

Article

The Protevangelium of James in Papyrus Bodmer V: Titles, Genres, and Traditions in Transmission

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Abstract: The apocryphal account of the birth and childhood of Mary, mother of Jesus (and to a lesser degree Jesus himself) known most commonly as the *Protevangelium of James* is one of the most influential early Christian texts outside of the New Testament. It is witnessed substantially in the Greek manuscript tradition as well as in several other languages. In the process of its transmission in Greek from the late third century or the fourth century into the late medieval/early modern period, various titular formulae were attached to the text. This article examines the earliest manuscript witness for *Prot. Jas*, Papyrus Bodmer V, and argues that the title present here is reflective of the complexities surrounding the perceived genre and function of early Christian literature in addition to the creation and continuation of traditions encompassing authorial identity and legitimacy. The *Prot. Jas* demonstrates well the hermeneutical weight often carried by titular paratexts as literature is transmitted, and regardless of whether P. Bodmer V represents continuity or evolution in this regard, it offers a window onto the flexibility of genre and its representation in early Christianity.

Keywords: *Protevangelium of James*; paratexts; titles; genre; gospel literature; infancy gospel; manuscripts



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1. Introduction

This article analyses the earliest known titling of the text most popularly known as the *Protevangelium of James* (*Prot. Jas*) in its Greek transmission. I argue that our earliest witness for this text, the late third-century or fourth-century Papyrus Bodmer V, exemplifies the functionality of titular paratexts as they interpret, as well as identify, the works they accompany and the broader textual traditions these form a part of. The *Prot. Jas* is variously referred to in modern scholarship as the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, the *Infancy Gospel of James*, the *Genesis Marias*, and the *Proto-Gospel of James*, and this plurality somewhat reflects the diverse ways that the Greek manuscript tradition identifies it, as it is copied over the course of around 15 centuries. Its titles, or rather, its identifying content that might be read as titles, range widely in both length and form.¹ *Prot. Jas* remains one of the most extensively transmitted Christian apocryphal texts, with a relatively rich manuscript history in numerous linguistic traditions.² I am concerned in this article specifically with the earliest evidence for the Greek tradition, which itself is witnessed in at least 169 manuscripts that have been written by more than 100 scribes between the second and nineteenth centuries.³ The inscriptions and subscriptions found in the manuscripts witnessing *Prot. Jas* also demonstrate in several cases the blurriness of the “title” as a paratextual genre in itself, especially in cases where a short title gives way to a lengthier summary of the text’s content.

The functionality of all *Prot. Jas*’s titles is determined by the scribes and readers who imparted their own interpretations and expectations of the text—often building on those of their predecessors—into the manuscript witnesses that have survived. When it comes to P. Bodmer V, the incipit and subscript title read Γένεσις Μαρίας ἀποκλυψις Ἰακώβ (Birth of Mary, Revelation of James). We cannot be certain to what degree the scribe is

reproducing or adapting the designation/s for the text present in an exemplar, but its form raises a series of pertinent questions for understanding not only *Prot. Jas* but also broader developing early Christian traditions. These will guide much of the discussion that follows:

1. In what way, if any, does *Prot. Jas* relate to other literature bearing the designation of ἀποκάλυψις, and how does this further enrich our understanding of the way early Christians conceived of textual genres?
2. How does James's authorial voice—presented near the end of *Prot. Jas*'s narrative—and his claim to be writing an ἱστορία interact with the way scribes and interpreters titled the text?
3. Does the artificial designation of the text as a proto-gospel say more about early modern concerns surrounding textual categorization than is reflective of how early Christians understood it?

Attempts to establish the most “reliable” reading of *Prot. Jas* have seen scholars since the late nineteenth century grapple with the vast number of Greek manuscripts. Tischendorf's edition (Tischendorf 1853, pp. 1–49) remained the standard until the discovery of P. Bodmer V, a late third-century or fourth-century manuscript found in Egypt that forms part of the so-called Bodmer Miscellaneous (or Composite) Codex,⁴ in which we find the entire text preserved.⁵ This discovery ignited new interest in the Greek tradition, which was spearheaded by de Strycker's 1961 study that sought to promote what he believed to be the oldest form of the text. Zervos's recent edition catalogues and collates these witnesses,⁶ but even so, his intention is not to provide a comprehensive critical edition.⁷ Rather, he centers P. Bodmer V as the earliest witness and highlights “the idiosyncrasies of the papyrus text vis-à-vis the remainder of the Greek MS tradition.” His stated goal is to show how scribes, copyists, and modern editors “received and manipulated the type of early text of the *ProtJas* epitomized in the ancient papyrus” by documenting instances of redactions motivated by particular theological agendas (Zervos 2022, p. 1). This desire to ‘redeem’ P. Bodmer V is partly in response to the influence of de Strycker's argument that, despite preserving possibly the oldest text of *Prot. Jas*, this manuscript lacked any credibility as a witness to early Christian thought, being a later document entirely dependent on the New Testament gospels. Such questions regarding ‘reliability’ are not of concern in this essay. In line with new and material philological approaches that have gained significant traction in the study of early Christian literature in recent years, I treat P. Bodmer V as an instance of transmission and interpretation.⁸ It acts as the reception not merely of a text we now call *Prot. Jas*, but also of traditions surrounding the figure of James himself and the textual genres that become attached to him.

