Who Read Early Christian Apocrypha?

L. W. Hurtado (University of Edinburgh)

The question posed in the title of this essay is difficult to answer for several reasons. First, there is a diversity of texts usually included under the category ‘early Christian apocrypha’, including typically some texts often linked with dissident, ‘heretical’ groups and/or ideas, but also other texts that may have been intended to supplement or expand upon early ‘orthodox’ texts and ideas, and/or simply to promote a version of Christian edification, and perhaps entertainment. ¹ So an immediate answer to the question of who read ‘early Christian apocrypha’ is that the variety of texts under this heading likely signals a variety of readers; and this is confirmed by other evidence that we will note shortly. Given the diversity and number of texts that comprise ‘early Christian apocrypha’, however, within the limits of this discussion it is not realistic to attempt anything more than an illustrative treatment of the matter.

Another problem lies in the available evidence for a number of these apocryphal texts. For some of them (e.g., the gospels often linked specifically with Jewish Christianity), we have only what purport to be brief quotations given by some early Christian writers, mere snippets of what may have been texts of some considerable size. So inferring readers from contents (always difficult) is all the more difficult with regard to these texts. This has not stopped some scholars from speculating about the provenance of these writings, but in my view these speculations carry little probative force. ²

Moreover, some apocryphal texts survive only in translation, often from a considerably later time than the probable point of original composition, reflecting a transmission-history that likely involved significant redactional changes, sometimes perhaps of incalculable dimensions. Even when texts survive in the likely original language, it is often clear that they underwent significant re-shaping and adaptation in the course of being copied across the early centuries (as, e.g., we can see in comparing the extant portions of the earlier Greek text of the Gospel of Thomas with

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¹ I place the words ‘heretical’ and ‘orthodox’ in scare-quotes to signal that I use them simply to reflect how certain texts have been seen traditionally.
the later Coptic version). On the one hand, the translation of these texts certainly reflects interest in them and usage of them by readers in various cultural settings. On the other hand, this usage by different kinds of readers across time further complicates any answer to the question of who read the texts in question.

Positing Readers from Contents

One of the ways that scholars have gone about trying to posit the readers of early Christian texts (both canonical and extra-canonical) is by making inferences based on their contents. Indeed, this kind of ‘mirror reading’ has often generated proposals that this or that kind of readers or ‘community’ is reflected in, and lay behind, a given text. Granted, to some extent early Christian texts do likely reflect interests and situations of authors and intended readers. But defining with any precision the identity and nature of the intended readers on the basis of the contents of unprovenanced texts is more difficult that some may have realized, and involves making a few dubious assumptions. By contrast, in the case of some texts, e.g., such as the undisputed letters of Paul, we may well have explicit identification of the author and addressee(s), as well as reference to the situation (either the author’s or the addressees’) that occasioned the letter. But by ‘unprovenanced’ texts I mean texts that do not give such information, making it more often very difficult judge these things.

One of the dubious assumptions sometimes made is that the characters, settings and emphases in texts reflect the historical circumstances and characteristics of the intended readers sufficiently to permit us to determine these matters. But in fact literary texts may reflect imaginary settings, may project fictional, perhaps idealized people and circumstances, and may even portray circumstances that contrast with those of the author and intended readers, e.g., for the purpose of offering something exotic or interesting to readers. It is actually not clear that texts so readily

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and directly mirror their intended readers. Any claim that they do must be argued on a case-by-case basis, preferably supported with some other corroborating evidence.

A related dubious assumption is that texts such as the apocryphal writings were intended for some specific ‘community’ or particular circle of readers in the first place. Several decades ago, Frederik Wisse criticised the assumption that texts such as those often labelled ‘gnostic’ reflect specific circles or ‘communities’ whose beliefs and practices can be read off the texts in question. He judged it ‘very questionable’ to attribute the special features of a given text to ‘a certain, otherwise unknown, branch of early Christianity.’⁴ To cite Wisse further, the beliefs and practices advocated in these writings, insofar as they vary from those reflected in other Christian texts, cannot be attributed to a distinct community or sect. Rather, these writings were more likely idiosyncratic in terms of their environment. The ‘teaching’ they contain was not meant to replace other teaching but to supplement. They did not defend the beliefs of a community but rather tried to develop and explore Christian truth in different directions.⁵

