

“AS GOD COUNSELLED SOCRATES:”
COMMISSION NARRATIVES
IN COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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This essay deals with a particular aspect of the interaction of religions in the first centuries of the Common Era: divine commissioning. Comparing religions of the late Roman Empire poses various methodological challenges. Most traditional religions of Graeco-Roman Antiquity were first of all cults, which can be described in terms of rites and institutions. Mythology was also important, but it was transmitted in a number of different ways (history, poetry, fine arts, etc.) rather than controlled by religious institutions. The interpretation of mythology, together with the discussion of the great issues of life, lay outside the realm of religion. Philosophers rather than religious specialists discussed various religious themes, such as the nature of God. Judaism was a complex national, cultural and ethnic phenomenon, which could be lived in a number of ways in a number of contexts. It was text-centred and had the tendency to involve the entirety of life, rather than being limited to certain cultic events. Finally, in early Christianity a single institution attempted to coordinate mythology, rituals, social life, philosophical thought, and ethics. Although Christian tradition was partly cumulative, as was rabbinical thought, with time it also developed the concept that some Christian texts (and traditions) were harmful and forbidden. More than other religions of the period, it was divided from the beginning by fierce philosophical debates.

The path that I have chosen in this study is new in more than one way: (1) I do not compare religious motifs or elements across various religious traditions of late Antiquity. Instead, I select a central theme that recurs in a large section of the existing body of ancient literature, and which is probably also a central theme of human thought in general: divine commissioning. The theme of divine commissioning transcends the boundaries of what one calls “religion” in Antiquity: in Greece, it was part of the philosophical tradition; in Egypt and the Near East a mythological theme; in Judaism it appears in historical narratives; whereas in the Christian context it was a *topos* of biography. (2) In the final part of the essay, insights from cognitive science will be used to explain the widespread appearance and manifold variations of the theme in the literary traditions under discussion.

1. STORIES OF DIVINE COMMISSION

In a well-known episode of the *Book of Acts*, Saul the young Pharisee, zealous persecutor of Jesus' followers, is defeated by a heavenly vision on the Damascus road.¹ From this moment, Saul, later called Paul, becomes the protagonist of *Acts*.² Luke repeats the story of Paul's divine commission twice in the frame of Paul's forensic apologies in the last chapters of the book (22:1-21; 26:2-29).

Paul's commission is the first in a series of apostolic commission narratives in the canonical and apocryphal Acts.³ The recently published Coptic Bodmer Papyrus XLI reports a different version of the commission of Paul, in which Judas, the Lord's brother, also called the "blessed prophet," plays a major role.⁴ The *Acts of John* (late 2nd c.) begins with a commission narrative as well, and John reports his commission in the first person twice in his speeches in the rest of the book. The first story (c. 18) contains a vision in which Jesus sends John to Ephesus; the second narrative (c. 88-89) is set in the frame of a small gospel narrative; finally, the third account (c. 113) concentrates on John's encratism and spiritual development. The *Acts of Thomas* (early 3rd c.) reports the apostle's resistance to going to India (c. 1), which was allotted to him as a missionary field. Jesus appears (c. 2-3) in a human form on the marketplace, and sells Thomas as a slave to an Indian merchant. In chapter 3 of the *Acts of Philip* (late 4th c.) we read how Philip entreats his fellow-apostles to endow him with their power so that he "may go and preach the gospel, and may be counted among those who realised the power that is in them."⁵ In the longer text of the *Acts of Philip*, the apostle's commission is sealed by a peculiar encounter with Jesus in the form of an eagle.⁶ *Acts of Philip* 8 contains another commission story, where Philip, like Thomas in his Acts, protests against his allotment; Mariamne mediates between Jesus and the apostle, and she becomes appointed as Philip's companion.

The Coptic *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* (late 4th century) can be read as one long commission narrative. Its plot is quite different from the other apostolic Acts,

¹ *Acts* 9:1-31; for Saul as a Pharisee, see *Acts* 26:5.

² Saul is identified as Paul first in *Acts* 13:9.

