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The Apocryphon of Seth
A new translation and introduction
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The Liber apocryphus nomine Seth, "Apocryphal Book in the name of Seth", is known exclusively from a lengthy quotation in a spurious Latin commentary upon the Gospel of Matthew. This work, commonly known as Opus imperfectum in Matthaem, until the sixteenth century C.E. was believed to have been authored by John Chrysostom. Its authenticity was first called into question by Erasmus of Rotterdam, and since then an Arian author writing in the fifth century in or around Constantinople has been singled out as the most probable source of the commentary. Opus imperfectum in Matthaem is characterized by a great leniency towards pseudepigraphal writings which borders upon a blurring of the biblical canon. In this context noncanonical writings are especially sought out for an elucidation and augmentation of the canonical text, and it is in this respect that the Liber apocryphus nomine Seth makes its appearance.

Contents
The Liber apocryphus seems to have been a comparatively short text which is concerned with the pre-history of the magi visiting the newborn Jesus. Its contents are summarized by the author of the Opus imperfectum, who quotes the book in connection with an exegesis of the canonical birth-story in Matt 2:1-12. The account begins with a reference to a "certain scripture" (quadam scriptura), presumably the Liber apocryphus, which tells of a tribe living in the outermost East in the vicinity of the world-surrounding oceanus. This tribe is later identified with the magi, who are given to celestial observation and the safeguarding of the apocryphal book in question. More precisely, they expect the appearance of a certain star, for which they are looking out over generations. The star is finally seen; upon this the magi travel to Judaea, where the canonical narrative sets in. After returning to their home country they proclaim Christ; finally they are baptized by the apostle Thomas. At this point the author of the Opus imperfectum resumes his/her own work with a lengthy discussion of the value and fallaciousness of astrology.

1. In Jacques-Paul Migne's edition (PG 56, 637) it bears the subtitle Mons Victorialis "the victorious mountain/mountain of victories". On this motif, cf. below.
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Manuscripts and Versions
The author of the Opus imperfectum obviously had first-hand knowledge of this apocryphal book, but he or she does not seem to quote verbatim; rather his/her account gives the impression of an abbreviated form which seeks to summarize all the important points while leaving out things considered to be superfluous or known through the canonical text. There is no independent textual evidence for the Liber apocryphus, which means that its textual history is identical with, and reduced to, the textual history of the Opus imperfectum, of which it forms a part. The textual tradition of the latter work has been studied extensively by Joop van Banning, who distinguishes altogether four families of texts, all in the Latin language.\(^3\) This classification goes back to work by Friedrich Kauffmann\(^4\) who in 1909 identified a group of mainly Carolingian manuscripts, one of mainly French manuscripts from the twelfth century and one of mainly English ones from the thirteenth century. In 1974 a fourth group of manuscripts of Italian and Spanish provenance was discovered by Joseph Lemarié and Raymond Étaix,\(^5\) which is counted as the third family by van Banning due to its date between Kauffmann's French and English families, the fourth one in van Banning’s system being Kauffmann's English subgroup.

Editions of the Opus imperfectum go back to an early date with the editio princeps having been printed in 1487 as part of an edition of the works of John Chrysostom. This was followed by editions of the Benedictine monks of Santa Justina in Padua (Venice 1503), Andreas Cratander (Basel 1525) and Erasmus of Rotterdam (Basel 1530). The latter published a revised edition in Paris 1536, which was reprinted in Basel 1539. Jacques-Paul Migne’s edition in volume 56 of the Patrologia Graeca goes back to an edition of the works of John Chrysostom by Bernard de Montfaucon from 1724; it does not represent any substantial improvement over against Erasmus’ edition from 1536.\(^6\)

Genre and Structure
Due to the abbreviated form of the text in the Opus imperfectum attempts at determining its literary character have to remain tentative. There is on the one hand a reference to an actual book going back to Seth (it is not clear whether this book is identical with the account quoted by the author of the Opus imperfectum), which calls to mind similar texts claiming to be revelations given by Adam to his son Seth.\(^7\) As these revelations assume the shape of a testament of Adam, it is possible that the Liber apocryphus originally belonged to the same literary genre, i.e., Testaments of the Patriarchs.\(^8\) On the other hand the text is obviously linked with the birth of Jesus and seeks to give an account of the origins and further adventures of the magi. In this respect it might be seen as akin to other pseudo-

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3. Cf. van Banning, Opus Imperfectum, XI-XIII.
6. Cf. van Banning, Opus Imperfectum, CCCXXXI-CCCXLVIII.
8. This would fit well with the text’s Christian character, which corresponds to the Christian origins of the genre; cf. Robert A. Kugler, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 35-38, summarizing work by Marinus de Jonge.

