

# The Acts of John as a Gnostic text

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THE BIBLICAL book Acts of the Apostles has a title which does not suit the contents, because the story focuses on just a few apostles, mainly Peter and Paul. This is however, as we know, not Luke's fault, because the title of the book was added well after its writing. In any case, Christians who wanted to know what the other apostles had done and what had happened to them needed to turn to other sources of information. But even about the two principal characters of Acts, Peter and Paul, much more could be told. To mention just one thing, in Acts their death is not described. Consequently, from the second century onwards these gaps in popular knowledge were filled by a number of early Christian texts that presented themselves as 'Acts' of a specific apostle. The five oldest and best known texts of this group are the Acts of Andrew, John, Paul, Peter and Thomas. From later periods we have the lesser known Acts of Bartholomew, Philip, Matthew, Thaddeus and not a few others.

But these texts are not just stories; they have an ideology of their own. Thus, regarding each of them, the question has been posed whether the contents could or should be qualified as orthodox or heretical. In the second half of the 19th century this question often took the form of the dilemma: Orthodox or Gnostic. We will see in the course of this paper that a slight refinement of categories was in place.

Here we will focus on just one of these texts, the Acts of John. In my opinion this text is the most interesting of all Apocryphal Acts because it gives a description of Jesus which differs radically from what we find in the NT, yet was not written by a 20th or 21st century theologian. We will discuss the place of this text in the field of early Christianity.

## Labels

For a long time it has been standard practice to treat the five Acts of Andrew, John, Paul, Peter and Thomas as a kind of corpus. As the author of the collection, a certain Lucius was mentioned, who is probably just a legendary figure, this corpus of Acts was usually labelled 'Gnostic', although some scholars regarded them as the output of a Jewish form of Christianity. This common treatment was not completely unjustified, in so far as the Manichees dealt with these texts as a group.

But in order to make progress, the attention of scholars had to focus on the individual Acts. When this was done, the unified picture disappeared. It became clear that the Acts of Paul and Peter may not be really 'Orthodox' in our modern sense, but that they are definitely not Gnostic: at least as long as that word is not so stretched that it becomes the

label for everything not fully orthodox. The Acts of Thomas and Andrew on the other hand are more or less similar in the ideas that they express and they both represent a certain form of Gnostic thinking, although not everybody agrees with this qualification. The Acts of John, in whichever way we want to describe its theological ideas, has a position of its own among the extra-biblical Acts.

## Text and order

The Acts of John was written in Greek but it has not been preserved intact in its entirety. The church found it so heretical that it was placed on the index. Possession and copying of it were forbidden. It is therefore very remarkable that the text was not completely lost, as with so many other texts from the early church. In fact, we do not just owe our knowledge of it to one of those spectacular discoveries that were made in Qumran or in Nag Hammadi. It has been with us all the time.

The Acts of John was partly handed down unnoticed. Large parts were incorporated in a collection of older and younger stories about the apostle John. In turn, this collection was part of a larger group of stories about all apostles, which was read in the form of daily readings in medieval monasteries. In order to reconstruct the ancient Acts of John, older and younger elements of this medieval collection – which exists in several manuscripts – had to be sifted. This process was not an immediate and complete success, as can be seen from the fact that the stories which in the nineteenth century received the chapter numbers 1 to 17 in the reconstructed Acts of John are now no longer considered part of the original text. However, as the chapter numbers had become a fixed element of research, the authentic text now starts with chapter 18 [diagram 1]

The transmission of the most interesting part of the book,

### Diagram 1

[1- 17	inauthentic]
18- 86	in several MSS
87-105	just in one MS
106-115	in many MSS

which bears the chapter numbers 87 to 105, was different from that of the rest of the text. These chapters are found in only one manuscript in which no other parts of the Acts of John occur and which (incidentally) contains numerous mistakes. It was copied in 1324 by somebody who was unable to write good Greek himself and probably did not know with what kind of a text he was dealing. This important part has thus been preserved more or less by accident.

Besides the beginning, other parts of the text are miss-

ing as well, as can be seen from the rough beginnings and endings of some episodes. Moreover, sometimes it appears that copyists abbreviated long speeches of John on their own accord. How much of the text is lost is hard to say; it is also uncertain if the losses are permanent. Only recently a reworked fragment of an already known part the Acts was found in the Dakleh oasis in Egypt. Thus, new findings in the future cannot be excluded.

