



Apostolic Authority: An Ancient Text Offers a Humorous Critique

A Bible and Beyond Podcast Interview with Dr. Kimberly Bauser McBrien

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Transcript

Narrator:

Hello, and welcome to the podcast, Early Christian Texts: The Bible and Beyond. We explore historical and spiritual questions about Jesus, gender, women, salvation, healing, and demeaning of life. Shirley Paulson is hosting a series of conversations with scholars who are able to unlock mysteries from extracanonical books, forgotten scriptures, so-called 'gnostic gospels,' and the Bible. And for those of you who love our Bible and Beyond podcasts, would you please consider becoming a supporting member of our Patreon page? Go to [patreon.com/bible and beyond](https://patreon.com/bibleandbeyond) to join at any level just right for you. And now here's Shirley Paulson.

Shirley Paulson:

We have an unusual conversation set up for our Bible and Beyond podcast. Today we'll get into a little-known ancient text that'll help us to get to know how the apostles of Jesus got their authority. So I want to introduce you to Dr. Kimberly Bauser McBrien. She's a lecturer at Trinity University, teaching various courses in New Testament and Early Christian history. Her PhD from Boston College was on social memory theory and the way it helps us understand how the sayings of Jesus were preserved and produced. She has an article coming out later this summer in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, and it serves as a basis of our conversation today. The title of her article is, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Third Heaven: Reading the *Secret Book of James* with a Parodic Imagination." If you don't know the word parodic, don't worry. We're going to talk about that. So anyway, welcome Kim. So glad to have you with us.

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Thank you, Shirley. It's my pleasure to be here.

Shirley Paulson:

Alright, so honestly, I have often wondered how the apostles of Jesus had so much power and authority after the crucifixion of Jesus. They seemed to have been portrayed in the gospels as followers who had even a hard time understanding him and doing what he was asking them to do. And you've been

studying one of these extracanonical texts that focuses on the apostles and how they understood their authority. So let's start with having you maybe introduce us to that book. What's its name and its main topic, and then we'll get into my questions, but let's talk about the book first. What is it?

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah, yeah. So we call it the *Secret Book of James* or the *Apocryphon of James*, as it has sometimes been known. Its actual, whatever it was titled in antiquity, is lost to us now in a lacuna, in a hole, in the text. So we don't know what anyone in the ancient world might have known this text as. We came to that title, however, because elsewhere in the manuscript, the author refers to himself as Jacobus or translated as James. And they describe the text that they are sending to a recipient. They describe the content of it as an apocryphon. This is a Greek lone word that means secret or a hidden or concealed. So this is something that is secret. They stress that it's meant to be kept secret. And from that, we get this title that this is the *Apocryphon of James*. The text itself is a really curious instance of a text.

I've described it elsewhere as almost like a Russian nesting doll of a text. So the outer layers both at the front end and the back end are set up as an epistle, or as a letter, from James to this particular recipient. So in that sort of portion, they introduce themselves as James. They address their recipient. They actually refer to another apocryphon that they claim to have sent to this same recipient. And they explain that that one should be understood as having been revealed only to James, whereas this one was revealed to. . . . And then we have another lacuna. This is the holy problem of studying ancient texts. So inside that outer epistolary layer, we have the next layer, which is a narrative. And the author describes himself now as part of the narrative as James among the sort of apostolic writing party that is interrupted by the resurrected Jesus who shows up.

And so we have this sort of post-resurrection appearance of Jesus, and then we cap it off at the other end with a post-resurrection ascension of Jesus, followed as we'll likely discuss further later down the conversation, by an ascension of James and Peter as well, plus narrative portion. And then inside that the real meat of this text is a revelatory discourse. This is a sort of common extracanonical idea that we get the post-resurrection Jesus revealing particular information, particular teaching, to select apostles or other recipients of that divine revelation. And so we get that sort of revelatory discourse between Jesus and James and Peter in particular at the sort of heart of this text.

Shirley Paulson:

Wow, that's a very helpful picture you've drawn for us about this text. I appreciate that. One, I think big, question we still might have is: "I know Peter, but there seems to be a couple of Jameses who are related to Jesus and disciples. So which one are we talking about here?"

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

That is a great question. So as with Marys and Johns, and even Judases, James is a common name in the early Christ movement. And so there often is James confusion or James conflation. The one we have here is likely meant to be James the brother of Jesus, or he's elsewhere known as James, the Just or James the Righteous. So yeah, among all the James, he's not, interestingly, he's not James the Apostle during the life of Jesus as we have it recorded in our canonical gospels, but he does become a leader in the early Christ movement in Jerusalem.

