The Rebellion of Dimas
A new translation and introduction
by Mark G. Bilby

Rebellion of Dimas (Reb. Dimas; CANT 78.2) is a brief narrative inserted into a single manuscript of the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. This title does not appear in the Latin manuscript, but it is proposed here to avoid confusion with other apocryphal stories about the so-called "Good Bandit" (or "Bon larron" or "Gute Schächer"). Reb. Dimas furnishes one of several medieval backstories about the repentant criminal of Luke 23:40-43, this one depicting him as a Judean procurator’s adolescent son, who fails his father by allowing the Holy Family to cross the borders between Judea and Egypt where the father and son stand guard. This family heritage and border location make Reb. Dimas unique among the backstories of the bandit.

Contents
Following immediately after the description of the domestic and wild animals that accompany the Holy Family on their journey (Ps.-Mt. 19),¹ this episode begins (v. 1) by identifying Dimas as the bandit crucified to Jesus' right. He is of a royal family, the son of a Judean procurator. Following the command of Herod to slaughter all male infants, Dimas joins his father to guard the borders between Israel and Egypt so as not to allow anyone traveling with an infant to pass (2). One day, his father leaves on a routine patrol of the surroundings. At that opportune moment, the Holy Family approaches (3). Divine mercy moves Dimas to greet this family, and especially the infant Jesus, with care and affection, even as he proceeds dutifully with his careful inspection and inquiry (4). The inspection frightens Mary, but Joseph cleverly finds an opening in Dimas’s initial evaluation of them as poor (5). Joseph shows great deference to the young inspector and cunningly applauds his efforts to find the infant born to a royal, wealthy family. Joseph plays the convincing part of an impoverished migrant whose family is fleeing starvation in the hope of finding food. His rhetorical role-play succeeds in persuading Dimas to rule out the Holy Family as a legitimate political threat to Herod (6). Dimas instead opts for charity and mercy, supplies their needs, gives his blessing to the infant and his family, and allows them to cross the border unmolested. Even after he releases the Holy Family, Dimas feels a tremendous longing for Jesus and desires to rejoin him, but he remains at his post out of respect for his father (7). When his father returns, Dimas tries to explain to him why he let a male infant escape

¹ The numbering for Ps.-Mt. reflects the most recent critical edition by Gijsel, Pseudo-Matthaei evangelium, whose A-text and numbering is also used as the basis for the fairly recent English translation of Ps.-Mt. in AG, 73–113. See also the new translation and commentary by Brandon W. Hawk, The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (Early Christian Apocrypha 8; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019).
The Rebellion of Dimas

(8). His father furiously reprimands him for abdicating their sworn duty to Herod to detain all infants, rich and poor, foreign and domestic (9). Word of the failure spreads, and the procurator himself comes to trial (10). To avoid the charge of treason, he disowns his son. Forsaken, Dimas now embarks upon a vicious life of violent banditry (11). The short story then subsides and the narration of the Holy Family's Egyptian sojourn in Ps.-Mt resumes, specifically its account of the desert palm that bows at the command of the infant Jesus (Ps.-Mt. 20), followed not long after with the Egyptian temple idols bowing down to Mary and Jesus (Ps.-Mt. 23) and the Egyptian governor Afrodissius, his army, and friends following suit (Ps.-Mt. 24). The Afrodissius episode typically concludes the A-family of Ps.-Mt., but in this particular manuscript, the interpolated story of Dimas resurfaces as an expanded ending that describes how the Holy Family returns from Egypt (12) and then how Pontius Pilate came to rule the Jews and punish rebels (13). Finally the text describes how the same bandit was captured, made his confession to Jesus, was tortured together with him, and ultimately joined him in beatitude (14).

Manuscripts and Editions
Reb. Dimas is currently known in only one source, a twelfth-century Latin manuscript held by the library of the Grand Séminaire in Namur, Belgium, there designated as manuscript 80 (A'1a5 in Jan Gijssel's study of Ps.-Mt. manuscripts). It belongs to the A-family of Ps.-Mt. manuscripts, which represent the earliest textual tradition, going back to the eighth century. Namur lat. 80 is described in detail by Carine Billiard, who argues this manuscript originated in a French monastery. It is also featured significantly in a text-critical investigation of Ps.-Mt. by Guy Philippart. The only edition of the Latin text to appear in print thus far is by Maurice Geerard. The story about the bandit is found split into two segments, respectively found on folios 13v.15–15v.25 and 17r.25–17v.23, all written by the same elegant hand as the surrounding text. The first part of this interpolation falls between Ps.-Mt. 19 and 20 and thus the interpolation's verses in the translation below have supplemental labels in keeping with this placement (19.3.1; 19.3.2, etc.). The second, shorter part of the interpolation provides an expanded ending for Ps.-Mt. Its verses also have supplemental labels below in keeping with its placement (24.2.1; 24.2.2; 24.2.3).

Literary and Theological Importance
Generally speaking, Reb. Dimas is one of numerous apocryphal narratives about the so-called "Good Bandit." The chapter on the Hospitality of Dysmas in the first volume of this series provides a list and brief overview of several of these narratives. Among these legends, Reb. Dimas is most similar to two other stories from Western sources: the Irish Leabhar Breac and the narrative summary in Aelred of Rievaulx's De insti-
tutione inclusarum. All three of them picture the bandit as a young person who opts to be a righteous rebel against the ways or instructions of a wicked father. Reb. Dimas varies slightly in this respect, since the father is not depicted as an evil bandit but as a dutiful representative of a wicked, ruling authority. All three feature Mary in only a minor role, whereas many Egyptian and Byzantine legends elevate the character, power, and/or piety of Mary.7 In this cluster of three stories, the focus remains on the beauty and/or power of the infant Jesus. Like Reb. Dimas, Leabhar Breac places the encounter en route to Egypt, but its story is set on Mount Sinai rather than the border between Judea and Egypt. Reb. Dimas and Leabhar Breac also share the uncommon detail about the Holy Family’s poor clothing. These three texts together reflect an elevation of youthful chivalry and virtue, including conscientious disobedience. One wonders whether they were intended to carry an implicit call for the young to leave family, join the Crusades, and become a friend of Jesus in and around the Holy Land.

Reb. Dimas also reflects numerous features common among broader clusters of literature devoted to the Good Bandit. It uses a slight variant (Dimas) of the most common name for the repentant bandit Dymas/Dismas.8 Apocryphal texts featuring that name, and even some without any name for the bandit,9 likely aim to promote devotion to the bandit as a saint and invite his followers to imitate his devotion and care for the Holy Family. Like at least four other versions of the bandit’s story, it comprises a self-contained interpolation found within a major collection of apocryphal traditions.10 All of these interpolations draw a consistent, intentional parallel between the bandit and the bending date-palm: both show deference to Jesus and/or Mary, both nourish the Holy Family, and both are ultimately planted in paradise. Like most Byzantine and Medieval Latin stories, Reb. Dimas has no interest in furnishing a backstory for the wicked bandit of Luke 23:39, something more typical of originally Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, and Ethiopic stories.11 Reb. Dimas also follows many of the other bandit stories in associating his conversion with his vision of Jesus, whether individually or together with Mary.

Dimas’s role as a procurator’s son is unique among stories of the bandit. The Judean-Egyptian border location here is also unique, given that other stories locate the bandit’s early life either in Judea/Palestine or Egypt, or, as in Leabhar Breac, Sinai. By positioning him on the border, Reb. Dimas may be attempting to invent a plausible explanation of how the bandit could participate both in the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt as well as the Judean crucifixion of Jesus. Another feature unique to Reb. Dimas is that the aged Joseph, rather than the infant Jesus or mother Mary, takes initiative and helps move the plot. To put it differently, among apocryphal stories of the bandit, Reb. Dimas has a unique tendency to take its infancy narrative cues from Matthew’s

9. E.g., Ps.-Chrysostom, Holy Preparation (CPG 4877) and Ps.-Ephrem, Holy Preparation (CPG 4145.22; 4162.3).

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visionary Joseph and royally revered Jesus more than from Luke's priestly/prophetic Mary and Wunderkind Jesus.

Language, Date, and Provenance
The only known source for this story, Namur lat. 8o, is in Latin, and there is no reason to think it originally existed in another language. The manuscript dates to the late twelfth century, providing a terminus ante quem. It is difficult to set a precise terminus post quem. Earlier Ps.-Mt. A-family manuscripts date back as far as the eighth century, but they do not contain this interpolation.

