

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

---

## Liturgies as Plot Devices in Apocryphal Acts

Berglund, Carl Johan

*Published in:*  
Why We Sing

*DOI:*  
[10.1163/9789004522053\\_008](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004522053_008)

Published: 17/11/2022

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript

*Document License*  
All rights reserved

[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*

Berglund, C. J. (2022). Liturgies as Plot Devices in Apocryphal Acts. In C. J. Berglund, B. Crostini, & J. Kelhoffer (Eds.), *Why We Sing: Music, Word, and Liturgy in Early Christianity: Essays in Honour of Anders Ekenberg's 75th Birthday* (pp. 202–224). (Vigiliae Christianae Supplements; Vol. 177). Brill.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004522053\\_008](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004522053_008)

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Liturgies as Plot Devices in Apocryphal Acts

This paper takes a novel approach to the liturgical material in the apocryphal acts of Andrew, John, Paul, Peter, and Thomas, by considering how the liturgical practices of anointing, baptism, Eucharist, and singing of psalms contribute to the plots of the narratives in which they are found. By this analysis, various combinations of anointing, baptism, and Eucharist are found to be used to confirm a character's conversion to a Christian faith, the Eucharist is used to strengthen the sense of community within a group of Christians, and both the Eucharist and singing of psalms are used to give a character encouragement in a dangerous situation. Thereby, the narratives depict conversion, community, and courage as reasons to participate in Christian liturgical practices.

### 1. Introduction

The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles are diverse collections of early Christian stories describing the adventures of the twelve apostles after the conclusion of the New Testament Gospels.<sup>1</sup> Earlier research on liturgical material within these stories have generally focused on the rituals themselves – the wordings of prayers and the details of the actions described – as reflections of actual early Christian liturgies, leaving their narrative contexts virtually unexplored, as noted by Harald Buchinger:

---

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to this literature, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor, 2008).

While the rituals narrated by apocryphal acts meanwhile have been exploited by liturgical historians, their narrative context still awaits exhaustive research.<sup>2</sup>

Buchinger describes how the majority view has shifted from presuming liturgical material in the Apocryphal Acts to represent “deviant, if not heretic minority traditions”<sup>3</sup> to viewing them as invaluable witnesses to otherwise invisible practices. He points especially to the Acts of Thomas as providing valuable data on early Syrian liturgies that did not completely conform to the Western mainstream.<sup>4</sup>

The shift described by Buchinger is exemplified by Gerard Rouwhorst, who meticulously goes through all Eucharist celebrations in the Acts of Thomas, comparing Greek and Syriac versions of the prayers offered, arguing that their wordings reflect early Syriac practices rather than heterodox ones.<sup>5</sup> Although Rouwhorst is well aware that the narrative character of his material means that liturgical elements with no particular relevance to the plot may simply have been left out,<sup>6</sup> the actual narrative is relevant for him only once – to explain the sacrificial language of Acts Thom. 158 as fitting with the anticipation of Thomas’s imminent martyrdom in Acts Thom. 159–168.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Harald Buchinger, “Liturgy and Early Christian Apocrypha,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*, eds. Andrew Gregory et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 361–77, here 373.

<sup>3</sup> Buchinger, “Liturgy,” 361.

<sup>4</sup> Buchinger, “Liturgy,” 361–66; cf. Susan E. Myers, *Spirit Epicleses in the Acts of Thomas*, WUNT II 281 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 109–10. At the expense of liturgical material in other apocryphal acts, the Acts of Thomas tend to dominate this discourse.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Rouwhorst, “La célébration de l’eucharistie selon les Actes de Thomas,” in *Omnes Circumadstantes: Contributions Towards a History of the Role of the People in the Liturgy*, eds. Charles Caspers and Marc Schneiders (Kampen: Kok, 1990), 51–77.

<sup>6</sup> Rouwhorst, “La célébration,” 75–76.

<sup>7</sup> Rouwhorst, “La célébration,” 69–70. More recently, Rouwhorst, “Hymns and Prayers in the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas,” in *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in Their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity*, eds. Clemens Leonhard and Hermut Löhr, WUNT II 363 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 195–212, has

Susan E. Myers is similarly focused on ritual language and liturgical-historical contexts in her full-length analysis of the prayers to the Spirit as “merciful mother” and “hidden mother” in Acts Thom. 27.5–10, 50.2–5. Like Rouwhorst, she takes a traditional-historical approach to these prayers, regarding them as established liturgical material secondarily incorporated into the third-century narrative.<sup>8</sup> She concludes that they “appeal to a feminine Spirit who reveals mysteries and enlightens her adherents,”<sup>9</sup> and conform to the Greco-Roman practice of enumerating attributes of the divine entity whose presence one wants to encourage.<sup>10</sup>

### Theory

In contrast to the focus on ritual language and historical developments in previous research, this study is focused on how the liturgies function as plot devices within the narratives in which they are found.

A plot device can be understood as any mechanism used by an author to move the plot forward.<sup>11</sup> It can be an object desired by the protagonist, a mechanism by which an obstacle is removed, or a

---

studied three particular prayers in Acts Thom. 10, 27, 80, continuing his focus on the liturgical texts he takes (pp. 200–201) to be independent units inserted more or less verbatim into the narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 224.

<sup>10</sup> Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 223. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, “Taufe und Taufucharistie,” in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, eds. David Hellholm et al., BZNW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 1483–1530, also has his focus on early developments of the Christian rites when he studies the practice of celebrating the Eucharist after baptism in Justin Martyr, Didache, Apocryphal Acts, and Pseudo-Clementines. An important point for Weidemann is that these *Taufeucharistien* differ from the regular celebration of the Eucharist (cf. p. 1492).

<sup>11</sup> A plot is defined by M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), 293, as an arrangement of the events and actions of a dramatic or narrative work toward achieving particular artistic and emotional effects. As discussed by Mark Allan Powell, “The Plot and Subplots of Matthew’s

phenomenon that occupies the attention of the audience during the completion of a process whose importance will only be revealed later. In biblical studies, a well-known example is Luke's way of organizing his material around journeys, which allows his protagonists Paul and Jesus not only to meet people, preach, and heal, but also to visibly progress toward their suffering (Luke 9:51–23:46; Acts 21:30–28:31).<sup>12</sup> This effect of the plot device on the plot may be called its plot contribution.

In a composite narrative, such as several of the stories in the Apocryphal Acts, there may be more than one plot active at any given time. In addition to the main plot, which is typically active from the beginning to the end of the entire narrative, that may be episodic subplots that dominate a part of the narrative while pausing or simultaneously advancing the main plot, and concurrent subplots that run concurrently with the main plot for large parts of the narrative.<sup>13</sup> For instance, Mark A. Powell argues that the Gospel of Matthew has a main plot, defined by the conflict between God and Satan, and two concurrent subplots defined by Jesus's relations to his disciples and to the religious leaders.<sup>14</sup> A plot device must be analyzed in relation to the plot which it advances, even if that is not the main plot of the narrative.

Marie-Laure Ryan remarks that plot devices range on a continuum from cheap to brilliant, and claims that cheaper tricks – such as extraordinary coincidences, false news, and tell-tale letters – often arise from the discrepancy of needs between author and narrative characters. Our ability to accept cheap tricks and plot holes varies not only with genre and taste, Ryan argues, but also on their location within the

---

Gospel,” *NTS* 38.2 (1992): 187–204, plots can be analyzed based on concepts such as narrative flow, causality, or conflict.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. William S. Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts: Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 27–28.

