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Review

ERIC J. BECK, *Justice and Mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter: A New Translation and Analysis of the Purpose of the Text*

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Reviews

ERIC J. BECK, *Justice and Mercy in the Apocalypse of Peter: A New Translation and Analysis of the Purpose of the Text*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 427 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019). xiii, 197 pp. Price: €104.00. ISBN: 978-3-16-159031-3.

Among the not so few texts in use among Christians of late antiquity that the Ethiopic tradition has preserved and transmitted to the present, the *Apocalypse of Peter* (CAe 1047; CANT 317, hereafter abbreviated as ApcPt) holds a special place as the oldest Christian text describing the afterlife and the fate of the dead. The history of research on this text has been marked by the widely used edition—the second one after the 1910 *editio princeps* by Sylvain Grébaut—and translations (a literal one and an interpretive one) by Dennis D. Buchholz as well as a number of studies by Paolo Marrassini, who is the only one to have seriously posed the fundamental question of the *Vorlage* of the Ethiopic and suggested an Arabic one.¹ Yet, the entire Pseudo-Clementine Ethiopic dossier where the ApcPt is included has never been re-edited after Grébaut's 1907–1910 *editio princeps*. The renewal of interest enjoyed by this text—‘the most neglected of all Christian works written before 150 CE’, as rightly stated by Richard Bauckham² (quoted on p. 178)—since twenty years, also with the publication of a number of dedicated miscellaneous volumes,³ has neither resumed the question of the *Vorlage* nor definitely solved the question of the origin of this text—just to simplify and roughly draw a line between current opposing hypotheses, Syria-Palestine or Egypt—nor that of the general message this text conveys, which is the special subject of

¹ D. D. Buchholz, *Your Eyes Will Be Opened: A Study of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, 97 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988); P. Marrassini, ‘L’Apocalisse di Pietro’, in Yaqob Beyene, R. Fattovich, P. Marrassini, and A. Triulzi, eds, *Etiopia e oltre. Studi in onore di Lanfranco Ricci*, Studi Africanistici, Serie Etiopica, 1 (Napoli: Istituto Orientale di Napoli, Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi, 1994), 171–232. For further details see A. Bausi, ‘Towards a Re-edition of the Ethiopic Dossier of the “Apocalypse of Peter”’, *Apocrypha*, 27 (2016), 179–196.

² See R. J. Bauckham, ‘The Apocalypse of Peter: A Jewish Christian Apocalypse from the Time of Bar Kokhba’, in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, 93 (Leiden–Boston, MA–Köln: Brill, 1998), 160–258 (160).

³ See most recently D. C. Maier, J. Frey, and T. J. Kraus, eds, *The Apocalypse of Peter in Context*, Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha, 21 (Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2024).

Eric J. Beck's monograph. Less dramatic is the question of the absolute dating of the ApcPt, because there is no doubt that the text dates back to the second century CE, when it is already quoted, yet problems arise as to *which* text. In fact, the ApcPt shares with other texts the characteristic of a parallel transmission in other languages: in this case, a complete Ethiopic version is accompanied by two distinct Greek recensions. The first Greek recension, closer to the Ethiopic version, with important differences in crucial passages, and presumably representing the earliest textual phase (according to Beck, along with others, earlier than the Ethiopic) of the ApcPt, is attested by only two parchment fragments consisting of one folium (Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS. Gr. th. f. 4, comprising ApcPt 10:6–7) and a bifolium (Vienna, P. Vindob.G 39756, sometimes also referred to as the 'Rainer fragment', comprising ApcPt 14:1–5), certainly belonging to the same codex, dated to the fifth century. The second, later and much more extensive Greek recension, with definite traces of rewriting and reworking, but according to Beck still more reliable than the Ethiopic in some respect, is attested by a parchment codex (Cairo, Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, P. Cair. 10759, better known as the 'Aḥmīm codex') dated between the sixth and seventh centuries: it includes ApcPt 15:1–16:5 (§§ 1–20); 7:2–8:4 (§§ 21–26); 9:1–10:7 (§§ 27–34).