That is, the intended readers of these ‘gnostic’ texts may as likely have been assorted individuals of various types, interested (perhaps for various reasons) in what they may have regarded as the explorative or innovative approach to Christian faith taken in the texts. Moreover, despite assumptions to the contrary, there is no good reason for thinking that these texts functioned as ‘scripture’ for defined Christian groups such as ‘Thomasine’ Christians distinguishable from other Christian circles.⁶

An example of the dubious tendency to ascribe specific groups or types of readers to early Christian texts is the claim that some of the apocryphal Acts were intended for women readers.⁷ The basic reason for such proposals seems to be that the texts in question feature prominent women characters. Here, again, we see the somewhat simplistic notion that texts rather directly mirror their intended readers.

This particular view, however, that certain of the apocryphal Acts were particularly

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⁵ Ibid., 188.
directed to women readers, has been challenged recently by Kim Haines-Eitzen. Focusing on the physical form of the early manuscripts containing these texts (a topic to which I return later in this discussion), she judges that ‘there is nothing to suggest a gendered readership’.\(^8\) Instead, she concludes,

If, indeed, the form of ancient books can tell us something about their readers—a subject we still have much to learn about—then these apocryphal acts were not by the ‘popular’ masses or necessarily by ‘women’ but rather by those members of the upper echelons who likewise enjoyed poetry, history, and perhaps philosophy.\(^9\)

In sum, instead of assuming that any specific readership can be inferred directly from the contents of a given text, it is wiser to take account of other data as well. In what follows, I underscore this other evidence, some of which has perhaps not been considered adequately.

‘External’ References to Usage

In what follows, I first discuss ‘external’ evidence, by which I mean here explicit references in ancient Christian writings to the use of apocryphal texts. One of the most explicit of such references is the oft-cited passage where Eusebius describes how Serapion (bishop of Antioch, 199-211 CE) reacted to being informed that a Gospel of Peter was read by certain members of the church in Rhossus (Eusebius, HE 6.12.1-6), one of the communities within his episcopal authority. Initially assuming that the text was harmless (though he apparently doubted the attribution to Peter), Serapion did not object to Rhossus Christians continuing to read it. Then, however, after being prompted to read the text himself carefully, he came to the view that, though for the most part it was ‘in accordance with the true teaching of the Saviour’, there were some things ‘added’ (προσδιεσταλμένα), which he apparently regarded as possibly tending in a heretical direction.

Although it cannot detain us here, an obvious question concerns the identity and contents of the text that Serapion considered. A majority of scholars have


\(^9\) Ibid., 62-63.
assumed that it is substantially the same as the partially preserved text included in the ‘Akhmîm codex’ (P.Cair. 10759, dated variously 7th–9th century CE), which, accordingly, has acquired the title ‘Gospel of Peter’.\(^\text{10}\) In the most thorough examination of matters to date, however, Paul Foster urges that ‘one should exercise caution before too quickly identifying the Akhmîm text with the Gospel of Peter that Serapion declared open to docetic interpretation’.\(^\text{11}\) But it is not crucial here whether the Akhmîm does or does not preserve substantially the text that Serapion wrote about; instead, we focus on what Eusebius relates about the use of the text that he refers to as the Gospel of Peter.

Clearly, this text was read by Christians in Rhossus, and likely in addition to, not instead of, other texts more familiar to us that came to form the emerging Christian canon. Eusebius says that Serapion wrote a refutation of the ‘false statements’ in the Gospel of Peter, because some in Rhossus ‘on the ground of the said writing had turned aside into heterodox teachings’ (HE 6.12.2). But it is by no means clear that these people comprised some separate circle or ‘community’ that identified itself with particular reference to this text. Instead, it appears to have been simply one of the texts read among at least some Christians in Rhossus, with some of them apparently taking it as justifying some ideas that Serapion considered heterodox. However, it is interesting that, although Serapion became concerned about this, he also judged that ‘for the most part’ the text was acceptable. It is not clear from Eusebius’ report whether, in addition to refuting the bits that he regarded as susceptible to heterodox interpretation, Serapion also actively sought to suppress this Gospel of Peter, or was content to correct what he regarded an inappropriate uses of the text.

