

Whence the Giant Jesus and his Talking Cross? The Resurrection in *Gospel of Peter* 10.39–42 as Prophetic Fulfilment of LXX Psalm 18

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The curious resurrection account in the *Gospel of Peter* (10.39–42) is not simply the author's creative innovation, but is based on a Christocentric interpretation of LXX Ps 18.1–7. The *Gospel of Peter's* unusual description of Jesus' exit from the tomb, whereupon he expands gigantically so that his head enters heaven (*GPet* 10.39–40), derives from an early Christian interpretation of LXX Ps 18.5c–7. The following conversation between God and the glorified cosmic cross (*GPet* 10.41–2) derives from a Christocentric interpretation of LXX Ps 18.2. In addition, the cross's verbal affirmation that it had preached to the dead (*GPet* 10.42) follows from a literalising yet Christocentric reading of LXX Ps 18.2b.

Keywords: *Gospel of Peter*, Christocentric interpretation, Psalms, resurrection, giant, firmament, Jesus, cross

1. Resurrecting Jesus in the *Gospel of Peter*

The resurrection narrative in the *Gospel of Peter* (10.39–42) contains what is the major *crux interpretum* of this gospel (henceforth *GPet*). The picture of a giant Jesus who exits the tomb with a moving and talking cross has no precise parallel in early Christian literature and it comes as a surprise within a gospel which otherwise has few miraculous embellishments. After setting out some of the difficulties in accounting for *GPet's* resurrection narrative, I will propose a relatively straightforward but underexplored explanation: the resurrection scene in *GPet* 10.39–42 is based on a Christocentric interpretation of LXX Ps 18.1–7 (cf. MT 19.1–6).¹

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While the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is arguably the most important component of early Christian confession, none of the New Testament gospels provides us with a narrative of that event. Instead, each canonical gospel skips from Jesus' burial to a later discovery of his empty tomb.² The resurrection of Jesus is but an inference of this narrative progression. It is of course the case that Matthew, Luke and John, as well as the longer ending of Mark, attempt to corroborate Jesus' resurrection with accounts of his *post*-resurrection appearances to followers.³ Yet nowhere in these appearance accounts do we find any description of how Jesus rose from the dead. At most, as Tobias Nicklas has observed, Matthew makes a step towards filling the 'gap' in Mark by narrating that an angel opened the tomb.⁴ Yet Matthew, while influencing later developments in *GPet*, 'does not describe the actual event of Jesus' resurrection' and does not intimate that the angel 'causes Jesus' resurrection'.⁵

GPet fills this narrative gap, providing us with the earliest known resurrection narrative in a Christian gospel – one probably dating to the second century CE.⁶ In

2 Mark 15.42–7; 16.1–8; Matt 27.57–61; 28.1–8; Luke 23.50–6; 24.1–12; John 19.38–42; 20.1–13. Matthew interpolates a further account which adds Roman soldiers who guard the tomb (27.62–6; 28.4; cf. 28.11–15).

3 In Matt 28.9–10, 16–20; Luke 24.13–53; John 20.14–31 (and John 21); Mark 16.9–18.

4 T. Nicklas, 'Resurrection in the Gospels of Matthew and Peter: Some Developments', *Life Beyond Death in Matthew's Gospel: Religious Metaphor or Bodily Reality?* (ed. W. Weren *et al.*; BTS 13; Peeters: Leuven, 2011) 27–41.

5 T. Nicklas, 'Angels in Early Christian Narratives on the Resurrection of Jesus: Canonical and Apocryphal Texts', *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception* (ed. F. V. Reiterer *et al.*; Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook 2007; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007) 293–311, at 298, 300.

6 Although the dating of *GPet* and its literary relationship with the canonical gospels is contentious, it is widely dated to the second century CE: J. A. Robinson and M. R. James, *The Gospel according to Peter, and the Revelation of Peter: Two Lectures on the Newly Recovered Fragments together with the Greek Texts* (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1892) 32; H. B. Swete, *The Akimim Fragment of the Apocryphal Gospel of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1893) xxxvii; C. H. Turner, 'The Gospel of Peter', *JTS* 14 (1913) 161–87, at 164; M. Dibelius, 'Die alttestamentlichen Motive in der Leidensgeschichte des Petrus- und des Johannes-Evangeliums', *Abhandlungen zur semitischen Religionskunde und Sprachwissenschaft: Wolf Wilhelm Grafen von Baudissin zum 26. September 1917* (ed. W. Frankenberg and F. Kähler; BZAW 33; Gießen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1918) 125–50, at 146; B. A. Johnson, 'Empty Tomb Tradition in the Gospel of Peter' (ThD thesis, Harvard University, 1965) 7 (*terminus ad quem* 200 CE; *terminus a quo* 70 CE); R. E. Brown, 'The Gospel of Peter and Canonical Gospel Priority', *NTS* 33 (1987) 321–43, at 335; T. J. Kraus and T. Nicklas, eds., *Das Petrus-evangelium und die Petrusapokalypse: Die griechischen Fragmente mit deutscher und englischer Übersetzung* (GCS; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004) 15–16 (with the proviso that, as the content of Serapion's text is largely unknown and there were many other ancient Petrine texts, identification with *GPet* cannot be made 'mit letzter Sicherheit'); P. Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary* (TENT 4; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010) 172 (with the proviso that identification with the text encountered by Serapion remains uncertain); contra

certain respects, *GPet* 10.39–42 provides what we would expect from any attempt to fill the narrative gap: it describes the manner in which Jesus exited the tomb and informs us where he went afterwards. But it would be difficult, practically impossible, to anticipate the content of *GPet*'s resurrection narrative based solely on the canonical gospels. *GPet* 10.39–42 describes a Jesus who, on exiting his tomb, expands giganticly from earth to the highest heaven. That is, it does not describe Jesus as ascending to heaven after his resurrection, but claims that his body expanded so that his head entered the heavens while, presumably, his feet remained on terra firma.⁷ In addition, two men – earlier described as descending from heaven – escort Jesus from his tomb and also turn into giants, stretching from earth to the boundary of heaven. Even more peculiar is Jesus' cross, which is able to move and talk. The cross follows Jesus out of the tomb and speaks with God to confirm that it had preached to the dead.

This startling resurrection narrative begins while two Roman guards are in the midst of reporting the descent of the two men from heaven to Jesus' tomb. They are interrupted as follows:

(10)³⁹ καὶ ἐξηγουμένων αὐτῶν ἃ εἶδον πάλιν ὀρ[ῶ]σιν ἐξελθόντ[α]ς ἀπὸ τοῦ τάφου τρεῖς ἄνδρ[α]ς καὶ τοὺς δύο τὸν ἕνα ὑπορθοῦντας καὶ σταυρὸν ἀκολο[υ]θοῦντα αὐτοῖς. ⁴⁰ καὶ τῶν μὲν δύο τὴν κεφαλὴν χωροῦσαν μέχρι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, τοῦ δὲ χειρα[γ]ω[γ]ουμένου ὑπ' αὐτῶν ὑπερβαίνουσαν τοὺς οὐρανοῦς. ⁴¹ καὶ φωνή[ς] ἤκουον ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν λεγούσης· ἐκήρυξας τοῖς κοιμώμενοις; ⁴² καὶ ὑπακοὴ ἠκούετο ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ [ὅ]τι ναί.

