

The Fluid Transmission of Apocrypha in Egyptian Monasteries

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Abstract

This article discusses the long history of the production and use of Coptic apocrypha in Egyptian monasteries and the mechanisms governing the fluidity of apocryphal texts and traditions. The article draws upon recent theoretical work within media studies on modern fanfiction as well as cognitive perspectives on readers' mental creation and simulation of storyworlds. These perspectives are combined with insights from new/material philology, especially regarding the inherent textual fluidity of the transmission of texts in a manuscript culture, thus shedding new light on the functions, significance, and development of apocrypha in Coptic Egypt.

Keywords

Hagiography, Apocrypha, biblical storyworld, textual fluidity.

Having finished the process of creating Adam, God ordered all the angels to worship his creation. Not all of them obliged, however, including the first-formed of all the angels. As Jesus recounts the story to his apostles:

My Father said to him, 'Come and worship the first human being that we have made according to my likeness and my image and the work of my hands'. The first-formed replied, 'I will not worship him, for he is a human being and I am prior to him and I am greater than all the angels!'

After the first-formed refuses several additional requests to change his mind, God loses patience with him and proclaims that because of his disobedience and stupidity he shall 'henceforth not be called first-formed', but rather 'Saklam, the adversary of his Lord';² and proceeds to order a cherub to strike him down and throw him out of heaven.

Jesus tells this story to his apostles on the Mount of Olives, and it is said to have been recorded by John, the apostle and evangelist. It is not part of John's canonical Gospel or Letters, though, but another text purportedly authored by John that explains many things that are left unsaid in the canonical biblical texts, such as why the devil fell from heaven, how the Archangel Michael got his prominent position as the devil's successor, why Adam was created and later fell from grace, as well as such issues as the devil's role in the death of John the Baptist and, most prominently, the post-mortem judgment of souls and the punishment of sinners. This text is the so-called *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, a work that seems to have been quite popular in Egypt over several centuries, as indicated by both direct and indirect attestations.

1. A popular, but controversial, genre

Not only is the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael* attested in three Coptic manuscripts from Egyptian monasteries, and from fragments of Greek and Old Nubian manuscripts from Nubian monasteries, but its popularity is also reflected in sources hostile to it. Around the turn of the seventh century, bishop John of Parallos,

¹ *Invest. Mich.* M593, 9. Translation based on the Coptic text of Morgan Library manuscript M593 in MÜLLER 1962, 12. All translations from Coptic throughout this article are my own unless otherwise noted. For a complete English translation of the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, see LUNDHAUG 2020.

² *Invest. Mich.* M593, 10; Coptic text in MÜLLER 1962, 12.

in Lower Egypt, attacked the reading of the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael* and other apocryphal texts in his treatise *Against the Heretical Books*,³ where he deals with the problem of the ‘blasphemous books of the heretics,’ which he claims were being read throughout Egypt, even ‘in the orthodox churches.’⁴ The bishop mentions apocryphal books with titles such as *The Preaching of John*, *The Laughter of the Apostles*, *The Teachings of Adam*, *The Counsel of the Savior*, and the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*. These books, he says, invent details that are not mentioned in the canonical texts, such as the claim that the devil fell because he refused to worship Adam,⁵ that the Archangel Michael was given the position formerly occupied by the devil,⁶ and the exact dates on which these things happened.⁷ He also criticizes those who would teach the contents of such books to what he, echoing Athanasius’ 39th *Festal Letter*, described as simple-minded people.⁸ For John of Parallos, knowledge of the biblical storyworld⁹ should only be derived from the canonical Scriptures (to which he, unlike Athanasius, also counted Tobit),¹⁰ and gaps in that knowledge should not be filled using apocryphal texts such as the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*.

Both the well-documented opposition in certain quarters against the production and use of apocryphal literature in Egypt from the days of Athanasius in the fourth century to the time of John of Parallos and further into the Islamic period, and the abundance of Coptic manuscripts containing apocryphal materials testify to the fact that apocryphal literature was produced and used in Egyptian monasteries from the early Christian centuries and continued into the second millennium. As one can see from the extant manuscript evidence of the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, John of Parallos’ campaign against apocryphal books did not produce the desired results, as this and many other noncanonical books attributed to the apostles continued to be produced and read in Egyptian monasteries for centuries. Even the White Monastery, from which our only extant copy of John of Parallos’ anti-heretical sermon against apocryphal books derives, held a copy of the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, made – and presumably read – long after John of Parallos’ condemnation of it. We also know that the use of this text in the White Monastery was not an isolated occurrence, as the text is also attested in two ninth-century manuscripts found in the ruins of the Monastery of St. Michael the Archangel at Phantou in the Fayum, a discovery that also unearthed many other apocryphal works.¹¹

In his polemical work against heretical books, John of Parallos specifically opposes the use of apocrypha in churches across Egypt.¹² Indeed, his opposition to heresies and the use of illicit books is what he is primarily known for.¹³ The later catechetical work *Kitāb al-Īdāh*, attributed to the tenth-century heresiologist Sawirus Ibn al-Muqaffā,¹⁴ for instance, relates that John confiscated apocryphal books from Egyptian monasteries and ordered them burned.¹⁵ In addition, the *Kitāb al-Īdāh* also attacks the contemporary use of apocryphal books, in particular a book dealing with the *Investiture of Abbaton, the Angel of Death*. This text, which according to the *Kitāb al-Īdāh* was pseudepigraphically attributed to Theophilus of Alexandria, is in fact also directly attested in a late tenth-century manuscript deriving from the Monastery of Mercuri-

3 This Coptic text, partly preserved in the remains of a single manuscript from the White Monastery (MONB.CM), has been edited by van Lantschoot 1946. For an English translation of the text, see BULL - JENOTT 2020.

