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Tom de Bruin: Fan Fiction and Early Christian Writing: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Canon

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In contrast to other biblical scholars that express a profound distrust in Apocryphal writings and in contemporary cultural theories alike, Tom de Bruin offers a rather adventurous proposal in his most recent monograph, *Fan Fiction and Early Christian Writings: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha and Canon*. De Bruin seeks to reposition the prevailing paradigm of a negative (and often pejorative) fan fiction model associated with Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, which are often classified as ‘false’ and/or ‘heretical’ literature, by applying the term ‘fan fiction.’ The principal aim of his work is to target what he perceives to be the overly rigid, and indeed, pejorative, hierarchical bifurcation of ‘canon’ (authoritative scripture) and ‘extra-canonical’ (or non-scriptural) literature. De Bruin claims that the literary activities of early Christian communities reflected a participatory culture—similar to what contemporary media scholar Henry Jenkins described regarding fan writings. Rather than framing Apocryphal authors as duplicitous and forgery authors, he views them as ‘fans’ who created and/or added to the archetexts.

The book follows the interdisciplinary shift in New Testament scholarship, with reception history and cultural studies becoming increasingly closely aligned, building on de Bruin’s earlier work on *The Great Controversy* and apocalyptic literature (see *The Great Controversy: The Individual’s Struggle Between Good and Evil in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and in their Jewish and Christian Contexts*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014). The book includes preliminary thoughts from the field of media studies (e.g., Henry Jenkins, Kristina Busse, and Abigail Derecho) and from the field of Christian apocrypha studies (e.g., J.K. Elliot and Tony Burke). As part of the series “Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible,” this book specifically notes de Bruin’s attempts to understand how scripture leaves cultural traces beyond the domain of exegesis. The book is carefully structured, moving from ideas to real-world use. De Bruin’s work features a detailed index of references at the end that does not just list the Bible and other old books but also includes books that were not included in the Bible and elements from today’s culture. The register is helpful for readers to find their way in both theology and media studies.

The book starts by explaining what fan fiction means and how it can be applied in a useful way to learn about the past. De Bruin then turns to case study chapters that apply his theory to specific texts such as the Protoevangelium of James, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and the Gospel of Peter. Each case study is structured to highlight a specific function of fan fiction, such as ‘filling in the blanks,’ fix-it fic, or shipping. The extensive bibliography at the end of the book demonstrates the depth of De Bruin’s research, which combines two rarely intersecting corpora of literature: patristic interpretation and postmodern narrative theory.

One of the strengths of this book is its usage of Henry Jenkins' concept of textual poaching. Prior to De Bruin's interpretation, the majority of scholarly commentary on the Apocryphal writers framed them as heretics who sought to fool people into believing that works attributed to the apostles were authored by them through pseudonymity (i.e., writing under a pseudonym). De Bruin provides a new perspective, viewing them as active participants in their given interpretative community. In the book's opening chapters, De Bruin links the way ancient readers created and interpreted literature to the way modern Internet users do. Citing Abigail Derecho's seminal work on fan fiction as archontic literature (see "Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction." In: Busse, Kristina/Hellekson, Karen (eds.): *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006, 61-78), De Bruin states that archontic "[l]iterature is the history of work, which will continually have new entries added to the archive" (45). Just like modern fans who consider their fan fiction to be tributes to the original source(s) rather than copyright infringement, the early Christians viewed their rewriting of apostolic texts as extensions of apostolic traditions, not as acts of deception.

In addition, de Bruin provides a particularly incisive analysis of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas through 'gap-filling,' a methodology used when studying fan fiction. He argues that the canonical gospel accounts of Jesus's infancy—both Matthew and Luke—create a large gap in our knowledge of Jesus's formative years, with the result that the natural fan urge (i.e., curiosity) to fill this gap is what drives the creation of Infant Jesus stories. Through an analysis of Thomas's text, de Bruin illustrates how the author of the Gospel of Thomas attempts to address an extremely complex theological question: how does divine omnipotence manifest in the emotionally immature and physically frail body of a young child? The response by Jesus to this question (his emotions were often childish and his actions deadly) has made many contemporary theologians uncomfortable.