(10)³⁹ While they were reporting what they had seen, again they saw coming out from the tomb three men, and the two were supporting the one, and a cross following them. ⁴⁰ And the head of the two reached as far as heaven, but that of the one being led by them surpassed the heavens. ⁴¹ And they were hearing a voice from the heavens saying, 'Have you preached to those who sleep?' ⁴² And a response was heard from the cross, 'Yes.'⁸

The earlier depiction of the cross in the crucifixion scene (*GPet* 4.10–11) had provided no indication that it possessed such extraordinary abilities. So whence does *GPet*'s depiction of a gigantic Jesus and his mobile, talking cross derive?⁹

the pre-canonical dating of a hypothetical earliest layer by H. Koester, 'Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels', *HTR* 73 (1980) 105–30, 126–8; J. D. Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 16–17; A. J. Dewey, 'Resurrection Texts in the Gospel of Peter', *Forum* 10.3–4 (1994) 177–96, at 182.

⁷ See section 2.1 below.

⁸ Text and tr. Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 408, adding Foster's proposed emendations (408–13); cf. Kraus and Nicklas, eds., *Das Petrus-evangelium*, 42–3, 52.

⁹ I do not evaluate here the merits and limitations of Mark Goodacre's recent suggestion to emend σταυρόν ('cross') to σταυρωθέντα ('crucified'), i.e. referring to Jesus rather than

In the absence of any precursor for such an unusual combination of elements, scholarship has tended to concur that the author has been especially creative at this point. Addressing the cross's departure from the tomb, Paul Foster for example drolly remarks, '[t]o describe this as an embellishment to the tradition would be to understate this innovative addition'.¹⁰

But such a conclusion does not rest easy with the conservatism otherwise evident in *GPet*'s composition. *GPet* adds few significant details not already found in the canonical gospels. Unlike many second-century gospels and Acts, *GPet* is parsimonious in its inclusion of additional miraculous or supernatural elements.¹¹ The gospel provides a description of the tombstone rolling away by itself (*GPet* 9.37), rather than being removed by an angel as in Matt 28.2, and it offers the explanation that, when the crucifixion nails were placed on the ground, they caused the earthquake mentioned in Matt 27.51b (*GPet* 6.21). Each of these descriptions simply accentuates miraculous elements already introduced by Matthew. Moreover, no mention is made of the stones splitting or the resurrection of the dead saints which follows in Matt 27.52–3.¹² We may observe a similar conservatism in respect of other changes in *GPet* which merely advance earlier developments in the Gospel-writing tradition. For example, *GPet* 1.1–2 and 2.4–5a more fully integrate the actions of Pilate and Herod, a dynamic introduced to the passion tradition by Luke (23.5–12). *GPet* 8.33–9.34 adds the detail that Jesus' tomb was sealed with *seven* seals, accentuating an addition first made by Matthew to emphasise the security of the tomb (27.66). *GPet* also manifests a heightened polemic against 'the Jews', already well escalated by John.¹³

his cross ('A Walking, Talking Cross or the Walking, Talking Crucified One? A Conjectural Emendation in the Gospel of Peter' (Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting (Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha Section), London, July 2011)); contra, P. Foster, 'Do Crosses Walk and Talk? A Reconsideration of *Gospel of Peter* 10.39–42', *JTS* 64 (2013) 89–104, at 97–9.

¹⁰ Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 417; cf. L. Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre* (ÉB; Paris: Gabalda, 1930²) 288–9, 300; M. G. Mara, *Évangile de Pierre: introduction, texte critique, traduction, commentaire et index* (SC 201; Paris: Cerf, 1973) 182–4; Brown, 'Gospel of Peter', 336; H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: TPI/London: SCM, 1990) 232–3; T. Hieke, 'Das Petrus-evangelium vom Alten Testament her gelesen: Gewinnbringende Lektüre eines nicht-kanonischen Textes vom christlichen Kanon her', *Das Evangelium nach Petrus: Text, Kontexte, Intertexte* (ed. T. J. Kraus and T. Nicklas; TU 158; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007) 91–115, at 114; T. P. Henderson, *The Gospel of Peter and Early Christian Apologetics* (WUNT 11/301; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 154.

¹¹ Turner, 'Gospel of Peter', 166.

¹² Arguably the preaching to the dead replaces the reference to the dead saints of Jerusalem. But if *GPet* had a heightened interest in the miraculous, it might be expected to have included both items.

¹³ 'The Jews' are made to confess their guilt (7.25), proclaim Jesus' innocence (8.28), attend the tomb to reinforce the guard and witness the resurrection (8.31b), threaten the guards with

Further evidence of a conservative compositional style is found in the manner that *GPet* recontextualises existing canonical elements by shifting them to other places in the narrative. In each case, *GPet* refrains from adding its own words, preferring instead to recycle the authoritative voices of its precursors for new ends. For example, the blood-guilt cry in Matt 27.25 becomes a narrator's comment and is shifted to the point of Jesus' death on the cross (5.17; cf. 11.48); Joseph's request for the body of Jesus occurs before Jesus is handed over for crucifixion (2.3), not after his death; Peter recounts *in the first person* how the disciples went into hiding at this time (7.26–7); the declaration 'truly, this was God's son' is voiced by the guards after the resurrection, rather than by the centurion at the crucifixion (11.45; cf. Mark 15.39; Matt 27.54); Pilate declares Jesus' innocence after the resurrection, not before the crucifixion (11.46; cf. Matt 27.24–5). The changes are in each case subtle and do not directly contradict the canonical gospels, so are seemingly respectful of their authority.

Furthermore, a number of what might at first appear to be innovative elements in *GPet* turn out to be drawn from Old Testament passages, interpreted as prophecies of Christ.¹⁴ There are two explicit citations of LXX in *GPet*, both referring to the law that the sun should not set on an executed person (2.5a; 5.15b; Deut 21.23). For the most part, however, the author works the substance of Old Testament 'prophecies' into the gospel narrative. For example, in *GPet* 5.16, Jesus is given both gall and vinegar to drink in one mixture, literalistically following LXX Ps 68.22, whereas Mark 15.23, 36 and Matt 27.34, 48 present two separate events.¹⁵ More striking is *GPet's* use of Isa 59 in *GPet* 3.6, 5.15 and 5.18. The Petrine author adds the unusual detail that Jesus' scourging was carried out 'on the run' (τρέχοντες; 3.6), in contrast to the more stationary scourging at the praetorium in Matt 27.26b–30 (cf. John 19.1–3). The description fits literalistically with the description of evildoers spilling innocent blood in Isa 59.7a: οἱ δὲ πόδες αὐτῶν ἐπὶ πονηρίαν τρέχουσιν ταχινοὶ ἐκχέαι αἷμα ('and their feet run to evil, swift to shed blood'). Further, the addition of the description of many people stumbling as though it were night, despite carrying lamps, is most likely constructed on the basis of verses which closely follow (Isa 59.9–10). Foster notes, in particular, that the description of the darkness in *GPet* 5.15, 18 shares two words with Isa 59.10b, μεσημβρία and πίπτω, and that the former is

stoning if they spoke of the resurrection (11.48), and keep Mary in fear of visiting the tomb (12.50, 52).