Shirley Paulson:

Oh, that's a little bit weird right there. Yeah,

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Absolutely. Yeah, actually, I mean, so why that James is another good question. Why would an author pick a sort of central character? And here I perhaps should explain: this James, who is identified as the narrator, is not the author of the text. We have here an example of pseudepigraphy, as it is often known, or a false writing or writing under a false name, writing in a name that belongs to somebody else. So our author, writing probably at the end of the second or third century, is taking on the sort of persona of James, the brother of the Lord. I have described this elsewhere as a matter of prosopopia, which is a fun tongue twister of a word to say that literally means putting on the face or making a face. And this was a common way for smart people to show how smart they were in the ancient world.

So we all have our ways that we like to try to show that, but being able to convincingly imitate someone else was one of those sort of modes of educational performance in the ancient world. And so it's possible that our author is trying to do that because of course, they're not just writing as James when they write this revelatory discourse. They're also going to be writing as Jesus and as Peter. So they're putting on multiple faces throughout this work. The issue that I have with just calling it pseudepigraphy is that I have questions about whether the author ever actually intended for anyone to think that this was a text authored by James the brother of Jesus in the first century, or whether they assume that their audience would've known that that part was a fiction from the start.

Shirley Paulson:

That's helpful. So while we're still getting used to what this text is all about, we will get into it, but I just think it might be also helpful for you to tell us why was it missing for so long? What happened to it that we don't know about this very well?

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah. So the only copy that we know of now in the 21st century is preserved in what scholars sometimes call NH I, or Nag Hammadi I. This is a sort of modern scholarly fiction, but it was found in the mid-20th century among a collection of bound papyrus, papyri, what we sometimes call codices, near Nag Hammadi, Egypt. The origins of this collection are, as you and your audience, no doubt know, are a matter of great debate: Were they intentionally hidden, buried in the desert to sort of overcome the canonizing authorities of orthodox Christianity at the time? Did some monk want this particular collection buried with them? How and why they ended up in the desert? We don't originally know, but many of these texts within this—what we've now call the Nag Hammadi collection—are Coptic translations, including this one. So they are fourth-century texts. This one is a fourth century Coptic translation of what we think was likely a late second or early third century Greek original. It probably originated somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, possibly in Alexandria, Egypt. But some scholars have put it in Syria or other sort of hotbeds of early Christianity in this sort of late second, early third century period. The question of why it was missing for so long is an excellent one. I mean, the easy answer is it was buried in the sand and nobody knew that it was there, but why? Right?

The narrative that shows up in novels by authors who will not be named and channels of TV that will not be named is that this was a massive conspiracy, that this was heart of an overarching, just massive attempt to suppress alternative versions of Christianity and silence these voices, these sort of contradictory voices from what would become orthodox Christianity at the time. That is appealing for its sort of sensational effect, but probably overstates the actual authority that any individual church, let alone the church had at this time. So it probably was not a conspiracy, it probably just. . . , we don't know why it was buried. We also don't know how many copies of this text there ever may have been. This is the only one to which we have access, but it's possible that there were many others at one point,

that there might even be many others now that we just haven't dug up yet. As far as how many copies there ever would've been, we kind of have two lightly conflicting data points. So on the one hand I mentioned that this sort of epistolary shell, this outer shell of the text mentions that this text is an apocryphon. It's secret, and the author is, like, and it's meant to be kept secret. So one thing that they really insist to their recipient is don't rehearse this to many. This is not for everybody. In fact, they even make a passing comment about it having been written in Hebrew, presumably to sort of play up the secrecy of it somehow. So, shh! don't tell anybody. If we take that as authoritative, then maybe there really weren't that many copies. Right? On the opposite side, though, the only copy that we have comes from approximately a hundred years after the original was written, and it's translated so at least somebody has copied it and translated it and possibly moved it from one location to another. So it certainly wasn't like we didn't take the author's advice . . .

Shirley Paulson:

To keep it a secret!

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Perfectly, but it might've had a certain cachet. So who knows how many there may have been, regardless, possibly along the same lines as Christians are starting to kind of emphasize a closed canon of sorts? This text seems to have fallen into disuse. And along with that, this copy is buried for whatever reasons and just waiting for us to refine it.

Shirley Paulson:

That's really fun to hear about this. And so what's also, I think fun about this particular text is that it's talking about apostles, and I know that people are always hungry to find out what happened to them, who are they? What's going on? So this is a great subject to get into itself, and I've always been curious about when or why they became the way they did in our memory of them. And so what is it about James that we should know about? I mean, tell us about him and the apostles then.