With this state of the art, the book under review, which is the outcome of a PhD dissertation submitted to The University of Edinburgh in 2018 with the title *Perceiving the Mystery of the Merciful Son of God: An Analysis of the Purpose of the Apocalypse of Peter*, intends to provide an explanation and an interpretation of the reasons behind this text, that is, its ideological and theological motivation, which, according to the author (not unrightly), has seldom received the attention it deserves. In doing so, it also marginally touches on the question of the relationship of the versions in those points where they diverge with consequences on the content, even though this is not the main interest of the author in this book.⁴

The author begins with a concise history of the research (Chapter 1: Introduction, pp. 1–19) and the general methodology used (Chapter 2: Methodology, pp. 20–31). Much space is devoted to discussing the theses of some authors (Richard Bauckham, Robert Helmer, Jan Bremmer, Peter van Minnen, Eibert Tigchelaar, Tobias Nicklas, Wolfgang Grünstäudl) on the debated issues of place and context of origin and the relationship of ApcPt to 2 Peter. Most of the scholarship published in French and Italian is *de facto* ignored. Authors like Paolo Marrassini, Richard Bauckham himself for the French translation and commentary published in the standard French collection—quoted in the bibliography but apparently not

⁴ See, however, E. J. Beck, 'The Apocalypse of Peter: The Relationship of the Versions', in Meron T. Gebreananaye, L. Williams, and F. Watson, eds, *Beyond Canon: Early Christianity and the Ethiopic Textual Tradition*, Library of New Testament Studies, 643 (London–New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2021), 117–130.

used—as well as Enrico Norelli's quite a few important articles on the topic are simply not taken into account.⁵ The methodology section includes a discussion of the genre and a presentation of the author's approach to historical, source, and rhetorical criticism.

Chapters 3 (Afterlife Torment Texts in Context, pp. 32–53) analyses a series of texts (*Apocalypse of Zephaniah*; two texts included in Plutarch's *Moralia*, that is, *On the Delays of Divine Vengeance* and *On the Daimonion of Socrates*; the *Testament of Isaac*; Lucian's dialogue *Menippus* and the romance *True Histories*; the Greek Apocalypse of Ezra; the Latin Vision of Ezra; the Acts of Thomas; and the *Apocalypse of Paul*) that shares themes with the ApcPt (tour of hell and description of torments in the afterlife). For each of them, Beck singles out the meaning of the text and its character, measuring the *monitory* attitude of each text and the presence of the motif of *mercy* towards the punishment of the wicked, which are the features he intends to explore and compare in the ApcPt.

Chapter 4 (A Composite Translation of the Apocalypse of Peter, pp. 54–96) presents what the author assumes to be one of the most important contributions of the book, that is, a new translation that reconstructs the form of the text considered to reflect the earliest state of the ApcPt, before important changes were introduced, Beck assumes, particularly in the Ethiopic text. The major assumption in this regard is the hypothesis that the Ethiopic version is not necessarily the best representative of the earliest text. Particularly in the passage of 14:1, which is crucial for the doctrine of mercy, he relies on the Greek text of the fragmentary Greek codex, but also, in general, he advocates for the importance of the Aḥmīm text for determining the earliest textual stage of ApcPt. The section dedicated to observations of detail on the translation (pp. 60–65), as already stated, ignores proposals and conjectures advanced by Paolo Marrassini in his 1997 translation (republished several times) for the French collection of New Testament Apocrypha.⁶ Some concerns should also be raised about the not so thoughtful argumentation on translation: it is obvious that the semantic sphere of a term in one

⁵ See E. Norelli, 'Situation des apocryphes pétriniens', *Apocrypha*, 2 (1991), 31–83; Id., 'Pierre, le visionnaire: la réception de l'épisode de la transfiguration en 2 Pierre et dans l'*Apocalypse de Pierre*', *Foie & Vie*, 106/4 (= *Devenir Pierre: un destin d'apôtre*, Cahiers Bibliques, 46), 2007, 19–43; Id., 'L'adversaire eschatologique dans l'*Apocalypse de Pierre*', in Y.-M. Blanchard, B. Pouderon, and M. Scopello, eds, *Les forces du bien et du mal dans les premiers siècles de l'Église. Actes du colloque de Tours, septembre 2008*, Théologie historique, 118 (Paris: Beauchesne, 2011), 291–317; and more recently also Id., 'Introduzione', *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo*, 17/1 (= *Apocalisse come genere: Un dibattito ancora attuale?*) (2020), 3–58; Id., 'L'«Apocalisse di Pietro» come apocalisse cristiana', *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo*, 17/1 (2020), 111–184.

