
Implied Reader Response and the Evolution of Genres: Transitional Stages Between the Ancient Novels and the Apocryphal Acts

Robert M Price

Institute for Higher Critical Studies

Drew University, Madison, NJ, USA

Abstract

This article aims at elaborating on the commonly held judgment that the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles have somehow been influenced by the Hellenistic novels. It is argued that the one evolved from the other. Three stages can be traced. A first stage consists of Christian allegorizing of the novels based on the many striking crucifixion and empty tomb passages, followed by a second stage of writing Christian allegories based on the Old Testament heritage of Christianity. Joseph and Asenath being the sole surviving example. Finally, the third stage is the explicit composing of Christian versions of the picaresque romantic adventure novels, namely the Apocryphal Acts.

1. EVOLVING GENRES

No scholarly hypothesis is universally supported, but it is at least very widely held among scholars that the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles owe much in the way of both inspiration and form to the Hellenistic romances (Haight 1945:48; Perry 1967:31-32; Hagg, pp. 160-161¹). Can we envision a plausible *Sitz-im-Leben* for this transition? It would seem natural to picture early Christians, like modern ones, indulging a guilty pleasure in reading the novels and eventually being motivated to write their own safe, sanitized versions in the form of the Apocryphal Acts. After all, precisely the same thing has happened in our own day, when Zondervan Publishing House has expanded its repertoire from biblical commentaries and devotional manuals to include *risqué* but chaste 'Serenade' romance novels². In the present article I would like to delineate a couple of possible intermediate stages between the Hellenistic romances and the Christian Apocrypha.

As I am going to deal with some factors which would have facilitated the evolution of the first genre into the second, I dare not pass by B.E. Perry's repudiation of the very notion that one genre evolves into another, deeming the evolutionary model drawn

from biology to be inappropriate. He believes that a genre must be defined by the intention of the author, not by the component elements the author uses (see Perry 1967:9ff; Schneemelcher & Schaferdiek 1965:176; Hagg, pp. 160-61; Heiserman 1977:204-205). Thus, that is Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* does not qualify as a novel like the *Leucippe and Clitophon* of Achilles Tattius despite the fact that both use many stock plot devices such as exotic travel reports and climactic rescues. Philostratus meant to defend the dubious figure of Apollonius the mage/sage, whereas Achilles Tattius simply meant to tell a rousing tale. Again, Perry does not deny that Pseudo-Callisthenes's *Alexander Romance* shares much with the genuine histories it seeks to ape. But the *Alexander Romance* means to entertain and to edify, not primarily to recount the historical exploits of a great man as do Arrian and Plutarch in their accounts of Alexander.

Perry (1967:16-17) grows indignant at the suggestion of many critics that the romance grew out of the history, albeit perhaps in stages no longer discernible to us, given the fragmentary state of the evidence³. The literary 'fossil record' may no longer contain all the transitional forms. So goes the theory. But Perry, like a 'scientific creationist', asks how history is simply to have evolved into romance. Are we to imagine that historians just grew sloppier and evermore extravagant in their mistakes, adopting legend as easily as fact into their accounts, until only romance remained? No, Perry insists, new genres, works of a new intentionality, must have emerged with the impetus of a new inspiration, some great new cultural or spiritual factor that gave authors something new to want to say.

But instead of rejecting the evolution model outright as Perry does, we might better adopt the model of 'punctuated equilibrium' proposed by Niles Eldridge. Here it is suggested that evolutionary changes cluster in times of major environmental change and then slow down in a long period of taking up the slack. During this time, slower and more subtle changes gradually accumulate. It is such a pattern of change that I venture to find in the evolution of the novel into the Acts genre.

And besides, on Perry's own account we can speak of familiar elements coming to be used in new genres, even if we cannot speak of old genres being bent to new purposes. I cannot see much of a difference between saying that once Christian faith came on the scene novelistic elements were taken over into a new Acts genre on the one hand, and on the other saying that under Christian influence the novel genre was used as a vehicle for Christian edification in the production of the Acts. In any case, I think that the evolution model is important because we can in fact delineate some transitional stages in the process, some literary archaeopteryxes amid the fossil record.

Developments in recent literary criticism and reading theory go even further in undermining Perry's objections. For one thing, as Tzvetan Todorov says, the conventions of literary genres are more a matter of ideal types than hard-and-fast categories. Genre conventions merely inhibit creativity and impede fruitful analysis when we use them as standards to which we think individual texts must conform (so that we judge them aberrant or inferior the farther they diverge). It is far more natural as well as more productive to use genre conventions as yardsticks against which to measure and chart the movement of creative evolution. New and revolutionary works stand out, surprise and refresh us, by transcending/transgressing genre conventions⁴. And this is a process exactly parallel to species evolution in biology. Small changes accumulate until one suddenly comes to notice that old genre conventions have been left behind, and new ones have altogether, albeit gradually, replaced them. And then new works will start to transcend those new standards by transgressing them here and there.

Genre conventions, as many critics agree, are a kind of verisimilitude: they play on the expectations of most readers, either to use them to deceive the reader, to satisfy the reader by meeting those expectations⁵. And this leads us to the second respect in which recent reading theory has qualified Perry's judgments. A genre is not so much a matter of *authorial intentionality* as of *reader expectation*. Often the reader cannot know the intent of the author anyway, and even if the reader did know it, it is far from clear that the writer holds some copyright on the text, so that only his or her interpretation of it counts. In what follows, I want to show how reader response to the ancient novels may have had everything to do with the process whereby that genre evolved into that of the Apocryphal Acts. So genres *do* evolve, and precisely because genres are *not* to be defined solely by reference to authorial intention. Genres, themselves defined by the conventions of verisimilitude, change with changes in reader response. The reader response change in view here is that made by the Christian faith embraced by ancient Christian readers of the romances who learned to read and enjoy the stories in new ways.

Following Wayne Booth (1983:71-76), many critics are in the habit of speaking of the intention of 'the *implied* author'⁶, realizing that we cannot be sure if our own exegesis mirrors the *actual* author's intent. The 'implied author' idea implies that the text speaks for itself; that we are not at the mercy of the author's intent (whether known or unknown), and that if the author meant the text to impart some other message than the one most of us pick up, then it's his fault we are 'wrong', not ours. Thus we speak of the apparent intent, the implied authorial intent. Mirroring this critical construct is another, the 'implied reader' (cf. Genette 1988:149) or 'ideal reader' or 'super reader'. This is someone who understands the intentionality we infer for the

author (implied or inferred author), whether anyone previous to us actually ever did or not). Thus the implied reader, the response we infer that the original readers would have had, is fully as theoretical an inference as the implied author. In the present case, we will be reconstructing a somewhat different 'inferred reader', one that might not have been reading the novels on their own original terms but rather through a special set of lenses. I will attempt to imagine the likely reader response of Christians making what they could of pagan romances and reading them, as far as they could, through Christian filters.

2. EDIFYING NOVELS

Perry himself notes how in Heliodorus's *An Ethiopian Story* the conventions of the romance (star-crossed lovers enduring great reverses and threats to chastity, finally to be united by Fate in serve to tell a story primarily not of young and determined love, but rather of the inscrutable ways of Providence, of all things working together for good for those whom the gods love. Can we not here see already the kind of shift in intentionality that will become clear with the appearance of the Acts?

Perry notes that early Christians fancifully made both Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus into Christian converts, then bishops (!), regarding their novels as products of their pre-enlightened youth. I suspect this posthumous induction was occasioned by the fact that Christians had already found it handy to regard these novels as 'noble pagan' works bearing signs of greater, more Christian things to come.

In the case of Achilles Tatius, it is difficult to see how popular tradition could have fancied him to have been or to have become a Christian bishop; but in the case of Heliodorus it was almost inevitable that he should be mistaken for such. He was a kindred spirit. In him, more easily than in any other ancient romancer, they could find spiritual values of the kind that they wanted to find, while enjoying at the same time that element of sensational adventure which is always popular with readers who have time for it, and which was abundantly featured — though not on its own account — in their own biographies of the saints and martyrs.

