

EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ANTIQUITY

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Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation

Discursive Fights over
Religious Traditions in Antiquity

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Introduction

The present volume assembles written versions of lectures presented and discussed at a conference of the same name held at Aarhus and Ebeltoft in Denmark from 31 May–4 June 2010. The conference concluded a research project entitled *The Discursive Fight over Religious Texts in Antiquity* instituted and led by the *Centre for the Study of Antiquity and Christianity (C-SAC)* at the Faculty of Arts at Aarhus University. The titles of the conference and of the volume are closely related to the name of the forgoing research project, but there is also an important difference. Most of the religious texts studied in the project were drawn from Early Judaism and Early Christianity. Our interest in these was on the one hand elucidating different aspects of the role they played in the formation and transformation of the religions, and on the other hand, investigating the role these same texts played in cooperation and conflict between these two religions. Topics of our studies have for example been (a) the processes of canonization in Judaism and Christianity, (b) the Christian use of LXX, (c) the use of LXX and New Testament texts among Christian minority groups, (d) the function of scripture as a normative factor in the construction of symbols in the early church, (e) the normativity of liturgical texts, etc. Whereas in the project, we focussed mainly on the use of religious texts by the various groups, for the conference we adopted a more systematic approach, focussing on four particular themes:

1. Reuse, Rewriting and Usurpation of Biblical and Classical Texts
2. Invention and Maintenance of Religious Traditions:
Theoretical and Historical Perspectives
3. Orthodoxy and Heresy
4. Formation of the Biblical Canon

In the first theme: *Reuse, Rewriting and Usurpation of Biblical and Classical Texts*, we intend to focus on user-perspectives of biblical and classical texts: How was the very comprehensive and diverse textual material available in Antiquity and Late Antiquity used in different religious traditions? This use of existing textual material often has the character of reuse, rewriting and even usurpation. Texts from earlier traditions are almost never used as they are. In one or another way, they have to be adapted to the new context

if they are to be useful in the new situation. Even if the texts themselves are quite stable – which is the case with the texts in the Biblical as well as the Homeric canons – the reuse of the texts in new contexts implicitly changes the meaning of the texts. If the changing context for the use of texts does not in itself add new meaning to the texts, they can be rewritten. We know many examples (especially from Jewish Studies) of what is now called the “rewritten Bible”. Another way of adding new meaning to old texts is to comment on them – in teaching, preaching, writing of commentaries, etc. Through such processes of the reuse of former textual traditions, religious groups can usurp texts which originate from other religious or cultural settings. An obvious example of this is Christian use of the LXX.

Dealing with *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation. The Case of the Johannine Gospel in the Second Century*, Harold Attridge discusses two cases of rewriting of the Johannine Gospel: *The Acts of John* and the commentaries on the Gospel of John by Origen and Heracleon. *The Acts of John* is what Attridge calls “Christian fiction” – texts with several layers whose earliest form can be traced back as far as the second quarter of the second century. *The Acts of John* is not a totally new invention, but rather a rewriting of the *Gospel of John* focussing on correcting and/or reinterpreting central points of the Gospel. *The Acts of John* agrees with the *Gospel of John* that the crucifixion and death of Jesus was a revelatory act, but the *Acts* disagrees with the *Gospel* in its interpretation of this revelatory act: The *Gospel* interprets it more concretely than the *Acts*, which prefers a more symbolic interpretation. Unlike the *Acts of John*, commentaries on the *Gospel of John* by Heracleon and Origen do not rewrite the text of the *Gospel*, but comment on it; in each case, their inventions aim at making the *Gospel* consistent with their own respective philosophical outlook. In this fashion, Attridge reveals the diverse forms assumed by rewritings of normative texts.

Christian Müller’s contribution, entitled *From Athanasius to “Athanasius”. Usurping a “Nicene Hero” or: The Making of the “Athanasian Creed”*, shows how Athanasius was usurped in the Western theological tradition. Through his exiles in the West, Athanasius won allies in this part of the Empire. Later on, these allies and their successors wrote theological texts which they or others attributed to Athanasius. In this way an “Athanasian” corpus of texts was established in the Latin theological tradition. Given this background, Müller challenges H. Drecoll’s thesis that the *Athanasian Creed* (*Symbolum Quicumque*) was a compilation from Augustine’s texts. Müller shows that this creed is more probably a compilation made from Latin Pseudo-Athanasian texts. Furthermore, it is possible to find parallels to some of the Pseudo-Athanasian elements in the Augustinian corpus. This process of usurpation is thus multi-layered: The Nicene hero, Athanasius, has been usurped by Latin writers to secure the orthodoxy of their own theological writings. In a second phase, a creed has been established by usurpation of elements from this Pseudo-Athanasian corpus. At an even

later stage of history, the obvious parallels between the *Athanasian Creed* and Augustine's Trinitarian theology in particular have been used to certify the orthodoxy of Augustine's Trinitarian theology.