<sup>13</sup> Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 295, define a subplot as a second story that is complete and interesting in its own way – a definition that clearly include subplots that coexist with the main plot throughout the larger part of a narrative.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, “The Plot and Subplots of Matthew's Gospel,” 198–203.

narrative arc: a preparatory coincidence is easily forgotten, while a *deus ex machina* ending lingers in the reader's mind.<sup>15</sup> As pointed out by Boris Thomashevsky, a plot device is an embarrassment only if the author unsuccessfully tries to conceal it.<sup>16</sup>

Karin Koehler argues that the Victorian author Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) uses trains, letters, and telegrams not as simple props to resolve his plots, but to express the experience of living in a changing society.<sup>17</sup> In *Desperate Remedies* (1871), two men – Owen and Springrove – are desperate to reach a third, Manston, who just left on a train. Owen goes to buy a ticket to the next train, which is due to leave in forty-five minutes, and sends Springrove to dispatch a telegram to intercept Manston at his destination. Having sent the telegram, Springrove spots a late train at the station, and manages to catch it, in order to reach Manston before Owen does. Koehler finds the three men's experiences of modern communications to shape an intricate plot, but also to express their ultimate lack of control in an increasingly accelerated and interconnected world.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), the heroines' ability to write and send letters is one of their few ways of resisting their male oppressors, but ultimately proves insufficient for the poor and marginalized in Victorian society.<sup>19</sup> Thereby, Koehler concludes, Hardy's use of contemporary advances in communication as plot devices becomes an integral part of his plea for social change.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, "Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design," *Narrative* 17.1 (2009): 56–75.

<sup>16</sup> Boris Thomashevsky, "Story, Plot, and Motivation," in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson (Ohio State University Press, 2002), 164–78, here 176–77.

<sup>17</sup> Karin Koehler, *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and Postal Systems* (Cham: Springer, 2016), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Koehler, *Thomas Hardy*, 133–42.

<sup>19</sup> Koehler, *Thomas Hardy*, 164–84.

<sup>20</sup> Koehler, *Thomas Hardy*, 219.

Like Luke's looming doom and Hardy's futile struggles, deeper narrative patterns may be detected in how the stories in the Apocryphal Acts use liturgies to advance their plots, and reveal what reasons the implied author found for participating in these practices.<sup>21</sup>

### Material

This study considers every episode in the Acts of Andrew, Acts of John, Acts of Paul, Acts of Peter, and Acts of Thomas which depicts anointing, baptism, Eucharist, or singing of psalms.<sup>22</sup>

These stories are not preserved in a consistent manuscript tradition, but exhibit significant differences between available manuscripts, both in details and in the inclusion and exclusion of scenes and episodes.<sup>23</sup> While some manuscripts seem to be redacted with an eye toward ideological harmonization, others

---

<sup>21</sup> Judith Perkins, "The Apocryphal *Acts of Peter*: A Roman à Thèse?," *Arethusa* 25.3 (1992): 445–57, argues that the Acts of Peter is an ideological novel, aimed at proving the superiority of Christianity with references to its ability to cure sickness and death. A more subtle approach toward presenting Christianity as beneficial for the believer may be found in the use of liturgies as plot devices.

<sup>22</sup> These five collections are generally considered the "five major" Apocryphal Acts, and constitute a reasonably large material for a limited study, as is done by e.g. Janet E. Spittler, *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: The Wild Kingdom of Early Christian Literature*, WUNT II 247 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008). A complete study would have at least thirty other such collections to consider, including the Acts of Philip, Acts of Thaddaeus, and Acts of Matthew in the City of the Priests.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, the Acts of Andrew and Matthias are traditionally included in the Acts of Andrew, as summarized by Gregory of Tours, but are often considered independent of Acts Andr. See Dennis R. MacDonald, trans., *The Acts of Andrew*, Early Christian Apocrypha 1 (Farmington: Polebridge, 2005), 2–6. Cf. Christine M. Thomas, "The 'Prehistory' of the Acts of Peter," in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Harvard Divinity School Studies*, eds. François Bovon, Ann Graham Brock, and Christopher R. Matthews (Cambridge: Harvard CSWR, 1999), 39–62; Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 59; Glenn E. Snyder, *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus*, WUNT II 352 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–5; Julia A. Snyder, *Language and Identity in Ancient Narratives: The Relationship between*

comprise different materials suggesting widely divergent theological views.<sup>24</sup> This study makes no attempt to bring harmony and consistency to this diverse collection of material, but regards each self-contained story within the tradition as a more-or-less independent narrative, with its own ideological and theological outlook. When traditions are extant in multiple languages, a Greek version is generally given preference.

As historical fiction,<sup>25</sup> the Apocryphal Acts may contain some confirmable historical information,<sup>26</sup> which may or may not extend to the descriptions of early Christian liturgies. For instance, King Gundaphoros (Γουνδαφόρος)<sup>27</sup> is not only an important character in the Acts of Thomas, but also a

---

*Speech Patterns and Social Context in the Acts of the Apostles, Acts of John, and Acts of Philip*, WUNT II 370 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 91–97.

<sup>24</sup> Rouwhorst, “Hymns and Prayers,” 200, finds it clear that one or more editors have combined various rather heterogenous materials into the Acts of Thomas. Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 57–59, 67–70, 107, 222–23, characterizes the Acts of Thomas as a composite work characterized by extensive redaction, whereby the prayers, in which she is primarily interested, have been inserted into the narrative.

<sup>25</sup> The pioneer in comparing the Apocryphal Acts to ancient novels is Ernst von Dobschütz, “Der Roman in der altchristlichen Literatur,” *Deutsche Rundschau* 111 (1902): 87–106.

<sup>26</sup> James McGrath, “History and Fiction in the Acts of Thomas: The State of the Question,” *JSP* 17.4 (2008): 297–311, here 297–99, remarks that good historical fiction always comprises hard historical facts. Christine M. Thomas, *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel: Rewriting the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87–105, proposes that the Acts of Peter are positioned – together with the book of Esther and Joseph and Aseneth – at the approximate mid-point of a continuum between ancient novels and ancient historiography, sharing their fluid manuscript tradition with the former category and their references to an assumed historical reality with the latter. Karl Olav Sandnes, “Seal and Baptism in Early Christianity,” in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, eds. David Hellholm et al., BZNW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 1441–1481, here 1464, characterizes the Acts of Paul stating: “A minimal amount of historical facts have been developed and embellished to the extent that they tell more about Christian storytelling than about actual events.”

<sup>27</sup> The Syrian texts have “Gudnafar” or “Gundafar”. Cf. Acts Thom. 2.2, 2.4, 17.1, 26.1.



historical ruler of northwestern India, king Gondophares (ca. 19–46 CE), who declared himself independent from the Partian empire, and whose portrait is available on contemporary coinage.<sup>28</sup> Buchinger points out the methodological difficulty of knowing whether a narrative reflects historical practice, or if historical practice has taken inspiration from a narrative,<sup>29</sup> and remarks that liturgies in a narrative have no need to reflect actual practice, but cannot strike the intended reader as completely absurd.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, this study makes no assumption regarding the historical accuracy of the liturgies in the Apocryphal acts, beyond requirement that the intended reader would not find them to be completely implausible.