A textual problem of another nature concerns the place of the chapters that bear the numbers 87-105 in the whole of the text. As I said, these chapters have been preserved only in a separate manuscript from 1324. For some time now it has been the common assumption that they were not inserted in the correct position when research started in the nineteenth century. These chapters are thought to fit better between chapters 36 and 37 and they have indeed been placed there in the recent printed editions. [diagram 2]

However, my own research led me to the conclusion that

### Diagram 2: 'improved order' (1964)

[1-17 inauthentic]  
18- 36  
87-105  
37- 86  
106-115

the nineteenth century order is the better order after all. I therefore propose to consider the order as indicated by the chapter numbers to be the correct one. This order is assumed in the rest of my presentation.

## Origin

The story is situated in Asia Minor and more specifically in and around Ephesus. It was, therefore, assumed that the text was originally written in this area. The Gospel that bears the name of John was also situated in this area in 19th century research. When in the course of the 20th century Syria was proposed as the place of origin of the Gospel, not unnaturally the Acts of John were also thought to be of Syrian origin. That suggestion had the obvious advantage of removing the strange suggestion that somebody from Ephesus or thereabouts would have described how John destroyed the famous temple of Artemis, the pride of the city. (More on this episode later on.)

However, the two scholars who prepared the latest edition of the text, the Swiss Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, rather unexpectedly suggested that the text stems from Egypt. In popular publications their view is uncritically accepted, but on closer scrutiny it turns out to be far from convincing.

In the meantime scholars have returned to the idea that the fourth Gospel was written in Asia Minor. I believe – and the group of scholars who supervised my research fully agree with me – that there are more than just traditional reasons to assume that the Acts of John was also composed in the west of the present Turkey. The two main reasons are: The Acts of Paul and the Acts of Peter also stem from this general

area,<sup>1</sup> and in the Acts of John women have important positions in society as well as in the circle of the believers, something which coincides with what we know about the social situation in Asia Minor in the 2nd century.

We can, I think, be even more specific about the place of origin: in our text. The inhabitants of Smyrna are described in a remarkably positive manner. This suggests that the author was somehow related to the city of Smyrna, the traditional rival of Ephesus.

The name of the author or authors remains unknown. Because women have an important and remarkably positive role in the diverse episodes of the Acts of John as well as in the other Apocryphal Acts, it has been suggested that these texts were written by women. Although this cannot be excluded, the positive evidence for the idea is so small that I usually refer to the author as a male person.

## Story line

The first preserved chapter, chapter 18, brings us right into the middle of the action. It tells us how John and a group of followers are on their way from Miletus, a harbour city in Asia Minor, to Ephesus. As soon as John arrives there, he raises two persons who were apparently dead (ch.18-25). There is not a word about the prior existence of a Christian church in the city, whereas the New Testament tells us that Paul had founded a church there.

In the next episode somebody secretly commissions the painting of a portrait of John. When John discovers the painting he is unhappy about it, because according to him the real human being cannot be captured in a picture for it is spiritual (ch.26-29).

In the theatre of the city of Ephesus John gives a long speech and afterwards heals many old women from the city who are ill (chs.30-36). He gains some adherents and makes long speeches. These speeches are quite moralistic and their content is somewhat removed from the message of the New Testament. John also raises more people from the dead, but he lays stress on the fact that spiritual resurrection is more important than revival of the body. On a certain day he causes half the temple of Artemis to tumble down, after which the people pull down the other half with their own hands (chs.37-45). This temple is known to many as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In reality it was plundered about the year 262 AD by the Goths, after which it stood more or less derelict until the beginning of the fifth century. Yet there are valid reasons to date the Acts of John well before the year 262, such as its theology and the close relationship to the Acts of Paul and of Peter. Both these Acts stem from the second century and are most probably dependent upon the Acts of John. We can, I think, be even more precise about the time of composition.

But let us return to the story line. After a sexually overactive boy has become a believer, he chops off his own private parts. John neither condemns nor justifies this act, but he proclaims that the real problem of greed is something within a person (chs.48-54). Because many people urge him to do so, John then leaves Ephesus for Smyrna. The story about his consequent travel through Asia Minor has largely been lost, except for a reference to the city of Laodicea.