There are several hints that Reb. Dimas responds to traditions seen in the Vis. Theo. and/or the Arabic recension of Hom. Rock. An interesting juxtaposition can be made between the emphasis placed on the Holy Family’s rich garments in Vis. Theo. and (Arab.) Hom. Rock in contrast to their filthy garments in Reb. Dimas. In the Eastern stories, the opulent garments are stolen, while in Reb. Dimas the filthy garments are cited as a reason to leave the Holy Family alone. Another interesting contrast suggestive of critical appropriation is that the infant Jesus is (temporarily) kidnapped in Vis. Theo. and (Arab.) Hom. Rock, while in Reb. Dimas Mary’s fear of her son being kidnapped proves unfounded. Despite this contrast, these texts still share an emphasis on Mary’s fear. And Reb. Dimas and (Arab.) Hom. Rock both describe the bandits explicitly as agents of Herod, though the bandits in (Arab.) Hom. Rock are soldiers of Herod, rather than a procurator and son following orders from Herod. Even if Reb. Dimas is indeed dependent on Vis. Theo. and (Arab.) Hom. Rock, the difficulty of dating those texts offers little assurance about the original date of Reb. Dimas.

A twelfth-century origin is suggested by the similarities (but not clear dependencies) Reb. Dimas shares with De institutione inclusarum of Aelred of Rievaulx (mid-12th cent.) and the Leabhar Brec (12th–14th cent.). The story was certainly well known enough by the fourteenth century to be incorporated into an extended conflation of Dismas legends in French by Jean d’Outremeuse. That early reception, as


14. Vis. Theo. is difficult to date, but it could have been composed prior to the sixth century. See Fatin Morris Guirguis, “The Vision of Theophilus: Resistance Through Orality Among the Persecuted Copts” (PhD diss., Florida Atlantic University, 2010), 287. The earliest Coptic fragment of the text is dated to the tenth or eleventh century. See Alin Suciu, “Me, This Wretched Sinner: A Coptic Fragment from the Vision of Theophilus Concerning the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt,” VC 67 (2013): 436–50 at 443. The originally Coptic Hom. Rock dates to the sixth or seventh century. See Rémi Gounelle, “Une légende apocryphe relatant la rencontre du Bon Larron et de la Sainte Famille en Égypte (BH G 2119y),” AnBoll 121 (2003): 241–72 at 244 n. 2. But the Coptic version lacks many of the parallels noted above. Its Arabic recension is difficult to date, since its manuscripts are of more recent vintage (17th–20th centuries).

15. Jean d’Outremeuse, Ly myrere des histors, chronique de Jean des Preis dit d’Outremeuse (6 vols.; ed. Adolphe Borgnet; Corps des Chroniques Liégeois; Brussels: Hayez, 1864–1880), 1:1355–62. The first mention of Dismas locates him among Herod’s armies guarding the border outside Bethlehem and as the one who grants the Holy Family safe passage (p. 355). Later he appears as one of twelve thieves, the one who allows the infant Jesus to be bathed in a fountain in his garden (p. 360).
well as the composition of Namur lat. 80 in a French monastery (as Billiard argues), suggests a French provenance.

Translation

Jacques Poucet used Geerard’s edition as the basis for an online French translation of several excerpts, which are interspersed with Poucet’s own running summaries. The translation here is apparently the first complete translation in a modern language. It is based on my autoptic analysis and fresh diplomatic edition of Namur lat. 80, and it includes footnotes where my edition varies from that of Geerard.

Sigla

G Diplomatic edition by Maurice Geerard

N Namur, Bibliothèque du Séminaire, lat. 80 (late 12th cent.)

Bibliography

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS


STUDIES

Bilby, Mark G. As the Bandit Will I Confess You: Luke 23, 39–43 in Early Christian Interpretation. Turnhout: Brepols; Strasbourg: University of Strasbourg, 2013. (Further bibliography may be found here.)


The Rebellion of Dimas

Introduction: Dimas's background and duty

Moreover, Dimas was the bandit—as will be read in what follows—hanged at the Lord's right side. He sprung from the land of promise, from a free class, evidently from a royal family, as the son of a certain procurator. During the youth of the Lord's incarnation, in that very crisis of Herodian cruelty against boys, he was ordered by the king to guard the borders with his father, lest some boy brought from somewhere escape some distance away.

Providence leads the Holy Family to Dimas

Yet Joseph, just as the Gospel says, was warned in a dream by an angel to take the boy and mother and flee to Egypt. On that very day, the father and son had gone outdoors, and where a plentiful crowd was accustomed to come, they watched the crossing. The father said to the son, "Sit here. I will wander all around. After I inspect the crossroads, I will return to you. Watch carefully, lest I be found in contempt if someone escapes." It happened by God's providence that he quickly wandered away, [and] behold, the son saw Joseph coming with his belongings and Mary holding in her arms a boy, yet also poorly outfitted.

