

PREFACE

In the autumn of 2012 I was finishing my Master's degree in the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University. I was taking Intermediate Syriac and simultaneously working on my first conference presentation—which had nothing to do with Syriac, but focused on the Greek *Acts of John*. While reading through J.K. Elliott's *Apocryphal New Testament*, I noticed a passing reference to acts of John in Syriac translation. Since I was learning Syriac at the time, the reference caught my attention. Thankfully, due to the ongoing work of Jeff Childers, ACU has an ever-growing library dedicated to the Syriac Christian traditions and they happened to have a copy of William Wright's *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles in Syriac*. There, unexpectedly, I first discovered the *History of John the Son of Zebedee*.

Like most of the pieces in Wright's collection, the *History of John* had largely been overlooked in favor of “the jewel” of Wright's volume: a Syriac version of the *Acts of Thomas*. In Wright's assessment, the *History of John* was of little value from a historical point of view and he thought it only useful for purposes of philological comparison to its assumed Greek *Vorlage*. This attitude was, of course, typical of a methodological obsession with trying to get back to an original, *Urtext* for any given narrative. As a result, Wright gave little thought or attention to the contextual conditions that gave rise to the *History of John* within Syriac communities—regardless of its origins in Greek or Syriac.

Since Wright, several other witnesses have come to light that have called most of his assumptions into question. Moreover, the work of Eric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli has begun to sort out the place of the *History of John* within the larger *Acta Iohannis* corpus.

This volume is the culmination of text-critical work as much as it is a venture into what I would call “contextual criticism”, building on the work of Junod and Kaestli. No one, until now, has offered any strong cases for the date, authorship and provenance of the *History of John*, and thus my own inquiry must begin with such basic, but foundational, questions.

Along the way, a few methodological questions have guided my thinking in the course of this project. When I first encountered the *History of John*, I was struck that a Christian group in a post-Nicaea (and post-Eusebian) context would write and continue to read and copy this text. Who would write such a text? Why would they write it? What type of literature is this? What was the intended function of this text? Whose interests was it intended to serve? Who was trying to convince whom of what with this narrative? How does this text help contribute to our understanding of Christian literature in Syria?

I started with these fundamental questions that had yet to be asked of this particular narrative, many of which were stimulated by religion scholars like Bruce Lincoln.

These questions and others have been the driving force behind my inquiry. In the end, I must admit that I have merely scratched the surface of this text. With this book, however, I provide a solid foundation for further investigation by offering some preliminary hypotheses about its origins and functions. It is my hope that this initial work will stimulate further interest in this text that has been the object of my curiosity for so long.

The layout of the book is quite straightforward. I begin with a history of scholarship—which is quite brief, given the text has received little attention. Most of the critical investigation surrounding the *History of John* has focused on its relationship to other literature in the *Acta Iohannis* corpus. This is a discussion that needs to continue beyond the confines of this book and I offer here a mere summary of the important arguments. Some material incorporated into later versions of the narrative—which is published here for the first time—may have a bearing on the discussion of how this text fits into the traditions about John writ large.

Chapter two addresses the manuscripts, focusing particularly on how they might relate to one another. Again, more work here

needs to be done, as I have not been able to compare the Syriac versions to the Arabic or the Armenian versions. Chapter three turns to the questions about provenance, date and authorship. Much of this material has grown out of investigations from my dissertation. I have left out the more speculative hypotheses to save for other venues. Here, I think it is important to address the fundamental questions as critically as possible before moving into speculative investigation.

The rest of the book consists of the texts and translations. I have followed current trends in publishing Syriac texts and have opted to use the earliest extant manuscript as the base text. I have made every effort to present the base text as it appears in the manuscript. The same may be said of the recorded variants. In the appendices I have included longer portions of added material from later witnesses, which could not reasonably be included in footnotes. In the case of one manuscript, which is an abridgment of the narrative, I have included the entire Syriac text with a translation.

William Wright did not see much value in this text. Nevertheless, the *History of John* has been an academic gold mine for me over the last several years and will likely continue to be so for years to come.