If we return briefly to consider the Akhmîm text regarded by many as a later copy or version of The Gospel of Peter, it is noteworthy that the small, composite codex containing the text (along with portions of the Apocalypse of Peter, 1 Enoch and the Martyrdom of St. Julian) was found in the grave of a man buried in a

\(^{10}\) The partially-preserved text in the Akhmîm codex bears no title, but is typically referred to as the Gospel of Peter, largely because of the statement in the final lines, ‘But I, Simon Peter, and Andrew my brother, having taken up our nets went to the sea . . .’ (Gospel of Peter 14.58). I translate the transcription of the text in Paul Foster, The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 205.

cemetery that seems to have been associated with a nearby monastery. The most natural assumption is that the man was a member of the local Christian community, quite possibly a monk, and was given a Christian burial, this small codex buried with him, perhaps because it was some special possession of his. So, whether the text is or is not related to the Gospel of Peter that Serapion read and refuted, indications are that this apocryphal text (along with the other extra-canonical texts in this codex) was read (and perhaps treasured) by this Christian man, with no indication that he was particularly heterodox or that he was part of some discrete circle attached to the text.

There are also several references in ancient Christian writers to other gospels that they link specifically to Jewish Christians. But there are problems that create major uncertainties about these texts. The most significant problem is that all we have are a handful of what these writers present as citations of these texts, and no copy of any of them survives. A second difficulty is that the references to and descriptions of these texts do not cohere very well. So, for example, it is not entirely clear whether we are dealing with two or three such gospels. In scholarly discussion one finds references to a Gospel according to the Hebrews, a Gospel of the Ebionites, and a Gospel of the Nazoraeans, but only the first title appears in the ancient sources, and the others are convenient titles attached by scholars to the putative excerpts of texts associated with Jewish-Christian circles in the ancient writers in question.

The earliest, Irenaeus (Adv. Haer. 1.26.2; 3.11.7), refers to Ebionites having their own gospel, which he took to be a version of the Gospel of Matthew. Later, Epiphanius (Pan. 30) also refers to Ebionites, whom he characterizes as having certain heretical beliefs, and he gives several citations of what he says was their own

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15 Noting recent studies, Evans (The Jewish Christian Gospel Tradition, 246) states, ‘Obviously, the state of the scholarly question has been thrown into the air; there simply is no consensus’.

16 Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 2.43.5 and Jerome, Comm. Mich. 7.7; Comm. Isa. 40.9 refer to a gospel according to the Hebrews. Gregory, ‘Jewish-Christian Gospels’, 56-59, reviews the difficulties in identifying how many such gospels there may have been and what they may have comprised.

gospel. But scholars are not agreed that Epiphanius actually knew either Ebionites or the gospel that he ascribes to them.

Whatever we make of Epiphanius’ statements, as Gregory noted, the apparent acquaintance with a Gospel according to the Hebrews shown by Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Didymus ‘suggests that it was both widely known and widely acceptable, at least among those for whom they wrote’, and that it was likely ‘a text with wide appeal in the period before the boundaries of the New Testament canon were formally closed’. In short, although there were extra-canonical gospel-texts that may well have emerged in Jewish-Christian circles and may have been intended initially for such readers, it appears that they then obtained a wider readership in the early Christian centuries. If these texts functioned as scripture for some, they were also read, and probably with some appreciation, also among those who did not so include these texts among their scriptures.