(Gennette 1988:108)

From these facts and Perry's observations on them we can conclude two things. First, the reading of the Hellenistic romance novels by early Christians was wide-spread, hence the baptism after the fact of some of their authors. Second, we can conclude that

these works were considered redeemable. The novels were not proscribed as were heretical works and pagan dramas which treated of the affairs of the false gods. Actors and teachers converting to Christianity were required to renounce their livelihoods as these were received to be tainted with pagan mythology. Why were the novels, which after all swim in pagan religious references, not similarly rejected? I conclude there must have been a Christian way of reading them.

Further, I suggest that such a Christian hermeneutic can have had little to do with the author's intention. It is Perry's definition of genre according to authorial intent that causes his puzzlement over the Christian fondness for the bawdy-sophist Achilles Tatius. The early Christian, lacking Perry's critical acumen, simply remained oblivious to the novelists' 'true' intention. I propose to indicate some factors, hitherto given insufficient attention as far as I know, that must, I think, have led Christian readers to see the novels as allegories of Christian ascetical piety, not just works of 'kindred spirits'.

Early Christians usually tended to view pagan counterparts to features of their own faith hardly as evidence of 'kindred spirits', but rather as the work of demonic spirits, Satanic counterfeits, as when Justin Martyr so explains away the birth legends of Perseus and Heracles, both so similar to the gospel myths of Jesus. Had they not come somehow to view the romances as in some sense Christian works, these, too, would have been tossed on the pyre.

I believe that certain clues discerned in the texts (though manifestly not so intended by their pagan and sophisticated authors) moved their Christian readers to appropriate the novels for themselves, much as they had co-opted the Jewish scriptures. Again, Justin felt free to wrest the scriptures away from his debate partner Trypho, claiming them as 'our scriptures, not yours'.

It is this Christian re-reading, analogous to the Stoic allegorizing of the *Iliad*, that furnishes us with a transitional form, a literary archaeopteryx, on the way between the Hellenistic romance and the Christians' own novels, the Apocryphal Acts. The Acts will be seen as attempts to make explicit what Christian readers found implicit in the novels.

To view the evolution of the Acts out of the romances in its proper light we must also note that the Acts constituted but one among the new sub-species of religious novels. The DNA for this development was already visible in Heliodorus, as Perry has noted, and I think we can point to three other distinct cases where the novel has mutated into a work of religious edification.

First, we must briefly consider *The Golden Ass* of Lucius Apuleius. This Latin work affords us a priceless opportunity for redaction-critical analysis. As it happens, this novel is based squarely on the earlier Greek comic novel *The Ass* by Pseudo-Lucian

(or on a previous common source of both novels, a moot distinction for my purposes). It may thus be quite clearly seen just what and where Apuleius has added to the earlier novel. He has added several bawdy and otherwise entertaining tales, having them told round the campfire by other characters in the story. These tales form interludes, time outs from the progress of the main plot which concerns the magical transformation of the over-curious narrator into a donkey and his tribulations until he can negate the spell.

Some vignettes of this kind flesh out the ribs of the plot in *The Ass*, but nowhere nearly as many. It might be speculated that Pseudo-Lucian cut out many of them appearing in the common source, and that Apuleius simply retained them. But two particularly striking episodes of *The Golden Ass* which do not appear in its Greek counterpart certainly seem to be redactional supplements by Apuleius. The first is the mini-novel of *Cupid and Psyche*, which fairly threatens to tip the whole book over on its side. It is in spirit and form utterly unlike the various Canterbury tales which decorate the plot elsewhere. The second is the conclusion, which is actually a new continuation of the plot, not another barnacle clinging to it. It constitutes a new and different ending by the redactor himself, based on his own religious experiences (we know from other sources that Apuleius had been initiated into the priesthood, as the new conclusion describes).

In *The Ass* the hero regains his happiness and his human shape in this wise: he has become a side-show attraction, a donkey aping human behavior with uncanny skill, extending even to coupling with human females. *The Golden Ass* runs parallel with *The Ass* up to this point, whereupon the two part company. In *The Ass*, the hero is about to commence sporting with a jaded matron before the eyes of spectators in an arena, when he chances to spy a garland of roses, the one thing he may eat in order to break the assomorphic spell. Availing himself of the opportunity, he regains human shape in dramatic fashion.

But in *The Golden Ass* the hero flees the stadium before the sex show gets off the ground, leaving behind a disappointed and drooling crowd. He pauses to rest at a lakeside and there prays to Isis to come to his aid. He is there and then vouchsafed an epiphany of the mighty goddess, who commands him to enter the city and wait for a religious procession in her honor. There he will see a priest of Isis whom she will have forewarned in a dream to expect the ass. The priest will offer him a garland of roses. All this happens on schedule, and the hero changes form and commits himself to the service of the divine Lady. At length he is triply initiated into the orders of Isis and Osiris.

Sullivan is surely right in seeing that the final transformation of the protagonist signals Apuleius's appropriation of the older folk tale for purposes of religious propaganda. The recovery of human form and the dropping of the donkey's form symbolizes the sloughing off of mere humanity (recall how St. Francis used to call the body 'Brother Ass') through the miracle of Mystery-initiation (Sullivan 1989:589). Losing the ass's shape is like stripping off the soiled Egyptian garment in *The Hymn of the Pearl*.

And Elizabeth Hazelton Haight (1936:193) insightful notes that the interpolated story of *Cupid and Psyche*, a transparent allegory of the love of the soul for the divine, has been made to serve as a on of the hero's own final spiritual transformation into the lover of Isis.

Cupid and Psyche, recounting as it does the vicissitudes of star-crossed lovers, one mortal but the fleshly image of Venus, the other immortal, is a miniature of the Hellenistic romances. In them, too, we follow the vicissitudes of young lovers as they are separated by misunderstandings, acts of God, and fate. The heroine is usually a spitting image of a goddess (Aphrodite, Andromeda, etc.) and is sometimes mistaken for a theophany in the flesh. The one difference in *Cupid and Psyche* is that the male lover is one of the gods himself. After various trials, Psyche overcomes the spite of Cupid's jealous mother Venus. After journeys to heaven and hell, Psyche proves her merit and is welcomed among the gods.

Haight (1936:193) has surely grasped what Apuleius intends: Psyche's obstacles on the way to joyous union with Cupid mirror those of Apuleius's own psyche on its difficult path to mystical union with his beloved Isis. The Hellenistic novel, here represented by one specimen, *The Ass*, is being transfigured into the romance of the soul with its god, here represented in *The Golden Ass*. Essentially this, I suggest, was the operative principle controlling the Christian reinterpretation of the novels, to be discussed below.

Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* adapts the conventions of the novel in the service of both exalting the reputation of Apollonius (commonly thought to be a meregoetes) by casting him in the role of a *theios aner* and Neo-Pythagorean sage and of at holding up the Neo-Pythagorean ideal in Apollonius, its chief incarnation. Here the novel, with its travel-log of exotic marvels and close shaves is pressed into service for edifying hagiography, only without any Christian coloring. Pretty much the same transformation, in a Christian direction, led to the Apocryphal Acts.

Joseph and Asenath is no less a Hellenistic romance novel than the others for the fact of its setting in Jewish rather than Greek antiquity. For its star-crossed lovers it chooses the biblical pair Joseph and Asenath the daughter of Potiphera (or Pente-

phres), hierophant of the gods of Egypt. Here the obstacle separating the lovers is the (really rather noble) paganism of the virgin Asenath. Though the original version of Genesis does not indicate that she renounced the teratocephalic gods of the Nile to marry Joseph, it was incredible to later Jewish and Christian imagination that she would not have converted, and so here she does. Equally, nothing of a real love story can be detected in Genesis, but to spin one out of that meager cloth required no greater imagination (much less documentation) than it took to make King Ninus and Queen Semiramis into teenaged lovers in the *Ninus Romance*⁷.