³ Cf. I. Czachesz, *Commission Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts* (Leuven 2007). For the date and provenance of the oldest Apocryphal Acts see: J.N. Bremmer, "The Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, (ed. *idem*, Leuven 1997) 149-70; for the major Acts and the *Acts of Philip*: F. Bovon, "Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of Apostles," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003) 165-94; for the *Acts of John* see recently: I. Czachesz, "Eroticism and Epistemology in the *Apocryphal Acts of John*," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 60/1 (2006) 59-72; for the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*: I. Czachesz, "Lithargoel in the Acts of Peter and the Twelve," in *The Wisdom of Egypt* (eds. A. Hilhorst and G.H. van Kooten, Leiden 2005) 485-502; for the *Acts of Barnabas* and the *Acts of Titus*: Czachesz, *Commission Narratives*, chs. 8-9.

⁴ R. Kasser and Ph. Luisier, "Le Papyrus Bodmer XLI en Édition Princeps l'Épisode d'Éphèse des *Acta Pauli* en Copte et en Traduction," *Le Muséon* 117 (2004) 281-384. For an English translation with a brief commentary, see Czachesz, *Commission Narratives*, 89-90.

⁵ Text in F. Amsler, *et al.*, *Actes de l'apôtre Philippe* (Turnhout 1996).

⁶ I. Czachesz, "The Eagle on the Tree: A Homeric Motif in Early Christian and Jewish Literature," in *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome: Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of A. Hilhorst* (eds. G.P. Luttikhuisen and F. García-Martínez, Leiden 2003) 87-99.

inasmuch as it reports no particular deeds of the apostles apart from their commission through Jesus, who appears in the mysterious figure of Lithargoel. The *Acts of Barnabas* (5th c.) begins with the commission of John Mark, who becomes the real protagonist in much of the book. In the *Acts of Titus*, God commissions the hero already in Jesus' earthly life.⁷ Titus witnesses Jesus' deeds and crucifixion, is counted among the one hundred and twenty believers mentioned in *Acts* 1:15, receives ordination from the apostles, and accompanies Paul on his missionary journeys until he becomes the apostle of Crete.

2. A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

Biblical scholarship on commission narratives has concentrated largely on their literary form, and has therefore often failed to analyse the stories as parts of larger biographical plots.⁸ A notable exception is Klaus Baltzer, who relied on Egyptian parallels to examine the prophetic biographies of the Old Testament.⁹ More than half a century ago, Olof Gigon collected a number of ancient stories about how Greek philosophers were called to the practice of philosophy.¹⁰ More recently, Arthur J. Droge highlighted the parallels between some late Hellenistic call stories about philosophers and the Gospel narratives about Jesus calling his disciples.¹¹ Neither Gigon nor Droge paid attention to the literary function of these "call narratives", or examined them in the larger context of biographical literature. Their work nevertheless suggests that one cannot restrict the literary context of commission narratives in the apostolic Acts to Near Eastern and Jewish parallels. Finally, Richard Goulet and Eric Junod compared the apocryphal Acts with the philosophers' biographies in late Antiquity, particularly emphasising the differences, but they did not focus on the commission narratives.¹²

⁷ Text in F. Halkin, "La légende crétoise de Saint Tite," *Analecta Bollandiana* 79 (1961) 241-56, repr. in idem, *Études d'épigraphie grecque et d'hagiographie byzantine* (London 1973). English translation in R.I. Pervo, "The Acts of Titus: A Preliminary Translation with an Introduction, Notes and Appendices," *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta 1996) 455-82.

⁸ Cf. N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965) 296-323; T.J. Mullins, "New Testament Commission Forms, Especially in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976) 603-14; B.J. Hubbard, "Commissioning Stories in Luke Acts: A Study of Their Antecedents, Form and Content," *Semeia* 8 (1977) 103-31.

⁹ K. Baltzer, *Die Biographie der Propheten* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1975).

¹⁰ O. Gigon, "Antike Erzählungen über die Berufung zur Philosophie," *Museum Helveticum* 3 (1946) 1-21.

¹¹ A.J. Droge, "Call Stories in Greek Biography and the Gospels," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1983 Seminar Papers* (ed. K.H. Richards, Atlanta 1983) 245-57; "Call stories (Gospels)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D.N. Freedman, New York 1992) 1: 821-23. Droge quotes call stories from Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*; the *Lives of the Sophists*; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. All of his texts are from the AD 3rd century.