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piegraphal infancy narratives and therefore could, following Helmut Koester's assessment of the noncanonical infancy gospels, be classified as an aretalogy.9 The latter alternative seems validated insofar as the Liber apocryphus does not contain a prophecy or revelatory testament in the strict sense but rather tells of the prehistory and aftermath of an episode from the childhood of Jesus as related in the New Testament. It gains additional weight by the fact that already in the canonical infancy narrative the magi's visit serves an aretalogical purpose: The new-born Jesus is put into one line with Persian and Roman emperors, at whose birth astrologers were present and unusual celestial phenomena made their appearance.10

Date and Provenance

As concerns the date of the Liber apocryphus a terminus ante quem is fixed by its use in the Opus imperfectum in the fifth century C.E. A terminus post quem is given by the fact that the text seems to presuppose a Christianization of earlier Hellenistic-Persian oracles (cf. on this below) such as can be found in Justin Martyr, Apol. 1:20:3; 1:44:12; Clem. Alex., Strom. 5:43:1–3 and Lact., Div. Inst. 7:15:19; 7:17:16; 7:18:2.11 This would result in a possible origin of the Liber apocryphus in the third or fourth century C.E. A further subdivision can be achieved, if the final episode concerning the apostle Thomas baptizing the magi is seen as a redactional element added to a more original account of the magi's visit to Bethlehem. In that case the text's core might well go back into the second century.12 The geographical background of the work is not quite as clear. On the one hand the text does not seem to have been distributed widely, since it is only known to the author of the Opus imperfectum; this would point to an origin in the vicinity of Constantinople with Greek or even Latin as the original language. On the other hand, some of the book's traditions are known from later Syriac sources as well, and furthermore the subtitle Mons Victorialis seems to go back to the misunderstanding of a Syriac term.13 This has led some researchers to assume a common source of Syriac provenance which would have been abbreviated by the author of the Opus Imperfectum while being expanded in later Syriac works.14

13. Cf. on this below.
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Literary Context
A first clue to the book's literary context and sources is given by the Iranian elements present within it. In the Latin manuscript tradition the book bears a subtitle Mons Victorialis, "the victorious mountain/mountain of victories." This term refers most likely to the world-mountain Harâ Brahma, more commonly known as "Alborz," of Zoroastrian lore. This cosmic mountain range is described in Yasht 10:50 as luminous; a Syriac term nūra nazitha, "luminous mountain" is indeed known from Cave of Treasures 6:23, and insofar as the root nūh can have the meaning "victorious," as well as "luminous," the Latin mons victorialis seems to be a mistranslation of the Syriac phrase. The tribesmen residing in the outermost East are explicitly identified as magi, who praise God "in silence and with a low voice"; this apparently refers to the silent, murmuring way of reciting sacred texts, which was considered characteristic of Zoroastrian priests in Greco-Roman antiquity.

The phrase post messem trituratorium "after the hay harvest" is identified by Geo Widengren as the designation of a Zoroastrian feast day. The Magi, who ascend the mons victorialis on this occasion, go to a cave nearby a fountain surrounded by trees. This brings immediately to mind the literary description of a Mithraic grotto in Porphyrius, de antro nymph. 66, as well as the depiction of trees representing the seven planets in archaeological remains of the Mithraic mystery cult.

Given this strong presence of Iranian elements within the Liber apocryphus it is tempting to locate the text within a Persian environment or at least to trace literary or oral sources of Iranian origin. However, since Hellenistic times Persian traditions were widely received in the Greek and Latin-speaking world, including Christian authors of late antiquity such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Lactantius. Iranian elements such as the mountain and cave, therefore, do not necessarily point to an origin in Persia; they can as well be elements of a much broader stream of Hellenized Iranian lore current in the early centuries of the Common Era.

This is confirmed by the fact that the Liber apocryphus contains other elements which are exclusively known from Jewish or Christian authors. The idea that Seth and his descendants possess a special revelatory knowledge based upon astronomy is found in Josephus, A.J. 170-71. The idea of sages residing in the East near to the earth-encircling ocean is known from the Syriac Cave of Treasures 27:6-11, where an apocryphal fourth son

15. Cf. my Die Adam- und Sethlegenden im Syrischen Buch der Schatzhöhle (CSCO 618; Subsidia 119; Louvain: Peeters, 2006), 230 with n. 47 and the literature quoted there. Messina, "Una presunta profezia," 197, sees a connection with the middle-Persian term vṛhāgan "victorious," which is an epithet of the Zoroastrian savior; still, the Latin term retains a distinct "colorito iranico" (ibid., 196).