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah. The apostles in general, as you're saying now, and as I believe you said in the introduction, are fascinating characters in the canonical gospels. They come off as effectively bumbling idiots, people who would pick these guys to be the leader of a movement. And I don't know why our gospel authors would make them look so inept so much of the time. It is possible that there's a sort of rhetorical move at play there where ahead of the resurrection, nobody was able to fully understand. Not even the people who were closest to Jesus, not even his chosen dudes were able to really get what he was about. And that only after the resurrection could they see clearly. Is that why? I don't know. Certainly we really turn their idiocy up to 11 time and again, so I'm not entirely sure, but we pretty consistently see that texts that are meant to portray the apostles after the resurrection, they fare a lot better, they look better, they look more authoritative.

We know this from as early as Paul, who is our earliest sort of witness to this early period of the Christ movement. He talks about meeting with multiple apostles. He names himself as an apostle. The Acts of the Apostles similarly suggest that there are leaders, consistent leadership. Some of those people who'd been traveling and learning from Jesus during his life now come into leadership roles, particularly in the church in Jerusalem. Other acts and apocalypses have these characters as sort of heroes of the faith as it were. So what we are dealing with here is not the historical apostles, as we might call them, but rather the sort of the idea of the apostles or the afterlife of the apostles, which it seems is quite malleable, that

different authors are able to sort of shape the apostles into whatever form is convenient for the message that they're trying to put forward. And they sometimes do that in competitive ways. Different apostles look like the hero of different texts because their authors are sort of drawing their own authority, their own tradition from different apostolic streams.

Shirley Paulson:

That idea of competition is really interesting the way some look like they're really got everything together, but at the expense of others who are just really stumbling along.

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah. And the Apocryphon of James, then, is an interesting case though, because we would expect it's a post-resurrection appearance, but it's in this sort of liminal time. And so the apostles who are named do not look great—neither, neither James nor Peter. A lot of people have come down hard on Peter that if this author wants somebody to say something like, gauche or dumb, then they put it in the voice of Peter. But James too is no hero in this text. So they both kind of don't fare particularly well.

Shirley Paulson:

What is the storyline in this book? Tell us the story then. What are happen doing?

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

So if we think about the storyline, it's primarily held in those inner two sections. So we've got the narrative, in particular, opens with an apostolic writing party that is said to have happened 550 days after the resurrection. So a year and a half after Jesus is resurrected, all 12 apostles are all together in the same room. And the author says that he was there too, that as in this narratorial persona of James, he's there too. And sometimes James seems to be included among the disciples or apostles, and other times, they seem to acknowledge like, "Oh, this character is not quite part of the group." So that's interesting. But they're all there. And the narrator says what each of them was doing was remembering sayings of the Lord, those that were open and those that were secret, and they're all writing it, each person in their own book, which is nuts!

This is an incredible vision that what we have here is a group of the apostles who are all writing down within less than two years of having known Jesus personally, they're writing down sayings of Jesus, they're recording them, and they're doing it in a group, so that the other apostles are presumably acting as a sort of collective guarantor of the accuracy of their memory. So that's what's happening when we open. And then all of a sudden, Lo! - as the text says - Jesus appears! The risen Lord shows up among them, and he has this sort of curt and mostly dismissive interchange with the whole group and then says, James and Peter, I want you guys. We're going to go have a private chat. Everybody else, I dunno, keep doing what you're doing. And so then James and Peter come with the resurrected Lord, and we enter into this revelatory discourse in which he sort of just sets them up as discursive punching bags, like time and again, it's like, why would they know the answer to this?

He says, blessed are those who have not seen me or heard me, but also remember that you have seen me and heard me. And blessed are you if you don't need a doctor and you've never been sick, but I've healed you. He's just like, he keeps kind of setting them up and saying like, oh, here's the secret . . . whoop! -- not for you! At one point they think like, "Oh, can we rejoice now?" And they're so excited we finally get something. And he says, Nope, you still don't get it. So we get this just really, really curious, sort of back and forth in this revelation, or revelatory discourse.

And then finally Jesus ascends. He says, I'm going to go and he does, and then James and Peter are going to ascend as well. And so we get this sort of description in which the narrator says that they bend their knees and they give thanks, and they send first their hearts up to heaven, and there they see with their eyes and they hear with their ears, war and turmoil and just a great disturbance around them.