### **Method**

For every scene in which a liturgy is narrated – where a character is anointed or baptized, bread is broken, a cup is shared, or a character is singing psalms – the plot or subplot of the surrounding story will be analyzed, and the contribution provided by the liturgy to the advancement of this plot identified. The plot contributions from different stories will be compared and grouped based on similarity. The application of this method to the material will not be described in detail, but the results will be presented organized around the three most frequently recurring contributions: (1) confirmation of conversion, (2) establishment of community, and (3) courage in danger.

## **2. Liturgies that Confirm a Conversion**

The most common plot contribution of liturgies in the Apocryphal Acts is to confirm that a character has converted to a Christian faith – an occurrence that is both recurrent and central to many of the plots. The

---

<sup>28</sup> McGrath, “History and Fiction,” 299–302. Gondophares’s rule of an originally Parthian province on the Indian sub-continent may explain why some sources connect Thomas to Parthia, while others link him to India. Gondophares reappears in later legends as the Caspar who visits Bethlehem together with Melchior and Balthazar.

<sup>29</sup> Buchinger, “Liturgy,” 371–73.

<sup>30</sup> Buchinger, “Liturgy,” 369–70.

conversion scenes are often not limited to a single rite, but depict a whole chain of liturgical practices that complete the convert's transition from a Gentile to a Christian identity.

### **Baptism and Eucharist in the Acts of Peter**

On a journey from Jerusalem to Rome, the apostle Peter successfully shares his faith with Theon, the captain of the ship on which he is traveling (Acts Pet. 5.13–24). On a calm day when everyone else on the ship is drunk and sleeping, Theon asks to be baptized with the sign of the Lord (*intingas in signo domini*). Peter complies, and also offers him the Eucharist:

Peter climbed down a rope and baptized Theon in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When he came out of the water he was overjoyed, and Peter was also cheerful since God had found Theon worthy of his name. Then, in the very spot where Theon had been baptized, a magnificently beautiful young man appeared, and said to them: "Peace to you." Peter and Theon continued up into the cabin, where Peter took bread and gave thanks to the Lord, who had found him suitable for his holy service, and granted him the vision of the young man who said "Peace to you." He said: "Best and only Holy One, who showed yourself to us, God, Jesus Christ. In your name he is now washed and sealed with your holy mark. Therefore, in your name I share your Eucharist with him, so that he may be perfected as your blameless servant forever" (Acts Pet. 5.25–31).<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Richard Adelbert Lipsius, ed., *Acta Petri, Acta Pauli, Acta Petri et Pauli, Acta Pauli et Theclae, Acta Thaddei, Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha 1* (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891), 50.29–51.10 (ET: mine): *Petrus per funem descendens, baptizauit Theonem in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. ille autem subiuit ab aqua gaudens gaudio magno, item Petrus hilarior factus, quod dignum habuisset deus Theonem nomine suo. factum est autem ubi Theon baptizatus est, in eodem loco apparuit iuuenis decore spendidus, dicens eis: Pax uobis. Et continuo ascenderunt Petrus et Theon et introierunt in lectina, et accepit panem Petrus et gratias egit domino, qui eum dignatus fuisset sancto ministerio suo, et quia uisus fuisset eis iuuenis dicens Pax uobis: Optimus et solus sanctus, tu enim nobis uisus es, deus Iesu Christe, in tuo nomine mox lotus et signatus est sancto tuo signo. sic itaque in tuo nomine eucharistiam tuam communico ei, ut sit consummatus seruus tuus sine repraehensione in perpetuo.* (The *lotus* here is Lipsius's correction of the manuscript's nonsensical *locutus*.)

Within the story of Peter's confrontation with the magician Simon of Aricia (cf. Acts Pet. 4.1–2; Acts 8:9–10), the episode depicting Peter's sea journey from Caesarea to Puteoli (Acts Pet. 5.7–33) is dominated by the subplot of Peter encountering Theon, who is curious about Peter's God, eagerly listens to his preaching, asks to be baptized, and eventually joins Peter in his missionary work in Rome (cf. Acts Pet. 6.35–36). The conversion liturgy of baptism and Eucharist advances the plot from Theon's desire to convert in Acts Pet. 5.24 to Theon's newfound Christian identity in Acts Pet. 6.4. This plot contribution is emphasized by Christ's sudden appearance and greeting of Peter and Theon, marking his acceptance of their service. When Peter recounts the event, he specifies that Theon has been washed and sealed with Christ's holy mark. This recount suggests that the baptism is the main element of the conversion process, and a prerequisite for the subsequent Eucharist.<sup>32</sup>

### **Eucharist and Laying of Hands in the Acts of John**

In contrast, no baptism is mentioned when John converts a large Ephesian crowd by turning up at their largest festival and challenging them to ask their goddess Artemis to kill him on the spot – or he might ask his God to kill them all (Acts John 37.1–39.1). The Ephesians shudder at this challenge, for they have seen John raise the dead to life (40.1). John prays that God instead shall show his mercy, and immediately half the Artemisian temple collapses and falls to the ground (42.1–2). Then, the Ephesians declare that there is no god but John's God (42.3, 44.2), accept conversion (42.4), tear down what is left of the temple (44.1)

---

<sup>32</sup> Weidemann, "Taufe und Taufeucharistie," 1500–1501, correctly identifies the Eucharist as the end point of the initiation ritual. That Peter and Theon celebrate this Eucharist among the two of them is natural, as they are the only two Christians on the ship. Wiedemann's presumption that any table fellowship between the Gentile captain and the Christian apostle would be out of the question before the baptism cannot be taken for granted, since Luke 7:1–10 and Acts 10 both do away with this tabu, which is most poignantly expressed in Jub. 22.16.

and urge John to receive them (44.8).<sup>33</sup> He responds by inviting them to a private home (46.1) to what appears to be an ordinary worship service, since the next piece of the plot takes place “after the homily to the brothers and sisters, the prayer, and the Eucharist, and after the laying of hands upon everyone who attended” (Acts John 46.4).<sup>34</sup> No baptism is mentioned, so the Eucharist and laying of hands appears to be enough of a conversion liturgy to resolve the conflict and transform the Ephesians from members of the failed Artemisian cult to Christians.<sup>35</sup>

### **Anointing, Baptism, and Eucharist in the Acts of Thomas**

An even longer conversion liturgy is depicted in the Acts of Thomas, where new Christians are recurrently welcomed into the Christian community via a chain of liturgical practices including anointing with oil, baptism with water, and the Eucharist – collectively referred to as the σφραγίς (“seal”). Curiously enough, baptism is not consistently described as the central element of this liturgical chain, while descriptions frequently give prominence to the anointing.<sup>36</sup>

The clearest description of this liturgical chain is the conversion of the noblewoman Mygdonia in Acts Thom. 120–121. Mygdonia is eager to hear Thomas’s proclamation of the new god (82), and when he finishes, she casts herself before his feet and begs him to give her the σφραγίς (87). Thomas does not immediately comply (88), and Mygdonia’s desire for the σφραγίς drives the plot through a number of

<sup>33</sup> Snyder, *Language and Identity*, 106–9, argues that both the crowd’s requests and John’s response reflects an outlook where the conversion is not completed in 42.4, but a longer process that is yet to be completed.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, eds., *Acta Iohannis*, Corpus Christianorum. Series Apocryphorum 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1983), 227.5–7 (ET: mine): μετὰ τὴν ὁμιλίαν τὴν πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς καὶ τὴν εὐχὴν καὶ τὴν εὐχαριστίαν καὶ μετὰ τὴν χειροθεσίαν τὴν ἐφ’ ἐκάστου τῶν συνεδρευόντων....