2. The Genre and Function of *Prot. Jas* in Scholarly Description

Numerous studies have interrogated the ways in which *Prot. Jas* in the form we have it uses and interacts with other source material, in attempts to better understand its *Sitz im Leben* (e.g., Beyers 1990; Cothenet 1988) and its apologetic, theological, and didactic functions for early Christians (e.g., de Strycker 1964; Cothenet 1988; Foskett 2005; Vuong 2013; Vanden Eykel 2016; Zervos 2018, pp. 174–97), as well as its later reception (e.g., Horn 2006; Cross 2006, 2007). Integral to many of these discussions has been the genre of *Prot. Jas*. While it is generally discussed within the framework of infancy gospel literature, not all have been satisfied with this classification. For example, Ehlen (2012) proposed reading the text as an ancient novel, while Allen (1991) argued for the limitations of ‘infancy gospel’ and emphasized instead the text's character as ‘historia’. This latter descriptor is reflected in the Latin translation of the sixteenth-century humanist Guillaume Postel, with whom both *Prot. Jas*'s popularity in modern Western Europe and the name *Protevangeliium* are generally associated. This title was assigned to the text by Postel following his encounter with an unidentified Greek manuscript (possibly now lost) while he was travelling in Constantinople in 1551 (Bouwisma 1957, pp. 16, 73; see recently Zervos 2018, p. 1). The

only manuscript presently known that bears the title of *Protevangelium* is very late and is held on the Greek island of Paros in the Longovardas Monastery (Paros, Longovardas 679, f. 87v–99r). This manuscript contains the full text of *Prot. Jas*, and is titled almost identically⁹ to the first edition of the Greek text of *Prot. Jas* produced by Michael Neander in 1564 (see Neander 1564, pp. 356–92). The main text is also so similar that it seems the scribe either copied from Neander’s edition or, alternatively, from the hypothetical lost manuscript that Neander and, perhaps, Postel had access to (see Zervos 2022, p. 37). However, we have no way of knowing that the title that Postel uses is directly based on that in a manuscript he was looking at, and the late date of Longovardas 679 makes it much more likely that it was copied from Neander’s edition. It is entirely possible that Postel simply felt the title *Protevangelium* (Proto-Gospel) was appropriate to the content of the text, without regard to its titling in manuscripts he had access to. Postel’s assignation has, nevertheless, been hugely influential in the text’s scholarly reception as gospel-related literature.¹⁰

“Gospel”, of course, remains an expansive genre in early Christianity, including not only narrative biographical texts like the New Testament gospels that recount Jesus’s human career on earth and beyond, but also so-called dialogue gospels, such as the *Gospel of Mary*, which feature a post-resurrection savior in conversation with one or more of his disciples. Then there is the *Gospel of Thomas*, which, despite sharing much material with the now-canonical gospels, takes the form of a series of sayings stripped largely of narrative; or the *Gospel of Philip*, whose attention to narrating Jesus’s life is more minimalistic, but where we still see a clear attempt to convey his soteriological significance. Infancy narratives, featuring other notable apocrypha, such as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, are just one type of text that contributes to this flexible genre we call “gospel”, which connects texts through shared forms, focuses, and/or, in many cases, their titles. In the case of *Prot. Jas*, the term *Protevangelium*, and with it “gospel” associations, is attached very late and serves clear theological purposes. Postel’s Latin translation of the text and his accompanying title was published by Theodor Bibliander in 1552 as *Protevangelium Sancti Patris Nostri Iacobi, Fratris Domini, Sermo historicus, de natiuitate Deiparae* (*Protevangelium of our holy father James, brother of the Lord, a historical sermon on the birth of the mother of God*). While we cannot confirm the Greek origins of Postel’s attribution of *Protevangelium*, his Latin title both describes the function of the work as primarily an account of Mary’s own nativity and also venerates James as author. Bibliander as his editor saw fit to expand upon this even further in his own title to the volume to establish the credentials and authority of James as an authorial figure, in addition to explaining that the text also deals with the birth of Jesus Christ himself:

Proteuangelion sive de natalibus Iesu Christi, et ipsius matris Virginis Mariae, sermo historicus diui Jacobi minoris, consobrini et fratris Domini Iesu, apostolic primarii, et episcopi Christianorum primi Hierosolymis.

(Protevangelium, or concerning the birth of Jesus Christ, and his mother the Virgin Mary, a historical sermon of the blessed James the minor, relation and brother of the Lord Jesus, first apostle, and bishop of the first Christians of Jerusalem.)

The desire to assure legitimacy is clear here. James is cemented not only as a familial relation to Christ (giving him credibility as an eyewitness) but also as the primary apostle and first bishop of Jerusalem. This complements the similar affirmations given in the titles of the two other texts in Bibliander’s volume that *Prot. Jas* shares. The text of Mark’s gospel, to which Postel and Bibliander thought *Prot. Jas* to be a prologue,¹¹ is attributed to “blessed Mark, disciple and son of Peter”, taking up the long-established tradition of connecting Peter to the evangelist, and a *Vita* of “the evangelist John Mark” is described as being composed by “the most reliable authors”!¹² We see in both Postel’s and Bibliander’s Latin titles several of the descriptors and concerns that the Greek manuscript tradition for *Prot. Jas* develops. In addition to James’s identity and role as author, we see the text described as recording history, yet within the theologically didactic framework that “sermon” implies.

