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FOREWORD BY
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John and the Robber
A new translation and introduction

by Rick Brannan

Some teachings of Jesus in the canonical Gospels imply that it is either difficult or impossible for the rich to enter into the kingdom of God (Mark 10:17–25 par.; see also Luke 16:19–31). Some letters attributed to Paul appear to echo the difficulty (e.g., 1 Tim 6:6–19). Clement of Alexandria strives to settle the issue in his homily *Quis dives salvetur* ("Who Is the Rich One That Is Being Saved?"). At the end of the homily (§42.1–15) he provides an otherwise-unknown story of the apostle John commonly referred to as "St. John and the Robber." In the context of the homily, *John and the Robber* is the capstone, illustrating the degree to which the redemptive love of Christ reaches. If Christ, through John, can so completely redeem the robber in this story, surely the same Christ can redeem those who are rich, if they truly repent.

Contents
At the end of the homily *Quis dives salvetur*, Clement of Alexandria introduces the story of *John and the Robber* by emphasizing that it is not merely a story, but a true and genuine account of the apostle John. According to the account, John was released from his exile on Patmos after the death of Domitian and came to live in Ephesus (42.2). While in Ephesus, John would visit area churches to appoint bishops and resolve issues in each region. In one of these visits, perhaps to Smyrna,¹ John encountered a charismatic young man. After his business with the bishop, John entrusted this young man to the bishop (42.3). Then John departed Ephesus. The bishop did what John asked, ensuring the baptism of the young man (42.4). Considering the young man secure, the bishop put his attention elsewhere. The young man, now on his own, soon fell in with a band of robbers, was slowly corrupted, and renounced his faith. Due to his charisma and passion, he soon became the chief of the band of robbers (42.5–7). After a while, John returned to the bishop on regular business. After the business was conducted, John asked the bishop about the deposit he had left with him. The bishop was confused, thinking John was attempting to extort money from him. John clarified, and the bishop recounted the story of the young man's descent to thievery and subsequent alienation (42.8–9). John responded with action, mounting a horse and commandeering a guide to bring him to the young man (42.10–12). When he confronted the young man, John offered him salvation, heard his repentance, and restored him in the name of Christ (42.13–15).

Manuscripts and Versions
There are two primary manuscripts for *Quis div.*: El Escorial, Real Biblioteca de San Lorenzo, MS Ω III 19 (11th cent.); and Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, gr. 623 (16th cent.), the

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¹. See "Date and Provenance" below.
latter most likely a copy of the former. Each of these contains the account of *John and the Robber*, typically numbered in modern editions as section 42.

Eusebius also provides the account of *John and the Robber* in his *Ecclesiastical History* (3.23.1–19), acknowledging Clement of Alexandria as his source. The form of the story in Eusebius is clearly derived from Clement’s account. Further, some manuscripts of Maximus the Confessor’s scholia on the works of Dionysius the Areopagite contain the account in a form that is not likely based on Eusebius but derived from a manuscript of *Quis div.* In his edition of *Quis div.*, Barnard lists the following additional manuscripts of the scholia that contain the account:

Florence, Biblioteca di San Marco 686, fol. 214r (12th cent.)
Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, v. 32, fol. 217v (15th cent.)
Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Conv. Suppr. 202, fol. 190v (10th cent., with some supplied by a 15th-cent. hand)
Jerusalem, Bibliothek tou Patriarcheion, 414 (16th cent.)
London, British Library, Add. 18231, fol. 12r (972 CE)
Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, H 11 Sup. 2, fol. 212 (13th cent.)
Moscow, Russian State Library, 36 (10th cent.)
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canon. 97, fol. 221r (14th cent.)
Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 141, fol. 2v (12th cent.)
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 440, fol. 177r (12th cent.)
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Coislin 86 (12th cent.)
Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, gr. 374, fol. 242 (13/14th cent.)
Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, gr. 404, fol. 76 (11/12th cent.)
Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, Ottob. 326, fol. 1 (16th cent.)
Vatican, Biblioteca apostolica, Regin. 38, fol. 321 (11th cent.)
Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Theol. gr. 65 (olim 49), fol. 117r (14th cent.?)
Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Theol. gr. 110, fol. 197v (10th cent.)

