

BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE

The First Apocalypse of James. Martyrdom and Sexual Difference.
By **Mikael Haxby**. WUNT 2/591. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023.
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When Mikael Haxby completed the PhD dissertation on which this book is based in 2013, few scholars studied the fragmentary Coptic apocryphal tale of conversations between Jesus and his brother, the martyr James. A Coptic text, translation and commentary of the version found in the Nag Hammadi Codex V (=NHC V) appeared in 1986. Discovery of another Coptic version in Codex Tchacos (=CT) and publication of a synoptic edition by Johanna Brankaer and Hans-Gehard Bethge (*Codex Tchacos. Texte und Analysen*. TU 161; Walter de Gruyter) in 2007 provided additional impetus for the author's undertaking. Haxby takes the CT version, which preserves much more text in the concluding pages than NHC, as the basis for his analysis. Nonspecialists may find themselves reading that NHC version with CT ending in modern language anthologies. Its subtitle identifies "martyrdom" and "sexual difference" as broad topics addressed by study of this little known apocryphon from the late second to mid-fourth century CE. The two Coptic versions are independent translations from the end of that period. Like the other Coptic texts in these codices, they are translations from an earlier Greek writing. (The Greek papyrus fragment identified as *1 Apoc. Jas.* is not yet published.) But, as Haxby admits, this work disappoints anyone expecting an addition to our corpus of martyrdom accounts. Even CT's conclusion provides only some badly developed and confusing "director's notes" for trial (or not), mixed up identity of victim, stoning, and a Jesus or Stephen-like conclusion, "My Father in heaven, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

1 Apoc. Jas. opens with Jesus privately instructing his brother James about his impending departure and divine origin ("I am the image of the Existing One"). And, though not narrated, Jesus follows the opening identity statement by saying that James had asked about "the Femaleness" – a reality which nevertheless "did not exist from the beginning" (CT 10,8–11,7). While most Christians could pick out tones from the Gospel of John, it would require those already familiar with some variants of Valentinian mythologizing to recognize in the "Femaleness" query a nod to elaborate higher and lower (Achamoth) Sophia myths. Haxby challenges typical readings of the story of Sophia and souls trapped in the lower, material world as a variation on male dominance in antiquity. In the formula that James must recite to ascend beyond the guardians of this lower world he is to summon the undefiled Sophia who remains firmly established in the divine realm (CT 21,25–22,6). And in NHC V35,5–7 that Sophia represents imperishable knowledge.

The second dialogue between Jesus and James "heals" the emotions of fear and grief that had overwhelmed James upon hearing about Jesus's suffering. In this context Jesus dissociates his true, pre-existent self that is untouched by sufferings or death from a "type" prepared for the lower world's powers (CT 18,8–16). Jesus responds by showing James that his own martyrdom/salvation will be accomplished in the triumphant ascent through the rulers to "the undefiled Sophia, the one through whom you will be saved, and all children of the Existing One" (CT 22,23–23,10). The required formulae for ascent past the gate-keepers are preserved in Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* I 21,5) and

Epiphanius (*Pan.* 36,3). In a chapter devoted to the complex intersection of docetic Christology, anthropology, and martyrdom, Haxby questions both ancient and modern use of such categories. The issue at stake here is, “. . .not merely how Jesus’ body is related to his divine being, but how all humans might be capable of great bodily transformations aimed at salvation and even divinization” (48).

From the perspective of a soteriology in which the path of those who belong to the Existing One has been cleared by the death/ascent/triumph of Jesus being instructed to call upon the “undefiled Sophia” is not a problematic ritual instruction. Haxby underscores the conceptual problem of a Sophia – Christ relationship and admits that the mythic penumbra of the dialogue exchanges could have resolved the question (115). Or, perhaps not . . . if a polymorphous fluidity rather than conceptual clarification was the practice in the lively discussion circles, which Haxby imagines producing this text.

James introduces a long section in the final dialogue with Jesus by asking about seven female disciples, “. . .who have become your disciples and whom all the generations bless? I am amazed that, although they are in weak vessels, they possess powers and perceptions” (CT 25,15–26). A typological interpretation associates them with the gifts of Isaiah 11:2–3. Then Salome, Mary, and Arsinoe are presented as models to be imitated (CT 27,25–28,5). In this instance, Haxby suggests that they are also associated with the undefiled Sophia and understood as perfected without the masculinization that one finds in such texts as *Gos. Thom.* 114, “. . .for every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom” (130). But then some text criticism enters the discussion because despite that theological orientation, one finds in CT 28,19–20: “the true work has attained to the male,” clearly in conflict with the previous passage. Haxby concludes that this reading as well as the divergence from CT 25.18–22 where James says that all generations bless these women to a reading in NHC V 38.18–20, “all generations bless you [= Jesus]” reflect scribal decisions about what the text means (132). Three other women, Sapphira, Susanna, and Johanna, have proved exemplary martyrs, not because of suffering but “. . .separated from a place of faith, for [they have received] hidden knowledge. . .” (CT 28,21–29,6). Faith is an intermediate stage in the process of transformation (133).

Although this reading of *1 Apoc. Jas.* remains wedded to its “martyrdom” and “sexual difference” combination, other scholars have questioned that glue. Dissociation of a martyr’s “inner self” accompanied by powerful identification with Christ is a common trope. So is a celebratory emotional joy that distinguishes that experience from mundane suffering. Haxby reads *1 Apoc. Jas.* as ethical exhortation that associates praxis with scripture. It is not, then, an artifact of speculative theologizing. Perhaps, but that requires more engagement with nus and bolts of synoptic comparison of the versions, Greek to Coptic translation, sources, and editing. For the dissertation broad comparisons with patristic and other gnostic texts served as evidence. This revision did not incorporate either such picky linguistic and textual details or the literary issue of using established bits of martyr-talk in theological reflection. That said, both specialists in gnostic studies and students of early Christianity will find provocative new insights in this study. Haxby makes the case that *1 Apoc. Jas.* should be more widely known.

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