14 See the analyses in Dibelius, 'Die alttestamentlichen Motive', 145; J. Denker, *Die theologisch-geschichtliche Stellung des Petrus-evangeliums* (EH 23/26; Bern/Frankfurt: Herbert Lang/Peter Lang, 1975) 58–77; Hieke, 'Das Petrus-evangelium', 91–115.

15 Cf. Brown, 'Gospel of Peter', 327.

uncommon.¹⁶ In addition, Thomas Hieke's recent study has shown how the two major authorial tendencies of *GPet* – anti-Jewish polemic and heightened Christology – each rely on interpretations of Old Testament passages for their construction.¹⁷ H. B. Swete summarises that the author 'is unwilling to go far beyond the lines of the canonical narrative. He is prepared to shift, transpose, reset his materials, but not to invent important sayings for which there is no authority in the canonical tradition.' The author displays, rather, a 'cautious conservatism'.¹⁸ As indicated by my brief survey of *GPet*, we should usually only expect a significant departure from the canonical gospels if there is some perceived basis for it in the Old Testament.

It is accordingly highly questionable to attribute *GPet*'s gigantic Jesus, two gigantic heavenly men and a mobile, talking cross to mere authorial creativity. The resurrection narrative would then constitute a surprising exception to the conservatism otherwise evident throughout *GPet*.

This conclusion holds even if we can provide parallels for each of the individual elements in *GPet* 10.39–42, which is the approach typically adopted by commentators, necessitated by their inability to locate a direct precedent for the resurrection narrative as a whole. To explain the bodily transformation of Jesus and his two companions, scholars have sought general comparanda in:

- traditions of visionary transformation, mysticism, ascent literature and epiphanies;¹⁹
- speculative literature on the enormous bodies of God, angels and righteous or antediluvian men and women;²⁰
- traditions of escorted ascent to the heavens and psychopomps (escorts for the dead);²¹
and
- other early Christian accounts of the gigantic height of the resurrected Jesus himself.²²

To explain the mobile, talking cross, reference has been made to alleged parallels in the following:

16 Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 323. Cf. Hieke, 'Das Petrus-evangelium', 96, 101–3, who also discusses other possible Old Testament resonances.

17 Hieke, 'Das Petrus-evangelium', 113–14.

18 Swete, *Akmim Fragment*, xxxvi.

19 Johnson, 'Empty Tomb Tradition', 83; Mara, *Évangile de Pierre*, 174, 183; Dewey, 'Resurrection Texts', 185–7; *idem*, "'Time to Murder and Create": Visions and Revisions in the Gospel of Peter', *Semeia* 49 (1990) 101–27, at 114–19; Koester, 'Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels', 129–30.

20 Swete, *Akmim Fragment*, 18; Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 299; Crossan, *Cross That Spoke*, 346; Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 418–20.

21 Crossan, *Cross That Spoke*, 338.

22 Robinson and James, *Gospel according to Peter*, 26–7; Swete, *Akmim Fragment*, 18.

- traditions of cross piety (hymns or sermons addressed to the cross as a salvific agent),²³
- traditions presenting the cross as a symbol of victory rather than an instrument of death;²⁴
- portrayals of the cosmic dimensions of the cross following the victory of Christ, including its symbolic status as the support that sustains the universe;²⁵
- traditions about the role or presence of the cross during Christ's harrowing of Hades, in which death is defeated and the righteous dead are raised up to heaven (this explains the divine question addressed to the cross, 'Have you preached to those who sleep?');²⁶
- stories about the miraculous actions of normally inanimate objects;²⁷
and
- representations of the cross's return in front of Christ, as his banner, at the Parousia.²⁸

As valuable as these partial parallels are in understanding *GPet* 10.39–42, the approach has at least two major potential weaknesses. The first is the inadequacy of the alleged parallels to the unique role of the cross in *GPet*. Foster acknowledges that the mobile, talking cross is 'not typical of the other forms of cross-devotion exemplified in patristic texts'.²⁹ Most importantly, none of the alleged parallels has a *talking* cross; none makes the cross a *self-propelled* agent; none has the *cross* rather than Jesus preach to the dead. Something further is, therefore, required to explain why the cross possesses these distinctive characteristics in *GPet*. A second weakness is that the piling up of comparanda does not and cannot explain why the author has *combined* the elements in the resurrection narrative in this fashion. The danger here, in other words, is that the listing of comparanda might act as a substitute for an explanation of the particular meaning of the text. As Samuel Sandmel insisted, in his justifiably famous article

23 Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 416–18.

24 Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 299; J. Daniélou, *The Development of Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea*, vol. 1: *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (tr. J. Baker; Chicago: The Henry Regnery Company, 1964) 265, 291; J.-M. Prieur, 'La croix vivante dans la littérature chrétienne du II^e siècle', *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 79 (1999) 435–44, at 442–3.

25 Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 266–92; Denker, *Die theologieggeschichtliche Stellung*, 97; Prieur, 'La croix vivante', 440.

26 Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 299; Crossan, *Cross That Spoke*, 362; Prieur, 'La croix vivante', 440; Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 425–9.

27 Swete, *Akmim Fragment*, 18; Turner, 'Gospel of Peter', 179; Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 403; *idem*, 'Do Crosses Walk and Talk?', 97–9.

28 Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 299; Mara, *Évangile de Pierre*, 184; Crossan, *Cross That Spoke*, 382.

29 Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 418.

'Parallelomania', the production of parallels does not necessarily explain the meaning of a passage, in particular where the contexts of the two texts substantially differ.³⁰ Put another way, even if each individual element of the Petrine resurrection narrative may be shown to have a good literary parallel, we would still be without any parallel for the particular combination of elements we find in *GPet*.

Despite the many lists of alleged parallel elements produced by commentators, it still remains to be answered: why is there a *talking* cross in *GPet*? Why did the author choose to make the cross speak to God and give *no* speech to Jesus? Why did the cross have such a prominent and active role in the narrative? Why did the cross and not Jesus preach to the dead? Why did the bodies of Jesus and his two heavenly psychopomps expand gigantically to the heavens rather than simply ascend to the throne of God after the resurrection? Why did the otherwise conservative author introduce these vivid and seemingly innovative elements to fill a more straightforward narrative gap in the canonical gospels? The parallels adduced for the resurrection scene in *GPet* 10.39–42 lack the explanatory power to address these questions adequately.