3. The Earliest Evidence of a Title for *Prot. Jas*: P. Bodmer V

We now turn to the aforementioned earliest and most famous witness to *Prot. Jas* featuring a title: P. Bodmer V.¹³ In this manuscript, the formula Γένεσις Μαρίας ἀποκάλυψις Ἰακώβ (Birth of Mary, Revelation of James) bookends the text, appearing as both an incipit and subscription. Taking the opening words of a text and reusing them as a separate title was a relatively common practice that we see in other early Christian codices.¹⁴ In this case, the incipit occupies the first line and a half of the text and is then reused as a subscription. The subscript title is visually distinguished from the end of the main text, spread over three lines, each beginning roughly halfway along with negative space preceding. Immediately below the subscript title, and again distinguished visually from it by beginning in line with the main text, is a colophon that reads εἰρήνη τῷ γράψαντι καὶ τῷ ἀναγινώσκοντι (Peace to the writer and the reader). The layout of the subscript title is worth briefly pausing over, since the division of the words across three lines separates three important elements as follows:

- (1) Mary's birth, the initial narrative focus of the text (Γένεσις Μαρίας);
- (2) The gene identification of the text as an ἀποκάλυψις;
- (3) The name of the author (Ἰακώβ).

Γένεσις Μαρίας
ἀποκάλυψις
Ἰακώβ

While it is possible that the scribe was simply trying to balance space on lines with ensuring the subtitle remained distinct from the end of the main text and the colophon that precedes it, it would certainly have been possible to retain this effect had James's name been written on the second line along with ἀποκάλυψις. Moreover, the word Ἰακώβ begins in ekthesis (of two letters in length) from the subtitle content in the two lines above it, meaning that James's name visually stands out further. Could the scribe be drawing attention to the various components of the title by choosing this particular layout? If the intention was to emphasize the importance of each of these elements (content, the text's divinely revealed status, and the importance of James as attributed author) then arranging the subtitle in this way ensures that this is visually clear in a way that the incipit is not.

3.1. Moving beyond Source-Critical Hypotheses

The substantial amount of work that has surrounded *Prot. Jas*'s compositional history has naturally sought to answer a different set of questions—largely concerned with the text's origins and earliest readers—from those addressed in the present study. Here, focus is not on the hypothetical author/s of the text itself, but on what P. Bodmer V might reveal about the interpretation and preservation of this imagined history and the building of traditions in early Christianity. Yet, we must briefly acknowledge the relevance of the substantial source-critical arguments made of *Prot. Jas* insofar as they relate to the title preserved in P. Bodmer V. While there has long been a broad agreement that this form represents a unified work resulting from one author (most prominently [de Strycker 1961](#)), the opposite viewpoint reigned for a long time (see [Harnack 1904](#), pp. 598–693), and has recently been renewed by [Zervos \(2018\)](#), who takes the view that *Prot. Jas* as we have it is a composite work composed in three main stages. Possibly as early as the first century, he argues, a work was written concerning the conception and birth of Mary that bore as its original title *Genesis Marias* (the first part of the title preserved in P. Bodmer V). He then argues that a “Composer” also working in the first century added to and amended this base text by incorporating new material on Joseph.¹⁵ The final major layer came, according to Zervos, in the second century, when a “Redactor” added canonical gospel material from Luke, Matthew, and John as well as prayers, dialogues, and additional narrative, notably including that related to Zachariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist.¹⁶ The text that we have in P. Bodmer V, Zervos argues, is the result of these three compositional stages ([Zervos 2018](#), pp. 19–20). From late antiquity, through the medieval period, and into mod-

ern times, copyists and scribes continued to make smaller edits generally inspired by ideological motivations, but for Zervos, P. Bodmer V offers the text of *Prot. Jas* “in the most pristine possible state” (Zervos 2018, p. 21).

While there are arguably identifiable layers and thematic clusters of material in the text of *Prot. Jas* that has come down to us, isolating the moments of incorporation for each of these will always remain speculative and, to some extent, arbitrary, since the fact remains that our earliest witness contains all of them. Some have expressed doubt as to the ‘originality’ of the second part of P. Bodmer V’s title due to the fact that several other Greek manuscripts make no reference to James (e.g., Hock 1995, p. 4). The problem with this is that we cannot base our knowledge of an older and hypothetical version of the text on the variances of its later manuscript tradition. We cannot make the claim with any certainty that the first part of the incipit and subscription of P. Bodmer V (*Genesis Marias*) was ever isolated as a stand-alone title for the imagined earliest text of *Prot. Jas*. In the present essay, therefore, as our earliest known witness, P. Bodmer V’s title will be treated as a unit in its own right. Whether the scribe of P. Bodmer V is copying this title from an earlier witness or takes the liberty of amending it at the point of adding the subscription we cannot know for certain. At this point, however, a frequently cited mention of *Prot. Jas* by Origen, who died in the mid-third century, becomes important.