Because of this name it has been suggested that John travelled along the seven cities in Asia Minor to which letters are written in Revelation 2 and 3. It is however unlikely that the author of the Acts of John knew the Book of Revelation. Thus it is equally possible that he made John follow the route of the Roman consul on his annual journey through the area, when he acted as the supreme judge in a great number of cities (chs.55-61).

When John is back in Ephesus (ch.62) a Christian woman dies for sorrow because a stranger has fallen in love with her. After the burial this man tries to enter her tomb in order to have sexual contact with her dead body. But an appearance of Christ prevents the execution of this plan. John is called and he raises from the dead not only the woman but also her own husband and the lover. However, the lover flies because he is afraid of the faith and of the faithful (chs.63-86). The appearance of Christ provokes many questions in the believers and this situation makes John tell about his own experiences with the Lord (chs.87-105). Thereafter he gradually says farewell to the followers in Ephesus. He asks some young people in his company to dig a grave for him outside the city, lies down in it and gives up his spirit (chs.106-115).

### The 'Gospel'

The part of the Acts of John in which the main character talks about his experiences with Jesus is by far the most interesting of the book. It has justly been classified as a 'Gospel', a description of the life of Jesus. In the first part (chs.87-93) John tells twelve brief episodes about as many meetings with the Lord. These episodes hardly contain indications of time and place. Taken as a whole they suggest that Christ was not permanently with his disciples but that he appeared to them only from time to time. All twelve episodes imply that the Lord did not have a normal human body. Thus we are told that he never left any traces even when walking in the sand, that he sometimes could not be felt, that he needed no food, never blinked with his eyes, and sometimes became very tall indeed so that his head touched the sky. Very intriguing is the suggestion that when James and John looked at him at the same moment, they nevertheless saw him in different shapes: one of them saw a child, the other an older man (ch.88). John also saw two Jesus' at the same time who talked to one another (ch.92).

Together these twelve episodes give an outspoken example of a docetic Christology. Docetism is the denial that Jesus Christ had a real human body, a result of strong dualism.<sup>2</sup> The idea that the dust of the earth is inferior to the spirit is here carried to its extreme.

The second part of the 'Gospel' (chs.94-96) is much harder to understand than the first. John tells about a meeting of Christ and his disciples on the eve of his capture. Whereas the reader expects a story about a meal, the Lord and his pupils dance and he teaches them a mysterious song.

The third part (chs.97-102) follows immediately after the second but its meaning is even harder to grasp. The Lord leaves and the disciples flee. John says that he cannot bear seeing the suffering of the Lord. Then there is a mysterious reference to the effect that while 'he' was crucified on Friday

and there was darkness over the earth, 'the Lord' stands next to John in a grotto on the Mount of Olives and enlightens him. Just as in the episode in which James and John saw the Lord in different forms, here we have to do with the idea that Christ is polymorph.<sup>3</sup> The Christ that appears to John says that he 'is crucified in the opinion of the mass in Jerusalem', but that he wants to talk to John as a master to a pupil and as a god to a human being.

### The cross of light

John sees a cross of light which is referred to under many names by the Lord, names such as logos, mind (Greek: *nous*), Christ, door, way, son, father, spirit (Greek: *pneuma*) and life. These names of the cross of light show that the cross is a mode in which Christ reveals himself. But at the same time John sees him on top of the cross. And the cross is not just Christ; it is also a symbol of the unity of the true, redeemed believers. The crossbeam divides the universe into an upper world and a lower world, and humanity itself also appears to be divided: around the cross there is a multiform multitude that has not yet been saved. In the cross the redeemed can be found.

From this we conclude that the Acts of John on the one hand denies that Christ suffered on the cross, but on the other hand maintains that he is not completely beyond suffering. The fact that he appeared on earth as the Logos and as the cross of light is considered as a form of suffering. This is apparently so because in this way he shares the earthly existence which inherently is a form of suffering. In addition to this the unsaved state of the human beings that are considered his members also causes him to suffer. Only when the believers are finally united with him, this suffering ends. This change is just as necessary for him as it is for humanity.

The third part of the 'Gospel' ends by saying that the Lord ascended to heaven unseen and that John understood that all these events were mere symbols (ch.102). Finally, in the fourth part (chs.103-105) John addresses his audience over their heads, calling them to faith in the Lord whom they now have come to know and who is always with them. The message ends with John going for a stroll.