In *Fido recubans sub tegmine Christi. Rewriting as Orthodoxy in the Epigrammata Damasiana*, Marianne Sághy presents an example of how texts from the classical Latin tradition were reused in the fourth-century Christian tradition. When writing his famous epigrams, Pope Damasus reused and usurped Vergil's texts. He literally Christianized them. Thus Damasus contributed to developing a Christian attitude to the Classical literary heritage. On the one hand, this literature was understood by Christians as promoting paganism. On the other hand it also exemplified how good literature should be written: and this was why children – Christian and pagan alike – read Homer and Vergil in the schools. Damasus and other leading Christians chose to usurp the classical literary style but to abandon the pagan content of the texts. Therefore Damasus wrote Christian epics in the style of Vergil. A classical literary genre was thus usurped to serve Christianity.

In *Velamentum stultitiae. 1 Cor 1:20–21 and 3:19 in Lactantius' Divine Institutes*, Gabor Kendeffy shows how Lactantius employs the two passages about wisdom and folly from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians to argue that God had hidden the truth from Jews as well as from Pagans. According to Kendeffy, this shows that the Pauline concept of revelation was taken up by Lactantius and used in his own theological context. In Lactantius we thus find a typical reuse of biblical traditions.

In *An Intertextual Geography of Cultural Value. Flavius Josephus on the Inland Location of the Jewish People*, Gunnar Haaland shows how Josephus reused a classical tradition about the importance of geographical location for the character of cities and nations. Greek and Roman authors (Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Strabo) depicted cities and peoples located inland and away from the coastal areas as those who lived quiet lives taking care of their ancestral traditions etc.; those living on the coast were supposedly unsettled merchants always on their way to new adventures. Josephus adopted these traditions, by depicting the Jews as living inland, cultivating their land in tranquillity while maintaining their old traditions. In other contexts, however, Josephus argues (contra Strabo) that Israel once was bigger, including coastal areas as well. Josephus is thus picking up classical traditions in his own descriptions of the Jewish people, but his reuse of these traditions is not totally coherent.

In *Canon as Pharmakón. Inside and Outside Discursive Sanity in Imperial Greek Literature*, Peter von Möllendorff poses different questions about the idea of canonization in Imperial Greek literature. These include themes such as: which authors belong to the centre and which to the periphery of the canon? How did they assume canonical authority? How are these authors used in education? According to Möllendorff, Imperial Greek authors

have different ideas about those classical authors belonging to the centre and those belonging to the periphery of the classical literary canon. The classical authors gained authority to the degree that they were imitated by later authors, and these later authors learnt the art of writing by imitating the canonical authors – and in addition to the imitation of the canonical authors they had to leave their own mark in their own writings in order to be recognized and perhaps accepted as canonical authors by later generations. The canon of classical authors and texts was thus in flux.

Karla Pollmann concluded the conference with her lecture *Tradition and Innovation: The Transformation of Classical Literary Genres in Christian Late Antiquity*. Beginning with the example of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* transformed into a detective story, Pollmann underscores the necessity of literary genres – not so much as a tool for the classification of texts but rather as communication systems guiding writer, reader and interpreter. Pollmann then points out that such communication systems are fragile and changing. Even if Aristotle (among others) defined the classical genres in his *Poetics*, these genres were morphing – and growing in numbers during the classical and Hellenistic periods. Changes in literary genres were thus not something which came about with Christian literature. Christian authors adopted non-Christian literary genres and concepts. These writers were brought up on pagan literature and used their literary training when writing Christian texts. However, they also invented new literary genres as the required new forms of expression in teaching, instruction and proclamation (to take but a couple of examples). The Christian writers of Late Antiquity thus represented tradition as well as innovation. They usurped older non-Christian literary traditions but they renewed them, transformed them and added to them as well.

In *An Unworthy Baptism Revisited*, Jennifer Hart shows that the rewriting of religious texts and traditions can take place in milieux chronologically and ideologically far removed from those in which the traditions were first established. In a quite late stratum of the Mandaean literature (7th century AD), one finds traditions about John the Baptist (called Yahia by the Mandaeans) including traditions about John's baptism of Jesus. These Mandaean traditions about John the Baptist differ significantly from those of the New Testament traditions about the Baptist. In the Mandaean rewritings, John is the important figure while Jesus is described as a person unworthy of baptism. According to Hart, this radical rewriting of the New Testament traditions about John the Baptist has a double aim: Firstly the Mandaeans want to create a clear distance between themselves and Christians. Secondly in the 7th century, the Mandaeans needed a prophetic figure who could persuade the authorities of swiftly spreading Islam that Mandaism was a religion in its own right. Jennifer Hart thus makes it clear that the process of rewriting can take a tradition a long way from its origins.