¹² R. Goulet, "Les vies de philosophes dans l'antiquité tardive et leur portée mystérieuse," in *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres* (eds. F. Bovon, et al., Genève 1981) 161-208; E. Junod, "Les vies de philosophes et les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres poursuivent-ils un dessein similaire?," *ibid.*, 209-19.

The earliest Greek biography is Plato's *Apology of Socrates*.¹³ It is remarkable that this early biographical text (around 389 BC)¹⁴ contains a story of Socrates' divine commission. In his first defence speech (21), Socrates reports that his friend Chaerephon asked the Delphi oracle whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. Pythia answered there was none. This was the beginning of Socrates' philosophical conversations with the Athenians. The story of the Chaerephon-oracle is a recurring theme of the first defence speech of *Apology* (17a-35d). The *narratio* of the oracle supplies affirmative arguments for the *refutatio* (refutation of opposing views) in the speech.¹⁵ Towards the conclusion of the first defense, Socrates refers back to his divine commission (33c): "This duty I have accepted, as I said, in obedience to God's commands given in oracles and dreams and in every other way that any other divine dispensation has ever impressed a duty upon man."¹⁶

In his discourse dedicated to the "call of the Cynic" (*Discourses* 3.22), Epictetus warns philosophers not to undertake the task of philosophy unless God advises him to do so. In another passage (3.21.19), Epictetus overtly refers to the divine call experienced by Socrates:

[O]ne ought to have [...] above all the counsel of God advising him to occupy this office: as God counselled Socrates to take the office of examining and confuting men, Diogenes the office of rebuking men in a kindly manner, and Zeno that of instructing men and laying down doctrines.

Epictetus' reference shows that Socrates' divine call was common knowledge in the AD first century. Socrates was also a popular figure in early Christianity.¹⁷ This popularity justifies us in our attempt to compare the use of the Chaerephon oracle in the *Apology* with the function of Paul's commission story in *Acts*. Among the three versions that Luke offers (*Acts* 9; 22; and 26), Paul reports his experience on the Damascus road twice in the frame of his apologies: first before the Jerusalem crowd (c. 22), then before the proconsul Festus and King Agrippa (c. 26). The word "apology" occurs eight times (as a noun or a verb) in *Acts* 22-6.¹⁸ In comparison to Plato's work, one could call these chapters the Lucan *apologia Pauli*. Paul's apology contains three defence speeches (22:3-21, 24:10-21, 26:2-29), in two

¹³ This is the starting point of A. Dihle, *Studien zur griechischen Biographie* (Göttingen 1970²) 18 and passim. His view is supported by P. Cox, *Biography in late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley 1983) 7. For recent attempts at defining ancient biography, see A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge 1971) 102-03; *Portraits* (eds. M.J. Edwards and S. Swain, Oxford 1997) 1-2.

¹⁴ M.C. Stokes, *Plato: Apology of Socrates* (Warminster 1997) 4.

¹⁵ Cf. E. de Strycker and S.R. Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates* (Leiden 1994) 22, 60.

¹⁶ Trans. H. Tredennick in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (eds. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Princeton 1963²) 19.

¹⁷ Scholars have often remarked that Luke alludes to Socrates in *Acts* 17; cf. J.C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting* (London 1970²) 160-71. Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus* 12, reports that the Christians (whom he depicts as rather single minded) called Peregrinus, when he was in prison, "the new Socrates". For Socrates with the second and third century Fathers, see K.W. Döring, *Exemplum Socratis* (Wiesbaden 1979) 143-61. For the imitation of Socrates in Eusebius' *Life of Origen* 6.3.7, see Cox, *op. cit.*, 87.