4 John of Parallos, *Against the Heretical Books*, MONB.CM 47-48.

5 John of Parallos, *Against the Heretical Books*, MONB.CM 63.

6 John of Parallos, *Against the Heretical Books*, MONB.CM 61-63.

7 John of Parallos, *Against the Heretical Books*, MONB.CM 58, 61-62.

8 John of Parallos, *Against the Heretical Books*, MONB.CM 49; cf. Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.15.

9 On the concept of ‘storyworld’, see the discussion below.

10 John of Parallos, *Against the Heretical Books*, MONB.CM 59; cf. Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.20-21.

11 The collection is commonly known as the ‘Hamouli manuscripts’ due to the proximity of their discovery location to the modern village of al-Hamouli. For overviews of this collection and its discovery, see DEPUYDT 1993; EMMEL 2005; HYVERNAT 1919, xiii–xviii; HYVERNAT 1912. Facsimiles of all the Hamouli codices in the Pierpont Morgan Library’s collection have been made available in HYVERNAT 1922.

12 John of Parallos, *Against the Heretical Books*, MONB.CM 47.

13 See, e.g., the Copto-Arabic Synaxarion’s entry for the 19th of Koiak. As Detlef Müller (1991) puts it, John of Parallos ‘did not share the Coptic inclination to search for instruction in unorthodox books’ or ‘to decipher God’s secrets not found in the Bible’, but ‘investigated monastery libraries and burned virtually every such book that he found’. Cf. also the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, 14 (EVETTS 2017, 1:207).

14 According to Mark Swanson, this attribution is pseudepigraphical, and the text was probably written by a Coptic monk (SWANSON 2011, 265-66).

15 See SWANSON 1996, 221.

us at Edfu, in an *Encomium on Abbaton, the Angel of Death* here attributed to Timothy of Alexandria.¹⁶ Like the *Investiture of Michael*, the *Investiture of Abbaton* also embellishes and reinterprets the events surrounding the creation and fall of Adam and the fall of the devil. It agrees with the *Investiture of Michael* and a number of other apocryphal texts that the devil was expelled from heaven because he refused to worship Adam.¹⁷ Moreover, just like the *Investiture of Michael* emphasizes the day of Michael's investiture, on the 12th of Hathor, the *Investiture of Abbaton*, which describes the role and authority of the angel of death, makes sure to point out that Abbaton was invested as the angel of death on the 13th of Hathor.

Like the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, the apocryphal work dealing with the angel of death seems to have been a popular one, its contribution to the biblical storyworld even extending across media, as described in the *Kitāb al-Īdāḥ*:

It is a mere tradition in all the churches of believers to draw his painting with his terrifying appearance and hideous manifestation together with his impure soldiers (standing) around him, ready to torture, in order that the believers fear them, care about performing good deeds in order to be saved from their hands, and praise the Son of God who redeemed them in his blood.¹⁸

Such transmedial transmission of traditions concerning Abbaton is also attested by archaeological discoveries made by Grenfell and Hunt during the excavation of a monastic complex at Tebtunis, where remains of a tenth-century fresco (now unfortunately lost) shows Abbaton together with sinners being punished, his appearance being, as far as can be made out from the photos of one of the then extant frescos, in accordance with the description of him in the Pseudo-Timothy *Encomium* preserved in the Edfu-manuscript as having claws.¹⁹ So while there was opposition to the production and reading of apocryphal texts about Abbaton and other angelic figures from certain quarters, apocryphal stories about them were circulating in texts and images in monasteries and churches across Egypt. Indeed, the transmedia aspect of the production, consumption, and transmission of apocrypha probably also comprised oral storytelling and liturgical, or at least paraliturgical, enactment.²⁰ It is crucially important to keep this in mind if we want to understand the full significance and impact of apocrypha in Egyptian Christianity.

2. *Apocrypha and associated practices*

While it is unclear to what degree our preserved Coptic apocrypha were read or heard by Coptic-speaking people in general or mainly by monks, it is clear that the majority of our Coptic manuscripts containing apocrypha demonstrably derive from monasteries, while there are no such manuscripts that can be shown decisively to be of a non-monastic origin.²¹ Why, then, did Egyptian monastics copy and read apocryphal texts?²² What were their functions? In what practices were they embedded? And how did variations in function contribute to the fluidity of these texts and traditions?

With regard to many of the later Coptic apocrypha it is clear that one of their functions was to provide justification for – and far more information concerning – the feast days of saints and archangels, such as for example the important celebration on the 12th of Hathor of the archangel Michael, or similar dates in other apocryphal texts.²³ At the same time, it is important to note that the direction of influence between texts and liturgy may pass in both directions. Practices may influence texts, and texts may influence practices. It is also worth noting that the directly liturgical, or paraliturgical, contents of such texts often

16 See SUCIU - SAWEROS 2016 for a new English translation and introduction. The colophon has been published in VAN LANTSCHOOT 1929, 1:187-189; The first edition of the text was in BUDGE 1914.