Contemporary scholars understand *Joseph and Asenath* as a product of Hellenistic Judaism. If this scholarly consensus is correct, then the *Joseph and Asenath* novel must be seen as yet another instance of the romance form coming to be used for religious edification, again, the same tendency that produced the Apocryphal Acts. But below I will return to *Joseph and Asenath* to suggest that an earlier, and now despised, theory about the origin and intent of *Joseph and Asenath*, namely that it is a Christian work, is closer to the truth, and that as a Christian work it forms still another transitional stage on the way to the composition of the Apocryphal Acts.

3. CELIBATE SIGNALS

Recent studies by Stevan Davies (1980:95-109), Dennis Ronald MacDonald (1983, 1984), and Virginia Burrus (1987) have shown to my satisfaction that we must look to the early communities of celibate women, the orders of widows and virgins, as the matrix of the celibacy stories in the Apocryphal Acts, and perhaps of the Acts as whole documents⁸, since as literary wholes the various Acts certainly promote encratite ideals and serve the interests of celibate women. What is the bearing of this hypothesis on attempts to reconstruct the process whereby the Acts as a genre evolved out of the novels?

Implicit in the discussion of Davies is the notion that the celibate women enjoyed the novels and began to write (or at least, when they became available from whatever source, to *read*) their own versions, the Apocryphal Acts. The thread of continuity was that both groups of texts exalted chastity and chaste heroines. In the case of the novels, it was a question of preserving virginity till marriage against temptations to the contrary. The heroine preserved her chastity for her betrothed, usually admirably chaste himself. In the Acts, the heroine, someone like Thecla, Xanthippe, or Polyxena, embraces absolute sexual abstinence in favor of a *hieros gamos* with her spiritual bridegroom, Jesus Christ. On earth the stand-in for the invisible groom is one of the Apostles. That Paul, Andrew, and the rest are supposed to function as vicars of Christ

in this sense is made clear by the astonishing fact that in every one of the major Acts, there comes a scene in which the exalted Christ appears on earth in the form of the apostle.

There are no sweet nothings whispered between the apostle and his female devotee, but she exhibits all the marks of romantic devotion, including dizzy palpitations, following him to new locations, visiting him in prison, and suffering various tortures sooner than renouncing her allegiance to him and his gospel. But in all these cases the apostle is clearly but the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices to hear the bridegroom's voice (John 3:29).

But that the earthly affection of the novels has been transformed into the heavenly devotion of the Acts is evident. And the implications for the readership of the latter is equally clear. The Acts must have been read (and likely written) by those who thrilled at the exploits of the spiritual lovers described therein. What has not been so clear is what these virgins and widows, these encratites, could ever have seen in the romance novels to make them want to emulate them (or to read sanitized substitutes!). Were they like some modern readers, who are simply addicted to the soap-operatic sentiments of Harlequin Romance novels? This would scarcely have been compatible with a single-minded devotion to Christ, the only bridegroom of the encratite! Must we imagine these supposedly consecrated women guiltily devouring romances that were not only thoroughly pagan religiously, but also dripping with the earthly eroticism they had supposedly left behind at conversion? Did they secretly cherish a scarcely sublimated pining for the arms of an earthly lover?

We might imagine that the widows/virgins had indeed put away such worldly desires upon their consecration, but now they sought an innocent Christian equivalent and read or wrote Acts of Apostles as their substitute. But I think that certain clues, as I have already anticipated, make it likely that the Christian celibate communities had come to appreciate the novels themselves as *Christian works*, even as *encratite works*, by reading them in light of certain hermeneutical keys. These they believed they could discern with the eye of faith, much as the evangelist Matthew believed that, once 'discipled unto the kingdom of heaven', he was able to bring forth from the scriptures treasures both new and old (Mt 13:52). I wish now to examine those keys.

First, there are various individual statements, avows of chaste love for the earthly lover, that might be read by Christians out of context as encratite *paranaesis*. Let me quote several.

We have acted like sage philosophers, Father [Clitophon's father, but read as the heavenly Father?], while we have been away from home [read as meaning heaven —

cf. 2 Cor 5:6]. Passion was hot on our trail; we fled as lover and beloved [cf. 1 Cor 6:17-18], but in our exile [cf. 1 Pet 1:17] we were like brother and sister [cf. 1 Cor 9:5; Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude 9:10-11, 'Thou shalt pass the night with us, {the virgins} said, "as a brother, not as a husband"'] (*Leucippe and Clitophon*, Reardon 1989:271.)⁹

... from the start I gave myself to you not like a woman yielding to her lover
.... To this day I have kept myself unstained by carnal contact ...

(*An Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:373)

So they ate a meal of nuts, figs, dates fresh from the tree, and other fruits of this kind, which formed the old man's customary diet, for he refused to take the life of any living thing for the sake of food; he washed his food down with water, Knemon with wine. [Cf. the Edenic vegetarianism of the encratites, and their abstinence from wine.]

(*An Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:396)

You see, she has renounced marriage and is resolved to stay a virgin all her life; she has dedicated herself to the sacred service of Artemis I had hoped to marry her to my sister's son ..., but his hopes have been thwarted by her cruel decision. I have tried soft words, promises, and reasoned arguments to persuade her, but all to no avail. [She has chosen] the best way of life [cf. 1 Cor 7:34]. Virginité is her god, and she has elevated it to the level of the immortals, pronouncing it without stain, without impurity, without corruption.

(*An Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:406)

... this was revealed to me by a voice from heaven — ... never to have felt love's touch is a blessing, but once caught it is wisest to keep one's thoughts on paths of virtue'.

(*An Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:435)

But the love they consummated was sinless and undefiled; their union was one of moist, warm tears; their only intercourse was one of chaste lips 'To live in union with one another, Charikleia, to possess that which we have come to value above all things and for which we have undergone so many travails, such is our prayer But the human condition is full of uncertainty

and subject to constant change; we have endured much and can expect to endure more ... a long and seemingly infinite distance still separates us from the land we hope to reach.' [Cf. Heb 11:13-16; Ac 14:22.]

(*An Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:448-449)

It is no depraving desire such as ordinary people feel that makes me act as I did in my distress, but rather a pure and chaste longing for the one who, in my eyes is nonetheless my husband for never having consummated our love ... [Cf. 1 Cor 7:36-38 — NEB.1

(*An Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:481)

There is, I imagine, a school of natural philosophers and theologians who do not disclose the meanings embedded in these stories to laymen but simply give them preliminary instruction in the form of a myth. But those who have reached the higher grades of the mysteries they initiate into clear knowledge in the privacy of the holy shrine, in the light cast by the blazing torch of truth. Well, may the gods pardon me for saying this much. The greatest mysteries may not be spoken of: let us respect their sanctity as we continue our story of the events at Syene.' [Read as a hint that this very text contained deeper, unspoken mysteries, known by the initiated Christian to be the truths of encratite paranaesis?]

In conclusion, I have suggested in this paper we need not content ourselves with the commonly held judgment that the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles have somehow been influenced by the Hellenistic novels. We can, I think, be more specific than that in explaining how the one evolved from the other. We can trace a first stage of Christian allegorizing of the novels based on the many striking crucifixion and empty tomb passages, followed by a second stage of writing Christian allegories based on the Old Testament heritage of Christianity (*Joseph and Asenath* being the sole surviving example), and finally a third stage of composing explicitly Christian versions of the picaresque romantic adventure novels, namely the Apocryphal Acts.

(*An Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:543-544)

We [the Arnazons] virgins who live here are under arms [like Perpetua, armed for the struggle against the dragon Satan]. There is nothing male among us.... All of us who wish to end our virginity stay with the men [cf. 1 Cor 7:28.]

(*Alexander Romance*, in Reardon 1989:727)

When she tearfully pleaded that she not be touched by any man, he granted her wish and placed her within the cloistered confines of the priestesses of the goddess Diana, where all the virgins were able to preserve their chastity.

