

*A THOUSAND YEARS
OF COPTIC APOCRYPHA.*
A LECTURE ON EARLY
COPTIC CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

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On the 10th of November 2021 Professor Hugo Lundhaug – one of the greatest contemporary scholars of Coptology – presented a paper entitled *A Thousand Years of Coptic Apocrypha*. The lecture was a part of the online lecture series *Material and Written Culture of Christian Egypt* organised by Professor Alin Suciu, who – among many other scholarly activity – is a member of the Digital Edition of the Coptic-Sahidic Old Testament project of the Göttingen Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Hugo Lundhaug (Professor of Biblical Reception and Early Christian Literature of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo) is one of the most accomplished scholars of history and transmission of Early Christian literature. He is best known for his research on the Nag Hammadi Codices and Early Egyptian monasticism. His monograph – coauthored with Lance Jenott – *The Monastic Origin of the Nag Hammadi Codices*¹ argued that the Nag Hammadi manuscripts were produced and read in a monastic, more exactly in a Pachomian milieu. The authors also disentangled the Nag Hammadi Codices from the category of Gnosticism and also argued that the Early Pachomian movement was more diverse than previously thought.

In the introductory part of the lecture Professor Lundhaug spoke about the rise of the Coptic language – which can be dated to the 2nd century CE –, then he directed the audience's attention to important general scientific questions regarding (Coptic) apocryphal texts: How long had they been produced? How can we define apocrypha and especially Coptic apocrypha? Where did these texts come from? What is their storyworld? How can we categorize them and what are the types of these texts? Below, I summarize Professor Lundhaug's responses to these queries.

¹ Lundhaug and Jenott, *The Monastic Origin of the Nag Hammadi Codices*... This book became a fundamental work for those interested in this field of research so the author of this article highly recommends it for reading.

Texts elaborating upon the stories of the Bible circulated widely in Egypt during the entire period of the Coptic literary language, which roughly encompasses one thousand years from about the 4th until the 13th century. Coptic Christianity became a dominant religion in the 4th century – which also gave rise to Coptic as a (literary) language –, then was separated from the rest of the contemporary Christian world at the council of Chalcedon in 451. Almost two centuries later, after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641–42, Coptic Christianity became a minority religion. After the conquest, although Arabic continuously spread throughout Egypt (and in many aspects replaced Coptic just like Coptic previously did Greek) Coptic was still used as a literary language. From the total amount of extant literary texts written during this one thousand year period, approximately 15-20% are apocrypha. After closing this part of the lecture, Professor Lundhaug gave a simple but very useful definition of apocrypha: These are texts and traditions that develop or expand upon characters and events of the Biblical storyworld.²

Since the concept of storyworld is a key term when one is to study apocrypha, the Professor also took care of defining it. With the help of cognitive literary theory he defined the term as a reader's mental construction and simulation of an imaginary world on the basis of the text that is being read or heard.³ He also highlighted that storyworlds can be 1. transnarrative (these texts often include more than one narrative); 2. transauthorial (when they are the product of more than one author); and 3. transmedial (these texts are often based on stories presented in different media, for instance on paintings). The Biblical storyworld is then an imaginary world that is mentally constructed by a reader on the basis of one or more canonical Biblical or even other apocryphal narratives. Consequently, the Biblical storyworlds are highly individual and depend upon historical and social contexts. They form a complex and adaptive system as apocrypha proffer several additional pieces of information that we may not, or just partially do, encounter in the canonical *corpus*.

In order to show the different storyworlds present in the apocrypha, the professor presented a collection of texts on the Garden of Eden. One topic that has many interpretations is the Creation and the Fall of Adam and Eve. One of the most interesting questions here is the ambivalent character of the snake, who is often presented as an evil creature (e.g. in Ps.-Timothy's *On Abbaton* or in the Gospel of Philip),

² The same definition could be applied to Coptic apocrypha as well, apart from the fact that we only denote with this epithet those sources that are written in this language (regardless of the dialect or composition).

³ In his doctoral thesis entitled »There is a rebirth and an image of rebirth«. A cognitive poetic analysis of conceptual and intertextual blending in the Exegesis on the Soul (NHC II,6) and the Gospel of Philip (NHC II,3) he used cognitive theories to analyze two texts from the Nag Hammadi corpus, the Gospel of Philip (NHC II, 3) and the Exegesis On the Soul (NHC II, 6).

while there are also certain texts that describe it as a wise teacher (e.g. On the Origin of the World: NHC II, 5 and NHC XIII, 2).

