forschung unserer Universität.

Besonderes Augenmerk widmet diese Ausgabe dem deutschlandweit ersten »Centre for Advanced Studies« an einer Theologischen Fakultät – einem Format, das die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) 2007 speziell für die Geisteswissenschaften aufgelegt hat: Unter der Überschrift *Jenseits des Kanons* erforschen und erörtern seit der Eröffnung des Zentrums im Oktober 2018 ortsansässige Wissenschaftler\*innen gemeinsam mit über 70 Gelehrten aus aller Welt Texte zu Riten und Dingen, die mit apokryphen Traditionen in Verbindung stehen und eine besondere Wirksamkeit im kirchli-

chen Leben entfaltet haben. Ausgewählte Beiträge aus dem Forschungsverbund gewähren Einblicke in das religiöse Leben jenseits kirchlicher und theologischer Normen und geben zugleich Aufschluss über die tatsächliche Bedeutung des biblischen Kanons.

Weitere Beiträge aus unterschiedlichen Fakultäten spiegeln die Vielfalt der Forschungsaktivitäten an unserer Universität in schon gewohnter Weise wider – von Tocquevilles Mutmaßungen über die Zukunft der Demokratie über die Frage, ob wir ein Grundrecht auf Bundesligafußball haben, bis hin zu Rezepten für gesundes Altern.

Bei der Fertigstellung dieser Ausgabe haben wir mit einigem Erstaunen festgestellt, wie die durch CoVID19 ausgelöste Krise auch die Wahrnehmung von und Auseinandersetzung mit den Inhalten einiger der hier präsentierten Arbeiten verän-

dert wird. Ebenso, wie CoVID 19 unseren privaten und beruflichen Alltag und das gesellschaftliche Miteinander in den vergangenen Wochen auf unterschiedlichsten Ebenen beeinflusst und sicherlich oft auch beeinträchtigt hat, so sehr regt die aktuelle Situation zur Reflexion über viele in der Vergangenheit als selbstverständlich wahrgenommene Lebensumstände und Werte und damit einhergehend den Umgang mit den Herausforderungen dieser Tage an. Mit Ihnen gemeinsam werden wir diese meistern.

Genießen Sie die Lektüre dieser Ausgabe und bleiben Sie gesund.

Prof. Dr. Udo Hebel  
Präsident der Universität Regensburg  
Prof. Dr. Ralf Wagner  
Vorsitzender Redaktionsbeirat

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# Polymorphic Jesus, Polymorphic Texts

Janet E. Spittler

**In the apocryphal Acts of John, Jesus is »polymorphic«: he is a »shapeshifter,« who appears to his disciples in different physical forms at different times. This protean Jesus is likely unfamiliar to readers of the canonical New Testament – and yet the idea makes good sense as one possible way to reckon with the theological proposition that Jesus was simultaneously God and human. What kind of body did God-made-flesh have? Early Christians wrestled with this question. The answer presented in the apocryphal Acts of John is that Jesus possessed a constantly changing body with infinite possibility. This is just one example of how theological ideas – both compatible with and contrary to what is found in canonical texts – were developed in non-canonical Christian literature.**

As early Christian thought developed, new questions were raised and answered, often through narrative texts about the activities of Jesus' apostles. These »apocryphal acts« were not static; to the contrary, they were themselves »polymorphic,« constantly changing, being adapted to suit the needs and interests of successive generations of Christians.

## Polymorphic Jesus

An early 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript held in Vienna at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (*Hist. gr.* 63) contains a narrative with the following title: »An Amazing Narrative concerning the deeds and the visions which holy John the theologian saw with our Lord Jesus Christ—how he appeared in the beginning to Peter and James, and wherein he narrates the mystery of the

cross.« This text narrates how the apostle John described for his own disciples some of his experiences with the living Jesus, essentially re-narrating scenes from the canonical Gospels from his own perspective. John begins with his first encounter with Jesus:

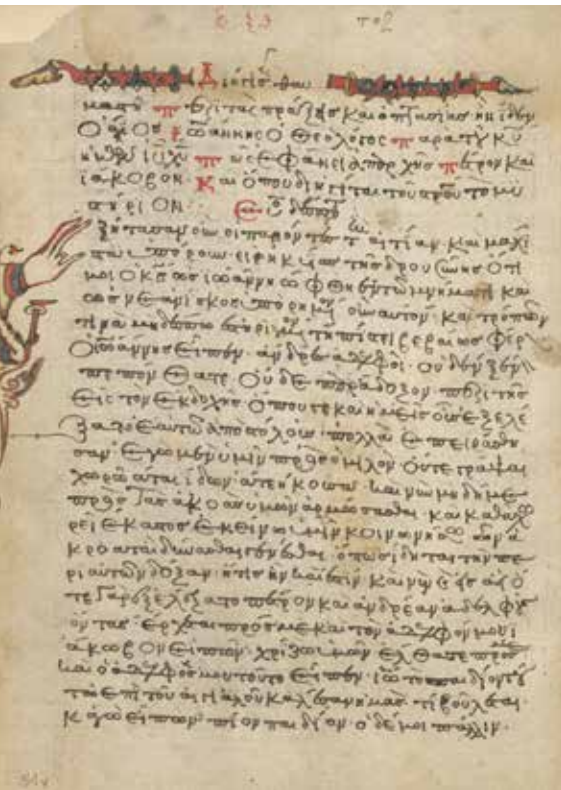
«Now, when he had chosen Peter and Andrew, who were brothers, he came to me and my brother James, saying: ›I have need of you; come to me!‹ And my brother, having heard this, said: ›John, this child on the shore who called to us – what does he want?‹ And I said: ›What child?‹ And he again said to me: ›The one waving at us to come!‹ And I answered: ›On account of our long watch at sea, you're not seeing straight, my brother James! Don't you see the man standing there – fit, good-looking, with the merry face?‹ And he said to me: ›I don't see that man, brother – but let's go and we shall see what this means.« (Acts of John 88; translations adapted from Pervo)

This first encounter – in which James sees a child, while John sees a handsome man – is just the beginning of John's unusual experiences with Jesus, whose physical form seems to be in constant flux. John goes on:

»After we had left that spot, determined to follow him, he appeared to me still differently: almost bald, with a thick, flowing beard, but to James as a youth whose beard had just begun to come in. We were both confused about the meaning of this apparition; and as we kept following, we became more and more confused in our struggle to comprehend what had happened. But then I saw something even more astonishing. My effort to view him more closely led me to see that his eyes never blinked; they were constantly open. Often he seemed to me to be both a small, unattractive person and one always looking at everything in the sky. He had another remarkable quality: at table he would let me lie on his chest; I would nestle closely. Sometimes his chest would feel

### Apocryphal acts of the apostles

The »apocryphal acts of the apostles« are non-canonical narratives describing the travels and activities of apostles, generally including the performance of miracles, the promotion of sexual abstinence, conversion of prominent individuals (frequently women), and conflicts with government officials (often related to the conversion of prominent women). These acts end with the death of the apostle, typically by public execution. Five works – the Acts of John, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Peter, Acts of Paul, and Acts of Thomas – are generally referred to as the »major apocryphal acts« or the »early apocryphal acts.« These five are dated to between the mid-second and mid-third centuries CE, but Christians continued to write, read, edit, and circulate narratives concerning the apostles well beyond this period. The category »apocryphal acts« also includes the Acts of Philip, the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles, the Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals, the Acts of Andrew and Bartholomew, and a host of other narratives composed in the third, fourth, fifth centuries and beyond.