¹⁸ *Acts* 22:1: *apologia*; *Acts* 26:1: *apologeisthai*; cf. *Acts* 24:10, 25:8, 25:16, 26:1,2,24.

of which Paul tells his commission story. In the rhetorical framework of these speeches, the *narratio* of the Damascus road serves as the most important argument.¹⁹

When telling their stories of divine commission, both Socrates and Paul shift responsibility for their deeds upon God, a rhetorical technique nicely called *metastasis* by George Kennedy.²⁰ Like Socrates, Paul talks about God's command to him: "Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned (commanded) to you to do."²¹ Socrates reminds his listeners to his total devotion to the cause which the god entrusted to him (23b-c): "This occupation has kept me too busy to do much either in politics or in my own affairs. In fact, my service to God has reduced me to extreme poverty." Paul also claims he "was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." Or, as he earlier stated to the Ephesian elders: "I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus."²²

The *Book of Acts* is characterised by the use of Jewish Scripture as well as Greek literary patterns. It is evident that many motifs in Paul's commission story draw on Jewish literary examples.²³ However, given the overall Hellenistic influence in *Acts*, it is very likely that the example of Socrates, so well-known in the Greek culture of the AD first century, caught the attention of the author when composing the account of Paul's trial. It is also possible that the call stories collected later by Diogenes Laertius (AD 3rd century) were already in circulation in the first century. Nevertheless, the emblematic figure of Socrates, his popularity with other Christian authors, and the rhetorical use of divine call suggest that Luke both knew and used the *Apology*.

As I have argued elsewhere, the *Acts of John* also relied on a Platonic model.²⁴ At this place I will only summarise the main conclusions of that interpretation. The second and third commission narratives in the *Acts of John* contain a Platonic epistemology. Chapters 88-89 together with the subsequent gospel narrative remind one especially of the *Symposium*. The bodily intimacy between Jesus and John becomes the source of the disciple's exclusive knowledge about his master. In those chapters, as well as in chapters 113-114, John accomplishes the ascent to absolute beauty recommended by Diotima in *Symposium* 201d-212b. Both texts use the topics of fondness, intimacy, and celebration to approach the theme of spiritual perfection. Socrates teaches the company at the banquet how to ascend to the realm of absolute beauty. Jesus, after manifesting himself in different ways to his disciples, not least during common meals, finally lets them participate in the ritual dance (which he calls 'a mystery' in *c.* 101). Socrates is willing to share his spiritual

¹⁹ Czachesz, *Commission Narratives*, 73-4, 80-1.

²⁰ G.A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill 1984) 134.

²¹ *Acts* 22:10. Luke's wording, *tetaktai soi poiēsai*, is very close to Plato's *emoi de touto... prostetaktai hupo tou theou pratein* in *Apology* 33c4-5.

²² *Acts* 26:19 and 20:24, respectively.

²³ For example, 2 *Maccabees* 3.24-40; 4 *Maccabees* 1-14, *Isaiah* 6. Cf. H. Windisch, "Die Christusepiphonie vor Damaskus und ihre religionsgeschichtliche Parallelen," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 31 (1932) 1-23.

²⁴ Czachesz, "Eroticism and Epistemology."

beauty with Alcibiades to help him to achieve excellence. Jesus, in turn, reveals his polymorphic body to John, and finally shows him the cosmic vision of the cross of light so that he might hear “what a disciple has to learn from the master, and a human from God” (c. 97). An idea of twofold initiation is present in the *Acts of John* as well as in the *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, it emerges as a distinction between the “Lesser” and “Greater Mysteries”, only the latter leading to the vision of the beauty. In the *Acts of John* the first level includes miracles and ethical teaching, while the second concerns the final revelation.²⁵

Like the Lucan *Acts*, the *Acts of John* also reports two of the commission stories, those with a Platonic character, in the frame of John’s speeches. These speeches, however, are not apologies; they have little or no rhetorical design. It seems that the commission stories of the *Acts of John* did not imitate Paul’s conversion in the Lucan *Acts*. The author of the *Acts of John* drew on Plato independently of Luke; the former mainly used the *Symposium*, the latter the *Apology*.