2. *GPet* 10.39–42 as Christocentric Interpretation of LXX Ps 18.1–7

The major contention of this article is that all of the key and seemingly innovative elements of the resurrection scene in *GPet* 10.39–42 have been constructed on the basis of a Christocentric interpretation of LXX Ps 18.1–7.

By 'Christocentric interpretation', I refer to the hermeneutic through which early Christians interpreted certain authoritative texts as though they foreshadowed the life, work or person of Jesus.³¹ LXX Ps 18.1–7 was widely interpreted in early Christianity as a Christocentric prophecy. The earliest such interpretation which we possess occurs in Paul's letter to the Romans. Quoting from LXX Ps 18.5ab, Paul interprets 'the words which have gone out to the end of the earth' as the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles (Rom 10.18). In the following century, Justin twice cites LXX Ps 18.1–7 as a prophecy of Jesus' appearance (*1 Apol.* 40; *Dial.* 64). He also interprets the Greek story of Hercules, who ascended to heaven when he died, as a Greek imitation of Christ, who was 'strong as a giant to run his race', alluding to LXX Ps 18.6–7 (*Dial.* 69). Hippolytus of Rome reports the claim by Hermogenes that the resurrected Christ left his body in the sun as he went up to heaven to the Father, and that Hermogenes had based his claim on LXX Ps 18.5c–6 (*Ref.* 8.10). Augustine, although writing much later, has repeated

30 S. Sandmel, 'Parallelomania', *JBL* 81 (1962) 1–13.

31 On the phenomenon within early Christianity, see e.g. B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of Old Testament Quotations* (London: SCM, 1961); D. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); R. B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2014).

recourse to Ps 18(19) as a prophecy of Christ.³² Christian interpretation of LXX Ps 18 as a prophecy of Christ is confined to the first half of the psalm; the theme of the perfection of the Law which introduces the second half of the psalm was perhaps not so conducive to Christocentric interpretation.

As I will argue in more detail below, LXX Ps 18.2–7 provides the basis for the two most distinctive elements in *GPet* 10.39–42:

- the description of Jesus' exit from the tomb and his bodily expansion to heaven (*GPet* 10.39–40), which interprets the groom departing from his bridal chamber and ascending to heaven 'like a giant' in LXX Ps 18.5c–7;
- the inclusion of two speeches in heaven, from God and the cross (*GPet* 10.41–2), which interprets the speeches from the heavens and from the firmament in LXX Ps 18.2, elaborated in 18.3–5ab.

The only major element of the resurrection narrative which was not taken from LXX Ps 18.2–7 is the reference to the two men from heaven, which depends on the reference to the 'two men' in Luke 24.4 (cf. John 20.12: 'two angels'). Yet even here, LXX Ps 18 influences *GPet*'s description of their stature, an element not mentioned in the canonical gospels and by no means a necessary feature in contemporary descriptions of angelic beings.³³

As I will argue, *GPet* extensively employs the central elements of LXX Ps 18, demonstrating the author's thorough familiarity with the psalm's language and content. Yet this does not mean that it was a merely literary or hermeneutical exercise. Its Christocentric interpretation may well have arisen in the context of early Christian liturgy, consistent with the evidence of Christocentric interpretations of LXX Ps 18 within paschal homilies dating from the second century CE – examples of which are discussed below. Another possibility is that *GPet*'s Christocentric interpretation may have arisen in the context of mantic or visionary experiences, perhaps based on meditation on the cosmic imagery of the psalm.³⁴ While the matter is arguably beyond determination, we may at least conclude that there is no necessary reason why the gospel's use of LXX Ps 18 should have been limited to literary influences. The author's Christocentric interpretation of the psalm may have been mediated by any combination of reading, preaching, teaching, cultic ritual and/or visionary practices, etc.

32 *Ennar. Ps.* 18; 44.3; 88.10; *Cons.* 1.46.30; *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 1.2; 2.3; 59.3; 78.3; *Arian.* 8.6; *Serm.* 192.3; 361.17; 377.

33 See the examples collected in P. M. Edo, 'A Revision of the Origin and Role of the Supporting Angels in the Gospel of Peter (10:39b)', *VC* 68 (2014) 206–25.

34 D. Aune, 'Charismatic Exegesis in Early Judaism and Early Christianity', *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans; JSPSup 14; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 143–8.

Given *GPet*'s non-literal and paraphrastic use of LXX Ps 18.1–7, it is not possible to identify with any security a particular version used by the author of *GPet*.³⁵ Simply as a practical aid, I reproduce here the text of LXX Ps 18.1–7 in Alexandrinus:

¹ Εἰς τὸ τέλος, ψαλμὸς τῷ Δαυιδ.

² Οἱ οὐρανοὶ διηγοῦνται δόξαν θεοῦ,
ποίησιν δὲ χειρῶν αὐτοῦ ἀναγγέλλει τὸ στερέωμα,

³ ἡμέρα τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐρεῦγεται ῥῆμα,
καὶ νύξ νυκτὶ ἀναγγέλλει γνῶσιν.

⁴ οὐκ εἰσὶν λαλιαὶ οὐδὲ λόγοι,
ὧν οὐχὶ ἀκούονται αἱ φωναὶ αὐτῶν,
^{5ab} εἰς πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν ἐξῆλθεν ὁ φθόγγος αὐτῶν
καὶ εἰς τὰ πέρατα τῆς οἰκουμένης τὰ ῥήματα αὐτῶν.

^{5c} ἐν τῷ ἡλίῳ ἔθετο τὸ σκῆνωμα αὐτοῦ,

⁶ καὶ αὐτὸς ὡς νυμφίος ἐκπορευόμενος ἐκ παστοῦ αὐτοῦ,
ἀγαλλιάσεται ὡς γίγας δραμεῖν ὁδὸν αὐτοῦ.

⁷ ἀπ' ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἡ ἔξοδος αὐτοῦ,
καὶ τὸ κατάντημα αὐτοῦ ἕως ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ,
καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὃς ἀποκρυβήσεται τὴν θέρμην αὐτοῦ.

¹ Unto the end, a psalm of David.

² The heavens describe the glory of God,
and the firmament announces the work of his hands.

³ Day to day it utters words,
and night to night it announces knowledge.

⁴ There are no utterances and no words
the sounds of which are not heard.

^{5ab} Their intonation went out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.

^{5c} In the sun he pitched his tent,

⁶ and he himself, as a groom going forth from his bridal chamber,
will greatly rejoice to run the course as a giant.

⁷ His departure is from the highest heaven,
and his goal is as far as the highest heaven,
and there is no one hidden from his heat.