As another category of apocryphal gospel, let us now consider the so-called ‘Infancy Gospels’. Once again, we have texts that seem to have enjoyed a wide readership and reception in Christian circles. In fact, the most influential of these, known variously as the Protevangelium Jacobi, the Nativity of Mary, and The Infancy Gospel of James, exercised ‘an influence on the faith and piety of the church which rivals that of the canonical gospels’. This is particularly evident in Christian art down the centuries after this text was composed, with numerous examples of scenes and figures that are derived from it. For example, depictions of Joachim and Anna (Mary’s parents), and type-scenes such as Mary’s birth, all reflect its influence long after the text itself was forgotten in Western Christianity (though it continued to be copied and read in Eastern Christianity). Moreover, if we note that the paintings in question were typically commissioned by ecclesiastical authorities, it becomes clear that this extra-canonical text exercised influence (and perhaps had a readership) in the

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18 See, e.g., Gregory, ‘Jewish-Christian Gospels’, 61-66, for discussion of the citations, which he judges may more likely derive from a gospel harmony that shows dependence on Matthew and Luke, but also some distinctive tendencies, e.g., vegetarianism.
19 Ibid., 67.
20 For a handy volume that combines introduction, Greek text, and translation of the two major writings of this type, see Ronald F. Hock, The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1995.
22 For examples, see Cartlidge and Elliott, Art and the Christian Apocrypha, 21-46.
hierarchy of Christianity, at least in late antiquity and the medieval period, and not only among the laity.\(^{23}\)

Another leading example of this type of text is *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (known in earlier centuries as *Evangelium Thomae Israelitae* or *Evangelium Thomae*), which is less a connected narrative and more ‘a collection of largely self-contained stories that are only loosely held together by a series of indications of Jesus’ age’ at various points in his childhood.\(^{24}\) Stephen Gero referred to it as ‘the fixation in writing of a cycle of oral tradition, of religious folklore’.\(^{25}\) The extant manuscripts exhibit considerable fluidity in the transmission of the text, with deletion and insertion of some stories, all the easier in such a loose collection of vignettes, at least some of which circulated on their own before being collected in *Infancy Thomas*. So, although some individual stories (especially the exchange between the child Jesus and a Jewish teacher about the meaning of the Greek letters *alpha* and *beta*) are attested in some early writings, it is not always easy to determine whether their authors actually knew and read something like the full text of *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* or instead simply were acquainted with some of these particular vignettes.\(^{26}\)

But the multiple later copies of this infancy gospel, and its translation into a number of ancient languages, surely show that it came to be read in various Christian circles.\(^{27}\) As Gero noted, ‘Apparently, both Greek and Slavonic versions of apocryphal gospels were quite generally used in Orthodox monasteries as devotional reading’.\(^{28}\) Moreover, to judge by the references to Jesus in the Qur’an as ‘he who made clay birds fly’ (*Surah* 3.49; 5.110; one of the famous stories in *Infancy Thomas*

\(^{23}\) The text seems to have become virtually unknown in the Western churches at some point, however, and was re-introduced in a Latin translation by Guillaume Postel in 1552 from a Greek manuscript that is now lost. The earliest complete copy extant is P. Bodmer V (4th century), a small codex whose provenance is probably upper Egypt, on which see Joseph van Haelst, *Catalogue des papyrus littéraires juifs et chrétiens* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1976), no. 599 (212-13). There are also fragments of two other early copies: *PSI* 1.6 (fragments of five leaves, 4th century) and *P. Grenf.* 1.8 (parchment, fragments of eight leaves, 5th-6th century), van Haelst, nos. 600 and 601 (213-14). Van Haelst also referred to a single leaf from another codex (now lost) and dated 4th century (no. 602).


\(^{27}\) Gero, ‘The Infancy Gospel of Thomas’, 48-56 discusses versions in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic and Old Church Slavonic.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 75.
2:1-7), it appears that *Infancy Thomas* (or at least some of its contents) may have been enjoyed (and influential) well beyond early Christian circles.

The several works in the category of ‘apocryphal acts’ likewise were widely read and influential for centuries.29 Of the five main works in this category (*Acts of John, Acts of Paul, Acts of Peter, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Thomas*), only the *Acts of Thomas* survives completely, but the extant portions of the others, along with references to them in other Christian texts, clearly show a great interest in all these works. As a collection, all five works were known and widely read among Manichaeans in particular.30 But also, despite critical comments about them by figures such as Eusebius (*HE* 3.3.2; 3.25.4), these works enjoyed varying levels of popularity and usage across wider circles of early Christianity as well. Indeed, in the case of a portion of the *Acts of Peter* that recounts his martyrdom, we have material taken into the liturgy of some ancient churches.31 Moreover, characters and scenes in this work (e.g., Peter’s crucifixion upside-down) and the other apocryphal acts were also popular subjects in Christian art.32 We have only to think of the enormous place of the figure of Thecla in Christian tradition and art, a figure that seems to have emerged influentially in the *Acts of Paul*, this account subsequently generating other texts about her (e.g., the *Life and Miracles of St. Thecla* dated to the fifth century).33