Other commission stories in the apocryphal Acts do not typically show a Platonic influence. Thomas’ commission in his Acts (c. 1-3) draws on Jewish narratives of God’s overcoming the reluctant prophet; but the motif of a hero sold into slavery is typical of Greek novels. The *Acts of Philip* used the Lucan *Acts* but took the figure of Mariamne from the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Gospel of Philip*, or other Gnostic texts; Jesus’ appearance as an eagle reminds one of Homer, *Paraleipomena Jeremion* and the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*.²⁶ The *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* has parallels with the *Gospel of John*, the *Acts of Philip*, and Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*; in general, however, the story is quite original and basically differs from all the other commission narratives that are known to us. Although the later apocryphal Acts draw substantially on the canonical *Book of Acts*, their commission stories are not mere imitations of Lucan passages. Especially the *Acts of Titus* incorporates several elements of Greek philosophical biographies and early Christian hagiography.²⁷

3. THE CASTING OF LOTS AS AN EXAMPLE

It seems difficult to identify any continuous line of tradition or a common source behind those narratives. The tradition of the apostles’ dividing the world by casting lots is an illuminating example. The episode appears first in the *Acts Thomas* 1,²⁸ and later in a number of texts, including *Acts of Philip* 8.²⁹ Scholars have suggested

²⁵ P. Lalleman, *The Acts of John. A Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism* (Leuven 1998) 52-53, also writes about two stages, and suggests that the second level was added at the final redaction of the text.

²⁶ Czachesz, “The Eagle on the Tree”.

²⁷ For a detailed analysis of those literary parallels, see Czachesz, *Commission Narratives*, chs. 5-9.

²⁸ J.D. Kaestli, “Les scènes d’attribution des champs de mission et de départ de l’apôtre dans les Actes apocryphes,” in *Les Actes apocryphes des apôtres* (eds. F. Bovon, et al., Genève 1981) 249-64 at 250.

²⁹ *Martyrium Andreae prius* 2 (M. Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum* 2/1 [Leipzig 1898] 46); *Acts of Andrew and Matthias* 1 (D.R. MacDonald, *Acts of Andrew* [Atlanta 1990] 70); Syriac *History of Mār Matthew and Mār Andrew* (W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts*, vol 1 [London and Edinburgh 1871] 102, trans. vol 2, 93); *Pseudo-Prochorus* (Th. Zahn, *Acta Joannis* [Erlangen 1880] 5); Arabic *Travels of John* (A. Smith Lewis, *Mythological*

that the beginning of the Lucan *Acts* had been the main source of this motif. In *Acts* 1:15-26, namely, the apostles elect Matthias among their number by casting lots. Richard Lipsius suggested that *Acts* 1:23-36 together with *Matthew* 28:19 (Jesus' commissioning the disciples) served as sources for the apostles' dividing the world by lot. Relying on *Pseudo-Prochorus*, Lipsius claimed that the motif was present already the hypothetical *periodoi Ioannou* in the second century.³⁰ Dennis MacDonald has recently suggested that the *Acts of Thomas* was inspired by the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, whose opening scene, in turn, was modeled after *Acts* 1-2.³¹

That the apostles' casting lots at the beginning of the Lucan *Acts* influenced the later apostolic Acts is an attractive hypothesis. There are, however, weak points in this theory. In the Lucan *Acts* we do not read about the division of the missionary fields. In the *Acts of Thomas*, where the division of the world occurs for the first time, both the act of casting lots and the prominent role of Peter are missing. Moreover, there are a number of other literary parallels that may have inspired the writers of the apocryphal Acts.

The idea of lots is widely represented in Jewish and Graeco-Roman sources. The division of the earth as well as the concept that these parts are inherited by "lot" have close parallels in the division of Canaan in *Joshua* 13-21.³² The actual "casting of lots" occurs in *Joshua* 18.10, but it was probably a secondary addition to the already existing geographical description of the land.³³ One's favorable "lot," "allotment," and "inheritance" are closely related ideas that frequently occur in the *Psalms*.³⁴ The oracle of the lot is a well-known metaphor in the Dead Sea Scrolls.³⁵ The occurrence of the motif, however, is not restricted to Jewish literature. In the *Iliad* as well as in Akkadian and Hittite mythology, the gods cast lots to distribute the regions of the world among themselves.³⁶ The division of land into *kleroi* is reported several times in classical Greek literature.³⁷ Finally, the description of the

Acts [London 1904] 38, parallel with Pseudo-Prochorus); Coptic and Arabic *Preaching of Philip* (O. von Lemm, "Koptische Apostelacten," in *Bulletin de l'Académie impériale des sciences de St. Pétersbourg* 1 [1890] 509-57; repr. in H.-G. Bethge, *Der Brief des Petrus an Philippus* [Berlin 1997]; Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, 60); Arabic *Preaching of Simon* (Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, 115). Cf. the Syriac *Didascalia apostolorum*, *Didascalia* 2 (ed. A. Vööbus, Louvain 1979) 229 and idem (trans) *Didascalia* 2, 212. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.1, writes that Thomas, Andrew, and John received (*eilechen*) Parthia, Scythia, and Asia, respectively.