### The New Testament

We will now look at the relationship between the Acts and the Bible. In the second century, the period when the Acts of John originated, the Christian church had the Old Testament in Greek. As we know, the writings that later on would be the New Testament increasingly came into circulation. They were used in the meetings of the believers and were recognised as the word of God.

The Acts of John conveys a message that is completely different from the Old Testament, from the Jewish people and from history. In some places it is evident that the author was not totally unaware of the Old Testament for he, consciously or unconsciously, alludes to the stories about Moses and Elijah. But that is all there is. The author does not even use a word like 'scripture' or a synonym of it. The vocabulary of the text could hardly be more independent of the Jewish

scriptures. It just seems as if God's revelation starts here and now with the coming and the preaching of John.

The relationship of the Acts with the parts of the later New Testament is different. But it is remarkable that in this respect there are great differences between the diverse parts of the Acts of John. Here we get a first indication that the text might not be an original unity.

Notably absent from all of the Acts of John are the epistles and the Book of Revelation. More precisely, of Revelation there is no trace at all, whereas the epistles of Paul are occasionally reflected in the vocabulary. However, they have no further role. Chapters 18-86 and 106-115 have clearly been influenced by the canonical Acts, but much less by the four Gospels. The influence of Acts can especially be seen in the fact that from time to time there appears next to John a narrator who uses the I-form. Moreover, this narrator is never introduced to the readers and the narrative perspective of his words is the same as that of the surrounding text, just as is the case with the well-known we-episodes in the canonical Acts (16:10ff; 20:6ff; 27:1ff). If one thinks that this is merely a minor detail, it can be said that a comparable alternation of 'he-form' and 'I-form' without clearly marked switching points occurs nowhere else in all Greek literature. It is especially because of this dependence on the Acts of the Apostles that we claim that the Acts of John belongs to the literary genre 'acts'. Within this genre the Acts of John is unique because it also contains a long section that belongs to the 'gospel' genre.

The Acts of the Apostles had hardly any influence, if at all, on the so-called Gospel (chs. 87-105). This section was influenced by the gospels that later came to be included in the New Testament. There are also some similarities with the Gospel of Peter, which was not included in the New Testament. The fourth Gospel exercised the strongest influence. The wording of the Acts of John shows that this Gospel was ascribed to the apostle John who is the main character of the Acts; a fact of obvious interest to New Testament scholars.

Yet it should be noted that in the Acts of John no book, not even a gospel, is recognized as authoritative. Consequently, the Acts of John never quotes. The author succeeds in writing the twelve brief episodes about the appearances of Christ (chs.87-93) in such a way that they resemble the (later canonised) gospels but never actually refer to these texts. His new gospel is a text on its own that can be read and understood without reference to or knowledge of other texts.

Specially remarkable is the situation in chapters 94-102, because here we find clear allusions to the fourth Gospel. However, unlike what might be expected, this Gospel is not endorsed but contradicted, and sometimes quite emphatically so. We get the impression that the author of this part of the Acts of John presupposes that his readers know the Gospel according to John just as he himself knows it, and that he wants to refute basic elements of it. I offer two examples of the way in which the fourth Gospel is contradicted. In ch.101 Christ says: 'You have heard . . . that blood streamed from my side, but it has not streamed.' And in the second place this part of the text rather self-consciously uses the verb 'to pierce' but denies emphatically that the body of Christ was pierced. In both cases we have to do with open and direct contradiction of John 19:34.

At the same time we see that these chapters of the Acts of

John are nonetheless dependent upon the fourth Gospel. Thus the concept of the cross of light seems to have arisen as a fusion of Jesus' words about the light of the world and the idea that the Lord was elevated on the cross (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:34). Moreover, the structure of the 'Gospel' as a whole follows the structure of the fourth Gospel quite closely. All these things taken together lead to the conclusion that the Acts of John originated in the sphere of influence of the Gospel according to John, but in a circle which had a very critical attitude towards this Gospel.