To be sure, the *Acts of John* exhibits certain emphases (especially in §§87-105) that raised doubts about its orthodoxy (e.g., Eusebius, *HE* 3.25.6), leading to condemnation of the text at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE. Klauck judged that in this material the text exhibited certain ‘points of contact’ with ‘the Eastern version of Valentinianism’, but predating ‘the elaboration of the great gnostic systems’.34 But it is likely that for at least some Christian readers more generally *Acts

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30 Ibid., 3-5, cites key evidence of Manichaean usage.


32 Cartlidge and Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, 134-235, for numerous examples and extended discussion.


34 Klauck, *Apocryphal Acts*, 17-18. Consequently, he regards *Acts of John* as the earliest of the apocryphal acts, proposing a date of ca. 150-160 CE.
of John and the other apocryphal Acts were read variously as interesting, provocative, and edifying texts. I return to this point later in this discussion.

Some recent studies emphasize certain similarities between the apocryphal Acts and Roman-era ‘pagan’ novels. Jan Bremmer firmly contended, ‘In fact, the intertextuality of the A.A.A. [apocryphal Acts of the apostles] with the novel cannot be doubted,’ underscoring similar motifs in both bodies of texts. Christine Thomas posited strong similarities to what she called ‘historical novels’ in particular, fictional accounts featuring characters regarded by writers and readers as real figures of history, and she proposed the Alexander romance as providing ‘the best generic parallel among the novelistic products of the Roman Empire’. Moreover, she contended that the ‘narrative fluidity’ of these apocryphal texts, ‘their existence in multiple translations, redactions, abridgments, and expansions’, comprises evidence of the popularity of the material that they contain among various ‘audiences’ over time and place.

I noted earlier that some scholars have taken the prominent place of Christian women in some of the apocryphal Acts as indicating that these texts were intended for, and were particularly read by, Christian women. To cite another scholar who takes such a view, Bremmer firmly contended that women were both ‘the actual readers’ and the intended readers of these texts. He further proposed that the authors of the apocryphal Acts had a ‘missionary’ intention, particularly aiming for the attention, and conversion, of upper-class women, a conclusion he judged ‘inescapable’ in light of the ‘female focus’ of these writings. But we have also already noted the critical assessment of this stance by Haines-Eitzen. Moreover, in likening the apocryphal Acts to the ancient historical novel, a type of writing that likely enjoyed a readership of males and females, Thomas seems implicitly to come down closer to Haines-Eitzen than to Bremmer. To be sure, women may well have been among those who enjoyed the apocryphal Acts (and other early Christian writings), but there does not seem to be a good a reason to make them the

36 Christine M. Thomas, The Acts of Peter, Gospel Literature, and the Ancient Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 87-105, citing 89. She distinguishes between ancient ‘historical novels’ and ‘erotic novels’ in that the former ‘are all “referential” texts that narrate major historical events, however constitutive novelistic techniques of embellishment may also be for their genre’, whereas the erotic novels ‘all avoid this sort of referentiality, focusing on the private events of obscure characters’ (93).
37 Ibid., 89.
predominant readers. Instead, we should probably allow for a diversity of people for whom these texts were meaningful in various ways.

The Artefacts of Ancient Reading

I turn now to consider evidence that is often overlooked in studies of early Christian apocrypha and their likely readers, the extant physical artefacts of ancient readers, the remains of early manuscripts of these texts. It has not been adequately recognized that the physical features of ancient manuscripts can give us hints of the kinds of readers for whom they were copied, and the settings in which they were read.\(^{39}\) Here also, because of the limitations of space, I shall confine the discussion to some examples.