<sup>35</sup> Snyder, *Language and Identity*, 108–9, 136–37, observes that the word ἀδελφοί and John’s way of referring to God without a qualifying “my” confirms the converts’ newly acquired Christian identity.

<sup>36</sup> Rouwhorst, “La célébration,” 74; Buchinger, “Liturgy,” 365–66, both argue that the focus on anointing and the Eucharist is consistent with Syriac sources on early liturgies.

complications (89–117) before they meet again (118), and she can repeat her request (120.1). This time, she also sends her servant Narkia to bring the necessary supplies: some oil, a bread, and a cup of water (120.8–11). Narkia offers to bring wine rather than water for the Eucharist, but Mygdonia rejects the offer – apparently expressing the implied author’s preference to celebrate the Eucharist with water even when wine is available.<sup>37</sup> With everything in place, Thomas performs the liturgy:

He took the oil and poured it on her head. [...]. There was a source of water there, to which the apostle went and baptized Mygdonia in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When she was baptized and clothed, he broke bread, took a cup of water, made her a sharer of the body of Christ and of the cup of the Son of God, and said: ”You have received the seal. Go and get yourself eternal life!” (Acts Thom. 121.2, 7–9)<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> The Syriac version has Mygdonia ask for wine that has been mixed, presumably with water, and only reject an abundant amount of wine. Rouwhorst, “La célébration,” 65–66, takes this as one of several changes in an effort to efface heterodox practices from the text. Since κράσιν ὕδατος can refer to wine mixed with water, this particular alteration may also be an attempt at simple clarification.

<sup>38</sup> Max Bonnet, ed., *Acta Philippi et Acta Thomae, accedunt Acta Barnabae*, Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha 2:2 (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1903), 230.21–22, 231.6–13 (ET: mine): καὶ αὐτὸς ἄρας τὸ ἔλαιον κατέχευεν ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ αὐτῆς [...] ἦν δέ τις ἐκεῖ κρήνη ὕδατος, ἐφ’ ἣν ἀνελθὼν ὁ ἀπόστολος τὴν Μυγδονίαν ἐβάπτισεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος. ὡς δὲ ἐβάπτισθη καὶ ἐνεδύσατο, ἄρτον κλάσας καὶ λαβὼν ποτήριον ὕδατος κοινωνὸν ἐποίησεν αὐτὴν τῷ τοῦ Χριστοῦ σώματι καὶ ποτηρίου τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ εἶπεν· Ἐδέξω σου τὴν σφραγίδα, κτίσαι σεαυτῇ ζωὴν αἰώνιον. The translation reflects Bonnet’s proposed emendation ποτηρίῳ for the less logical ποτηρίου.

Thomas's declaration that Mygdonia has received the σφραγίς ("seal") clarifies that the rite performed is a conversion liturgy, comprising an anointing of the head, a baptism in water, and the sharing of the Eucharist,<sup>39</sup> which achieves the transition from a Gentile to a Christian identity.<sup>40</sup>

The use of the conversion liturgy as a plot device desired by secondary characters recurs throughout the Acts of Thomas. After witnessing Mygdonia's conversion, her servant Narkia asks for, and receives, the same seal (121.11–12). Thomas's host Sifor also asks for him and his family to receive the seal (131.5).<sup>41</sup> They are subsequently anointed with oil on their heads (132.5), baptized in a basin (132.7), and given the bread of the Eucharist (133.1–6).<sup>42</sup> King Mizdai's son Vizian asks for the seal (150.1, 152.8),<sup>43</sup> and he and Mygdonia's sisters are anointed (157.14),<sup>44</sup> led into the water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (157.16),<sup>45</sup> and given the eucharistic bread (158.12).<sup>46</sup> Even king Gundaphoros and his

---

<sup>39</sup> Sandnes, "Seal and Baptism," 1468, argues that the double mention of σφραγίς before (120.1) and after (121.9) the liturgy confirms that the term summarizes a three-step initiation with oil, water, and meal. Weidemann, "Taufe und Taufucharistie," 1502, cf. 1506–7, finds confirmation of the same in Acts Thom. 15.3–42, where Thomas is described as a wizard who enchants people with oil, water, and bread.

<sup>40</sup> Rouwhorst, "La célébration," 64, remarks that Acts Thom. 120–121 constitutes a Christian initiation of Mygdonia.

<sup>41</sup> Rouwhorst, "La célébration," 66, identifies Acts Thom. 131–133 as an initiation scene.

<sup>42</sup> The Greek text mentions neither wine nor water as part of the Eucharist here, but a later Syriac version clarifies that wine is brought out together with the bread. Cf. Rouwhorst, "La célébration," 66–67.

<sup>43</sup> Rouwhorst, "La célébration," 68, identifies this scene as a Christian initiation.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas anoints the man himself and asks Mygdonia to anoint the women.

<sup>45</sup> Sandnes, "Seal and Baptism," 1473–74, claims that this text makes baptism and anointing into one ritual act.

<sup>46</sup> A cup (ποτήριον) with unspecified content is brought out (Acts Thom. 158.1) and associated with the blood of Christ (158.2), but only the bread is explicitly said to be distributed to the new converts (158.12). Rouwhorst, "La célébration," 68–70, notes that the Syriac version adds that the cup is mixed, i.e. contains wine mixed with water.

brother Gad eventually ask to serve the God of Thomas (24.6–7), and are both anointed (27.4) and given the Eucharist (27.14).<sup>47</sup>

Secondarily, the conversion liturgy is considered to give protection against evil spirits.<sup>48</sup> When Thomas liberates a woman who has been sexually abused by a demon for the past five years (Acts Thom. 42–48), she asks for the seal, in order to prevent the enemy from returning (49.3). The narrator states that Thomas laid his hands on her and many others, and “sealed” (ἐσφράγισεν) them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Acts Thom. 49.4), before inviting them to the eucharistic table (Acts. 49.7).<sup>49</sup> Baptism is not explicitly mentioned, but by analogy to the cases described above, we may surmise that the verb σφράγιζω (“seal”) refers to a complete conversion liturgy.<sup>50</sup> Karl Olav Sandnes suggests that the term should be understood – in analogy with the physical markings used on cattle, slaves, and soldiers as signs of ownership and authority – as an umbrella term for a clear Christian identity, regardless of which

---

<sup>47</sup> The extensive account of the anointing in Acts Thom. 27.4–11 gives the impression that the seal refers to the anointing only, after which the converts are declared to be sealed (27.11) and proceed to the Eucharist (27.14), but 25.4 refers both to the anointing with oil and the cleansing with a bath, so we may surmise that the royals received a baptism at some unspecified point in the liturgy. Rouwhorst, “La célébration,” 56, identifies this scene as a Christian initiation, and argues that the Greek version of Acts Thom. misinterpret a Syriac *rushma* (“seal”) that originally referred to a pre-baptismal anointing to simply mean “baptism.” Sandnes, “Seal and Baptism,” 1472–73, argues that the curious specification that they had not yet received τὸ ἐπισφράγισμα τῆς σφραγίδος (“the sealing of the seal”) in Acts Thom. 27.3 can be taken to mean that the seal was not complete until all links of the liturgical chain of baptism, anointment, Eucharist, and the laying of hands are performed. But this strict interpretation is contradicted by Acts Thom. 27.11, where the seal is complete even though the Eucharist has not yet been celebrated. More probable is that σφραγίς sometimes is used in the more limited sense of the anointing, sometimes in the inclusive sense of the complete initiation, as argued by Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 115.

