

Art and the Christian Apocrypha by David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. 226 pp., 102 black-and-white illustrations. \$34.00.

Review by Gail Leggio

The holiest week in the Christian liturgical calendar begins with Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey as children wave palms and sing “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” an incident familiar in medieval ivory carvings and nineteenth-century hymns. At the crucifixion the supporting players include Longinus, the soldier who stabs Jesus with a lance, and Dysmas, the good thief. (They are identified with inscriptions as early as the eighth century, in an icon from the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai.) What happened to Christ between the crucifixion and the resurrection? Many narratives fill in this time gap by describing the harrowing of hell. Christ breaks down the gates of hell, crushing Satan beneath them, and pulls Adam and Eve from the abyss. The harrowing of hell, also known as the *Descensus ad Infernos* or, in the Eastern Church, the *Anastasis*, gives us our most dynamic picture of Christ as heroic savior. A good example is the small but powerful oil painting *The Descent into Limbo* by Andrea Mantegna. These details of the salvation narrative derive not from the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament but from the body of apocryphal early



Caravaggio, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, c. 1596–97  
Galleria Doria Pamphili, Rome

Christian texts, specifically from a fifth- to sixth-century apocryphon known as the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

This is only one of the fascinating texts explored by *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*, a compulsively readable study and a valuable resource for anyone interested in Christian iconography, late antique and early Christian history, or the way written texts and the visual arts influence each other. The book juxtaposes generous excerpts from the apocrypha, translated by J. Keith Elliott, Professor of New Testament Textual Criticism at the University of Leeds in



England, with a lucid discussion of the issues involved by David R. Cartlidge, Beeson Professor Emeritus of Religion at Maryville College in Tennessee. The authors make clear the importance of the material. They single out a score of influential texts—including Infancy Gospels, stories about the dormition or assumption of Mary at her death, and apocryphal Acts of the Apostles—as crucial to early Church development, not only iconographically but theologically. Before the printing press was invented, most of the faithful learned about Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints not from books but from the liturgy, sermons and church decorations. The authors here take an inclusive stance, suggesting we consider what they call a “Whole Gospel,” incorporating canonical and apocryphal texts, along with “nearly two millennia of commentaries, liturgies, sermons, church disciplines, the church’s arts....” The process of interaction among oral, written and pictorial arts demonstrates “the church’s ‘thinking out loud.’”

The single most dramatic example of the significance of the apocrypha in Christian tradition is the story of the Virgin Mary, who figures infrequently in the New Testament. As the mother of Jesus and of the church, and as an embodiment of what Geoffrey Ashe has called the “goddess-shaped longing” (*The Virgin*) in human nature, Mary plays a crucial role. Her acceptance of the incarnation at the annunciation reverses the sinful choice of Eve and sets in motion the terrestrial phase of redemption history. Many of the iconographic details of the annunciation derive from the *Protevangelium of James*, which dates from the second half of the second century. (To judge how early this text is, consider that the New Testament canon was not set until around the fourth century.) From this text comes the image of Mary approached by the Archangel Gabriel as she works at spinning wool for the temple veil, as well as her family history. The story of Mary’s parents, Anna and Joachim, her birth and upbringing in the temple and her betrothal to Joseph are depicted in countless paintings, including Giotto’s fresco cycle in the Scrovegni chapel in Padua. *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* provides a detailed comparison of how this cycle evolved differently in the Western and Eastern Churches.

The Marian narrative overlaps with stories of Jesus’ birth and childhood. Many elements of the traditional nativity account can be traced to the apocrypha, including the presence of the ox and the ass at the manger (documented at least as early as the third century by a sarcophagus now in the church of Saint Ambrose in Milan). Often dismissed as a charming by-product of the stable setting, the ox and the ass have biblical resonance, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy that these animals will recognize their master (Isaiah 1:3). One of the most popular apocryphal texts was the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, from the eighth or ninth century but drawing extensively on earlier apocrypha, which provided paradigms for the rest on the flight into Egypt. Caravaggio’s lyrical version, from the Galleria Doria Pamphili in Rome, of this perennial image of the Holy Family appears on the cover of the paperback edition of *Art and the Christian Apocrypha*. The themes explored here have literary as well as pictorial and theological implications. During the Holy Family’s Egyptian sojourn, the miracle of the date palm occurs. Mary asks a weary Joseph to pick dates, and he angrily tells her to let the baby’s father do it. The tree lowers its branches so Mary can pick the dates. The scene is transposed to a more northern climate for the English medieval “Cherry Tree Carol.” In the *Arundel Infancy Gospel*, the infant Christ is compared to the sun, a trope that would enter the mainstream of Christian art and literature: “The child himself, like the sun, shone brightly, beautiful and most delightful to see, because he alone appeared as peace, bringing peace everywhere.... The light was born just as the dew descends from heaven to the earth.”

Another chapter focuses on the changing images of Christ, which form a diverse group even in the early Christian era. The Good Shepherd trope, which depicts Jesus as a beautiful



youth carrying a lamb across his shoulders, has pagan counterparts in images of Apollo, Hermes and Dionysus as ram-carrier. Since Judaism rigorously limited the use of images (although the prohibition was not absolute, as recent scholars have emphasized), early Christians sometimes appropriated elements of the pagan visual vocabulary that fit their own beliefs. You can see this process of appropriation at work in the fourth-century mosaics of Santa Costanza in Rome, where the vine tendrils and grapes decorating the barrel vaulting of the encircling ambulatory—originally pagan in character—become acceptable as illustrative of eucharistic themes in Christianity. There are also discussions here of the development of the image of Jesus as wonder-working magus and mature, bearded teacher. A related subject and one central to the role of Christ's face in devotional practice through the centuries is the *acheiropoietes*, an image "not made by human hands." The most famous example is Veronica's Veil, an image created when a pious woman offered Jesus a cloth to wipe his face during the Way of the Cross. The scene is described in the *Vindicta Salvatoris*, a medieval Latin text incorporating material from the earlier *Acts of Pilate*. Almost as celebrated during the medieval era was the Mandylion. The king Abgar, a historical figure who ruled Edessa in the first century, according to Eusebios, heard of Jesus' healing power and asked him for a blessing. The disciple Thaddeus goes to Abgar and heals him, either with a portrait of Jesus painted on a kerchief or a cloth with a true image generated by Christ's wiping his face.

Other chapters examine the post-ascension chronicle of the Church, focusing especially on the biographies of Saints Peter and Paul. The apocrypha provide lively accounts of these two giants of paleo-Christianity, including Peter's dual with Simon Magus and Peter's and Paul's martyrdoms. Less familiar is the story of a woman, Thecla of Iconium, a virgin and future martyr who accompanies Paul during his mission to Asia Minor. So prominent is her narrative strand in the *Acts of Paul* that many commentators refer to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* or even *Acts of Thecla*. Thecla's story became a model for the novelistic saint's life, owing much to the Greco-Roman romance genre. Converting to Christianity when she hears Paul preach, Thecla jilts her pagan fiancé to join the apostle in his work. She is martyred in Antioch, although not before a miraculous rain puts out the flames that threaten her and an attempt at throwing her to wild beasts is foiled by a protective lioness. Curiously, a limestone carving (fifth–eighth century) of Thecla flanked by beasts and angels looks more like an image of the goddess Artemis than a martyrdom. The heroic narratives of Peter, Paul, Thecla and the other apostles and evangelists, as outlined here, played a significant role in establishing a shared history for Christians, with elements that would be immediately understood in the visual abbreviations of iconography. Here, we approach the matrix for the system of pictorial cues called attributes. Even in repose, translated to the cloudy serenity of heaven or an atemporal throneroom surrounding Madonna and Child, it is easy to identify particular saints. The martyrs carry the palm (an ancient symbol of victory) and some more personal attribute, an object that encapsulates their manner of death: a gridiron for Saint Lawrence or a broken wheel for Saint Catherine of Alexandria.

*Art and the Christian Apocrypha* does not aim to exhaust its subject. Nor can this compact book explore every avenue of potential research through a maze of church history, theology, art history and epistemological theory, although the excellent notes and bibliography, as well as some deft discussions in the text, offer a good overview of issues in overlapping fields. But this is superb interdisciplinary scholarship, revealing the complex patterns of early Christian documents and images in evolution and convincing us of the continuing inspirational power of the apocryphal material.