Perhaps the best known Christian apocryphal text today is the Gospel of Thomas, and so the portions of three manuscripts of this text that are dated palaeographically to the third century which the earliest copies extant, provide a good place to start.\(^{40}\) Although one must be cautious in doing so, it is interesting to consider whether the comparative number of extant copies of a given text may reflect its comparative popularity in the ancient setting.\(^{41}\) In the case of the Gospel of Thomas, the portions of three early manuscripts certainly indicate some ancient interest in this text. To be more specific, on the one hand, it is not among the most frequently attested (cf., e.g., the twelve copies of Matthew or sixteen copies of John). By my calculation, the remains of three copies of the Gospel of Thomas make the text tie for thirteenth place (with James, Ephesians, Leviticus and Acts of Paul) in the number of extant copies among literary texts in Christian manuscripts the second and

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\(^{41}\) I have surveyed the comparative number of all the extant copies of texts of Christian provenance from before 300 CE, tentatively considering what we may infer in Earliest Christian Artifacts, 24-41.
third centuries CE. On the other hand, for many Christian texts, both canonical and extra-canonical, we have portions of only one or two copies from this early period.  

But what more might these fragments of early copies tell us about who read the *Gospel of Thomas* and the circumstances in which it was read? Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1 is a portion of one leaf of a papyrus codex, the extant text roughly corresponding to sayings 26-30 (+77b) and 31-33 of the Coptic text from Nag Hammadi. The original page-size of the codex (ca. 27 x 10-13 cm) makes it analogous to some other Christian codices of the same period containing literary texts, whether (what became) canonical or extra-canonical ones. The copyist-hand likewise fits within the spectrum of hands that we see in some other early Christian literary manuscripts, in this case a copyist aiming for clarity but of limited calligraphic abilities, as reflected in the inconsistency in letter sizes, the ligatures and an inability to produce truly ‘bilinear’ writing. It is, however, perhaps more interesting that, in comparison with some other early Christian manuscripts of equivalent page-size (particularly copies of texts known to have been treated as scripture in early Christian circles), the letters are somewhat smaller and the number of lines per page (ca. 37-38) somewhat larger, producing a more compressed format. A smaller number of lines per page suggests a text intended for greater ease of reading, perhaps public reading, whereas a larger number of lines per page may suggest a copy intended for individual reading/study.

Moreover, the intriguing page-number (ια = 11) on the verso side of the leaf (apparently added by an early reader) suggests that some other text (which, unfortunately, we cannot identify) preceded the *Gospel of Thomas*, and so this codex combined two or more texts. The desire to combine multiple texts in one codex would also help explain the somewhat more compressed writing mentioned above. In sum, the physical features of P. Oxyrhynchus 1 (e.g., compressed writing, absence of punctuation, etc.) suggest that it more likely was copied (as some sort of compendium

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42 Compare, e.g., figures for each NT writing of which there is evidence from before 300 CE. I indicate in round brackets the number of extant copies: Matthew (12), Mark (1), Luke (7), John (16), Acts (7), Romans (4), 1 Corinthians (2), 2 Corinthians (1), Galatians (1), Ephesians (3), Philippians (2), Colossians (1), 1 Thessalonians (3), 2 Thessalonians (2), Philemon (1), Titus (1), Hebrews (4), James (3), 1 Peter (1), 2 Peter (1), 1 John (17), 2 John (1), Jude (2), Revelation (5). For discussion of these figures, Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 20-21.

43 ‘Bilinear’ means letters of fairly even height, the line of letters set evenly within imaginary top and bottom lines, which is one of the key earmarks of a more skilled copyist.

44 See my discussion of the matter in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 171-77.
of certain texts?) for personal reading and study, rather than for public reading (e.g., in corporate worship).