3.2. Origen’s “Book of James”

Origen writes in his *Commentary on Matthew* X.17 about a “Book of James” (βίβλος Ἰακώβου) that is identifiable in terms of content with the version of *Prot. Jas* which we know, apparently containing material on Jesus’s brothers from a former marriage of Joseph.¹⁷ Harnack equated the first seventeen chapters of *Prot. Jas*, which he termed the *Genesis Marias*, directly with Origen’s “Book of James”, believing this section of the text to have been composed in the early third century (Harnack 1904, p. 601). For Lily Vuong, Origen is more concerned with the content of the text that he is describing than with recalling its precise title, hence the reason that he resorts to the rather generic term “book” (Vuong 2013, p. 34 n. 9). It is important to remember that “book” could sometimes effectively stand in for “gospel” in the titling and identification of early Christian texts. As Falkenberg argues, for example, in addition to the *Gospel of John*’s author identifying it also as a “book” (John 20:30; 21:25), we see the same across the several incipit, epilogue, and colophon titles given to the Coptic *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit/The Gospel of the Egyptians* in the two Nag Hammadi manuscripts that preserve it (NHC III; NHC IV) (Falkenberg 2022, p. 8). Texts did not necessarily need to feature the term “gospel” in their titles to be understood as falling under this broad umbrella of gospel literature. Sometimes terminological variation and ambiguity was even a useful and intentional way of inscribing or fading lines of definition.¹⁸ In Origen’s case, it is not clear that such intentional terminological bending either by Origen himself or by his source/s is at play. Origen discusses his “Book of James” alongside the more recognizably identified *Gospel of Peter*, which he also asserts to have contained similar content about the siblings of Christ.¹⁹ However, despite the lack of specificity in Origen’s reference, it is significant that he describes the text in the way that he does. When taken together, the similarity in thematic content (Jesus having siblings from Joseph’s former spouse) and the identification with the figure of James make a strong case for Origen having been aware of the text that we know as *Prot. Jas*, even if only by reputation.²⁰ His recollection of an association with James, especially when paired with his description of the text’s content, suggests that the attribution to James preserved in the latter part of P. Bodmer V’s title was known in its own right as a designation for this text even prior to the late third or fourth century, when this manuscript was produced.

4. Contextualizing *Prot. Jas*’s Earliest Title

Despite Harnack’s coincidental foresight in using the designation Γένεσις Μαρίας to refer to the chapters of *Prot. Jas* devoted to Mary’s own conception and childhood even before P. Bodmer V was known, there is no manuscript or other evidence for this specific

titular formula being used on its own. What we do have, however, is the reference in Origen's testimony indicating that the text was known in the third century specifically for its association with James. Put bluntly, neither Origen nor any other early witness indicates knowledge of a "Γένεσις Μαρίας", which sharpens the problems of the partition favored by Harnack and Zervos. As is well known, legitimation through association with apostolic or other authoritative figures was common in early Christian textual transmission and tradition-building practices, whether this was through titling, content, or both. In the case of *Prot. Jas*, the closing words of the text are given to James as the presented author, telling of the conditions under which he wrote:

Ἐγὼ δὲ Ἰάκωβος ὁ γράψας τὴν ἱστορίαν ταύτην ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις θορύβου γεναμένου ὅτε ἐτελεύτησεν Ἡρώδης, συνέστειλλον ἑαυτὸν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ἕως παύσεται ὁ θόρυβος Ἱερουσαλήμ. Δοξάσω δὲ τὸν Δεσπότην τὸν δόντα μοι τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ γράψαι τὴν ἱστορίαν ταύτην. Καὶ ἔσται ἡ χάρις μετὰ πάντων τῶν φοβουμένων τὸν Κύριον, ἀμήν.

"And I James who wrote this history in Jerusalem, tumult having arisen when Herod died, took myself away to the wilderness until the uproar in Jerusalem calmed, glorifying the Lord who had given me the gift and the wisdom to write this history. And grace shall be with them who fear our Lord, amen". (25.1–4)²¹

These words, placed on the lips of James, provide the constructed context for the work, wherein James is party to at least some of the events described within. They also identify the work as a "history" (ἱστορία), a point to which we will return shortly. But what should we make of the second element of P. Bodmer V's title, which identifies the text as an ἀποκάλυψις (revelation)? Despite its commonly held name in modern times, in this early manuscript of *Prot. Jas*, there is no trace of gospel-identifying language in the title, with focus instead placed on the theme of the text as the story of Mary's origins (Γένεσις Μαρίας), transmitted through James as "revelation" (ἀποκάλυψις Ἰακώβ). Unlike the numerous other early Christian texts that are given this descriptor in their titles, such as the New Testament Apocalypse of John (Revelation);²² the Greek *Apocalypse of Paul*; the separate Coptic *Apocalypse of Paul* (NHC V, 2); the (First) *Apocalypse of James* (NHC V, 3; Codex Tchacos); the (Second) *Apocalypse of James* (NHC V, 4); the *Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V, 5); or the *Apocalypse of Peter* (NHC VII, 3), *Prot. Jas* does not feature a revealer figure (in these examples either Christ in one form or another, the Holy Spirit, or Adam) imparting wisdom or visions to a chosen recipient. In what sense, then, is the text understood to be a revelation? Or rather, how might we explain the connection of this term to the text of *Prot. Jas* in P. Bodmer V? At this point, the context of the production and ownership of P. Bodmer V becomes important: if we understand the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex as a relic of Egyptian monasticism, illuminating connections can be made to other manuscripts from this context witnessing textual traditions related to James—specifically, the Nag Hammadi Codices.

