

BOOK REVIEW

Burke, Tony. *Secret Scriptures Revealed: A New Introduction to the Christian Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). vi + 164 pp. Pbk. USD18.00.

Tony Burke has been working with the Apocryphal texts his entire academic career. He writes with an approachable tone and pace for an introductory work, even though qualified to write for higher academic levels. The book possesses an enthusiasm that keeps readers engaged and curious. Striving to complete his ‘dream project’ (p. vi) of making the apocryphal texts attractive to the masses, Burke provides modern readers with an introduction to the literature he finds ‘important for understanding Christian history and culture’ (p. vi).

For the sake of the first-time reader, the language is accessible, and terminology is clearly defined. The book has the features appreciated in introductory works. Despite being an introduction, however, Burke throughout demonstrates himself an expert. His extensive knowledge is seen in the thorough engagement with both the original texts and numerous references to contemporary church fathers. While the book lacks footnotes or endnotes, there are sporadic floating boxes called “Sources and Studies” for those interested in further reading.

The book begins by explaining and defining the Apocryphal literature. Burke adopts the most inclusive definition possible by saying that Apocryphal texts are ‘stories about Jesus and his contemporaries similar to NT texts but, for one reason or another, not included in the Bible’ (p. 1). Put very simply, ‘a text is apocryphal because it was not chosen to be part of the canon’ (p. 9). Such a broad definition allows Burke to explore more texts while avoiding nuanced distinctions between different ancient sects that would be cumbersome in an introductory work.

Before moving into the body of the book, one of the most foundational questions is addressed of why the Apocryphal texts were written. While some present a conspiracy theory, Burke explains that

the texts were originally written to fill in gaps in the Jesus stories and further ‘clarify theological and Christological issues...to add more to the story’ (pp. 46, 51). Although, of course, the theological views were written from the vantage point of those composing them, Burke’s explanation is historically sensitive and nuanced.

The layout of the book follows a logical path helpful to readers. After the introductory section, there are two chapters addressing the media hype on the one hand and the utter disdain for the literature on the other. In this section, Burke discusses Hollywood’s interest in Apocryphal literature, most notably *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. He contends that the book turned Hollywood movie is neither accurate nor the way the Apocryphal literature should be handled. But disregard for the texts is likewise an inappropriate response.

The next three chapters address the life of Jesus as presented through various gospels, passion and resurrection narratives, and legendary tales. Here Burke makes reference to numerous texts but in a way that does not overwhelm the reader with minutia. Various miracles stories are examined for their enduring testimony about the beliefs and thoughts of early ‘proto-orthodox’ groups. Such stories set the stage for the final section where Burke directly addresses myths, misconceptions, and misinformation.

By far the strongest section contributes valuable commentary on nine key points. Here Burke aptly counters arguments by some who contend the Apocryphal literature to be dangerous or unnecessary. A few of those points are worth noting. Misconception two is that the Apocrypha are ‘forgeries’. Such a position is typical of those who wish to be entirely dismissive of the ancient texts for one reason or another, but stems from ignorance. Burke points out that the texts are not forgeries. For instance, the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Mary*, like other ancient texts, are titled after the prominent character. But they make no claim to authorship and ‘are actually anonymous’ (p. 135). Thus, texts should properly be called pseudonymous and not forgeries.

Myth four claims that Jesus is merely human in the Apocryphal literature. Again, Burke finds this to be a means for easy dismissal also based on ignorance. As a counterpoint, he points out that the *Gospel of Thomas* clearly presents Jesus as far more than a human (p. 140). Another significant myth addressed is the contention that the Apocrypha are harmful to the Christian faith. Burke acknowledges this to be a legitimate challenge and concedes, ‘the answer is yes. And no’

(p. 146). In Burke's opinion, those who have a weak faith built upon fundamentalist hermeneutics will find the texts troubling. However, the problem lies not in the ancient texts, but in the fundamentalism of the person. For those willing to think critically and engage with ancient history, the Apocryphal texts offer clarity and nuance to the ancient world. This greater appreciation for the contemporary world of early Christianity assists in better understanding the canonical scriptures.

While the book contributes some agreeable introductory points, I cannot recommend it as a better 'new introduction'. This is on account of the use of sensationalism as rhetorical flare throughout the book. Such methods of argumentation run counter to what Burke claims as his objective, that is, to 'cut through the rhetoric of the text's champions and opponents and present a sober discussion of the material' (p. 4). However, throughout it is clear Burke is writing what he claims is his dream project because he is a devoted champion of the Apocryphal literature.