³⁰ R.A. Lipsius, *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und Apostellegenden* 1 (Braunschweig 1883) 12-13.

³¹ MacDonald, *op. cit.*, 33-7.

³² Also described in *Numbers* 32.33-42 and *Deuteronomy* 3.12-17.

³³ J.C. de Vos, *Das Los Judas* (dissertation, Groningen 2002) 181-5, concludes that mention of lots belongs to the last phase of the *Redaktionsgeschichte* of the text. For earlier research, see T.C. Butler, *Joshua* (Dallas 1994) ad 15.1. Cf. *Jubilees* 8.10ff.

³⁴ *Psalms* 16:6 (15:6 LXX), 78:55 (77:55), 135:12 (134:12), 136:22 (135:22). In *Psalms* one speaks of *nach'lah* rather than *goral*, the latter being the proper term for the share received by lot. Cf. *Prayer of Enosh* (4Q369); 1 *Samuel* 10:17-24.

³⁵ A. Lange, "The Determination of Fate by the Oracle of the Lot," in *Sapiential, Liturgical, and Poetical Texts from Qumran* (eds. D.K. Falk, et al., Leiden 2000) 39-48.

³⁶ *Iliad* 15.187-93; M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon* (Oxford 1997) 109-111; P. Demont, "Lots héroïques," *Revue des Études Grecques* 113 (2000) 299-325.

³⁷ In Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 3.50.1, the Athenians divide the occupied island of Lesbos (*klerous de poiēsantes tes ges*) into three thousand allotments. In Herodotus, *History* 2.109, Sesostrius gives

territory of one's mission was an essential part of Egyptian and Jewish commission stories.³⁸

Consequently, the motif of the division of land and the talk about one's "inheritance" or "lot" is much earlier than the lottery episode of *Acts* 1. In other passages of *Acts* we also read about the "lot" (*klēros*) of the saints quite independently from the casting of lots.³⁹ The stereotyped occurrence of "lot" in earlier commission texts as well as the classical Greek usage of the motif are likely to have served as the sources of the division episodes in the *Acts of Thomas* and the *Acts of Philip*. The actual casting of lots was perhaps a secondary addition to the list of missionary fields, as it probably happened in the redaction history of the *Book of Joshua*. The lottery episode in *Acts* 1 provided a close analogy, which later influenced the description of the division of lands in the *Martyrium Andreae prius*, the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*, *Pseudo-Prochorus*, and the other versions of the apostolic Acts. In this phase, other elements of *Acts* 1-2, such as the exhortation by Jesus or Peter and the location of the scene on the Mount of Olives, were also added to the description of the episode.⁴⁰

In *Acts of Thomas* 1 and *Acts of Philip* 8, as in most Hebrew and Greek parallels, the central issue is the "inheritance" or "share" of the hero, rather than the actual technique of allotting the lands. The division of lands is attributed either to Jesus (*Acts of Philip*) or to the community of the apostles (*Acts of Thomas*). In both texts, as in many parallels, the hero immediately protests against the allotted task.

The test case of the casting of lots shows how problematic it is to establish a linear tradition through the apostolic Acts. It seems that the authors relied on different sources of inspiration. We have seen the same trend in connection with other motifs of the commission narratives. Sometimes a single detail, such as John's blindness in the *Acts of John* 113, may resemble one of the earlier Acts (in that case, Paul's blindness in *Acts* 9), while other features of the same story are rooted in different literary traditions. In sum, it is important to survey a broader scale of ancient literature before too quickly identifying earlier Acts as literary sources of the later ones.

"equal lots" (*klēron ison*) to everyone in Egypt. Cf. H.G. Liddell, *et al.*, *Greek-English Lexicon. With a Revised Supplement* (Oxford 1996) 959.

³⁸ Baltzer, *op. cit.*, 193.

³⁹ *Acts* 7:5; 8:21.