(*Story of Apollonius King of Tyre*, in Reardon 1989:754)

Have pity on me, master. Help me preserve my virginity. [Read as a prayer to the master Jesus Christ, as with similar 'prayer language' smuggled into the narrative by Matthew [e.g., 'Lord, save, we perish!' 'Lord, save me'! — Held 1963:265-266]

(*Story of Apollonius King of Tyre*, in Reardon 1989:759)

Plotina, a woman of rare faith ... despised all worldly pomp and delicacy of living in cities, and determined to follow her husband, and to be a partaker of all his perils and dangers: wherefore she cut off her hair, disguised herself like a man just as Thecla did, to follow Paul's example preaching the gospel, ... passing through the bands of soldiers that guarded him and the naked swords without any fear; whereby she shared all his dangers and endured many miseries with the spirit of a man, not of a woman [as in the Gospel of Thomas, 114, and elsewhere in early ascetical literature], and was a partaker of much affliction to save the life of her husband.

(*The Golden Ass*, in Schnur 1962:159)

And in general, the picaresque nature of the narratives, with providential escapes from deadly perils, all the while keeping chastity inviolate, would be seen as an elaborate allegory of the celibate Christian life.

4. ESCAPING CROSSES, EMPTYING TOMBS

But what would have been the clue that such a deeper level of meaning existed to be plumbed by the Christian reader? I believe the answer lies in a striking pattern of phenomena running through the various romances. In novel after novel we read of the heroine emerging alive from the tomb, as well as frequent accounts (though not quite

so many) in which the hero comes down alive from a cross! Failing this, we still find remarkable scenes involving empty tombs thought to be occupied, crucifixions at the sites of tombs, filled or empty, or other variations on the theme.

I cannot but believe that Christian readers would fairly have been forced to 'recognize' in such passages hidden, allegorical references to the cross and empty tomb of their Christ, much as Matthew 'recognized', against the plain meaning of the text, a reference to the virgin birth of Jesus in Isaiah 7:14.

The heroes and heroines of the romance novels would then seem not merely to be prototypes of the faithful encratite Christian, but also Christ-figures in the fullest sense. From such reinterpretations it would have required no long step to the Apocryphal Acts with their Christomorphic apostles. Herewith, a review of the relevant passages in the novels.

In Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Chaereas is falsely incited to rage against his wife Callirhoe and delivers a kick which seems to kill her. She is entombed alive. Soon pirates (who are virtually ubiquitous in these novels) appear to rob the tomb. They discover Callirhoe alive, now having revived in the cool of the mausoleum, and they kidnap her to sell her as a slave. In her captivity, Callirhoe pities her doubly vexed husband in terms strikingly reminiscent of the New Testament empty tomb accounts: 'You are mourning for me and repenting and sitting by an empty tomb ...' (in Reardon 1989:37).

But the resemblance to the gospel accounts only grows stronger a little later when in fact poor Chaereas discovers the empty tomb.

When he reached the tomb, he found that the stones had been moved and the entrance was open. He was astonished at the sight and overcome by fearful perplexity at what had happened. Rumor — a swift messenger — told the Syracusans this amazing news. They all quickly crowded round the tomb, but no one dared go inside until Hermocrates gave an order to do so. The man who went in reported the whole situation accurately. It seemed incredible that even the corpse was not lying there. Then Chaereas himself determined to go in, in his desire to see Callirhoe again even dead; but though he hunted through the tomb, he could find nothing. Many people could not believe it and went in after him. They were all seized by helplessness. One of those standing there said, 'The funeral offerings have been carried off [Cartlidge's translation reads: 'The shroud has been stripped off' — cf. Jn 20:6-7] — 'it is tomb robbers who have done that; but what about the corpse — where is it?'

Many different suggestions circulated in the crowd. Chaereas looked towards the heavens, stretched up his arms, and cried: 'Which of the gods is it, then, who has become my rival in love and carried off Callirhoe and is now keeping her with him ...?'

(*Chaereas and Callirhoe*, in Reardon 1989:53)

The parallels to the empty tomb accounts, especially to John 20:1-10, are abundant and close. Chaereas even suggests that Callirhoe has been (like Jesus) translated to heaven. An almost identical scene is found in Photius' summary of Iamblichus' *Babylonian Story* (all we have left of this romance):

The grave of the young woman is left empty, and there are left behind several robes that were to be burned on the grave, and food and drink. Rhodanes and his companion feast on the food and drink, take some of the clothing, and lie down to sleep in the young woman's grave. As daylight comes, those who set fire to the robber's house realize that they have been tricked and follow the footprints of Rhodanes and Sinonis, supposing that they are henchmen of the robber. They follow the footprints right up to the grave and look in at the motionless, sleeping, wine-sodden bodies lying in the grave. They suppose that they are looking at corpses and leave, puzzled that the tracks led there. [Cf. Lk 24:12.1

(Iamblichus' *Babylonian Story*)

Later Callirhoe, reflecting on her vicissitudes, says 'I have died and come to life again' (in Reardon 1989:62). It is obvious how this line would have struck a Christian reader. Later still, she laments, 'I have died and been buried; I have been stolen from my tomb'. Note the parallel to I Corinthians 15:3-4, 'that Christ died ..., that he was buried, that he was raised' Scholars debate whether the 'buried' reference in 1 Corinthians means to imply a tomb emptied by the resurrection. I would venture that the parallel with Chaereas and Callirhoe does suggest such an implication, since in the latter, disappearing from the tomb is equal to rising from the dead. Again, towards the end of the novel Callirhoe recounts, not simply her regaining of consciousness, but 'how she had come back to life in the tomb' (in Reardon 1989:111).

In Miletus Callirhoe comes to believe that Chaereas perished while searching for her. To console her and to lay her fond memory of his rival to rest, Dionysius, her new husband, erects a tomb for Chaereas. It lacks his body, but this is not, as all

think, because the corpse is irrecoverable, but rather in fact because he is still alive elsewhere. His tomb is empty because he is still alive. Why seek the living among the dead?

But elsewhere poor Chaereas is 'imitating Christ' a bit too closely for his comfort, as he is condemned to the cross!

Without even seeing them or hearing their defense the master at once ordered the crucifixion of the sixteen men in the hut. They were brought out chained together at foot and neck, each carrying his cross Now Chaereas said nothing when he was led off with the others, but [his friend] Polycharmus, as he carried his cross, said: 'Callirhoe, it is because of you that we are suffering like this! You are the cause of all our troubles!'

(in Reardon 1989:67)

At the last minute Chaereas' sentence is commuted.

Mithridates sent everybody off to reach Chaereas before he died. They found the rest nailed up on their crosses; Chaereas was just ascending his. So the executioner checked his gesture, and Chaereas climbed down from his cross

(in Reardon 1989:69)

As he later recalls, 'Mithridates at once ordered that I be taken down from the cross — I was practically finished by then'. Here, then, is a hero who went to the cross for his beloved and returned alive. In the same story, a villain is likewise crucified, though gaining his just deserts, he is not reprieved. This is Theron, the pirate who carried poor Callirhoe into slavery. 'He was crucified in front of Callirhoe's tomb' (in Reardon 1989:57). We find another instance of a crucifixion adjacent to the tomb of the righteous in *The Alexander Romance* when Alexander arrests the assassins of his worthy foe Darius. He commanded them 'to be crucified at Darius's grave' (in Reardon 1989:703). We cannot help, any more than the ancient Christian reader could, being reminded of the location of Jesus burial 'in the place where he was crucified' (Jh 19:41).

We meet with the familiar pattern again in the *Ephesian Tale of Xenophon*. The beautiful Anthia seems to have died from a dose of poison but has in fact merely been placed in a deathlike coma. She awakens from it in the tomb.

Meanwhile some pirates had found that a girl had been given a sumptuous burial and that a great store of woman's finery was buried with her, and a great horde of gold and silver. After nightfall they came to the tomb, burst open the doors, came in and took away the finery, and saw that Anthia was still alive. They thought that this would turn out very profitable for them, raised her up, and wanted to take her.