In P.Oxyrhynchus 654 we have remnants of a re-used papyrus roll (an ‘opisthograph’), the extant portion of Gospel of Thomas copied on the outer side of a roll, the inner side (with horizontal fibres) containing the remains of a survey-list. As for the copy of Gospel of Thomas, the complete inability at bilinear writing, the irregularities in letter-size and formation, and other features of the copyist-hand (errors in spelling, a bizarre first line) suggest someone of very limited skill. There are horizontal lines extending from the left margin and into the text to signal the first line of a saying of Jesus, these apparently added by a reader rather than by the copyist. Here, too, the physical features of this manuscript suggest that it was prepared for private study. This was the typical purpose of re-used rolls.45

P. Oxyrhynchus 655 comprises fragments of a small papyrus roll, the small majuscule characters confidently and skilfully formed, forming neat, narrow columns of ca. 12-16 characters per line. The original height of the roll was about 16 cm (inclusive of top and bottom margins), yet with some 30 lines of text per column. This was clearly a manuscript toward the small/compact end of the spectrum of sizes of literary rolls.46 As a modern comparison, volumes in the Loeb Classical Library series have pages of just over 16 cm height, and a maximum of ca. 32 lines of text per page. As the case with the Loeb volumes, P. Oxyrhynchus 655 was almost certainly intended (and used) for personal reading.

Another text that is witnessed in remnants of early manuscripts is the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene).47 Although its text is preserved most extensively in a fifth-century Coptic copy, it is the remains of two early Greek copies that will concern us

45 Opisthographs are ‘usually taken as a sign of an economy-minded collector’, George W. Houston, ‘Papyrological Evidence for Book Collections and Libraries in the Roman Empire’, in Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome, ed. William A. Johnson and Holt N. Parker (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 257 (233-67). He cites Julian Krüger, Oxyrhynchos in der Kaiserzeit: Studien zur Topographie und Literaturrezeption (Europäische Hochschulschriften, 441 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990),161, as showing that of all recovered Oxyrhynchus papyri 17.9% were opisthographs.


here. The one, P. Oxyrhynchus 3525, is a scrap measuring 11.5 x 12 cm, the text written in a cursive hand on the ‘recto’ (the side of papyrus with horizontal fibres), the ‘verso’ side blank, which strongly suggests that it is a portion of a roll.\(^4\) The cursive hand, the roll book-form, and the modest size of the roll, all make it rather certain that this is the remnant of someone’s personal copy of the text.

The other Greek remnant of the *Gospel of Mary* is P. Rylands 463, a papyrus fragment (8.9 x 9.9 cm) with writing on both sides and page-numbering, which make it the remains of a leaf of a codex.\(^4\) In this copy, the writing is majuscule and a hand described by Roberts as ‘clear and upright [but] also ugly and ill-proportioned, and show[ing] considerable cursive influence’.\(^5\) Tuckett noted the numerous mistakes made by the copyist, some of them corrected, and some of the mistakes producing Greek text that ‘makes little sense’ such that at these points it can only be understood on the basis of the later Coptic translation.\(^5\) Here, again, in view of these data, plus the small size of the codex (ca. 11 x 16 cm), we likely have an informal copy intended for someone’s personal reading of the text.\(^6\)

The general point I wish to make at this point is that, based on the nature of the remnants of the early manuscripts of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary*, in neither case do we have any reason to link these copies with distinctive circles of Christians. That is, it would be dubious to posit a circle of ‘Thomas’ Christians or ‘Mary’ Christians as connected with these manuscripts. Indeed, I suggest that this should be taken as illustrative more widely of how apocryphal gospels functioned. There were obviously Christians who wrote these and other gospel-texts featuring figures such as Thomas and Mary, and there were obviously other Christians who enjoyed reading these texts, as reflected in the remnants of early copies of them, and the subsequent translations of these and other such texts (e.g.,

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\(^5\) Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, provides photographs of both sides, among photos after p. 110. He accurately identifies the recto and verso side, correcting the labels attached to the items by the Rylands Library.


\(^6\) Roberts estimated a writing-column of ca. 7.5 x 12 cm (‘The Gospel of Mary’, 20). My estimated page-size allows for margins of at least 1.5 cm left, right and top, and 2 cm bottom. For further discussion of the significance of the size of codices, see Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 155-65.
Coptic and other languages). But the features of the extant artefacts of the early reading and readers suggest that these texts were (typically?) copied for, and read by, individuals, the texts likely circulated and copied among those Christians who expressed an interest in them. As to the social connections of these individuals, at the most, we should probably imagine loose networks of sorts, rather than defined circles or sects of Christians.\footnote{It takes us into broader issues than can be handled adequately here, but my proposal of loose networks of somewhat like-minded individuals has some resonance with some recent explorations of the circumstances in which so-called ‘gnostic’ writings were copied, translated and read, in particular Michael A. Williams, \textit{Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 235-62 and Stephen Emmel, ‘The Coptic Gnostic Texts as Witnesses to the Production and Transmission of Gnostic (and Other) Traditions,’ in \textit{Das Thomasevangelium: Enstehung – Rezeption – Theologie}, eds. Jörg Frey, Enno Edzard Popkes and Jens Schröter (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 33-49.}