<sup>48</sup> Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> Rouwhorst, “La célébration,” 59, identifies Acts Thom. 49–50 as an initiation scene.

<sup>50</sup> This is argued in Myers, *Spirit Epicleses*, 111–15, 140–41.

particular liturgical practices are used to establish it. Such an identity would naturally imply the obligation to defend, obey, and serve Christ, as well as the expectation of his protection.<sup>51</sup>

### **Baptism in the Acts of Paul**

The Acts of Paul also use a conversion liturgy called σφραγίς (“seal”) as a desired plot device, but its descriptions focus entirely on water baptism. In a most memorable scene, a talking lion suddenly appears on the road to Jericho in Phoenicia and demands to be baptized:

Then a huge and famished lion came out of the valley of the field of bones. As for us, we were praying fervently; Lemma and Ammia fell before the beast in prayer. When I had finished praying, the beast was crouched at my feet. Filled with the spirit, I looked at it and said, “Lion, what do you want?” “I want to be baptized.” I praised God who had given speech to the beast and safety to God’s servants. That spot featured a large stream; I went down into it, the creature following. [...] Following this prayer I grabbed it by the mane and immersed it three times in the name of Jesus Christ. When he had come up out of the water he shook out his mane and said to me, “Grace be with you.” “And also with you,” I replied (Acts Paul 9.7–9).<sup>52</sup>

The scene is dominated by the immediate threat of the beast, and its desire to be baptized functions as a surprising release of the tension. Paul prays for his life, grabs the lion by the mane and immerses it three times in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts Paul 9.9). In the larger story of Acts Paul 9.1–28, the converted lion is used as a Chekov’s Gun – a plot device that is introduced early in the story, and later reappears to resolve the main plot in an interesting way: When Paul later on is thrown into the Ephesian arena, before a large, ferocious lion, the lion greets him with a human voice, and turns out to be the lion he previously baptized

---

<sup>51</sup> Sandnes, “Seal and Baptism,” 1443–46, 1474–75.

<sup>52</sup> P. Bodmer 41.4.4–19, 5.10–17; Rodolphe Kasser and Philippe Luisier, “Le Papyrus Bodmer XLI en édition princeps. L’*épisode d’Éphèse des Acta Pauli* en copte et en traduction,” *Le Muséon* 117 (2004): 281–384, here 320.4–19, 322.10–17; ET: Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 22.



(9.22–24).<sup>53</sup> In order to effectively establish the lion’s conversion and set up the Chekov’s Gun, the narrative needs to depict the essential element(s) of a conversion liturgy, and for the intended audience of the story, this seems to be a water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.

The σφραγίς (“seal”) is also desired by other characters within the Acts of Paul. Hermocrates, who suffers from edema, is both healed and sealed by Paul, but this angers his son Hermippus, who was counting on the inheritance (5.1–6). When Paul breaks out of prison the night before his planned execution in the arena, in order to baptize a woman named Artemilla (9.16–21), he not only lays his hand upon her and descends into the water, but also offers her bread and water (9.21), which implies that the author could envision a longer conversion liturgy when circumstances so allowed.<sup>54</sup> At the eventual beheading of Paul, a prefect and a centurion are convinced by his words and courage, and wonder how they will be able to live when Paul is dead. Paul sends them to Luke and Titus, who seal them (14.1–7).

The character most eager to convert is the young woman Thecla. When she asks to be given the seal, Paul responds by promising her τὸ ὕδωρ (“the water”; 3.7, 3.25). When Thecla later claims to have received τὸ λουτρόν (“the bath”) by throwing herself into a pit of water in the name of Christ, Paul does not offer any additional liturgy, but sends her off to teach Christ’s message in Iconium (4.15–16, cf. 4.9). Sandnes argues that the Thecla story identifies seal and baptism, but also incorporates a protective element of the Christian seal: The baptism serves to protect from sexual temptations, which is why Paul wants the young and attractive Thecla to postpone her baptism until an age when she can be expected to keep her

---

<sup>53</sup> Spittler, *Animals*, 182–87, cf. 174–75, suggests that the story originated as a combination of the notion that Paul once escaped unharmed from a lion in the arena (cf. 1 Cor 15:32; 2 Tim 4:17) and the story of Androcles, which also features an unlikely friendship between the protagonist and a lion, both of which are subsequently captured and expected to fight each other in the arena.

<sup>54</sup> Snyder, *Acts of Paul*, 73–74, observes that the liturgy consists of baptism and a “post-baptismal sacrament consisting of bread and water.”

chastity. When she turns up baptized, she is also dressed like a man, thereby demonstrating that she has overcome her sexuality, and no longer is in danger of defiling the seal.<sup>55</sup>

### **Evangelization Liturgies**

The consistent use of the σφραγίς (“seal”) as a plot device that is desired by all insightful characters strongly project Christian conversion as something worth pursuing, thereby contributing to the evangelizing aim of many of the stories within the Apocryphal Acts. In the Acts of John and the Acts of Thomas, this aim is accentuated by two scenes where preaching and singing is used to present the Christian tradition to outsiders, giving them the choice of proceeding toward a commitment to Christ.

When John learns that there are many old women in Ephesus who are paralyzed, deaf, arthritic, or otherwise ill, he decides to make a show (θέα) out of the healings in order to convert (ἐπιστρέφω) some of the curious onlookers (30.7). The women are gathered in the theater (30.6, 32.1), a large crowd turns up (31.3), and John treats them all to a revival sermon where he promises healings, condemns sin, warns of eternal punishments, and calls everyone to convert (33–36). The end of this story is not extant, but may have comprised a liturgy confirming the conversion of the crowd.<sup>56</sup>

When Thomas attends the public festivities surrounding the marriage of king Gundaphoros’s daughter (Acts Thom. 4.1–7), he notices a Hebrew girl playing the flute. Recognizing their common interest in music, he sings her a song in Hebrew, describing the eternal wedding banquet of the heavenly kingdom (6.3–7.10). This gets her attention, and when he also accurately predicts the demise of one of the other servants at the banquet (6.1–2, 8.9–9.4), she declares him to be either a god or an emissary of God (9.3). Since they are the only two at the festival who understand Hebrew, this evangelization liturgy is narrowly focused on its intended audience, but it is effective – and the girl can relay the message to those around her.

---

<sup>55</sup> Sandnes, “Seal and Baptism,” 1463–66.

<sup>56</sup> A similar show may be intended when Paul rents a storehouse (ὄρπιον) outside Rome to teach the word of truth there (Acts Paul 14.1).

### 3. Liturgies that Establish a Community

Some liturgies are less tailored to the situation, presented as regularly occurring in the Christian community, and contribute to build a sense of fellowship, companionship, and solidarity between the local Christians. This is particularly pronounced in the two eucharistic scenes where one of the would-be communicants is denied participation, and where the Eucharist is used as a plot device to inform the reader that some kinds of misbehavior would lead to exclusion from the community.