17 See, e.g., DOCHHORN 2012; MÜLLER 1959.

18 Translation from Suciū and SAWEROS 2016, 554.

19 WALTERS 1989; Ps-Timothy of Alexandria, *Encomium on Abbaton, the Angel of Death*, BL Or. 7025.49-50.

20 On textual fluidity in the interaction between oral and written transmission, see Johansson 2017. On the use of apocrypha in liturgy, see ROSE 2009; HAWK 2018.

21 For a sustained argument in favour of the monastic provenance of the much-debated Nag Hammadi Codices, see LUNDHAUG - JENOTT 2015. See also TUTTY 2019 and the article by Bull in the present volume.

22 Here I include both male and female monastics. For the possibility that the Nag Hammadi Codices were produced and read by female monastics, see GRIBETZ 2018.

23 On this aspect, see SUCIU 2017.

show a different degree of fluidity from that of the rest of the writing in question. We see this, for instance, in the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, where the differences between the three preserved versions of the text are especially distinct in an extended hymnic passage.²⁴

Moreover, the production, donation, and reading of manuscripts containing apocrypha was evidently regarded by many as pious, devotional practices on a par with the production, donation, and reading of other Christian literature, including the canonical biblical texts. Many colophons attest to this, including one following the *Encomium on Abbaton* in manuscript BL, Or. 7025 (MERC.AU), which states that the 'God-fearing brother Chael' financed the production of the book and had it donated to the monastery of St. Mercurius at Edfu for his soul's salvation, and so that the monks of that monastery would be able to read in it the name of Abbaton, and so that St. Mercurius would call upon Christ and save Chael from the machinations of the devil, and expresses a wish that 'the Archangel Abbaton' might treat him kindly and forgive him his sins when he dies.²⁵ The first part of the colophon contains a short prayer for remembrance by the scribe Theopistos, who copied the text in the year 981, by 'everyone who reads in this book'.²⁶ There is also a statement at the end of the *Encomium on Abbaton* itself, where the homilist Pseudo-Timothy states, after having finished 'quoting from' the fictitious book on the *Investiture of Abbaton*, that this and other books he claims to have found 'in the library in Jerusalem' had been placed there by 'our holy fathers the apostles' 'for the sake of the faith and salvation of the unbelievers'.²⁷ This sentiment in fact echoes what is found a couple of pages earlier, towards the end of the quoted apostolic book itself, where Christ proclaims to his apostles that they should preach on Abbaton's day of remembrance 'so that the children of men will be afraid and repent'.²⁸

The fact that not only the production, donation, and use of manuscripts containing apocrypha, but also the composition of apocryphal narratives was seen by some as a pious activity is attested to by the *Homily on the Passion and Resurrection*, pseudepigraphically attributed to Evodius of Rome:

The king will not find fault if embroideries are added to his garments, but he will greatly commend those who have added them, so that everyone might praise the garment because of the embroideries which are on it. Thus the Lord Jesus will not find fault with us if we add adornments to the Holy Gospels, but he will instead greatly commend us, and bless those who will bear fruit through them.²⁹

By this clever metaphor the homily argues that expanding on the biblical narratives should not be regarded as an objectionable activity, but rather the opposite, as such embellishments could only reflect positively on the canonical gospels, and thus be pleasing to God, not least because it might help people in their faith, a point we also saw being made in the *Encomium on Abbaton*. Not everybody would agree, though, and Pseudo-Evodius is aware of it, as his defence of apocryphal embellishments is made in anticipation of accusations of having 'added to the words of the Holy Gospels' from 'someone who is strict among the brothers', thus necessitating his explanation by means of a creative simile.³⁰ Yet some brothers evidently approved, of this type of literature, as we find this text preserved completely in a ninth-century parchment codex from the Monastery of the Archangel Michael at Phantou and fragmentarily in the remains of at least six other codices, from the White Monastery, Thinis, and elsewhere.³¹

And there were many such books in Coptic, copied and read by monks, that elaborated upon and extended the gospels and other canonical texts. Pseudo-Evodius is in good company in doing so. A great number of apocryphal texts and traditions have been preserved in Coptic manuscripts over the entire timespan of Coptic literary production. Throughout this period of profound socio-religious change, apocryphal texts and traditions continued to be copied and read throughout Egypt. What is unusual about Pseudo-Evodius' homily is simply that it admits to what it is doing and presents a defence of it while doing so.

²⁴ See LUNDHAUG 2019b; LUNDHAUG 2020.

²⁵ LANTSCHOOT 1929, 1188. Abbaton is never referred to as an archangel in the *Encomium* itself, but only in the manuscript's colophon.

²⁶ LANTSCHOOT 1929, 1187-189.

²⁷ Ps-Timothy, *Encomium on Abbaton*, BL, Or. 7025.67-68.

²⁸ Ps-Timothy, *Encomium on Abbaton*, BL, Or. 7025.66.

²⁹ Ps-Evodius, *Homily on the Passion and the Resurrection*, 42 (Coptic text in CHAPMAN 1991, 1:90-91).

³⁰ Ps-Evodius, *On the Passion and the Resurrection*, 40 (Coptic text in CHAPMAN 1991, 90).

³¹ See BURNS 2020. There was significant textual fluidity in the transmission of this text (see, e.g., CHAPMAN 1991, x-xi).