(Ephesian Tale of Xenophon, in Reardon 1989:151-152)

Later on, her beloved Habrocomes goes in search of her and winds up being condemned to death through a series of misadventures too long to recount here. 'They set up the cross and attached him to it, tying his hands and feet tight with ropes; that is the way the Egyptians crucify. Then they went away and left him hanging there, thinking that the victim was securely in place'. But Habrocomes prays that he may yet be spared such an undeserved death. He is heard for his loud cries and tears. 'A sudden gust of wind arose and struck the cross, sweeping away the subsoil on the cliff where it had been fixed. Habrocomes fell into the torrent and was swept away; the water did him no harm; his fetters did not get in his way' (in Reardon 1989:155).

At length Habrocomes returns to a temple where, in happier days he and Anthia had erected images of themselves as an offering to Aphrodite. Still deprived of Anthia and thinking her to be dead, he sits there and weeps. He is discovered by old friends Leucon and Rhode.

They did not recognize him, but wondered who would stay beside someone else's offerings. And so Leucon spoke to him. 'Why are you sitting weeping, young man ...?' Habrocomes replied, 'I am ... the unfortunate Habrocomes!' When Leucon and Rhode heard this they were immediately dumfounded, but gradually recovered and recognized him by his appearance and voice, from what he said, and from his mention of Anthia.

(Ephesian Tale of Xenophon, in Reardon 1989:67)

Here I see a striking resemblance to the New Testament empty tomb accounts, where Jesus or an angel accosts a weeping mourner, and a dramatic recognition results. (Cf. Jh 20:11-16, where we also have the question 'Why are you weeping', the initial failure of recognition, and the recognition being sparked by the mention of a woman's name. Lk 24:13ff. is only slightly less close.)

In Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon* the heroine twice appears to be disemboweled in climactic scenes worthy of a Saturday afternoon movie serial. But both times it was sleight-of-hand or mistaken identity. On the former occasion Leucippe had to lie in a coffin until her faked sacrifice. She is warned by her confederate to 'stay inside the coffin as long as it was daylight and not try to come out even if she woke up early' (in Reardon 1989:220). And of course she does eventually emerge alive from the coffin, giving us another resurrection scene. Referring later to this scene in a letter to Clitophon, she recalls 'For your sake I have been a sacrificial victim, an expiatory offering, and twice have died' (in Reardon 1989:242). What must Christian readers made of such language save to read it as an allegory of Christ's atonement? Another character marvels over Leucippe's many adventures, including 'those sham deaths'. 'Hasn't she died many times before? Hasn't she often been resurrected?' (in Reardon 1989:262). Eventually Leucippe must prove her virginity by means of an old local ritual, described thusly:

If she has lied about her virginity, the syrinx is silent, and instead of music, a scream is heard from the cave. At once the populace quits that place, leaving the woman in the cave. On the third day a virgin priestess of the place enters and finds the syrinx lying on the ground, with no trace of the woman.

On the third day a woman comes to cave in which someone was *entombed* but now *finds no trace of a body!* Did early Christian readers peruse such lines without remark?

In Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* we find only traces of the pattern, but they are worth noting. 'He ran down to the plain, threw his arms around Chloe, and fell down in a faint. When he was, with difficulty, brought back to life by Chloe's kisses and the warmth of her embraces ...' (in Reardon 1989:315). Later in the tale we hear that in the bleak midwinter Daphnis, deprived of the sight of his beloved Chloe, 'waited for spring as if it were a rebirth from death' (in Reardon 1989:319).

Later, when some vandalism mars the garden tended by the happy pastoral folk of the story, there is fear of harsh reprisal: "'There's an old man [the master will] string up on one of the pines, like Marsyas; and perhaps he'll ... string up Daphnis, too!' ... Chloe mourned ... at the thought that Daphnis would be strung up, ... When night was

already falling, Eudromus brought them the news that the old master would arrive in three days' time ...' (in Reardon 1989:336), but all ends well.

The pattern comes into sharper focus again in Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*, where Knemon hides Charikleia, lover of Theagenes, in a cave for safekeeping.

Put her in, my friend, close the entrance with the stone in the normal way, and then come back ... this stone dropped effortlessly into place and could be opened just as easily Not a sound passed Charikleia's lips; this new misfortune was like a deathblow to her, separation from Theagenes tantamount to the loss of her own life. Leaving her numbed and silent, Knemon climbed out of the cave, and as he replaced the threshold stone, he shed a tear in sorrow for himself at the necessity that constrained him, and for her at the fate that afflicted her; he had virtually entombed her alive

(Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Story*, in Reardon 1989:375)

Here are two more cases of apparent death and resurrection in *The Story of Apollonius, King of Tyre*. The king's wife seems to expire during childbirth while on a sea voyage, though the text baldly says, 'she suddenly died' (Loeb, p. 752). They secure her body in a carefully sealed coffin and commit her to the sea. 'Three days later waves cast up the coffin' (Loeb, p. 753). A medical student examines the body and is able to tell from subtle indications that she still lives. He manages to revive her, though it will be years before her loved ones learn she is not dead after all.

The baby daughter grows up and is committed to care of foster parents by the grief-stricken Apollonius. Out of envy for her royal possessions, her foster-mother conspires to have young Tarsia assassinated. The hired killer cannot bring himself to commit the crime, but instead sells her into a brothel as a slave. Meanwhile, the wicked foster-mother, thinking Tarsia dead, trumps up a false story of how she died and builds an 'empty tomb' (758) to honor her memory. Tarsia contrives to maintain her virginity even in the midst of a brothel and is eventually hired to visit a despairing old man (Apollonius, of course) to cheer him up. This she tries to do with nothing more salacious than moral exhortations, bidding him to 'come out of the darkness and into the light' (Loeb, p. 763)¹⁰. Once the two recognize one another, he says, 'my hope has been brought back to life' (Loeb, p. 767). The townspeople, learning of Tarsia's identity avenge the outrage perpetrated upon royalty, killing the pimp whose slave Tarsia was. Apollonius responds, 'Thanks to you, death and grief have been shown to

be false' (Loeb, p. 769). Once he has also been reunited with his wife, who has in the meantime become a priestess of Diana, Apollonius prays to Diana, thanking her that 'you restored me to life' (Loeb, p. 770).

Iamblichus, in his *Babylonian Story*, features not only an empty tomb story, as we saw above, but yet another apparent death. The maid Sinonis is missing. Her father discovers a half-devoured female corpse and hastens to the conclusion that it is that of his lost daughter. He hangs himself on the spot, but not before inscribing in blood, 'Lovely Sinonis lies buried here'. Arriving on the scene not long after Sinonis' lover Rhodanes despairs and is about to stab himself, but another woman appears and shouts, 'It is not Sinonis lying thee, Rhodanes'.

A friend of the two lovers, Soraechus, 'is condemned to be crucified', but while 'being led away to be crucified', Soraechus is rescued by a band of soldiers who drive away his guards. But in the meantime, Rhodanes, too,

was being led to and hoisted onto the cross that had been designated for him by a dancing and garlanded Garmus, who was drunk and dancing round the cross with the flute players and reveling with abandon. While this is happening, Sacas informs Garmus by letter that Sinonis is marrying the youthful king of Syria. Rhodanes rejoices high up on the cross, but Garmus makes to kill himself. He checks himself, however, and brings down Rhodanes from the cross against his will (for he prefers to die [seeing that his beloved is to marry another]).

(Iamblichus' *Babylonian Story*, in Reardon 1989:793)

Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* contains two scenes which bear an uncanny resemblance to the gospels' scenes at the empty tomb of Jesus, though neither is exactly analogous to them. First is a scene of forbidden necromancy. Those assembled seek to interrogate the shade of a murdered man in order to discover the identity of his slayer.

Behold here is one Zatchlas, an Egyptian, who is the most principal prophesier in all this country, and who was hired of me long since to bring back the soul of this man from hell for a short season, and to revive his body from the threshold of death for the trial hereof, and therewithal he brought forth a certain young man clothed in linen raiment

(Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, in Schnur 1962:62)

The dead man is briefly reanimated and supplies the desired information. I have thus far omitted the occasional scenes of actual raising of corpses for purposes of necromancy. We find it occasionally in the novels, but I include this one because of the association with a resurrection of a young man in white as in Mark's gospel.