⁶ See R. J. Bauckham and P. Marrassini, 'Apocalypse de Pierre', in F. Bovon and P. Geoltrain, eds, P. Marrassini, tr., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens*, I, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 442 (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 747–774.

language does not completely match the semantic sphere of a corresponding term in another language; indicating (for example, in parenthesis) the translated term answers exactly the need of providing the information on what is found in the text, while still giving a readable translation in the target language. Some comments are not so to the point: in the long discussion on the difference between *lā 'alām* and *zālā 'alām* (p. 64) the essential point is missed, namely, that the former is an adverbial expression and the second is an adjectival/attributive expression, realized through the relative pronoun *zä-* (as often in Ethiopic, also through relative verbs), which obviously explains why *lā 'alām* means 'forever' and *zālā 'alām* 'eternal'. The solutions adopted by rendering 'əgzi' *abəher* 'master of the land' in ApcPt 2:6 (instead of the correct 'God' everywhere else) is also not so convincing: the etymology of the term (even when written separate, as happens in archaic texts and manuscripts, i.e. 'əgzi' *a bəher*) belongs, so to say, to the prehistory or proto-history of the language and cannot be projected to the age when the translation of the ApcPt into Ethiopic took place. The translation also marks with square brackets any 'word or phrase that is in the extant manuscripts but is unnecessary when translated into English' (p. 65), which is a quite clumsy formulation; this applies in particular to the conjunction *wa-*, which, however, does not only have the meaning of 'and'. While the attempt at providing a reconstructed text in translation of the ApcPt by giving preference to the Greek of the Aḥmīm codex in several passages (particularly, keeping the prologue and following the Greek in 7:2, 9–10, 9:1–4, 5–7, 10:2–4, 6–7, 14:1–5, 15:1–16:4, to which the following section on pp. 73–96 is dedicated) based on its assumed message is legitimate, the linguistic understanding of the text does not attain perfection. See below for some sample passages.

Chapter 5 (Setting the Stage, pp. 97–124), Chapter 6 (The Tour of Hell, pp. 125–168), and Chapter 7 (The Purpose of the Apocalypse of Peter, pp. 169–178), are certainly the most valuable chapters of this monograph, which by themselves make this book essential reading and an unavoidable term of comparison for anyone interested in the overall meaning and interpretation of the ApcPt. The author engages in a fine and detailed discussion of the structure of the ApcPt, always, through the analysis of the attitude towards sinners, and the delicate balance between justice and mercy in all episodes of the text. The basic concept, as the author puts it (p. 168), while still conceding the possibility that some readers may understand the text as having a monitory character (i.e. 'a text meant to warn people not to sin by using frightening images of punishment in hell', p. 169), is that '[t]he concept of justice in the Apoc Pet requires that all people receive recompense according [to] their actions. The righteous receive, as their reward for their faithfulness in life, the opportunity to request mercy on behalf of the wicked. In this way, mercy for the wicked is justice for the righteous. The text is admit-

tedly ambiguous regarding for whom the righteous will request salvation. However, due to the universality of the compassion of the righteous throughout the text, it is probable that the request for mercy will likewise be universal'. This conclusion, which implies, as already said, in particular the discussion of a delicate passage in ApcPt 14:1–2—decided by Beck for the superior reading in the Greek codex—probably needs re-examination in light of a more careful consideration of the Ethiopic text.⁷ The author, moreover, integrates his interpretation of the ApcPt with the consideration of the broader context of the Ethiopic textual tradition, suggesting that the Pseudo-Clementine work known as *The Second Coming of Christ and the Resurrection of the Dead*, of which the ApcPt is part, exactly presupposes the doctrine, which becomes a 'hidden' doctrine in the treatise, that 'mercy for the wicked is justice for the righteous', as the author puts it.⁸