The translation ὡς γίγας ('like a giant') in LXX Ps 18.6 occurs also in Aquila and renders the Hebrew כַּגֵּב ('like a great man/hero').³⁶ The irregular rendition of the

35 Cf. Swete, who describes the attempt to identify a version '[i]n the absence of formal quotations' as 'precarious to speculate upon' (*Akmim Fragment*, xxviii).

36 The translation is not recorded in Symmachus, which is closer to the Hebrew psalm's own context with ἰσχυρός ('strong man').

term in Aquila and LXX is probably dependent on the Greek translation of Gen 6.4, which describes the production of גברים ('great men/heroes') from the sexual encounters of 'the sons of God' and 'the daughters of men'. LXX Gen 6.4 renders הגברים ('the great men/heroes') as οἱ γίγαντες ('the giants'), an interpretation popularised by the Enochic literature.

In what follows I will first examine the two major elements which *GPet* derives from LXX Ps 18: the giant Jesus and his mobile, talking cross. Then I will account for the unique speech of the cross, in which it confirms that it has preached to the dead.

2.1 *Like a Giant*

One distinctive area of dependence on LXX Ps 18 occurs within the first half of *GPet* 10.39–42, which describes Jesus' exit from the tomb and his bodily expansion to the highest heaven (10.39–40). This scene is based squarely on the psalm's peculiar depiction of the sun as 'a groom going forth from his bridal chamber ... as a giant (ὡς γίγας)' and its subsequent ascent 'as far as the highest heaven (ἕως ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ)' (LXX Ps 18.6, 7). The early Christian identification of Jesus as a bridegroom is established in Mark 2.19–20 // Matt 9.15 // Luke 5.34–5. Moreover, the narrative progression in LXX Ps 18.6–7 – departure from a room, becoming 'like a giant' and ascension to heaven – provides the only biblical narrative capable of furnishing the progression found in *GPet* 10.39–40, in which Jesus leaves the tomb, expands like a giant and reaches the highest heaven.

That we are dealing with an expansion of the body rather than an ascension is indicated by the unusual description of the head of the two men reaching (χωροῦσαν) the heavens, while Jesus' own head surpasses the heavens. Foster observes that the verb χωρέω 'has the meaning' in this passage 'of movement by extension'.³⁷ This conclusion receives corroboration in four accounts of Jesus' transfiguration in which his head extends to heaven while his feet remain on earth: accounts in the *Gospel of the Saviour*;³⁸ Pseudo-Bartholomew, *Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*; Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem, *On the Life and Passion of Christ* (CPG 3604; clavis optica 0113); and the *Acts of John*.³⁹

The 1999 *editio princeps* of the *Gospel of the Saviour* (P. Berol. 22220) describes a transfiguration in which 'our Saviour pierced [through] all the heavens', and later includes the word 'foot' within a textual lacuna (100).⁴⁰ Stephen Emmel has since skilfully reconstructed the wording of the passage (33 in Emmel's

37 Foster, *Gospel of Peter*, 420.

38 The title is conventional and does not reflect the genre of the text.

39 My thanks to Alin Suciū for alerting me to many of these works, and for his valuable discussion and provision of resources.

40 C. W. Hedrick and P. A. Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior: A New Ancient Gospel* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1999) 35.

numbering) with reference to a close parallel in the fifth- to sixth-century Pseudo-Bartholomew, *Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* 18.1 (manuscript C).⁴¹ In the latter text, after the disciples see the firmaments open, they relate that

ΑΝΘΩΥΤ̄ ΑΝΝΑῩ ΕΠΕΝ̄CΗΡ̄ ΕΠΕΨΩΜΑ ΜΟΟΥΕ̄ ΕΞΡΑΪ̄ ΕΜ̄ΠΗΥΕ̄
 ΕΡΕΝΕΨΟΥΨΕΡΗΤΕ̄ ΤΑΧΡΗῩ ΕΧ̄Μ̄ ΠΤΟΥῩ ΝΜ̄ΜΑΝ̄. ΑΨ̄CΟΥΥΤ̄Ν̄ ΕΒΟΛ̄
 Ν̄ΤΕΨΕΙΧ̄ ΝΟΥΝΑΜ̄ ΑΨ̄ΨΡΑΓΙΖΕῙ Μ̄ΜΟΝ̄ Μ̄Μ̄ΝΤCΝΟΥΨC̄. ΑΝΜΟΥΨΕ̄
 ΞΩΩΝ̄ ΝΜ̄ΜΑΨ̄ ΕΠΧΙCΕ̄ ΨΥΔΞΡΑΪ̄ ΕΝΕCΚΗΝΗ̄ Μ̄ΠΕΙΩΤ̄ ΠΑΓΑΘΟC̄ ΕΤΜΕΞ̄
 CΑΨΨΕ̄ Μ̄ΠΕ̄.⁴²

we stared and saw our Saviour as his body went up into the heavens, his feet placed firmly on the mountain with us. He stretched out his right hand and sealed us twelve, and we went with him on high to the tents of the good Father, to the seventh heaven.⁴³

Accordingly, Emmel restores the fragmentary *Gospel of the Saviour* 33 as ΑΝΝΑῩ ΕΠΕΝ[C]ΩΤΗΡ̄ ΕΑΨΧΩΤΕ̄ [Ν]Μ̄ΠΗΥΕ̄ ΤΗΡΟῩ. [ΕΡΕΝΕΨΟΥΨΕΡΗΤΕ̄ [ΤΑΧΡΗῩ ΕΧ]Μ̄ ΠΤΟ[ΟῩ ΝΜ̄ΜΑΝ̄] ΕΡΕ[ΤΕΨΑΠΕ̄ ΧΩ]ΤΕ̄ Ν̄[ΤΜΕΞCΑΨ]ΨΕ̄ Μ̄ΠΕ̄ ('We saw our Savior having penetrated all the heavens, [his] feet [placed firmly on] the [mountain with us, his head penetrating the seventh] heaven').⁴⁴ Emmel contends that the *terminus ante quem* for the *Gospel of the Saviour* is the fifth century CE, on the basis of his papyrological analysis of the Strasbourg Coptic Gospel codex (Strasbourg Copte 5-7), which he further demonstrates is from the same work.⁴⁵ Hedrick and Mirecki date the original composition of the *Gospel of the Saviour* to the late second century CE, contemporary with *GPet*, with the proviso that 'it is scarcely possible to be certain'.⁴⁶ Yet Alin Suciū has recently argued that it is better explained as a fifth-century text. Suciū bases his conclusion primarily on the *Gospel of the Saviour*'s likely post-Chalcedonian interpretation of 'king' and 'son of the king' in LXX Ps 71.1 as references to the divine and human natures

41 S. Emmel, 'Preliminary Reedition and Translation of the *Gospel of the Savior*: New Light on the *Strasbourg Coptic Gospel* and the *Stauros-Text* from Nubia', *Apocrypha* 14 (2003) 9-53, at 33.

42 M. Westerhoff, *Auferstehung und Jenseits im koptischen 'Buch der Auferstehung Jesu Christi, unseres Herrn'* (OBC 11; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999) 152-4.