Second, in the interpolated romance of *Cupid and Psyche*, we find a scene in which Psyche's sisters seek her out, fearing her dead.

After a long search made, the sisters of Psyche came unto the hill where she had been set on the rock, and cried with a loud voice and beat their breasts, in such sort that the rocks and stones answered again their frequent howlings: and when they called their sister by her name, so that their lamentable cries came down the mountain unto her ears, she came forth, very anxious and now almost out of her mind, and said: 'Behold, here is she for whom you weep; I pray you torment yourself no more, and dry those tears with which you have so long wetted your cheeks, for now may you embrace her for whom you mourned'.

(*Cupid and Psyche*, in Reardon 1989:118)

A typical sham death and resurrection due to poisoning meets us later in the novel. An evil step-mother has sought from a doctor poison with which she intends to despatch her stepson who has rebuffed her illicit advances. But the doctor, suspecting some chicanery, sells her only a potent knock-out formula. So in the midst of the inquest, he leads everyone to the coffin where a surprise awaits them (though by now we know full well what to expect).

[E]very man had a desire to go to the sepulchre where the child was laid: there was none of the justices, none of any reputation of the town, nor any indeed of the common people, but went to see this strange sight. Amongst them all the father of the child removed with his own hands the cover of the coffin, and found his son rising up after his dead and soporiferous sleep: and when he beheld him as one risen from the dead he embraced him in his arms; and he could speak never a word for his present gladness, but presented him before the people [cf. Lk 7:15] with great joy and consolation, and as he was wrapped and bound in the clothes of the grave [cf. Jn 11:44], so he brought him before the judges.

(*Cupid and Psyche*, in Reardon 1989:241)

The step-mother is exiled, her henchman 'hanged on a gallows', or literally, crucified. Again we have the immediate association of crucifixion with an empty tomb.

Petronius's *Satyricon* repeats a widely disseminated tale which juxtaposes the same two features again, and in a striking fashion. A woman of Ephesus is so devoted to her late husband that she resolves to enter the tomb with him, there to starve herself to death and so join him in the great beyond. A servant keeps vigil with her. Meanwhile a company of thieves are crucified nearby.

Next night the soldier who was guarding the crosses to prevent anyone removing one of the corpses for burial noticed a light shining among the tombs and, hearing the sound of someone mourning, he was eager to know ... who it was and what was going on. Naturally he went down into the vault and seeing a beautiful woman, at first stood rooted to the spot as though terrified by some strange sight.

(Petronius's *Satyricon*)

The soldier brings some food and urges her to eat. He seeks to comfort her in her loss. The servant accepts the food and begins to join in the soldier's urgings. 'What good is it ... for you to drop dead of starvation, or bury yourself alive ...? ... Won't you come back to life'? This counsel proves persuasive. In fact, not only does the widow refresh herself with the food, but she is so infused with the *joi de vivre* that she fornicates with the soldier right there in the tomb. 'The doors of the vault were of course closed, so if a friend or a stranger came to the tomb, he thought that the blameless widow had expired over her husband's body'.

While all this is going on, the family of one of the crucified thieves, noticing that the crosses are unattended, 'took down the hanging body in the dark and gave it the final rites'. The soldier finds one cross empty and knows what must become of him for failing his post. He is about to kill himself when his new lover suggests he 'take the body of her husband from the coffin and fix it to the empty cross'. This is what he does (Petronius's *Satyricon*, Penguin, pp. 120-122).

Here a dead man exits his tomb only to be crucified and thus save the life of the soldier and to bring a new lease on life to his now no longer grieving widow! Here the elements of the story of the crucified and resurrected savior in the gospels are reshuffled but all present. There is even the element of a crucified dead man disappearing despite the posting of guards, somewhat recalling Matthew's empty tomb account!

Another Matthean peculiarity finds its parallel in an account in Book IV of Philostratus' *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. In chapter XVI the divine sage makes a pilgrimage to the tomb of Achilles. He calls out, Jesus to Lazarus,

O Achilles, ... most of mankind declare you are dead, but I cannot agree with them ... show ... yourself to my eyes, if you should be able to use them to attest your existence'. Thereupon a slight earthquake shook the neighborhood of the barrow [cf. Mt 28:1-2], and a youth issued forth five cubits high, wearing a cloak of Thessalian fashion ... but he grew bigger, till he was twice as large and even more than that; at any rate he appeared ... to be twelve cubits high just at that moment when he reached his complete stature, and his beauty grew apace with his length. [Cf. the gigantic risen Jesus in the Gospel of Peter.]

(Loeb, vol. I, 377, 379)

Here, then, are the parallel texts. What are we to make of them? As is well known, Merkelbach (in Hagg, pp. 101-104) began from such passages to form his theory that all the ancient novels were intended by their authors as coded ritual/paranaetic texts for use in the Mystery Religions. He took references to resurrection and rebirth to denote ritual regeneration on the pattern of the ancient myths of the resurrected nature divinities like Attis, Adonis, Tammuz, and Osiris. The central theme of the separation of the lovers and their long quest for reunion Merkelbach derived from the fundamental myth of the murder and dismemberment of Osiris by Set and the quest of loyal Isis to recover her husband's sundered parts in order to resurrect him.

Most scholars have not followed Merkelbach, judging that one need not reach so far to explain the writing of picaresque tales of star-crossed lovers in a world where death did often come by poisoning, premature burial, and crucifixion. But it is worthy of note that even scholars who dissent from Merkelbach seem to feel impelled on occasion to refer to the scenes we have outlined as 'episode[s] of death and resurrection' (Heiserman 1977:190; see Hagg, p. 103). The most Hagg is willing to admit is that it is not 'inconceivable that an ancient reader of the *Ethiopica* might have read the novel in the same way as Merkelbach: allegorical interpretation of literary works, however profane, was much practiced in late antiquity, Homer, of course being its main object' (Hagg, p. 103).

I mean torque along similar lines: while I do not dismiss Merkelbach's theory (in the nature of the case it would be impossible to prove even if true), my point is that for a certain segment of the novels' ancient readership the many references to protagonists

emerging alive from the tomb or appearing alive after crucifixion can have seemed no accident. Regardless of authors' intentions, the early Christian readers must have allegorized the novels as catechisms of the *imitatio Christi*¹¹.

I will go a step further and suggest that not only did the novels, thus allegorized, form the basis for the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, with their Christomorphic heroes and heroines, but that the novels' device of only apparent death and of rescue from the cross may help to explain the frequent docetic treatment of Jesus and his cross in the Acts.

This is clearest in the Acts of John where the true Christ summons John from Golgotha to a cave in the Mount of Olives, where he tells him he only seems to be crucified on Calvary (97-102). In the Nag Hammadi Apocalypse of Peter the crucified Jesus is depicted as 'glad and laughing on the tree' (81:4-30), laughing at the folly of mere mortals who thought thus to be rid of him. Here I cannot help thinking of the striking scene in *A Babylonian Story* where Rhodanes laughs high atop the cross.

But the study of the empty tomb scenes of the novels has important implications not only for the Apocryphal material. I am coming more and more to embrace the opinion of Johannes Leipoldt (1948:737-742) that the empty tomb narratives of the canonical gospels represent borrowings either from the novels the selves or from the mythological sources upon which these latter draw. For instance, just as Merkelbach saw a parallel between the searching of the parted lovers and the search of Isis for the slain Osiris, Leipoldt sees the Isis and Osiris myth as the origin of the gospel traditions of the women searching for the body of Jesus on Easter morning. In both cases, 'the third day' motif occurs, as we have had occasion to notice in various novels as well. I am about convinced he is right, though it may be Isis novels themselves from which the gospel accounts are borrowed. The parallels are just too close. The golden age of the Hellenistic novel was the second century AD, but there are earlier specimens, and it is far from clear that the gospels are not later than the first century.