3. *Apocrypha and the biblical storyworld*

What exactly do I mean by apocrypha? For the purposes of the present contribution I have chosen to define apocrypha as (1) texts and traditions that develop or expand upon characters and events of the biblical storyworld; (2) and/or contain a claim to authorship by a character from that storyworld or a direct witness to it.³² I do not place any chronological limits on the concept.³³ As for 'storyworld', it denotes a reader's mental construction and simulation of an imaginary world on the basis of the text or texts he or she is reading.³⁴ By 'biblical storyworld' I refer to the specific storyworld that is created on the basis of a reading of the biblical texts. For readers of these texts, the biblical storyworld was transnarrative, i.e., it was based on the reception of a combination of narratives.³⁵ Moreover, it can be described as hyperserial, in the sense that it is the result of a multitude of narratives that in effect become mere episodes in a much larger story.³⁶ The above definition of apocrypha thus highlights their crucial role in contributing to readers' cognitive construction of the biblical storyworld. The understanding Coptic monastics, for instance, had of the appearance, history, functions, and significance of the archangels was crucially shaped by their reading of apocryphal texts. In this regard the specific role of the apocryphal texts was, from a cognitive perspective, to function for their audience as 'blueprints for the creation and modification' of this 'mentally configured storyworld', to use David Herman's terminology.³⁷ Importantly, they would have this function in interpretative conjunction with their readers' prior knowledge of the biblical storyworld, where the canonical biblical texts would of course play a crucial role.

From this perspective it is clear that the biblical storyworld could never be a static construct. Not only would different readers mentally configure and simulate the storyworld in different ways,³⁸ especially when embedded in different contexts, but both the availability and constitution of the blueprints for world-creation constituted by the apocryphal texts would change over time and be context-dependent. As Bronwen Thomas points out, 'storyworlds are generated and experienced within specific social and cultural environments that are subject to constant change',³⁹ and our manuscript evidence of Coptic apocrypha shows us that both apocryphal traditions and the apocryphal texts themselves were subject to change, reworking, and further development in shifting contexts of transmission.

Throughout the history of the production and transmission of Coptic literature, contexts changed in sometimes highly dramatic ways. As Stephen Emmel has pointed out, 'the increasingly difficult circumstances of the Copts after the seventh-century conquest meant that much even of what has survived of Coptic literature has come down to us filtered through cultural circumstances that may well have altered, perhaps only to varying extents, but nonetheless in definitive ways, the character of that literature'.⁴⁰ The importance of interpreting the Coptic apocryphal texts in light of the context in which the surviving

32 It is thus worth noting that I here adopt a significantly broader understanding of the category of apocrypha than, e.g., ORLANDI 2016, where, for instance, the later apocrypha embedded in pseudepigraphical sermons are not regarded as belonging to the category at all (cf. also ORLANDI 1983, 68, 70). While Orlandi (1983) is absolutely right that it is important to understand Coptic apocrypha in light of their historical contexts (see the discussion below), for my purposes here it is valuable to treat all texts conforming to this broad definition together, as they share a number of important traits.

33 The decoupling of the concept of 'apocrypha' from chronological considerations is in line with recent treatments of apocrypha, e.g., PIOVANELLI 2005; 2015; MARKSCHIES 2012; 2015; BURKE 2015. When referring to Coptic apocrypha, I make no claims with regard to their original language of composition. Taking my cue from Stephen Emmel's (1997; 2007) suggestion that it probably did not matter for those who read or heard these texts in Coptic whether or not they were reading translation literature I treat all apocryphal texts preserved in Coptic in their current form as Coptic texts produced for and read by Coptic speakers, regardless of whether the texts are likely to have been originally composed in Coptic – probably the case with the majority of the later Coptic apocrypha – or whether they are likely to have been originally composed in a different language – primarily Greek, the likely original language of a majority of the earliest Coptic apocrypha (cf. ORLANDI 1983; 1991; 2016). I would also like to add the observation that there is often significant textual fluidity stemming from the process of translation, with the context of translation significantly influencing the shape of the translated text (cf. EMMEL 1997; WISSE 1997).

34 See, e.g., RYAN 2017; HERMAN 2013.

35 See WOLF 2012.

36 Cf. JOHNSTON 2015.

37 HERMAN 2009, 73.

38 Cf., e.g., GERRIG 2010 on how readers with different backgrounds may fill in gaps differently when reading the same texts.

39 THOMAS 2011, 6.

40 EMMEL 2007, 84.

manuscripts were produced and used, namely in Coptic monasteries in various parts of Egypt at various points in time, is thus evident. Indeed, as Emmel emphasizes, ‘nearly everything written in Coptic was finally subordinated to the needs of the Egyptian churches and monasteries, which by the tenth century were effectively the only bastions of Coptic (Christian) culture in what had become an Arab-speaking and largely Islamic land.’⁴¹ It is thus to be expected that Coptic literature, Coptic apocrypha included, reflects in various ways the changing socio-religious landscape in which it was produced and used.

With this in mind, we may approach the question posed by David Herman: ‘When a narrative is adapted or remediated, which features of the storyworld remain constant and which features change – and with what overall effect?’⁴² With regard to Coptic apocrypha, this aspect has so far not been systematically analysed, but it is clear that the apocryphal traditions, and thus the biblical storyworld, changed over time in response to changing interests and circumstances. And we see such changes also in the transmission of individual apocryphal texts, for there is notable fluidity both in the development of these apocryphal traditions and in the transmission of the texts.