While the book seeks to cry foul against exaggerations by Hollywood, *The Da Vinci Code* is mentioned numerous times starting on page one. The references are presented in a manner to trump up interest and social connection with readers. Even beyond the Hollywood references, there are exaggerations for the sake of creating an air of mystique.

One area of concern is his method of arguing for there being interest in the ancient texts. Burke claims the literature is important as evidenced by its enduring to modern times. This is correct historically, but embedding the point within comments like, 'despite the Church's effort to suppress apocryphal texts, many of them never really went away', does not benefit the reader (p. 15). Such comments are merely sensationalism. He does not establish his claims with other surviving ancient literature like Homer, Plato and numerous other texts that have likewise continued to modern times. It is troubling for Burke to present the issues as if the Apocrypha were secretly being copied as scribes were hiding from the Spanish Inquisition (p. 145).

The mere existence of Apocryphal texts does not establish their socio-political position; Burke has only established that the texts were read. For instance, while holding to a canon of 66 books, if my library were dug up from the sands 2000 years from now, most Apocryphal texts, Homer and Euripides would be found. This does not mean the Apocrypha are more or less significant to me than my other books.

Burke would have a stronger case and convince more to use the documents if he could maintain his definition of the ‘scholarly perspective’ (p. 148).

Another example of exaggeration is seen in his comments on the *Acts of John*. Concerning sections 60-63, Burke states, ‘an astute reader of the text in Greek would recognize that the story is really about John ordering women from his bed’ (p. 106). However, his presentation is a bit one-sided. Indeed, using τῶν κορίων for ‘bug’, is peculiar and could be a play on κόρη for ‘young girl’. However, it is reductionistic and arrogant to claim that all astute readers would come to the same conclusion as him. In fact, there are some textual variants potentially pointing in different directions. Also, Burke makes no comment on the resulting oddity of the narrative. How was it possible for John to lie on the bed for some time if it was ‘filled with girls’ before John commanded them to get out? And why would his friends laugh when there are girls standing in the corner all night long? The text would no longer appear to teach about celibacy as he claims, but how to be misogynistic and abuse young women. In fact, other scholars have indeed come to different conclusions, but perhaps they are not as astute readers. Even though an introductory work, it is important to orient readers to the field, not merely give them partisan interpretations.

Another area of exaggeration is the reduction of possible explanations. Burke contends the *Protevangelium of James* was banned in the West because it contradicted the theory of Jerome concerning the siblings of Jesus (p. 48). Jerome believed the siblings were cousins, and thus Mary remained a perpetual virgin. But this exaggerates Jerome’s authority and ignores the fact the *Protevangelium of James* was rejected on numerous other grounds. Most pointedly is its rejection and contradiction of the four most popular Gospels of the early period, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Even Burke acknowledges the four canonical Gospels were popular among proto-orthodox and heretical groups and eventually became the consensus of the widespread group (p. 144).

The propensity for exaggeration is most explicitly found in Burke’s contention of there being a scholarly unanimity on issues. While the book is intended for a general audience—meaning scholars are outside his target—this is not an excuse for overstating his position. For instance, stating that ‘scholars of early Christianity are in universal agreement that Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist’ is entirely

indefensible (p. 124). If biblical scholars at major conferences were polled, perhaps the only unanimous and universal agreement would be that scholars are not in unanimity on any biblical issue. Burke actually later contradicts himself when he remarks, 'there are no firm conclusions in scholarship' (p. 148).

The problems of this book are exemplified in the comment that 'scholars of these texts deserve to get more attention for their work' (p. 129). I agree, but his comment displays more a cry for attention than an attempt at scholarly contribution. Scholars do not typically get praise for their scholarship. Their efforts might get attention if they warrant merit, but good scholarship does not receive fame and fortune. That is what Hollywood is pursuing, not academia. If attention is what a scholar wanted, then using rhetorical flare and getting on the New York Time's Best Seller List is one way, but it is doubtful that quality meticulous scholarship is going to make it on the popular level.

Despite a few fundamental issues with the book, I am in hearty agreement with the conclusion. Burke believes the ancient literature has value despite probably not originating with Jesus or his contemporaries (p. 151). The literature does prove the ancient writers had vivid imaginations and 'the value of the texts...is in what they tell us about Christianity, not Christ' (p. 151).

I believe Burke has presented some solid reasons for not demonizing the Apocryphal literature and treating it as though it were worthless. Even the most obscure diplomatic scraps from Oxyrhynchus have value in offering insights into the ancient world. The texts display the thoughts of some people and groups interacting with what became the canonized biblical stories and narratives, and for that we are thankful for having them. All will find Burke to be engaging, but not all will agree.

Chris S. Stevens
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON