

From Helsinki to Copenhagen. Contextualising the New Testament

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As I am writing this, the autumn semester is at its end. The students and I spent fourteen weeks studying and discussing the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament I class in the BA programme in Theology. These weeks have been full of learning, and since I have come to Copenhagen from a different university and a different country, learning applies not only to students, but to myself as well. Some of the progress is still underway – for example, I write in English, although I am learning Danish. In what follows, I will write a few words about my previous research and some of my academic interests as a way of introducing myself.

Nag Hammadi studies

For a New Testament scholar, my range of academic interests exceeds the boundaries of the canon and the first century CE, and much of my work has been with texts and materials outside the New Testament.

Somehow the idea that there was more literature that the first Christians read and wrote than what was included in the canon captured my interest already as student. My teachers at the University of Helsinki, Antti Marjanen and Ismo Dunderberg, have worked to a large extent with Nag Hammadi writings, and that was the direction I first took in my research. My doctoral dissertation, defended in 2013, was a study of one of the Coptic Nag Hammadi writings, *Authoritative Teaching/Authentikos Logos* in the Codex VI. It is a treatise of a soul's descent into earthly life and its ascent and return, with intertwined passages considering the origin of the world, purpose of life and wisdom-like exhortation to true worship of God. The work is now published as *A Journey of the Soul from the Nag Hammadi Library: Authentikos Logos (NHC VI,3)* by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (2015).

Although Nag Hammadi texts are often associated with Gnostic thought, my approach to these texts is different. It seemed problematic to assume that these are Gnostic texts – only some of the texts in the collection of several codi-

ces or fragments of codices contain ideas that could be characterized as Gnostic. Not only do the overall contents cover a wider selection of themes, but also the so-called Gnostic ideas had wide appeal in the ancient world. A further question that merits asking is who may have been the readers of these texts. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, attacked all kinds of heretics in the second half of the fourth century, at the same time as the Nag Hammadi texts were copied, but he is silent on Gnostics.

A good option for the transmission and ownership/readership of the codices, many argue, would be some of the ascetics living in the region, whom we know were interested in issues that are prevalent in the Nag Hammadi writings: the soul, God, demons, wisdom and secret revelations, rewriting of biblical myths, to mention some. My work contributed to this discussion by analysing Authoritative Teaching in relation to other Christian texts from the second to the fourth centuries. Leaving hypothetical second century Gnostics aside, I focused on the concepts of the soul, matter and body in this text, and then sought to put it in its literary context. The writing finds its place within themes discussed by Christian authors in the third and fourth centuries rather than earlier, wherefore I proposed a later dating to the text than so far assumed. In my view, the readers of this type of text must be sought within ascetics of Upper Egypt. In the centuries prior to the end of the fifth century, one should allow for interaction in the different areas of the bilingual country, i.e. ascetics in the desert were interested in philosophy and Greek-speaking theology, and not unin-

terested in these themes as sometimes has been proposed. Texts such as Authoritative Teaching bear good evidence for that.

The synagogue in Horvat Kur and narratives of otherness in late ancient Palestine

Historical and material backgrounds of texts we study are often difficult to reconstruct, yet contexts are important for the way we interpret texts. Archaeology and study of material culture are one way to gain perspectives of contexts. University of Helsinki is one of the four universities that form a collaborative network, Kinneret Regional Project, that carries on archaeological excavation work in Galilee, Israel. For six seasons (2011–2016) I participated in that work, both excavating in the field and working with findings in the field lab, the findings in question being architectural fragments of the building. What the Kinneret Regional Project has been excavating are remains of a late ancient synagogue on a hilltop only known by its modern name Horvat Kur. The site is located just a few kilometres from the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and about five kilometres from Capernaum. The remains of the large communal building can be safely identified as a synagogue. The plan of the building resembles plans of other ancient synagogues excavated in Galilee, Judea and Golan, and there are further details to ensure the identification. Most important of these are the remains of a large platform against the south wall that housed the Torah shrine of the synagogue, and a dedicatory mosaic inscription that is preserved, even when for the most part the

mosaic that once covered the building's floor has been destroyed.