Unsurprisingly, the later Coptic apocrypha introduce aspects to the biblical storyworld that intersect with later ideas and concerns, rooted in later contexts. The *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, for example, describes how the devil, masquerading as an apostle, does his best to make the disciples of the apostles envious of their apostolic masters after Jesus has flown away with them on an olive tree to show them what happens to sinners and righteous after death.⁴³ However, the ‘little disciples’, as they are called, are not fooled by the devil, but make him go away by throwing stones at him. As one of the apostle John’s disciples explains to his peers, John had himself once managed to hit the devil with a stone, and thus they go about chasing away the devil.⁴⁴ When this text was being read in the Monastery of the Archangel Michael in the Fayoum and in the White Monastery, when the extant manuscripts were in use,⁴⁵ this story would have reminded many of its readers or hearers not only of the Christian storyworld, but also of similar traditions in Islam, where a well-known story has Abraham throwing stones at the devil, who tries to dissuade him from doing God’s will, a legend that is reenacted yearly even today in the rami al-jamaraat ritual during hajj.⁴⁶ Indeed, this overlap between the Christian and Islamic storyworlds is also attested in another Coptic apocryphal text, the *Homily on the Life of Jesus and His Love for the Apostles*, preserved in several manuscripts from the White Monastery.⁴⁷ A similar overlap can also be seen in the devil’s refusal to worship Adam, which we find not only in the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael* and the *Encomium on Abbaton*, but also in the Qur’an.⁴⁸

There was a long tradition of copying and using apocrypha in Egyptian monasteries, and there are many features that also show continuity between the earliest Coptic apocrypha and the much later ones, from pseudepigraphical attribution to apostles,⁴⁹ to the setting of dialogues between Christ and the apostles on the Mount of Olives,⁵⁰ to similarities in exegetical interests, such as the creation, names, and functions of the angels,⁵¹ the fall of the devil, and the creation and fall of Adam. The *Investiture of the Archangel*

41 EMMEL 2007, 84.

42 HERMAN 2013, 10.

43 *Invest. Mich.* M593, 27; M614, 20; Coptic text in MÜLLER 1962.

44 *Invest. Mich.* M593, 28; M614, 20-21; Coptic text in MÜLLER 1962.

45 The two manuscripts from the Monastery of the Archangel Michael at Phantou were produced in the ninth century, while the White Monastery manuscript was produced sometime between the ninth and eleventh centuries (see LUNDHAUG 2020).

46 See, e.g., FIRESTONE 1991.

47 See PETTIPiece 2020.

48 Q 2:34, Q 7:11, Q 15:29-31, Q 17:61, Q 18:50, Q 20:116, Q 38:72-74; see LUNDHAUG 2019b; LUNDHAUG 2020.

49 E.g., the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Investiture of Michael* and the *Mysteries of John* are all directly attributed to the apostle John

50 On this setting as used in the early Coptic apocrypha, often designated as ‘Gnostic’, see, e.g., RUDOLPH 1968; PERKINS 1980. Such dialogues can sometimes also take place prior to the resurrection, as is the case in the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*.

51 E.g., the use of the name ‘Saklataboth’ for the devil in the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, which can be regarded as a combination of the names Saklas and Ialdabaoth given to the world ruler in some of the Nag Hammadi texts, including the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (cf. DOCHORN 2013, 28-29; DOCHORN 2012, 46). Another example of continuity over time can be seen with the use of the name ‘Lithargoel’ in the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* (applied to Jesus as a physician; *Acts Pet. 12 Apost.* 8.14-19, 9.30-32, 10.31-11.26) and in the *Investiture of the Archangel Gabriel* (applied to a healing angel ‘Litharkoel’; cf. SCHENKE 2003, 2:418-19; JENOTT 2020). Similarly, the *Investiture of Gabriel* features the angel-names Leleth, Hormosiel, and Oriel, which are very close to the angel-names Eleleth, Harmozel, and Ouriel found in the *Apocryphon of John*.

gel Michael, for instance, states in its incipit that ‘These are the words, excellent and filled with profit, of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he spoke to his disciples and his holy apostles on the Mount of Olives, having spoken to them concerning the creation of the heaven and the earth, and concerning the way in which he created the human being after his likeness and his image, and concerning the way he invested Michael the Archangel on the 12th of Hathor, the holy John the Evangelist, the beloved by God, having interpreted them.’⁵²

Many of these apocryphal works directly address questions that are not treated by the canonical biblical texts, and many are engaged in explaining what was treated or hinted at, but left unexplained, there. We see, for instance, a great interest in exegeting the first chapters of Genesis in Coptic apocrypha from the earliest to the latest, but also themes with less direct connection to the canon are popular. Multiple texts relate stories of what happens to the individual soul at death, how sinners will be punished and the righteous rewarded, including vivid descriptions of hell and various heavenly realms, and multiple narratives deal with the creation and roles of the angels and the fall of the devil. Based on only a limited number of references in the canonical biblical texts, a large number of apocrypha thus collectively – trans-narratively and hyperserially – establish a much more detailed and rich picture of the biblical storyworld.