43 Tr. S. Emmel, 'Preliminary Reedition', 33.

44 Emmel, 'Preliminary Reedition', 34, 48; *idem*, 'The Recently Published *Gospel of the Savior* ("Unbekanntes Berliner Evangelium"): Righting the Order of Pages and Events', *HTR* 95 (2002) 45-72, at 54-5; cf. J. L. Hagen, 'Ein anderer Kontext für die Berliner und Straßburger "Evangelienfragmente": Das "Evangelium des Erlösers" und andere "Apostel-evangelien" in der koptischen Literatur', *Jesus in apokryphen Evangelienüberlieferungen: Beiträge zu außerkanonischen Jesusüberlieferungen aus verschiedenen Sprach- und Kulturtraditionen* (ed. J. Frey and J. Schröter; WUNT 1/254; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 339-71, at 363.

45 Emmel, 'Preliminary Reedition', 30 n. 67.

46 Hedrick and Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior*, 23. Emmel outlines the range of opinion in 'Preliminary Reedition', 29-30.

of Christ, interpretations which only became common in the fourth to fifth centuries CE.⁴⁷

In addition, Joost Hagen has drawn attention to a similar conception of a gigantic Jesus found in a transfiguration scene in the post-eighth-century Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem, *On the Life and Passion of Christ* 78.⁴⁸ The relevant section reads, ΔΝΕΡ ΖΟΤΕ ΔΝΣΩΥΤ ΔΝΝΑΥ ΕΠΩΤΗΡ ΝΘΕ ΝΟΥΤΥΛΛΟC ΝΚΩCΤ ΔΥΩ ΝΕΡΕΝΕΨΟΥΕΡΗΤΕ ΔΙΧΜ ΠΤΟΥΥ ΝΨΜΑΝ ΔΤΕΨΑΠΕ ΠΩC ΥΔ ΕΞΡΑΙ ΕΤΠΕ ΕΨΟ ΝΚΩCΤ ΤΗΡΨ ('We were afraid and looked and saw the Saviour like a column of fire, and his feet were with us on the mountain but his head reached to the sky, and he was entirely of fire').⁴⁹ The close verbal similarities in these first three texts strongly suggest a literary relationship.⁵⁰

The *Acts of John* provides a fourth example of a gigantic Jesus in a transfiguration scene. As the work is dated to the late second or early third centuries CE, it also demonstrates the broad contemporaneity of this conception with *GPet*.⁵¹ The apostle John recounts his vision of Jesus while on the mountain during the latter's transfiguration. John recalls that Jesus appeared from behind as something other than a normal man, and that 'his feet were whiter than snow, so that the ground there was lit up by his feet. And his head stretched up to heaven' (τοὺς μὲν πόδας [ποίας] χιόνος λευκοτέρους, ὡς καὶ τὴν γῆν ἐκείνην καταλάμπεσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ποδῶν. τὴν δὲ κεφαλὴν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἐρειδομένην, 90). Yet when Jesus turned towards John, he appeared in more regular dimensions, appearing as a 'small man' (μικρὸν ἄνθρωπον, 90).⁵²

In all four texts, Jesus' 'head' enters into or reaches the heavens while he keeps his feet firmly planted on the ground; he becomes a giant of cosmic proportions. In addition, I note that *Acts of Andrew* 54 employs much the same imagery, but in a speech by Andrew which addresses the cross (whose stature is not mentioned in *GPet*).⁵³

47 A. Suci, *The Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon: A Coptic Apostolic Memoir* (WUNT 370; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 132–8.

48 Hagen, 'Ein anderer Kontext', 363.

49 Text and tr. R. van den Broek, who notes that the transfiguration scene 'must have originated in a completely different context': *Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem: On the Life and the Passion of Christ: A Coptic Apocryphon* (VCSup 118; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 51, 150–3; cf. Hagen, 'Ein anderer Kontext', 363.

50 Hagen, 'Ein anderer Kontext', 362–3; Suci, *Berlin-Strasbourg Apocryphon*, 77–8.

51 E. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis* (SA 1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1983) 632.

52 Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 195.

53 D. R. MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew and The Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals* (TT 33; CA 1; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990) 184–5. The section is present only in the expanded recensions in *Martyrium prius* 14 and Nicetas' *Laudatio* 46 (late eighth and early ninth centuries respectively), although parts may derive from the original second-century *Acts of Andrew*, as MacDonald argues (409).

A transfiguration tradition thus existed as early as the second century CE which pictured Jesus as expanding rather than ascending from earth to heaven. *GPet*'s depiction of the resurrected Jesus as a giant whose head reaches into heaven shares this same conception of Jesus' cosmic gigantification, albeit in a resurrection context. It is the peculiar combination of the gigantic Jesus motif with that of the bride/Jesus going out from the bridal chamber/tomb, together with the unique conversation between the heavens and the cross (to be discussed in the next section), that makes *GPet*'s dependence on LXX Ps 18 likely.⁵⁴

Already in an 1893 article, J. Rendel Harris made note of the probable influence of LXX Ps 18 on *GPet* 10.40.⁵⁵ But Harris attributed the second half of the resurrection narrative, *GPet* 10.41–2, to a Christocentric interpretation of Hab 2.11, 'The stone cries out of the wall, and the cross-beam answers back to it' (MT).⁵⁶ This prompted Harris to identify the stone as Christ, contrary to the majority of scholars who interpret the voice as God's. In his 1930 commentary, Léon Vaganay strongly rejected Harris' suggestion regarding Hab 2.11.⁵⁷ Yet Vaganay also agreed that there was some influence of LXX Ps 18.6–7 on *GPet* 10.39–40, albeit that the gospel only makes incidental use of the psalm. According to Vaganay, the author decided to present Christ as a giant in a vulgar attempt to make Jesus' resurrection seem more impressive – prior to his decision to use LXX Ps 18 as a proof-text. Perhaps as a result of Harris' sometimes speculative suggestions and Vaganay's depreciation of the psalm's influence on *GPet* 10.39–42, the connection virtually drops out of consideration in scholarship after 1930. There is no mention of the influence of LXX Ps 18, for example, in studies and commentaries by Johnson, Mara, Denker, Koester, Crossan and Foster, or in the edited volume by Kraus and Nicklas.⁵⁸

54 Several early Christian texts give the glorified Jesus gigantic height, without any other detectable motifs shared with LXX Ps 18. For example, Hermas, *Sim.* 9.6 describes the Son of God as 'a man of lofty stature, so as to overtop the tower'. The *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* describes Jesus as having 'large stature' (4) and as 'a man of marvelous greatness, so as to exceed the top of the amphitheatre' (10). According to Hippolytus and Epiphanius, the Elksaite Christians also represented the glorified Jesus as a giant (Hippolytus of Rome, *Ref.* 9.13.2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.3).

