
Early Christian Literature: Christ and Culture in the Second and Third Centuries—The Apologies, Apocryphal Acts and Martyr Acts
by Helen Rhee

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Studies of early Christian literature typically focus on a modest subsection of the available evidence. Helen Rhee seeks to break through this compartmentalizing approach in this succinct book, a revised version of her dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary. *Early Christian Literature* systematically compares the thematic content of three major genres of the early Church: the apologies, the *Apocryphal Acts*, and pre-Decian martyr literature. The result is an engaging, thought-provoking study that documents both the diversity and common threads of early Christian literature.

The central texts for Rhee's analysis were all written between the mid-second and early third centuries. Yet these texts, composed in the Greek East, Rome, or Latin North Africa, present 'radically different, if not contradictory, Christian self-portraits' [4]. The book's first chapter ('Second-Century Christian Literature in its Historical-Social Context') concisely orients readers in the thicket of modern scholarship that has developed around each genre. Building on the work of Robert Grant and A. J. Guerra (among others), Rhee highlights the debt of the 'apologists'—Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Tatian, and a half-dozen others—to the protreptic tradition of ancient rhetoric and philosophy. While attacking the errors of paganism, the apologists also sought to 'defend, propagate, and explain' Christian doctrine in Greco-Roman terms [29]. By contrast, the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (John, Paul, Andrew, Peter, and Thomas) and the earliest martyr literature (the *Acts* of Polycarp, the martyrs of Lyon, Perpetua, Felicitas, and others) present an unrelentingly hostile portrait of Greco-Roman society. Later Christian orthodoxy embraced the

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apologists and the martyr literature, but usually rejected the non-canonical *Apocryphal Acts* as fraudulent and heretical. The three genres thus stand in a 'triangular relationship' [47], united by shared goals and assumptions, but strongly divergent in their views of Greco-Roman society and their relationship to later Church authority.

Chapters 2–4 each examine a pivotal theme in Christian self-presentation during the second and third centuries. Early Christian writers all proclaim the superiority of Christian monotheism [chap. 2], but do so in profoundly different ways. The apologists are the most deeply indebted to Platonic models. Most present themselves as operating *within* the Hellenic intellectual tradition. Justin in Rome and Tatian in Syria, while 'poles apart' in their attitude toward Greek philosophy, agree with Clement of Alexandria that Christianity represents the true form of philosophy [70]. Nearly all of the apologists identify Christ as the Logos, 'emphasizing the divine and cosmological nature of the Son' [103]. The *Apocryphal Acts*, by contrast, focus on demonstrations of Christ's power in action. Their narratives abound with exorcisms, healings, and resurrections performed in the name of 'Jesus Christ' or the 'Lord Jesus'. While the *Apocryphal Acts* share the apologists' conception of God as unbegotten and unchangeable, they present Christ, God's Son, as the twin of the apostles, even blurring the distinction between the divine Christ and his closest disciples. The men and women who accept the apostles' teachings are, in turn, sometimes able to perceive Christ themselves. One believer sees Him as a child, another as an old man with a flowing beard. Since His human appearance is only an illusion, Christ is 'not confined to any single illusory form on earth' [83]. Finally, the martyr acts present Christian monotheism as 'true piety', drawing upon the Greco-Roman vocabulary of sacrifice [88]. As sacrificial victims, the martyrs imitate Christ and become mediators between Christ and His followers. But they do not become Christ. The martyr acts, Rhee argues, maintain a more careful demarcation between the human and the divine than do the *Apocryphal Acts*. Instead of 'divine men taking over Christ', the martyrs remain 'disciples and imitators of Christ' [102].

Christian writers in all of these genres emphasize the superiority of Christian sexual morality [chap. 3]. The apologists keenly defend the 'rigor and stringency of the Christian sexual codes', which they

contrast with Greco-Roman practices of prostitution, homosexuality, adultery, abortion, and infanticide [117]. Some apologists, such as Clement of Alexandria, highlight Christians' respect for marriage, echoing Stoic ideals that were widely admired by Greco-Roman aristocrats. At the other end of the spectrum, Tatian insists upon chastity as the true mark of Christian sexual piety, even linking marriage in one passage [*Oration* 8.1] to pederasty and adultery. His strident rejection of human sexuality made him a 'heretic' in the eyes of most patristic writers [124]. Yet, all five of the *Apocryphal Acts* convey a comparable hostility toward marriage and sexual intercourse. Time and again in these narratives, apostolic preaching precipitates the dissolution of traditional political and family bonds. The *Apocryphal Acts* frequently depict distraught male rulers who exhibit 'increasingly "womanish" or "female" attributes, while the continent heroines display increasingly "manly" or "male" qualities' [138]. Thecla, the heroine of the *Acts of Paul*, Maximilla, the wife of the Roman proconsul of Achaëa in the *Acts of Andrew*, and the Indian noblewoman Mygdonia in the *Acts of Thomas* all fit comfortably into this narrative pattern that celebrates the disruption of normative marital bonds. The martyr literature similarly features numerous stories of Christian women whose commitment to Christ—expressed in many cases through their chastity—leads them into bitter conflict with their non-Christian husbands and fathers. Perpetua's rejection of her father's tearful pleas exemplifies this narrative pattern. Indeed, the only legitimate form of paternity in the early martyr literature is that of God the Father [122].

Finally, chapter 4 investigates Christian attitudes toward the Roman Empire. The apologists forcefully assert Christians' loyalty to the emperor, drawing a 'critical distinction between worship of the emperor and honor paid to him' [166]. Tertullian offers the most precise formulation of this distinction, defending Christians' refusal to swear by the *genius* of the emperor, while affirming their willingness to swear by his health (*salutem*). His endorsement of imperial authority stands in sharp relief to the rhetoric of the *Apocryphal Acts* in which the apostles repeatedly flout and disrupt various forms of non-Christian government (often, but not exclusively, Roman). In these narratives, there appears to be 'no common ground between Christianity and the Empire' [187]. Hostility to Roman authority is, in fact, the central leitmotif of the martyr literature. As Rhee

observes, the martyrs' words and actions emphatically demonstrate 'their contempt for and renunciation of the entire Roman system of power' [186].

In sum, Rhee makes a strong case for a more integrated approach to early Christian literature. While few of the book's individual arguments break new ground, the whole is greater than its parts. By slicing across the traditional divisions in the historiography, *Early Christian Literature* highlights both the shared features and remarkable diversity of early Christian literature. Inevitably, given the range of material the book embraces, there are holes in its bibliography, especially in German scholarship. But its 31-page bibliography and more than 1100 endnotes provide a valuable introduction to each of the subfields it considers.