5. JESUS AND ASENATH

There is one Hellenistic romance novel that demands separate consideration, and that is *Joseph and Asenath*. I have already commented that if the consensus view of its origin as a Jewish work be accepted then we at least have in the work another example of the novel form taking on religious coloring. But I wish to challenge the placing of *Joseph and Asenath* in a Jewish context. It seems to me rather that the earlier view of Batiffol was correct: that the novel is a Christian product.

Burchard notes that Batiffol dated his Christian *Joseph and Asenath* to the fifth century CE, but that 'Every competent scholar has since affirmed that is Jewish, with perhaps some Christian interpolations; none has put the book much after A.D. 200, and

some have placed it as early as the second century B.C.' (Burchard 1985:187)¹². One wonders if Burchard's yardstick for scholarly competency is precisely whether one calls the book Jewish or Christian. At any rate, I believe that while he may have dated it too late (though a fifth century date seems not unreasonable to me), Batiffol was right as to the Christian origin of the work and probably about its birthplace as well. It seems overwhelmingly clear to me that the book means to present the drama of spiritual romance between Christ, thinly veiled as Joseph, 'the first-born son of God'! (XXI:3) and the Christian encratite virgin in the person of Asenath. Asia Minor was a hotbed of encratism, so perhaps the novel was indeed written there.

I will attempt to support my judgment below, but to anticipate, let me say that on my reading of the text, *Joseph and Asenath* represents a transitional stage between the Christian allegorical reading of the pagan Hellenistic romances and the writing of explicitly Christian romances such as Paul and Thecla. Intermediate between the two was the writing of a work intended by its Christian author as an allegory of Christian encratite devotion. Someone wrote what she thought she was reading in Heliodorus and Chariton, a Christian celibate allegory, set in pre-Christian times. Only a pious Christian would never write a story employing the props of pre-Christian paganism, hence the Old Testament setting of *Joseph and Asenath*. All that remained was to bring the allegory out into the open, in full Christian dress. This final step was taken with the writing of the Apocryphal Acts.

The preconversion Asenath is already a model of committed celibacy: 'Now Asenath despised all men and regarded them with contempt' (II:1). Like the ecclesiastical widows and virgins, but unlike any sectarian Jews we know of, she lives in a community of celibate women: 'And seven virgins had the remaining seven rooms' of Asenath's dwelling '... and no man or boy ever had anything to do with them' (II:10,12).

Joseph, lieutenant of Pharaoh, arrives to dine with Pentephres the priest, Asenath's father. She appears dressed in splendor, 'adorned as the bride of God' (IV:2), surely language suggesting the celibate Christian woman's betrothal to Christ (1 Tm 5:11-12). Yet she is none too eager even to meet Joseph, as he belongs to the accursed male gender. But even she cannot help but be overwhelmed by the sight of him. As Pentephres describes him, 'Joseph is ... a virgin ..., and the spirit of God is upon him and the grace of the Lord is with him' (IV:9).

What better husband could a girl ask? Asenath soon agrees, bitterly repenting of her first disdain of him: 'And how will Joseph, the son of God, regard me, for I have spoken evil of him? Where can I flee and hide myself, for he sees everything, and no secret is safe from him, because of the great light that is in him' (VI:2-3)? 'I spoke

evil of him and did not know that Joseph is the son of God. For who among men will ever father such beauty, and what mother will ever bear such a light? ... now let my father give me to Joseph as a maid servant and a slave, and I will serve him for ever' (VI:6-8).

I cannot miss either the transparent Christological references or the suggestions that what we have here is a prayer of repentance and conversion, preparatory to initiation into the celibate community of the maidservants of Christ. Burchard (1985:187, 191) says there is nothing in the text that cannot be Jewish, though he admits certain passages might be Christian interpolations. The 'son of God' references are no doubt on his list! Is he not saying that in fact the text *does* contain clear pointers to a Christian origin? It might be different if the Christological passages ran against their context, but they seem to me quite consistent with their context, and it is a Christian encratite context.

Once betrothed to Asenath, Joseph speaks with the classic language of the virgines subintroductae: 'she is my sister, and I will regard her as my sister from today' (VII:11). Even so, Pentephres says to Asenath, 'Greet your brother, for he too is a virgin as you are today ..., a man who worships God ... and eats the blessed bread of life, and drinks the blessed cup of immortality, and is anointed with the blessed unction of incorruption ...' (VIII:1, 5). Momentarily, in what I believe to be an initiation liturgy for Christian celibate women, we will hear that she, too, is to partake of both bread and cup. Do these references make any sense in any form of Judaism we know of? Are they not rather clearly Christian references? Why not place them in the only natural *Sitz-im-Leben* we know, a Christian one¹³? Here is the liturgy, a prayer spoken over Asenath by Joseph.

And he lifted up his right hand above her head and said,
 O Lord, the God of my father Israel, the Most High, the Mighty One,
 Who didst quicken all things, and didst call them from darkness unto
 light,
 And from error into truth, and from death into life;
 Do thou, O Lord, thyself quicken and bless this virgin,
 And renew her by thy Spirit, and remould her by thy secret hand.
 Quicken her with thy life.
 And may she eat the bread of thy life,
 And may she drink the cup of thy blessing,
 She whom thou didst choose before she was begotten,
 And may she enter into thy rest, which thou hast prepared for thine
 elect.

(*Joseph and Asenath* VIII: 10-11)

Note the theme of salvation as 'rest', familiar from the Gospel of Thomas, an encratite work.

As in Acts 2:44-45, initiation is accompanied by renunciation of wealth. Asenath 'took her best robe ... and threw it out of the window, for the poor. And she took all her innumerable gold and silver gods and broke them up into little pieces, and threw them out of the window for the poor and the need'. And for seven days she mourns in sack cloth and ashes (X:12-20).

In a prayer of repentance, Asenath expresses the distinctly Christological sentiments that Joseph is God's 'son' and 'elect one' (XIII:10). From now on, she is content to 'wash his feet', the very task the ecclesiastical order of widows is to perform (1 Tm 5:10).

Shortly Asenath beholds the apparition of a glorious angel, 'like Joseph in every respect, with a robe and a crown and a royal staff' (XIV:8 ff.). It is apparent that it is really the transfigured Joseph, in his true heavenly form that she sees. The figure closely parallels the epiphany of the exalted Christ in Revelation 1:12-18, down to details, even saying to Asenath, as to John, 'Take heart and do not be afraid; but stand up and I will speak to you'. I would guess the epiphany of Joseph the son of God here has been borrowed from that of Jesus the Son of God in Revelation, itself an encratite work which speaks of celibates (14:4) as the Bride of Christ (22:17). Also compare XV:3, 'your name is written in he book of life', with Revelation 3:5.

In XV:1, Asenath is told, 'Take now the veil off your head, for today you are a pure virgin, and your head is like a young man's'. Compare this with the prophesying women who go unveiled in 1 Corinthians 11.

There are further parallels to Revelation and others to the Acts of Paul, as when a jealous villain, deprived of the holy virgin, determines to kill her. Nowhere can I see the characteristic traits of Hellenistic Jewish missionary propaganda familiar from the Epistle of Aristeeas, Philo, and kindred works, that is, lampoons of idolatry and rationalizing apologetics for the Torah¹⁴. Instead, everywhere we hear the voice of Christian encratism.

And what surprise that Christians should clothe Jesus Christ in the mantle of the Jewish patriarch Joseph? This was a standard feature of Christian typology from ancient times.

In conclusion, I have suggested in this paper we need not content ourselves with the commonly held judgment that the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles have somehow been influenced by the Hellenistic novels. We can, I think, be more specific than that in explaining how the one evolved from the other. We can trace a first stage of

Christian allegorizing of the novels based on the many striking crucifixion and empty tomb passages, followed by a second stage of writing Christian allegories based on the Old Testament heritage of Christianity (*Joseph and Asenath* being the sole surviving example), and finally a third stage of composing explicitly Christian versions of the picaresque romantic adventure novels, namely the Apocryphal Acts.