1 *Vienna Hist. gr. 63 folio 51v*, with the first page of an episode belonging to the Acts of John. © ÖNB/Wien, Cod.hist.gr. 63 fol. 51v

smooth and soft; at other times, hard as a rock. This left me confused, wondering, »What does this mean?« (Acts of John 89)

This passage, thus, describes a Jesus who not only appears in different forms to different people, but is constantly changing also from the perspective of one individual. Moreover, it is not just that Jesus *appears* in different guises; John (who, understood here as the beloved disciple who reclines against Jesus' chest in John 13:23–25, would know) describes how Jesus' body also *feels* different from moment to moment. This point is emphasized later in the narrative, as John explains to his disciples: »At times I would find a material, solid body when I sought to touch him; but at other times I would grasp at an immaterial and incorporeal substance, just as if it were not there.« (Acts of John 93)

The Jesus described by John, moreover, neither eats food nor leaves footprints on the ground (the latter being a topic that Christians will return to again and again in subsequent centuries, as noted in Andreas Merkt's essay):

»We would accompany him whenever he accepted a dinner invitation from a Pharisee. Each of us, Jesus included, would receive from the hosts a normal-sized loaf

of bread, but he would bless his and distribute it among us. That small piece would fully satisfy each of us, and our individual loaves be untouched, leaving our hosts astonished. Often, while walking with him, I tried to see if he left a footprint in the ground; but, observing that he kept himself suspended above the earth, I never saw a footprint.« (Acts of John 93)

The Jesus described in this narrative clearly differs from the Jesus described in the canonical Gospels, where Jesus' body is generally described in much more »human« terms. Compare, for example, Luke 24:36–43, where the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples:

»As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, »Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.« And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, »Have you anything here to eat?« They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.« (Revised Standard Version translation)

This passage from a canonical Gospel seems to address precisely the question noted above, with the added dimension of the post-Easter context: What kind of body did God-made-flesh have, and did it change after his resurrection? The answer provided by the author of the Gospel of Luke differs notably from that offered in the Vienna manuscript: in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has flesh and bones of the ordinary, human variety; as if to prove the reality of his flesh, moreover, Jesus asks his disciples for food and eats in their presence – just the opposite of what is reported of our polymorphic Jesus.

But is the polymorphic Jesus of *Vienna Hist. gr. 63* completely foreign to canonical accounts? The careful reader might point to the first half of Luke chapter 23, where Jesus appears to a pair of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, but »their eyes were kept from recognizing him« (Luke 23:16), or to John 20:11–18, where Mary Magdalene, after meeting Jesus near the empty tomb, takes him to be the gardener, or indeed to the three parallel accounts of Jesus' transfiguration described in Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, and Luke 9:28–36. Are these passages not all, in some sense, instances of poly-

morphy, in which Jesus' body is either literally transformed or appears in different forms to his disciples?

## Supplementation, Adaptation, Correction

Scholars have identified the »Amazing Narrative« from *Vienna Hist. gr. 63* as belonging to the Acts of John, one of multiple »apocryphal acts« produced in the second and third centuries CE (see box). At this time, the core texts of what would later become the canonical New Testament (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as well as the book of Acts, and Paul's letters) had already been composed, but the long process of gaining authoritative status was far from complete. Christian authors in the second, third, fourth centuries and beyond felt free to compose new narratives describing both the life of Jesus and the activities of the apostles after his death – narratives that relate to earlier accounts in a wide variety of ways.

Some of these narratives supplement existing texts: whereas the canonical Gospels offer very little information about Jesus' childhood, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, for example, fills in this blank with multiple entertaining stories of boy-Jesus' activities. Likewise, the Acts of Andrew and Acts of Thomas tell the stories of apostles that are passed over in the canonical Acts (which, in fact, is not so much the »acts« of *all* the apostles as primarily of Peter and Paul).

Other new compositions seem to be intended to adapt existing narratives, developing the ideas therein. The sections of the »Amazing Narrative« quoted above seem to fall into this category. The author is, on the one hand, familiar with stories that we recognize from the canonical Gospels. It is clear, for example, that the author has read John 13:23–25, in which the beloved disciple reclines against Jesus' chest, and moreover – I would argue – expects his audience to recognize the scene. That said, the author also feels free to lift the episode from the Gospel of John and adapt it to suit his own purposes: here, a contemplation of the polymorphic nature of the living Jesus' body.