#### The Eucharist Establishes the Community

In several scenes, the Eucharist is depicted as an integrated element of the life of Christian communities, a regular activity that creates a sense of community. This function is especially important when the protagonist has just joined the community or is about to leave.

When Paul arrives at Iconium in Lycaonia, on his journey from Antioch in Pisidia (cf. Acts 13:14, 50–51), the community gathers in the house of Onesiphorus (cf. 2 Tim 1:16–18, 4:19) to celebrate:

When Paul entered Onesiphoros's house, there was great joy. Knees were bent, bread was broken, and God's word about self-control and resurrection was preached by Paul, who said.... (Acts Paul 3.5).<sup>57</sup>

This short account refers to several different liturgical practices: the bending of knees (κλίσις γονάτων), seemingly for praying, the breaking of bread (κλάσις ἄρτου), apparently for the Eucharist, and the preaching of God's word by Paul. These liturgies contribute to establishing the good accord between Paul and the Iconian Christians, in anticipation of the introduction of Thecla in Acts Paul 3.7.

When Paul sets out to leave Corinth for Rome, the Corinthian Christians are grieved by the prospect of never seeing him again, since his activities in Rome might lead to his martyrdom. When they celebrate the Eucharist, the Spirit assures them that Paul will convert many in Rome, and the meal turns

---

<sup>57</sup> Lipsius, *Acta Petri*, 238.9–12 (ET: mine): Καὶ εἰσελθόντος Παύλου εἰς τὸν Ὀνησιφόρου οἶκον ἐγένετο χαρὰ μεγάλη, καὶ κλίσις γονάτων καὶ κλάσις ἄρτου καὶ λόγος θεοῦ περὶ ἐγκρατείας καὶ ἀναστάσεως, λέγοντος τοῦ Παύλου....

into a joyous feast (Acts Paul 12.2–5). An almost identical scene is depicted in the Acts of Peter, where Paul is called to leave Rome for Spain (Acts Pet. 1.5–6). The Roman Christians worry that he will be martyred in Spain, so that they never see him again (1.7–8), but a heavenly voice asserts that Paul will be martyred in Rome, before their very eyes (1.14–16). Reassured, they bring Paul bread and water to celebrate the Eucharist (2.1).<sup>58</sup> Similarly, when John decides that it is time to leave earth for heaven, he does not depart until the following Sunday, to first speak to the assembly and share the Eucharist with them (Acts John 106.1–110.2). After the liturgy, John asks two disciples to dig a grave, lies down in it, and gives up his spirit (Acts John 110.3, 111.2–7, 115.1–2). All three of these liturgies serve to accentuate the tight bond between a Christian community and the departing protagonist, thereby deepening the intended reader's sense of loss. Thereby, the plot also establishes the Eucharist as contributing to a strong sense of community among Christians.

### **Exclusion from the Eucharist**

The Eucharist's narrative function of establishing community is further pronounced by two scenes where one of the prospective communicants is rejected because of grave unconfessed sin. At Paul's farewell service in Rome (Acts Pet. 2.1), a woman named Rufina approaches him to receive the Eucharist – but Paul rejects her, saying:

Rufina, you are not coming to God's altar as someone who is worthy. You have got up not from your husband's side, but from that of an adulterer (*moechi*) – yet you try to receive God's Eucharist! (Acts Pet. 2.3–4).<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Since no wine is mentioned, while Acts Pet. 2.2, 2.4 state that the meal is a Eucharist, the intended reader apparently had no difficulty celebrating with bread and water.

<sup>59</sup> Lipsius, *Acta Petri*, 46.16–18 (ET: mine): *Rufina, non tamquam digna accedes ad altarium dei. surgens a latere non mariti sed moechi, et dei eucharistiam temptas accipere.*

Paul's wording clarifies that while it is perfectly acceptable to participate in the Eucharist while having an active sex life with one's husband, receiving it while cheating on him is not. Such behavior, if revealed, implies exclusion from the Christian community – and Paul's prophetic vision perceives the offense.

At another Eucharist, celebrated by the apostle Thomas (Acts Thom. 50.7–9), an approaching young man is rejected by the sacrament itself. When he takes the bread in his hand and tries to put it into his mouth, both his hands wither and shrivel, so that he is unable to reach his mouth (51.2). When questioned by the apostle, he readily confesses that he has killed his girlfriend, because she wouldn't give up her work as a prostitute (51.4–12).<sup>60</sup> Although “adultery is more serious in the eyes of God than the other sins” (58.6),<sup>61</sup> murder is no better. Luckily, Thomas is able to restore the boy's hands, bring the girl back to life, and advise them both to refrain from further misdemeanor (52.3–54.5, 58.1–9).

Both these episodes are built on the use of the Eucharist as a desired plot device that can be denied those who do not fulfill the requirements, and establish that grave sin – adultery and murder – lead to exclusion from the Christian community established by the Eucharist.

### **The Eucharist is Life, Its Rejection is Death**

The crucial contrast between the life-giving community of the Eucharist and the death of exclusion is further developed in the last scene of the morbid love story between Drusiana and Kallimachos (Acts John 63–86). Drusiana and her husband Andronikos have decided to refrain from sex to emulate John in Christian discipleship (63.2). Kallimachos lusts after Drusiana, and will stop at nothing in pursuit of her body (63.1).

---

<sup>60</sup> That she is a prostitute can be inferred from the statements that she lived in an inn (51.8), that she was unwilling to live a chaste life (51.11–12), and that the boyfriend was unwilling to watch her commit adultery with other people (51.13). Cf. Harold W. Attridge, trans., *The Acts of Thomas*, Early Christian Apocrypha 3 (Salem: Polebridge, 2010), 54, note to 51.8.

<sup>61</sup> Bonnet, *Acta Philippi et Acta Thomae*, 175.9–10: ἡ γὰρ μοιχεία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ πάνυ χαλεπὸν ἐστὶν παρὰ τὰ ἄλλα κακά.

To escape from his desires, Drusiana lies down and dies (64.3–8), but Kallimachos bribes Andronikos’s chief servant, Fortunatus, and gets into the tomb to rape her dead body (70.1–2). When only a single cloth remains of Drusiana’s decency, a venomous snake turns up, kills Fortunatus, and immobilizes Kallimachos (71.1–3).<sup>62</sup> When John liberates Kallimachos and revives Drusiana, who raises Fortunatus (75, 80.1–83.1), Kallimachos is remorseful and converts (76.12–15),<sup>63</sup> but Fortunatus spitefully declares that he had rather stayed dead than encountered John and Drusiana again, and dashes out from the tomb (83.2–4). In the final scene, Fortunatus dies in a ditch from his untreated snake wound (86.2–5), while John and the other believers happily celebrate the Eucharist in the emptied tomb (85.1–86.1).

This story plays with the distinction between life and death. Due to John’s unusual ease in raising the deceased,<sup>64</sup> the line between death and life is made permeable, and the knowledgeable reader anticipates that none of the deceased will stay dead. This playfulness makes Fortunatus’s second death all the more final.<sup>65</sup> The true distinction between life and death has nothing to do with being physically alive, and everything to do with being a Christian.<sup>66</sup> This contrast is highlighted when the believers share the bread of

---

<sup>62</sup> Spittler, *Animals*, 110–16, recognizes that the ambiguous portrayal of the snake, who punishes the wrongdoers with no recognition from John, is in line with a widespread understanding of snakes as punishers of the wicked, and suggest that the snake’s aversion to seeing Drusiana naked is informed by a tradition that snakes shun all naked people attested in *Physiologus* 11.