Other features change noticeably over time. One such feature is the framing of the apocryphal texts. While the earliest Coptic apocrypha are usually attributed directly to an apostle, evangelist, or another figure from the biblical storyworld, in the later centuries there is a tendency to embed such traditions within more or less elaborate frames. A highly common framing device is that of homilies pseudepigraphically attributed to patristic figures from the fourth to the sixth century with a high standing in the miaphysite Coptic tradition.⁵³ In these homilies, the pseudonymous author often claims authority for the apocryphal contents of his sermon by explaining how his teachings derive from apostolic books found in Jerusalem, sometimes the discovery location is even specified as the ‘library of the apostles’.⁵⁴ In the *Encomium on Abbaton, the Angel of Death*, for instance, Pseudo-Timothy states in the homiletic frame that he acquired a book concerning the *Investiture of Abbaton, the Angel of Death* on a trip he made to Jerusalem to celebrate Easter. The major part of Pseudo-Timothy’s homily is then simply an extended quotation from this fictitious book, itself framed as a post-resurrection dialogue between Christ and the apostles, with Christ explaining the history and role of the angel of death in relation to topics ranging from a discussion of Abbaton’s role in the creation of Adam, to the more contemporary issue of his role in the death of every single human being and the collection of their souls.⁵⁵

Sometimes, however, such later Coptic apocrypha also betray their Egyptian context of production and use. For example, in Pseudo-Timothy’s *Homily on the Festival of the Archangel Michael*, the pseudonymous homilist tells us that he found a book in Jerusalem narrated by John the Evangelist and written down by his disciple Proklos, but one of the topics treated in this book is in fact the flooding of the Nile, which places its relevance neatly in Egypt, at least in its manuscript context.⁵⁶ In another text, the *Encomium on Mary Magdalene*, pseudonymously attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem, it is even stated that the embedded book on the *Life of Mary Magdalene*, which Pseudo-Cyril says he ‘found in the library of the holy city’, was ‘written in Egyptian’.⁵⁷

While it is clear that many of the later apocryphal narratives are found embedded within pseudepigraphical homiletic frames, often containing stories about how this or that apostolic book was acquired by the pseudepigraphical homilist, it is nevertheless important to note that we do in fact also find texts directly attributed to apostles, evangelists, or other figures from the biblical storyworld, in late Coptic manuscripts. It is thus quite clear that it was still possible to introduce new apostolic books in Coptic at a

52 *The Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, M593, 1.

53 See HAGEN 2004; SUCIU 2017; SHERIDAN 2016.

54 On this *topos* in Coptic manuscripts, see HAGEN 2004; SUCIU 2017.

55 See SUCIU - SAWEROS 2016.

56 Ps-Timothy of Alexandria, *Homily on the Festival of the Archangel Michael* was first published in Budge 1915. The flooding of the Nile is also referred to in the colophon of the codex which contains this text (BL, Or. 7029, from the Monastery of Mercurius at Edfu), where a great miracle is said to have happened in connection with the flooding of the Nile in 982, as well as in 992 (see VAN LANTSCHOOT 1929, 1:197-200).

57 Ps-Cyril of Jerusalem, *Encomium on Mary Magdalene*, IV (COQUIN - GODRON 1990, 176). On this text, see also MARQUIS 2016.

very late date. This is the case, for instance, with the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael* or the *Mysteries of John*,⁵⁸ which are both directly attributed to the apostle John. Even the fictional successor of Peter as bishop of Rome, Evodius, is attributed with the authorship of an eye-witness account of the crucifixion, in the pseudonymous *Homily on the Passion and the Resurrection*, which circulated widely at a relatively late date.⁵⁹

4. *Elaboration on the storyworld and the fluidity of tradition*

Different apocryphal texts often elaborate upon the same parts of the biblical storyworld, in different but often overlapping ways. An example of this can be seen in the different elaborations of the story of the creation of Adam in a wide range of texts from the *Apocryphon of John* or the *Gospel of Philip* from the Nag Hammadi Codices, to such later texts as the *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*, the *Encomium on Abbaton*, and the *Mysteries of John*, to mention just a few of the many texts that deal with this particular theme. How are we to understand this growth of additional materials based on the biblical storyworld? I would suggest that the mechanisms by which such traditions evolved and new works were produced based on the storyworld of the biblical texts can be likened, at least partly, to modern fanfiction. In this type of text, usefully defined by Bronwen Thomas as ‘stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a ‘canon’ of works’,⁶⁰ fans create stories that serve to expand and fill in gaps in the storyworld of the authoritative source text or texts on which they are based. These ‘fan-products’ can sometimes gain authoritative status of their own, albeit on a somewhat secondary level, and become part of what can be described, using terminology from modern fanfiction studies, as a *fanon*. They gain such ‘fanonical’ status basically by being well enough received and popular enough in fan communities that they are further transmitted within them.⁶¹ Similarly we may suspect that those Coptic apocrypha that gained a positive reception among Egyptian monastics may have gained such secondary ‘fanonical’ status. When they were read in monastic communities some of their contents might well have come to be regarded as ‘intrinsic to the story world’ in the same way as their canonical source materials.⁶² On the basis of the surviving manuscript evidence, some Coptic apocryphal texts and traditions may indeed have gained such a status, which seems to have been the case, for instance, with the texts dealing with the investiture of the archangel Michael and the angel of death Abbaton.

5. *Manuscript culture and textual fluidity*

One of the central insights of material (or ‘new’) philology⁶³ is the fact that in a manuscript culture texts undergo change every time they are copied, and that a major mechanism governing the change is contextual influence. This is because textual variants arose not only from the basic fact that scribes made mistakes, but also from intentional changes made to the texts in order to make them relevant for new contexts of use. This also means that we may gain insights about the reception of texts by reading them in light of their manuscript contexts, i.e., in light of the times and places in which the manuscripts that have survived were produced and used.