Having seen that the Acts of John is dependent upon several canonical books, we can say something more about the use of the label apocryphal. Traditionally, gospels, acts, epistles and revelations from the first three centuries of the Christian era that were excluded from the New Testament are called 'apocrypha of the New Testament'. The word apocryphal has the negative implications of 'not inspired', 'secondary' and even 'false'. Recent scholarship has suggested abandoning the label: at least for texts like the five major acts of Andrew, John, Paul, Peter and Thomas. These texts, it is argued, are nothing else than independent stories which were not written in order to gain a place in the canon and which should therefore be judged in their own terms.<sup>4</sup> Although I agree in principle that the label apocryphal should be handled with care and that it is not very clear what we gain by using it, I would argue that its use in the case of the Acts of John is not unwarranted. This text has clearly been modelled upon the canonical books and indeed was meant to replace the fourth Gospel. Such a text can surely be labelled apocryphal. The Acts of John represents a different form of Christianity than that which is found in the canonical books.

### A Gnostic text?

The question whether the Acts of John is a Gnostic text appeared to be rather tricky in the past, not least because of problems of definition. Junod and Kaestli, the editors of the text, launched a solution that is as simple as it is radical. In their opinion the text consists of two parts which were written by different authors. One of them was a Gnostic and wrote the second and the third part of the 'Gospel' (chs.94-102) as well as a single chapter in the final part of the text (ch.109). The other author moved in the margins of the 'catholic' church, but he was no Gnostic: he is responsible for the rest of the text (chs.18-93 and 103-115 minus 109). Not all scholars have accepted this solution, not least because it is not very elegant. All too often in the past problems of interpretation were solved by cutting a text into pieces and ascribing these to different sources. But in the present case I have become convinced of the essential correctness of the hypothesis of Junod and Kaestli, except regarding the 'colour' of chapter 109 (which does not need to be discussed here). [diagram 3]

Let us first of all return to chapters 94-102, which we consider as Gnostic. I work on the basis of the following marks of Gnosticism:<sup>5</sup>

1. A definite dualism which poses an absolute, transcendental God over against the world. This results in an attitude of animosity against the present world.
2. Humanity is seen as basically divine, sparks of light

### Diagram 3

18-86 stories about John in Ephesus  
87-105 'Gospel'  
87- 93 first part: twelve brief episodes  
94- 96 second part: dance and song of Christ  
97-102 third part: the cross of light  
103-105 fourth part: call to faith  
106-115 death of John in Ephesos

who do not really belong in this earthly sphere.

3. The salvation of the wandering humans is conceived as the result of revelation of their real descent and their real being; this knowledge is at the same time knowledge of God.
4. These ideas and others besides are usually expressed in the form of myths in which reference is often made to non-human beings in the universe, known as aeons or hypostaseis.

These four elements of Gnostic thinking are clearly present in Acts of John 94-102. Above all the author wants to introduce his readers to the correct knowledge of Christ and of the cross of light. This knowledge specifically focuses on the paradox that the Christ cannot suffer yet suffers. His suffering, however, is not related to his hanging on the cross, because the cross of Golgotha has been changed into a mythical cosmic principle. The suffering of humankind consists in their restless wandering in the darkness of the earthly existence. Christ in his dance imitates the instability of the human situation that can be resolved when they find stability in the cross. Life on earth as such, however, is identical with suffering. Salvation has in no way to do with sin or the taking away of sin, but with the passing on of knowledge. In his dance Christ shows himself to be a lamp, a mirror, a door and a way for human beings (ch.95).

With respect to humankind, which has a divine nature just like Christ, there is a distinction between their true nature and the situation in which they have temporarily landed. John is addressed as a 'relative' of Christ (101). The speculation about the cross of light as a border within the cosmos can later on become an element of a cosmic myth. The text shows traces of an emerging division of heavenly and cosmic realities into separate aeons, although we do not find here the complicated system that characterizes some later Gnostic texts. The earth belongs to the lower spheres, which are separated from the world of light by the cross.

### The spiritual story

In the other parts of the Acts the atmosphere is different. Here we are unable to identify specifically Gnostic ideas. This text is not anti-cosmic as can be seen from the fact that the world is referred to as God's creation (79) and it is said that God reveals himself through nature (112). The theme of the text is the struggle between John as the representative of the God Christ and the great adversary, the devil. The precondition for redemption is not knowledge, but faith, love of God and good works. Sometimes faith and knowledge are mentioned together, but faith is always mentioned first. On a

closer look it appears that God is always the content of the knowledge. It is likewise remarkable that whereas Gnostics always have certainty of their redemption, in this part of the text nobody has any certainty. Even the apostle John himself is uncertain in this respect and he can only hope that God will consider his good works as more important than his failures (112, 114).