But then they send their minds further up and they see with their eyes and they hear with their ears, and this time it's hymns and angelic benedictions and praise and rejoicing. So great. And then they want to send their spirits up even further to the majesty. But after ascending, the narrator says that they were prevented from actually witnessing the majesty because the other disciples call out and say, "Hey, hey, what's going on up there? Tell us what you've learned from the Lord!" And so they have to come back down, or we don't really know the physics or metaphysics of what this ascension might've looked like. But they come back down, they return to the rest of the group, and they share with them a little bit of what they learned, relaying a message that the Lord has promised them life and has also revealed these children who are to come after, by which or by whom they're going to be saved.

Great. This is sort of an abbreviated form of everything that they've been supposed to have learned, and the other disciples do not take it well.

At first they're like, oh, cool. And then they get really upset, and it seems like they're upset over this idea of the children who are to come. So upset that the narrator says—as James—that he has to send everybody away, each to their own place. It's sort of like, "Everybody, just go to your room!" Everybody has to go to their own place. And he alone claims that he then goes up to Jerusalem to pray, and that's how the narrative portion ends. So that's what happens in the narrative of the Apocryphon of James.

Shirley Paulson:

You left us with more questions than I think you have answers for, but that's okay. So let me see if I can sort of organize some questions that'll go somewhere then. So this thing about, let's just understand what does ascending mean? Does it mean going up and looking around in heaven and then coming back to earth? Or does it mean going away forever to sit with God? Or what does this mean? What is he doing?

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah, so that's a great question, and it seems primarily to be the latter, that it's a sort of temporary ascension, and this was already in the second and third century. This was already a familiar trope. We know this from some of the Jewish apocrypha or pseudepigrapha. We also possibly have examples of this in some Greek and Roman writings, but also in Christian writing. So Paul, for example, in one of his correspondences with Corinth, he describes himself, or somebody he knows, as having experienced this sort of ascension to the third heaven, and then he comes back. And so how are we meant to take this idea of ascending? It seems as if . . . what the actual experience of the person who ascended was, I do not know. This is mysticism beyond my expertise, but how it shows up in literature and what it seems to be conveying is an interesting question.

So it seems like people generally, they see or they hear something. Like, part of an ascension is that you get a vision, and that vision might be—it's often of the future, or of a sort of presumed heavenly, divine, supernatural reality that's playing out possibly at the same time as an earthly reality. So in the present or in the near future, the Book of Revelation is a good example of that, and other apocalypses—something is being revealed. Often, particular teaching is imparted. So you're meant to learn something when you ascend, and what you learn might prepare you for when you go back, or it might prepare you for your own eventual afterlife.

So this is a preview of what's to come so that you know what to do when you're ascending for good, but it also seems to convey a certain amount of authority. Somebody who's sort of chosen to ascend or who has the experience of ascension then has a particular authority in and of itself in addition to whatever teaching they've gained from that. Just the fact that you are someone who ascended is kind of like apostolic bragging rights. I did this. I now have kind of a seal of approval on me.

Shirley Paulson:

Obviously we are talking together about how odd this all sounds, and I just can't help but wonder, do you think that this author was knowingly writing something just odd, or was it something people understood then and it didn't seem so odd to them? I need to deal with why it's so peculiar.

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah, and so I think that they're doing both and they're intentionally doing both, right? They are using the idea of ascension, which seems to have been somewhat familiar at the time. That already is blowing my modern mind. But I think that part was meant to be familiar, but then they're doing it in a way that's weird. So ascensions are familiar, ascensions through multiple tiers of the heavens are familiar, ascensions that involve sights and sounds of angels, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. All of that is familiar. Ascensions that are interrupted is weird. That's weird. In fact, an ascension that is completely thwarted, cut short in this way, as far as I know, is unprecedented. And so we've had to ask, why would the author use this familiar trope, but then do it in a way that is odd? Some scholars have suggested, oh, maybe James and Peter were meant to have to come back down in order to fulfill their mission on earth before they're able to ascend and kind of complete themselves.

But it's not the majesty that sends them back down because of some inadequacy. They don't get rejected by a toll collector as we see in some other apocalypses. It's the disciples. So then some people have said, "Well, maybe it's for the benefit of the disciples. Maybe this is a teaching idea. They have to share their revelation before they're allowed to continue their ascension." But as I said, the other disciples do not take it well. So I mean, as a teacher, I know maybe your job is teaching and still your students don't take it well, but it doesn't. . . . Why would the author invent that?