End notes

¹ However, both Perry and Thomas are loathe to say that the Acts simply evolved from the novels of that they can be considered Christianized novels; still, neither denies some connection or influence. Arthur Heiserman (1977:205); Reardon ('General Introduction' to *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 1989:3); Schneemelcher & Schaferdiek (1965:176); Soder (1932:148, quoted in Davies 1980:85); Burrus (1987:58) see the connection as between common folk tale sources, not direct literary dependence between the two genres.

² 'In these books, suave but secular Lotharios are forever tempting young Christian maidens — bodies tremble and lips part — but eventually the heroine enters the promised land of Christian marriage. It is an ample market: Zondervan, an evangelical publisher, has a line of Serenade books ...; Thomas Nelson, the Bible publisher, has Cherish books; Harvest House publishes Rhapsody Romances, and waiting in the wings are six Evensong Romances from Fleming H. Revell ... "These books exploit the needs of evangelical women who are unfulfilled by offering them romances to read about", says Jan P. Dennis, editor of Crossway Books', who does not appreciate the trend' (Woodward & Moorman 1984:69).

³ Perry (1967:118) himself is well aware of the fragmentary state of the evidence.

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov (1975:21-22): 'We have postulated that literary structures, hence genres themselves, be located on an abstract level, separate from that of concrete works. We would have to say that a given work manifests a certain genre, not that this genre exists in the work. But this relation of manifestation between the abstract and the concrete is of a probabilistic nature; in other words, there is no necessity that a work will faithfully incarnate its genre, there is only a probability that it will do so. Which comes down to saying that no observation of works can strictly confirm or invalidate a theory of genres'.

⁵ 'Yet there is a happy realm where this dialectical contradiction between the work and its genre does not exist: That of popular literature. As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre. Detective fiction has its norms; to 'develop' them is also to disappoint them: to 'improve upon' detective fiction is to write 'literature', not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one that transgresses the limits of the genre, but the one that conforms to them' (Todorov 1977:43).

⁶ Gerard Genette (1988:140-150) cogently suggests that the 'implied author' is a pseudo-objectifying sleight-of-hand for what ought to be called the 'inferred author'.

⁷ Similarly note the romanticizing of Mary and Joseph in numerous TV movies and popular novels, e.g., *Two from Galilee*.

⁸ Davies (1980:95-109), *Revolt of the Widows*, chapter VI, 'The Authorship of the Acts', argues that the works as wholes were written by celibate women. Hagg (p. 162), deems it likely enough that a woman wrote at least the Paul and Thecla section of *The Acts of Paul*. Dennis Ronald MacDonald (1984:21-38) rejects Davies's theory, but in MacDonald (1983:34-53), he agrees that the pericopes about celibate women are the work of their real-life counterparts in the widows' communities.

⁹ The following page references are to the novels as published in Reardon's *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, except for the references are to the Adlington translation of *The Golden Ass*, edited by Harry G Schnur (1962), the Loeb edition of Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, vol. I & II, tr by F C Conybeare, and the Penguin edition of Petronius' *Satyricon*, tr by J P Sullivan.

¹⁰ Her red-light career is highly reminiscent of Woody Allen's (1976:35-42) 'The Whore of Mensa' in his collection *Without Feathers*.

¹¹ A recent case of precisely the same reader response, this time, ironically, on the part of a modern scholar, can be found in the astonishing suggestion of Bowersock (1994:121-143, chapter 6, 'Polytheism and Scripture') that novelistic motifs similar to those of the gospel story were in fact derived from the gospel proclamation in the first place, and that Christian readers were attracted to the novels for the sake of them: 'as the popularity of the novelists grew ... it as perhaps not surprising for the Christians to pick up in turn and to exploit the very genre that seemed to have come into being, to some degree, as a response to stories of theirs that were now enshrined in the canonical Gospels' (Bowersock 1994:139). Bowersock, like the ancient readers I am envisioning, just cannot help seeing an inner Christian sensus plenior in the novels. Like Jonathan Z. Smith (1990), he has reverted to the classic Christian apologetic one associated with the Soviets in 1960's jokes: 'We invented it first!'

¹² I have not used Burchard's translation in what follows, however, preferring that of D Cook, in H F D Sparks (1984). No important hinges upon any difference between the two renderings.

¹³ Burchard's (1985:191) attempt to make sense of these bald-faced sacramental references in a Jewish context is pathetic. Like Russell Spittler (1983:834), I would place *The Testament of Job*, too, in a Christian prophetic (perhaps Montanist, as Spittler suggests) *Sitz-im-Leben*, rather than a Jewish one. Where do we find other references to speaking in the tongues of angels? Not in Judaism, but in Christian sources including 1 Corinthians (see Currie 1965:274-294; Williams & Waldvogel 1975:61-113).

¹⁴ Graham Anderson (1984:81) sees *Joseph and Asenath* as conversion propaganda, while Burchard (1985:186) would hesitate to restrict the intent of the work so narrowly.

Works consulted

- Allen, W 1976. *The Whore of Mensa*, in *Without Feathers*, 35-42. New York: Warner.
- Anderson, G 1984. *Ancient Fiction: The Novel in the Graeco-Roman World*. Totowa: Barnes & Noble.
- Booth, W 1983. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd edition. University of Chicago Press.
- Bowersock, G W 1994. *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Sather Classical Lectures 58.)
- Burchard, C 1985. Introduction to Joseph and Asenath, in Charlesworth, J H (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Burrus, V 1987. *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Currie, S D 1965. Speaking in Tongues: Early Evidence Outside the New Testament Bearing on *Glossais Lalein*. *Interp* 19/3, 274-294.
- Davies, S L 1980. *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Genette, G 1988. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, tr by J E Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hagg, T s a. *The Novel in Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Haight, E H 1936. *Essays on Ancient Fiction*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.
- 1945. *More Essays on Ancient Fiction*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Held, H-J 1963. Matthew as Interpreter of the Marcan Miracle Stories, in Bornkamm, G, Barth, G & Held, H-J, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, tr by P Scott. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Heiserman, A 1977. *The Novel Before the Novel: Essays and Discussions About the Beginnings of Prose Fiction in the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Philostratus' *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, tr by F C Conybeare. Loeb Vol I & II.
- Leipoldt, J 1948. Zu den Auferstehungsgeschichten. *ThLZ* 73, 737-742. [An English translation by Erich Weinberger, entitled 'The Resurrection Stories', is published in *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 4/1 (1997), 138-149.]
- MacDonald, D R 1983. *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- 1984. The Role of Women in the Production of Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. *The Illif Review* 40/4, 21-38.
- Perry, B E 1967. *The Ancient Romances: A Literary-Historical Account of Their Origins*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Petronius' *Satyricon*, tr by J P Sullivan. (The Penguin edition.)

- Reardon, B P 1989. General Introduction, in Reardon, B P (ed), *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Reardon, B P (ed) 1989. *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schneemelcher, W & Schaferdiek, K 1965. Second and Third Century Acts of Apostles, Introduction, in Hennecke, E & Schneemelcher, W (eds), *New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol 2. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Schnur (ed) H G 1962. *The Golden Ass*. (The Adlington Translation). New York: Collier.
- Smith, J Z 1990. *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Soder, R 1932. *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike*. Stuttgart: W Kohlhammer Verlag.
- Sparks, H F D 1984. *The Apocryphal Old Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spittler, R 1983. Introduction to Testament of Job, in Charlesworth, J H (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Sullivan, J P 1989. Introduction to *The Ass*, in Reardon, B P (ed), *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 589. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Todorov, T 1975. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, tr by R Howard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 1977. The Typology of Detective Fiction, in *The Poetics of Prose*, tr by R Howard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Williams, G H & Waldvogel, E 1975. A History of Speaking in Tongues and Related Gifts, in Hamilton, M P (ed), *The Charismatic Movement*, 61-113. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Woodward, K L & Moorman, M 1984. Inspirational Romances. *Newsweek*, February 20, p. 69.