Role of Esoteric and Apocryphal Sources
in the Development of Christian and Jewish Traditions

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During recent decades our acquaintance with apocryphal and gnostic literature has deepened considerably; this has allowed us to see some of the exegetical, liturgical and artistic sources of early Christianity in a new light. We are now better able to discern, in numerous elements of Christian traditions in both East and West, an indebtedness to texts of Jewish or Gnostic origins. Scholars have demonstrated how texts of Jewish derivation were elaborated by Christians, and how the literature of the Second Temple provided inspiration for Christian authors and artists of different national traditions, even when the ‘explicit meaning’ of such documents seemed to contradict the New Testament. A special place in this process of cultural transmission—and ‘hiding’—must be accorded to apocalyptic texts. Certain themes deriving from Second Temple Judaism, which are not present in our Canonical Scriptures, were inherited by both Christianity and the Jewish traditions of the Rabbinc period. Each tradition, however, developed these themes in its own way, so that the place occupied by them in Christianity is not symmetrical with their place in Judaism. Nevertheless, the investigation of these two religious worlds may be undertaken as a shared enterprise.

Guy Stroumsa has observed that because Christianity claimed to offer salvation to all ‘exoterically’, any tradition that was ‘hidden’ would, over the course of centuries, be identified as ‘apocryphal’ and thus, almost by definition, be suspected of heresy. There are, however, texts which were not explicitly rejected by the Churches, and yet which were disregarded in the process of the shaping of the official doctrine and rite. When they were not destroyed as heretical or impious, such texts often survived in the ‘margins’ of ecclesiastical culture. Scholars have recently identified more relics of religious traditions of the Near East that were transmitted through these documents. A remarkable number of such documents continued to condition the mental world of late antique and early mediæval Christendom, and influenced aspects of Christian life in East and West. Such survivals as these may outline a ‘margin’ or a set of ‘margins’, and these now await definition and description. The reception and amplification of apocryphal texts form part of the lengthy process of the indigenisation of Christianity, which relied not only on the Church’s official corpus, but also on sources that had remained outside the Canon. A margin is ‘outside the text’, but it is still on the same page as the text; what is the value of the figure of the margin for identifying what is not Canonical yet which may have given shape to the Canon?

The process of canonisation took place at different dates in each of the Churches; over centuries, the boundaries between the Canonical and the apocryphal remained unclear or porous. This porosity allowed numerous extra-canonical texts to become integral parts of a living religious culture, thus making the interplay of its diverse elements extremely complex and unpredictable. Different Christian traditions privileged their own sets of apocryphal texts and traditions, each one reflecting specific concerns. Though not Canonical, an apocryphal text can strengthen a particular tradition and provide guidance for those undergoing particular upheavals. The rise of Islam provides a clear context in which various apocryphal themes may be invoked by Churches contiguous to conquered territories, or lying within them. Apocryphal texts may even reveal the hidden ‘lymph’ of a Christian culture, and allow us to detect the undercurrents which animated the spiritual world of a people. We may even be able to identify those features of religious devotion, which enabled Christianity to survive under
Zoroastrian and, later, Islamic rule. Docetic tendencies in Christology, which implied that Christ’s appearance revealed nothing of his true identity, could provide a particularly fertile ground for the transmission of esoteric traditions. Some of the traditions of extra-Canonical derivation endured for centuries; some even survived until recent times in oral transmission.

One of the central themes that this conference will seek to explore is the origin of the human race as presented in exegetical, liturgical and artistic sources of the first millennium. Apocryphal sources narrate the story of the first human beings, telling also about the eschatological expectations which they would transmit to their posterity. Some sources speak of a secret knowledge passed on by Adam to his progeny. Transmission of divine revelation via Adam and other patriarchs would thus make real the covenant between creatures and the Creator, while ideas about the origins of humankind conditioned the understanding of time. This conception of the human past played a crucial role in the formation of historiographical representations. The Christianisation of time, as well as the understanding of time in the Rabbinic tradition (and, more widely, in the late antique and early mediaeval Jewish world, as well as in the Samaritan tradition), have seldom been addressed within the scholarly contexts of both early Christianity and Judaism.

Texts regarding primaeval human beings also traced a direct line between Adam and the Messiah: the advent of the Saviour is accompanied there by numerous references to the vicissitudes of the first human beings. Christ’s Nativity was depicted as the accomplishment of the promises received by Adam, Eve and other antediluvian patriarchs: the new-born child is visited by Eve who recognises in him her Saviour; the Magi coming from the east to Bethlehem revealed themselves as inheritors of an ancient secret behest of salvation, while the infant Jesus was presented as an actor from the days of Creation. The recognition of the Messiah by his contemporaries, which had to rely on ancient revelations and prophecies, was a precondition of the Messiah’s earthly ministry.

This subject is related to a series of kindred themes which the participants at this conference are invited to address: angelology, the depiction of God’s Kingdom, the understanding of Eve as a messenger of divine Wisdom, the figure of Melchizedek and his genealogy, the figure of the Son of Man, the hidden Messiah, the suddenness of Messiah’s advent, divine polymorphism, revelation of the Messiah as a paidogerion, the topos of the ‘snatching away’ of the Messiah, the topos of the suspension of time. Comparative study, such as this conference is designed to enable, should reveal a number of parallels in the elaboration of these themes in Christianity and in Judaism.

The purpose of the conference is thus to bring together scholars of Apocrypha, of Patristics, of Gnosticism, of Jewish liturgy, Apocalyptic literature and mysticism, of Samaritan tradition and of early Jewish and Christian art, in order to identify and reconstruct the diverse trajectories of esoteric traditions.

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