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Last week I was in Marburg, Germany for the annual conference for the Society of New Testament Studies. This is an international society at the top tier of NT scholars in the world, a closed society that no one can actually *join*. You have to be nominated and voted in, and there are strict academic guidelines (in terms of qualifications and numbers of books and articles published, etc.). I'm not saying I'm in favor of that system, but as we say these days (or at least were saying a year or so ago) it is what it is.

I've been a member since the 1990s but actually haven't been to one of the meetings since 1995. But I went to this one because I was asked to read a paper and I'm really glad I went. It was absolutely terrific. Really smart people there (maybe 300 or so?) (OK, some smarter than others....) from around the world doing interesting and important work.

The paper I read was related to the scholarly project I'm working on, involving the journeys to the underworld recorded in early Christian texts. As I've said on the blog before, this kind of trip is technically called a "katabasis," a Greek word for "Going Down" (i.e. to the world below) (the same word is also sometimes used, generically, but somewhat confusedly, for trips "Going Up" to heaven above).

My paper was meant for scholars but it is not heavily burdened with anything particularly scholarly and inaccessible. It dealt with two of our earliest Christian katabaseis (the plural of the word) in the non-canonical Acts of Thomas (if you don't recall what that text is about, I discussed it recently on the blog, here:

<https://ehrmanblog.org/thomas-and-his-identical-twin-jesus-in-the-acts-of-thomas/>)

It's pretty fascinating stuff, and thought you might be interested in parts. I won't give the entire paper here, but just the bits of greatest interest to what generally happens on the blog. This is how I begin (I'll explain any unusual words as necessary):

One of the most fascinating but understudied features of the Acts of Thomas is its understanding of the afterlife, particularly in light of its two remarkable katabaseis, both of which are narrated as Near Death Experiences. The first comes in the second Act, connected with Thomas's commission to build a new palace for the Indian king Gundaphorus (recall: Thomas is Jesus' twin brother, sent on a missionary journey, after Jesus' death, to India; Gundaphorus is the king there). Gundaphorus provides extensive funds for the building but Thomas gives it all to the poor. When Gundaphorus comes to inspect the nearly completed project, Thomas assures him that rather than building a mere earthly palace, he has been building him a mansion in heaven. Gundaphorus, not unexpectedly, has the apostle locked up, with plans to have him flogged and burned at the stake.

But that evening the king's close-knit brother Gad dies and is taken to heaven by angels who show him the various residences available to him. None is as glorious as a recently constructed palace. He tells them he would like to dwell in a small part of it rather than have his own luxurious dwelling for eternity. When he learns it is the palace built for his brother by Thomas (alms-giving — even if unconscious) having earned for the king a "treasure in heaven") he persuades the angels to allow him to make a temporary return to

life to purchase the property. But when he is resuscitated and Gundaphorus learns the true state of things, he refuses the sale, suggesting Gad make his own palace. On the spot Gundaphorus converts to the Christian faith and the life of self-sacrificing charity that this apocryphon promotes.

A glorious afterlife, then, is in store for those who convert and adopt the ascetic lifestyle promoted by the apostle. And what of those who do not do so? This is the subject of the katabasis in Act 6, granted not to an incredibly wealthy and powerful male sovereign, but to a lower-class anonymous woman. A young man, recently converted, comes to Thomas to take the Eucharist; but his hands shrivel before the elements. The apostle naturally knows something has gone awry. On inquiry he learns that the man has just come from murdering his lover after failing to persuade her to embrace the new faith and the chaste lifestyle it entails. His idea had been to enjoy spiritual but not physical pleasure with her for the rest of their lives; she evidently preferred conjugal relations. Driven mad by the idea that she might enjoy them with someone else, he has slaughtered her and left her corpse behind before going off to take communion.

Thomas and the young man arrive at the scene of the murder. The apostle instructs the man to revive his erstwhile lover through the power of God. When he does so the woman's first reaction is amazement, not at the resuscitation per se but at by the presence of the apostle, identical in appearance to the person she had just a moment before been addressing in the realm of the dead. Here then is another play on the concept of the identical didymoi (Greek for "twins"), as it is better known from the account of the bridal chamber in Act 1 (see the earlier post I referred to above).

Thomas instructs the young woman to recount what she has just experienced in her brief visit to the afterlife. Unlike the equally pagan Gad before her (for some unexplained reason), she was not transported to the realm of the blessed but to the chambers of torment. A "hateful" looking man had taken her on arrival and guided her to the places of punishment, where pitiable souls were being tortured for their sundry iniquities: abortion, adultery, slander, theft, and so on. As in other Christian katabaseis, some of the punishments matched the penalty: for example, hangings by various appropriate body parts most culpable in the sin. Others involved canonical torments of the genre: muck, worms, and wheels of fire. The woman was then shown a very dark cavern reeking with stench, where she saw souls that had not been destroyed by their torments, fighting for breath for eternity. When her hellish guide refused to give her over to any of the eternal tormentors, she was suddenly returned to the body. On reviving, she begs Thomas to prevent her from being taken back.

The apostle informs the bystanders that there are actually worse punishments, which the woman had not observed, and that if they (and she) don't turn to God from their sins, they will be subject to them for an eternity of abject misery. The only solution is to convert to his gospel message. Given the Christian author and audience of the text, there is the expected and glorious outcome: "Then the entire crowd believed and delivered their obedient souls to the living God and to Christ Jesus."

There is much to be said about these texts. In this paper I would like to consider them in light of significant comparable texts from earlier times and different religious traditions (Greek and Roman mainly). My overarching thesis is that this kind of early Christian katabasis, more famously found in the somewhat earlier Apocalypse of Peter and the later Apocalypse of Paul, functioned not only to instruct Christians about the life to come and

(secondarily) to urge non-Christians to convert to this faith but also to set the Christian message in clear contrast to other religious traditions of the Greek and Roman worlds, as expounded in even better known, pagan katabaseis. The Christians borrowed the forms of these earlier texts but radically transformed their content to incorporate the truth of their gospel message.



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