The scholia of Maximus were translated into Latin around 860 CE. Barnard mentions two Latin manuscripts of the scholia that he consulted:

Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole 1526 (early 14th cent.)
Cambridge, University Library, Il–3–32 (13th cent.)

In addition to Eusebius and the scholia of Maximus, Antiochus of Palestine, writing in the seventh century, records the episode in his *Homily* 122, though he erroneously attributes it to Irenaeus. Anastasius of Sinai (also of the seventh century) correctly ascribes the story to Clement in his recording of the episode in his *Homilia in sextum Psalmum*.

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John and the Robber

There is no large disagreement between the various sources; they can all be associated with the version given by Clement in *Quis div.* 42 either directly or through Eusebius. Barnard was the first to use the superior Escorial manuscript as the basis of his edition of *Quis div.*; subsequent editors have followed his lead. 8

Date and Provenance

Given its place in *Quis div.*, the terminus ad quem for *John and the Robber* is within the lifetime of Clement (ca. 150–ca. 215)—the late second or early third century at the latest. As to Clement’s source for the episode, little is known. Based on cues within Clement’s version of the story, Butterworth supposes, “It was an oral tradition, then, which Clement heard and first put into writing.” 9

Clement of Alexandria displays hesitancy in stating the location of the story: “Therefore, having come also to a certain city not too far away, the name of which also is reported by some” (42.3). In doing so, he betrays knowledge of at least one tradition regarding the setting of the episode, 10 but may not consider it fully accurate or trustworthy. Fortunately, the *Chronicon Paschale*, dated to the first half of the seventh century, 11 preserves a note about *John and the Robber* in which Smyrna is mentioned as the location of the episode:

John the apostle and evangelist remained alive until the time of Trajan, Irenaeus records. But even Clement of Alexandria himself approves of the same, and that he went around Asia and neighboring lands appointing bishops and clerics. During this time the youth was placed by the apostle John with the bishop of Smyrna. After this chief robber became new, his repentance through Saint John was made known. 12

The *Chronicon Paschale* assigns a date of 101 CE to the account. As J. B. Lightfoot rightly points out, it is unknown whether the chronicler drew his information from a source also known but discounted by Clement, or whether Smyrna is conjecture on the chronicler’s part. 13 It is possible also that tradition has associated Smyrna with the account in the interim between Clement’s initial recording of the story and its mention in the *Chronicon*.

Further in Smyrna’s favor is the placing of John in Smyrna in a similar timeframe by the *Acts of John*. In chapters 56–57 of their edition, Junod and Kaestli include an account of John in Smyrna casting out demons from the sons of Antipatros. This follows mention in chapter 55 of the Smyrnaeans sending messengers to John asking him to come to them. 14 Conceptually, then, the tradition surrounding John allows for the events described in *John and the Robber* to take place in Smyrna.

If the *Chronicon Paschale* is correct in placing the events in Smyrna prior to 101 CE,

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then perhaps it is possible to identify one of the participants in the episode as Polycarp. He is known to have been bishop of Smyrna (Ignatius, Pol. Salutation) and is identified as a disciple of John by Irenaeus (Haer. 5.33.4). Irenaeus records also that Polycarp was appointed bishop of Smyrna by apostles in Asia (Haer. 3.3.4); according to Tertullian (Præscr. 31) and Jerome (Vit. ill. 17.1) he was appointed specifically by John. Based on these commonalities, Pierre Halloix understood the bishop in John and the Robber to be Polycarp.\(^{15}\) This is problematic, however, due to Clement's use of presbyteros ("elder," either a term for a liturgical office or simply an old man) in reference to the bishop. If "elder" is meant as a title, its usage reflects a conflation of terminology for "bishop" that is hard to reconcile. If meant as "old man," it is similarly troublesome. The Martyrdom of Polycarp has Polycarp claim "eighty-six years I have served him" (9.3). This statement is usually understood as Polycarp testifying to being eighty-six years old and having been a Christian from his birth. If this statement reflects Polycarp's actual age at his time of martyrdom (155–156 CE), his birth would have been around 70 CE, leaving little time for him to age enough to be referred to as presbyteros while John was still alive. If this information is anywhere near reflective of truth, Polycarp would be around thirty years old at John's death. Because of this discrepancy, Lightfoot posits Bucolus, a possible predecessor of Polycarp known from Life of Polycarp 3, as the bishop in the tale.\(^{16}\)

The identity of the robber is not known. If Bucolus is identified as the bishop, then it is possible the robber could be identified as Polycarp. If the statement about Polycarp's actual age at his time of martyrdom has any validity, then there is time available for him to have a history as a youth and a robber prior to his conversion. However, that same statement of age qualifies itself as the length of time Polycarp confessed Christianity, leaving no room for a nefarious past on the part of Polycarp.