I take it to be congruent with this view that the remnants of these texts were found in the same locations (e.g., in the same mounds in Oxyrhynchus) as the remnants of familiar Christian texts such as copies of writings of the OT and the emergent NT, and writings by Irenaeus, Melito, and others, all of which are typically taken as reflective of ‘mainstream’ Christianity of the time. This suggests that the ‘apocryphal’ texts were likely read by at least some in the same Christian circles in which these other texts also functioned.

Along similar lines, consider again Wisse’s contention that the so-called ‘gnostic’ texts likely circulated primarily among individual Christians who were intrigued by the alternative ideas in them.\footnote{Wisse, ‘The Use of Early Christian Literature As Evidence for Inner Diversity and Conflict’} Whether or not the \textit{Gospel of Thomas} or the \textit{Gospel of Mary}, for example, is taken as ‘gnostic’ by scholars today, the earliest extant artefacts of these texts in themselves give no basis for positing discrete circles of Christians devoted particularly to these texts and their distinctive teachings. Instead, as noted already, these early manuscripts appear to have been prepared for individual usage. Of course, discrete Christian circles of various sorts may well be posited on other grounds (e.g., the claims of writers such as Irenaeus or Eusebius). But my point here is that, whatever such circles there were, the sorts of texts that we have been considering also likely circulated and were read, perhaps mainly, by interested individuals who otherwise were members of ‘mainstream’ Christian churches of their time and place.

This also seems to me broadly in accord with Haines-Eitzen’s view cited earlier about the likely readers of the apocryphal Acts, based on her analysis of the
extant manuscripts of these texts from the first six centuries. As noted already, she was particularly concerned to test contentions by other scholars that these writings were read especially by women, concluding against this view. She also weighed the view that these writings had a ‘popular’ readership, i.e., people of relatively lower social levels, and found this, too, dubious. The thirteen manuscripts of apocryphal Acts that she surveyed are all codices (as we would expect generally for Christian literary texts increasingly after the third century). Moreover, she judged that they show no particularly distinctive physical features in copyist hands or other matters in comparison with copies of other texts (including scriptural texts), making it ‘highly problematic to continue to argue for the popular readership—or the popular/female readership—of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles’. Instead, she proposed that the readers of these texts were simply individuals (more likely ‘members of the upper echelons’) who enjoyed the stories of the adventures (and martyrdoms) of heroic Christian figures.

For the purpose of this discussion, the main point is that the apocryphal Acts, as also the case with the other Christian apocryphal literature, found readers who for various reasons were interested in the contents of these texts. In some cases, this or that apocryphal text might have been of special significance for a given circle of Christians. But, more generally it seems, as a diverse body of writings, early Christian apocrypha likely drew a diversity of readers, most of whom were simply interested individuals who found the texts variously intriguing, entertaining, inspiring, provocative, or edifying, and perhaps other readers who found them dubious or even objectionable. Who read early Christian apocrypha? The best general answer would seem to be a variety of people who took an interest in these diverse texts for a diversity of reasons.

56 Ibid., 57. See also 58-61 for her brief comments on several illustrative examples of manuscripts of apocryphal Acts.
57 In the earliest period from which we have manuscript remains (2nd-3rd centuries CE), Christian preference for the codex seems to have been most pronounced for copies of texts that functioned as scripture. For example, we have no NT writing on an unused roll from this period. Christians did, however, use the roll for other literary texts (e.g., theological treatises), though even for these texts the codex was more often used. For further discussion, see Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 53-61, and the list of texts in early Christian manuscripts, 209-29, which includes information about book-form and other matters.
59 Ibid., 63.