<sup>63</sup> Snyder, *Language and Identity*, 115–16, remarks that John’s reference to “our God” in Acts John 78.2 might imply that Kallimachos’s conversion process is quicker than those of the Ephesians.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Acts John 23.1–5 (Kleopatra), 24.7–8 (Lykomedes), 47.4 (the high priest of Artemis), and 52.1–3 (the father of a young man).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Acts John 86.5 with 84.16, where Satan and all who share his orientation are explicitly excluded from Christian practices, including (84.13) baptism and the Eucharist.

<sup>66</sup> Buchinger, “Liturgy,” 366–67, takes the juxtaposition of resurrection and Eucharist as a narrativization of “the widespread understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrament of immortality or imperishability.”

life in a tomb, while the one who fled the tomb dies outside. The partakers of the Eucharist are alive, even if they already lie in the tomb, while those rejecting Christ are, one might say, already dead.

#### 4. Liturgies that Give Courage in Dangerous Situations

In two episodes, the liturgies give the apostles strength and courage in times of danger and suffering, thereby serving as plot vouchers – plot devices that let the characters overcome obstacles to their objectives.

##### The Eucharist Gives Courage

After the joyful celebration following the conversions of king Gundaphoros and his brother Gad (Acts Thom. 25–27), the Acts of Thomas take a turn toward the darker. Thomas warns his converts that gluttony, greed, and sexual immorality always will threaten to drive them back into the darkness (28.1–13), a mysterious prophecy proclaims that they still have a debt to pay to the devil (29.1–2), and in a dream, Christ commissions Thomas to walk two miles out of the city to face the enemy (29.5–6). Before confronting primordial evil, Thomas takes the opportunity to teach his followers where to seek strength and courage:

Waking up from sleep, Thomas said to the brothers and sisters who were with him: “Children, brothers, and sisters, the Lord wants to accomplish something through me today. Let us, therefore, pray and beg him that nothing ever comes between us and him, but that everything, now and always, turns out for us in accordance with his will and desire. Having said this, he laid his hands on them and blessed them. He broke the bread of the Eucharist, gave it to them, and said: “May this Eucharist bring compassion and mercy, not judgment and retribution.” They responded: “Amen!” (Acts Thom. 29.7–11)<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Bonnet, *Acta Philippi et Acta Thomae*, 146.10–20 (ET: mine): Αναστάς δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕπνου ἔλεγεν τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς τοῖς οὖσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ· Τέκνα καὶ ἀδελφοί, ὁ κύριος βούλεται τί ποτε σήμερον δι’ ἐμοῦ διαπράξασθαι· ἀλλ’ εὐξόμεθα καὶ δεηθῶμεν αὐτοῦ ἵνα μηδὲν τί ποτε ἐμπόδιον γένηται ἡμῖν πρὸς αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ ὡς πάντοτε καὶ νῦν κατὰ τὸ αὐτοῦ βούλημα καὶ θέλημα γένηται δι’ ἡμῶν. Καὶ ταῦτα εἰπόντος αὐτοῦ ἐπέθηκεν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτοῦ καὶ εὐλόγησεν αὐτούς· καὶ κλάσας ἄρτον τῆς εὐχαριστίας ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς εἰπών· Ἔσται ὑμῖν αὕτη ἡ εὐχαριστία εἰς εὐσπλαγγίαν καὶ ἔλεος, καὶ μὴ εἰς κρίσιν καὶ ἀμοιβήν. Καὶ αὐτοὶ εἶπον Ἀμήν.

Thomas identifies the true danger of the situation not as the tangible evil force that he is about to meet – what could it do beyond killing him? – but as the temptations to violence, hate, and retribution that unavoidably reside within him and his followers. Before going out to face the enemy, he therefore makes all effort to equip himself and the Christians around him with the strength and courage necessary to withstand such temptations, especially in the event of his own demise. The plot vouchers at his disposal for this task are liturgical practices: prayer, blessing, laying of hands, and most importantly the Eucharist.<sup>68</sup> Strengthened by the liturgy,<sup>69</sup> Thomas confronts the serpent of Eden and prevails (Acts Thom. 30–33).<sup>70</sup>

### **Singing Gives Courage**

When Matthias, the new apostle commissioned in Acts 1:23–26, enters the city of Myrmidonia,<sup>71</sup> the fierce Myrmidons immediately seize him, cut out his eyes, give him a mind-deranging drug, throw him into prison, give him grass to eat, and mark the date in order to give him thirty days to fatten up before they

---

<sup>68</sup> Rouwhorst, “La célébration,” 71, notes that the Eucharist is intended to give strength to overcome Satan and death.

<sup>69</sup> A full-fledged plot voucher is an object given to the character well in advance, whose importance is only revealed when it matches the obstacle. Here, one might imagine that Christian liturgical practices are part of the default inventory, so to speak, of a Christian character.

<sup>70</sup> The serpent claims himself (Acts Thom. 32.6–13) to have enticed Eve (Gen 3:1–5), inflamed Cain (Gen 4:8), made the angels lust for women (Gen 6:1–4), hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Ex 7–11), and incited Judas (Matt 26:14–16). Spittler, *Animals*, 193–99, suggests that the plot of this story is inspired by other tales of giant Indian snakes.

<sup>71</sup> Myrmidonia is the city of the Myrmidons (Acts Andr. Mth. 5:6), who – according to Ovid – were created by Zeus out of ants in order to replace the plague-stricken human population of Aegina, and who – according to Homer – fought under Achilles at Troy.



slaughter and eat him (Acts Andr. Mth. 2.1–2, 3.9, cf. 1.3–5).<sup>72</sup> Matthias prays to Christ, who immediately restores his sight, but otherwise leaves him in peril for weeks before sending Andrew to release him (2.4–3.5, cf. 4.1–2).

How is Matthias to endure in this difficult situation? Before leaving Matthias to describe Andrew's adventures on his journey, the narrator remarks:

Then Matthias sat down in the prison and sang psalms (Acts Andr. Mth. 3.6).<sup>73</sup>

After many adventures, including an encounter with Christ in disguise, a miraculous transportation, the striking down of seven guards with silent prayer, and an opening of a prison door with a simple sign of the cross (Acts Andr. Mth. 4.1–19.3), Andrew is finally united with Matthias, and the narrator describes the encounter:

When he entered with his disciples, he found Matthias sitting there, singing psalms (Acts Andr. Mth. 19.4).<sup>74</sup>

Apparently, Matthias has overcome his perilous situation by continually singing psalms for fifteen chapters of storytelling, over a narrative duration of twenty-seven days.<sup>75</sup> This use of a plot voucher becomes a

<sup>72</sup> Spittler, *Animals*, 89–91, remarks that the story is reminiscent of Homer, *Od.* 10, where Odysseus's companions are turned into swine, but while the swine keep their minds, these prisoners keep their human bodies but lose their minds.

<sup>73</sup> Constantin von Tischendorf, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1851), 134.20–21 (ET: mine): Τότε οὖν ὁ Ματθείας ἐκαθέσθη ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ καὶ ἤν ψάλλον.

<sup>74</sup> Tischendorf, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 149.14–16 (ET: mine): καὶ εἰσελθὼν μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ εὔρε Ματθείαν καθήμενον καὶ ψάλλοντα...