The book is carefully edited, but a number of passages betray some problematic, inconsistent, or even wrong transcriptions of the Ethiopic: p. 77: *zä 'iyätäff* (for *zä 'iyätäffä*); p. 81: *lä 'älä qärbu* (for *lä 'ällä qärbu*); p. 85: *εἰδῶλον* (for *εἰδῶλον*); p. 86: *läwäldyā* (for *läwäldäyā*); p. 'ellā (for 'ällä); p. 111: *yä 'alwu* and *wäyā 'alwu* (for *yä 'alläwu* and *wäyā 'alläwu*); p. 150: *yäblu* (for *yäbälu*); *yätläbsu* (whatever one reads, a non-grammatical form, for either *yätläbbäsu* or *yätläbäsu*); *yäläbsu* (for *yäläbbäsu*). – P. 83: for 'älu 'ämuntu mätä 'wänä (ApcPt 10:2: for 'ällu 'ämuntu mätä 'wanä), translated as 'these are [they] the idolaters', considered a 'corrupt' passage, is probably, at worst, an explanatory gloss; really, the passage should be indicated as 'secondary' more than 'corrupt', in case it is, even though this is certainly an 'innovation', an intrinsic 'error'. – P. 98: besides the usual mistakes ('elä for 'ällä): '[Robert C.] Helmer's addition of the proposition is necessary due to his nominal translation of *zänägäro läpetros* into "the narrative of Peter." A nominal translation is unlikely, as *zänägäro* is the perfect form of the verb *nägärä* with the relative pronoun *zä*- and the third-person masculine singular object suffix -o. A nominal reading of the phrase would likely either use the construct state, *zänägärä petros*, or the pronominal suffix, *zänägäru läpetros*': here one does not understand how the relative pronoun, in whatever function, is considered. – Pp. 108–109: the much-discussed expression *yägabba'u dährehomu* (ApcPt 2:8) can only have a reflexive interpretation (already advocated by Julian

⁷ See A. Bausi, 'Su *ApPt* 14,1-2: un passo controverso della *Apocalisse di Pietro* greco-etio-pica (CAe 1047; CANT 317)', in K. Geus, S. Talay, and Z. Wellnhofer, eds, *Erythraea. Äthiopistische und äthiosemitische Beiträge für Rainer Voigt zu seinem 80. Geburtstag*, Philippika, 179 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2024), forthcoming.

⁸ See now an English translation by the author of the whole treatise: E. J. Beck, 'Translation of the *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Peter* including the Pseudo-Clementine Framework', in D. C. Maier, J. Frey, and T. J. Kraus, eds, *The Apocalypse of Peter in Context*, Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha, 21 (Leuven–Paris–Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2024), 377–400.

Hills and discussed several times by Paolo Marrassini): this is not only the best option but the *only possible one* according to its use in Ethiopic. – A general problem, not affecting only this contribution, is the tendency to discuss terms and expressions occurring in Ethiopic versions of biblical and parabiblical texts by comparing versions that can be centuries distant one from the other, even from linguistically different *Vorlagen* typically, Greek and Arabic, and possibly stemming from completely different cultural contexts (see on pp. 111–113 the long discussion of *‘alāwā* and *kəḥdä* in the ApcPt and in 1 Enoch). In fact, there is nothing, aside from the affinity dictated by the disciplinary interest of the scholars, that linguistically relates the ApcPt to 1 Enoch more strictly than to innumerable other Ethiopic texts where the term *‘alāwā* and *kəḥdä* (always wrongly written as *kəḥda*) occur. There is, as we all know, a dearth of lexicographical resources for the study of Ethiopic, but this state of the art does not authorize any simplification at the risk of heavy distortions of the evidence. The correct understanding of the language needs to go beyond the delimitation of genre and no restriction to the field of biblical and parabiblical literature is legitimate. On the contrary, a broad consideration of the linguistic context of the creation of each single version is necessary for a correct understanding of the letter of the texts.

This book, in the opinion of the reviewer, notwithstanding some oversight of previous scholarship and some approximation in the philological and linguistic analysis of the Ethiopic version of the ApcPt, provides an extremely careful and fresh reading of this fascinating text. The thesis that the ApcPt focuses on *mercy-as-justice* and does not primarily have a monitory character is finely presented and keenly defended with a thorough examination of previous studies, even though it might not convince all readers. Not the least of its merits, this book also repropose the thesis of the presence, acceptance, and rebuttal of the *apokatastasis* doctrine in the Ethiopian Church.

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KAI MERTEN, *Mäsqäl. Die Traditionsgeschichte des Festes um das wahre Kreuz Jesu in Äthiopien*, Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte, 65 (Berlin–Münster: LIT Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2021). 237 pp. Price: €34,90. ISBN: 978-3-643-14986-2 (print).

In Ethiopia, the Feast of the Cross (መስቀል, *mäsqäl*) is a major holiday that was recognized as an Intangible World Heritage by UNESCO in December of 2013. Several questions remain about its origins and the reasons for its current appearance. The celebration, which dates to 326, commemorates the discovery of the