Another remarkable feature of this non-Gnostic part of the text is the fact that Christ is presented as more or less the same person as God. According to the Acts of John there is only one God, the Lord Christ, who sometimes appeared on earth but never lived on earth 'in the flesh'. There never was a real human Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, this form of Christianity has no room for stories about the birth, the suffering and the death of Jesus, let alone his resurrection. This peculiar view of Christ has never been found with Gnostics.

Although we may safely say that the largest part of the Acts of John presents no Gnostic ideas, we can nonetheless imagine that this text was attractive for people who cherished Gnosticising ideas. The form of Christianity that we find here has broken with the authority of old books and the link with Judaism has been cut completely. There are no traces of an organized church or of a hierarchy. The religion that John preaches has, as I said, no relation to the earthly ministry of the human being Jesus of Nazareth. The words 'raise' and 'resurrection' do occur frequently, but they never refer to Christ but always to the spiritual experiences of the believers. The many miracle stories merely spiritualize the concept of miracle and devote all attention to the soul. Baptism has been marginalized and the Lord's supper is a spiritual event in which all attention goes to the dignity of the participants. To sum up, the Acts of John presents an unorthodox form of Christianity, a spiritual, a-historic form of faith from which the step to a Gnostic form of faith is not too big.

### Interpolation

We therefore conclude that the Acts of John is not of one piece, but that it is an originally non-Gnostic text which now contains a Gnostic element. The non-Gnostic spiritual part is not polemical in tone but rather a quiet exposition of ideas. This text seems to have been meant as a presentation of the faith for outsiders, as an 'evangelistic' text. The Gnostic part, on the contrary, as we saw when we discussed the relationship to the New Testament, openly opposes the faith of Christians of other convictions and specifically the contents of the Gospel according to John. Consequently, the composite text does not aim at unbelieving readers but at readers who are already Christians but not yet Gnostics.

The most likely explanation of the way in which the composite text originated is that the non-Gnostic part is the original text. This text must stem from a community that held the apostle John and his Gospel in high regard while the old covenant played no role at all. This uprooting would seem to be the most important factor in the rise of this specific form of Christianity. Apparently the text produced within this group was so attractive to a Gnostic reader that he undertook to add the part that we now call the 'Gospel'. The result is a biography of John in which the apostle towards

the end pays much attention to the person of Christ. Comparable composite texts were not uncommon in the second and third century; an example is the Letter of Peter to Philip which was found in Nag Hammadi.

## Structure

When we once more survey the text as a whole, we notice that the 'Gospel' is situated towards the end of it. Within the whole of 18-115 it composes 87-105. After this 'Gospel' the story soon comes to a close; everything that happens after the 'Gospel' has been told is marked by the approaching farewell of the apostle. The same observation will already have been valid with regard to the text as it was before the Gnostic part (94-102) was added to it. Even then the 'Gospel' must have constituted a kind of culmination of the whole story. This effect has of course only been enhanced by the addition of the Gnostic part of the Gospel. The text in its final form has become an introduction to the Christian faith in which there is a gradual progress from general to specific. The great New Testament scholar and Early Church expert Theodor Zahn first noted this structure over a century ago, but in the course of further research it was not mentioned and his observation was consequently forgotten. It became visible again after the chapters 87-105 had been restored to their original position, in the way that I described above.

The long first part of the text introduces the readers to John as the apostle of God, to the power of God, the ethical standard of the faith and the possibility of the spiritual birth. After attentively reading it the reader can have become a 'spiritual' being. It is to this type of spiritual humanity that the person of Christ is introduced at the end of the text. The episode that immediately precedes the 'Gospel' describes an appearance of Christ by means of which the expectations of the reader are increased. The chapters 87-88, 93 and 97 are clearly recognizable steps in the next phase in the revelatory process. Moreover, chapters 93 and 102 emphatically state that the written text does not contain everything that could have been told. Such remarks suggest that any reader who has become involved will be more deeply introduced into Gnostic thinking outside the text.