4.1. The Dishna Papers and the Nag Hammadi Codices

The production, ownership history, and rationale behind the inclusion of texts in the so-called Bodmer Composite Codex that contains P. Bodmer V remain very much up for debate but are important in considering the particulars of *Prot. Jas*'s title in this manuscript. The exact contents of the diverse collection of Greek, Coptic, and Latin material known as the Bodmer Papyri, or Dishna Papers, is not universally agreed upon.²³ Particular items now spread across a number of libraries and museums are variously included or excluded by different scholars as being part of the original find,²⁴ comprising a mixture of biblical and non-biblical Christian texts, classical texts, and educational material discovered in a jar in the early 1950s on the Dishna plain, Upper Egypt. The precise location has also been a matter of dispute, and this has played a part in the different arguments put forward as to their origins. The most expansive view of what the collection contains is rather vast, with James Robinson listing 29 codices and 17 rolls, which include a selection of Greek and

Coptic Pachomian monastic letters. This maximalist view of the collection has since come under strong criticism.²⁵ Yet, the likelihood of a direct connection between the Dishna Papers and the Egyptian Pachomian monastic community that flourished during the fourth century still remains extremely strong. This link was consistently and famously maintained some years ago by Robinson, who first asserted this in an essay of the early 1990s (Robinson 1990–1991, pp. 26–40). Similarly to the Nag Hammadi Codices uncovered in 1945 in roughly the same locale, early suggestions of a Pachomian monastic link came to be questioned by some (Van Elderen 1998, p. 56) but retained the confidence of others as at least a viable possibility. One reason for this is that, just as with the Nag Hammadi Codices, the details of the Dishna Papers find story remain sketchy, leading to caution over ascribing too much weight to arguments for physical proximity to the Pachomian monastery at Pbow, which Robinson’s account suggested was the likely source of the newly discovered “library” of texts.²⁶

Recent examination of cartonnage from one of the codices (p. Bodmer XXIII)²⁷ supports an origin in the general vicinity of the cliffs at Jabal al-Tarif, where the Nag Hammadi Codices were found a few years earlier. Taking this and a wealth of additional material and ideological indicators into account, Hugo Lundhaug has recently argued for the likelihood that the Dishna Papers and the Nag Hammadi Codices both stem from Pachomian monasticism (Lundhaug 2018, pp. 329–86). We might best acknowledge them as artefacts not just from the monastery at Pbow, as has been common, but potentially from several monastic houses in a slightly broader locality,²⁸ home to a wide range of monks who variously knew Coptic, Greek, and Latin, some of whom could have brought items among the Dishna codices with them when they joined the monastic community. There are various points of contact between the Dishna Papers and the Nag Hammadi Codices, which have already been noted. For instance, certain items share scribal similarities, paratextual features (such as title placement), and physical construction.²⁹ This is certainly true in the case of *Prot. Jas* in P. Bodmer V, which like several titles in the Nag Hammadi Codices is formed of an incipit that is subscripted to the text. Like many titles in the Nag Hammadi Codices, the title is visually distinguished by negative space, and a line of diplai is present (in P. Bodmer V’s case under the colophon). Beyond simply these aesthetic features, however, when we consider the titling of *Prot. Jas* in P. Bodmer V alongside some of the literature that we find in the Nag Hammadi Codices, some salient points emerge in relation to ancient perceptions of the text’s genre and the figure of James himself.

4.2. James the Revealer

We begin with two texts witnessed as the third and fourth items in Nag Hammadi Codex V, both of which bear a form of title (through one or more of an inscription, incipit, or subscription) reading *Apocalypse of James* despite being distinct literary works.³⁰ The so-called (*First*) *Apocalypse of James* (ταποκαλυψις ν̄ ιακωβ[ος]) (NHC V, 3 44, 8–10) is witnessed not only at Nag Hammadi but also in Codex Tchacos. However, in this latter manuscript, the text is simply entitled *James*. This once again demonstrates the need for open-mindedness when it comes to the degree of significance particular terminology might or might not have when being used to identify a text in a given manuscript. The (*Second*) *Apocalypse of James* (ταποκαλυψις ν̄ ια[κωβος]) (NHC V, 4 44, 11–12) is placed in the codex between the (*First*) *Apocalypse of James* and the *Apocalypse of Adam* and is identified simply by an inscription matching its incipit: ταποκαλυψις ν̄ ιακωβος. While the (*First*) *Apocalypse of James* prefigures James’s future suffering, the (*Second*) *Apocalypse of James* concludes with his martyrdom by stoning. It is interesting in connection with *Prot. Jas*, however, that unlike the (*First*) *Apocalypse of James*, which is explicit that James and Jesus are not biologically related (24, 14–16),³¹ the (*Second*) *Apocalypse of James* draws admittedly rather confusing familial connections between James and Jesus. Specifically, James’s mother tells him that he was both “nourished by the same milk” as Jesus (50, 18–19) (see Hedrick 1979, pp. 122–23) and also that he is his “brother by your father” (προν[τα] πεκειωτ) (50, 23). Following the inscription identifying this text as the *Apocalypse of James*, its incipit (44, 13) describes it as