55 J. R. Harris, 'The Structure of the Gospel of Peter', *The Contemporary Review* (1893) 217–36, at 220.

56 Harris, 'Structure of the Gospel', 224.

57 Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 303.

58 Johnson, 'Empty Tomb Tradition'; Mara, *Évangile de Pierre*; Denker, *Die theologiegeschichtliche Stellung*; Koester, 'Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels'; *idem*, *Ancient Christian Gospels*; J. D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 125–81; *idem*, *Cross That Spoke*; Foster, *Gospel of Peter*; Kraus and Nicklas, eds., *Das Evangelium nach Petrus*.

2.2 *The Voice from Heaven and the Talking Cross*

The second half of the resurrection narrative, *GPet* 10.41–2, is also dependent on LXX Ps 18, although the relationship between the texts has not to my knowledge been perceived in earlier scholarship. The brief conversation between the heavenly voice and the cross in *GPet* 10.41–2 is based squarely on what Peter appears to have interpreted as two separate speeches in LXX Ps 18.2:

Οἱ οὐρανοὶ διηγούνται δόξαν θεοῦ,
ποιήσιν δὲ χειρῶν αὐτοῦ ἀναγγέλλει τὸ στερέωμα.

The heavens describe the glory of God,
and the firmament announces the work of his hands.

In the original context of LXX Ps 18.2, the two cola are synonymous: each describes in different ways how the universe evidently demonstrates God's role as creator. But in a literalising interpretation frequently found in early Christian interpretation of LXX poetry, *GPet* interprets this original synonymous parallelism as two separate speeches by two different characters.⁵⁹ *GPet* 10.41 interprets LXX Ps 18.2a as the first speech, by a voice from 'the heavens' (οὐρανοί in both LXX Ps 18.2 and *GPet* 10.41) which talks about 'the glory of God' (δόξαν θεοῦ); *GPet* 10.42 interprets LXX Ps 18.2b as the second speech, made by the firmament, which verbally confirms the work of its hands. It is this firmament (τὸ στερέωμα) in LXX Ps 18.2b that *GPet* – following an established Christian identification – interprets as the cosmic cross. After Jesus has 'run his course', i.e. had died, descended to Hades and was resurrected, the cross becomes in some sense the sustaining firmament of the universe.

The identification of the cross with the firmament is widely attested in Christian texts dating as early as the second century CE. We may distinguish a first group of texts in which the cross is identified with both the firmament and the world-pillar and a second group in which the cross is identified primarily with the firmament, viewed as the horizontal boundary between heaven and earth.

Beginning with the first group, in which the cross is identified, sometimes ambiguously, with both pillar and firmament, I have already mentioned *Acts of Andrew* 54, which attributes cosmic and salvific significance to both the vertical and horizontal aspects of the cross. Pseudo-Hippolytus' *In Sanctum Pascha* exhibits a similar conception. Although the dating of the Easter sermon ranges from the second to the fourth century, the majority of scholars date it to the late second century, so contemporary with *GPet*.⁶⁰ In a discussion of types or

59 Other literalising interpretations of synonymous parallelism include Matt 21.5 (Zech 9.9); John 19.23 (LXX Ps 21.19; cf. *GPet* 4.12); and Acts 4.27 (LXX Ps 2.1–2).

60 See the recent survey in D. A. Giulea, *Pre-Nicene Christology in Paschal Contexts: The Case of the Divine Noetic Anthropos* (VCSup; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 7–9.

figures of Christ in the Old Testament, the sermon quotes from LXX Ps 18 as a prophecy of Jesus (*In Sanctum Pascha* 3). A later part of the sermon describes the cross in the following fashion:

τοῦτό μοι φυτὸν εἰς σωτηρίαν αἰώνιον ... τοῦτο δένδρον οὐρανομήκες ἀπὸ γῆς εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἀνέβαινεν, ἀθάνατον φυτὸν στηρίζας ἑαυτὸν ἐν μέσῳ οὐρανοῦ τε καὶ γῆς, ἔδρασμα τῶν ὅλων, στήριγμα τοῦ παντός, ἔρεισμα τῆς ὅλης οἰκουμένης, σύμπλεγμα κοσμικόν, τῆς ποικίλης καὶ ἀνθρωπίνης οὐσίας συνεκτικόν, ἀοράτοις γόμοις τοῦ πνεύματος συνηλωμένον, ἵνα τῷ θείῳ συναρμοσθὲν μηκέτι λυθῆ. ἄκραις μὲν κορυφαῖς τῶν οὐρανῶν ἐπιψαύων, τὴν γῆν δὲ στηρίζων ποσί, τὸ δὲ πολὺ καὶ μέσον πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀέρος πανταχόθεν χερσὶν ἀμετρήτοις περιλαβόν, ὅλος ἦν ἐν πᾶσι καὶ πανταχοῦ.

This [cross] is the tree of my eternal salvation ... This tree, wide as the firmament, extends from earth to the heavens, with its immortal trunk established between heaven and earth; it is the pillar of the universe, the support of the whole world, the joint of the world, holding together the variety of human nature, and riveted by the invisible bolts of the Spirit, so that it may remain fastened to the divinity and impossible to detach. Its top touches the highest heavens, its roots are planted in the earth, and in the midst its immeasurable arms embrace the ever present breaths of air. It is wholly in all things and in all places. (*In Sanctum Pascha* 51)⁶¹

The cross, on which Christ is literally being crucified, is ‘as wide as the firmament’, its ‘immeasurable arms’ traversing the air beneath the heavens. A subsequent passage in the sermon refers to ‘the crucifix which shelters the whole world’ (τῆς διὰ πάντων ἀπλουμένης σταυρώσεως, 56), a role again identical with that of the heavenly firmament.

Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 5.17.4) similarly refers to the ‘tree’ of Christ. He connects it (with reference to Eph 3.18) to ‘the breadth and length and height and depth’ of the love of Christ, and therefore to the two horizontal and two vertical directions of the cross. Irenaeus also identifies the cross (with reference to Eph 2.14–16) with the broken middle wall of partition (φραγμός). Jean Daniélou interprets Irenaeus as referring here not only to the vertical division between Jew and Gentile, and thus to the evangelisation of the whole world, but also to the horizontal division between humans and God in heaven.⁶² Also relevant is Melito’s contrast between Jesus as creative Logos of the universe and the human Jesus who is crucified within that universe: ‘He who hung the earth is hanging; he who fixed the heavens has been fixed; he who fastened the universe has been fastened to a

61 G. Visonà, *Pseudo Ippolito, In sanctum Pascha: studio, edizione, commento* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1988) 300–2; tr. Adalbert Hamman, ed., *The Paschal Mystery: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts* (New York: Alba House, 1969) 64–5, slightly adapted.