**Relationship to the Acts of John**

The Acts of John, dated as early as 150 CE,\(^{17}\) contain a series of episodes supposedly from the life of the apostle John. No complete copy of the Acts of John is extant, but to date no manuscripts of the text have been found that contain the episode of John and the Robber.\(^{18}\) Some manuscripts do place John in Smyrna as an evangelist and miracle worker (Acts John 56–57). But this material emphasizes John's role as healer and perhaps even as establishing the church in Smyrna. Such a description does not fit with the role of John or the

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d, 1633), 1:569.


2:1096.


18. No reconstruction of the Acts of John has incorporated John and the Robber, including the editio princeps: Richard Adelbert Lipsius and Maximilien Bonnet, eds., *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (2 vols. in 3; Leipzig: H. Mendelsohn, 1891–1903). Notably, Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, include the complete *Virtutes Iohannis* as related material in their second volume (799–834) and this text does include the story. The Latin text is also available in John Allen Giles, *Codex apocryphus Novi Testamenti. The uncanonical

Gospels and other writings*, referring to the first ages of Christianity; in the original languages: collected togethet

from the editions of Fabricius, Thilo, and others (London: D. Nutt, 1852), 336–69; more recently, Italian

translations are available in Mario Erbeta, ed. and trans., *Gli apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento*, vol. 2: *Atti e legende* (Casale Monferrato, Italy: Marietti, 1975), 111–29; and Luigi Moraldi, ed. and trans., *Apocrifi del

Nuovo Testamento*, vol. 2: *Atti degli Apostoli* (Classici delle Religioni 5; Casale Monferrato, Italy: Piemme, 1994), 583–609.
state of the church in Smyrna as described in *John and the Robber*. In *John and the Robber*, the apostle is portrayed primarily as an itinerant administrator who appoints bishops and corrects problems in established churches, and the church in Smyrna appears to be fairly well established.

The story of *John and the Robber* does appear in what is known as the *Virtutes Iohannis*, book five of Pseudo-Abdias's *Virtutes apostolorum*. A sixth-century work, the *Virtutes* includes Latin translations of some material also found in the *Acts of John*, as well as other ancient traditions of John. A related sixth-century work, the *Passio Iohannis* of Pseudo-Melito, shares some material with the *Virtutes* but does not include *John and the Robber*. Some consider the *Virtutes* to be an expansion of the *Passio*, and others posit that *John and the Robber* came into the *Virtutes* through Rufinus’s Latin translation of Eusebius. Whatever the textual history, the sources all appear to derive ultimately from Clement. As Butterworth writes, “We know that Eusebius wrote it out in full, but Clement was his source; and all other copies or references came either from Clement direct or through Eusebius.”

**Translation**

The following translation is based on Otto Stählin’s edition of *Quis dives salvetur* 42. The verse divisions were established by Stählin.

**Bibliography**

**Editions and Translations**


**Studies**


John and the Robber

John arrives in Ephesus

42 1 Now so that you may have confidence when you have truly repented that a reliable hope of salvation remains for you, listen to a story (that is) not (actually) a story but a genuine account from John the apostle that was passed down and preserved in memory.

2 For after the demise of the tyrant,* (John) came from the island of Patmos to Ephesus. He would go away upon request, even to the neighboring regions of the gentiles, appointing bishops in some places, reconciling whole churches in other places, and in other places appointing one of those indicated by the spirit.

John, the bishop, and the young man

3 Therefore, having come also to a certain city not too far away, the name of which also is reported by some, b and having given resolution to the brethren in other things, in addition to everything else, he looked upon the newly appointed bishop. Upon seeing a young man, able in body, outwardly handsome and warm in spirit, he said, “I entrust this one to you with all eagerness before the church and the witness of Christ.” And (the bishop) accepted (the trust) and made every promise and he committed himself and solemnly testified again to the same things.