a “discourse” (ὡαξε) spoken by James the Just in Jerusalem. This location is an important aspect of the narrative setting (in this case for the martyrdom of James) just as it is in *Prot. Jas*, where James identifies it as the location from which he begins writing his account. As is frequently noted, the (*Second*) *Apocalypse of James* does not take a particularly revelatory form, being more of an account by a priest named Mareim to James’s father, Theuda, about the events surrounding James’s death. Much like *Prot. Jas*, then, this text takes part in a revelatory tradition connected to the apostolic figure of James in that it is labelled as such by the scribe/s who copied it and, as indicated by its incipit earlier in its compositional and/or transmission history too, despite its content being more of a narrative report.

Nag Hammadi Codex V collects together texts which in four out of five cases contain ἀποκάλυψις in their titles, even if their form and content is predominantly something other. The first text in the codex, *Eugnostos the Blessed* (also appearing in NHC III), is written in the form of an epistle but is distinctly revelatory in character, uncovering the mysteries and order of the cosmos and its divine inhabitants to the reader. However, in the case of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, which appears second in the codex, the apocalyptic label in the manuscript subtitle and the content of the text are more obviously matched, with the tractate narrating a revelation imparted to the apostle Paul by the Holy Spirit in the form of a small child. Similarly, the *Apocalypse of Adam* identifies itself at its outset and closing as a revelation of hidden knowledge given by Adam to his son Seth.

While *Prot. Jas* is not presented as revelatory in the same way as the other examples noted above and rather self-identifies as a “history”, the presence of ἀποκάλυψις in the incipit and subscript nonetheless suggests a familiarity on the part either of P. Bodmer V’s scribe or a version they were copying from with revelatory textual tradition/s connected to James, such as are evidenced in the two above-mentioned texts from Nag Hammadi that connect James with the genre of ἀποκάλυψις. Moreover, while *Prot. Jas* does not explicitly speak of James *himself* as a relative of Jesus, referring only to unnamed siblings who share Joseph as a father, this general theme of Christ’s familial context also finds itself common to texts that bear James’s name. James’s involvement in *Prot. Jas* is not as a recipient of specialist knowledge but rather as an author of events that he is explicitly recounting shortly after they have taken place. As others have commented, the mention of Herod’s death is a clear strategy to date the narrative reasonably close to the birth of Christ.³² Taken together, these narrative details and the looming presence of an apostolic narrator lend the text a revelatory character. Yet that revelation is one that concerns past events and their significance, and so constitutes a *history*. That is, the mode of presentation is revelation; the content of what is presented is history. It is likely that both *Prot. Jas* and the above-mentioned revelatory texts witnessed at Nag Hammadi were all composed perhaps significantly earlier than their earliest (and in some cases sole) witnesses. However, for the purposes of this paper the issue at stake is what we can learn from their presentation in the hard evidence provided by their surviving manuscripts, which were likely owned (and maybe even produced) by the same monastic community in Egypt. What this physical evidence suggests is that both P. Bodmer V and Nag Hammadi Codex V indicate a broader tradition of associating James the Just with the genre of ἀποκάλυψις, even if this is loosely or barely applied in terms of textual content.

5. Conclusions

Postel’s early modern title to *Prot. Jas* has maintained influence in both popular and scholarly designations of this text. Yet, it is loaded with the need of scholars of his age and beyond to categorize ancient Christian texts according to genres that are much messier in the manuscript tradition than in the minds of those who have subsequently interpreted and copied them. In its later Greek transmission, *Prot. Jas* appears mainly in hagiographical and liturgical manuscripts.³³ The feast calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church continues to this day to use hymns that evidence dependence on the Greek text of *Prot. Jas*.³⁴ These surviving later manuscripts variously transmit the text under designations such as ἱστορία (“history”; appearing extremely frequently), λόγος (“discourse”; appearing relatively fre-

quently), and διήγησις (“narrative”; appearing four times).³⁵ The single known example of “Protevangeliu[m]”, which appears in the late Paros Longovardas 679, was probably copied from Neander’s first printed edition. This pluriformity in the designation of the text illustrates a clear distinction in views of the text: the first is that of the Eastern Church which continued to develop its understanding of *Prot. Jas* as a valuable source of Christian teaching and theology; the second is what may well be a sixteenth-century humanist attempt to create legitimacy or status via the currency of “gospel” terminology—legitimacy that was either assumed or less of a concern to the numerous Christians who copied and used the text in earlier centuries. The title present in P. Bodmer V, on the other hand, brings into question some of the arguments that have been made about the layered composition of *Prot. Jas* and how it was known by Christians in its early days of transmission.