62 Similarly, Irenaeus, *Epid.* 34; see Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 280.

tree (ἐπὶ ξύλου ἐστήρικται) (*Peri Pascha* 96).⁶³ The nominal equivalent of the verb στηρίζω employed here is στήριγμα ('support/pillar'). Christ on his cross is thus contrasted with his depiction as the pillar which supports the firmament.⁶⁴

There is a second group of passages in which the cross is identified primarily or even exclusively with the firmament. This category includes a number of Valentinian texts, as well as the *Acts of John*. Although *GPet* has nothing of the intricate cosmogony of the Valentinian texts, what invites comparison is that they share a personification of the cross as a cosmic salvific agent. Turner fairly sums up the role of the cross in *GPet* as 'a step, if only a step, in the direction of the Aeon Stauros' of Valentinian tradition.⁶⁵ According to Hippolytus, Valentinians believed that the breadth of the universe is 'Stauros, the limit of the Pleroma', which possesses a boundary-setting function, i.e. its role is that of the firmament (*Ref.* 6.29). Hippolytus also reports that the reason the Father sent the Aeon Stauros into the world was for the guarding and defence of the Aeons above, as he 'becomes a boundary of the Pleroma', safeguarding the principal emanations of God above from the imperfections introduced into the lower world by Sophia's breach of the Pleroma (6.26). Irenaeus confirms that the Valentinians identify the cross with Horos, the Aeon responsible for maintaining the boundary between the Pleroma in the heavens and the material world below, and that 'insofar as he supports and sustains, he is Stauros, while insofar as he divides and separates, he is Horos' (*Adv. Haer.* 1.3.5). So the cross/Stauros is presented here as the firmament, maintaining the appropriate cosmic separation between Aeons and the material world.

The *Acts of John*, in a section bearing some affinity with Valentinian theology (94-102, 109),⁶⁶ likewise describes the cross as that which 'draws a boundary between the things that proceed from the origin and those below' (διορίσας τὰ ἀπὸ γενέσεως καὶ κατωτέρω, 99). This description thus identifies the cross with the firmament, separating the principal emanations of the heavenly sphere from the material world. In the same section, the cross is described as διαπηξόμενος (literally 'cross-beaming',⁶⁷ 'fixing apart') all things, that is, separating them in respect of its horizontal beam, as well as εἰς πάντα πηγάσας ('compacting [them] into one') in its vertical aspect.

So the interpretation of the firmament as a prophetic type of the cross is well attested in Christian literature from the second century onwards, albeit with some variation in the precise nature of the typology. Although some of the examples

63 *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (ed. and tr. Stuart G. Hall; OECT; Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

64 Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 288.

65 Turner, 'Gospel of Peter', 172; contra Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 299.

66 Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 589-632.

67 As rightly suggested in a curious work by G. R. S. Mead, *The Gnostic Crucifixion* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1907) 15.

appear in Valentinian or Valentinian-like texts, we should not overemphasise the divide between various gnostic and proto-orthodox Christians during the second century. The blurred lines are especially evident in the case of *GPet*, which, while not containing any obviously Valentinian elements, comes close in its depiction of the cosmic cross. In addition, the firmament-sustaining role of the cross was shared by proto-orthodox second-century authors such as Irenaeus and Melito. Second-century Christians who read the conversation between heavens and firmament in LXX Ps 18.2 through a Christocentric lens would then readily perceive a speech from God and an answer from the cross: precisely what we see in *GPet* 10.41–2.

2.3 *Preaching to the Dead in Hades*

As there are therefore good grounds for viewing *GPet* 10.41–2 as a Christocentric interpretation of LXX Ps 18.2, we might also look to the psalm for the basis of *GPet*'s unusual understanding that the *cross*, rather than Jesus, was responsible for preaching to the dead. This basis may be found, readily enough, in the firmament's announcement about 'the work of his/its hands' (ποίησιν ... χειρῶν αὐτοῦ) in LXX Ps 18.2b. As we have seen, *GPet*'s Christological interpretation ignores the synonymous parallelism between LXX Ps 18.2a and 2b in order to create its conversation between God and cross. So the author of *GPet* would have sought the postcedent/antecedent of the personal pronoun αὐτοῦ (genitive neuter/masculine) within 18.2b, not in 18.2a. Accordingly, the postcedent would have been identified as στερέωμα (neuter) in 18.2b, rather than θεοῦ (masculine) in 18.2a. The author would therefore have understood that the *cross* spoke of 'the work of its hands' not of the work of 'his' (i.e. God's) hands.⁶⁸ Indeed, the very imagery of a firmament with hands (χειρῶν αὐτοῦ) would have been strongly suggestive – in Christocentric perspective – of the outstretched cosmic cross.

The cross's 'work' that it spoke of, after the resurrection, would most probably be equated with its victorious role in Hades. In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the cross is present in Hades as a symbol of victory over death (8[24].2). In the Greek manuscripts of *Nicodemus*, Jesus blesses Adam with the sign of the cross. In the Latin A recension, Adam asks Jesus to set up his cross in Hades as a sign of victory, and Jesus responds by marking the sign of the cross on Adam and all the righteous dead. In the Latin B recension, Jesus' actual cross is erected in Hades as a sign of victory over death (10[26].1).⁶⁹

Yet it is striking that none of the other extant texts which picture the cross as present in Hades comes close to depicting the cross as itself preaching to the dead.

68 *GPet*'s attribution of the preaching to the cross does not necessarily envisage that Jesus did not also preach to the dead, but is simply a result of the gospel closely following the wording of its source, LXX Ps 18.2. Thus there is no necessary conflict with 1 Pet 3.19; 4.6.

69 Cf. Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 303.

This innovation should therefore be understood as the distinct influence of Peter's Christocentric interpretation of LXX Ps 18.2. *GPet* 10.42 is the outcome of a combination of LXX Ps 18.2's talking firmament/cross with the tradition that the cross accompanied Jesus in Hades to preach to the dead.

3. Conclusion

A Christocentric interpretation of LXX Ps 18.1–7 has generated the gospel's most distinctive and unusual elements, in particular the gigantic Jesus and his mobile, talking cross. LXX Psalm 18.5c–7 provides the basis for *GPet*'s unusual description of Jesus' resurrection from the tomb. This passage furnishes all of the key elements in *GPet* 10.39–40: the exit from the tomb, the transformation into a gigantic form, and a head which ascends 'as far as the highest heaven'. *GPet* then makes use of LXX Ps 18.2, which when viewed through the author's Christocentric lens appears to describe a conversation between God and the glorified cosmic cross (10.41–2). In addition, *GPet* 10.42's non-synonymous interpretation of the cola in LXX Ps 18.2 has led it to attribute the work of preaching to the dead to the cross itself. The resurrection account in *GPet* therefore stands in fundamental continuity with the preceding passion account, which likewise utilises a series of Christocentric interpretations of the Old Testament in constructing its narrative. The most innovative elements in *GPet* 10.39–42 are no mere authorial inventions but depend centrally on an understanding of LXX Ps 18.1–7 as a prophecy of Christ's resurrection, furnishing a striking example of early Christian use of 'prophecy' to create a purportedly historical narrative.