Work at Horvat Kur excavations have taken me to questions of Jewish history and identity, which also are at the heart of the New Testament. That has been so as we have read the Gospel of Mark in the NT1 class this autumn with Jesus teaching in the synagogue and disputing with representatives of different Jewish groups, and the question will intensify in the NT2 class in the spring semester, where the students and I will be reading Paul's epistle to Galatians and inquiring into his person and context.

Excavating a late antique synagogue raises questions of co-existence between different people. Inhabitants of Palestine from the fourth to the seventh centuries were Jews, Christians and Samaritans. It has been proposed that people of different identities maintained a relatively clear separation from each other. Rural Galilee had a largely Jewish population, but remains of churches from places such as Hippos, Sepphoris and other towns indicate a Christian presence. Many of the Christians in Galilee are often presumed to have been monastics and pilgrims from outside the region. This seems to have been the case with the neighbours to the inhabitants on the Horvat Kur: the site is close to Heptapegon/Tabgha, a church and monastic dwelling, mentioned for example by the pilgrim Egeria in her travel account.

Questions such as who were the Christians in late ancient Palestine and how did they relate to their non-Christian neighbours led me to a collection of short narratives called the *Meadow*, attributed to John Moschus, a monk who lived in

several Judean monasteries. It has been suggested that Christianization had a profound, marginalizing effect on Jews; some argue that it should be understood as colonization. Christians had a position of power and in their writings they sought to define and refute the "other", be they Jews, heretics or pagans. How does this image change if we seek to reconstruct not just literary opinions of the elite, but the larger context? If we study both material and literary evidence, my hypothesis is that boundaries between communities are not as clear-cut as some of the written sources suggest. Despite emphasis on boundary drawing by the elite who wrote the literary sources we have, everyday life at different levels of the society would have been more complex. Certainly some of the stories in the *Meadow* indicate that the relations between Jews and Christians could be closer and less well defined than what early Christian (or Jewish) writers wanted to admit.

Women in early Christian literature

Views about the "other" can also be detected in the way women are portrayed in early Christian literature. This could apply to Authoritative Teaching and other texts where the soul is personified as female, and it applies to the way monastic authors such as John Moschus portray women in their writings. Women characters act as teachers, bring messages and exemplify aspects of faith or wisdom in ancient texts. This autumn in the NT1 class we have noted their presence in the earliest gospel: a Gentile woman demands healing for her daughter and in her demand, wins Jesus in debate (Mark 7:24–30), and an unnamed woman personifies foreknowledge by

anointing Jesus in advance of his burial when the male disciples are about to betray or deny their teacher (Mark 14:3–9). A complex relationship emerges in ancient Christian literature concerning women and knowledge.

Recently, I was one of the editors, with Ivan Miroschnikov, Outi Lehtipuu and Ismo Dunderberg, of the book *Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity* (Brill 2017). Essays in the book explore the relationship of women and knowledge in early Christianity from various perspectives, including real women and their participation in knowledge, whether knowledge that connects with literacy or with religious knowledge and authority, to literary constructs of wise women or female personifications of wisdom. In my article “What Happened to Mary? Women in the *Meadow* of John Moschus”, I analyse some of the female characters in the *Meadow*. Of the numerous tales of women, I worked with the ones where the characters are named Mary at some point of the tradition. These narratives are not connected to legends about the Mary, mother of Jesus, but they suggest influence of biblical narratives and provide good examples to study the use of scriptural and oral traditions in monastic literary production. They can, furthermore, be approached from the point of

view of ideas and ideals attached to gender, Christian life and otherness, and in that last sense they relate to the views of ethnic others in the *Meadow*, which I mentioned above.

Perspectives

As the overview of my scholarly interests presents above, much of my work is outside the New Testament canon and the first century. Studying ancient Christian texts widely enables us to grasp something of the meaning and uses of scriptures for ancient Christians and for the New Testament. As we seek to understand the world in which Christianity emerged and was fashioned, work in other fields such as archaeology is a way to reconstruct the past. While showing us the limitations of our sources and knowledge, it leads us to new insights and no doubt new questions to solve. In the future, I plan to continue my work with early Christian sources in late antique Palestine, address the theme of otherness from the perspective of the written and material sources and how they complement and conflict one another. Another area of future work is gender and childhood in New Testament and early Christian literature. Pursuing these interests, I look forward to collaboration with colleagues and students in Copenhagen.