This article has argued ultimately that the infancy text preserved in P. Bodmer V shows, through the combined presence of its incipit, subscript title, and self-identification as a history recorded by the apostle James, the overlap and porousness of genre boundaries within the early Christian literary world. Rather than being presented in this earliest manuscript witness as a gospel text, the work we continue to label as *Prot. Jas* claims to be a historical account with apostolic credentials (25.1–4) framed as a revelation. The late introduction of the gospel label to *Prot. Jas* demonstrates the weight that later interpreters of early Christianity place on this categorization, which was not necessarily shared to the same degree by the earliest scribes (even, perhaps, authors) and readers of much of its literature. As has been discussed, the shared features of texts designated in our manuscripts as “gospels”, “apocalypses”, and even “books” strongly indicate that flexibility with the borders of these descriptors was not only extremely common but also an intrinsic part of the way in which early Christians played with and developed tradition.

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Notes

- ¹ George Zervos has recently collated the Greek manuscripts of *Prot. Jas*, and the many titles of the text are given in (Zervos 2022, pp. 95–99).
- ² The text is preserved in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Georgian, Church Slavonic, and Syriac alongside Greek.
- ³ (Zervos 2022), ix, gives the number of scribes as 135.
- ⁴ LDAB: 2565. *Prot. Jas* occupies ff. 1–49 of P. Bodmer V. Images available to view at: <https://bodmerlab.unige.ch/fr/constellations/papyri/mirador/1072205366?page=013>, accessed on 2 May 2023.
- ⁵ P. Bodmer V was originally dated to the late-third century (Testuz 1958), although with some calls to push this into the early fourth (notably, (de Strycker 1961)). For a brief overview, See (Zervos 2012, esp. pp. 181–85). Regardless, it maintains its status as the earliest known witness to *Prot. Jas*.
- ⁶ (Zervos 2022); for important prior engagements with *Prot. Jas*’s Greek manuscript history see especially (de Strycker 1961, 1980; Daniels 1956).
- ⁷ See (Zervos 2022, pp. 38–41) for a table itemizing the manuscripts that he is aware of, building on the work of Daniels (1956) and Zervos’s own earlier dissertation (1985). Not all of these manuscripts preserve titles for *Prot. Jas*., with many containing only a portion of the text.
- ⁸ Some select recent examples include (Lied and Lundhaug 2017; Lundhaug and Jenott 2015; Allen 2020; Parker 2007; Kister et al. 2015).

- ⁹ Πρωτοευαγγέλιον ἢ περὶ γεννήσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ τῆς μετρὸς αὐτοῦ τῆς ἀειπαρθένου Μαρίας λόγος ἱστορικὸς Ἰακώβου τοῦ μείονος συγγενοῦς τε καὶ ἀδελφοῦ τοῦ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ ἀποστόλου πρώτου καὶ ἐπισκόπου πρώτου χριστιανῶν τῶν ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ.
- ¹⁰ For substantive accounts of Postel and *Prot. Jas*, see especially (Bouwisma 1957; Backus 1995). As others have commented, to credit Postel with ‘rediscovering’ a lost apocryphon (as had become common in much scholarship narrating the text’s history) is an overstatement, and runs counter to what its rich and linguistically varied manuscript tradition, spanning at least fifteen centuries, suggests. See (Vanden Eykel 2016, p. 14; Zervos 1986, p. iv).
- ¹¹ As noted by Vanden Eykel (2016, pp. 11–12), the view of more recent scholarship is that the author of *Prot. Jas* knew Matthew, Luke, and John, but not necessarily Mark. See especially (Goodacre 2018).
- ¹² For Postel’s Latin translation of *Prot. Jas*, see (Bibliander 1552, pp. 24–50).
- ¹³ Additional early papyri fragments of the text from the fourth century were discovered in Aschmunen, Egypt (PSI 6; see Pistelli 1912, pp. 9–15), as well as parts of the text on vellum in a fifth or sixth-century fragmentary codex (p. Grenfell II.8; see Grenfell 1896, pp. 13–19). No titles are present in any of these fragments. All other manuscripts are from the seventh century onwards.
- ¹⁴ The fourth-century Nag Hammadi Codices are a good example of this, with numerous texts surviving only in one or more of these books, and the incipit titles being the only examples we have of scribal designations for these texts. Notable examples are *The Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3; XII, 2); *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II, 4); *The Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V, 5); and *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHC III, 3; V, 1). See (Robinson 2004, pp. 70–71; Falkenberg 2022, pp. 7, 9–11). Falkenberg also discusses another text named according to its incipit, found in a possible fifth or sixth-century miniature codex, the *Gospel of the Lots of Mary*. As recognised by Falkenberg (see his n. 48), the provenance of this item is not certain.
- ¹⁵ As Zervos notes, previous scholars favoring the tri-stage composition theory have tended to refer to this material as the *Apocryphum Joseph*.
- ¹⁶ Referred to by prior scholars as the *Apocryphum Zachariae*.
- ¹⁷ In his *De Carne Christi* VII (composed at the start of the third century) Tertullian also discusses Jesus’s family as part of his refutation of Apelles and Marcion’s denials of his nativity. Van Stempvoort sees this as evidence that *Prot. Jas* was being widely circulated by the third century (see Van Stempvoort 1964). For discussion of Joseph’s children and prior marriage in *Prot. Jas*, and the role this may have played in the text falling out of favor in the West (hence the much more limited surviving Latin manuscript tradition), see (Vuong 2013, pp. 11–12; Painter 2004, pp. 198–99; Foster 2007, pp. 574, 577).
- ¹⁸ Falkenberg notes that the titles of the *Apocryphon of John* in its long recension (NHC II and IV) bear the Greek accusative ΚΑΤΑ ΙΩΖΑΝΝΗΝ formula familiar of gospel titles, allowing for an adjectival rendering of ΑΠΟΚΡΥΦΟΝ that suggests an implicit “Gospel” (so, “The Secret Gospel According to John, or “The Secret Gospel of John”) (Falkenberg 2022, pp. 4–5).
- ¹⁹ What survives of the fragmentary *Gospel of Peter* contains no infancy material, so if Origen is referring to this same text he is aware of (or at least claiming to be aware of) content that has since been lost.
- ²⁰ Bremmer (2020, p. 61) has recently argued that the case for Origen having *Prot. Jas* specifically in mind is further strengthened by the fact he uses the uncommon word σύλλημμα, which *Prot. Jas* uses in Joseph’s description of Mary’s pregnancy (19.6), when Origen himself comments on this in his *Homilies on Luke* VI (see the edition of Rauer 1959, pp. 34–35).
- ²¹ Greek text as in (Zervos 2022, p. 78). Translation mine.
- ²² On the complex titling history of which see (Allen 2020, pp. 54–57). Despite the significant variation in forms that develop over the course of the text’s transmission, however, the genre identification as an “apocalypse” is one feature that remains constant from the earliest manuscript evidence onwards (Allen 2020, p. 59).
- ²³ It has become more common in scholarly discourse to hear these documents referred to as the “Bodmer Papyri,” since the majority of the codices were bought by the Swiss collector Martin Bodmer. However, while uncertainty remains as to their precise proximity to the town of Dishna upon discovery, Dishna Papers better acknowledges their locality even if only in a broad sense, rather than their post-purchase status.
- ²⁴ See (Nongbri 2018, pp. 170–75) for the codices “universally regarded as part of the Bodmer find” (Nongbri’s Table 5.1). See also (Knust 2017, pp. 100–1), who provides a similar chart but with material listed in a slightly different order.
- ²⁵ Brent Nongbri discounts a large number of the items associated with the original find that are listed in Robinson’s catalogue. See (Nongbri 2018, pp. 169–94). Similarly, (Knust 2017) includes those items which Robinson and Kasser mutually accepted, but like Nongbri excludes the additional material which Robinson uniquely included. See (Kasser 1964) and the response to Kasser’s criticism of the more expansive list of Dishna contents given in (Robinson 2013, pp. 177–84).
- ²⁶ Referring to the Dishna Papers as a “library” should be resisted, because this suggests a degree of bounded integrity to the documents that skews our understanding of their relationship both to each other and to the larger reading and learning context that they may reflect. Rather, they may represent an un-curated sample of the literary material held by one or more of the local Pachomian monasteries. See also (Lundhaug 2018, p. 351).
- ²⁷ This codex contains Isaiah in Sahidic Coptic, and its cartonnage includes land and tax registry papyrus fragments dated palaeographically to the fourth century. See (Fournet and Gascou 2015, pp. 25–40).