This is not surprising, for even though modern readers often tend to regard textual variants as deviations from the norm,⁶⁴ textual fluidity is in fact the norm in manuscript cultures, not least in the trans-

58 The *Mysteries of John* is preserved completely in BL, Or. 7026, from the Monastery of Mercurius at Edfu. The text was first published in BUDGE 1913. For a new English translation and introduction, see LUNDHAUG - ABERCROMBIE 2020.

59 See CHAPMAN 1991; BURNS 2020.

60 THOMAS 2011, 1. On fanfiction, see also HELLEKSON - BUSSE 2006; JENKINS 2013. For recent applications of fanfiction theory to the understanding of ancient apocrypha, see, e.g., LARSEN 2019; LUNDHAUG 2019b; ROSLAND 2019.

61 Cf. the definition of ‘fanon’ in PAGE - THOMAS 2011, 277: ‘A fan-derived alternative to the ‘canon’ whereby aspects of plotting, background information, or characterization become ‘fanonical’ due to uptake and dissemination within fan communities.’

62 Cf. THOMAS 2007.

63 On new/material philology, see esp. NICHOLS 1990; NICHOLS 1997; SPIEGEL 2014; LUNDHAUG - LIED 2017.

64 See BRYANT 2007, 19.

mission of literature in the vernacular.⁶⁵ In our Coptic materials we see that in those cases where we are lucky enough to have a work preserved in more than one manuscript, there is textual variation. As Paul Zumthor has argued, we should not conceive of such works along the same lines as modern works, for works in a manuscript culture are by the very nature of their material basis ‘fundamentally unstable.’⁶⁶ Thus conceived, the work itself ‘exists outside and hierarchically above its textual manifestations,’ and is ‘dynamic by definition.’⁶⁷ As Zumthor puts it, the work ‘grows, changes, and decays,’ and the individual textual manifestations of a work found in manuscripts, Zumthor describes as ‘less something complete in itself than the text still in the process of creation.’⁶⁸ Each time a text is being copied by a new scribe, in a new context, there is a ‘renewed attempt to get at meaning,’ and not simply the creation of an exact copy of meaning that is fixed once and for all.⁶⁹ In such a situation, the common scholarly practice of using the various manuscript witnesses to a work mainly to reconstruct a text as close as possible to the hypothetical ‘original’ text and to focus interpretive efforts on that text, and its often equally hypothetical context of authorship, risks erasing the work’s history of transmission, evidence of which is located in the work’s individual manuscript instantiations.⁷⁰

While the variance created through these processes span the whole range from minor orthographic differences, or minor details, to major differences in textual contents and length, in many cases the variants are significant enough to support different interpretations,⁷¹ resulting in different constructions and understandings of the biblical storyworld, even in cases where the variants between texts may seem to be relatively minor.⁷² Take for instance the abovementioned *Investiture of the Archangel Michael*. At one point in the narrative, the apostle Peter asks Christ why he and his father created Mastema (i.e., the devil) when surely they knew all the bad things that would happen because of him.⁷³ The answer given by Jesus is slightly, but significantly, different in the two manuscripts that preserve it. While admitting that he and his father created the devil as the ‘first-formed from the hands of God,’ Jesus’ explanation of how the devil’s arrogance arose is different in the two manuscripts in a way that both reflects, and could give rise to, differences in interpretation, as M593 explains that ‘it was within him (i.e., the devil), though, that we made this great arrogance,’ thus admitting to having created the devil as an arrogant being in the first place, while M614 explains that ‘it was within him (i.e., the devil), though, that this great arrogance came into being,’ thus distancing the devil’s creators from his arrogance.⁷⁴ Similarly, when Jesus explains to the apostles why Adam was created, M593 states that ‘My Father gazed upon the entire world we had made, and he saw that he did not find anything within it that would praise him’; in M614 Jesus includes himself as praiseworthy together with his father: ‘My Father gazed out upon the entire world and he found nothing within it that would praise us.’⁷⁵

Looking at a significantly earlier text, we find multiple significant differences, both great and small, between the extant witnesses to the *Apocryphon of John*.⁷⁶ Preserved in three versions in the Nag Hammadi Codices (Codices II, III, and IV), as well as *Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502, there is also a fragment from the Bala’izah discovery that displays great similarities in contents, while not seeming to derive from the ‘same’ work⁷⁷, thus illustrating how fluidity of tradition may sometimes intersect with textual fluidity more strictly speaking. With regard to the latter, we see, e.g., in an important passage regarding Barbelo’s relationship with the Father, how the version in *Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502 states that ‘Barbelo gazed intensely into

65 See CERQUIGLINI 1989; ZUMTHOR 1972; NICHOLS 1990; LUNDHAUG - LIED 2017.

66 ZUMTHOR 1992, 47.

67 ZUMTHOR 1992, 47-48.

68 ZUMTHOR 1992, 48.

69 ZUMTHOR 1992, 48.

70 See KING 1997, 131.

71 Cf. the definition of a fluid text in BRYANT 2007, 17: ‘any written work that exists in multiple material versions due to revisions (authorial, editorial, cultural) upon which we may construct an interpretation’. Cf. also BRYANT 2002.

72 For examples of small but significant variants, see, e.g., JENOTT 2017; LUNDHAUG 2017a; LUNDHAUG 2019a; LUNDHAUG 2019b.

73 *Invest. Mich.* M593, 5; M614, 3.

74 *Invest. Mich.* M593, 6; M614, 4.

75 *Invest. Mich.* M593, 6; M614, 4.