Dimas is moved to compassion for the Holy Family

Converted to a pious disposition through the mercy of God, he drew near and intently looked at the boy. While they faltered in their fear, he greeted them in a most officious way, saying, "May the Lord be with you and guide your journey, because though you all appear to be poor, you also possess a most distinguished descendant." Obviously, the very fount of goodness and compassion discerned him and banished his hardness of heart lest he be troublesome to them.

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a. N has no formal title (inline or glossed) for this interpolated story. The story is woven neatly into the prose between Ps.-Mt. 19 and 20 without a break, marginal explanation, or the illuminated red titular script seen elsewhere in the MS (e.g., 16, 14, 17). The only internal hint at the interpolation is that the capital D in its first word, "Dimas," is slightly larger than typical of the MS.

b. A clever double entendre wherein the bandit's assessment of the infant Jesus also prophetically foreshadows his auspicious future.

c. I.e., the infant Jesus.
The Rebellion of Dimas

Dimas rationalizes making an exception
4(19.3.4) Nevertheless, attempting to understand, he said, “It makes sense, where you come from, who you are, and where you are heading, or whatever reason you are wearying such an elegant boy with your journey. Indeed, the king's order we have is not to allow boys to escape. Yet perhaps on that account such a wonderful face is being carried away, that when the time is right, he will return and rule. If I will have seen you fleeing from the ruler's hand and hiding the boy, you must think somewhat against his empire [and] will heed a different one.”

Mary's fear and Joseph's cunning response
5(19.3.5) As he said these things, Mary, seeing that he was standing nearby, so attentively inspecting the boy, was choked up in her insides, fearing lest he snatch (Jesus) away violently. Joseph responded to them. “Lord,” he said, “your lord, a powerful king, discovered by report that a powerful king had been born, and fearing the loss of his dominion, he appointed you the guarding of boys. Therefore, it is fitting that you all watch out for the sons of the rich men of this region who are capable of begrudging his superiority at a later time. Yet, when you see people squalid in misery, it is not appropriate to reproach them with these talks. Indeed, how is it possible to consider superfluous matters when someone wearied by several troubles wishes to perish? And it is certainly quite undistinguished for an adolescent of such exceptional, inborn quality to wish to ridicule with misfortunes the oppressed, whom he ought, if he has good sense, to refresh with consolations. Great people manage lofty matters sensibly, and to guard the peace they do not desist rooting out those they see opposed to them. I who have lived so long was a craftsman. To that extent a hand is idle, a home is empty. I valued what is most profitable. Please [allow] me and my partner to manage to find some food quickly, we who come from the region of Galilee, that is, from the city of Nazareth. We were exiled from there, coming to your borders. Driven by starvation, we are compelled to cross over. Indeed, we have heard from destitute persons who move around by begging that toward the borders of Egypt, whether by griping at doors or doing some work, they found abundantly as regards survival. Consider, lord, what you are asking, because we surely want to arrive there so that we and this boy whom you discern will have the strength to survive.”

Dimas generously grants passage to the Holy Family
6(19.3.6) Hearing that inasmuch as they were migrants, it would not be reasonably possible for them to be hostile, he brought out a little something, staring at him. Admiring, blessing and magnifying the infant, interspersing other sweet words for the parents, and having nothing but love's exceeding devotion, he permitted [them] to leave. Having been released, they hastened to get quickly through this trouble, fearing defeat from the rear.

a. There is a brief lacuna in the text, apparently an erasure by the scribe.
Dimas deliberates what to tell his father

7(19.3.7) The young man returned whence he had come, expecting his father's return. Meanwhile, he reconsidered and ardently longed for the boy's charm, the sight of whom could not be sated. As his father delayed, he was struck motionless. He disparaged himself, because he had released them so quickly. His mind was seized by different thoughts, not knowing whether to await his father or to follow the boy. Respect for his father won out.

Dimas cautiously explains what happened

8(19.3.8) When he returned, he questioned him with an oath what he had seen. Both hiding the secret and avoiding a lie, he responded, "Absolutely nothing except the poorest rustic, and a weak woman carrying a wailing boy, wrapped in filthy rags. Because I saw they were beggars, knowing that such would not concern the lord, especially because they were pilgrims, I permitted them to go."