- 28 Christian Bull has recently nuanced the argument for the Pachomian connection to the Nag Hammadi Codices by arguing that different codices were the products of different monasteries. These books, he argues, came to be united via a network of exchange that the federation used to swap reading material, or possibly even by individual monks relocating from one monastery to a different one (Bull 2020, p. 139).
- 29 One codex containing Luke and John's Gospels (p. Bodmer XIV–XV) is physically constructed in a way that is extremely reminiscent of the Nag Hammadi Codices. See (Nongbri 2014, 2016; Lundhaug and Jenott 2015, pp. 225–29).
- 30 Scholarly convention distinguishes between the two texts with bracketed designations of "First" and "Second".
- 31 "For not without reason have I called you my brother, although you are not my brother materially" (see the edition of Schoedel 1979, pp. 68–69).
- 32 For discussion of Herod's relevance see (Foster 2007, p. 580).
- 33 Some (very) select examples include: Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.9.2 (twelfth century); Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France gr. 897 (twelfth century); Athos, Monē Batopediou 74 (twelfth century); Oxford, Bodleian Library Laud gr. 70 (twelfth century); Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Vat. gr. 1631 (twelfth century); Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria fonds principal C. IV. 04 (Pasini 135) (thirteenth century); Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek hist. gr. 114 (thirteenth century); Ann Arbor (MI), University of Michigan Library MS 059 (fourteenth century); Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France coisl. 121 (fourteenth century); Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana C 092 sup. (Martini-Bassi 192) (fourteenth century); London, British Library Add. 10073 (sixteenth century). This is a small sample, but a search for manuscripts featuring *Prot. Jas* by century in the Pinakes database (<https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/recherche-generale.html>, accessed on 2 May 2023) allows a fuller picture, including the different works that *Prot. Jas* was bound with in individual manuscripts.
- 34 (Zervos 2018, p. 2) notes the Nov 21 *Feast of the Presentation of the Theotokos*, the text for which, along with those of other feasts associated with Mary and her mother Anne, are studied in (Krivko 2011) as part of the Byzantine Menaia's manuscript tradition.
- 35 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France gr. 1454; Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana gr. II. 082 (coll. 1125); Jerusalem, S. Crucis 35; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Vat. gr. 1192; and Athos Iber. 448.

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