4 Then John left for Ephesus, and the elder c took the young man entrusted to him to his house and brought him up, protected him, cherished him, and finally enlightened him (through baptism). And after this he relaxed his great care and watchfulness, as he had set the seal of the Lord over the young man as the perfect guard.

The degeneration of the young man

5 But the young man received his liberty too soon and was joined together for mischief with certain idle, worthless (youths) of the same age (who were) accustomed to evil. First they strung him along with costly feasts, then sometimes at night they brought (him) along, going out to steal the clothes of bathers. Then they expected (him) to cooperate in something even greater.

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a. Likely Domitian. See Barnard, Homily, 71.

b. Perhaps Smyrna; see the introduction p. 364.

c. This word could be translated either as "presbyter," referring to the same person named as a bishop earlier, or it could be translated as "old man." The translation "elder" has been preferred, leaving the intent ambiguous as it is in the Greek.
6Now in a short time he became accustomed (to this) and because of his great nature was utterly changed. Just as an unbroken and strong horse on the straight path also bites the bit, he rushed even more quickly down to ruin. 7Finally, renouncing salvation in God, he intended nothing small but instead to do some great thing because he was ruined once and for all, (and) he expected to suffer the same as the rest. So he took these very youths and organized them into a band of robbers with himself as zealous chief robber—the most violent, most murderous, most dangerous of them all.

John's return
8Time passed and something happened to make it necessary to summon John. Now John, after setting in order the matters that he came to address, said, “So come on bishop, return the deposit to us which both I and Christ entrusted to you with the church, which you preside over, as witness.”

9Now the bishop was amazed at first, supposing that money, which he had not received, was being extorted (from him), and neither could he believe (such a charge) concerning what he did not have nor could he disbelieve John. But when John said, “I demand the youth and the soul of our brother,” the elder groaned deeply and even cried. He said, “That one is dead.” (John inquired,) “How, and what sort of death?” The bishop said, “He is dead to God. For he turned out wicked and utterly depraved, the chief robber, and now from the church he has taken to the hills with militants like himself.”

John's reaction
10The apostle, ripping apart his clothes and striking his head with a loud groan, said, “Indeed, I left a fine guard over the soul of this brother, but even now, put a horse at my disposal and get me a guide (to show) the way.” He rode just as he was, straight from the church.

11Arriving at the place, he was captured by the guard of the robbers, neither fleeing nor imploring (for release), but shouting, “For this I have come, take me to your chief.”

12The chief waited for a time, armed as he was, but upon approaching he recognized John and being shamed, he turned to flee. John pursued with all his might, forgetting his own age, crying out, 13“Why do you flee me, child, your own father, unarmed and old? Pity me, child, do not fear. You still have hope of life! I myself will give an account to Christ concerning you. If it is necessary, I will willingly endure your death, as the Lord did for us. For your life, I will give my own. Stand and believe; Christ has sent me.”

The young man's repentance and redemption
14Upon hearing this, first the young man stood looking down, then he threw away his weapons; then, trembling, he wept bitterly. Going to the old man, he

Mark 14:72 par.

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a. Some manuscripts have “the Savior.”
b. See p. 368 n. c.
c. Literally “naked.”
embaced (him). As he was able, he pleaded his case with groans and was baptized for the second time with tears, only hiding his right hand.\(^a\)

\(^a\)Now John, giving pledges (and) assurances that he had found pardon from his Savior, praying, kneeling, and kissing his right hand as having been purified by his repentance, brought (the youth) back to the church. Pleading with abundant prayers and joining together in continual fasting, and with various siren-like words, (John) calmed his mind. John did not leave his presence, as they say, before he had restored him to\(^b\) the church, giving a great example of true repentance and great example of regeneration, a trophy of resurrection that can be seen.

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\(^a\) Barnard, Homily, 75 n. 1 indicates "St. Chrysostom says his right hand was covered with blood," though Barnard provides no citation here and no mention in his Greek edition. In general, Chrysostom associates the notion of staining of the right hand with blood with taking responsibility for spilling the blood of others (Diab. 1.3; see also Hom. Rom. 7.22; Hom. 2 Cor. 3.7; Hom. Heb. 13.10). Such may be the thought here, that the robber is accepting responsibility for his actions and the blood he shed.

\(^b\) Or "he had set him over."