<sup>75</sup> Since Andrew wakes up early two mornings in a row (Acts Andr. Mth. 5.1; 17.1) between his drafting in 4.1–8 and his arrival in Myrmidonia in 19.1, the correct number should be twenty-nine, but Andrew states explicitly in 19.6 that three days still remain of Matthias's respite. Either the sleeping Andrew was transported two days back in

strong statement of the utility of Christian liturgy in fending off despair in difficult times: If singing psalms can keep Matthias's spirits up when he is all alone in prison for a month, surely a group of believers can use liturgy to survive in less dire circumstances.<sup>76</sup>

Although few in number, these two uses of Christian liturgical practices as plot vouchers serve to convey the message that prayer, singing, and the Eucharist can provide a believer with the strength and courage necessary to endure and prevail in difficult situations.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how stories in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles use anointing, baptism, the Eucharist, and singing of psalms to advance their plots – but also how these uses convey a message about why someone might take part of such liturgical practices.

In the Acts of Andrew, John, Paul, Peter, and Thomas, liturgies are used to advance the plot in three recurrent ways: Primarily, a character's conversion to a Christian faith is confirmed by the use of anointing, baptism, or the Eucharist – sometimes in isolation, but in most cases in a chain of liturgical practices that combine to securely replace the convert's Gentile identity with a Christian one. Secondly, a sense of community within a group of Christians is established by the Eucharist, especially when the protagonist has just arrived or is about to leave the group. This use is further emphasized by the two cases

---

time to wake up outside Myrmidonia on the same day as he was drafted, or the narrator fails to update his narrative clock in 19.6.

<sup>76</sup> The scene is obviously inspired by Paul's and Silas's singing of praises (προσευχόμενοι ὕμνον τὸν θεόν) in Acts 16:25, but exceeds this situation. While Paul and Silas are together and surrounded by other prisoners who listen, Matthias is all alone, and his prison mates are drugged and in no position to understand songs of praise (Cf. Acts Andr. Mth. 20.1–2). A more straightforward adaptation of Acts 16:25 is given in Acts Thom. 107–113, where Thomas is in king Mizdai's prison, and recites a long psalm to his fellow prisoners.

where unconfessed adultery and murder lead to exclusion from eucharistic participation, and by the sharp contrast between the life-giving Eucharistic community and the death outside of Acts John 85–86. Thirdly, liturgical practices such as the Eucharist and singing provide characters in perilous situations with the courage and strength needed to overcome their challenges. With such uses of liturgies as plot devices, these ancient narratives convey the message that a believer might participate in liturgical practices in order to become a confirmed member of a group of Christians, to strengthen the sense of community within this group, and to receive courage and strength to endure in perilous circumstances.

While an author of historical fiction enjoys a great deal of freedom in designing the details of a liturgy described in a fictional narrative – which is why it is difficult to gauge the historical accuracy of the prayers in the Apocryphal Acts – the characters’ motivations for engaging in liturgical practices could not appear too implausible to the intended reader. There is, therefore, a good chance that conversion confirmation, community building, and personal courage were perceived as tangible benefits of liturgical participation by historical early Christian believers.

## Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011.
- Attridge, Harold W., trans. *The Acts of Thomas*. Early Christian Apocrypha 3. Salem: Polebridge, 2010.
- Bonnet, Max, ed. *Acta Philippi et Acta Thomae, accedunt Acta Barnabae*. Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha 2:2. Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1903.
- Buchinger, Harald. “Liturgy and Early Christian Apocrypha.” Pages 361–77 in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*. Edited by Andrew Gregory, Tobias Nicklas, Christopher M. Tuckett, and Joseph Verheyden. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Dobschütz, Ernst von. “Der Roman in der altchristlichen Literatur.” *Deutsche Rundschau* 111 (1902): 87–106.
- Junod, Eric, and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, eds. *Acta Iohannis*. Corpus Christianorum. Series Apocryphorum 1. Turnhout: Brepols, 1983.
- Kasser, Rodolphe, and Philippe Luisier. “Le Papyrus Bodmer XLI en édition princeps. L’épisode d’Éphèse des Acta Pauli en copte et en traduction.” *Le Muséon* 117 (2004): 281–384.
- Klauck, Hans-Josef. *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction*. Waco: Baylor, 2008.

- Koehler, Karin. *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and Postal Systems*. Cham: Springer, 2016.
- Kurz, William S. *Reading Luke-Acts: Dynamics of Biblical Narrative*. Louisville: Westminster, 1993.
- Lipsius, Richard Adelbert, ed. *Acta Petri, Acta Pauli, Acta Petri et Pauli, Acta Pauli et Theclae, Acta Thaddei*. Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha 1. Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891.
- MacDonald, Dennis R., trans. *The Acts of Andrew*. Early Christian Apocrypha 1. Farmington: Polebridge, 2005.
- McGrath, James. "History and Fiction in the Acts of Thomas: The State of the Question." *JSP* 17.4 (2008): 297–311.
- Myers, Susan E. *Spirit Epicleses in the Acts of Thomas*. WUNT II 281. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010.
- Perkins, Judith. "The Apocryphal *Acts of Peter: A Roman à Thèse?*" *Arethusa* 25.3 (1992): 445–57.
- Pervo, Richard I. *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Eugene: Cascade, 2014.
- Powell, Mark Allan. "The Plot and Subplots of Matthew's Gospel." *NTS* 38.2 (1992): 187–204.
- Rouwhorst, Gerard. "Hymns and Prayers in the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas." Pages 195–212 in *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in Their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity*. Edited by Clemens Leonhard and Hermut Löhr. WUNT II 363. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.
- . "La célébration de l'eucharistie selon les Actes de Thomas." Pages 51–77 in *Omnes Circumadstantes: Contributions Towards a History of the Role of the People in the Liturgy*. Edited by Charles Caspers and Marc Schneiders. Kampen: Kok, 1990.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design." *Narrative* 17.1 (2009): 56–75.
- Sandnes, Karl Olav. "Seal and Baptism in Early Christianity." Pages 1441–1481 in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*. Edited by David Hellholm, Tor Vegge, Øyvind Norderval, and Christer Hellholm. BZNV 176. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010.
- Snyder, Glenn E. *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus*. WUNT II 352. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013.
- Snyder, Julia A. *Language and Identity in Ancient Narratives: The Relationship between Speech Patterns and Social Context in the Acts of the Apostles, Acts of John, and Acts of Philip*. WUNT II 370. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014.
- Spittler, Janet E. *Animals in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: The Wild Kingdom of Early Christian Literature*. WUNT II 247. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.
- Thomas, Christine M. *The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel: Rewriting the Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- . "The 'Prehistory' of the Acts of Peter." Pages 39–62 in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: Harvard Divinity School Studies*. Edited by François Bovon, Ann Graham Brock, and Christopher R. Matthews. Cambridge: Harvard CSWR, 1999.
- Thomashevsky, Boris. "Story, Plot, and Motivation." Pages 164–78 in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. Edited by Brian Richardson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002.
- Tischendorf, Constantin von. *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*. Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1851.

Weidemann, Hans-Ulrich. "Taufe und Taufeucharistie." Pages 1483–1530 in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*. Edited by David Hellholm, Tor Vegge, Øyvind Norderval, and Christer Hellholm. BZNW 176. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010.