Through a study of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, de Bruin uses the term 'fix-it fic'—a term borrowed from fan fiction that describes fannish attempts to correct assumed errors of the source material—as an example of how the Acts of Paul and Thecla attempted to correct what may be seen as the increasingly male-dominated and patriarchal (as represented by the Pastoral Letters) nature of the Pauline tradition of Christianity. By using Thecla, who is depicted as having baptized herself and claimed equal authority with Paul, the Acts of Paul and Thecla seeks to queer (or at least change) the gender hierarchy of the early church and the interpretation of Paul's epistles. In addition to examining the narrative storyline, de Bruin highlights the importance of this work as an expression of a community (possibly a women's community) of Christians who feel marginalized by the dominant interpretation of Paul's letters. De Bruin argues that it connects the ancient church to modern forms of fan activism, in which fiction is used as an advocacy tool to demand equitable and just treatment in society.

One of the book's important theoretical contributions is its application to the concept of 'fanon' (an aspect that fans accept as canonical even though it is not explicit in the official text). De Bruin points out that many Christian doctrines or traditions, such as the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, or details about Satan's fall, are actually 'fanon' derived from apocryphal texts such as the Protoevangelium of James and later adopted into the 'head canon' of the church, even though the text is not officially in the biblical canon. This analysis is particularly powerful because it demonstrates the fluid boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy. De Bruin argues, that the "boundary between canon and fanon in early Christianity was porous; texts were rejected, but their narrative innovations were often retained" (120).



It provides a new perspective on the history of canon formation, not as a purely bureaucratic decision but as an organic negotiation between authoritative texts and popular reception.

As an academic work, *Fan Fiction and Early Christian Writings* occupies a unique and challenging position. Within the broader framework of New Testament studies, this book challenges rigid historical-critical methods. The author succeeds in demystifying apocryphal texts by using analogies from the modern world (such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *Star Wars*), making the dynamics of ancient literature easier to understand for today's readers. The main success is to release the theological burden of 'truth vs. falsehood' that has so far overshadowed apocryphal studies. De Bruin does not question if something is 'real' or not but rather asks: why does this community feel the need to tell this story? This functionalist approach is very refreshing. In addition, de Bruin's mastery of two very different disciplines deserves appreciation: as he was able to navigate Henry Jenkins's theories while analyzing the Oxyrhynchus Greek manuscript, he offers a prime example of the success of interdisciplinary approaches, where one discipline does not simply fill the void of another, but becomes an important analytical framework.

However, the approach should also consider the risk of anachronism. Critics of the Puritan faith may view assigning a modern label such as 'fan fiction' (a product of capitalist culture and copyright law) to ancient texts as a mistake. The definitions of the terms 'fiction' and 'fact' changed dramatically over the centuries, and while the distinction between history and myth continues to blur in our time, the concept of biography in the ancient world is already significantly less distinct than in the contemporary sense of writing. Nevertheless, de Bruin is aware of this distinction and puts forward a good argument for adopting this analogy, even though on some occasions, such as his discussion regarding ancient heresy and 'flame wars' in online forums, the degree of correlation seems to be pushed too far. While it is easy to see how both are created by psychological mechanisms, the consequences for an Internet user engaged in a flame war are vastly different from those of an individual engaged in the ancient heresy discussion (barring excommunication or even execution).

Moreover, the book may place too much emphasis on the narrative aspect and overlooks the ritual or liturgical dimension of the text. Modern fan fiction is usually consumed privately or in online communities, while early Christian texts were often reserved for collective or liturgical reading. These differences in sociological context are areas that should be explored further. Nevertheless, the book achieves its goal of revitalizing the study of the apocrypha, providing a new terminology for academics to discuss these texts.

Overall, *Fan Fiction and Early Christian Writings* is an invaluable and timely contribution to biblical studies. Its main usefulness lies in its ability to open the 'theological imagination' of the reader. Rather than viewing the Bible as a fixed object or monument, de Bruin encourages readers to see it as the focal point of a living, evolving network of narratives. Therefore, de Bruin's book alters our perspective on how we approach both the apocryphal literature and the canon itself, reminding us that there is a community behind every work of spiritual literature—namely, the early fans who helped shape Christian faith.