Still other new compositions were clearly meant to correct and replace existing accounts. This is the case for another section of the »Amazing Narrative« in *Vienna Hist. gr. 63*, in which the crucifixion

of Jesus is described. The apostle John (still in first person narrative) reports that, when Jesus was arrested, he fled to the Mount of Olives. There, Jesus appeared to him in a cave:

»Then the Lord suddenly appeared in the cave »where I had secluded myself« and bathed me with radiance. »John,« he said, »as far as the crowd below in Jerusalem is concerned I am hanging on the cross, being pierced with lances and reeds and given vinegar and gall to drink. In reality I am addressing you here: listen to what I have to say. I put it into your mind to come up this mountain so that you might hear what the pupil should learn from the teacher, the human from God.« (Acts of John 97)

This material is more than a supplementation or adaptation of existing narratives; the clear implication is that what the reader finds in the Acts of John is *superior* to what is narrated in other texts. What the »crowd below« sees – Jesus tortured and crucified – is not »reality«; what is true and important is what Jesus reveals to John in the cave, that is, the content of this section of the Acts of John.

These processes of supplementation, adaptation, and correction were constant features of early Christian literary production. They are visible even *within* the New Testament canon, in the supplementation, adaptation, and correction of the Gospel of Mark by the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Once the New Testament canon was quite firmly established (in the fourth century CE), the adaptation and correction of canonical texts comes to an end. But apocryphal texts were still very much fair game. Just as the author of the Acts of John had lifted scenes from

canonical Gospels, retelling them from a new perspective and with a new purpose, later authors would do the same to the Acts of John. The author of a fifth century text known as the »Acts of John by Prochorus,« for example, would retell an episode from the earlier Acts of John in which the apostle destroys the temple of Artemis of Ephesus. In the second century narrative, the pagan cult is presented as a formidable and dangerous force for the fledgling Christianity to fight; the author of the fifth century Acts of John by Prochorus adapts the episode to illustrate instead Christianity's crushing defeat of paganism.

### »Polymorphic« Texts

A common misconception about apocryphal Christian literature is that apocryphal texts were declared heretical and banned by the early church *en masse*, with bits and pieces surviving either by accident or by being hidden and rediscovered later. This notion is understandable: the very term »apocryphal« carries with it, in Greek, the sense of being »hidden away.« There surely were efforts among early church leaders (e. g. Eusebius of Caesarea) to categorize some texts as authoritative and others as impious or otherwise unacceptable, and such lists did indeed have an impact. But the vast majority of apocryphal texts were neither declared heretical nor banned, nor were they in any sense »hidden«: apocryphal texts – particularly those describing the activities of the apostles – were read alongside the canonical throughout late antiquity and the medieval period, often in celebration of saints' days. As noted above, the canonical texts

were essentially frozen by canonization, whereas the content of apocryphal texts could be continually adapted to suit contemporary interests. The same holds true for the *form* of apocryphal texts: the late antique and medieval scribes who copied these texts felt free to collect and combine material on a single apostle, as well as to break off individual episodes for independent circulation. The apocryphal acts, then, are themselves »polymorphic,« existing in a sometimes bewildering variety of recensions. The scholar is thus often tasked with sorting through multiple layers of composition and editing, in an attempt to reconstruct the earliest form of the text. This work is, of course, extremely valuable, offering us new insights into the nature of earliest Christianity. That said, the value of »living literature« like the apocryphal acts is not limited to their transmission of early material: every permutation of a text is in itself valuable evidence of the constantly changing nature of the Christian context in which it was produced and read.

### Conclusion

Reading canonical works from a contemporary perspective, through a lens that has been ground and focused by centuries of Christian interpretation, often gives the impression that the meanings of these texts are more clear-cut than they actually are. Moreover, the canonical texts are generally seen alone in the center of the frame. To read canonical texts alongside non-canonical accounts is to look through a wide-angle lens, to view canonical texts as important pieces of the early Christian literary landscape, but only a part of the whole picture. Equally important to broadening our view, however, is to consider developments over time – to develop a moving picture of Christian thought. Here, apocryphal texts, in their continued capacity for change, are particularly valuable.

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