## The person of John

Finally we turn our attention once more to the person of John and the divers writings that are attributed to him or in which he figures. As we saw, the Acts of John is not just interested in the person of the apostle but even more in the fourth Gospel. It is important to note that, although the Acts was written in Asia Minor in the first half of the second century, it contains no historical information about life and work of John, except the fact that he worked and died in Ephesus and was buried there. This fact suggests that both authors who contributed to the Acts were dependent upon the information concerning John contained in the fourth Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles. They apparently did not have access to oral traditions about the fate of John. This means that the value of the Acts of John for our knowledge of the first century is very limited.

In one respect, however, this silence is quite eloquent:

the idea according to which there were two historical persons bearing the name John, the apostle and the elder, is not found here. This idea first appears in Eusebius in the fourth century and it plays a major role in modern scholarship dealing with the fourth Gospel. Yet for the Acts of John there is only one John, the apostle; the text suggests that he was the author of the Gospel that bears his name.

There is yet another way in which the Acts throws light on the origin of the Gospel. It has often been said that the fourth Gospel is the product of a secluded group, a kind of sect on the fringes of early Christianity. Traces of such a closed group cannot be found in the Acts, even though it is the product of the first or the second generation of readers of the Gospel. We saw that both authors who contributed to the text have been influenced not only by John's Gospel but also by other parts of the later New Testament. Such an influence rules out the suggestion that the Gospel and its first readers had a segregated existence.

## Gnosticism

To sum up, we can say that the Gnostic part of the Acts of John and therefore the text as a whole in its final form is in fact a Gnostic revision or rather a replacement of the fourth Gospel. Elements of the fourth Gospel that stimulated this revision are the fact that Christ is called the light of the world (Joh. 8:12; 12:35-36), his descent from heaven (e.g. Joh. 3:13, 31-32; 6:38; 16:28), the emphasis on his divinity (e.g. Joh. 8:58; 14:10-11; 17:3-5, 21-23), and Christ's claim that he himself is the one who puts down his life (Joh. 10:17-18). It thus becomes abundantly clear that the fourth Gospel was open to a Gnostic explanation. This explanation can be found in the second century Acts of John but likewise in the twentieth century with Ernst Käsemann, the famous New Testament scholar who seriously claimed that the Gospel according to John is a Gnostic text.<sup>6</sup>

Over against the spiritualizing-Gnostic approach to the Gospel there has always been the 'orthodox' approach. A very early witness to this has also been preserved, even in our Bibles, in the form of the first and the second Letters of John, which were probably written by the Evangelist himself in reaction to later developments. These Letters expressly defend the belief that Jesus Christ really became flesh (1John 1:1-2; 4:2-3; 5:6; 2 John 7). Those who deny the reality of the earthly existence of the redeemer are here called antichrists. It is evident that by the time of writing of the Letters the heterodox persons thus condemned had left the church, but it is unclear if this happened on their own accord, voluntarily or compulsory (1 John 2:19).<sup>7</sup>

We thus conclude that the Gospel according to John was read both within the 'orthodox' wing of the Early Church and within certain circles characterized by alternative, heterodox viewpoints. The first group of readers preserved as a testimony to the reception of the Gospel the Letters of John, from the heterodox group came both authors of the Acts of John. The Acts of John shows how outside its Judeo-Christian context the fourth Gospel could form a pathway to Gnosticism.

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## NOTES

- 1 See the contributions by J.N. Bremmer in the volumes he edited, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 2) (Kampen, 1996), and *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter: Magic, Miracles and Gnosticism* (Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 3) (Leuven, 1998).
- 2 Cf. R. Roukema, *Gnosis en geloof in het vroege christendom* (Zoetermeer, 1998), 30, 49, 184.
- 3 I discuss the origin and spread of this idea in my 'Polymorphy of Christ' in J.N. Bremmer (red.), *The Apocryphal Acts of John* (Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 1) (Kampen, 1995), 97-118.
- 4 See L. van Kampen, *Apostelverhalen. Doel en compositie van the oudste apokriefe Handelingen der apostelen* (PhD dissertation Utrecht, 1990).
- 5 Cf. Roukema, *Gnosis*, 137-138.
- 6 E. Käsemann, *Jesu letzter Wille nach John 17* (Tübingen 21967); English *The Testament of Jesus* (London 1968).
- 7 See my *The Adversaries Envisaged in the Johannine Epistles* (Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift 53 (1999)), 17-24, which also deals with the difficult text 1 Joh.5:6.