76 See WALDSTEIN - WISSE 1995; WISSE 1997.

77 See WALDSTEIN - WISSE 1995. On the Bala’izah manuscripts, see KAHLE 1954; GOEHRING 2015.

him, the pure light'; while Nag Hammadi Codex II rather thinks that 'he gazed into Barbelo in the pure light surrounding the invisible spirit and its shining'; and Nag Hammadi Codex III seems to agree with the former rather than the latter in stating that 'Barbelon gazed intensely into the pure light'.⁷⁸ Fluidity like this makes it very difficult to reconstruct a hypothetical original or archetype, and highlights the importance of trying to understand the ways in which texts actually appear in manuscripts, and consequently how they would have appeared to the users of these manuscripts.⁷⁹

But while works change in transmission, the various textual manifestations in manuscripts also remain identifiable as somehow the same work. There are thus certain constraints to the fluidity, but how do these constraints work? How is it that texts may change significantly in transmission, while still being identifiable as the same work? Stephen Nichols has suggested that texts may in some sense be regarded, with an analogy derived from the physical sciences, as dynamic systems. By doing so Nichols hopes to capture what he describes as the 'mutable stability' of texts when they undergo often significant changes in transmission.⁸⁰ That is, in other words, the mechanism by which texts stay useful by being changed when received in new contexts. Nichols thus paradoxically highlights the stability principles which he sees at work in the transmission of fluid texts in medieval literary culture. He likens the changes undergone by texts in transmission to the ways in which physical structures adjust to changes in their load. Similarly, he claims, 'Poetic structure in the manuscript age is dynamic; it constantly accommodates to the stress of modification without losing its ability to adjust to load changes or to suffer any reduction in performance or loss of identity'.⁸¹ Such transformation of texts in transmission in order to accommodate to shifting conditions, is described by Nichols as the paradox of 'mutable stability' – a stability which incorporates and depends upon change. If the texts were not adapted to new contexts of use and shifting circumstances they might end up no longer being useful. He describes one of the mechanisms by which such accommodation takes place as that of 'differential imitation', defined as 'the iteration of an object with nuanced variation',⁸² and speaks of the 'generative dynamic of transmission', a 'dynamic activity that transforms as it transmits'.⁸³ To put it in simpler terms, this is where we see the agency of scribes and the influence of context. Nichols argues that 'we should not be surprised to find traces of the contemporary context on the manuscript version it produces,' and points out the crucially important fact that multiple literary works, originally authored at different times and places, were being copied at the same time, and thus simultaneously went through processes of differential imitation in transmission, and that this also happened at the same time as new works were being authored, thus creating generative dynamics that were not unidirectional, but which crucially enabled works authored at later dates to also influence the reworking of texts authored before them, which were still being copied and adapted.⁸⁴ This explains how in the fluid transmission of texts in a manuscript culture, works may influence each other in more than one direction, at more than one point in time. It is thus important not to restrict analyses of possible influences between texts to the hypothetical originals. Such analyses, while highly common in scholarship, needlessly restrict the possible direction of influence to one that exclusively passes from the hypothetical original with the earliest hypothetical date of authorship to the one with the later date.

6. Conclusion

Finally, in lieu of a conclusion, I would like to suggest that one of the most important functions of the continuing production and use of Coptic apocrypha was their continuing contribution to keeping the biblical storyworld alive, while consolidating its importance, and making it, with all its divine entities, seem real

⁷⁸ For a discussion of this and other variants among the versions of *Ap. John*, see LUNDHAUG 2017a.

⁷⁹ On the importance of paying attention to the manuscript context when interpreting texts from the Nag Hammadi Codices, see also LUNDHAUG 2013; LUNDHAUG 2017b; LUNDHAUG 2017c; LUNDHAUG 2019a.

⁸⁰ NICHOLS 2016.

⁸¹ NICHOLS 2016, 100.

⁸² NICHOLS 2016, 90.

⁸³ NICHOLS 2016, 96, 97.

⁸⁴ NICHOLS 2016, 97.

and relevant in people's lives. They did this not least through their transnarrative and hyperserial nature, where different versions and stories about the characters and events of the biblical storyworld mutually enriched each other and the canonical texts alike, thus reinforcing each other's authority by being attached to the same storyworld. I would suggest that this aspect contributed in no small way to the popularity of apocrypha in Egypt, and may help explain why they were found to be useful reading materials in Egyptian monasteries for hundreds of years, through shifting contexts, as attested by manuscripts from all major Egyptian monastic manuscript collections for which we have evidence, where apocrypha are not found in isolation, but alongside lives of monks and other hagiographic writings, monastic rules, and the canonical biblical texts themselves, whose importance was probably only heightened by the simultaneous presence of apocrypha in these collections. Indeed, as Evodius, the fictional bishop of Rome, argues, the embellishment of the canonical gospels by means of apocryphal additions is 'like gold: when you mix it with the topaz stone, it shines greatly, so that no darkness occurs at all where it will be put. Thus also when the adornment of the words of the Holy Spirit is added by the teachers to the Holy Gospels, they shine brightly and cast forth lightning'.⁸⁵

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85 Ps-Evodius, *On the Passion and the Resurrection*, 44 (Coptic text in Chapman 1991, 91). The questions and topics discussed in this article will be further explored in the ERC-funded research project APOCRYPHA (Grant Agreement No. 865971 under HORIZON 2020, the European Union's Framework Programme for Research and Innovation) at the university of Oslo, starting August 2020.

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