⁴⁰ Peter's exhortation: *Pseudo-Prochorus* (Zahn, *op. cit.*, 3-5); *Arabic Travels of John* (Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, 37); *Syriac History of John* (Wright, *op. cit.*, vol 1, 5 and vol 2, 4); *Arabic Story of John* (Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, 157). Jesus' exhortation is often set on the Mount of Olives, as in *Acts* 1:12. In the *Preaching of Philip* Jesus commands the casting of lots (von Lemm, *op. cit.*, 168); in the *Arabic Preaching of Thomas* he commands the disciples, "Assemble and divide the world into twelve portions and let each one of you go to his portion" (Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, 80). The *Martyrdom of Saint Mark* paraphrases Matthew 28:18-20 (*ibid.*, 147). Cf. the *Arabic Preaching of Simon* and *Preaching of Thaddæus* (*ibid.*, 115 and 120, respectively).

4. WHAT KIND OF INTERTEXTUALITY?

We can now draw certain conclusions about the intertextual nature of the commission narratives. The eclectic use of sources and influences suggests that the authors of the apocryphal Acts did not work within the confines of an established genre. Even if they knew earlier Acts, they did not want to slavishly model their narratives after them. This becomes especially clear when we compare the apocryphal Acts of the second to fourth centuries with some of the later ones, such as the *Acts of Barnabas* or the *Acts of Titus*, which deliberately imitated the Lucan *Acts*. Most intertextual studies of the major Acts proceeded from the idea that their authors read and used (some) already existing apostolic Acts. Both the concept of authorship and solid literary texts may need to be revised. The major apocryphal Acts come down to us in fragments, and we have no compelling reason to believe that they have ever existed in a single finalised version. *Codex Bezae* and the Western textual tradition testify that even the Lucan *Acts* circulated in various revisions after the decline of the ancient world. It seems plausible that different collections of the words and deeds of individual apostles existed simultaneously, and that those “Acts” mutually influenced each other at some points.⁴¹ The interaction of written and oral traditions as well as secondary orality also will have played an important role in the shaping of the material. Collections of these texts could have been produced in different times and places. Tertullian’s presbyter in Asia Minor, Leucius Charinus, and Pseudo-Prochorus belong to the early redactors of the apocryphal Acts.⁴²

Recent scholarly work on early Christian literacy and Hellenistic schooling may shed more light on this process. The intertextual features of the commission narratives mentioned in this paper suggest that the authors of the apostolic Acts had access to various pieces of Greek literature. The range of Greek texts referred to extends from the works of Plato to the Greek translation of Jewish Scriptures and the novels. People who were able to compose texts at the level of the apostolic Acts, or even one episode contained in them, must have had a formal Hellenistic schooling, at the secondary, rather than the primary, level. The old thesis that the apocryphal Acts were “intended for the lower class” (*für das Volk bestimmt*) is a generalisation that is no longer tenable.⁴³ Texts written (just to talk about the “major” Acts) in as distant places as Rome, Asia Minor, Syria, and Alexandria,⁴⁴ by and for Christians speaking different languages and living in different cultural contexts, can hardly be anchored in a stereotypical social location. The texts are also different from each other in terms of literary quality. Concentrating on the major

⁴¹ Cf. Ch.M. Thomas, “Stories Without Texts and Without Authors,” in *New Perspectives on Ancient Fiction and the New Testament* (eds. R. Hock, et al., Atlanta 1998) 273-91.

⁴² Zahn, *op. cit.*, lx-lxxi; K. Schäferdiek “Manichean Collection,” in *New Testament Apocrypha 2* (eds. W. Schneemelcher and R.McL. Wilson, Cambridge 1992) 87-100; A. Hilhorst, “Tertullian on the Acts of Paul,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thekla* (ed. J. Bremmer, Kampen 1996) 150-63.

⁴³ R. Söder, *Die apokryphen Apostelgeschichten und die romanhafte Literatur der Antike* (Stuttgart 1932) 186. At the same time, Söder (*ibid.*) maintained that the novels were written for educated readers.

⁴⁴ Diversity characterises the history of research. Recently J. Bremmer, “The Apocryphal Acts,” 152-9, argued that all of the major Acts except the *Acts of Thomas* were written in Asia Minor.