The enraged father reprimands Dimas

9(19.3.9) His father's anger greatly flared. He was to slit the throats of boys not only of this region, but also foreigners. The father said to him, "Have you not done the worst? Did you not hear the lord instructing me what I now tremble to recall, that if I love life and whatever I possess, by no means should I dismiss either a rich or poor man, either a native or a foreigner? The one in fact whom I heard appointed the butchering of his own true son and domestics—how would he not kill foreigners also? What will I do now? Bound by oath, I will not be able to lie. If he convicts me of treason, he will kill me in place of the boys."

The father is put on trial and disowns Dimas

10(19.3.10) He asked the hour when he dismissed them, and bereft of the hope of finding them, he withdrew sad and terrified. When at last the massacre of boys was savagely finished, he did not dare to come voluntarily, but instead was summoned before the king, and he was found guilty of neglect for the empire. When he was held liable for high treason, he recalled the sequence of what had happened. When he was supported with their help, he quickly distanced such a crime from himself. Lest he be capitally punished for his son, he completely disowned him.

Dimas falls into a life of banditry

11(19.3.11) What finally happened?b Expelled from his father's house and neighborhood, he commenced engaging in banditry, and it became a tribulation, because he was hardened with weapons and perversity, and under the cloak of his parentage, the people did not dare to resist him. If ever he came

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a. On Herod's killing of his son Antipater II, see Josephus, Ant. 17.7.1; on his killing of other members of his household and court, 17.2.4.

b. A later scribal hand wrote Dimas nempe ("Dimas of course") in the margin here to clarify that this part of the story is about him and not his father.
back to himself, it was while thinking on the king’s such immense shame.\(^a\) He would continue faithfully a little, because he would recollect that he alone, in consideration of piety, had disregarded his empire. Now then, let us return to the order of what happened.\(^b\)

**The Holy Family returns and Jesus grows up**

\(^{12}(24.2.1)\) Not much time later an angel said to Joseph, “Return to the land of Judah, for Herod is deceased. Archelaus his son has succeeded him in rule.” While he ruled for a few years, Joseph, along with the boy and mother, returned. Passing over the land of Judah for fear of Archelaus, they returned to Nazareth. There our Lord Jesus Christ, for many years in submission to his parents, was growing in age, full of grace and truth.

**Pilate’s rise to power**

\(^{12}(24.2.2)\) King Archelaus was truly hostile to the Jews. By their appeal, Augustus summoned him to Rome and condemned him, convicted of the charges presented, to exile in Gallic Vienna.\(^c\) At last Pontius Pilate, sent by Augustus, accepted rule. He, in order to placate peace with the Jews, was eager to make reforms. Sending out his agents all around, he partly overthrew those who were seditious by hanging them.

**Conclusion: The bandit joins Jesus in punishment and beatitude**

\(^{14}(24.2.3)\) Wherefore it happened in the years that followed that our Lord Jesus Christ, because he had been doing miracles, was jealously accused by the Jews. By false witnesses scrutinizing him, he was unjustly condemned. But the bandit\(^d\) remembered above as previously described was the cause of the Savior’s exile at infancy. After he had perpetrated crimes for many years, he fully endured the traps of Pilate himself. For his guilt he came to the gibbet. But, by his humble confession to his partner in punishment, he who was being tortured for his guilt, finding mercy beyond what he had asked, became his partner in bliss.

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\(^a\) Apparently a reference to Herod the Great as described in the Matthean slaughter of the innocents (Matt 2:16). Herod’s shameful decree reminds Dimas of his righteous civil disobedience.

\(^b\) The first part of the interpolation ends here. The Ps.-Mt. narrative resumes with the story of the desert palm bowing to Jesus (Ps.-Mt. 20), the Egyptian temple idols bowing to Mary and Jesus (Ps.-Mt. 25), and the Egyptian governor Afrodisius and his cohort doing the same (Ps.-Mt. 24).

\(^c\) About Archelaus being exiled to Vienna, see Josephus, *J.W.* 2.7.3 and *Ant.* 17.13.2.

\(^d\) While the name “Dimas” does not appear in the main text of the second part of the interpolation, the plot does naturally connect back to the first part. Apparently in an effort to connect the two parts and two main characters of the interpolation explicitly, a later scribal hand wrote “Dimas” in the margin as a gloss on the term “bandit” here.