16. Cf. Geo Widengren, Die Religionen Iran (Die Religionen der Menschheit, 14; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), 207, 250 and the references in Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, Les mages hellénisés (Paris: Soc. d'Éd. Les Belles Lettres, 1973), 2285-86. It is, however, possible, that the silent prayer of the Magi in the Liber apocryphus is meant to emphasize their mystical inclinations as well; cf. Widengren, Religionen, 211 with n. 16. The two explanations do not seem to exclude each other.


19. This is done by Geo Widengren, Religionen, 207, as well as by Wilhelm Bousset, Hauptprobleme, 380-381, who regard the Liber apocryphus as essentially Iranian in character.

of Noah by the name of Yonton makes his appearance. Yonton is said to have lived near the okeanos and taught his stellar wisdom to Nimrod. The latter one, however, as well as Balaam, is frequently identified with Zoroaster in Christian texts of the third to eighth centuries C.E. Over against this the allegedly Iranian elements in the Liber apocryphus are not present in Zoroastrian tradition proper; they most likely stem from a syncretistic environment such as is attested by the Mithraic mysteries, the Oracles of Hystaspes and similar phenomena.

It seems therefore safe to put the Liber apocryphus within a context of applying Hellenized Iranian lore to Christ, as can be observed from the second century onward. An elaborate version of the material contained within the present text can be found in the eighth-century anonymous Syriac work commonly known as the Chronicle of Zuqnin or "Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre." Since there are marked differences between the latter's account and the Liber apocryphus, a common source has been assumed, which was abbreviated by the Liber apocryphus and expanded by the Chronicle of Zuqnin.

In the Latin West the book exercised a certain influence through its incorporation into the Legenda aurea of Jacobus de Voragine (end of thirteenth century), who refers to its content, without mentioning the source, in the context of Epiphany. The East-Syrian (Nestorian) Church, which knows of twelve magi visiting the new-born Christ, owes this knowledge via the Chronicle of Zuqnin likewise to the Liber apocryphus or a related account.

Bibliography

EDITION


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25. Cf. Duchesne-Guillemin, in ZDMG 111 (1961): 472. The early-13th-century Nestorian bishop Solomon of Basra, who in his Book of the Bee has preserved similar traditions, most likely took them over from the Chronicle of Zuqnin and therefore cannot be regarded as an independent witness, as Bousset, Hauptprobleme, 379, 381 has it. Unlike earlier scholars, Brent Landau is not convinced that the Chronicle of Zuqnin substantially reworks an earlier version; cf. his Sages, 165-70. In that case the Syriac text contained in the chronicle would be identical with Liber apocryphus nomine Seth.

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Apocryphal book in the name of Seth—The mountain of victories. I heard some relate from a certain scripture, albeit not wholly reliable, which is nonetheless not destroying faith, but rather pleasing, that there was a certain tribe residing in the furthermost East, opposite the Ocean, among whom a certain scripture is passed on, written in the name of Seth, about the appearance of this star and in which way those presents were offered. (This book) has come down through generations of studious men, fathers relating it to their sons. Thus they chose themselves some twelve from among their most studious, who were lovers of celestial mysteries and put themselves to looking out for that star. If one of them died, his son or someone of his relatives who was found to be of the same inclinations, was put in place of the deceased. In their own language, however, they were called “magi,” because they glorified God in silence and with a low voice. Now these went up each single year after the hay harvest to some mountain in this area which in their language is called “mountain of victories,” having within it a kind of cave in the rock, fountains and choice trees of the most pleasant kind. After having gone up there and washing themselves they prayed and praised God in silence for three days. Thus they did in each single generation, always wondering whether in their own generation this blessed star might rise. Finally it appeared to them descending upon this mountain of victories, having within it the shape of a small boy and above it the likeness of a cross. Then (the star) spoke to them, taught them and commanded them to go to Judaea. On their way, however, the star preceded them for half a year and never was there food or drink lacking in their bags. The rest of the deeds now, which are told about them, are briefly laid down in the gospel. When they had returned, however, they kept serving and glorifying God with great zeal, as before, preached to everybody in their tribe and educated many. Later, when after the Lord’s resurrection the apostle Thomas came into that province, they adhered to him and, having been baptized by him, became co-workers in his proclamation.