Acts only, one finds that the style of the *Acts of Andrew* (excluding the *Acts of Andrew and Matthias*) is “well educated,” whereas the rest of the (major) apostolic Acts is mostly “simple” and “unsophisticated.”⁴⁵ Stylistic observations alone, however, provide an unstable ground for describing the social context of the apocryphal Acts, because most of these texts came down to us fragmentarily and through a complicated transmission, including translations, rearrangements and epitomisation.

5. COMMISSION NARRATIVES IN COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

What does the example of commission narratives tell us about the mutual relations between religious traditions in the Roman Empire and late Antiquity? The conclusion that Christian thought was highly receptive of both Jewish and Graeco-Roman ideas does not come as a surprise. One cannot establish, however, a clear-cut model as to how traditions borrowed from each other. Motifs from a variety of backgrounds can, as we have seen, be combined within a commission narrative, yet the basic plot remains the same. It seems as if “commission story” were something of a cross-cultural pattern like “love story”: love stories can be different across cultures, yet they retain a basic plot and set of agents which do not necessarily rely on literary imitation.

What could be the universal psychological background of commission narratives? In his *Syntactic Structures*, Noam Chomsky proposed that human language is based on a universal sentence structure that consists of a nominal and a verbal part, the latter including a verb and a noun: “the man hit the ball.”⁴⁶ Elaborating on Chomsky’s generative grammar, E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley suggested that a universal scheme of “action representation” underlies religious rituals.⁴⁷ In terms of the action representation model, which derives a great deal from recent findings in evolutionary psychology, humans think about (ritual) actions as an agent acting (by means of an instrument) on a patient.⁴⁸ In terms of modern linguistic and ritual theory, commission can be understood as a universal representation of the gods’ activity in the world in the following form: *god is active in the world by means of his commissioned agent*. Further, as McCauley and Lawson suggest, rituals display a hierarchy of enabling actions: for example, “participants can partake in first communion because they were previously baptized.”⁴⁹ In that sense, commission narratives are *enabling actions that enable human beings to serve as tools of the gods’ activity in the world*. In short, our universal scheme of thinking about action

⁴⁵ D.H. Warren, “The Greek Language of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (eds. F. Bovon, et al., Cambridge 1999) 101-24 at 122-4; cf. Zachariades-Holmberg, “Philological Aspects of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” *ibid.*, 125-42 at 140.

⁴⁶ N. Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague 1957), chapter 4.

⁴⁷ E.Th. Lawson and R.N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition & Culture* (Cambridge 1990) 87-95.

⁴⁸ R.N. McCauley & E.Th. Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge 2002) 10-6.

⁴⁹ McCauley and Lawson, *op.cit.*, 18.

causes us to conceptualise divine action in a similar way; which in turn makes it necessary that the tools of divine action undergo enabling actions; that is, they need to be commissioned.

The actual narrative plots of commissioning display cultural variations. The universal structures of the mind are not “externalised” in a mechanical way. The actual historical course of events reveals a complex development of textual traditions strongly influenced by the universal mental structures (such as the action representation system). Therefore, traditions tend to develop in certain preferred directions, which results in the similarities across various traditions. Yet elements of the plot such as the division of missionary fields can be part of one tradition and be omitted from another. The actual “dialects” of commission narratives in late Antiquity *do* result from the cross-fertilisation of literary traditions.

When commission narratives are finally generated in the form of “surface texts”, these psychologically and culturally shaped plots are filled up with an array of textual elements which are available to the concrete authors in their respective communicative situations. Even the same author telling the same story on different occasions, such as Luke in his *Acts*, varies the presentation according to the context and the rhetorical purposes.

6. CONCLUSION

This essay has explored new perspectives for studying the interaction of religious traditions in late Antiquity. We found that stories of divine commission were used in almost all of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, and that they follow patterns of Graeco-Roman biography as well as Near Eastern models, the latter mediated to a great part through Jewish literature. Even so, a linear development of the tradition cannot be identified in the texts under examination. In order to understand the intertextual relations among commission narratives (and, by the same token, among other elements of religious traditions), we have to transcend the established boundaries of the inquiry. In particular, we have shown that the cognitive capacities of the human mind probably played a crucial role in the widespread appearance of commission narratives in ancient literatures.