Another interesting question regards the geography of the texts: Where do we find Coptic apocrypha in this thousand-year-long period? Professor Lundhaug listed all the Upper⁴ and Lower Egyptian⁵ cities and monastic sites where these texts had come from, while he also pointed out that the provenance of many manuscripts (e.g. *The Apocalypse of Elijah* on the Sa' manuscript) is still unknown.

Following this he elaborated on the structure and type of the Coptic apocrypha. The major constitutive parts of these texts are dialogues, which mainly unfold between the Christ and his Apostles (e.g. *Gospel of Judas*), Cherubs and the Apostles (e.g. *Mysteries of John*) and last but not least the Holy Spirit and the Apostles (e.g. *Apocalypse of Paul*: NHC V, 2). The professor also drew attention to the fact that other dialogues could be divided into other categories than those denoted by the participants – in this case, division can be based on either their chronological (e.g. between the Resurrection and the Ascension: *The Letter of Peter to Phillip* – NHC VIII, 2) or local settings (e.g. The Mount of Olives – *Mysteries of John*). We find examples to this type from the very earliest up to the very last Coptic apocrypha.

One of the protocategories of Coptic Apocrypha is works directly attributed to a character from the Biblical story. In this category we may find gospels (e.g. *The Gospel of Mary*: BG 8502, 1), apocryphons (e.g. *Apocryphon of James*: NHC I, 2), apocalypses (e.g. *The Apocalypse of Adam*: NHC V, 5), books (e.g. *Book of Thomas the Contender*: NHC II, 7), testaments (e.g. *Testament of Abraham*) etc. The second category consists of pseudoepigraphical works attributed to a historical figure of the church that contain one or more embedded works attributed to a character from the biblical storyworld. A good example for this group is Pseudo-Timothy of Alexandria's *Encomium of Abbaton, the Angel of Death* which is a pseudoepigraphic sermon that contains two embedded works: the first is the *Investiture of Abbaton, the angel of Death* that is attributed to the Apostles and the second is a dialogue between the Apostles and Christ before His ascension. In the third category we find pseudoepigraphical works that develop or expand upon characters and events of the Biblical storyworld without containing embedded works attributed to a character or characters of the same storyworld. One example is Pseudo-Theodosius of Alexandria's *On the Archangel Michael*. Unfortunately, there is one more category which we can

⁴ Monastery of Apollo (7–8th century manuscripts); The White Monastery (9–11th century manuscripts), the Monastery of John the Baptist (7–8th century manuscripts), The Pachomian federation (4–5th century manuscripts) and finally the Monastery of Mercurius (10–11th century manuscripts). In Lower Nubia there are also two important sites where several source texts were found: the Qasr Ibrim and the Qasr el-Wizz.

⁵ Monastery of Macarius (9–13th century manuscripts), Monastery of the Archangel Michael (9–10th century manuscripts).

not properly define, as some manuscripts are so fragmentary that it is impossible to identify the apocryphon (e.g. Unidentified fragment from the Monastery of Apollo in Bala'izah). Another important thing we must highlight is the fact that in some cases apocryphal texts are our only sources in which we can find reference to another, not (yet) extant apocryphal document.⁶

Finally, to offer a better understanding of the question of how and why these literary works were produced the professor pointed out the similarities between apocryphal literature and fanfiction (e.g. Star Wars). He argued that apocryphal literature served a very similar function to these fan-products, in the sense that they sometimes gain authoritative status of their own and become 'fanonical.' The same happened to some apocrypha which later gained serious role in the liturgy.

The lecture of Professor Hugo Lundhaug was fascinating, exciting and a pleasure to attend to. Those who are interested in Coptology and would like to listen to further lectures – or even previous ones uploaded to YouTube – regarding the Culture of the Christian Egypt, should visit the home page of the *Digital Edition of the Coptic Old Testament*⁷ where you can find more information about the lectures.

CITED LITERATURE

Lundhaug, Hugo – Jenott, Lance: *The Monastic Origin of the Nag Hammadi Codices*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015. (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 97.)

⁶ For an example see Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem's *On the Virgin*, in which he quotes from the Gospel of Hebrews.

⁷ coptot.manuscriptroom.com/lectures