So then I kind of came to the question, maybe something else is happening here. Maybe they're doing something that is intentionally familiar but also different. And in that sort of familiarity but difference both around this ascension scene and also around that apostolic writing party that I described earlier, I started to ask the question of whether the difference that I was seeing might actually make this an example of parody. So I've proposed, as you said when you were reading the title, "A Parodic Imagination," basically inconclusively, not coming to conclusion. This definitely is parody, but asking the question, what might we be able to see if we read this as parody? How might that open our minds? Can

Shirley Paulson:

I ask you to tell us what does the word parody mean? How should we understand that word that you're using?

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah. So this is . . . a contemporary parody scholar has described 'parody' as imitation, but with difference, or imitation with critical difference, in particular. It is a genre or a form that is steeped in literariness. It's one where you have to know something, right? You've got to know a body of a tradition or ideas. You have to have a sort of sense of target material that then you are twisting lightly in an ironic, or a comic, or edgy kind of way, in order to make it look a little bit different so that the point

actually changes. It's possible that I'm prone to see this because Airplane and Hot Shots and Naked Gun were some of my favorite movies as a kid. But I think it also was a really active, flourishing genre of literature in the intellectual environment of the late second and early third century. So you have one example in Lucian who, he's from Syria, but living within the Roman Empire.

So he's sort of like, he's an outsider in multiple ways, but he writes these parodies that establish characters who are outsiders as actually superior to insiders. He uses familiar tropes and uses the intellectual environment of Greece and Rome in the second century and sort of turns it on its head in order to prove the superiority, in particular, the intellectual superiority of these sort of unexpected characters. And so he does that in multiple ways, and I see possible parallels between some of the things that he's doing and some of the ways that I see the author of the Apocryphon of James flexing their own intellectual elitism. This is one of the most consistent things that scholars looking at the Apocryphon of James have said, have observed about the author is that this person is an elitist right there. They're an educated elitist and they want people to know it. Parody was the perfect form for that during this intellectual environment of what we sometimes call the second sophistic, because you have to show that you are in on the joke. Then you also kind of show that you think you know better than the joke, and I think that our author might be doing that as they play with the ideas of apostolicity and an apostolic authority with regards to other writings

Shirley Paulson:

That makes more sense than to think that somebody just wrote a silly thing out of the blue. That doesn't make any sense. That's very interesting. So to sort of wrap all this together here, how would you characterize them? What was his ultimate goal? Was he trying to tell us that the apostles were really to be critiqued and that they weren't so smart after all? Or was he really saying, I mean, what was the goal here? What did he really want to accomplish with this parody?

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Yeah, so I don't think the apostles themselves were his target. Rather, I think that the **idea of apostolic authority was the target**. I think that he's not really taking shots at anything in the first century. Instead, he's taking shots at his contemporaries in the second and third century who are giving all of this weight to the idea that a particular text might have certain apostolic credentials that maybe it was authored by, or maybe it was authored by somebody who was connected to a particular apostle, or that that apostle had this special revelatory experience, and that makes their teaching better than other teaching. I think this vision that starts with hyperbolized unity. All of the apostles together, writing things with which everybody would agree and then ends in fracturing. Everybody go to your own room. We can't agree on anything, right? I think that that marks their own sense of where the church is at—that whatever unity there may have ever been, it's now been lost, and if we are continuing to sort of vie for priority on apostolic grounds, we're missing the point.

The author seems to think that their own form of intellectual, spiritual access to salvation is the superior mode. We know that Christians love to take shots at one another, right? They do this in treatises. They do this in letters all the time. So the idea that there would be this competitive sense between different streams of Christian interpretation is not . . . that's not anything new. The idea that they would narrativize it and historicize it in this sort of way, I think maybe gives it a playful edge that makes the competition look sillier, right? It's sillier to think of somebody believing that the apostles actually all wrote everything down two years after the resurrection. There's kind of a ridiculousness to it that I think doesn't give his opponents quite so much credence as if he just wrote a treatise as if they had just

written a treatise would have. But then also it allows them to flex their own muscles. I think this is an author who likes to show off a little bit, and so they are using the sort of literary form of their day that lets them kind of flex their own chops, as it were.

Shirley Paulson:

Boy, this is really, really interesting because I think you're helping us to see that these texts just open our picture, our minds about what was going on and how to look at it from different angles, and not to take everything so literally, but to understand what's behind, what's underneath or what's inside the different layers that you're talking about. This is really helpful conversation. I want to thank you for introducing us to the Secret Book of James. Now, there's no longer a secret in the world. We're going to broadcast this even more, but I really appreciate you coming to talk to us about it. Thank you so much.

Kimberly Bauser McBrien:

Absolutely. My pleasure. Thank you, Shirley.